

# Cedar treason

By **Alexandra Belias**  
Political Correspondent

**F**or millions of people February 14 is Valentine's Day. But for the Lebanese this day has a special significance. Instead of the hustle and bustle of shopping, Lebanon has thousands and thousands of people demonstrating in the streets; instead of cheesy commercial formulas, Lebanon has militant slogans. Heart-shaped chocolates have been replaced by flags and the cedar tree, the nation's symbol.

On the February 14, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri, was killed in a car bomb. His assassination, though coming as a shock to most people, was in fact quite predictable, later inquiries even proving that Hariri knew his life might be in danger.



**LEBANON: Taking to the streets**

Since his death, Lebanon has undergone a revolution: the country which was dubbed the 'Switzerland of the Middle East' in the 1950s, which had suffered from 15 years of civil war and which, since 1990 was in a process of rebuilding, has suddenly returned into the international spotlight in its bid to become a united and independent country.

But Lebanon was never really either united or independent. Until the 1970s, the country prospered and became a beacon in the Middle East: its economy, its banks and its hotels attracted investment and workers.



**HARIRI: Assassinated**

But Lebanon was, from its very creation, a religiously diverse society in which tensions and conflicts were inevitable. Lebanon's constitution allocated political power on an essentially religious basis. Sectarianism remains a key element of Lebanese political life. For example, the position of President is reserved for a Maronite Christian, while the Prime Minister has to be a Sunni Muslim.

Lebanon was also weakened by its neighbours: after Israel's creation

in 1949, Palestinian refugees progressively moved to Lebanon, especially following the emergence of the 'Black September' faction and the relocation by the PLO to Beirut. The growing Palestinian population living in refugees' camps reopened Lebanon's wounds.

From 1975 to 1990 Lebanon was entangled in an international and civil war: the conflict between Palestinians and Lebanese was coupled with a conflict between Christians and Muslims. The intervention of Israel and the arrival of Syrian troops complicated the situation and led Lebanon to the edge of disaster. Peace was finally achieved at the beginning of the 1990s, but was accompanied by the recognition of Syria as a 'big brother', whose influence was obvious.

But Syria's stranglehold over the country became increasingly publicly criticized, especially after

Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. When Syria visibly interfered by modifying the constitution so that the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud could remain in office, widespread protests were seen.

This led to the UN Security Council resolution 1559 demanding that Syria remove the troops it had stationed in Lebanon. It was in this volatile context that Hariri was killed, undoubtedly by the Syrians as punishment for questioning their influence over Lebanon.

His assassination led to massive demonstrations in which unity was claimed to have been achieved. Syria ended by withdrawing its forces from Lebanon.

2005 has thus been a linchpin: it marks the beginning of a new era saluting the sovereignty of the country. However, it would be a mistake to voice an overly optimistic description of Lebanon: the blatant economic inequalities still ensure a divided society. Lebanon remains a very indebted country, and no alternative has been found to its religious foundations.

An even more worrying issue is that, since 2005, the country has been plagued by car bombings targeting anti-Syrian personalities. What has followed is a climate of fear, but also an atmosphere of mourning since journalists such as Samir Kassir, and more recently Gebran Tueni, have been killed. The commemoration of Hariri's death is thus an acknowledgement of the changes the country has undergone, but also a reminder that other reforms are needed.

# Price of patriotism

By **Tim Hewish**  
Political Correspondent

**L**ast week saw the Six Nations commence in dramatic style. Being an Englishman living in Wales I found our victory all the sweeter, but I was still pleased to witness the patriotism that every Welshman shared: the crimson shirt, the flags, the dragon and the abundance of empty Brains pint glasses.

Though what got my attention was the trip to the supermarket afterwards. The cost of the Welsh rugby shirt – £25 for an official product – is significantly below the RRP of £50. I know almost everyone reading this paper is a student, and thus always looking for a way to save money, but at what cost does this supermarket purchase have on the smaller businesses?

**Supermarkets do not have an affiliation with Wales. Their tie is economic, not patriotic**

On the following Monday I went out and visited four local Welsh rugby stores decked out with dragons and the shirts promoting the Welsh cause. For them the Welsh cause is not just for the Six Nations, but 365 days a year. But the price of each shirt was alarming to my bank balance; the price of being an honorary Welshman for the Six Nations came in at £50.

The shopkeepers have said that the price difference is an intrusion into their one and only market. That's now under attack by non-partisan businesses, whose only loyalty is counted and measured by money. These smaller

businesses promote the Welsh team each and every day, and I got the feeling that they believed the larger supermarkets were only looking to make a mass profit during the Six Nations period.

It doesn't take a genius to understand the repercussions of such a move. The Welsh stores simply lose out, with their corner of the market in Welsh paraphernalia under siege by the likes of Tesco and Asda. They can use economies of scale to their favour, and are subsequently able to sell the prized rugby shirt at a lower price.

A similar ploy was applied last year during the Ashes, when Asda managed to sell the England shirts for around as little as £25, while the RRP was pushing £40. The option of cheaper shirts allows more people to be able to own one and feel a part of the movement; but to many shopkeepers and locals, the pride of the Welsh shirt isn't just for the Six Nations, it's for life. Supermarkets do not have an affiliation with Wales. Their tie is economic, not patriotic.

The issue over shirts is just the surface of the well-known underlying problem with supermarkets growing and holding the monopoly over goods and products. In my native land, I remember walking into my local newsagents knowing all the shopkeepers and actually having a conversation with them. In Tesco, your only conversation will be the '£66.97 please' greeting we receive from the 16-year-old on the till.

This may soon be the only option for our rugby and football shirts; placed on the end of tills during the Six Nations and World Cup tournaments, only then to be discarded to the corner of the shop until the next tournament comes around.

But in my opinion, it is better to line the pockets of your local community so it can keep its head above financial water, than aid and abet the conglomerates' dominance over patriotism.



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