



Lebanon and Sustainable Solutions Sovereignty, Neutrality, and the Road to Everlasting Peace

By

Retired Brigadier General

Ziad El Hachem

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Introduction

Lebanon has a geographical location that was described by Michel Chiha as: "**An exceptional bridgehead, or rather an observation point to the world**" which magnified its geo-political importance.

Lebanon's unique history, the lack of an institutionalized political system, the intertwining issues it has with its surroundings, and its diverse ethnicities place it at the crossroads of regional and international politics. According to David Hale: "**The competition over power, ideas, ideology, and wealth in the Middle East manifests on the land of this country.**" Lebanon suffers from wars and foreign interventions, which exposes its sovereignty to internal violations by armed non-state actors, and external violations through influence or occupation. Therefore, it is imperative to discuss a policy of neutrality in the face of foreign interference, internal divisions, and the Lebanese people's lack of neutrality vis a vis regional issues, to preserve the country's sovereignty and rebuild the State.

This paper aims to briefly define the concepts of sovereignty, neutrality and the relationship between these three pillars in the Lebanese context, then to determine the positions of Lebanese parties and regional and international players regarding Lebanon's adoption of neutrality as a strategic option.

1. A puzzling entity and the need to assemble the pieces

Lebanon was formed under the French Mandate. Its borders were drawn to encompass diverse religious groups and the territories they inhabited, like gathering the pieces of a puzzle. The Mandate established political and administrative structures with sectarian divisions that laid the ground to a model of government known as "**Consensual Democracy**," enshrined in the "**National Pact**".

2. The National Pact and its Limits

The pact sought to establish a balance of power among the major sectarian communities, entrusting the Presidency of the Republic to a Maronite, the Cabinet to a Sunni, and the Parliament to a Shiite. This arrangement allowed for a pluralistic representation, yet it consecrated sectarian affiliations. Political elites failed to institutionalize the political system throughout the period following independence, arguing that the system had proven effective in the face of tensions, and consequently, the State adopted the "**Sectarian Quota**" model.

The political system was threatened by the influx of Palestinian refugees in **1948**, and Lebanon's geographical proximity to the **Arab-Israeli** conflict exacerbated the already fragile system. Sectarian disagreements over Lebanon's role in the region culminated in a full-scale war in **1975**, which generated various foreign interventions.

- **Civil War and Internal Imbalance**

Between 1975 and 1990, Lebanon became an arena for conflict between regional and international powers. Syria, Israel, Iran, and Western countries intervened through local proxies. The Syrian military presence, which began in 1976, was the most influential in reshaping the Lebanese political landscape. The 1989 Taëf Accord ended the war through a redistribution of powers, yet it did not provide sustainable solutions to the Lebanese crisis, as deeper structural problems represented by sectarian politics, foreign interference, and state weakness, remained unaddressed.

The legacy of war and Syrian tutelage has perpetuated a system of political nepotism and sectarian clientelism, during which Hezbollah has risen to become a major player, adopting resistance to the Israeli occupation as its core discourse and emphasizing the protection of the rights of the Shiite community.

3. Challenges to Lebanese Sovereignty

Sovereignty symbolizes a State's ability to govern its territory, free from any external control that monopolizes the use of violence and weapons. It also symbolizes the strength of its relations with others to ward off threats. Jean Bodin defined sovereignty as the absolute and permanent authority of the Republic. Sovereignty in Lebanon is constrained by intertwined factors, including a non-institutionalized political system, sectarian competition, external patronage, and the presence of non-state armed actors. This has allowed the State to share its sovereignty, contrary to the view of Thomas Hobbes who believed that sovereignty is indivisible.

- **Lack of institutionalization of the political system**

Lebanon is experiencing successive crises and is surrounded by internal and external threats. Since the independence, the ruling elite and those who held the reins of power afterwards, have failed to institutionalize the political system. The Constitution has not been respected or implemented, and laws have not been implemented. Lebanon has been governed by Conventions and Customs, as it was the case before the occupation or the guardianship. Lebanon was not destined for having historical State leaders to move the country towards a brighter future, but rather leaders of sectarian communities, denominations, and narrow identities. Responsibility and accountability were absent, leading the State to abandon one of its most important sovereign functions: "the decision of war and peace," in a clear violation of article 65 of the Constitution, and the right to use violence and weapons. Lebanese political parties have begun to resolve their problems in the streets instead of through constitutional institutions.

- **Non-State armed groups**

Non-governmental entities multiply to defend their environment and ideology, eventually competing with the State on service delivery and the use of violence and weapons, which violates sovereignty. In Lebanon, this started with the 1958 revolution, followed by the Palestinian armed

action, when the State relinquished its sovereignty under the Cairo Agreement of **1969**, and finally lead to the civil war.

Sectarian militias dominated Lebanon, fighting among themselves, shifting their loyalties and external alliances according to regional and international interests. The Shiite Amal Movement emerged in the early eighties, leading the "**February 6 Uprising**" that have dealt a crushing blow to one of the most important symbols of sovereignty: the Lebanese Army. Palestinian armed action led to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, coupled with the exportation of the Iranian revolution. Hezbollah emerged as an organization that combined the ideology of Wilayat Al Faqih (the rule of the jurisconsult) with the narrative of resistance to occupation.

The Taëf Accord reshaped the system according to the new balance of powers, but emphasized the participatory sectarian model. The agreements within Taëf Accord aimed at restoring State sovereignty by disbanding and disarming militias, except for **Hezbollah**. The party built formidable military capabilities, competed in providing services, and maintained foreign relations, particularly with **Iran**. The State was forced to coexist with the party in what is known as the "**Mediated State**," which had a profound impact on **Lebanon's** stability. **Hezbollah** caused the **2006** war and opened in **2023** a front to support **Gaza**. It dominated political life and monopolized the decision to launch wars. The political establishment secured this situation and maliciously deviated from imposing its sovereignty.

- **Foreign interference and regional alignment**

Some Arab countries, especially **Syria** under the **Assad** regime, pressured Lebanon to prevent it from imposing its sovereignty. **Syria** with the **Assad** regime supported the Palestinians and the Lebanese National Movement, then intervened militarily against them after they attempted to overturn the political system. The Lebanese disagreed over the resistance and its weapons after the liberation in **2000**. Iran treated Hezbollah as if it represented the State, and forged financial, ideological, and social links with the party that became part of a unifying Iranian identity. A segment of the Lebanese tightened their relationship with Saudi Arabia due to its fraternal ties to Lebanon. The Lebanese disagreed over the Syrian revolution until the **Assad's** regime fell, with the new administration promising not to interfere in Lebanese internal affairs. The Lebanese also disagreed over the **2023** support front to **Gaza** that Hezbollah started at Iran's request.

4. Concept of neutrality in the Lebanese context

Neutrality refers to non-involvement in wars and crises. A state declaring neutrality chooses not to participate to alliances, organizations, or external institutions that might cause its policies to deviate from neutrality, harm its national interests, or threaten its sovereignty, stability, and independence. The United Nations defined neutrality as the legal status arising from the abstention of a State from all participation in a war between other States, the maintenance of an attitude of impartiality toward the belligerents, and the recognition by the belligerents of this abstention and impartiality. General

Assembly Resolution **71/275** emphasized that national policies of neutrality can contribute to the strengthening of international peace and security.

- **Neutrality's historical precedents**

Lebanon witnessed its first attempt at neutrality under President Chehab, through balanced foreign relations. The Chehab movement was unable to protect Lebanese sovereignty in the face of Palestinian military, therefore President Charles Helou proposed legal neutrality, inspired by the Austrian model. Lebanon attempted to distance itself from the Syrian revolution, but Hezbollah intervened militarily in Syria.

- **Neutrality's potential benefits**

Neutrality, reinforced by national unity, is supposed to provide Lebanon with protection from regional crises and the direct influence of foreign support to certain Lebanese parties. Neutrality offers the Lebanese a new opportunity to address their internal issues. Lebanon's adoption of neutrality makes it immune to attempts by major powers to drag it into their alliances, and enables it to redefine its functional role as a mediator and negotiator in peacemaking, and as a beacon and example of human rights values and principles. This enhances its soft power, thus attracting foreign investment.

- **Obstacles to achieving neutrality**

Lebanon faces significant difficulties in adopting neutrality:

- The presence of non-governmental armed entities, which brings Lebanon into external conflicts.
- The attempt to rely on external support to seek protection and expand influence.
- The dependence of the Lebanese economy on economic relations and the labor market in the Gulf, as well as on aid from Western countries.
- Neutrality requires the approval of neighboring countries and influential regional and international powers. However, the competition between Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, in addition to the international struggle for influence and control, makes it difficult for Lebanon to adopt effective neutrality. This requires building defensive capabilities in the absence of alliances and military cooperation with others, and this is difficult considering the economic collapse.

Difficulties remain due to Lebanon's obligations under the treaties, agreements, and protocols it has signed.

5. Internal divisions and external engagements

Sovereignty and neutrality constantly interact and are influenced by political, social, and economic factors in Lebanon. Any attempt to permanently resolve the Lebanese crisis requires an understanding of these factors.

- **Local parties and regional and international patronage networks**

Lebanon comprises eighteen sectarian communities, each with a distinct history, reminiscent of the events they have experienced, their achievements, whether alone or through their alliances, and their fears for the future. The Maronites have been historically linked to France, and together they created Greater Lebanon. However, due to the tremendous changes in the domestic, regional, and international landscape, its role has declined. The Maronite Patriarchate has approached the issue of neutrality as a salvation for Lebanon, and Patriarch al-Rahi emphasizes the importance of neutrality in his sermons. However, **Hezbollah** insists on the necessity of dialogue and consensus around this issue. The Taëf Accord resulted in an increase in the influence of the Sunni community, supported by Saudi Arabia, especially during the era of **Prime Minister Rafik Hariri**, whose assassination provided an opportunity for the rise of the Shiite duo, namely Hezbollah, supported by **Iran** and **Syria**. The Druze community has maintained its presence by adopting flexible policies, relying on its historical leadership. Competing sectarian interests in power and influence, as well as external ties, have prevented the development of a unified vision based on neutrality to confront threats, despite a unique experience with the **2012 Baabda Declaration**, which stipulated in article **12** "Neutralizing Lebanon..." In his inaugural speech, **President Joseph Aoun** called for a policy of positive neutrality. Neutrality was also adopted in the ministerial statement of **Prime Minister Nawaf Salam**'s government ...

- **Role of the Civil Society**

Faced with the prospect of structural reforms to the political system facing a dead end, the civil society mobilized to forge a unified national identity, one of the most important pillars of which was neutrality and a public opinion favorable to reforming the sectarian system. The "**October 17 Revolution**" was considered the latest attempt to rise-up against the corrupt authority that responded to this movement with extreme violence, viewing it as a threat to its influence.

6. Impact of regional and international organizations and states

Foreign relations play an important role in ensuring sovereignty and neutrality, as regional and major powers play a fundamental role in Lebanon's stability.

- **Syria and Iran**

Syrian influence continued in Lebanon until the recent fall of the regime. A segment of the Lebanese population supported the rebels, while another segment supported the regime, turning Lebanon into an arena for proxy conflict. Iran decided to adopt a "forward defense" approach, establishing military arms extending from Yemen to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, limiting any chance of adopting neutrality.

- **Saudi Arabia and Other Gulf Countries**

Saudi Arabia has played a positive role in its relationship with Lebanon through political and financial support and economic ties. Relations with Lebanon have witnessed periods of tension, most notably the detention of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the travel ban to Lebanon in response to Hezbollah attacks, and to drug smuggling into the Kingdom. Lebanon maintains vital economic relations with the Gulf states, in addition to Gulf investments in Lebanon.

- **The absence of influence from the League of Arab States**

The Arab League intervened during the Lebanese civil war to establish possible solutions, but it was unable to do anything to enforce Lebanon's neutrality during the Syrian crisis, nor was it able to repel Syrian or Iranian influence on Lebanon.

- **Western powers and international institutions**

Western countries in Lebanon focus on combating terrorism, halting illegal immigration, and maintaining Israel's security. The United States are keen on preserving internal stability through supporting the Lebanese army. France is attempting to mediate in the crises plaguing Lebanon, to no avail. The United Nations play an important role, with the **UNIFIL** force in the South serving as a model for its contribution. The **World Bank** and the **International Monetary Fund** are participating in providing advice and alternative plans to the Lebanese authorities to salvage the financial situation and allow Lebanon to overcome the economic crisis.

7. Towards sustainable solutions: balancing between sovereignty and neutrality

The Lebanese have not worked to reform their political system, nor have they strengthened or activated their constitutional institutions. Therefore, policies capable of preserving Lebanon's sovereignty and maintaining neutrality shall be implemented.

- **Strengthening the State's institutions**

What is practically required is reforming the State's constitutional institutions and strengthening their capabilities, particularly the security and judicial institutions. This requires resolving the disputes between Lebanese citizens within these institutions and enabling them to provide essential services to citizens without allowing competition. Transparent mechanisms for oversight, accountability, and evaluation must be established.

- **Launching a national dialogue within the Council of Ministers**

A policy of neutrality cannot be imposed by force. A serious, organized national dialogue within the Council of Ministers is essential, addressing the status of Hezbollah's weapons, the mechanisms for economic and financial reform, and the lines of neutrality.

- **Reforming the political system and implementing the Taëf Accord in its entirety**

The political system must be reformed to establish a Civil State and adopt good governance, which shall reduce the reliance on sectarianism, ensure justice and equality among the Lebanese, and amend the electoral system to make it more representative.

The Taëf Accord has not been fully implemented, which requires launching a legislative workshop to amend the Constitution and legislations, aligning them with the requirements of the twenty-first century.

- **The Necessity of Implementing Extensive Administrative Decentralization**

- Approving a new law for the work of the Council of Ministers, as well as amending the work mechanisms within the Parliament.
- Enacting a law on the independence of the judiciary, strengthening independent judicial legislations and practices to combat corruption, and amending the method of appointing members of the Constitutional Council.
- Abolishing political sectarianism and forming a Senate.

- **What role for Lebanon?**

George Corm says, "Lebanon is searching for a role, while simultaneously searching for what others want from it." The functional roles Lebanon previously played, such as its participation in the axis of resistance, its role as a platform for destabilizing friendly and sister countries, and drug smuggling, are no longer suitable after the major changes that occurred in the international and regional geopolitical situation. After Hezbollah's loss in the war with Israel and the fall of the Assad regime, Lebanon has become bound to play a new role focused on preserving its sovereignty and security. This is how others' view of Lebanon can change.

8. The role of international law and multilateral frameworks

International law is indispensable to Lebanon. **UN Security Council** resolutions represent a realistic path to strengthening sovereignty by calling for the disarmament of armed groups and the extension of the State's authority over its territory. Lebanon's accession to several international treaties affirms its commitment to international legislations and standards.

9. Obstacles and lessons learnt

According to Henry Kissinger, "A State's choices are limited by its unique circumstances and history." Lebanon will face real obstacles by adopting neutrality, which could upset the regional balance of power.

The following lessons can be drawn from previous experiences in Lebanon:

- The presence of armed parties outside the State's authority will undermine the adoption of neutrality.
- The importance of adhering to the agreements and pledges made by the Lebanese parties.
- The economy and finance are closely linked to security: if the latter collapses, the former collapses as well.

Conclusion

Lebanon's crisis represents a microcosm of the region's complexities, as sectarian conflict, regional competition, and foreign interference intersect, constantly testing and violating the sovereignty of the State and rendering the notion of neutrality unattainable. Sustainable solutions require a comprehensive approach based on strengthening the State's institutions and fortifying internal unity. They also necessitate a serious national dialogue on security, political and economic priorities, and the development of a national security strategy from which a national defense policy would emerge, to address the weapons issue and ensure Lebanon's defense, reshaping foreign partnerships in a balanced manner, and reinvigorating diplomatic efforts.

The essence of this effort is to forge a unified national identity that transcends sectarian and factional loyalties. For **Lebanon** to overcome its successive crises, it must strengthen its sovereignty, strive for a degree of effective neutrality, and play the role of mediator, act as a center for diplomacy, and an oasis for investment attraction. It must thus present a model of a small, multi-confessional State that successfully manages its internal complexities and avoids forced involvement in regional conflicts and in a complex strategic environment.

Authors' Short Bio

Retired Brigadier General Ziad Al-Hashem: Former Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning, Lebanese Armed Forces.

He graduated in 1985 as an infantry officer from the Military College with a Bachelor's degree in Military Studies. He holds a BA in History from the Lebanese University and a Master of Science (MSc) from NPS University, USA. He is currently a doctoral student at the Lebanese University, writing a thesis on Civil-Military Relations (CMR) in Lebanon. During his 39 years of service, he held various command, command, and staff positions. He also served at the Research and Strategic Studies Center (RSSC), where he established, in collaboration with the Lebanese University, a joint "Research Master's in Strategic Studies" program. In 2017, he was appointed Secretary of Staff of the Army until 2019, then he was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning (DCoS-P) from 2019 to 2022, where he was responsible for the Lebanese Army's strategic planning within the scope of the Defense Resources and Capability Development Plans (CDP), and established the Directorate of Strategic Communications. He participated in numerous educational, training, and representational missions and attended and participated in several seminars and conferences inside Lebanon, focusing on national security, and outside Lebanon, including in the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and Egypt, where his primary focus was on international security and military cooperation. He led the strategic dialogue with UNIFIL to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701. He chaired the Lebanese Army Institutional Reform Team, the Digital Transformation Strategy Committee, the Cybersecurity Strategy Committee, and the committee tasked with proposing and preparing amendments to the National Defense Law at the Ministry of Defense.

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Civic Influence Hub
<https://cihlebanon.org>
Beirut Central District - Allenby St.,
Port136 Bldg., 4th floor. Beirut - Lebanon
info@cihlebanon.org
Phone: +961 1 986 760
Mobile: +961 81 624 012
+961 3 002 797

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