

Middle East madhouse

The Lebanese accused of hijacking a bus last week and running it onto Parliament's front lawn is, perhaps, deranged. Why should he be different from his countrymen?

After all, Lebanon has become a total madhouse, a country run amuck. In 1975, civil war erupted there. At first, the war was an attempt by economically and politically deprived Moslems to get a bigger slice of the economic pie from Lebanon's ruling class, the Maronite Christians. Soon, however, the struggle became a free-for-all in which every faction and neighbor fought the other.

Syria intervened to help the Maronites and then fought against them. Palestinians fought the Maronites, the Syrians, the Druzes and then the Shiites. Christian Maronite factions fought and slaughtered each other. Maronites massacred Palestinians. Orthodox fought Catholics who fought Maronites who fought Armenians.

Israel's right-wing strategists have long said: Knock the Arab nations hard enough and they will disintegrate into their component tribal factions. Lebanon and Syria, urged Israeli hawks, were ideal candidates.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. Gen. Ariel Sharon, the invasions's architect, aimed to crush the PLO forever and turn Lebanon into an Israeli protectorate under the Maronite leader Bashir Gemayel. But a bomb blew up Gemayel and with him Israel's Lebanese strategy. The mighty Israeli army was literally car bombed out of Lebanon — excepting a slice of the south, which Israel holds to this day.

Instead of a weak, pliant Lebanon, the Israeli invasion — which was quietly backed by the U.S. — made things go from bad to horrible. Today, ordinary Lebanese find themselves living in a shooting gallery run by lunatics and thugs. When not fighting one another for turf, Lebanon's militias battle over the lucrative hashish trade or smuggled cars. Today, wretched Lebanon — once known as the Switzerland of the Mideast — is a

Punch



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worse mess than ever.

There are two official governments, one Moslem and one Christian, the latter led by army chief Gen. Michael Aoun. Shiites are divided into two factions, Amal and Hizbullah, who hate each other. The Syrians occupy a third of the country and part of Beirut. The Maronites just got done killing one another again. Palestinian factions shoot it out when they're not fighting Shiites.

The latest round of fighting in Beirut last week left more than 150 dead and 600 wounded. Shells hit oil and butane storage tanks and rained down on residential areas. Beirut was swathed in black clouds of poisonous smoke. The cause? Gen. Aoun boasted that he and his motley little Christian army would throw the powerful Syrian army out of Lebanon. So he began shelling Moslem ports and residential areas. The Moslems fired back and so did Syrian big guns. More carnage, more ruin and all for nothing — as usual.

In typical Lebanese style, Gen. Aoun was emboldened to attack the Syrians by Iraq, which has been supplying Christian forces with large amounts of arms. Iraq is furious at Syria for backing Iran in the Gulf War. So Iraq is getting back at Syria by stirring up a hornet's nest for the Syrians in Lebanon. And the French, who used to rule Lebanon, are quietly backing the Maronites.

That's the Mideast for you. Syria won't give up and leave Lebanon because Lebanon used to be part of Syria until the French created Lebanon after World War I. Neither will the Israelis, who like their buffer zone in the south — which just also happens to contain important water resources.

The Americans, French, Iranians, Libyans, Saudis and Egyptians are all busy stirring the Lebanese pot. So have pity for the poor people of all tribes and religions who are stuck there.

No one knows how many Lebanese and Palestinian refugees have died since 1975, but a safe guess is about 160,000 out of a population of four million. In terms of Canada's population, this would amount to one million dead.

The 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have suffered most of all. They have been massacred, bombed, shot, displaced, napalmed and, two years ago, some were even reduced to cannibalism in their besieged camps. This has been going on for almost two decades. Small wonder Lebanon produces so many crazed terrorists who want to blow up western aircraft to get revenge on the West — which is blamed, only in part correctly, for Lebanon's torment.

The only way to save Lebanon, as this column has before proposed, is to deploy a big, mean, tough army there — with lots of Turks and Koreans. Disarm everyone, bang heads and make the Lebanese settle down and study war no more.