LEBANON - THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

Presentation by Dr. Joseph Gebeily, President of the Lebanese Information Center at The Hudson Institute on March 7, 2003

First, I would like to thank the organizers of the conference: the Hudson Institute and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, for hosting us today.

And I thank also the large attendance who took the trouble of coming here and listening to us. It is a pleasure to be with you and to speak about Lebanon.

Lebanon is indeed a "tiny little country", but it could be the source of "big trouble". So it is important to talk about it, every once in a while.

I hope today I can lay out to you some ideas that would help to make Lebanon a beacon of peace, freedom and democracy for the whole Middle East region, instead of being a source of trouble and instability.

Looking back at the history, modern and ancient, of Lebanon, particularly the history of conflicts, violence and wars, one can easily note that the repeated Lebanese crises are the results of 2 major factors:

1. Internal: the confrontation between the 2 main religious/cultural components of the Lebanese society, i.e. Muslim and Christian
2. External: the foreign interventions of other states or powers in Lebanon, in support of one Lebanese group against another.

Seeds of the conflict

Listening to what the 2 previous speakers said about the situation today in Lebanon, we can conclude that the seeds of renewal, or persistence, of the conflict are still present.

The foreign element: 3 major non-Lebanese powers exert significant influence on Lebanese soil.

- The Syrians who still have about 20,000 soldiers in various parts of Lebanon, and an unknown number of "Moukhabarat" (or military intelligence). They have control over all aspects of Lebanon's political life, and they interfere in all forms of the Lebanese daily life, including social, financial,etc.

© LEBANESE INFORMATION CENTER – ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

- The Palestinians who number around 400,000 which is more than 10% of the Lebanese population, estimated at 3.6 millions. They live in military camps located in different parts of the country, but outside the Lebanese State's authority. They form a "State within a State", harboring extremists, terrorists, criminals and outlaws.

4900 LEESBURG PIKE (SUITE 203), ALEXANDRIA, VA 22302
PHONE: 703-578-4214 FAX: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG

- The Iranians who constitute a direct foreign intervention in Lebanese internal affairs by supporting Hizballah, financially and militarily, in coordination with Syria.

The Domestic Element: exemplified mainly by the marginalization of the Christians of Lebanon.

Since the "official" end in 1990 of the 1975 Lebanese civil war, the Christians of Lebanon have been treated as the "defeated", the "losers", and submitted to a systematic elimination from political life and national decision-making process.

The examples are plenty. Allow me to summarize some of them:

First and foremost, the Christian participation and true representation in the government have been purposely weakened, as shown in the following.

- At the legislative level, the Lebanese parliament is comprised of 128 deputes: 64 Muslims and 64 Christians. But less than 30 of those deputes are elected by Christians voters, due to the government's devious alterations of voting districts and electoral laws.

- In the Executive Branch, while all major Muslim parties and political forces are represented in the Council of Ministers, such as Hariri (Sunnite), Berri (Amal-Chiite movement), Jumblatt (Druze-Socialist Progressive Party), as well as the Pro-Syrian groups (Franjie and the Syrian National Socialist Party), there is no political Christian representation.

- The Judiciary, along with the Military and Security branches, has been the arm of the Executive in the elimination of the Christian political opposition.

Across the board there has been a significant deterioration in the state of Democracy and Human Rights in Lebanon since 1990. The abuses are documented in numerous reports from Human Rights organizations, like Amnesty International, and from others, like the US State Department Human Rights reports.

Political repression has been targeting mostly the Christians through:

- Jailing, such as the case of Dr Samir Geagea, the leader of one of the largest Christian party, the Lebanese Forces (LF).

- Forced exile, such as the case of General Michel Aoun, the former Christian Prime Minister whom you will see this afternoon. And a number of other opposition political activists, including yours truly.

- And Banning, political parties, meetings, activities, and even religions services …

The Syrian-backed Lebanese Government continues to suppress civil liberties at all levels from the control of the media (most noticeable is the closing last year of the Christian opposition TV MTV), to the attacks on political and individual freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to demonstrate, the right to form political associations, and through the use of the widespread phone tapping, arbitrary arrests, illegal detention, torture and death under torture, forced confessions, prevention from access to proper legal counsel, and the excessive use of military courts.

© LEBANESE INFORMATION CENTER - ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

4900 Leesburg Pike (Suite 203), Alexandria, VA 22302
Phone: 703-578-4214 Fax: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG

In addition, political assassinations and kidnappings still occur. Example last year, Ramzi Irani the LF student leader who was abducted, tortured and murdered.

And last but not least of the attacks on freedom and democracy is the rise of religious violence, especially within the last couple of years, where Christians have been the usual victims.

Examples include the massacres of Christian villagers in North Lebanon in 1999-2000, the bombing and desecration of churches also in North Lebanon, and just recently the massacre of 8 Christian teachers by a Muslim fanatic and the shooting of 5 Christian soldiers in an army barrack by a Muslim soldier.

Consequences

The shift in the balance of power-sharing disfavoring the Christians, coupled with a lack of democracy and freedom, and aggravated by the foreign interventions mentioned above, is having detrimental results on the Lebanese National scene, leading to:

1. An atmosphere of extremism and fanaticism, and a culture of violence supportive of extreme and destructive behaviors like suicide bombing and other forms of cruel brutality.

2. A flourishing of terrorism and terrorist organizations like Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, PFLP-General Command, and Osbat-el-Ansar linked to Al Qaeda. All of these are included in the US terrorist organizations list.

3. A climate of instability in different parts of the country starting from the south on the Israeli border, but also around major cities like Saida and Tripoli, where violent incidents are commonly occurring. Armed clashes for local control between Pro-Syrian Lebanese armed factions, supposedly disarmed, happen quite often.

4. An anti-Western and specifically an anti-US attitude, promoted by Lebanese government officials including president Lahoud, Prime Minister Hariri and Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, just to mention a few.

5. Late last year, the Lebanese government's ban of pro-US TV ads and the boycotting of our US Ambassador's social activities, like the Iftar dinner, are examples of the anti-US official stance.

6. Very large demonstrations (the largest in the Middle East) even before the US-Iraqi confrontation were being staged in Beirut.

7. Violence against US citizens and US interests are indeed worth mentioning, such as the murdering of the Missionary Bonnie Penner Witherall and the bombing of US franchises: McDonald and KFC, during the past few months.

8. Civil unrest: There is a state of large popular resentment in the country. Surveys and Polls have shown that more than 40% of the Lebanese residing in Lebanon wish to leave. Demonstrations and strikes are becoming daily routine.

© LICUS INSTITUTE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

9. Socio-Economic trouble: 30% of Lebanese live under the "Poverty Line", according to government data from 2000 and 2001. And unemployment is around 14% in the general population and 28% in the young segment of the population (18-45 years old).

4900 Leesburg Pike (Suite 203), Alexandria, VA 22302
Phone: 703-578-4214 Fax: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG

Solutions:

Solutions to the Lebanese problem should aim to eliminate the 2 sources of conflict, through:

1. Stopping the foreign intervention in Lebanese affairs.

2. Eliminating the imbalance in power-sharing and governance.

To establish these solutions, the following principles should be implemented:

1. Sovereignty:

Sovereignty of the Lebanese state should be instituted with International and Arab guaranties. Up to the point of neutrality and non-alignment.

Lebanon has the right to have what every other Arab country and government has: the liberty to rule over its own affairs, without interference from any other Arab State.

The era of Pan-Arabism, Baathism, Nasserism, or "Qadhafism", whereby Arab governments should be toppled by force and Arab States and Countries should disappear and "melt" into one large Arab nation, this era is long gone.

2.Freedom and Democracy:

Freedom of individuals and Rights of the communities should be protected within a democracy of consensus (or consensual democracy).

The "plurality" or "diversity" of the Lebanese society with its different religions and cultural groups is not itself the problem.

It is the attempts and efforts to eliminate this diversity and marginalize or minimize the participation and role of a particular group, that is creating the problem.

3.Balance of Powers through a Pluralist / Federal System:

Hence the need for a true balance in power-sharing and governance, and a fair and equal participation of the religious-cultural components of the Lebanese society, regardless of their numbers, in running the country and in national decision-making process.

Modern democracies are not based anymore on the "rule of the majority of the number", rather on the equal political participation of the different groups that form the society in a democracy of consensus.

Examples in recent history include: Bosnia and the Balkans, currently Cyprus, and hopefully soon Iraq.

In all of these countries a Federal System has been found to be the generator of stability and the protector of the rights of all minorities.

© LEBANESE INFORMATION CENTER – ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

4900 LEESBURG PIKE (SUITE 203), ALEXANDRIA, VA 22302
PHONE: 703-578-4214 FAX: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG

Details of the Solutions

To achieve a long lasting solution to the current Lebanese crisis, the different issues should be resolved according to the following criteria:

1. Syrian Relations:
    - Complete withdrawal of Syrian Troops and Military Intelligence from Lebanon.
    - No Syrian interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.
    - Establishment of the best relations between the 2 independent and sovereign States

2. Palestinians Refugees:
    - Deserve a fair and just solution, but not at the expense of Lebanon's frail demographic balance.

3. Israeli Conflict:
    - Cessation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon.
    - Deployment of the Lebanese Army at the Southern border.
    - Initiation of peace negotiations

4. Arab Relations:
    - Lebanon remains part of the Arab world, while preserving its crucial and sensitive need for neutrality and non-alignment.

5. Relation with the West:
    - Lebanon should regain its role as a crossroad of cultures and civilizations, from the East and from the West, and maintain friendly relations with the West, based on the sharing of common basic values and ideals.

6. Role of the Diaspora:
    - 6 to 12 million Lebanese live outside Lebanon. They should have a say in Lebanese matters. Registered Lebanese voters living aboard should be granted the right to vote.

7. Freedom and Respect of Human Rights:

Focusing on 5 areas:

- Thought and religion.
- Expression: Media, publications.
- Economy, i.e. free market.
- Culture and Education: Lebanon being considered a multicultural society.
- Political activism.

8. Government:
    - A central government totally inclusive with equal participation and power sharing between Christians and Muslims.
    - A largely decentralized system, with more prerogatives to local governments.

9. Demographics:
    - No attempt should be made to falsely and artificially tip the demographic balance in Lebanon in favor of one religious community over another.

4900 Leesburg Pike (Suite 203), Alexandria, VA 22302
Phone: 703-578-4214 Fax: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG

- The 1994 Law naturalizing 360,000 foreigners (10% of Lebanon's population) 90% of them being Muslims, should be nullified.

10. Ending the Lebanese war:
    - To effectively close the chapter on the latest of the Lebanese wars (1975- 1990), and according to the Taif accord, the following steps should be taken:
    - Initiating efforts of dialogue leading to national reconciliation among the different parties in conflict during the Lebanese war.
    - Applying general amnesty, leading to the freeing of all political prisoners, particularly Dr. Samir Geagea, and to the return of all political exiled, particularly General Michel Aoun.
    - Disbanding and disarming all militias.
    - Forming a government of true National Unity.
    - Running free and fair elections following a new Electoral Law.

Conclusion

The problems of the Middle East have been the problems of its minorities.

Amidst the turmoil and the conflicts of the Middle East, Lebanon's role-mission is to be:

- A model of Christian Muslim co-existence.
- A link between East and West.
- A promoter of democracy, freedom, tolerance and respect of Human Rights.

The Lebanese democracy can be revived and Lebanon can play a crucial role in spreading democracy in the Middle East. This would be possible by a strong and long term commitment from the United States to support the freedom, independence and sovereignty of Lebanon and to assist in establishment a pluralistic and decentralized form of government that protect the rights of all religions groups.

The US goal to democratize the Middle East would have a greater probability of success if after Iraq the Lebanese democracy is revived to act as a model for other Arab Nations.

A free and democratic Lebanon will cease to be a source of terrorism and instability in the region and it will regain its role as a natural friend of the West and serve as a beacon of prosperity and freedom in the Middle East.

Finally, and quoting his Holiness John Paul II: "Lebanon is not just a country; Lebanon is a message to the World".

© LEBANESE INFORMATION CENTER – ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

4900 LEESBURG PIKE (SUITE 203), ALEXANDRIA, VA 22302
PHONE: 703-578-4214 FAX: 703-578-4615 WWW.LICUS.ORG