

Lebanon in Arab and World Politics

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In my presentation today, I want stress five conceptual points. Firstly, although the east-west rivalry had a negative and destabilising effect on Lebanon, the internal struggle in Lebanon was not solely an extension of the great powers rivalry. Regional dynamics -- inter-Arab rivalries and the Arab-Israeli conflict -- have affected Lebanon's behaviour and destiny much more strongly than have developments on the global stage. In other words, what happened at the regional level -- the inter-Arab scene and the Arab-Israeli theatre -- often had a much more determining influence on Lebanon than that of the global struggle. From the mid-1950 until the late 1980, it was the Arab cold war rather than the East-West Cold War that ultimately influenced the foreign policy agenda of Lebanon, though the two cold wars were closely interconnected. The superpower competition was a minor affair in comparison to the local disputes that split and fragmented the Lebanese body politic.

Given its complex socio-political structure, Lebanon has been exceptionally vulnerable to the convulsions, which have shaken the region since the mid-1950s. For example, the 1958 crisis, the protracted conflict with Palestinian guerrillas from 1969, and the all out war that erupted in 1975 had their roots in the Lebanese communities' differing perceptions of Lebanon's relations with its regional environment. Similarly, the only periods of relative political stability in Lebanon coincided with the convergence between internal and regional politics rather than between internal and international politics. The 1958 crisis was finally resolved when Chéhab realigned Lebanon's foreign policy with that of the UAR. Lebanon committed itself to follow the UAR's lead in the region and would not join in any Western alliances against Egypt and Syria. Chéhab's policy of accommodation with Nasser ensured

social peace until 1967. Likewise, the 1975 war came to a halt in 1990 after Lebanese politicians were forced to accept Syria's unconditional hegemony. Little wonder that the last decade – 1990 until the present – ushered in relative stability and harmony.

A qualification is in order here. The brief period, 1958-1967, of tranquillity was not only short-lived but also deceptive. The Chouh-Nasser pact ensured social peace by tying Lebanon to Egypt's Arab policy, with the inherent implications. This strategy worked as long as Egypt maintained its predominance in inter-Arab affairs and the latter did not escalate beyond a dangerous ceiling and as long as other local and international developments did not disturb the internal balance of power. As a result, Lebanon's political fortunes were closely tied to the precarious regional order, which underwent a radical change in the late 1960s. One might go further, like Farid el-Khazen has, and trace the breakdown of the state in Lebanon to this dramatic development, especially to the upheavals that rocked the Arab world in the 1960s.

Indeed, the 1960s witnessed a steady deterioration of both inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli relations. The resurfacing of the Arab-Israeli question was very much related to the escalation of Israel's Arab policy and the intensification of inter-Arab tensions -- the breakup of the UAR and the serious challenge to Egypt's dominance of the Arab world by both conservatives and revolutionaries. Little wonders that Israel played a divisive factor in inter-Arab politics, putting enormous strains on the inter-Arab state system.

The result was the 1967 Arab-Israeli war whose devastating effects overburdened the fragile political system in Lebanon. First, the war accelerated the mobilization of the Palestinian community and the success of the Liberation Palestinian Organization (PLO) in turning Lebanon into a theatre of military operation against Israel. Second, the occupation of the Golan Heights enhanced the strategic value of Lebanon in Syrian and Israeli calculations.

In this context, Lebanon became a battlefield on which the Palestinians, Israelis and Syrians fought each other. Third, one of the most important consequences of the war was the rekindling of internal tensions over Lebanon's role in the Arab-Israeli theatre.

While the Lebanonist constituency called for neutrality in the Arab-Israeli context, the Arab nationalist community expected Lebanon to fully engage against Israel by granting maximal freedom of operation to the PLO and severing Lebanon's links with the United States. Unlike the 1958 crisis, the 1967 war radicalised the Arab nationalist adherents, who blamed the Western powers for the shattering Arab defeat and who came to equate Israel with the West.²

The increase of U.S. intelligence, business, and political presence in Beirut after 1967 -- after the breaking of diplomatic relations between several Arab states and the United States -- added to the anti-American feeling among the Arab nationalist/Islamist proponents. The latter's resentment was directed against the state apparatus for allowing Lebanon to become an outpost of 'American imperialism'.³ A host of leftist Lebanese parties and emergent Palestinian guerrilla movements looked toward Moscow for arms and military training. The upshot was to turn Lebanon into an arena for regional and superpower conflict.

On the one hand, by trying to be neutral in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanonist's view denied the peculiarities and specificities of inter-Arab relations and its geographical importance to the other regional actors; it also opened up the Pandora box of the identity issue. This policy prescription lacked consensus at home and proved to be divisive and impossible to implement. On the other hand, the nationalist/Islamist's perspective suffered not only from unrealistic assessment between goals and capabilities but also served, consciously or unconsciously, as a conduit and mirror to the PLO's and Syria's policies: Lebanon's national interests took a back seat.⁴

Here is another example of how developments on the regional level had a direct impact on Lebanese domestic politics. In the contemporary history of Lebanon, the most controversial issues that have decided its citizens centred mainly around two principal arenas -- inter-Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 1950s Chamoun tried, with no success, to play an active role in regional politics by aligning Lebanon with the United States. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the state apparatus was unwilling and incapable of performing one of its basic functions -- protecting its citizens and territory -- and shielding the country from the destabilizing reverberations of inter-Arab tensions and the escalation of Arab-Israeli hostilities.

In particular, the escalation of the Arab-Israeli dispute introduced a very destabilizing element into regional politics and, as a consequence, into the Lebanese domestic scene. The state apparatus failed to adjust to this stage of Arab-Israeli hostilities created by influx of the PLO's military machine to Lebanon by formulating a politico-security policy to tackle the new situation. The notion, 'Lebanon's strength lies in its weakness', meant that the state surrendered its main role -- ensuring the security of the country.⁵ After the destruction of the PLO's military infrastructure in Jordan, Lebanon became its major theatre of operations against Israel.

The Palestinian-Israeli confrontation in Lebanon proved to be costly for several reasons: (1) making Lebanon an operational arena for inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli hostilities; (2) undermining Lebanon's political integrity as a sovereign state; and (3) exacerbating internal tensions. One wonders, for example, if the 1975 upheaval and the consequent collapse of the state apparatus could have been avoided had the Lebanese state not relinquished its security responsibly to other players. What if the state stood up to Israel in order to protect its fragile communal balance and defend the Palestinians in Lebanon, thus obviating the need for the

PLO's War of National Liberation from Lebanon? Would not the temporary loss of South Lebanon to Israel been less costly than the state of anarchy and chaos, which prevailed in the country from 1968 until 1975, leading to the breakdown of state and society? Although he had appreciated the likelihood of a military defeat, King Hussein of Jordan decided to participate in the 1967 war. Hussein realized that Jordan could not remain aloof, for this would have resulted in a civil war in Jordan.⁶

In a similar vein, under Syrian tutelage, Lebanon appears to be trapped between Israelis and Syrians. Once again, it has been turned, and turned itself, into a staging point of military operations in the occupied Shabaa farms in support of the Syrian strategy, with the consent of the Beirut authorities. Initially, the Syrians, the Lebanese authorities, and even Hizbullah, have expressed their intention to isolate Lebanon from the repercussions of the Al-Aqsa intifada, even when they have supported the Palestinians. However, some elements in Lebanon and Syria and among the Palestinians would like to turn Lebanon into a natural staging point for anti-Israeli operations. As a result, Lebanon would more likely be dragged into a Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the authorities' relationship with the Palestinian refugee population could change. The danger lies not only in Israel's retaliatory attacks but also in their reverberations on the Lebanese internal scene. Not unlike the late 1960s and early 1970s, disagreements exist among the Lebanese constituencies regarding their country's role and strategy toward Israel. More than ever, the Arab-Israeli conflict arena is the most vital one of Lebanon's foreign policy and its domestic politics as well. The most determining variable in Lebanese-Israeli relations is the nature and state of Syrian-Israeli interactions. The dyadic relationship between Beirut and Tel Aviv is in reality a triangular relationship. To what extent would deterioration of relations between Syria and Israel affect the internal debate in Lebanon as well as social harmony and co-

existence? Can tiny Lebanon afford the inherent long-term costs of being an active, open zone in the Arab-Israeli conflict? Would Syria's moment in Lebanon ultimately plunge the country into deeper abyss, not unlike that of the Nasser's era, and prove to be as fleeting and transitory as its more charismatic predecessor? ...

This leads me to a second conceptual point: On the whole, the great powers themselves recognized the primacy of regional politics. After its 1958 intervention in Beirut, the U.S. government acknowledged publicly that the genesis of the crisis lay in the tensions and strains within the Lebanese socio-political structure and the inter-Arab state system rather than in the Cold War. Neither President Camille Chamoun nor his assertive foreign minister Charles Malik fully appreciated Lebanon's limited influence in relation to Egypt and Syria's. In reality, the United States saw Cairo, not Beirut, as the nerve centre of the Arab world. The United States refused to risk a confrontation with Egypt-Syria over Lebanon. Here lies the explanation behind Washington's abandonment of Chamoun and its secret agreement with Nasser to resolve the Lebanese crisis. This modality -- negotiating with Lebanon's neighbours rather than with the state apparatus to contain upheavals inside Lebanon -- would become a pattern of U.S. behaviour toward Lebanon.

Likewise, when the 1975 war broke out in Lebanon, both superpowers did not seem very concerned about the unravelling of the Lebanese polity because they viewed the confrontation there through local, not global, lenses. Neither power was willing to intervene to stop the bloody cycle of destruction, which devastated state and society in Lebanon. Both were responding to local developments over which they had no control and which they hoped, at most, to influence in order to preserve and maximise their interests. Moscow did not have much of a stake in a traditionally pro-Western country. Although the war afforded the Soviets a golden opportunity to establish a presence on the ground through their support to the

Palestinian-leftist coalition, they did not have an ambitious agenda in Lebanon.

In a similar vein, the United States resigned itself to the fact that nothing could be done to save Lebanon. Through the 1970s, up until about 1980, U.S. officials looked at Lebanon as a 'dangerous sideshow' in the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, they did not engage diplomatically in Lebanon as long as the war there did not spill over into the other Arab-Israeli fronts. For example, in 1976 when the escalation of the Lebanese conflict threatened to drag Israel and Syria into a confrontation, U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, brokered an informal understanding between Israel and Syria whereby the two sides agreed to respect each other's security interests in the country.

In a similar deal to the one struck by the Eisenhower administration with Nasser over Lebanon in 1958, Kissinger and the State Department sanctioned a larger Syrian role in the country. The United States went further by blessing the entry of Syrian troops, who were armed and trained by the Soviets, into Lebanon in June 1976. It sacrificed Lebanon's independence on the altar of regional stability. U.S. officials were preoccupied with the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations, which were the centrepiece of American strategy at that time, the Lebanese drama was a distraction and nuisance that should not be allowed to derail the potential for Arab-Israeli peace.⁷

Ironically, Cold War considerations did not figure highly in U.S. calculations. The early 1970s saw the emergence of détente between the superpowers. The 1975 war in Lebanon was viewed in local terms rather than as an extension of the East-West struggle. Little wonder then that the near collapse of the state apparatus, a pro-Western entity, and the success of the Palestinian-leftist coalition, which was closely allied with Moscow, in the first year of the war, did not elicit any serious response by the United States. Washington's inaction raises a few critical questions about Lebanon and the Cold War. Despite its inconsequential role in

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regional and international politics, Lebanon acquired a special importance during the heyday of the east-west struggle. In contrast, détente had the effect of marginalizing Lebanon further in U.S. and Soviet eyes.

One wonders then whether the Cold War was not a blessing in disguise for Lebanon, notwithstanding the fact that it sometimes overburdened the fragile Lebanese political system. For example, would the superpowers have tolerated the disintegration of the country in the 1970s had not U.S.-Soviet rivalry been replaced by détente? To what extent did the Cold War regime serve as an effective regulating mechanism in local conflicts? Would the United States have given Syria -- a pro-Soviet state -- a yellow or green line to intervene militarily in Lebanon had the Cold War been at its height? Although it concluded a secret agreement with Nasser in 1958, the United States did not sanction Egyptian physical presence in Lebanon, attempting instead to rejuvenate Lebanese institutions. This lesson was not lost on some Lebanese politicians: they impatiently awaited the coming of the second Cold War in the early 1980s, hoping to use it in order to change the internal and regional balance of forces in their favour.

Given the disinterestedness of the great powers, tiny Lebanon, sandwiched strategically between Israel and Syria, became a political football kicked by Arabs and Israelis alike. The Israeli issue was a divisive and destabilizing factor in internal Lebanese politics due to the lack of consensus among Lebanon's constituencies vis-à-vis Israel. The Lebanese state was too constrained by domestic and regional considerations to act decisively. Furthermore, by relinquishing its main responsibility -- protecting the national territories -- the ability of the state apparatus was further undermined, creating a power vacuum which was exploited and filled by rival groups. The Palestinians, Israelis, Syrians and Iranians turned Lebanon into an arena for surrogate conflict.

This bloody circus was tolerated by the superpowers as long as it did not spill over into the Israeli-Syrian or into the Israeli-Egyptian front. As mentioned previously, when the war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, none of the superpowers felt the need to engage diplomatically there as long as the conflict did not spill over into the broader Arab-Israeli theatre. In fact, Henry Kissinger's disengagement diplomacy vis-à-vis Lebanon was not only informed by his perception of the inherent precariousness of the country, but also by the strategic need for a safety valve where Arab-Israeli tensions would be released without the threat of a major Arab-Israeli confrontation.

The above reading, however, does not imply that the Lebanese accepted their humble status and weak position in international relations. On the contrary, they suffered from an opposite tendency: an overestimation of their own and of Lebanon's importance in the world. In the heyday of the Cold War, some Lebanese leaders, being on the defensive internally and regionally, tried to compensate for their weakness by going on the offensive and by exploiting the superpower rivalry. In 1958 and 1982-83, respectively, Presidents Camille Chamoun and Amin Gemayel relied on U.S. military and diplomatic weight to win the fight against Egypt and Syria and their supporters inside Lebanon. In both instances, the opposition won the contest. Chamoun and Gemayel discovered that pursuing an active foreign policy to counterbalance their domestic and regional opponents was not only costly but also endangered the very survival of the country.

Chamoun and Gemayel suffered from a 'geostrategic myopia' caused by their misreading of the U.S. commitment to their policies. What they failed to see is that Egypt's Nasser and Syria's Asad, even as adversaries, were by far more important to appease because of their capabilities and regional status than a vulnerable, divided, unconditionally pro-American Lebanon. Both leaders learned the hard way a very basic lesson of realpolitik: a

detente with a regional superpower is more rewarding than an entente with an underdog.⁸

For example, when the Syrians and their Lebanese proxies undertook a major offensive to destabilize the pro-Western regime in Lebanon, Gemayel called on the United States to help him stop the Syrian offensive. He discovered belatedly that the United States was unwilling to over invest in Lebanon, and it could not afford the high costs involved: Lebanon was not worth it. Lebanon's Prime Minister Shafiq al-Wazzan was shocked to learn that 'the greatest power on earth does not seem able to help us'. He and the foreign minister concluded that 'the Americans talked big, but delivered little'.⁹ When the U.S. government withdrew its marines from Beirut in early 1984, Gemayel conceded defeat by scrapping the moribund May 17 agreement and appointing a new cabinet, including pro-Syrian ministers.

Gemayel's defeat, coupled with the withdrawal of U.S. forces, marked the beginning of Syria's era in Lebanon. The Reagan administration washed its hands of Lebanon and concluded that Syria had the means to maintain order in the country. Syria's 1990 attack on the Christian heartland and its occupation of the Lebanese presidential palace could not have taken place without implicit U.S. consent. U.S. officials became tired of the Lebanese headache finding in Syria a strong and effective panacea for the Lebanese problem. Contrary to President Reagan's promises, the United States did reverse gear in Lebanon. Elie Salem was told bluntly that 'Lebanon was no longer important to the United States, and no one in Washington believed that Lebanon was pivotal to the success or failure of American policy in the Middle East'.¹⁰ Little wonder that Assad was given a free hand over Lebanon's domestic and foreign policy. U.S. officials rewarded Assad in Lebanon as a means to open a dialogue with Damascus on broader regional issues, such as Iran and the Middle East peace process.

Despite Chamoun and Gemayel's brief attempt at assertiveness, a third conceptual point is worth highlighting: Lebanon has played a marginal player in regional and foreign affairs. On the whole, inaction and passivity have characterized Lebanon's external relations with the outside world since its birth in the 1920s. In particular, since the mid-1970s, the state apparatus was no longer capable of formulating foreign policy autonomously. Tiny Lebanon was seen as the sick man of the Middle East, as a non-viable political entity, and as a dangerous sideshow in the Arab-Israeli drama. In the overall context of Arab politics and east-west rivalry, Lebanon was a casualty of the system. The seeds of impotency were planted ever since the French created Greater Lebanon in 1920. Lebanon's various constituencies are deeply divided along sectarian, religious and ideological lines, behaving more like tribes than a civil society. Each community has a different conception from each other of Lebanon's role in the regional and international environment.

This leads me to my fourth conceptual point. Given the fragmentation of the internal scene, strong state control has been difficult to develop. The inability of the state apparatus to formulate and follow an active and independent foreign policy lies in the fact that the state is one among many constituencies on the Lebanese scene. The state could only function as a 'democratic management of a perennial conflict situation'.¹¹ The symptomatic weakness of the state apparatus led an observer to wonder whether Lebanon actually pursues any foreign policy, since sects and political parties have different foreign policies.¹²

Lebanon's various factions served, consciously or unconsciously, as a "conduit" for and mirror to other policies, such as those of Nasserism, the PLO, Syria, Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹³ Thus the 'Wars of Others' in Lebanon have been fought by willing Lebanese accomplices. As the weakest link in the Arab chain, Lebanon became an arena and

a safety valve where regional and international conflicts were played out, directly as well as through proxies.

Hence any systematic study of Lebanon's foreign policy must focus on the organic interplay between the internal mosaic and the external balance of power. Most of the controversial issues that have erupted into crises belong to the realm of both internal and external politics.³² Lebanon's constituencies have allied themselves with regional and great powers to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis the state or their adversaries, compromising the independence of their country and jeopardizing its national unity. As a result, Lebanon became an arena for regional and international rivalries. Complicating the situation is the failure of the Lebanese political elite to develop an inclusive, positive ideology that transcends the provincial concerns and fears of their particular constituencies.

A fifth conceptual point needs to be reiterated: regardless of the Arab hegemon who exercises political control over Lebanon, the latter has remained firmly anchored within the Western harbour. Since it achieved independence in the 1940s, Lebanon has had a pro-Western orientation, espousing a capitalist system and free market economy and maintaining extensive political, diplomatic and military relations with the West. Neither the 1958 crisis nor the 1975 war has had a major impact on Lebanon's pro-Western outlook. In his first major foreign policy initiative after the 1958 crisis, President Chehab repudiated the Eisenhower Doctrine and took serious steps to repair Lebanon's connections with Egypt's Nasser. Although the new administration appreciated the saliency of regional politics and the need to navigate carefully in its rough waters, ironically, the Chehab-Nasser rapprochement did not come at the expense of Lebanon's pro-Western orientation. Lebanon remained within the Western economic and cultural orbit maintaining its free market and independent educational

system. No expansion of Soviet influence occurred in Beirut, and Soviet-Lebanese relations were far from ideal. Similarly, Syria's control over Lebanon has neither changed the latter's pro-Western orientation nor its pursuit of *laissez faire* economics.

Michel Chiha would probably be smiling in his grave because of tiny Lebanon's ability to maintain its links with the West. Unfortunately, however, the latter neither shares the perceptions of the Lebanon elite's perceptions of their country's civilizational or unique mission in the Muslim Middle East nor of its strategic importance to the West. The opposite is true. The dominant view of Lebanon within Western foreign policy circles is of a lawless safe heaven for terrorists and militants and of a political class that is morally corrupt and that has forfeited the country's freedom and independence. I wonder how would Chiha and the other founding fathers reconceptualize and explain the Western powers' ambivalence toward Lebanon and their sell out of the tiny country at the alter of their material interests in the region. I also wonder if the misperceptions of the Lebanon elite do not reflect a deeper crisis of national identity and inability to appreciate the nature and sources of state power. These misperceptions also reveal a dismal misunderstanding of Western approaches to international diplomacy and politics.

At any rate, apart from their influence on Lebanon's small communist party, the Soviets never succeeded in establishing close links with Beirut. Ironically, official Lebanon -- be it under Egyptian or Syrian tutelage -- remained well within the Western economic and political orbit. In this context, the impact of the east-west rivalry on Lebanon's international orientation was minimal. In contrast, the Arab cold war and the Arab-Israeli wars have affected Lebanon's domestic politics and its local alignment as well. This fact testifies to the primacy of regional politics. Lebanon's destiny will continue to be shaped and conditioned by

its hegemonic neighbours rather than by great power rivalries. The historical record shows that resolving a national crisis and establishing peace at home is usually a by product of an understanding between the United States, on the one hand, and a dominant Arab power, on the other. In both the 1958 and 1990 crises, the United States negotiated directly with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and Hafez Assad's Syria, respectively - without fully consulting with the Lebanese authorities - and conferred legitimacy on their hegemony over Lebanon in return to ensure stability. Lebanon's independence was sacrificed at the altar of the regional order and the remaining superpower, the United States.

Finally, there is a qualitative difference between Lebanon's position in Arab politics and the world in general before the 1990s and after. In the eyes of both, the Lebanese government has ceased to be an independent actor in terms of having a monopoly on the use of force and taking decisions on critical internal and external matters. A general consensus exists that the centre of gravity lies in Damascus, not Beirut, and that the Lebanese authorities no longer even pretend to be masters of their own affairs. At the height of the east-west rivalry and inter-Arab competition, Lebanon had a small margin of manoeuvrability, a breathing space that enabled it to escape total absorption by a regional hegemon. A complex and fluid regional balance of power existed and militated against the subjugation of tiny states by their powerful neighbours.

The 1958 crisis is a case in point. After their military intervention in Lebanon, the Americans acknowledged Nasser's pre-eminent position and influence there and they brokered a settlement that, while taking Egyptian interests and concerns into account, preserved the integrity and relative independence of the various Lebanese institutions and constituencies. The United States remained engaged in Lebanon and U.S. businessmen increased their capital investment in the country. More or less, General Fouad Chihab and his successor's hands were unfettered in

domestic politics, and as long as they desisted from pursuing Arab and foreign policies hostile to Nasser, they conducted the state's foreign relations unhindered. As importantly, Nasser's hegemony in Lebanon was razor thin, lacking in depth and was actively opposed by other Arab states and foreign powers. More importantly than all these variables, the 1958 crisis did not substantially weaken or undermine Lebanese civil society or institutions and the political elite survived intact to fight many other battles.

The 1975 war dramatically altered not only the domestic configuration of forces but also Lebanon's role in the region and beyond. Although initially the United States half-heartedly resisted Syria's dominance in Lebanon, it then backtracked and blessed the newly imposed order. Its brief experiment with policing Lebanon's shaky peace in the early 1980s ended in a bloodbath, humiliation, and retreat. The killing of the U.S. marines, coupled with the tragedy of American citizens' taken hostage in Beirut, turned Lebanon, in U.S. eyes, into a nightmare and a perpetual migraine that could not be easily healed. In the words of a senior American official, Lebanon became an incubator of terrorism, a plague that had to be quarantined to prevent the further spread of its infection.

More or less America's European allies came to a similar conclusion. Even initially disgruntled and sceptical, the Arab states accepted Syria's fait accompli with little resistance. Seen as the terminally sick man of the Middle East, Lebanon was unwillingly admitted into the intensive care unit, knowing full well that the regional doctor in charge would administer shock therapy. And why not, reckoned the Americans and their bleeding-heart liberal European allies, after all the Lebanese were an unruly lot, unfit to govern themselves. As its big brother, Syria would be entrusted with its small neighbours and have an open-ended mandate as long as it enforces law and order in the country as well as ensures stability on the Arab-Israeli theatre. Have no doubt about

it; the Syrian order in Beirut has an American stamp written all of it. The Americans never tire of reiterating their respect and commitment to Lebanon's independence and sovereignty but their deeds speak louder than their words. The various US administrations have refrained from criticising Syria's mandate or any of its specific actions; In fact, under attack by Congress and pro-Israeli elements for being timid on Syrian military presence in Lebanon, the Bush and Clinton administrations walked a fine line between addressing the concerns of the strongly pro-Zionist Congress, while stressing the continuity of the US approach.

Despite a well-orchestrated onslaught against Syria in the United States nowadays, the new Bush administration has not joined the chorus of Syria's bashers in Washington yet. A few weeks ago, in a heated testimony to the Congress, former undersecretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Walker, was grilled by angry congressmen who demanded to know if the Syrian military presence in Lebanon should be classified as occupation. Walker did not oblige and impressed on his sceptical audience the complex and stabilizing role that Damascus performs in Lebanon. He also insinuated, however, that the United States is clearly observing Damascus' relationship with Hizbullah and its behaviour toward the sanctions against Iraq. Senior administration officials, including the president, have stressed the importance of not antagonizing Syria and keeping it engaged on sanctions against Iraq and the Arab-Israeli peace process. It is within this context that senior Bush administration found no time to meet with Patriarch Sfeir during his tour of the United States last month.

It should not come as a surprise that American foreign policy, when faced with a choice between broader regional issues and Lebanon's interests, has often chosen the former. Complicating the situation is that US officials are terrified of the jungle-mentality of Lebanese politics. would Hizbullah, not hold the country hostage and escalate further in the south if Syria

retires home? Although it is true that US officials tend to be mildly critical of Syria's unwillingness to shut Hizbullah's shop in the south, nevertheless, they figure that, without Syria's moderating influence, Hizbullah would act more recklessly and dangerously. In US eyes, Syria might not be an ideal partner but its carrot and stick approach keeps the unruly Lebanese under control.

Ironically, while Washington and its European allies criticise the Lebanese authorities for their submissiveness, they turn around and negotiate with Syria as a substitute. US secretary of state General Colin Powell did not even hother to stop by in Beirut on his recent tour of the region which was ironically intended to calm heightened tensions in Palestine and on the Israeli-Lebanese border. Despite their complementary diplomatic pronouncements, American officials appear to hold the new elite in Lebanon in contempt. They never miss an opportunity to undermine the legitimacy of the second republic in the eyes of its citizenry and the world at large. The Congress' decision to withhold aid from Lebanon is a case in point; so are Washington's frequent calls on the same new elite to stand tall and be counted as an equal member of the community of nations. Although the new elite in Lebanon never fails to disappoint, its scepticism of American foreign policy is well founded. Washington's cynicism and contempt for failed states, tiny Lebanon included, knows no boundaries.

The danger lies in the fact that the cynical US approach further undermines Lebanon's position in its immediate environment and beyond. Apart from a few dissenters, the Arab states fully recognize and even accept Lebanon's subservient, dependent relationship with Syria. To the credit of Syria, the new situation never materialized even at the height of Nasser's influence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The manner in which Arab leaders interact with their Lebanese counterparts, on both the symbolic and concrete levels, reflects the extent of Syria's influence and dominance over its small neighbour. When last year Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited

Beirut to show his solidarity after Israeli bombing of the civilian infrastructure, he felt obliged to call his Syrian counterpart in advance, thus acknowledging his unrivalled authority over Lebanon. Once more this year, in a press conference with Syria's new president, Bashar al-Assad, Mubarak, leader of the pivotal Arab state, stated clearly that Lebanon is still in need of its Syrian brother. Far from being outraged after President Emil Lahoud, unlike his Arab and foreign counterparts, failed to attend King Hussein's funeral, the Jordanians expressed understanding and even empathy and acknowledged the obvious. They even welcomed a hastily arranged visit subsequently by Lahoud after the late Syrian President Assad gave it its approval¹⁶.

These examples show the extent to which that Lebanon's position and standing has dramatically changed in Arab politics. Arab states, as a matter of fact, no longer assume that Lebanon may have a voice or a role of its own in the area. For them, this issue is no longer salient or worth discussing. Lebanon's destiny is closely tied to that of Syria, with all the consequent implications to state, society, Arab and foreign policies. It is not suggested here that Lebanon can afford to pursue an active Arab and foreign policy at this historical juncture. On the whole, historically, Lebanon has paid dearly whenever it ventured into the rough seas of Arab politics. The 1950s and early 1980s are cases in point. Now this has become a mute issue, however, Lebanon's role appears to get cancelled out altogether to the detriment not only of Lebanon but also of Syria and for the democratisation of inter-Arab relations. The weakening and marginalization of Lebanon's position in the region and beyond does not automatically get converted into currency of influence for Syria. The opposite might occur and both countries might suffer the consequences of decline and political decay.

The critical question facing Lebanon and its leadership is not to devise a foreign policy in opposition to Syria – that goes against geography, history, and culture – but rather to prevent the

seizure and monopoly of the country's external role from dramatically retarding the evolution of its liberal institutions. This problematic lies at the heart of Michel Chouh's conceptualization of Lebanon's role in the region and abroad, which revolves around the cross-cultural fertilization between Lebanon's liberal experiment and its interaction with the broader world. In this context, to what extent does the current Syrian-Lebanese relationship inhibit the growth and consolidation of liberal institutionalism in Lebanon? Do the tensions and contradictions inherent in Syrian-Lebanese relations strengthen Lebanon's culture of sectarianism and fuel and produce authoritarianism as well? What are the prospects of state- and nation-building in light of the emergence of the new elite and its internal subdivisions? And how does the further diffusion and monopolization of Lebanon's external role complicate Lebanon's crisis of a legitimate and economic?