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## **TOWARDS A CONSIDERATION OF LEBANON IN WASHINGTON**

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*N.B: The article only reflects  
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## TOWARDS A CONSIDERATION OF LEBANON IN WASHINGTON

With new presidents elected in both Lebanon and the United States, deep political transformations have taken place in both countries in a short span of time. The new reality commands an immediate attention to shifting policies, but also necessitates a reconsideration of approaches that have not succeeded in highlighting Lebanese interests in Washington to a mutually beneficial and adequate level.

Relations between the United States and Lebanon — in line with the relations between Washington and the totality of world governments — are inherently asymmetrical. The impact of US policy on Lebanon, whether such policy is characterized by action or lack of, is deeply felt. It may even rise, in either case, to the level of primary agency in

shaping Lebanese reality. On the other hand, what Lebanon may constructively offer the United States is extremely modest, and any danger that it may harbor remains minor and tangentially containable.

Lebanese assessments of Washington's consideration of the impact of Lebanon on its interests are formulated through elements gathered from two conduits: (1) diplomatic, that is the respective embassies in Beirut and Washington, and (2) political, through the visits of Lebanese politicians to the US capital. There is an inherent bias in both conduits towards an undue magnification of the importance of Lebanon in US interests and political consciousness. While contradicting most Lebanese assessments, the more sober reality is that Lebanon occupies

a low priority position in the hierarchy of US international concerns, and that much of the attention allocated to Lebanon is derivative — Lebanon is more relevant to the United States as part of a larger whole, than it is on its own. Specifically, the low interest in Lebanon is somewhat elevated when the concern is the security of Israel — to which the United States has a commitment based on culture, values, and history; or when the concern is to contain the spillover effect of the Syrian crisis, or to interdict Iranian expansionism. The limited interest in Lebanon may even be governed by specific issues of concern, such as addressing its status in previous decades as an exporter of narcotics. A novel, but potentially expiring, commodity to transact with US agencies may be the intelligence and investigative efforts of Lebanese security services in tracking terrorist activities.

The US Government is structured to pursue a comprehensive approach in considering and assessing international developments. Departments and agencies — State, Defense, Treasury, the intelligence services, and many others — house special desks tasked with data collection and analysis of developments in virtually every country worldwide, formulating recommendations and implementing directives along set procedures. Lebanon is no exception in being a subject of study. However, together with other lesser priority countries, Lebanon is often assigned to desks tasked with multiple subjects, or ones headed by younger or less experienced analysts — while experts are allocated to higher priority issues. A more accurate, and more modest, assessment of the place of Lebanon in Washington's consideration of its interests is thus reflected in the

place of Lebanon in the US Government administrative structure.

This structural limitation, however, can and has been overcome, albeit rarely, through the personal relations of Lebanese political figures with US decision-makers. The last notable instance was with the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri; earlier cases where a meaningful presence in relevant circles in Washington overcame structural limitations were with President Amine Gemayel and the late President Camille Chamoun.

A sustained soft presence may also help mitigate the administrative limitation. Engaging opinion-makers – media, academia, and the policy community, as well as maintaining visibility in society and culture, may help balance the structural shortcoming. The Lebanese-American community would

be slated to an important role accordingly, in light of its considerable size and history, as well as the achievements of many US citizens of Lebanese descent. As a community, however, the Lebanese Americans exhibit multiple divisions, and have not coalesced as an influential group.

This is not to say that the prospects of Lebanon in the United States are dire. It is instead to underline the wide divergence between the assessment of the importance of Lebanon to the United States when considered from Beirut, where it is deemed high, and its reading in Washington where it is modest at best. Taking stock is a necessity to address the next phase.

It is evident that Lebanon, which has rejected the French Mandate in the course of the Second World War, at the urging of Great Britain, has

been for much of its nearly three quarters of a century as an “independent” state, under the custodianship of a variable numbers of external powers. Lebanon’s internal peace has largely been a function of the agreement and accord of these powers. Any confrontation among them is reflected as internal strife in Lebanon, while their entente yields relative stability. Naturally, internal Lebanese actors are not absolved of responsibility in shaping local political developments, or even of nudging the external powers towards conflict. Still, a hard truth that many Lebanese prefer to ignore is that Lebanon is at the highest levels managed by an implicit “Board of Directors” of external powers. In its current incarnation, the “Board” consists of Saudi Arabia, Iran, France, the United States, and Syria. The lines of demarcation of today’s “Board” are between Iran, with

a hegemony built upon militias and finances, and Saudi Arabia which relies on its economic influence and vassal political presence. As to today’s United States, it is guided by its overall pivot and retreat policy towards the Middle East in general, except for questions of terrorism and international security, and is inclined to delegate the assessment of the Lebanese situation, but not necessarily the decision making, to its “Board” allies, namely France and Saudi Arabia.

Delegation was not the permanent attitude of Washington towards Lebanon. It even appeared, albeit briefly, that the importance of Lebanon mandates its elevation to a self-standing concern at the White House, and not merely as part of other more complex dossiers. This happened during the George W Bush Administration, in reaction to events on

the ground — and not as a deliberate US decision.

The aftermath of the assassination of PM Rafiq Hariri in 2005 witnessed a heightened mobilization by pro-Syrian forces, culminating in a massive rally on March 8th, confirming in Washington the conviction that the Syrian regime is still in firm control of Lebanon. The United States had been part of the implicit mandate provided in the early 1990s to the Syrian regime to effectively administer Lebanon in exchange for the Syrian participation in the military campaign to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein (and for the interdiction of cannabis and opiate cultivation). The even more massive counter rally that took place on March 14th, 2005, however, shattered this conviction, allowing actors in Washington advocating more attention to Lebanon to score political

and administrative gains. Had these developments been accompanied by a vigorous attempt at further framing and consolidating them from the Lebanese side, their longevity would have been insured.

The various Lebanese parties did not act accordingly. Still US policy towards Lebanon entered a rare pro-active phase, with potential considerations of Lebanon as part of the new political order that seemed to be emerging in the Arab world after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003.

While it may be difficult to attribute intent and capability in the breakout of wars, such as the one experienced by Lebanon in July 2006, Iran exploited the unfolding of the conflict to derail Washington's focus on Lebanon, while rooting for the eventual retreat of the United States at the regional level — as realized in the late Bush years and during

the Obama Administration.

President Obama was averse to pro-active approaches in the Middle East, opting instead for a strategic retreat. The inherent inclination was thus towards consolidation, and the abandonment of the elevated attention to Lebanon as a separate concern. The Obama preference was confirmed inadvertently by calls upon his administration, from prominent Lebanese figures, to concentrate on the Palestinian question and to seek to engage Syria.

The “Arab Spring”, in its heyday, subsequent erosion, and collapse, notably as reflected in the consecutive failures of President Obama himself to correctly assess the Syrian situation, relegated Lebanon in the US policy towards an adjunct status in an incoherent attempt at managing the evolving Syrian crisis. The downgraded Lebanon policy in Washington

relied increasingly on French and Saudi assessments, while a side consideration was also to avoid any motion that may endanger the precarious and then secret negotiation with Iran.

The dramatic contrast in approach between the Bush and Obama Administrations was not incidental or limited to Lebanon. It is instead at the core of the doctrinal transformation in US international policy. It is a trajectory worthy of delineation, in anticipation of its next phases.

The delegation of Lebanon to Syria in the early 1990s fit the then-dominant blunt realism in policy. With the Cold War ending, the 1990s witnessed the adoption of new globalization-inspired terms in US foreign policy, highlighting human rights and universal values – even if the rhetoric was not matched by sufficient action. Critics of the George



W Bush Administration may accuse it of all conceivable villainy; in fact, much of the thrust of the Bush actions was framed as a realization of the principled responsibility to support freedom.

A “circle” is thus drawn. The Bush Sr Administration adhered to neither discourse nor action towards the materialization of universal values. The Clinton Administration maintained a limited engagement materially — at least in the Arab world, displaying pro-active engagement elsewhere — but saw the elevation of human rights and values discourse. The George W Bush Administration witnessed an attempt at aligning action with discourse — an effort generally deemed a failure in the United States. The Obama Administration sought to abstain from action, while still offering a discourse of commitment and moral

exceptionalism. The election of Donald Trump completes the circle, with an anticipated abandonment of most claims of principle in conjunction with the continuing limitation of action. The result is thus likely to be a return to blunt realism in foreign policy.

Beyond the sidelining of the advocacy of human rights and universal values as a baseline, the Trump Middle East policy is yet to coalesce. One aspect of the President-Elect’s policy is nonetheless certain, with two additional aspects probable.

The continuing constant in US foreign policy in the region is its commitment to Israel’s security and qualitative supremacy in its surroundings. Israel cannot be complacent to the fact that the ideological wing of the Iran regime maintains a sizeable force at its northern borders. Removing such force, once it has completed its

Syrian combat entanglement, whether resulting in relative depletion or the alleged capacity enhancement, will be an unavoidable Israeli priority. Trump's robust support for Israel will thus translate into a direct endorsement of any action it undertakes. Lebanon would therefore witness a replay of the July 2006 confrontation, with the notable difference of Israel's determination to eradicate the Iranian proxy force even if at the detriment of Lebanese state and society, and without a US call for restraint.

The approach of the Trump Administration to Syria can only be measured in probabilities. It is likely that Trump will delegate the Syrian situation to Russia, even if conditionally. Russia would endeavor to implement the template used in its Chechen war — that of an overwhelming destructive force to insure submission

and victory. The results of such approach would be mixed; it may yield some immediate pacification through oppression, coercion, and brutalization, but would only exacerbate longer term radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. It is hard to imagine that the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees currently in Lebanon would return to their devastated communities. The question of Syrian refugees, long subject to denial and political exploitation in Lebanon, constitutes an existential threat, to which there is no evident immediate solution. It is likely to metastasize towards more complexity with the anticipated hands-off approach of the coming Trump Administration.

The second facet of a Middle Eastern policy that can be expected from the Trump Administration is its war on terrorism. If the

President-Elect adheres to the brute force measures that he advocated during his campaign, he may actually get instant results and instant gratification. The duration of elation will however prove to be extremely limited, with the Trump measures yielding a multiplication, rather than a reduction of the threat. In need of serious education on the subject, Trump seems to promote an approach that satisfies radical Jihadism's desire for divisive polarization, by confusing Muslims and radical Islamists. Trump's learning curve and its anticipated kinetic action may constitute another existential threat to Lebanon's delicate internal balance.

Lebanon may not have an independent path to address the effects of US policy in the coming Trump era. Had the Lebanese taken advantage of the moment of opportunity presented to them a decade

ago to confirm and consolidate a multi-faceted presence in Washington, it would have been possible to act pre-emptively and engage the United States at multiple levels, political, social, and cultural, averting the dangers as they emerge. Today, instead, and until a longer-term approach succeeds in realizing the Lebanese potential in Washington, the sole venue available to Lebanon is to call upon its "Board of Directors" and hope that through France, Saudi Arabia, maybe Iran, or even Russia and Turkey as putative new members of the "Board", the Trump Administration may be convinced to spare this small country some of the unintended consequences of its anticipated policy.

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