

**Lebanon:
Threshold for Regional Stability**

Amine Gemayel
President of the Republic of Lebanon, 1982-1988

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Introduction

It is an honor to participate in this Director's Forum at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. This Center is a great venue for respectful dialogue and reasoned debate and is recognized as such throughout the world.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Wilson Center, which operates under the skillful direction of Lee Hamilton and Michael Van Dusen. As co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group, Mr. Hamilton again demonstrated why he enjoys a well-deserved reputation as one of America's wisest statesmen.

The Centrality of Lebanon

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Middle East region is desperately in need of peace. Most obviously, the Middle East needs peace in Iraq and in Palestine. Additionally, intensifying sectarian tremors threaten to tear open fault lines throughout the Arab world.

Given the realities of persistent and widespread conflict, what justifies calling Lebanon, as I do today, "The Threshold for Regional Stability?" The answer to this question begins with an understanding of how the Lebanese situation is central to the conditions in the Middle East and beyond.

The centrality of Lebanon derives, I believe, from three key factors: cultural, economic, and strategic.

First, taking the long view which history provides, Lebanon is intimately connected to, and a part of, both the Mediterranean cultural zone and the Middle Eastern cultural zone, and it also enjoys strong cultural links with Europe.

Because Lebanon is located at the point where three cultural zones converge, it inevitably serves as a channel for social and political ideas. By the same token, Lebanon is an incubator of socio-political ideas, trends, and movements that the Lebanese, with their typical entrepreneurial spirit, "export" abroad.

In short, Lebanon is the crucible of the Middle East in which the region's diverse cultural trends, religious tenets, and political ideologies interact in a dynamic fashion.

Second, the centrality of Lebanon arises because it is both a crucial economic entrepôt to, and a vital economic model for, the wider Middle East.

As an entrepôt, Lebanon's status as a center of trade and transshipment has been an established fact since the days of the ancient Phoenicians, and need not be elaborated.

As an economic model for the region Lebanon has long operated the kind of free market economy upon which the future prosperity of the Middle East depends.

Third and finally, the centrality of Lebanon rests upon certain immutable laws of power politics.

Under prevailing conditions, Lebanon is assigned by its powerful neighbors one of two roles: either a classic buffer state that maintains a precarious neutrality, or a proxy that is exploited to fight wars and conflicts not of its making and not in its interest.

In the final analysis, as either a buffer or a proxy, Lebanon has been, is, and shall be the subject of acute concern to neighboring, regional, and even global powers and forces of all kinds, both states and non-state actors.

Lebanon as a Threshold

Today, it is my thesis that what has always been Lebanon's peril—its status as a buffer or a proxy—can be transformed into an opportunity, namely: Lebanon as a threshold for regional stability.

How can Lebanon—this land of many religious groups, many ideologies, and many imported turmoils—be transformed into becoming a threshold for regional stability? The answer, of course, begins with achieving a solution to Lebanon's ongoing political crisis.

If the Lebanese people, along with the inevitable outside actors, achieve conflict resolution in Lebanon, then this success will serve as a powerful example of how other regional conflicts can be solved, or at least managed in a more peaceful way.

Beyond the potent symbolism that success in Lebanon will engender, any Lebanese solution will depend on the kind of intense diplomatic contacts that can, with relative ease, be redirected to other cases.

Although Lebanon as a buffer is less destructive for her people than Lebanon as a proxy, the real hope for the country, and the region, lies in its potential to act as a threshold for stability.

The Threshold Option and the Need for Internal Dialogue

If the “threshold option” is to develop, then Lebanon needs a sustained internal dialogue coupled with vigorous international diplomacy. Certain positive steps have already been taken on both tracks.

Internally, Lebanon’s ethnic and religious composition—which in certain respects parallels the composition of other Middle Eastern countries like Iraq—means that its existence as a stable nation and state depends on coexistence between distinct groups. Therefore, dialogue, mutual understanding, and reconciliation among Lebanon’s various communities has been, is, and will be essential.

At this crucial moment in its history Lebanon is faced with two possible futures. The first future—to which I am devoted with determination—is a path of dialogue and reconciliation.

The second future is a road to destruction, and its first landmark is a kind of coup d’état to unseat the country’s legitimate, democratically elected government. This threatened coup is aimed not at a single leader or even a group of ministers; rather, its target is Lebanon’s political soul—the system of constitutional democracy.

The destabilizing street actions now taking place in Lebanon are *not* akin to the necessary, rough-and-tumble of parliamentary democracy. Rather, a political minority is perpetrating these disturbances in order to subvert the constitutional and legal norms of Lebanon.

Above the din of discordant, dangerous, and even deadly street actions now wracking Beirut, the basic facts of Lebanese politics speak for themselves:

- As stipulated by the letter and the spirit of Lebanon’s constitution, the current government led by His Excellency Prime Minister Fouad Siniora is supported by a majority of the Lebanese parliament, itself a democratically elected body;
- The Lebanese administration is a representative government which exercises its functions in accordance with all—repeat all—national and international standards of democratic governance;
- Opposition forces enjoy absolute rights to free speech and to compete in free and fair elections, and neither of these rights has been, or will be, abrogated in any way;
- Opposition forces seeking to topple the Siniora government are not motivated by democratic yearnings—a proposition that is absurd on its face because they already enjoy every right and privilege that Lebanese democracy bestows;
- The weapon of political assassination—which in a democracy is the essence of terrorism—is wielded exclusively against members and supporters of the government, including my own beloved son, Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel;
- The true goal of opposition forces, and their foreign supporters, is to block the establishment of a U.N. tribunal to investigate the assassinations of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, my dear son Pierre, and others.

Perhaps the essential point for Americans, and all supporters of democracy, is that the government of Lebanon is a *representative* government, therefore the resignation of the current administration will *not* resolve but will only accelerate the political crisis.

The other facet that must be stressed is that Lebanon's political crisis is not completely, or even essentially, a domestic phenomenon. Foreign powers are applying enormous pressure in order to advance their own interests at the expense of Lebanese national interests.

In this situation, Hezbollah and its allies do not deny that they benefit from Iranian and Syrian support and influence.

The facts I have shared in this speech are not contested—and indeed are not contestable—by any fair-minded observer. Lebanon is a democracy under grave internal and external threat.

A moment ago I mentioned the necessity of dialogue, and it certainly is incumbent on the government to respond to the legitimate grievances of the opposition, even if such grievances are not always expressed according to democratic norms.

In the view of supporters of the legitimate, democratically elected government, the solution to Lebanon's political crisis is to start the process of reform by having parliament elect a new president of the Republic.

A new incumbent in the presidency will restore that office to the dignity and authority it should, by rights, enjoy. With this major step towards stability in place, all Lebanese parties can then work together to form a new government of national unity and reconciliation.

What neither the government of Prime Minister Siniora, nor its supporters in parliament and the country at large, will accept is an end to the U.N. tribunal to investigate Lebanon's cycle of political assassinations. This international tribunal is essential to preserve both Lebanon's national security and the physical security of Lebanese politicians.

Without national security there is no sovereign state, and without physical security there is no democratic system. The U.N. tribunal can help preserve both and is, therefore, nonnegotiable.

Within Lebanon and also regionally, talks to settle the Lebanese crisis continue at a high level. Although actions by the government's opponents have come dangerously close to inciting large-scale violent conflict, I am personally convinced that no major figure in Lebanon today wants a return to civil war.

The Threshold Option and the Need for Regional Diplomacy

If the first track of Lebanon's transformation into a threshold for regional stability is internal dialogue, then the second track is international diplomacy. In fact, these two tracks are not distinct but are one.

Perhaps more than any other nation, Lebanon is a "foreign policy country" in that its domestic affairs and external relations cannot be separated from each other. Indeed, some of the most promising initiatives for resolving the Lebanese crisis have been articulated by external actors such as the Arab League and Saudi Arabia.

A realistic assessment leads to the conclusion that until substantial movement is achieved on some of the Middle East's most intractable conflicts, Lebanon will remain a proxy for struggle rather than a threshold for stability.

Other opportunities to start the process of building momentum may emerge from the upcoming meeting of the "Road Map" Quartet in Berlin. Hopefully, the United States, Russia, the United Nations, and the European Union will forge a new determination to jumpstart peace diplomacy on an urgent basis.

In addition, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has called for the next meeting of the Arab League to take place in his capital, Riyadh. It will be recalled that in March 2002, as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, His Royal Highness took the lead in drafting what came to be called the "Arab Peace Initiative."

The upcoming Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia may provide an opportunity to further develop the Arab Peace Initiative, whose terms, including the following, remain valid as the basis of a peace process:

- "Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967";
- "Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem";
- "The acceptance of the establishment of a Sovereign Independent Palestinian State on the Palestinian territories occupied since the 4th of June 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza strip";
- "[Arab countries] consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region"; and,
- "[Arab countries] establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace".

SOURCE: Website of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Washington, DC (available at [http://www.jordanembassyus.org/arab_initiative.htm]).

A major Lebanese stake in the Arab-Israeli peace process concerns the status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. For decades, a national consensus has existed in Lebanon against the permanent residency of Palestinian refugees in the country.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts, and I would be happy to take your questions. Before doing so, however, I would like to reiterate my main theme: Lebanon as a threshold for regional stability.

I began by articulating three factors that place Lebanon at the forefront: cultural, economic, and strategic. My analysis in this regard can and should be a subject for debate.

Not subject to debate, however, is the fact that Lebanon is periodically thrust into the epicenter of regional and, indeed, global politics. It certainly was during my presidency back in the 1980s.

As political analysts we must ponder the question: "Why is it that a small nation of less than 4 million souls tucked away in the farthest corner of the Arab world excites the acute, intense, and sustained interest of state and non-state actors from all over the Middle East and indeed from all over the world?"

I submit that the reason for this extraordinary condition is that world recognizes that Lebanon is a threshold whose destiny reverberates far and wide.

For this reason, may Lebanon emerge from its travails in a condition that will honor the vision of its founding fathers: as a constitutional democracy where personal freedoms, including freedom of speech and freedom of religion, are ingrained in the political culture.

It is as a democracy—an *Arab* democracy—that Lebanon will make its greatest contribution.

The Lebanese people, including my family, have paid a high price for their commitment to Lebanon's independence and democratic values. Having seen my brother and son perish, I pray that Lebanon will reemerge as a sovereign, healthy democracy that can be a threshold for regional stability.

Thank you.

[End]