

## **In the Middle East**

### **Not so independent Lebanon has Independence Day**

(Reuters)

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BEIRUT - Lebanese took a day off work on Thursday, 64th anniversary of independence, but with foreign powers hovering over the search for a new president, many Lebanese wonder if they can ever shake off outside intervention.

"Nothing shows the bitter reality of independence better than the crisis over the presidency," said commentator Rafik Khouri, writing in the conservative Beirut newspaper al-Anwar.

Lebanon in its present form began as a French creation in the 1920s and in its troubled history more than a dozen foreign governments have sent troops here, often with, sometimes without the consent of successive Lebanese governments.

Israel has made three major invasions, US troops have intervened twice to prop up governments they liked and Syrian troops underpinned Syrian dominance for most of the period from 1976 until they left on U.N. orders in 2005.

Other troops have come from Britain, France, Iraq, Italy, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. Many other countries have contributed separately to a U.N. peace force deployed along the Israeli border since 1978.

On the political scene, intervention has been more subtle and harder to document. But Lebanese politicians have routinely had close ties with one or another foreign power.

During the civil war of 1975 to 1990 many Lebanese and Palestinian militia groups depended for weapons and money on foreign sponsors, turning Lebanon into a theatre of choice for complex proxy wars between regional and global powers.

A small and diverse country wedged between two powerful and mutually hostile neighbours -- Israel and Syria, Lebanon has for the last four decades often been the scene of the action when one of the two wanted to strike at the interests of the other.

The country also has to deal with the inescapable geographical fact that Syria controls its access to the Middle East hinterland, giving Damascus the power to make or break a Lebanese economy based on trade and services.

Common perception

On the eve of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's last day in office, and with no consensus yet on a successor acceptable to the major players, the reality of foreign interference is a given in the wrangling over who should replace him.

On one side, Iran and Syria stand behind the opposition alliance led by the Shi'ite Muslim Hezbollah movement. On the other side the United States, with French and Saudi sympathy, pressing for a candidate favourable to its interests.

An Independence Day cartoon in the conservative Beirut daily an-Nahar reflected the common perception -- a Lebanese flag, one half intact, the other half covered by the flags of Egypt, Syria, Iran, Russia, France and the United States, with the presidential throne empty between them.

"There is a vast gulf between independence in its nationalist sense and the state we are in, not just since the start of the current frightening dispute but since the year 1943," said a commentary in al-Liwa daily.

The parliamentary majority accuses Syria of intervention in a direct and violent form, through the assassination of a succession of Lebanese politicians who stood in its way, most notably former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005.

Syria denies any responsibility for the killings and its allies accuse the Lebanese cabinet and parliamentary majority of collaborating in an American-Israeli plan for the Middle East.

US intervention has tended to take judicial and economic forms, for example by pressing for the prosecution of Hariri's assassins and threatening to freeze the assets of any Lebanese deemed to have tried to undermine the Beirut government.

Iran has supplied large amounts of money to Hezbollah, helping the movement to retain its influence among those who suffered in last year's war with Israel, analysts say.

Saudi Arabia has influence in Lebanon mainly through close business relationships. The late Hariri made his fortune in the Saudi construction industry and was close to the ruling family.

A political advertisement on a television station owned by the Hariri family optimistically promised real independence. As a firm hand quells the storm swirling around the country, the slogan reads: "Lebanon is not a plaything in anyone's hand."