

Why the Situation in Syria Is at a Stalemate

Cedars are valuable for their lasting quality. Building material and dock lumber all attest to a cedar's ability to resist wood rot. "Cedars of Lebanon" filled the list of building materials required by Nehemiah to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Solomon eyed the magnificent and resilient cedars for building the temple in Jerusalem.

Today, be it rot from the inside or attack from the outside, the Lebanese, having survived wars and its many rumors, speak in quiet tones, wondering if listening ears from Syria or its minions—Hezbollah in the south—are plotting nefarious schemes.

Prized as the pearl of the Mediterranean, the choice site for oil in the Gulf, Beirut, until the civil wars of the late 20th century, was a premium choice for lifestyle, opportunity and political freedom.

Centuries before Christ, as pioneers in coastal trading, Lebanon's marine culture stimulated trade, bringing it riches and envy. Conquered by Persia (present-day Iran), then Rome, Lebanon became central to the spread of the gospel in the first century. Seventh-century Muslim Arabs took over the country, while a minority of Maronites (under the Roman church) hung on. Smack-dab in the path of the Crusaders, the country's connection with France shaped her European influence.

Following World War I, as European powers divided up much of the world, Lebanon's borders were decided by France. This twist, added to the mix of Christians (Maronites) as 50 percent of the population, brought about an eightfold increase of Sunni Muslim and four-time increase of Shi'ite Muslims. In 1926, Christians made up 84 percent of the population in

Lebanon; today, they are 39 percent.

Lebanon wrote a constitution based on religious powers, a remarkable feat of building a country founded on religious sectarianism but also a disaster in the making. It was unprecedented and, in the end, problematic. France promised to keep Lebanon Christian; these were political promises with little current reality.

The Lebanese government was so divided, and this remains today: The president has to be Christian and the prime minister always Sunni Muslim, although the president can veto legislation. Even though, by the early 1960s, Muslims outnumbered Christians, the formula still remains.

For decades, Lebanon has been the punching bag of Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. Syria used Lebanon to get at Israel, with its latest effort being to supply arms (much from Iran) through Lebanon to Hezbollah in the south. Israel retaliated. Tens of thousands of Palestinians flooded Lebanon after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Now, it's estimated that 300,000 Syrian refugees bulge the camps in the north and along the Beqa'a Valley. Between 1975-1990, civil war raged, and 100,000 died. Syria continued its political interventions and military presence.

Finally, a new government led by Rafic Hariri started rebuilding, but on Feb. 14, 2005, a massive bomb killed Hariri, with fingers pointed directly at Syrian President Assad as the assassin.

This historical overview is meant to put in place the important moment Lebanon faces today, for it is in this world that Christian faith seeks its witness and presence. While evangelicals are not implicated in the political trade-off of Roman Catholic Christians and Sunni Muslims, the precarious environment requires strategic thinking for living between the factions, knowing that at any moment, an unexpected move could

destabilize the tenuous arrangements of life and liberty there.

It was to Lebanon I came to renew friendships with Lebanese Christian leaders, to hear their concerns of what the Syrian debacle might mean to them and to visit Syrian refugee camps in the Beqa'a Valley, just east of Mount Herman, the mountain famous from the Scriptures.

Visiting these camps, east of Beirut, the human tragedy of Syria is overwhelming. Alongside the more than 300,000 refugees (mostly Syrian, although some came from Iraq) that are now in Lebanon, all together, some 2 million Syrians are displaced in their own country.

The situation in Syria is at a stalemate while the West offers words, Russia and Iran provide money and munitions, and the Chinese continue to back President Assad.

I had wonderful times with a number of families while I was there, as well as groups of Syrians, as they gathered round once I began to talk, huddling outside their shacks, interested in what was being said. I began by asking how they were getting along and what they needed, and then for their own views of what was needed back home.

I asked if I could pray. You should have seen their faces light up. It was as if I had given them a priceless gift. I told them I was a Christian and would pray in the name of Jesus. Before I began, I reminded them who Jesus is, as noted in the Quran, and then in my prayers (and my prayers were not short), I prayed about Jesus and to Jesus. In the prayer, I reminded those listening that he, too, was a refugee, fleeing with his parents to Egypt. This resonated with them.

At the close of the prayer, I asked the leader in the camp to step into the center, and then I put my hands on him for a special blessing. When I finished, their hand-signs told me how much it meant. One leader, Ibrahim, asked us into his

shack for tea, which is a common sign of hospitality. A dentist from Damascus, he began asking about Jesus as we sat drinking tea with him.

The young man I was with from a local and creative ministry called Heart for Lebanon, (a good group to help) who love to tell others of the Lord, began with gentleness and care. He took it only as far as appropriate, and then said he would be back in a few days with a Bible.

I was most interested in knowing who else was there to help the refugees. They knew of Heart for Lebanon and World Vision. Then I asked where their Muslim organizations were. One man looked at me, turned his head and spit. "We've seen no one. No one has come here. Only Christians."

Brian C. Stiller *is global ambassador for World Evangelical Alliance.*