

142<sup>nd</sup> Bergedorf Round Table

## **Conflict Management in the Middle East: Regional Solutions for Regional Problems?**

March 20–22, 2009, Beirut

### **The Case of Lebanon—a Model for the Region?**

Introductory Statement by H.E. Fouad Siniora, Prime Minister of the Lebanese Republic

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure to address such a distinguished audience so interested in peace and stability in Lebanon and the Middle East. I am especially pleased to be at the Orient Institute which has enjoyed an excellent reputation since its establishment in Beirut in 1961 having to its credit hundreds of publications and which trained many researchers in Arab and Islamic studies. The choice of Beirut is a reminder of what this city stood for at the time: It was the most liberal and prosperous Arab capital. Its freedom emanated from the diversity of the religious, cultural and political fabric of Lebanon and the dynamism of its democratic political system.

In my opinion, there are three ways to evaluate the Lebanese political system:

First: If we look at the cultural, economic and social status of Lebanon in comparison to the Arab World and the Mediterranean region, we realize that its favourable status over other countries reflected by higher living and education standards is due to its liberal and open system.

Second: If we analyze the political system in comparison to other political systems in the region, we see that our constitutional system is that of constitutional legitimacy and freedoms. It was never suspended nor disrupted officially since Lebanon's independence in 1943. There were no military coup d'état or amendment in the political system or laws outside of Parliament. However, Lebanon has suffered from major political crises that turned sometimes into civil strife, the longest of which started in 1975 and ended in 1990 leaving behind many repercussions that affect us till today.

Third: Based on a comprehensive approach joining economic, social and political issues together and linking them to the geopolitical environment of Lebanon, we can see that the "Lebanese specificity," which the Lebanese boast about, is less solid, viable and stable than what we would like to think. I mean that if we look at the numerous crises Lebanon and its regime went through, we find that, with the exception of the 1952 crisis—due to a constitutional amendment allowing the President to stay in power for a second mandate—, all the other crises and turmoil occurred due to the conjunction of internal and external factors. In fact, the Lebanese independent regime

was never given the necessary time to grow, develop and acquire immunity against consecutive external shocks: Five years after the independence, the Palestinian Nakba took place followed by ordeals, displacement, socio-economic, political and security repercussions that shook the Arab region. Then came crises caused by attempts by Lebanese Presidents to renew their mandates, in addition to the 1958 crisis with its Arab and international dimensions, the 1967 war, the 1973 war, the Israeli aggressions against the Lebanese territories, the internal conflict ongoing since 1975 etc.

In 1958, only a few years before the establishment of the Orient Institute, the Lebanese President of the Republic's attempt to renew his mandate resulted in armed political conflict which was complicated by regional and international factors. A new regional dynamic was created by the existing Cold War tensions between the USA and the USSR along with the creation that year of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria and the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq. The US did not want to provide an additional foothold for the expanding Soviet influence in the Arab region, including Lebanon. As a result, the US Marines landed on the shores of Beirut and the crisis ended with a consensus between the US and President Nasser of Egypt to preserve Lebanon's independence and regime under a new President who was then the Army Commander, General Fuad Chehab. This was a concrete example of the involvement of local, Arab, regional and international factors in resolving political crises aggravated by external shocks that leave behind them serious internal repercussions.

Here, I would like to draw your attention to a main element to be taken into consideration if we are to understand the events which have taken place in Lebanon over the past 40 years and the effect of local regional and international factors on the management of the successive conflicts which erupted in this country.

This element is the geopolitical situation of Lebanon since the establishment of Israel on the neighbouring Palestinian territories, which has been a serious problem deeply affecting all the countries in the Levant, particularly Lebanon. On the one hand, Israel expelled hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to neighbouring countries in 1948 and 1967; and on the other, the bordering Lebanese territories became exposed to Israeli aggressions despite the Armistice Agreement. Furthermore, since the mid-1960s, and in the absence of a solution to the Palestinian question, the Palestinians started organizing themselves in the countries of their refuge including Lebanon, and obtaining weapons to regain occupied Palestine. This led in turn to armed confrontations between Israel and the factions of the PLO, exerting more pressure on South Lebanon in particular and the country as a whole, culminating in the destructive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978 and then 1982 leading to the first occupation of an Arab capital, Beirut. This was at the core of the turmoil in Lebanon when the civil war broke out in 1975.

The waning of the Egyptian role in the sphere of influence on Lebanon after the Camp David accords, a result of the successive Israeli wars, made room for an expanded Syrian intervention and

role. Of course, this intervention, since 1976, had its reasons both local and regional, and played a primary role in Lebanon until the withdrawal of the Syrian troops in 2005 after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This introduction was necessary to fully understand the conflicts' nature, causes and dimensions in Lebanon's geopolitical environment. When a political crisis is purely local like that of 1952, constitutional institutions, politicians and confessional leaders attempt to resolve it, as they did in the first two decades following the independence of Lebanon. However, when the crisis has regional and international dimensions, its parameters vary. In this latter case, the Arab framework is the natural first recourse for mediation. Lebanon is an Arab country and a founding member of the Arab League with whom it has a common defence pact. That's why with the escalation of the Arab Israeli conflict after 1968, Lebanon turned to the Arab League. As the Israeli pressures increased against Lebanon and caused internal dissension, and with the increasing Syrian intervention after 1975, Lebanon called for a meeting of the Arab League. The Riyadh and Cairo Summits in 1976 transformed the Syrian forces in Lebanon, to which other Arab troops were added, into the "Arab Deterrent Force." Later, when Israel invaded South Lebanon in 1978 and the entire country in 1982, we needed the help of international mediators and the Security Council resolutions, most important of which was resolution 425. However, the most important Arab intervention during the ongoing conflict was the Taif meeting in Saudi Arabia in 1989. A committee formed by Arab foreign ministers made every effort to organize that meeting after the mid-1980s and these efforts ended by convening all Lebanese MPs in Taif city where the Accord amending the Lebanese constitution dealing with all the problems of the political system was adopted, thereby putting an end to the long-lasting crisis. In addition, the Arabs provided major relief and assistance to the country in order to rebuild what was destroyed by the continuous Israeli aggressions and the internal conflict. The late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri played a role of paramount importance in both phases: the Taif Accord phase and the reconstruction phase to rebuild the political system and the country. This is a good example of a sound Arab model of problem solving in Lebanon, in the context of its local, Arab, regional and international dimensions. Taif allowed the Lebanese to direct their constitution towards more openness, provide opportunities to overcome political sectarianism in the system and create a stronger and larger balance between constitutional institutions.

The Taif Accord and the subsequent amended constitution shielded Lebanon from further destruction, but three problems remained: the Israeli occupation of large parts of South Lebanon and West Bekaa; the failure of the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict despite Madrid and Oslo; and the continued presence of the Syrian troops in Lebanon. Then, Lebanon needed the military and security assistance of Syria, because of its weak military and security apparatus as a country emerging from civil war. Lebanese parties and organizations had launched resistance operations against the Israeli occupation since 1982. In 1990, Hezbollah became the leader of the Lebanese

resistance. In the 1990s, Lebanese governments cooperated or coordinated with the resistance against the Israeli occupation. Thanks to both military and political efforts, Israel withdrew from most of the Lebanese occupied territories in 2000. Some Lebanese parties thought after 2000 that Syrian troops should also withdraw from Lebanon and a national dialogue should address the question of the continuation of armed resistance in Lebanon. Unlike the past, there was no Arab intervention between Lebanon and Syria, because Lebanon did not request it.

In fact, the Taif Accord underlined the importance of adhering to the Armistice Agreement of 1949 after the liberation of the occupied Lebanese territories by Israel, and called for the extension of the sovereignty of the state over the whole of its territory, as well as the redeployment of the Syrian troops to the Bekaa and West Bekaa areas. It also required the disbanding of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias and the handing over of their weapons to the Lebanese government. Despite these provisions and toward the end of President Lahoud's mandate, the Syrians were determined to renew his mandate and stay in Lebanon. This was opposed by a Lebanese resolve to reject the constitutional amendment and the cloning of the Syrian regime in Lebanon. That's when the Americans and the French decided to draft Security Council resolution 1559 calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanon and the respect of Lebanon's democracy and constitution. However, the Syrians did not withdraw until after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and the demonstration of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese who took to the streets calling for the Syrian withdrawal and the respect of Lebanon's independence and sovereignty.

Free elections took place in the country after the Syrian withdrawal and a Lebanese government that I had the honour to preside was formed. Then, a national internal dialogue was launched with two main focal points: First: Putting an end to the problem of weapons and armed parties on the borders between Lebanon and Syria and inside and outside Palestinian camps. Second: Agreeing with the "Islamic resistance" on reaching a point where the Lebanese army and security forces will have the monopoly of holding weapons in Lebanon. Syria has not responded favourably to the calls to delineate borders and help with the disarmament of Palestinians outside the camps. Hezbollah, who accepted the principle of dialogue on a defence strategy in Lebanon, rejected the idea of merging with the Lebanese army. Along with the escalation of tensions came the 2006 July war where all the Lebanese stood together, Hezbollah resisted Israel and the Lebanese government succeeded in sending the Lebanese army back to the South until our international borders after it was forced to leave that area at the beginning of the 1970s. Later, UN resolution 1701 was adopted, establishing an enhanced UNIFIL Force to assist the Lebanese Army south of the Litani. Unfortunately, all this did not prevent the later escalation of internal tensions.

The crisis intensified, particularly because of the argument over the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon looking into the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri with the aim of putting an end to impunity. A sit-in was organized in Downtown Beirut and the Lebanese Parliament closed its doors for more than a year and a half, effectively preventing the election of a new president after the end of President's Lahoud's second mandate. The Arab League intervened as

a mediator through its Secretary-General and Arab foreign ministers to open up the Parliament and elect a new President for the Lebanese Republic.

The *Doha Agreement* that led to the election of President Suleiman and the formation of the current government was held after the attack launched by armed forces against Beirut and other areas on May 7, 2008 in contradiction with a tacit agreement that the resistance's weapons should be used exclusively against Israel. The council of Arab foreign ministers met in Cairo and decided that a committee would accompany the Lebanese protagonists to Doha for a round of political negotiations. The subsequent Doha agreement led to the reopening of Parliament, the election of a new President, the promulgation of a new electoral law, and the formation of the current government albeit of the exceptional political arrangement whereby a blocking power was granted to the minority. This is a recent example of the Arab model of conflict mediation in Lebanon.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Lebanon finds itself caught between two political visions: The first considers Lebanon to be an integral part of the regional and international conflicts, and thus an open theatre and a battleground for external powers with internal ramifications. The second seeks to take Lebanon out of this deadlock by promoting its relative independence from external shocks and influences and building an independent and a sovereign state, instead of waiting for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict or allowing the interests of regional powers to control Lebanon so that they can increase their ideological and political influence in the Arab world. Opting for the second position does not in any way imply isolating Lebanon from the region's causes, but rather states that there should be no contradiction between Lebanon's independence and sovereignty and its alignment with the just Arab causes. I have adopted this choice in my political life and in government; indeed I chose not to allow Arab and regional dissensions to explode into local conflicts and our local turmoil to become an additional reason for Arab divisions.

The policy that aspires to the building of the state institutions and the reinforcement of relative independence from external influences requires that we put our local political differences in their true framework, the constitutional institutions, and within their real limits, the limits of the Lebanese rules of government and vibrant democracy. Hence, democratic competition between the different Lebanese parties will be based on national choices, which contradicts the vision that opens up our political life to regional conflicts reflecting global confrontations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You may have the impression after this long presentation of the Lebanese conflicts and their resolution that Lebanon's history is a series of local conflicts with regional and international dimensions. But our political approach and governmental practises were focused on consolidating and activating the constitutional institutions so that the Lebanese state extends its sovereignty over all

its territory, establishes relations with Syria based on parity and good neighbourhood and works with Arab sister countries and the international community to liberate the remaining Lebanese occupied territories and provide security and good living standards for all the Lebanese. I strongly believe in the Lebanese internal dialogue to solve problems, a dialogue that did not stop even in the darkest moments. In early June 2009, Lebanon will hold legislative elections that are no less important than those of 2005. In the meantime our relations with Syria have begun to improve. While many issues are still unresolved, we now have diplomatic representation between the two countries, and we hope that the Arab reconciliation will create a better climate for the development of Lebanese Syrian relations.

To sum up, and from a Lebanese perspective based on the past decades, I would like to bring to your attention three elements that are required for the resolution of local crises in their regional and international dimensions:

One: The first cause for tension in the whole region remains the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts. The continued occupation of Arab lands in violation of international security council resolutions, the ongoing Israeli crimes and wars, the total Israeli disregard for international law and the will of international community, the absence of a just solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees, all lie deeply in the Arab conscience and will continue to fuel anger and instability in the region and beyond. Furthermore, moderation in the Arab region will continue to be endangered and will be replaced by escalating fundamentalism leading to socio-economic, political and security instability in the Arab region. Conversely, a just solution to the Arab Israeli conflict based on the Arab Peace Initiative and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state will be to the advantage of the Arab world, not least Lebanon, as well as the rest of the world.

Two: It is of paramount importance to re-establish strong relations between Syria and Lebanon based on parity and mutual respect. The Arabs do play a major role in this regard, especially with the current efforts to achieve Arab reconciliation and Palestinian reconciliation. These efforts were launched by King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz at the Kuwait Economic Summit and we hope it will expand to a larger scale to the benefit of all, particularly Palestinians and Lebanese.

Three: It is also vital to continue to exert efforts for the promotion of Lebanese constitutional institutions so that they have exclusive power of arbitration. Indeed, Lebanon cannot survive without a fair and capable state and there will be no stability in the country except through a constructive internal dialogue and greater common denominators.

In other words, the turmoil in Lebanon was caused for the first time after its independence by the Israeli invasion and its expansionist aggressive policies or what's known as the Arab-Israeli conflict that persists until today. This was characterized by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and subsequent withdrawal in 2000, with the exception of Shebaa farms, followed by the 2006 war. The second phase of turmoil is exemplified by the Syrian intervention, particularly after

2000, which reached its peak in 2005 with the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon. And the third phase is that of the expansion of the Iranian influence that we hope to overcome with the least possible losses and build close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran based on trust, mutual respect and non-intervention in internal affairs. In this context, the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs reflected our hopes when he said to his Iranian counterpart: We welcome Iranian assistance, but we want it to come through the gate of Arab legitimacy.

The main remaining pillar for a democratic, free and independent Lebanon is the living together of its citizens and their consensus on the national pact, the Taif Accord, the constitution and the political system. This is the approach we have adopted to face all problems, i.e. promoting dialogue and looking back only to learn lessons from the past.

Late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri used to ask: Why do people establish states and political regimes? And his answer was: They do it to enhance their living standards and protect their national and local interests. In my opinion, these are today the objectives of the vast majority of the Lebanese.

We depend very much on the Arab role that has safeguarded Lebanon on many occasions. But we ask the Arabs and the international community to help us seize all opportunities to allow Lebanese constitutional institutions experience to mature, stabilize and be effective. We have suffered from one grueling crisis after another since 1948. Multiple Israeli aggressions and invasions, the civil war, the questionable constitutional amendments to extend presidents terms, the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and many other politicians and media figures. With the acceleration and worsening of events, Lebanese institutions have not had the chance to work effectively. However, this should not hinder the reinforcement of our institutions or lead to radical approaches by some.

Indeed Lebanon is special among Arab countries and in the region. Let me only refer you to the Orient Institute that works freely since 50 years and the Saint-Joseph University and the American University of Beirut that date back to a century and a half ago. Our free, open and prosperous country welcomes daily in its capital hundreds of scholars, intellectuals, businessmen and visitors who help promote this melting pot of cultures and civilizations that characterize our cosmopolitan city in the Arab region and who enjoy Lebanon's beautiful sea and high mountains. Here, poetry and reality meet together and intertwine. And Lebanon and the Lebanese stand tall and remain strong.

I thank you for your attention.

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#### Imprint

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