

**The United States and Lebanon:
A Complicated Past, Present and Future
Maison du Futur, Serail Bikfaya
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In the midst of the American-Iranian tension sweeping the region and along the geopolitical and geostrategic shifts that have taken place, “Maison du Futur” held at its headquarters in Serail Bikfaya a panel discussion with Dr. Marla Karlen, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, entitled "**The United States and Lebanon: A Complicated Past, Present and Futur**". The panel was attended by President Amin Gemayel and a number of politicians, military personnel and experts, and moderated by Jean-Pierre Katrib.

President Gemayel opened the panel with a welcoming note, stressing the audience's eagerness to hear an American point of view on the fast-moving developments in the region, especially the latest escalating series of incidents in the Gulf.

Karlen took the stage after being introduced by Katrib and said: “Those who know me are fully aware that I view Lebanon as the gem of the region and the most compelling country in the world. However, truth be told, after years of exploring the Lebanese politics, I'm still bewildered and not sure that I have been able to capture all its aspects or solve the many mysteries wrapping its course”. She continued: “I will address the Lebanese-American relations and try to shed light on the latest attacks on tankers in the Sea of Oman that have sparked fresh tension in the Gulf”.

She stressed that any attempt to understand the Middle East's muddles should start from Lebanon, be it the Shia Sunni conflict, terrorism, security ordeals or the peace process. From Washington's stand point, all strings seem to lead to Lebanon, and these interconnected issues are linked to this country in a way or another and the security relationship between the two countries reflects their dynamics. She added: “Despite the fact that the United States played a role in Lebanon since the 1950s, this role gained importance only in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon; at that time, President Reagan saw the US Secretary of Defense's

hallmark in triggering this invasion with the goal of ousting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut, and Washington helped the PLO relocate to Tunisia. However, after the Marines were attacked in Beirut, the United States withdrew from Lebanon. Washington's mission at that time was ambiguous, turning from peacekeeping to supporting security.

Outlining reasons behind the United States' support to the Lebanese Army Forces (LAF), she said: "In 1983, the United States' standing by the LAF raised several eyebrows: was it just a logistic support restricted to provide the military with weapons and equipment, or it reflected the US' readiness to fight on his side when needed? In fact, at that stage it was clear that logistical support was intended, until the American battleships launched an attack on Lebanese territory, making the US mission in Lebanon more ambiguous".

She pointed out the existence of vicious parties keen to undermine US-Lebanese relations, such as the Israeli Army, the Syrian Army and Lebanese militias of all stripes; "unfortunately they have achieved their goal, and Washington severed its relations with Beirut and bilateral ties grew apart", she added.

She continued: "Lebanon regained prominence in the US foreign agenda in 2005, in the wake of Former PM Rafic Hariri's assassination and the outbreak of the Cedar revolution. President George W. Bush, who was back then anxious to democratize the Middle East, saw in this revolution the fulfillment of this endeavor. Adding to that, some Lebanese political activists in Washington succeeded in hallmarking the occurring events in Lebanon with a romantic aura, especially with the Cedar revolution's historic success in peacefully driving the Syrian Army out of Lebanon. Other veteran American officials were fervent to revive the flourished US-Lebanese relation that was prevalent before 80 years".

Furthermore, in 2005, the LAF "had only three bullets per soldier," was not deployed on all Lebanese territory and its ability to move within the country was very limited. In spite of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the bilateral ties deepened further with the goal of strengthening the LAF, especially after its leaderships' wise decision to avoid embarking in this war. The UN Resolution 1701 endorsed with US blessing, paved the way for the LAF's deployment in all Lebanese territory especially in the south, after being denied access to this region for nearly two decades. Afterwards, the LAF achieved an overwhelmingly victory against extremist groups in northern Nahr al-Bared camp for Palestinian refugees. However, this period has witnessed the emergence of several flaws that have tainted the bilateral relation, most notably the LAF's abstinence of acknowledging

the aid it receives from the US. The core problem was in the Lebanese reluctance to admit that when in trouble, they turn to Washington for help; they deny it even when their request is answered.

She stated: “We all recall how Lebanese politicians bombarded Washington with calls asking when the Marines will be deployed to Beirut, after being trapped in hotels or their home fearing the massive Hezbollah’s show of force when its fighters swept the capital streets, or in the aftermath of the assassination wave that took the lives of many of their colleagues from the same political mainstream. But the US refused direct intervention and declined to provide more aid”.

“Today, we look forward to the future, realizing that all avenues of cooperation are open owing to common threats, starting with the war in Syria, the threats by extremist groups especially ISIS, and fears tonational security. But internal rifts within the Lebanese political landscape could prevent the strengthening of this relationship,” she said.

Revealing that Washington is no longer interested in developing a strategy that defines its policy and interests in the region, for the Middle East and the fight against terrorism are no longer high on its agenda, she indicated that the US’ top priority nowadays is confronting China and Russia to secure Europe and Asia. She stressed that the relationship with Lebanon will remain strong through joint security understandings, yet it will be subjected to several bumps, especially with the region taking a backseat in the US foreign policy.

As for the Gulf latest developments, she said: “We are trying to comprehend what is going on in the Gulf and we are not surprised by the strained relations between the US and Iran. After the Trump administration pulled out of the nuclear deal and imposed sanctions on Tehran, we were expecting Iran to retaliate. If Iran is responsible for these incidents, what remains important to discern is which Iranian wing carried out these attacks? Was it the Iranian Army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or its surrogate local militias?” She stressed that answering this question is essential to determine if the US will counterattack and which Iranian targets it will single out.

Reiterating the US gravitational pull towards China and Russia, she casted doubt on the US embarking in a new military confrontation in the region saying: “Let us not forget that as of today we remain unable to overcome the consequences of the war waged against Afghanistan in 2001; we need to think twice about the extensive implications of a possible military conflict between Iran and the US”. An eventual

war with the US will be for Iran akin to an existential battle and it would mobilize into this war its regional and worldwide proxies, including Lebanese Hezbollah. “We should be aware of what's to come if this standoff between the US and Iran escalates, and I do not want even to imagine its impact on regional countries, especially Lebanon! The dire consequences of recent wars waged by the US in the region are a taste of things to come should the current crisis boils over into war”, she said.

“Last year, alarm bells ringed in the world for news of an upcoming war between North Korea and the US; nevertheless, nothing happened and Trump eventually chose to negotiate with Pyongyang. The escalating tension between Iran and the US could follow suit, even though such prospect fall on deaf ears in Washington and among US allies in the Gulf”, she added.

She concluding saying: “My students often ask me the following question: Do we learn Chinese or Russian because the future is theirs?” My answer was and will always be: I do not know, but the only advice I can give you is to focus on the Middle East”.

Katrib addressed three questions to Karlen:

Katrib: “You wondered about Hezbollah’s stance should tensions between the US and Iran escalate into war. What about the LAF’s stance? Do you think the Lebanese Army will intervene?”

Karlin: “My advice to the Lebanese Army is that in such a case it has to hide: it is essentially incapable of intervening; it must ensure minimal internal security and protect its equipment and weapons so as not to fall into Hezbollah or any other entity’s hands. I believe that the LAF will refrain from siding with Iran in a prospective standoff with the US, but if it does in any way, I think that the relationship with the United States will not recover”.

Katrib: “Some parties in Washington could use the carrots and sticks approach to drive Lebanon away from the Iranian orbit. What’s your input over voices in Washington, though shy, calling to stop the military assistance to the LAF?”

Karlin: "Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US focus tilted towards the Middle East; it has fought many wars and supported militaries of more than one country in the region, including the LAF. However, I think the United States has failed at capturing the whole scenery and focused instead on one of its many sides. Let me explain myself: the support the US has brought to the LAF is primordial, however it will not weight if the other institutions of the state remain weak. The

United States' commitment to the countries of the region, especially Lebanon, must not be restricted to military aids, it should include supporting all governmental institutions; it should be a commitment towards the government for the two countries face many common challenges, such as ISIS and post-ISIS, the refugee camps etc...". She asked: "you said that Lebanon is increasingly tilting towards Iran. Why would you say that and what evidences could you provide to back your statement?"

Katrib: "In fact, as observers, this hypothesis is based on what we hear from Washington. Several voices talk about Lebanon sliding into the Iranian orbit and they view the outcome of both presidential and parliamentary elections as a victory for Hezbollah, not to mention the path through which the latest cabinet was formed, asserting the Party of God's upper hand in decision making. In the same vein, files that were under the mandate of President Michel Sleiman managed by personnel close to him, are now being managed by people close to the Hezbollah-led March 8 Movement".

Karlen: "what you are saying is striking, yet I think it is related to the sensitive balance in Lebanon and I do not believe that the situation is as dramatic as to assert that Lebanon has fallen into Iran's influence".

The debate session was inaugurated with a threefold question:

Question: "My question will focus on three issues that have a major impact on the Lebanese political scene, the first being the US Januslike stance towards Hezbollah. In fact, from one side, the US is coping with the reality of Hezbollah's partnership in the government, and from the other side it has labeled the group as a terrorist organization; we all know that Hezbollah's military capabilities far outweigh the LAF's ones and during the last decade they were strengthened by a far-reaching political influence that allows us to affirm its control over the state apparatus. My question relates to whether the US is still committed to securing Lebanon's stability and restraining from pushing the country on the brink of abyss? Don't you think that labeling it as terrorist organization when it wields significant influence across Lebanon's various sectors might destabilize the country? The second issue is the Syrian war and the crisis of the Syrian displaced: Can the United States, or will it, play a role in finding a solution to the Syrian crisis as it seems that the Syrian displaced crisis in Lebanon and in other countries, will not be solved but along a comprehensive solution to the Syrian conflict. The third issue is your input on David Satterfield-led US-mediated talks between Lebanon and Israel on resolving the dispute over land and maritime demarcation borders".

Karlen: “As for the first question, the answer is rather complex. In fact, the US can deal with a Lebanese government that incorporates Hezbollah members and at the same time declaring the group a terrorist organization. We should understand that the United States does not see Hezbollah from the perspective of Lebanese internal politics, but through only two lenses: the Syrian lens and the Iranian lens. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, the US was focused on making the war-torn country’s president, Bashar al-Assad, leave power; but Hezbollah entered the Syrian war alongside the regime and we should understand Washington’s view of the group from this angle, i.e. his support for Assad regime. The second lens is Iran. Washington sees Hezbollah as Iran’s most successful proxy project in its quest to project power throughout the Middle East. The group could prove potent asset for the Islamic Republic in any crisis and the current biggest concern for the US is the Iranian threat to blockshipping in the Strait of Hormuz”.

As for the second question, she said: “We all know how complex the situation in Syria is; it is an imbroglio. The problem is that during the eight years of the war, Washington focused on securing humanitarian aid and mainly limited its military support to the Arab-Kurdish alliance, i.e. the Syrian Democratic Forces. With Russia and China gaining prominence in the US foreign policy, it should have focused more on Syria from a political and security angles because of the Russian military intervention in the raging Syrian war and China's support for the Assad regime. But it did not. We admit that Washington has erred in Syria and is still, because we are certain that what is going on in Syria will spillover and will not remain inside Syria. Furthermore the long fight against ISIS looks good on a map, it is yet to be decisive on the battlefield and I don’t think it is; the fight against the extremist group is far from over and the biggest concern is to see the emergence of ISIS-alike groups. The Syrian crisis needs a political solution, but I think that Washington has neither the ability nor the will to push for achieving such a solution”. “I can’t imagine how the displaced Syrians could return to an unstable country; however, I hope that the Lebanese government will not force them to return because a coercive and premature return will increase vulnerabilities and foster a new generation of extremists. As for Satterfield's mission, I believe that maritime security and common interests can bring together competing parties,” she added.

The following questions were also raised:

- To what extent do you think the US presence in eastern Euphrates will be sustainable?

- Satterfield voiced some concerns about Washington's assessment of Lebanon's security: Is this assessment stands still and will it be the benchmark for future US-Lebanese relations? To what extent the US is committed to ensure Lebanon's security? And what about its relation with Turkey amidst the Russian-American compatibility in the Syrian file?

- Will the US sanctions contain and deter Iran's influence in Syria and push it out of the country? What if the US sticks policy fails? The repercussions will be devastating for the region.

- To what extent did the battle of Nahr al-Bared constituted for the US an incentive to increase support for the LAF?

- You raised the issue of delaying the return of displaced people to Syria and debate is currently soaring about their safe and voluntary return. Why does the United States insist on refusing the voluntary return of displaced Syrians?

- If we look at the sequence of events since Obama sworn into office, we could notice the following: his administration withdrew from Iraq, it did not intervene in Syria despite Assad breaching Obama's red lines, and it did not intervene in any other Arab country that has witnessed turbulence; finally it inked the nuclear agreement with Iran. I think the withdrawal from the Middle East policy launched by Obama is continuing its course with Trump administration and what we are witnessing today in the Gulf is part of these sequential events. I think that Trump is double dealing as I think that Iran is witnessing internal conflicts and power struggles among its ruling elite. In a number of respects, the scenery is foggy and I believe that the US is in crisis and overwhelmed; whatever is taking place in the region it aims at driving the US out of the Gulf as it was driven away from Lebanon, Syria and the whole region.

- Is the Congress pushing to end or make major cuts in military aid to Lebanon?

- Many consider the Deal of the Century to be "the biggest bribery in History". Do you think that this debatable deal is a big mistake? How its implementation will affect Lebanon?

- I am not certain that the US interest in China and Russia is behind its withdrawal from the Middle East; in fact several crises serve as a front for the US-Russian/Chinese standoff such as Venezuela, South-East Asia and the issue of liquefied natural gas in Europe. The focus on Russia and China does not mean that the Middle East has become irrelevant to American interests. Neglecting the problems inflicting the Middle East is a blow firstly to the US interests and secondly to its regional allies interests. It has allowed Iran to expand its hegemony in the region and Russia to re-emerge as a key player in the region and the world. All issues are overlapping in a way that does not justify neglecting one issue because we are focusing on another. What is happening in the US and why this confused and inconsistent foreign policy?

- I think that radicalism applies as much to jihadist groups as to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and I trust that we will not win the battle against Iran unless we strike it with a fatal blow. Iran is behind the latest attacks in the Gulf and the US should plan its retaliation accordingly.

Karlen:

As for the American presence in eastern Euphrates, she said: “President Trump seems to be unenthusiastic about keeping an American presence in this region. I am not aware of both executive and legislative branches’ stance pertaining to this issue, however, June is here and the US Army is still in that area, which leads me to bet on the absence of any solid and serious springboard to withdraw from this area. Some believe that the presence of the United States there is beneficial for the Syrian Democratic Forces and is a deterrent to Iran; yet I think it only annoys Iran, while it is an acute challenge to the Turkish ally which may justify its resorting to the Russians in the missile deal. I reiterate the United States’ approach in assessing one issue from different angles. It can be in Syria and accept the Iranian presence because its first objective there is to fight ISIS. I think that the American administration and the Congress alike will try to maintain an American military presence in eastern Euphrates, in spite of some elements that might affect this presence such as a Turkish intervention, the controversial situation of Assad and Trump himself. However, I believe that a year from now, American forces will remain there provided that nothing extraordinary occurs”.

"As for Lebanon’s security, I believe that Washington is committed to maintaining stability in Lebanon, yet I do not think it might wage a war or even intervene militarily for its sake. In what pertains to the Deal of the Century, nothing indicates that expectations are running high in both Israel and Palestine; the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships and people are interested in this deal. They will put it on ice and reject it, but how and in what way remain to be seen”.

Addressing the American-Turkish relations, she said they are currently in shambles, noting two major points of tension between the two countries: the first is the US support for the Kurds in Syria; the second is the deal to buy S-400 missiles from Russia, not to mention Turkey's authoritarian drift. However, Turkey remains a key ally in NATO and while its fear from growing Kurdish power in neighboring Syria is understandable, its rush towards Russia is not, stressing that “Turkey must act as a responsible member of NATO”.

Speaking about Washington's pressure on Iran to leave Syria, she said: “Tehran has long sought to establish a land corridor stretching from Iran, Iraq, Syria to

Lebanon and considers Syria to be the geostrategic lynchpin connecting Hezbollah to Iran". She added that former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad managed to stay at a relatively long distance from Iran and this is what Bashar al-Assad failed to do.

"Although Europe has repeatedly declared its unwillingness to normalize with the Assad regime because of its nihilistic barbarity against its people, and the United States' announcement that it will not withdraw from Syria before the Iranian withdrawal, I am certain that these two declarations are simply illusory and impossible to be implemented; the question surrounding Iran's presence in Syria and Lebanon will revolve around what is the acceptable level of an Iranian presence in both countries and to what extent it will be allowed proximity to the Israeli border", she stressed.

"Iran needs to be present in Syria and in Lebanon and it will never accept to undo its gained unhampered hegemony in both countries; it will just not leave. But does Bashar al-Assad really need Iran to stay, and for how long? I think that Bashar al-Assad does not have a word about what is going on in his country."

She continued: "the US support for the LAF began in 2006, and the US has often reiterated its intention to persevere in its efforts to bolster the elements of state security in Lebanon, with an emphasis on the Lebanese army. The Nahr al-Bared battle was an opportunity for the US to beef up its military aids; unfortunately no one acknowledged this effort to strengthen the military capacities and downplayed the aid magnitude even though it was \$2 billion worth. This stance stirred up anger in Washington and several voices rose requesting to halt aid. There are always limits to what we can provide and as far as we are concerned, the US government should justify its policies to taxpayers".

"Regarding the refugee issue, we recognize the detrimental impact of their presence on host countries; however, mounting pressure for large-scale refugee returns to Syria threatens the international consensus that return must be safe, dignified, and voluntary. It is hard indeed to imagine how they will return to an unstable country where protection thresholds are not met", she said. "The Syrian refugee crisis will be a serious long-term challenge to Lebanon, and I think the refugees will stay in Lebanon for years to come; Lebanon will shoulder a great socioeconomic weight, not to mention threats to security".

On another vein, she said: "There is a prevailing idea that the United States withdrew from the region under Obama mandate, and I truly believe this idea to be unfounded. The region has witnessed a colossal change with the unexpected uprising ushering the ousting and collapse of several entrenched autocratic regimes.

In tandem, the nuclear deal came as a major turning point in the region's juncture. I think the United States has lost interest in the region and the Obama administration has given importance to nuclear peace at the expense of Iran's abusive behavior in the region. Although I do not think a better nuclear deal could be reached, Trump backed away from this agreement and the US allies in the region were the first to welcome this decision".

She pointed out that the United States is criticized when it intervenes and similarly criticized when it chose not to do so. It is true that many mistakes have been made preventing the United States from pursuing a good path in Iraq, but we cannot continue to blame the US for all the world's hardships".

"It is important to remember that the United States is a global power, and the fact that it was at some point submerged by the threats in the Middle East along with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has allowed China and Russia to strengthen their power", she stressed. "Washington has reshuffled its priorities with an emphasis to secure Asia and Europe. The post-World War II order is shaking, and it is an order built by the US and not by Russia or China. Regrettably this order is currently in decline as I mentioned, and it is important for the US to secure the safety of Europe and Asia during this transition period".

Finally, she said that in the foreign policy arena, American decision making is known for its slowness especially when it involves foreign interventions; when they occur, the results may run sharply counter to the expected outcome. Finally she pointed out that in a precedent to American history, "The United States is witnessing today an internal rift; this is unfortunate for the world," asserting however Washington's ability to overcome this "unusual" ordeal.