

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

17TH ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

***“TRANSITIONING THE WHITE HOUSE:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”***

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2008

**RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

9:30-10:30: "GEO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS (I): LEBANON AND SYRIA"

Chair: **The Honorable Edward W. Gnehm, Jr.** – Kuwait Professor of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Affairs, Elliot School of International Affairs, The George Washington University; former United States Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; former United States Ambassador to Australia; former director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Personnel for the Department of State; 36-year career in the United States Foreign Service.

Speakers: **H.E. Dr. Imad Moustapha** – Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United States

Dr. Bassam Haddad –Director, Middle East Studies Program and Assistant Professor, Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia

Dr. Daoud Khairallah, Esq. –Adjunct Professor of International Law at Georgetown University Law Center and the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.

Transcript by Ryan & Associates

[DR. JOHN DUKE ANTHONY] Chairing this session is an individual known to many. And for those who do not know him you have missed something for all these years. This is Edward Gnehm, known affectionately by his friends and colleagues as Skip Gnehm. He is currently the Kuwait Professor of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Affairs at George Washington University and he lent more than a helping hand this past summer when the National Council held its annual university summer student internship program in Washington in conjunction with 17 sister organizations.

We had the cerebral massages for the interns in mid-day and then the evenings at George Washington University's Elliot School of Public Affairs and International Affairs thanks to Ambassador Gnehm. 36 years in the U.S. Foreign Service as a career Foreign Service Officer. Last having served as U.S. Ambassador to Jordan, in terms of his ambassadorial assignments. Also ambassador to Australia. And ambassador to Kuwait, even when Kuwait was invaded and under occupation. He served as well as the Deputy Permanent Representative to the United States. He served as the Director General of the entire Foreign Service and Director of Personnel for the entire U.S. Department of State.

I was privileged to attend Ambassador Gnehm's swearing in when the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was underway. There were several hundred there on that occasion and it was presided over by Secretary of State James Baker. And the emotionality of the moment was such that there wasn't a dry eye in the entire audience there except one, and that was Ambassador Gnehm.

Ambassador Gnehm.

[AMBASSADOR EDWARD GNEHM] Well that was very generous of you, John. Thank you very much.

It's a real pleasure to be here with you today and to have a chance to chair this first panel on Lebanon and Syria. These are countries which are extremely important to all the states in the region quite obviously. But I would submit to you and the world at large that neither of these countries can be dismissed or isolated from the political realities in the world today.

You know a year ago, in looking back at the transcript from last year's panel it was reminding me the discussion was very much focused on an Israeli attack on a site in Eastern Syria that was allegedly part of a Syrian nuclear program. And news from Lebanon was the continued turmoil, the tension in trying to elect a new president and the jockeying for power among so many political factions.

Well now, today, once again the news is dominated by military action. And this time the U.S. military action in Eastern Syria. But much has happened in the last year and I think we should take a moment to note them. And that is that Lebanon does have a president now. There have been some significant political developments in that country. Recent announcements in Damascus and in Beirut by both of those governments to establish embassies in each capital, another noteworthy development. News reports that we've all seen of Turkish led talks, albeit at a distance, between Israel and Syria over a potential peace agreement. And on the negative side,

violence continuing in Lebanon and of course the bombings even in Damascus itself.

I look forward to a discussion of these matters and others with a very distinguished panel this morning. You have their biographies in the program book so I'm not going to give them the introduction that they really deserve. I would like to warmly welcome Doctor Imad Moustapha, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic here in Washington; Doctor Daoud Khairallah who is an adjunct professor, both at Georgetown University and Johns Hopkins University; and if Dr. Bassam Haddad arrives he will be joining us as well.

Now the format today will be presentations, remarks by our panelists followed by an opportunity for you to pose questions to the panel and I would just note, you have probably already figured this out, there are some cards and pens, and if you would kindly write your question as was done previously, we have people coming around collecting them who will bring them to me. And we will certainly use every amount of our time to try to address those questions.

So without further ado I will turn the discussion over immediately to Doctor Khairallah.

[DR. DAOUD KHAIRALLAH] Good morning ladies and gentlemen. In Lebanon at this time Hizballah and radical Sunni militants are the two groups that preoccupy most Lebanese regional actors and international powers.

Regarding Hizballah. Inside Lebanon many call for integrating Hizballah's armed forces into the Lebanese army and resent having an armed group belonging to one sect. Regionally, while Syria and Iran extend military and political support to Hizballah, Israel would like to see it wiped out of existence along with the contagious culture of resistance that it generates. Some Arab governments see in Hizballah a threat to the status quo and an ally to Shiite Iran. Internationally, the U.S. along with other Western countries have labeled Hizballah a terrorist organization and would like to see it disarmed and its political discourse discredited.

Regarding the Sunni militants. For most Lebanese the radical Sunni militants are at the present time the main source of concern and instability. The regional powers that associate Hizballah with the growing influence of Iran and see in the Sunni militants a counterweight, if you want, to Hizballah, would tolerate if not encourage their expansion in Lebanon irrespective of the consequences it seems. The U.S., if concerned about the Jihadist expansion in Lebanon, its officials have not shown the levels of concern that the growing risk to U.S. interests justifies.

In dealing with these two groups I'd like to focus my remarks on an issue that does not in my opinion get the attention it deserves nor does it get the effort it calls for to understand and deal with the agents of instability in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. It is the impact of religious and sectarian culture on sources of instability and progress in the region. Hizballah is often perceived as a military growth incompatible with a proper functioning of the state and is frequently referred to as a state within the state. A careful look however at the circumstances that led to the emergence of Hizballah and how it recruits in the military, political and social scene in Lebanon makes us realize that Hizballah is not a state within a state. It is a state in the absence of the state. It is a byproduct of a dysfunctional sectarian system that prevents a level of solidarity necessary to establish a properly functioning state. Hizballah came into existence shortly after

the Israeli invasion in 1982 and while Lebanon was in a state of civil war.

All major events that led to and facilitated that invasion can be linked to troubled Lebanese sectarian system, the underlying generators of the country's social and political disintegration. It was the division among Lebanese along sectarian lines that enabled the PLO to establish a military presence in Lebanon and use the Lebanese territory to carry out military activities against Israel and occasionally against the Lebanese army. That same sectarian division was the precursor of the Lebanese civil war which lasted 15 years where the PLO, Israel and Syria took sides and played major roles, some in putting an end to the war, but most for prolonging it.

In the absence of a national government, local resistance to the Israeli occupation was a natural course of action. It was at this time that Hizballah came into existence and started military operations against the Israeli occupier while at the same time filling a vacuum left by the government in terms of providing education, health and other social services. The civil war ended in 1990. The legislative authority was reconstituted. The government headed by the late Prime Minister Hariri was established. Now, once established the Lebanese government did not assume the sovereign right and duty to free its land from Israeli occupation. It could neither obtain the needed consent and commitment of its members for such an undertaking nor could it secure the required military structure, training and weapons for a successful war of liberation. So the sovereign task of liberating the land was relegated to the resistance headed by Hizballah. When in 2000 Israel withdrew from most of the Lebanese territory it kept scores of Lebanese detainees in its jails. Again the government did not assume the duty or make efforts to free its citizens. That task was relinquished to Hizballah and was carried out successfully.

During all phases of the Israeli occupation the armed resistance, particularly Hizballah was the vehicle that exercised the national sovereign right to free the country, especially in the eyes of the people of south Lebanon who suffered most from that occupation. Irrespective of any motivation behind the foreign assistance provided to Hizballah, assistance it most likely continues to receive, many Lebanese and other free minded people share with Hizballah a sense of justification for the military and political support they receive. Most liberation movements seek and get foreign assistance to end foreign occupation. What is unusual about this assistance is that it goes to an organization representative of one sect and not to a government or organization that represents the collective national will. Granted that the U.S. would probably never provide weapons to a Lebanese government that are effective in deterring Israeli military attacks against Lebanon. But thanks to the political system in Lebanon, no Lebanese government has managed to build consensus on involving all Lebanese in establishing an adequate military structure armed from whatever source for the defense of the country and its people.

In the absence of state institutions willing and able to defend the country and its people it's not reasonable to expect any threatened group who feels capable of defending itself to simply disarm and disband. Self-defense is a right and an instinct that precedes in existence the state and its laws. Hence the call by Hizballah for an agreement on a defense program and strategy as a precondition for dismantling its military structure. Those who would like to see Hizballah disarmed or be integrated in the Lebanese army whether inside Lebanon, regionally or internationally should realize that this is likely to succeed only to the extent that the military threat is eliminated or that an effective state apparatus is in place. Encouraging other sects to

establish armed groups in the hope of taking on Hizballah is not the answer and it is simply short sighted and very dangerous.

Since the death of Prime Minister Hariri and the departure of the Syrians, various Sunni Islamist groups have emerged as political forces in Lebanon. These groups represent various strange, if you want, mainstream political movements with a relatively large political constituency participating in party politics. A small number of Sunni Jihadist groups, however, some inspired by Al Qaeda, are behind most of the unrest inside Lebanon, including several attacks against the Lebanese army. The militant strain that has strengthened by a, is caused by a considerable number of Lebanese who returned from Iraq. Both mainstream Islamist and militant Jihadist groups have received and continue to receive support from inside and outside Lebanon. Mr. Hariri, the future movement and associated media have used sectarian language to mobilize their Sunni supporters. Mr. Hariri is said to have spent lavishly to shore up Sunni support especially in the northern district of the country, the stronghold of the Sunni militants. Considerable efforts were made that led to following convicted members of Sunni militants and substantial amount of money were paid in bail to set free members accused of crimes against the state. This is an absurd policy. The Lebanese who hope to live in the security of a properly functioning state will only see the state weakened and they realize they are threatened by terrorist acts as is happening at the present time.

Regional powers who are funding and encouraging the emergence of such groups in the hope of weakening the influence of Iran and its allies in the Arab world will soon realize the groups they have helped establish have grown autonomous and are as difficult to control as Al Qaeda and probably as dangerous to their own regime.

Israel and the U.S. should realize that the Sunni fundamentalist operating in Lebanon, no matter how much resentment they may have for a Shia armed group, as Hizballah, they have more resentment and deeper rooted hatred for Israel and the U.S. policy in the Middle East. It is not that all unlikely that in the near future they would have some understanding and in fact an agreement was reached between the leadership of Hizballah and a coalition of Sunni fundamentalist groups in Lebanon, less than two months ago, but was soon suspended as a result of strong pressure from financial sources outside. Contacts between the two groups continue however.

Encouraging sectarian culture in the Middle East is very short sighted and carries dangerous consequences to all. It is definitely incompatible with the objectives declared by our Secretary of State Rice of helping to build and sustain democratic well-governed states in the Middle East. We have an idea about what happens when we Lebanize or institutionalize and promote sectarian culture as has been done in Iraq. After the Iranian revolution and the expansion of the Wahhabi version of Islam, starting in the later part of the last century, the sectarian ideological discourse dominated the political scene in the Middle East in general and Lebanon is no exception. But notwithstanding the sectarian political situation in Lebanon, Syria and Lebanon have had the most exposure to secular modern thinking and are least prone to religious fundamentalism and most capable of fighting it in the Arab world.

If secular democracy has any chance of succeeding this is where it should start. This is where the

internal regional and international efforts of secular democratic forces should be invested to stem the tide of fundamentalism.

Thank you.

[AMBASSADOR IMAD MOUSTAPHA] Ladies and gentlemen good morning. John Duke Anthony thank you for the good work you have been doing since before I was born, but particularly since I came to this country five years and a half ago. This is just yet an additional achievement. I congratulate you on this. Also I want to express my gratitude to Ambassador Gnehm. I always had these doubts. His name has always had this Arabic tone to it. He has assured me that he is from Georgia. But I plead with you, check your family history please. Probably there is one good thing about your family back, back in ancient history and times.

I just arrived ten minutes ago and I was particularly delighted to discover that his Royal Highness Prince Turki is among us. I am so happy to meet you again Prince Turki and you know that I'm very.. I'm personally sincere that I hope you will not quote me on this, you are my favorite royal ever, of all nationalities, or all royal dynasties..

[voice from audience]

..I know, please don't quote me.

I was supposed to be talking about different issues, more on a positive tone but what has happened in Syria last week will force me to retell the story that I was planning to tell originally, but before I explain to you what happened in Syria last week, I need to go back a little bit. Just a little bit. Back to what happened last September in New York. Probably you can answer the questions I am going to ask you because I don't have answers to them.

To be candid and honest to you we in Syria have resigned ourselves to the fact that there will never be a political reengagement between Syria and the United States of America as long as this Administration continues to be in power. And we started to work very hard with all Congressional leaders, Congressman and Senators from both sides of the aisle, Democrats and Republicans to outreach to them and to tell them, look, Syria is not an enemy to the United States. It does not serve the national interest of Syria or to the national interest of the United States itself to portray us as enemies to the United States despite our willingness to engage with the United States. And in a way, this message which is a very moderate message, has been widely accepted by the rational center here in the United States. Not only in the Congress but also among the media, among the universities, academia, and the political think tanks.

The general trend across the United States today, of course I'm talking about the rational center, is that the United States needs to engage with Syria and of course this is our position. You all know it takes two to tango and you can ask yourselves when will the tango dance start between the Syrians and the Americans. Well there is one single major exception, which is the Administration that has isolated itself in a bubble refusing to talk to Syria, refusing to engage diplomatically with Syria for a simple reason. We are the rogue state and the good Administration of the United States of America does not talk to rogue states. Fair enough.

So we have resigned ourselves to this fact. Meanwhile we have major regional problems and crises in our regions. So we started to work on these major issues in our region with various allies and friends. A couple of months ago two senators, one Democrat, one Republican, published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, in which they said, I think you know who I'm referring to, they wrote major positive developments are taking place in the Middle East right now. Egypt has brokered a truce between Hamas and Israel. Germany has brokered a prisoner exchange between Hizballah and Israel. Syria, Qatar and France have helped the Lebanese to reach a national reconciliation, elect a new president and end up with a national unity government, and Turkey is helping Israel and Syria start negotiations right now.

While these major developments are happening in the Middle East our country, of course I'm talking about the two senators, our country is on the sidelines watching. Then they concluded by saying while we were attempting to isolate Syria we ended up isolating the United States of America from the major developments in the region.

I will jump now to September, last month. We were attending the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York and suddenly out of the blue we received a message from Secretary Rice requesting a meeting with our Foreign Minister. To be honest with you, I promised to be candid, we were pleasantly surprised. The meeting took place. It was not a hostile meeting. She was not pointing fingers. Actually she was commending the positive good things that were happening in our region, mainly the positive developments regarding Iraq, Lebanon and the talks with Israel. That was a short meeting followed up two days later by a lengthy meeting by the Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the Near East region. In that very long meeting almost every issue was discussed in depth. And I assure you, regardless of anything else you might hear, because we have the proof to this, we have taped this meeting, the tone was extraordinarily, puzzlingly positive as far as we are concerned. Of course, why were we puzzled, because for the past four years time and again we tried to tell the United States, stop this belligerent attitude toward us.

If you have issues with Syria of course we also have issues with the United States. We are extremely unhappy with the death and destruction you have bestowed on Iraq while bringing them democracy and prosperity. We are extremely unhappy of the fact that while Israel was bombarding Lebanon in 2006 destroying two thirds of its infrastructure and killing 1,300 civilians and leaving one million plus cluster bomblets to continue the killing process after Israel left.

While the whole world was demanding that Israel agree to a ceasefire the United States of America singularly, uniquely opposed the whole world in a ceasefire because it cared a lot, you know for Lebanon. And of course we are extremely, extremely unhappy in Syria about the fact that over the past 60 years the Palestinian nation has suffered tremendous despair, humiliation, dire conditions thanks to the humane, liberal, renaissance-like Israeli occupation of their territories and the flagrant, blind support the United States of America provides to the Israeli occupation of our territories.

Having said this we also understand that the United States has issues with Syria. Our message

with the United States was.. always whenever we had problems in the past, we were able to sit together and address these issues, find a common ground, work to narrow the gaps between us and you, find solutions, compartmentalize, some problems can easily be addressed, other problems need hard work, need vision, need diligence. But we failed. Even with President Reagan. We didn't have a crisis with President Reagan. And the New Jersey air carrier bombarded our troops in Lebanon. What happened? Did President Reagan withdraw the U.S. Ambassador from Damascus? Did he boycott Syria and say Syria is a rogue state and we don't talk to rogue states? No, not only did he leave the ambassador in Damascus but he sent a special envoy to Damascus, Philip Habib. So the United States realizing it had a crisis with a country, would work with this country more intensively than with any country in the world. I'm talking about President Reagan. I'm not talking about President Carter or President Clinton. Or one of the most admired American Presidents in our part of the world, President Bush the father.

Back to September. We were pleased. We were surprised. For years we were telling the United States sit with us, let us address the issues. They wouldn't. Suddenly, by the very end of the second term of this Administration they decide to sit with us. They engaged with us on every single issue and the discussions were on the practical level and they were most encouraging, particularly regarding Iraq. Actually they asked us, why don't you.. they congratulated us for sending a Syrian ambassador to Baghdad, which was the first Syrian ambassador we sent to Iraq for 27 years. And they asked us why don't you send higher level delegates to Iraq, the Iraqi government needs this show of support – Arab leaders visiting Iraq. And we told them, simply our Prime Minister was planning to visit Iraq, but the Iraqi government that invited him originally told us that the U.S. opposed this visit and they can't go ahead with a visit. The President of Iraq, the Prime Minister of Iraq cannot actually invite the Prime Minister of Syria to Baghdad without the approval of the United States of America. When we told them this in New York they said things have changed. Go ahead. Let your Prime Minister visit Baghdad. We will provide him with full security and full protection and we will be very happy that he will visit Baghdad.

That was just last September. And of course they were particularly pleased by the intelligence, security and cooperation between the Syrian government and the Iraqi government on security related issues. By the way, we were not doing this to please the United States of America. We were doing this because we believed this served the interests of our region. It is not about doing things so that the people in Washington, DC will be pleased. If that was the policy of Syria in the first place we would have been in a very different position by now. Our policies stem from our perceptions, our convictions for our region. We might be right, we might be wrong, but at least these are our perceptions. And we are in no position to come to the United States and tell America, as an example, what is best suited for your region, for North America for example. This is your region. That's our region. We happen to belong there and we are as you know caught between the hammer and the hard place -- the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the American occupation of Iraq. Occupations usually generate and spawn lots of evil and it's an evil circle of violence and counter violence, death, bloodshed, destruction and usually it fuels extremism on both sides, the occupier and the occupied. This is why we have always opposed the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and of course the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and of the other Arab territories, the Syrian Golan, and the Lebanese Shebaa Farms.

Back to the major developments that took place, at least our understanding, after September, last month, was that the United States was seriously engaged in reevaluating, reassessing its policy toward Syria and probably a new phase of bilateral relations between Syria and the United States would start. And then.. I have only ten minutes left.. Okay thank you.

I will be as succinct as possible. I will leave some time for the questions.

Okay. Last week you know exactly what has happened. Four U.S. helicopters went into Syria to a village near Abu Kamal. Villagers living there, a group of them building a small residential house like villagers usually do in that part of the world in our country. Two helicopters starting shooting and firing on those people, civilians, villagers, Syrians all of them. Not a single person of them had even a knife to defend themselves. They were never involved in any organization or even probably with due respect to them, they have passed away now, they probably didn't really understand the complete context about the U.S. enterprise in Iraq, bringing freedom and democracy, prosperity and.. you know all the rosy pictures to Iraq. They don't know anything. Of course they know there are U.S. troops in Iraq. They know there is death and bloodshed in Iraq. They know that there are 1.5 million Iraq refugees today in Syria fleeing that haven of democracy and prosperity into a rogue state. But this is irrelevant. They killed all these guys and then two other helicopters went down and the soldiers from those helicopters moved around the bodies being sure that each single person was killed and shooting additional bullets into the bodies. It was a criminal terrorist attack against unarmed innocent civilians. One father and four of his sons died. Another couple died. And an eighth man, a fisherman died. Totally, totally, unjustified.

But the big question. Why did it happen? Why the sudden change? Probably the guys here don't talk to each other and they have different attitudes. Some people within the administration believe it's time to reengage with Syria and others say look it's an election time and we need to do something to remind the people that we have a crisis in Iraq and we are fighting against Al Qaeda, let's do something Rambo style so we can stir emotions and the hearts and minds of the American people so they might reconsider their election positions. Well thank you very much if you care for your elections, but don't come and kill Syrian innocent civilians in order to manipulate the domestic elections here in the United States.

I will stop here. John Duke is already upset with me. And I think we can further discuss this at a later stage

Thank you, very much.

[GNEHM] Doctor Bassam Haddad was not here when I was welcoming our other two and I just want to welcome him this morning. Bassam, I'll give you the microphone.

[DR. BASSAM HADDAD] Every time I talk about Syria the Ambassador happens to be in the room, so I ask him not to be upset with me.

Thank you all for being here. Thanks for the invitation and giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished audience. My talk is titled.. I'm going to try to squeeze it into a smaller

number of minutes. It's called "U.S., Syria, Lebanon: Between Beating a Really Dead Horse and a Hard Place." I'm going to stick to the text so that I don't go on many tangents. So I apologize for reading from my notes. It is difficult to characterize the United States' relationship with Lebanon and Syria over the past two decades together or separately.

The United States and its various tentacles have supported and criticized as well as attacked both countries in the previous three decades. The latest attack on Syrian soil was only a few days ago. The meddling in Lebanese politics and toying with those of Syria stretches back to the 1950s. Accordingly successive U.S. administrations have been duly been praised, maligned and/or ignored. There is no indication that stable relations will ensue with either country, not least because any new Administration is likely to bring its own interpretive lenses into the mix. As is the case with U.S. policy in the Middle East in general, its relations with Syria and Lebanon suffer from recurring shortfalls which I'll be discussing in a minute. So much so that analysts of all persuasions find common ground in addressing some shortcomings.

I wish I could sit here and pretend I would be presenting observations that were earth shattering or even novel in some way. When it comes to U.S. policy in the Middle East the unpleasant aroma, whether moral or analytical that was infused in the 1980s, 90s and today is very familiar to the trained and untrained observer. So much so that you very rarely see U.S. Middle East policymakers continue to take seriously or take pride in the politics or policies they formulated after leaving office. It's a tough lose-lose job that someone has to do until the next Administration or team comes along. What changes are the costs under differing circumstances. Today, as ever we bear witness to inconsistencies in policymaking, U.S. policymaking.. a one step forward, two steps back courses of actions. We want democracy but we don't like the winners. We want pluralism, but we don't want everyone represented. We want regime change in Syria but don't like the Islamist alternative. We want Hariri but not the Sunni radical supporters in the north. We want a democratic Lebanon but not the vote of the plurality of Shias. The last and best of all, at times, we want stability without balance of power. A concept we'd like to do away with after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However you look at the U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria you'll have to work hard to avoid the following undramatic observations. U.S. policy in SNL.. short for Syria and Lebanon, not Saturday Night Live. Policy in SNL suffers from an absence of the long view that is not determined by immediate political concerns. This is also very much a function of how the American political system operates and is structured. And that's not the subject of discussion here, at least. It suffers from an absence of a truly independent foreign policy team capacity that is able to shake off special interests, all special interests. The idea here is that special interests not only do not always comport with the national interests but they sometimes drag the country into costly policies and wars.

Third, and finally, after 9/11, and I'm restricting my comments to three here.. After 9/11 2001 both the insecurity and arrogance of U.S. policymaking in the Middle East have made for an all new approach that invites delusion. Whether it is the blind and unaccountable support of a pro-Hariri government to a war to eradicate the most popular movement in Lebanon, to strikes against, and inside Syria, by our allies or our own military forces the U.S. foreign policy team has outdone itself with nothing to show for it except an increase in anti-US government hostility

in the two countries and beyond, among Islamists and secularists alike, including Waleed Jumblatt.

That's supposed to be a joke. For those who know Waleed Jumblatt.

It is a rather simple task to point out the shortcomings when it comes to U.S. Middle East policy. It is more difficult to find solutions and even more difficult to apply them.

I'm going to skip a discussion that borders on an IR, or international relations, approach or digression and I will go right to how do we proceed.. how to proceed.. what kind of suggestions we can put on the table, given that.. well since I started learning about the Middle East in the early and middle 1980s I've been hearing the same exact criticisms. Things changed in the rest of the world. In Latin America, Sub Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but when it comes to the Middle East we find a continuity that is remarkable and remarkably problematic. Power relations among the actors involved, prejudice for a starting point that privileges the United States if only because its policies are more consequential. Neither are Lebanese policies going to affect the other players – sometimes they don't affect most Lebanese, nor are the Syrians able to affect the behavior of other states, stronger states. Within two years the sovereignty of Syria has been directly and violently violated at least twice. Once by Israel and once by the United States and the Syrian regime was hardly able to do or say more than “the next this happens we reserve the right to retaliate. “

Here are some basic negative suggestions for U.S. policymakers working on Lebanon and Syria, in the context of the war on terrorism, the Iraq war, the Iranian situation and the Arab-Israeli conflict. I'm making negative suggestions because positive ones like “apply your principles or support international law” let alone serve justice will not be heeded for obvious reasons of international politics.

First, this is going to sound quite arrogant considering I was critiquing the arrogance of U.S. policy.. First do not take your own classification of terrorist organizations and state sponsors of terror too seriously in your policies because most actors around the world don't take them seriously. They take the problematic and violent consequences seriously but not the designation. If one studies the history of classifying organizations and groups as terrorist in the United States you'll realize why U.S. policymakers themselves don't take them seriously. It is a very politicized process. If this worked to mobilize this country to invade and occupy Iraq it will not work any more absent another attack on U.S. soil.

Another point stems from this first one. Do not try to eliminate or eradicate a mass movement that constitute a plurality in any country including the Lebanese or Lebanon on the grounds that they are terroristic. This works on Fox News but not in the real world.

Do not assume, that's the second point, that you can effectively establish a new favorable balance of power in the region or a stable Iraq without the support of the Syrian and Iranian regimes as they stand. Clearly that's why there was talk about regime change in Syria a couple of years ago. But the Israelis warned of an Islamist alternative so we dropped that prospect. And

clearly this is why we wanted a different or weaker regime in Iran via a military strike of sorts.

In other words absent some dramatic, unforeseen development or regional war you have to talk to the Syrians and the Iranians at some point. A subsidiary point here. Do not continue to strike Syria or support striking Syria if you expect to have stability in Iraq, especially when Syria is resuming relations with the rest of the world and is emerging out of its isolation since 2005 with talks with the European Union, France, Britain, China, Russia and beyond.

Third, do not meddle in the internal politics of these regimes because you have a new world order created by the United States where alliance with the United States is your allies strongest liability within those countries. In Syria most secular anti-Islamist and anti-Syrian regime activists, the opposition, that is secular, that is anti-Islamist, are most scared of being associated with an arrogant, aggressive and unprincipled United States in the effort to shake off the regimes authoritarian practices domestically.

In Lebanon the U.S. unequivocal support to the Hariri camp weakened that camp by first inflating the value of that support only to see it deflate as circumstances on the ground proved inhospitable for U.S. meddling of any sort. In fact this one sided U.S. support of any group in Lebanon is more likely to ignite or reignite civil war than to serve the interest of any party involved.

Fourth, my personal favorite, do not assume the Syrian regime is sincerely interested in peace with Israel absent some comprehensive plan that includes the Palestinians. This is not necessarily about solidarity with the Palestinians but a rational preference on part of the Syrian regime given the opportunity cost of unnecessary peace to domestic regime interest in Syria. The derivative of this is no matter how many pundits see an opportunity on the Syria-Israel peace track don't go for it whole-heartedly without having made strides on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The gaze of the Syrian regime is in that direction. It will accept being second to last only when the game nears and end, not before.

Most importantly, this is the last comment, stop listening to think tanks and Arab intellectuals that staff some of them who will tell you we know how this or that society works, or how these people think and what will or will not work with them. You are being taken on an expensive and costly often irreversible ride. Best to stick to basic principles of balance of power that are analytically and morally mediocre but will control damage and will reduce irreversible courses of action and ultimately allow future generations in the region the opportunity to produce seriously sound policies under different circumstances. So to U.S.-Middle East policymakers this is not your day. It has not been for awhile. So go for the sub-optimal, you might get somewhere. And there will still be allies with local legitimacy that might still respect you and the U.S. government. If you go all the way, or, go all the way, and you'll find that the only weapon you have is force and that is the sure sign of an impending grand fall.

Thank you.

[GNEHM] Thank you Bassam and thanks to all the panelists for their comments. It's unfortunate that we had to squeeze people. As a professor I would say this is a semester seminar and we

should be here a lot longer but I only have about ten minutes before John will start punching me in my right rib cage. So let me go quickly to questions. I have a couple I'm going to read them. They are a bit different. These are aimed at Doctor Khairallah and I'll let you address them both.

One relates to Hizballah and its resistance status. I think the point of this question is don't some of these actions, Hizballah actions, such as turning weapons against the people of Lebanon last May, shooting down a Lebanese helicopter last May, or continuing their resistance after the UN has certified that Israel has withdrawn, don't these actions undermine Hizballah's resistance status.

The second is, if the explicit sectarian government of Lebanon is to blame for quote absence of a state should the Lebanese constitution be reconsidered and possibly amended.

[KHAIRALLAH] We should agree on one thing. It is an abnormal presence that you have an armed presence within a state within a country that functions independently. It is incompatible with the normal functioning of the state, but there ought to be a state functioning as a state. Hizballah represents a group, and I said a few words about how it came into existence. Now it feels as long as there is a threat to meet, and there could be all kinds of considerations with the relations with the political environment for Syria and Iran or beyond. Hizballah feels that I need to keep this, my arms, to be able to defend myself and people who have been threatened in South Lebanon since 1948, since the war of independence, Israel calls it. And the receiving of waves of Palestinians into Lebanon. Since that time some villages at the borders between Lebanon and Syria, villagers could not leave their homes after dark. This is since 1948. So these people feel now that I have a sense of security. I am the master of my destiny. And there is no state to take my place to protect me. Why do they stay in this status. Because the state does not. And why did they use their weapons against other Lebanese? Again, because there was a threat to take away their weapons. This was the occasion that caused them to react. They were not involved in the civil war in the sectarian sense that some villages were fairly protected.

Now with respect to whether or not a constitution needs to be changed. Yes it does if we are to substitute to this dysfunctional sectarian system, substitute a modern, democratic, secular system, this would require constitutional amendments and this would require emergence of a new culture everyone should work on, propagating and instilling in the people.

[GNEHM] Thank you very much. I have a request here for the Ambassador. This has to do with talks between you and Israel under Turkey. It says the discussion between Syria and Israel through Turkey. Are they serious? If so, what are the major issues to be resolved?

[MOUSTAPHA] That's a big question I was trying to answer it in as shortly as possible. First I need to thank you for saying Syria and Israel. My dear friend Bassam mentioned Israel seven times but whenever he would mention Syria he would mention the Syrian regime.

As you all know, Syria has never changed its position for the past 20 years. We have said yes, we want to make peace with Israel based on the fair principal of land for peace. Israel will give us back our occupied territories in return for peace. And of course, without going into the details and the singular tracks that are taking place right now, but also the pan-Arab peace initiative, that

was flatly rejected by the Israelis for the past four years. Now things might be changing, we don't know but this is too early to judge.

For the past five years Syria has invited Israel time and again, publicly on the record, to restart peace talks. And Israel was refusing to do this based on the following pretext. I know you will say this is preposterous but that was the Israeli pretext. We would love to restart peace talks with Syria. It serves our national interest but we can't do this because the Bush Administration is fiercely opposing any peace talks between Syria and Israel. Of course, whoever would come and tell us this on behalf of the Israelis we will always have one simple answer. Come on we don't believe this. We understand what Israel is. Clearly when Israel wants to start peace talks with Syria the last thing in the world they will care for is the opposition of the White House. It is the other way around.

Without going also into much ado about this, suddenly out of the blue Israel decided to change their positions. The Turks who are close friends came to us and told us that the Israelis after five years of opposing peace talks between Israel and Syria have changed their mind and they want to restart peace talks. Now in the past, this is not the first round of peace talks between Syria and Israel. In the past twice we sat with the Israelis and we tried to achieve peace based on international legitimacy, United Nations Security Council Resolutions and the principal of land for peace. Yitzhak Rabin in the past has put it in writing that he is willing to withdraw to the line of June 4, 1967 in exchange for full peace with Syria. He put this in writing and he deposited this with President Clinton. You can read this in Clinton's biography. It has been called, since that time, the Rabin deposit.

So in the past twice we have negotiated with Israel all the details, all the intricacies, when we will reach the point of the borders markup the peace talks will collapse. This time instead of wasting time, energy and resources, we told the Turks let us start with indirect talks in Istanbul. Let the Israelis come, we will come, you will mediate between us. If we agree that the peace talks will be based on the return of all Syrian occupied territories back to the line of June 4, 1967 then if we understand they are willing to do this, then why not. We can start peace talks. But start peace talks and spend a long time negotiating all the details then when it's time to agree on the withdrawal line, they will say we don't want this, we want that. Let us not raise expectations and dash them again. Let us be clear about this, without going into details about what has happened in Istanbul I can assure you that the three first rounds of talks were mostly on the positive side. And our understanding, at least for the while, Ehud Olmert was willing in a serious way was willing to consider in a serious way full withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967. Now as you know because of purely domestic issues in Israel these peace talks have stopped now. They did not stop because of problems between Syria and Israel. The Turks are telling us that once Israel will settle these issues and once they will know who will be their next prime minister they will resume their role of brokering peace talks between Syria and Israel.

Historically it used to be the United States that would broker peace between Syria and Israel. The United States did not only forfeit this role actually they changed into a position of opposing peace talks between Syria and Israel. I'll stop here.

[GNEHM] Thank you very much, sir. I have a question for Bassam. Given your comments about

America's policy is there no hope with elections, a change of Administrations, for a change that you would consider positive?

[HADDAD] The short answer is no. As far as I'm concerned there might be, as you hear on the news and analysis.. Barack Obama if he is to be president there might be a change of style, but there's also pressure to actually deflect some of the anticipated courses of action by Obama or the anticipated changes that could end up pushing Obama more to the right. So I do not see any substantive changes if Obama is elected and clearly with McCain it is not an issue to begin with.

[GNEHM] Thank you. I apologize to many of you I have some wonderful good questions. But I think we need to say to our panelists thank you very, very much for your presentations.

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