

In Halim Barakat, ed,

Towards a Viable Lebanon,

Croom Helm, London, 1987

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## Is a Lebanese Foreign Policy Possible?

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This paper deals with a rather enigmatic, ambiguous and changing issue: Lebanon's foreign policy. Indeed, it is difficult to say whether Lebanon actually follows any particular foreign policy. Sects and political parties have different foreign policies: they use their relations with foreign powers to strengthen their positions on the local scene, creating a fertile ground for foreign interference and ignoring that in this way they may destroy their country's independence and jeopardize its national unity.

Any country's foreign policy is a reflection of the nature of the ruling power. The ambiguity of Lebanon's foreign policy is a consequence of the disintegration of the central power, and is a reflection of the radical changes which are affecting the structure of the regime. This means that the adoption of a clear and unequivocal foreign policy requires a strong and stable central power, even for a limited period of time — precisely what Lebanon has been deprived of during the past decade.

It is also possible, however, to view what is left of Lebanon's foreign policy in the light of the incredible turmoil which has taken place since the establishment of the new regime in 1982, namely, the insurrection of 6 February 1984 in Beirut, the Geneva and Lausanne conferences and the formation of Rashid al-Karami's 'National Unity' Cabinet. The Lebanese state then went through a hard stage of reconsideration at every level, especially regional and international relations. Obvious indications of this reconsideration are the cancellation of the 17 May 1983 agreement with Israel, the withdrawal of the multinational (US, British, French and Italian) force sent to Beirut in August 1982, several summit meetings between Lebanese President Amin al-Jumayyil and Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad and

a more active (and accepted) Syrian role in Lebanon, as well as the new diplomatic orientations included in Karami's ministerial declaration in May 1984 and in the 28 December 1985 Damascus agreement. Beyond these developments, one is struck by the organic relation between the internal scene and the external regional and international balances of power; in Lebanon, there is no clear-cut distinction between the two, which are intertwined and interdependent. One may even go further to say that a strictly internal scene no longer exists in Lebanon; occupations and other foreign interventions have to a large extent destroyed what was left of Lebanon's 'soul' in diplomatic affairs.

Three basic choices face Lebanon today, and any solution to Lebanon's foreign policy dilemma lies in how the Lebanese deal with these alternatives in a way that preserves what remains of their unity and independence.

## I

The first alternative is independence versus unity. Both are theoretically desirable: we as Lebanese want political and economic independence, as well as unity of the people, land and institutions, at least theoretically. However, this attitude is more rhetorical than meaningful. For unity means a unified Lebanese position at any cost, in order to prohibit the use of Lebanese factions by foreign parties and to permit diplomatic activity only by the central government. Unity also means working for the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation (unity of the territory) and putting an end to the presence of any non-Lebanese armed forces on Lebanese territory (unity of sovereignty). Independence means that the Lebanese government has the right to choose any diplomatic option without feeling more than the usual and reasonable pressure any state makes upon another, especially where one state is more powerful.

This does not mean that the Lebanese must choose one of these two goals at the expense of the other: attaining one goal brings us closer to the other. The whole question lies in deciding which goal will have priority at a specific time.

If independence is given priority, the consequences will probably be dangerous: the deterioration of relations with Syria at a time when Lebanon is in great need of better relations with its

strong Arab neighbor. It might also threaten internal unity, since independence was the recurrent theme of the Jumayyil regime in 1982-4, leading the opposition to seek external help, seeing in the 'independentist' orientation of the government an attempt to camouflage its reliance on foreign powers in order to isolate, and even liquidate, the Syrian-supported opposition. Moreover, none of the Lebanese sects is currently capable of playing the role of Lebanon's Prussia by securing independence first and then unifying the country under its leadership. When independence is not the common goal of all the sectarian communities, it tends to be the means by which one community tries to extend its hegemony over the others.

Thus, unity must be given precedence over independence; that is, we should give precedence to building a unified internal position over the external stating of such a position. No real independence can be possible with such a level of internal disintegration, nor with the feeling of some that they are threatened by the others' hegemonistic schemes. Until now, all warring Lebanese factions have resorted to foreign parties in order to strengthen their positions on the local scene, and this behavior will go on as long as these factions cannot identify their own interests with the defense of Lebanon's independence. These factions will be ready to defend the Lebanese state and its sovereignty only when they are able to feel that they belong to the system in a just and equal way.

In addition, if priority is given to the goal of unity over the goal of independence, it must also have priority over the demands of radical equality, even though democracy can hardly be thought of without equality. In fact, it is as dangerous to call for a radical reform of the system as to call for absolute independence, because they both could prevent Lebanon from attaining the goal of unity. What is basically needed is an equitable solution to the issue of participation (*musharaka*) in government, on the one hand, and an agreement over the necessity of independence, on the other, together with unanimity over the fact that a credible level of internal unity must remain an essential issue. It is evident that such a deal will be refused by the religious fundamentalists, sectarian hardliners and those scheming for partition as well as by many hostile countries.

Such an option has clear consequences: since the heaviest accusation against Israel is that it seeks to undermine Lebanese society to the point where a unified country is no longer viable,

and since Syria is accused of influencing Lebanese decisions so that they conform with Damascus' regional interests, giving priority to the goal of unity over the goal of independence at this time means giving precedence to the struggle against Israeli occupation over efforts (even if they are legitimate) to follow a foreign policy different from Syria's.

## II

The second alternative involves the issue of Lebanon's Arabism: it is the alternative between belonging and interest, between Arabism out of conviction and Arabism as a compulsory *status quo*.

On the Lebanese scene, enthusiastic Arabism has jeopardized the country's independence, unity and civil peace, since it was in the name of Arabism that many Lebanese factions favored the Palestinian armed presence, not only in the struggle against Israel but also as a party to the domestic conflict. These factions saw Lebanon as an indivisible part of the Arab nation which must henceforth share its joys and pains, defeats and victories. They thus advocated favouring the Arabs' grand national interests at the expense of any narrow local (in this case Lebanese) consideration. This vision led these factions to accept Arab interference in local issues and to consider any non-Arab (even when non-Israeli) interference as an absolute evil. This parochial Lebanese interpretation of Arabism has clear domestic political implications: it tends to deprive the faction which could be described as Christian (by way of simplification) of any foreign support and to limit Arab support, which is considered legitimate, to only one internal faction (basically the Muslims). Hence, the conception of Arab nationalism shared by many Lebanese — including a number of Christians — is not Arabism of conviction, but a camouflage for a local ploy to disrupt the internal sectarian system, to the detriment of the 'Christian' half of the country.

As for *status quo* Arabism, it refuses the principle of Lebanese political and cultural belonging to the Arab world, and considers that Lebanon's Arab orientation is dictated by geographic, not ideological, considerations. Hence, the call of its adherents that Lebanon should follow a policy of equilibrium between an environment it did not choose voluntarily and other

regional and international relations, counterbalancing the Arab influence by making it one of many influences over Lebanon. Until recently, these 'other' regional and international relations were those old links with France, and later with the United States and the region's conservative states. This concept of equilibrium between Arab and non-Arab influences played an important role in 1943, when the National Pact was formulated, and in 1958 in the limited American deal with Egyptian President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir on Lebanon. The new factor in this respect is the gradual reliance of those favoring this trend on Israeli military might (and its potential as a deterrent) to counterbalance the Arab influence in Lebanon and to meet the (largely Muslim) pressure to change the domestic balance of power under the veil of Lebanon's 'Arabization'. Settling this dialectic becomes possible only when we consider the following.

### **The Internal level**

It is probably wise to divest the National Pact of 1943 of the mythological aura bestowed upon it by school textbooks and to acknowledge that this pact is no longer operational. For if the pact were on the surface an agreement between the Lebanese, or at least between some of them, on how to rule the country, it was also a way to profit locally from a larger regional deal. The 1930s had been essentially a period of Franco-Syrian confrontation and the Second World War came as a blow to the stronger party, France. Hence, the National Pact was probably possible only because Syrian nationalist leaders abandoned their Lebanese allies in order to secure international support, which was given to them on the condition that Syria accept the Lebanese entity. Hence the external party (Syria) abandoned its internal ally (Lebanon's Muslims) before the latter dispensed with the former, even though the two processes were intertwined. It is always useful to spot the periods when local factions have been relinquished by their foreign patrons to try and strike a deal on the future of the country.

What has probably ended with the old pact is its dualism, for the two sectarian communities (Maronites and Sunnis) that drafted it can no longer monopolize the representation of the many existing sects through a dual pact. This was implied in Karami's ministerial declaration of 31 May 1985, which

indicated that the Lebanese entity cannot be defended by the (Maronite) community which was most privileged by its creation, and that it has become impossible merely to replace this prevailing community by another in any future formula. Hence the 1984 declaration, which gave extensive privileges to the Council of Ministers, transformed it into a quasi-collective governing body. A partly consociational executive was established with veto power recognized by at least four major and/or militarized communities (Maronite, Druze, Sunni, Shi'ite). This collegial formula was later confirmed in the Damascus 'agreement of 27 January 1985.

### **The Arab level**

One should notice here the specific character of the current phase; after the Arab defeat of 1967 and the many important events of 1970, the Arab regional system became dominated by a trend toward disintegration.

From Iraq to Morocco, in the 1950s and the 1960s, the polarization phenomenon had its bases in ideological factors; the whole Arab world was first split between the trend toward independence and the Hashimite-British trend; later between the Arab nationalists, the pro-Western conservative trend and the radical leftist currents. This ideological polarization constituted one of the causes of the 1958 troubles in Lebanon, but it was also a rather effective means to end them, since by reaching an agreement with 'Abd al-Nasir (who was by then the incontestable leader of Arab nationalist forces) through an American mixture of show of force and mediation, a solution to the internal crisis became a much easier goal.

However, since 1970 the Arab regional system has been dominated by other polarizations more strategic and geographic than ideological. The regional system has disintegrated into a number of sub-regional systems — that is, small groups of neighbouring states — each dominated by a conflict and/or competition between regional powers: Morocco vs Algeria, Algeria vs Libya, Libya vs Egypt, etc. As for Arab Asia, and since Iraq has exhausted its capabilities and endangered its own existence in its war with Iran, the process of polarization takes place around states with regional ambitions, such as Saudi Arabia within the framework of the Gulf Co-operation Council.

or Syria in the Arab Near East.

The more each Arab sub-system is concerned with its local problems and conflicts, the more the Lebanese problem (or the Palestinian) is marginalized. And should any Arab country regain interest in Lebanon, it must reach it through Damascus, or be ready to oppose (or at least compete with) Damascus in Lebanon. Whether or not one criticizes this state of affairs or favors it, one must recognize it and identify its causes, which can be summarized as follows:

(i) First, the regional system has disintegrated into local and separate sub-systems where geographic proximity and hegemonic practices are the determining factors.

(ii) Second, the Arab-Israeli struggle has been largely reduced to a Syrian-Israeli confrontation. Jordan still has not overcome the consequences of the 1967 defeat. As for Egypt, it has chosen the path of the 1979 separate agreements and cannot evade this path in the near future. Iraq is involved in a costly war, the consequences of which are unpredictable. As for the PLO, one cannot disregard what happened to it in Beirut (summer of 1982) and Tripoli (autumn of 1983). These developments have obviously favored Syria's leadership in the region, and therefore heavily increased Syrian influence in Lebanon.

For these reasons, the conflict between the Arabism of conviction and the Arabism of *status quo* has become largely artificial. For what convictions are still possible when Arab solidarity is almost non-existent, when most of the institutions of the Arab League are paralyzed and ineffective, when sweeping Islamic fundamentalism threatens the ideological and geographical strongholds of Arabism? What convictions are still possible with the deterioration of nearly all relations between Arab states, and with each Arab faction or country encouraging regional non-Arab or international interference to strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* other Arabs? On the other hand, is it possible to reduce Arabism to a mere fact or to a secondary matter? Are not the deep linguistic, cultural and often family relations between Arabs something more than a mere *fait accompli*? Is not Arabism part and parcel of how most Lebanese define themselves?

But even though the dispute over Arabism is outdated in



many Arab countries, it still adds fuel to the Lebanese conflict. Lebanese who are very reluctant to identify with the Arabs tend to forget that Nasirism, for example, has protected small Arab states; it brought Lebanon peace and stability in 1958 (even though it had contributed to its destabilization before) and defended Kuwait's independence and sovereignty in the face of Iraqi claims, even though it did so in the name of Arab unity. The Arab League's charter, on the other hand, has guaranteed the member states' independence. The Lebanese economy has flourished largely thanks to its strong links with the Arab world. It is therefore inaccurate to describe Arabism as a mere threat to Lebanon, or at least to its Christians, especially when compared with the new wave of religious fundamentalism which is sweeping the area.

It is equally dangerous to reduce Arabism to a mere political alignment with Syria, even if this was what it meant to many Lebanese leaders who in 1984-5 were repudiating their Israeli leanings or their support of the 17 May agreement. Their adoption of the so-called 'Arab option' was a tactical alignment with Syria's positions, which could be reversed at any time in the future. To survive as a real option, Arabism should be a cultural project that no Lebanese sectarian force could use in its conflict with another. Such a project should be as much concerned with Arab unity as with internal unity in each Arab state (if not more). It should be a 'civilized' project which does not overly indulge in the glorification of the past, whether religious or national, and be firmly based upon the principles of citizenship, equality, modernization and on a scrupulous respect for human rights. For the inequality among sectarian groups prevailing in Lebanon is only a mild reflection of the many aspects of the blatant inequality prevailing in the Arab world, and of which Christians sometimes, blacks, Shi'a or Kurds other times, and Arab women everywhere are victims, deprived of their rights as citizens. Lebanon has a genuine interest in such a new Arabist wave, and the tragedy of Lebanon today is to a large extent both a reflection and a consequence of its absence.

### III

The last alternative to be examined here concerns Lebanon's position within the international system. The Karami ministerial

declaration of 31 May 1984 states the necessity of clinging to a policy of non-alignment without abandoning relations with friendly countries or, above all, relations with the 'Free World'. Here lies some contradiction: a policy of non-alignment yet friendly relations with the 'Free World.' However, non-alignment is so wide a movement, bringing together Cuba and Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Algeria, North and South Yemen, Somalia and Ethiopia, Iraq and Iran, that the expression itself is no longer really meaningful. As for the 'Free World', it is a concept that goes back to the days of the Cold War and is no longer used in respectable contemporary political writings. What the ministerial declaration probably meant is that Lebanon's foreign policy does not lie between East and West, but further to the right, between the non-aligned movement — practically dominated by countries considered as friends of the Soviet Union but not as its allies — and the West.

In fact, the internal struggle in Lebanon does not reflect the East-West confrontation, even though this confrontation always had an effect on the development of the situation in Lebanon, especially during the 1982-4 period.

Lebanon's position in the 'center-right' of the international system means that while espousing a capitalist system and *laissez-faire* economy and establishing economic, political diplomatic and military relations on a wide scale with the West, there is a consideration for Arab interests in the struggle against Israel which leads to a more friendly attitude *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

This was the essence of Shihabist foreign policy, characterized by closeness to the West, but only to the extent permitted by a generally pro-Nasir Arab policy. If our explanation is accurate, the 1984 ministerial declaration would be a real political event, since it brings Lebanon back from a policy of complete alignment with the West and especially the United States in 1982-3 to its initial position, which was elaborated by Philippe Takla, Rashid al-Karami and Fu'ad Shihab: that is, between the West and the non-aligned movement. This position was translated at the time into an alignment with Nasir's policy on the regional scene and with the West in the international system, a happy mixture during the years from 1958 to 1967.

Shihab's foreign policy did have two positive aspects: it best represented the regional interests of the country, and it secured internal stability. Lebanese merchants are Western-oriented for

the most part, and the Lebanese military is armed, trained and thinks according to Western standards. The diplomat's role tends to correct this dual pro-Western orientation by devising a foreign policy which is more than a mere expression of the active pro-West behaviour of the Lebanese merchant and of the average Lebanese officer.

However, the local, regional and international situations are very different today from what they were in the 1960s and the Shihabist era, and they do not illustrate a cyclic evolution of history. So how would it be possible to formulate a foreign policy which is not identical, but is at least close, to the Shihabist policy at the present time? Perhaps the following points should be adopted.

First, Lebanon's position *vis-à-vis* the United States should be reformulated on the following bases:

(i) To assert that Lebanon is not aligned with the socialist camp, neither in the international scene nor in inter-Arab politics.

(ii) To stress Lebanon's determination not to allow its territory to become a stage for international terrorism nor an active front against Israel while other fronts are quiet.

(iii) To assert Lebanon's acceptance of the liberal *laissez-faire* economy and its strong links with the world market.

(iv) To refuse any American armed presence on Lebanese territory and to downgrade substantially all military links with the United States (training, arms sales, intelligence co-operation, etc.).

(v) To avow that the active pro-American option that constituted the government's policy in 1982-3 has seriously harmed internal unity and was not realistic on the regional level.

(vi) To press Washington for a clear and uncompromising attitude concerning Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, to obtain its participation as a mediator in negotiations for an unconditional Israeli withdrawal and to share publicly the Arab criticism of its consistent and unfair position *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian people.

Second, it should reconsider the fact that the West does not mean the United States alone; Lebanon has had close links in the past with a number of European countries, and with France

in particular. Suddenly the French found themselves treated as strangers in a country with which they have historical links and toward which they were following a much more careful policy than their American counterparts. This was one of the regime's most serious mistakes in 1982-3. Paris and London are not merely stopping-places on the road to Washington; they are also capitals of independent countries, and relations with them must be based on this fact.

Third, as regards relations with Moscow, Lebanon's negligence is obvious and hardly forgivable; it did not even have an ambassador there for more than two years, and before that time the embassy was hardly effective. This policy toward the Soviet Union was short-sighted and uselessly biased. It would be possible to support the Soviet Union's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its realistic call for an international conference on the Middle East. The fact that Lebanon is not aligned with the Soviet Union must not make it a partner with the American scheme which aims at driving the Soviets from the region; the Lebanese as Lebanese (and Arabs) have a genuine interest in making the region regain its independence *vis-à-vis* the United States, and a certain level of Soviet presence can be useful in this respect.

Fourth, Lebanon has spent one-and-a-half years as an unconditional ally of the United States, despising international organizations. It is as easy to criticize the United Nations and its limited effectiveness as to criticize the Arab League and the paralysis of its institutions. But small countries like Lebanon are these organizations' spoiled children. The UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon) presence in south Lebanon, despite its limitations, has been a stabilizing factor and a useful reminder of Lebanon's rights and sovereignty *vis-à-vis* Israel's arrogant interventionism.

During the autumn of 1983, a resolution was proposed to the UN Security Council. It demanded the extension of the UNIFIL area to the whole Lebanese territory, where the force could supervise disarmament of all militias, return of all refugees since 1975 to their place of origin and withdrawal of all non-Lebanese armed forces. This proposal was short-lived because of its dismissal by the Lebanese government, which was still betting on its American friends (because of US Secretary of State George Shultz's clinging to the 17 May agreement), and also because of the lack of co-ordination with the Soviet Union,

which vetoed it in the Security Council. On the other hand, what happened in 1978 when Israel invaded part of south Lebanon must make us reconsider our disregard for international organizations. The UN at the time played a very positive role in 'freezing' (if not in solving) a threatening crisis. The declaration of the Cabinet of Prime Minister Karami in 1984 was positive because it reintroduced certain basic principles which were ignored in 1982-3:

(i) It rejected the slogan used in 1982-3, 'withdrawal of all foreign forces', and replaced it with the expression, 'liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation'.

(ii) It stressed the fact that dissension among the Lebanese exists, and that it has transformed Lebanon into a stage for by-proxy regional and international wars.

(iii) It insisted that Lebanon adopt a non-aligned policy.

(iv) It stressed that south Lebanon is the most essential and central issue for Lebanon.

(v) It called for the increase of UN forces in numbers and effectiveness.

(vi) It reaffirmed Lebanon's belonging to the Arab world.

An important change in the foreign policy process was also introduced by the declaration; it emphasized the role of the Cabinet in all fields, and especially in the field of foreign policy. We only have to compare Article 52 of the Constitution, which gives the president of the republic the right to conclude and promulgate international treaties even though he is not responsible before Parliament, with the ministerial declaration, which stressed the role of the Cabinet as a collegial government, in essence a consociational body, where the various sectarian groups counterbalance one another and recognize one another's veto power on basic issues.

However, the first months which followed the adoption of this new line were less successful than forecast. The Syrian government was apparently always ready to help and the Israelis were expressing a probably sincere willingness to withdraw. The US government, probably with Shultz still infuriated by the cancellation of 'his' agreement, was, however, reluctant to be involved in any further step before the 1984 presidential elections. A new failure (military or diplomatic) would have had negative effects on President Reagan's re-election campaign. A

representative of the Soviet Union came to Beirut twice in the year, but Beirut knew that Moscow could offer little help with Israel. By autumn 1984, both London and Paris were showing new interest in pleading Lebanon's cause with the Israelis.

But Lebanon was not yet ready to take advantage of this new environment. Basically, the 'liberation' issue was too heavily linked to reforms in the political system. For example, in order to be able to send the Lebanese Army to south Lebanon, the president demanded that it should be reunified. But in order to reunify it, the opposition insisted that leadership should be less sensitive to the Maronite mainstream. Hence Lebanon was in a stalemate. Other examples abound.

We said earlier that national unity should be given priority over liberation as well as over political reforms. But all of these three goals seem sometimes to be absent from Lebanese politicians' minds. They appear not to hesitate between these three objectives but to forget all of them, some looking basically for the preservation of old sectarian and/or personal privileges, and others seeking the acquisition of such personal and/or sectarian ones. By 1985, the sectarian conflict became overriding, opposing the Maronites and the others, Christians and Muslims, Shi'a and Sunnis and later Shi'a and Druze. The south gradually became a marginal issue even for those who preferred to be absorbed by its liberation. 'Reformist' proposals were publicized one after the other, to be immediately criticized with no serious consideration.

By the end of 1985, a formula involving the leaders of the three main militias was found, thanks to active brokerage by the Syrian officials. It was signed on 28 December 1985 but was frozen some three weeks later because of an acute struggle for power within the Maronite community and, according to Muslim leaders, because of Israeli and American interference. While introducing substantial reforms in the political system, this agreement reaffirms the country's Arab identity, which is basically to be embodied in strong multiform links with Syria. These links actually give Syria a large role in the rehabilitation of the Lebanese Army (training and intelligence sharing) and the right to deploy its own army in Lebanese territory. Lebanon is asked in Chapter 4 of the agreement not to be 'the door by which Syria's attempts to establish a strategic parity with Israel are threatened'. When trained and reorganized, the Lebanese Army is to participate in the establishment of this parity. The

two countries have the same enemies and should therefore coordinate their information, diplomatic, military, economic and education policies.

The opposition encountered by this agreement, particularly in Maronite ranks, is based on its radical reform of the constitutional system as well as on the contents of Chapter 4 establishing 'privileged relations' with Syria. The two parts are equally unacceptable for some, while others have shown some willingness to strike a trade-off with Syria, in which Chapter 4 is retained and the domestic issues are reviewed in a less radical way. Whatever its intrinsic merits, this agreement was a serious attempt to end the war, an undertaking not only accepted but even initiated by the militias' leaders. In this sense, all who think that national unity is a prerequisite to national liberation, long-term reforms and independence felt that the Damascus agreement could have been an important step. But the Lebanese have so often shown an incredible mastery in spoiling the opportunities to end their war.