



Lebanon's Foreign Policy: *Challenges and Recommendations*

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Policy Brief



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معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة
والشؤون الدولية

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Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Historical Overview: Did Lebanon ever have a “Foreign Policy Doctrine”?	6
Domestic Crisis and Its Impact on Foreign Policy	7
Pre-Civil War Foreign Policy	8
Post-Civil War Foreign Policy	8
Post-Syrian Withdrawal Foreign Policy	9
A Foreign Policy based on Pro-Active Diplomacy and ‘Positive Neutrality’	9
Positive Neutrality and Commitment to the Arab League	11
Pro-Active Diplomacy, Building Bridges, and Mediation	12
Recommendations for a Reformed Diplomatic Apparatus	13
<i>A Need for Public Diplomacy</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>From Networking to Lobbying</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Institutionalizing Diaspora-Motherland Ties</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Establishing a Diplomatic Academy and Training Skilled Diplomats</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Preparing Future Mediators</i>	<i>14</i>
Conclusion	15
References	16

Introduction

Lebanon, a small country with a complex institutional setup, has struggled to identify its foreign policy doctrine over the past decades. Lebanon's foreign policymaking reflects its geographic location, the composition of its sectarian makeup – often described as consociational democracy but in practice a federation of sectarian leaders – and its reliance on commerce and trade. Throughout its history, Lebanon has shouldered the consequences of regional and international developments and transnational ideologies, often doing so beyond its capacities. Since its foreign policy has been linked to choices made by sectarian political parties that are backed by regional or international actors, consecutive governments have disregarded the state's political and economic interests. As such, every major community has its own regional or international backer and seeks to impose its agenda on the state. The last 50 years have shown us that the division of sectarian parties over regional issues and unilateral decisions to meddle in the domestic affairs of neighboring countries or pose a threat to their national security, have further complicated internal politics by exposing Lebanon to regional conflicts. As such, societal vulnerability, based on friction among political identities, triggered multiple conflicts and street clashes over the identity of Lebanon.

Within this context, the recent political events and regional developments have further exposed the disintegration of state institutions and the voluntary resignation of political authority from its role. Some may argue that there are no clear foundations for Lebanese foreign policy today and no diplomatic action to ensure the security and safety of the Lebanese or defend the country's national interests. Throughout the past decades, the almost total absence of a state-sanctioned foreign policy was a direct result of non-state actors, most notably Hezbollah's, control over strategic political decisions, in favor of its regional role and alliances. This constitutes an extension of decades of proxy wars, making Lebanon a pawn of regional actors at the expense of its own national interest. Hence, it is necessary to set up a national foreign policy based on a comprehensive internal consensus to strengthen Lebanon's diplomacy and its ability to defend its national interests. The recent war in Lebanon and its aftermath, and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, have both pushed many analysts to think about how to distance Lebanon from regional conflicts and protect its national interests for once.

The objective of this policy paper is to first, identify whether Lebanon had “foreign policy doctrines” over time; second, assess how domestic divisions and polarization have led to foreign policy paralysis; third, to highlight the importance of adopting ‘positive neutrality’ and pro-active diplomacy for the country to navigate regional conflicts; and finally, to provide recommendations on reforming its diplomatic apparatus and put Lebanon back on the regional and international diplomatic map.

Historical Overview: Did Lebanon ever have a “Foreign Policy Doctrine”?

We can argue that throughout the modern history of Lebanon, the country has adopted four foreign policy tenets, each reflecting a certain era associated with regional and domestic developments. These doctrines are: forced accommodation, confrontation, passive preventative accommodation, and active preventative accommodation.¹

‘Forced accommodation’ is chosen when the state faces an internal crisis due to a lack of national consensus over its foreign policy, most notably on the Palestinian issue. In this case, the state is forced to provide concessions to the most influential Arab actor on the Lebanese domestic scene at the cost of its sovereignty. In the case of ‘confrontationist’ foreign policy, the state contests the demands and interests of the hegemonic Arab power, positioning itself against its

¹ Nassif Hitti, *The Foreign Policy of Lebanon; Lessons and Prospects for the Forgotten Dimension*, Centre for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, April 1989, p. 12, 13 and 20.

interests by aligning with its opponents in the region or international scene. This foreign policy led to the collapse of the national consensus and often triggered political clashes and state paralysis, such as in 1958 with President Camille Chamoun's endorsement of the Eisenhower Doctrine.² The 'passive preventative accommodationist' foreign policy involves when the country refrains from acting against the Arab hegemony, often providing certain compromises to it on the domestic scene to avoid negative repercussions. Finally, an 'active preventative accommodationist' foreign policy is characterized by the state's rapprochement with the Arab hegemon. This allows the state to engineer a certain national consensus and consolidate domestic stability. This policy is useful for two main reasons: first, it supports the policies of the main actor without necessarily providing concessions on regional and international issues due to internal national consensus; and second, it strengthens the domestic front and prevents any transnational politics from undermining the front by engaging in state-building to foster national unity.³ This was mainly the case with Fouad Chehab's⁴ regional foreign policy (1958-1964).⁵

However, these foreign policy choices are dynamic and overlap with domestic political shifts, as sectarian leaders often align with their regional or international patrons to consolidate their position, often at the expense of other communities and overall state interests.⁶

Domestic Crisis and Its Impact on Foreign Policy

The demarcation line between domestic and foreign policy is blurred in Lebanon. This section will highlight how domestic and foreign policies overlap in a state that lacks national consensus on strategic issues. Disagreements among various religious communities over foreign policy choices often paved the way for violent confrontations. These have included the case of associating Lebanon with the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1958, armed support to Palestinian militias (1960-1970s), the May 17 agreement with Israel in 1983, the type of relation with Syria (1990-2005), the question of resistance against Israel, and the country's involvement in regional conflicts (e.g., Syria, Gulf states, and Gaza).

“ This overlap between domestic and foreign politics exacerbated the situation in Lebanon, making it vulnerable to external pressures and interventions, while allowing regional and international actors to decide on matters at the cost of Lebanon's sovereignty and state interests. ”

Local actors deployed transnational ideologies (pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, etc.) or tried to bandwagon with external actors (incl. the US, Soviet Union, Egypt, Syria, and Iran) to strengthen their positions in internal political struggles. Consequently, this overlap between domestic and foreign politics exacerbated the situation in Lebanon, making it vulnerable to external pressures and interventions, while allowing regional and international actors to decide on

² Douglas Little, Vol. 20, No. 1, Winter 1996, "His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis," pp. 27-54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24913444?seq=1>.

³ Bassel F. Salloukh, The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon, "The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization," Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, AUC Press, July 2010, p.295.

⁴ This foreign policy doctrine was articulated in 1959, when President Gamal Abdel Nasser of the United Arab Republic (UAR) met with Lebanese President Fouad Chehab at the Lebanese Syrian border to negotiate a resolution to the Lebanese crisis. This remarkable gathering, called "The Tent Meeting," took place in a tent located on the border itself, half in Lebanon and half in Syria. The setup was in accordance with President Chehab's desire to convey a strong message to Abdel Nasser that Lebanon, as an independent nation, would never join the UAR and in return, Lebanon would not join any alliance to threaten the interests of the UAR.

⁵ Nahla Hasan al-Ansari, al-Ra'is Fouad Chihab Wa Siyasa Lubnan al-Kharijiya (President Fouad Chehab and Lebanon's Foreign Policy 1958-1964), al-Muassa al-Haditha LilKitab, first edition, 2020.

⁶ Bassel F. Salloukh, July 2010, p.295.

matters at the cost of Lebanon's sovereignty and state interests.⁷ We can divide Lebanon's foreign policy periods into three eras:

Pre-Civil War Foreign Policy

Since the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920, the proponents of Lebanism (mainly the Maronites) emphasized Lebanon's Mediterranean-Phoenician heritage. Sunnis, on the other hand, (not exclusively, as many Shias and Greek Orthodox politicians have joined them too) supported Lebanon's Levantine or Arabist heritage, arguing that "Lebanon had always been part of [geographic] Syria" and cannot be detached from the Arab World.⁸

A formula was devised in 1943 between President Beshara El Khoury and Prime Minister Riyad Al Solh, known as the National Pact, which was a cornerstone of Lebanon's political system and future foreign policy. The Pact declared Lebanon as an independent state with an "Arab face," and committed Muslims to renounce their demands to reunite with Syria and accept the existence of a sovereign and independent Lebanon. Meanwhile, Christians accepted the 'Arab image' of the country and renounced its special link to France as a protector. Hence, Lebanon was regarded as an Arab country but with a certain special character. According to Fahim Qubain, by this agreement, Lebanon was supposed to refuse to align itself with any power conspiring against Arab states, but in case of dispute among Arabs, it had to remain neutral. In return, Arab states had to recognize the independence and sovereignty of Lebanon and not aim to incorporate it into their territorial projects.⁹ However, this foreign policy was challenged by domestic and regional developments, as Lebanon struggled to position itself between the West and the Soviet Union, or major Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria. Although the Lebanese government sought to establish close relations with France and the US, this did not prevent the government from losing its monopoly over foreign policy, as the Palestinian factor and other regional interventions backed by domestic forces disintegrated state institutions and triggered 15 years of civil war, often fought by proxy forces.

Post-Civil War Foreign Policy

The US-Syrian-Saudi mediated Taif Accord (1989) that put an end to the Civil War declared Lebanon a country with "an Arab identity and belonging," which meant that Lebanon should have committed to a pro-Arab orientation. Moreover, the agreement mentioned that Lebanon and Syria are linked by "special relations" and share common interests entailing policy coordination. Lebanon also had to balance its relations with the Gulf states, mainly Saudi Arabia. Capital inflows from Arab Gulf investors and tourism revenues were prime sources of post-war economic growth. Remittances by Lebanese expatriates living in the Gulf reached USD 4.5 billion in 2003¹⁰, contributing to Lebanon's balance of payment surplus. Hence, Lebanon's foreign policy towards the Gulf was shaped mainly by these economic incentives.

Until Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, Beirut adopted a pro-Syrian foreign policy orientation. Syria shaped Lebanon's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict, aiming to serve its geopolitical aims. Lebanon's relations with the US also passed through Syria. Moreover, after the Madrid conference in 1991, Lebanon's delegation was pressured by Damascus to only negotiate matters related to Israeli withdrawal from the South of Lebanon, while peace negotiations should wait for the outcome of the Syrian-Israeli track.¹¹ When Israel withdrew from the South in 2000, Damascus used the issue of the Shabaa Farms and Hezbollah's operations there to score pressure points against Israel, ignoring its own occupied lands in the Golan Heights.

⁷ Ibid., p.284.

⁸ Ibid., p.285.

⁹ Fahim I. Qubain, *Crisis in Lebanon*, Middle East Institute, 1961, Washington, p. 18.

¹⁰ Marwan Iskandar, Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon, Saqi Books, 2006, pp. 133 and 187.

¹¹ Bassel F. Salloukh, July 2010, p.303.

Post-Syrian Withdrawal Foreign Policy

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 and other politicians opposing the Syrian presence divided the country between two factions along opposing domestic and regional visions. With the exit of Syria, and for a short time, Lebanon repositioned itself, strengthening its ties with Saudi Arabia, the US, and France. Thus, the Syrian ‘guardianship’ was replaced with an American-French-Saudi ‘sponsorship.’ However, this equation didn’t last long, as Damascus had influential political tools to continue shaping Lebanon’s internal dynamics. As such, Lebanon turned into a battleground or proxy arena between the Iranian-Syrian axis, backed by Hezbollah and its allies, and the US-Saudi axis, backed by the forces previously associated with the so-called March 14 alliance.

“ With the exit of Syria, and for a short time, Lebanon repositioned itself, strengthening its ties with Saudi Arabia, the US, and France. Thus, the Syrian ‘guardianship’ was replaced with an American-French-Saudi ‘sponsorship.’ ”

This sharp regional division along sectarian and political lines further polarized Lebanese society. The polarization between “March 14” and Hezbollah-backed “March 8” alliances, shaped by sectarian sentiments, exposed the country to external intervention and paralyzed state institutions. Meanwhile, the outcome of the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel showed that Hezbollah was Lebanon’s only “viable deterrent to Israel’s military superiority.”¹² The societal polarization led to armed clashes in certain neighborhoods of Beirut and some parts of Mount Lebanon, thus giving Hezbollah military superiority on the domestic front. This provided Hezbollah the political power to dictate its terms in Doha (May 2008) – an agreement reached in Qatar to end the 18-month-long political crisis in Lebanon and avoid a new civil war- hence giving the party and its allies the veto power in the government. Henceforth, the party resisted any attempts to position Lebanon in the US or Saudi camp and adopted a confrontational foreign policy against Riyadh. Moreover, Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War, its support for the Houthis in Yemen, and criticism of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates isolated Lebanon in the Arab World. The Gulf states withdrew their support of Lebanon, thus exposing the country politically and financially to new challenges. Amid the financial and political crisis, and the abandonment of the Gulf, Iran became the main political player in the country, until Hezbollah’s involvement in the Gaza-Israel war, the signing of the new ceasefire deal in November 2024, and the ousting of the Baathist regime in Syria, all which contained Iran’s role in the region and militarily weakened Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A Foreign Policy based on Pro-Active Diplomacy and ‘Positive Neutrality’

Geo-strategic location, perhaps, is the prime constraint on a state’s survival. States, unlike human beings, cannot choose their neighbors. Since their location is fixed, they must find the best ways and means of interacting with them. As discussed in the previous section, Lebanon’s foreign policy was linked to regional conflicts, and unilateral decisions taken by local actors to meddle in the internal affairs of neighboring states or vice versa posed a threat to internal stability and Lebanon’s credibility in international relations. Hence, Lebanon needs to adopt a state-centric foreign policy based on two important pillars: positive neutrality and pro-active diplomacy. To achieve this, it is imperative for the country to build an internal consensus around the proposition of pro-active diplomacy and positive neutrality amid local sectarian and political polarization.¹³

¹² Ibid., p.292.

¹³ Nassif Hitti, November 16, 2020, Shorouknews, “Siyasa Hiyad Ijabi Nashet... Darura li Lubnan (Pro-active Positive Neutrality is Necessary for Lebanon), <https://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=16112020&id=017097e2-fe06-4c19-9202-5aa60ec9c95e>.

To begin with, we have to ask, is self-neutrality a realistic choice? Lebanon's self-neutrality towards the Arab-Israeli conflict is problematic as it suffers from two basic shortcomings.¹⁴ First, a strong consensus at home is needed to launch such a policy, but throughout history, this has proved impossible. Neutrality, in this case, cannot be dissociated from the identity issue. It would have to assume that Lebanon is not attached to the Arab world. The logic of this policy denies the specificities of Lebanese-Arab relations that are the product of a sense of belonging to the larger Arab identity.¹⁵ Second, let us assume that Lebanon adopts self-neutrality. If this unilateral declaration does not constitute a status of permanent neutrality in international law – accompanied by regional and international agreement or some form of acknowledgment – it would not be materialized due to the strategic choices of the regional actors, and the local actors affiliated with them involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁶

Therefore, Lebanon cannot adopt the status of legal neutrality like Switzerland or Austria, especially since the Swiss and Austrian experiences are not the same as Lebanon.¹⁷ In both cases, neutrality was agreed upon by international and regional powers. The significance of their neutrality is that it was formally recognized by great powers and the entire international system of that era.¹⁸ Neutrality became legally binding for both countries. This scenario does not apply to Lebanon, an Arab country and a founding member of the Arab League, which needs to abide by the resolutions of the League, especially those related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hence, Lebanon cannot detach itself from its commitments. However, this does not mean that Lebanon alone will shoulder the burden of conflict and turn into a transit country for exporting and importing conflict to or from Arab countries. The argument is that Lebanon should not become a tool on the regional chessboard.

As a country that has hosted Palestinian refugees since 1948, Lebanon should be motivated more by symbolic solidarity with the Palestinian cause and less by military or geopolitical considerations. This solidarity can be translated into Lebanon's role in international conferences and backchannel diplomacy in foreign countries to address the Palestinian issue and push for the resolutions – known as the Arab Peace Initiative – adopted in the Arab League Summit of Beirut in 2002.¹⁹ Any war with Israel, as shown after October 8, 2023, would be disastrous to Lebanon's national security due to military imbalance and Lebanon's economic and diplomatic vulnerability. On the other hand, the indifference towards Israeli military incursions in the South, the misunderstanding of the dynamics of Palestinian nationalism, and the unwillingness to accept a certain level of sacrifice proved disastrous for Lebanon.²⁰ The illusion that completely detaching from the developments in the bordering areas and immediate neighborhood sometimes brought additional conflicts to Lebanon, dictated by regional actors. Moreover, and due to multiple domestic considerations, Lebanon cannot take a risky path like that of Egypt's Anwar al Sadat and be pushed toward unilateral normalization with Israel, which may threaten the interests of Syria (despite the recent indirect talks between Israeli and Syrian officials)²¹ and resolve the issue of the Palestinian refugee presence at the expense of Lebanon's state interests.²²

¹⁴ Nassif Hitti, *The Foreign Policy of Lebanon: Lessons and Prospects for the Forgotten Dimension*, Centre for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, April 1989, p. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ In the case of Switzerland, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the great European powers imposed the status of permanent neutrality on the country. The agreement formalized the country's neutrality and guaranteed its territorial integrity in wartime. In exchange, the country pledged to remain neutral during wars waged on the continent. The same was imposed on Austria where its neutrality status was a product of the US and Soviet agreement in exchange for ending the Soviet occupation of Austria.

¹⁸ Efraim Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States*, Routledge, 1988, p. 18.

¹⁹ The Arab Peace Initiative floated the idea of land for peace based on a two-state solution, the 1967 borders, East Jerusalem as Palestine's capital, a just solution for the Palestinian refugee problem, and in return, recognition of Israel by Arab states and signing a comprehensive peace plan. The text of the Arab Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002 is available here:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/empa/dv/1_arab-initiative-beirut/1_arab-initiative-beirut_en.pdf.

²⁰ Nassif Hitti, April 1989, p. 24.

²¹ Syria's al-Sharaa confirms indirect talks with Israel amid soaring tensions, *Al-Jazeera*, May 7, 2025,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/syrias-al-sharaa-confirms-indirect-talks-with-israel-amid-soaring-tensions>.

²² Nassif Hitti, April 1989, p. 25.

Positive Neutrality and Commitment to the Arab League

If it is Lebanon's right not to make peace alone, then so it is Lebanon's right not to make war alone. Hence, the normalization of the situation on the Lebanese-Israeli border along the "Blue Line"²³ and the demarcation of the border between them is an ultimate legitimate goal of the Lebanese state. This process can be fulfilled by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the US, as mentioned in the 2024 ceasefire agreement.²⁴



"Republic of Lebanon – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants"

By 'positive neutrality', i.e., political neutrality, we mean taking a cooperative stance towards neighboring countries, while avoiding involvement in any conflict between them. In this sense, neutrality is not exercised towards a state with which one lacks diplomatic engagement, but toward neighboring or friendly countries with which Lebanon has diplomatic relations. Moreover, if country A invades country B, by taking a positive political neutral position, Lebanon has the right to denounce the invasion, but at the same time establish a dialogue or mediation platform for the conflicting parties. Moreover, positive neutrality does not mean withdrawing from regional or international

²³ The "Blue Line" is not a border, but a temporary "line of withdrawal" set by the UN in 2000 for the practical purpose of confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon.

²⁴ Joseph Bahout and Yeghia Tashjian, January 2025, Beyond a Ceasefire: A Comparative Analysis of UNSCR 1701 and the 2024 Ceasefire Agreement, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs-American University of Beirut, <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/Comparative-Analysis-of-UNSCR-1701-and-the-2024-Ceasefire-Agreement.pdf>.

organizations, but strengthening Lebanon's role within these institutions so that it becomes a partner in the search for conflict resolution rather than remaining a victim of division and conflicts. This idea was clearly reflected in the inaugural speech²⁵ of President Joseph Aoun and at the emergency Arab League Summit,²⁶ and the government ministerial statement read by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam in Parliament.²⁷

“ Opting for a neutral foreign policy does not preclude the possibility of a state sympathizing with a cause. Rather, it implies an undertaking to adopt a balanced and impartial policy that serves its state interests. ”

Here, neutrality is not expressed on the ideological level, but rather on the practical one. That is, opting for a neutral foreign policy does not preclude the possibility of a state sympathizing with a cause. Rather, it implies an undertaking to adopt a balanced and impartial policy that serves its state interests. It is worth mentioning that international law does not prohibit neutral states from remaining indifferent or displaying verbal sympathy or condemnation towards an aggressor.²⁸ Therefore, Lebanon should support and seek a united Arab front through diplomatic means without engaging in risky military adventures that could jeopardize its statehood.

Pro-Active Diplomacy, Building Bridges, and Mediation

‘Positive neutrality’ should go hand-in-hand with pro-active diplomacy based on the ‘weather bell/ fire detector’ (rather than just the ‘firefighter’) approach. Engaging in pro-active diplomacy means that the country needs to engage in preemptive foreign policy making instead of taking a reactive approach to surrounding conflicts. That is, Lebanon's foreign policy should be initiative-oriented rather than engaging in a wait and see approach. As a civilizational country, where historically Lebanon has culturally bridged the West and East, the country has the Diaspora element that can be deployed to consolidate its position in the international arena using various soft power tools, including culture, cuisine, business networks, and lobbying groups.

For this to happen, Lebanon needs social cohesion and prudent management of economic resources that would result in internal stability first and foremost. An interesting model that can be studied is the Omani model. Oman's foreign policy rotates around five key pillars: being a good neighbor; encouraging dialogue; relying on tolerance; looking outwards; and adopting pragmatism.²⁹ This is not to say that Oman and Lebanon have the same geography and similar challenges.³⁰ Oman's balanced, pro-active diplomacy and good neighbor approach helped the Sultanate to engage positively in the Yemeni conflict and mediate between conflicting parties. In addition, Oman played the role of ‘good office’ between the US and Iran during their nuclear negotiations. This pro-active diplomacy empowered Oman as a regional potency able to influence the dynamics in the Persian Gulf and beyond.³¹

On several occasions, especially during the Syrian crisis, Lebanon successfully engaged in mediation efforts. General Security played a key role with Qatar in mediating the release of nuns in Maaloula (2013-2014), as well as of Arab,

²⁵ President Aoun delivers inaugural speech, pledges to discuss comprehensive defense strategy and implement positive neutrality policy, National News Agency, January 9, 2025, <https://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/politics/750867/update-president-aoun-delivers-inaugural-speech-p>

²⁶ “Lebanese President Aoun urges Arab nations to support Lebanon's sovereignty, stresses unity and Palestinian rights — the details”, LBCI, March 4, 2025, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/lebanon-news/841566/lebanese-president-aoun-urges-arab-nations-to-support-lebanons-sovereignty/en>,

²⁷ Salam presents Ministerial Statement, outlines government's reform and sovereignty commitments, National News Agency, February 25, 2025, <https://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/politics/761869/salam-presents-ministerial-statement-outlines-gove>

²⁸ Efraim Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States*, Routledge, 1988, p. 23.

²⁹ Azzurra Bassetti, *Omani Diplomatic Neutrality in the Surrounding ‘Ring of Fire’*, the Diplomatic Affairs, <https://www.thediplomaticaffairs.com/2024/09/17/omani-diplomatic-neutrality-in-the-surrounding-ring-of-fire/>.

³⁰ Unlike Oman, Lebanon suffers directly from the Palestinian conflict (presence of Palestinian refugees and military presence of Palestinian armed groups in refugee camps), Israeli occupation in the South, and the spillovers of the Syrian conflict (presence of Syrian refugees, lack of border demarcation, transborder sectarianism, and the direct involvement of some Lebanese parties in Syria's domestic conflicts).

³¹ Giorgio Cafiero, “Oman's Quiet Role in Calming Regional Tensions,” Middle East Council, October 16, 2024, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/omans-quiet-role-in-calming-regional-tensions/.

American, and Canadian citizens kidnapped by armed groups in Syria and Iraq. However, such efforts need to be institutionalized. Lebanon needs to reform its diplomatic apparatus by engaging in structural and institutional reforms to prepare the diplomatic cadres to properly address contemporary regional and internal challenges proactively.

Recommendations for a Reformed Diplomatic Apparatus

To have a foreign policy based on ‘positive neutrality’ and pro-active diplomacy, Lebanon needs to reform its diplomatic apparatus. Reforming a diplomatic apparatus – that is, the institutions, processes, and officials responsible for a country’s foreign policy-making – is often a crucial step to adapt to evolving global, regional, and local political developments. There needs to be democratization and decentralization in the foreign policy process and encouragement of bottom-up diplomatic initiatives. The key recommendations on why and how these reforms must be undertaken are the following:

A Need for Public Diplomacy

Unlike traditional state-to-state diplomacy, which is engaged through official diplomatic channels, public diplomacy aims to strengthen state-to-people relations. The purpose of this diplomacy is to foster goodwill between nations and, through soft-power elements, provide a positive image of a country abroad. Methods that can be used in such diplomacy vary from cultural and academic exchange programs to media, language, cultural, or Diaspora focused activities. As a culturally aware country situated in the Eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon can serve as a bridge between the East and the West.

For Lebanon, public diplomacy, if conducted successfully, contributes greatly to fostering its national interests and objectives at the global level.³² Indeed, small states need to forge strong ties at the international level and be present at key issues often neglected, such as climate change, water security, protection of cultural monuments, and humanitarian diplomacy, that interest the world community to garner support. Public diplomacy contributes to such an endeavor. It accompanies official diplomacy and tends to build bridges to explore new areas of cooperation and seek the support of foreign countries to back Lebanon’s interests. It can be conducted by officials, but mostly by non-official actors such as individuals or groups. The latter, via their engagement, seek to create new connections and identify new areas of cooperation, while reinforcing existing ones between Lebanon and different countries in a variety of fields of interest.

In addition, having a Foreign Ministry spokesperson is also an important step to maintain a constant engagement with the public. Ultimately, public diplomacy is about winning hearts and minds on the global stage, and post-war Lebanon requires such diplomacy to project a competent image abroad.

From Networking to Lobbying

Public diplomacy is done through organizing different forms of meetings of information, and communications of events, targeting foreign parliamentarians, policymakers, lobbying groups, businesspeople, chambers of commerce, universities, think tanks, and research centers. Within the core of this idea, lies *soft power*. Soft power is very important for networking which allows states to build trust-based relationships, creating an environment where a state’s culture, values and policies are viewed more favorably and clears the path for state-sponsored lobbying. As such, organizing international conferences or forums, such as a “Beirut Dialogue Forum” or “Levantine Cooperation Forum” (between Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan) on an annual basis in Lebanon could be another plus compared to neighboring

³² Speech by Nassif Hitti during an event organized by the Lebanese Foreign Ministry in May 2016 in Beirut.

countries, as Lebanon enjoys freedom of speech and multicultural richness. The Foreign Ministry, in partnership with local universities and think tanks, could organize high-level dialogue forums or cultural events.

The key objectives of these events are to deconstruct certain misperceptions about Lebanon, reposition Lebanon on the regional and global cultural map as a peaceful and mediating country, facilitate cross-cultural and cross-academic interaction, enhance regionalism, and equip the ministry with the tools to engage in cultural diplomacy.

Institutionalizing Diaspora-Motherland Ties

Lebanon has an asset that many countries lack: a large Diaspora spread all over the globe. As such, the harmonization and institutionalization of relations between Lebanon's Foreign Ministry and Diaspora organizations is key to fulfill the above-mentioned objectives in terms of pushing Lebanon's interests globally. The Diaspora and its lobbying groups (from cultural centers to religious organizations) can engage in informal diplomacy by organizing cultural events, aiming to engage in fundraising activities, attracting tourists to Lebanon, and representing Lebanon's political and economic interests on the global stage. Moreover, such events would be a networking opportunity between local diplomats, businesspeople, and experts with Lebanese diplomats.

Establishing a Diplomatic Academy and Training Skilled Diplomats

The importance of having a diplomatic academy or school affiliated with the Foreign Ministry cannot be overstated, especially in today's complex, interdisciplinary, and interconnected global landscape. Foreign Ministries such as in Austria, Malta, and Turkey, jointly with local and international academic institutions, have successfully implemented this strategy in training future diplomats. Such an academy provides structural education and training for future diplomats to help them gain knowledge in international law, international relations, negotiation, communication, mediation skills, cultural awareness, artificial intelligence, response to global or regional developments, conflict resolution, and to develop a sense of duty and shared purpose. As such, diplomats can engage in annual training workshops on these topics. This is why there needs to be a permanent training curriculum to equip Lebanese diplomats with knowledge about newly emerging challenges in the fields of environment, climate change, water and energy security, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital diplomacy, trade, economic diversification, humanitarian law, and matters related to arbitration and cultural inclusivity. Moreover, there needs to be a bridge between the world of ideas and the world of diplomacy. Lebanese diplomats must be encouraged to attend and even participate in international, regional, and local forums and report to the Ministry.

Preparing Future Mediators

To prepare future diplomats and mediators who can meet contemporary global challenges, recruitment at the Ministry should not be just based on academic background in political science or international relations, but candidates with backgrounds in political economy, international finance, and conflict resolution should also be encouraged to join the diplomatic corps. The main objective of this policy is to increase the number of cultural and trade attachés in major countries to build networks with international organizations and agencies and attract investments to Lebanon. Hence, the ministry needs to invest in human resources and, at the same time, be attractive to young people who seek to represent and defend the interests of Lebanon abroad. As such, a reformed and expanded diplomatic service with competitive skills can enhance cultural diplomacy, international cooperation, and national branding. This process can further be facilitated by engaging in partnerships with other foreign ministries and foreign academic centers that have special departments on preparing and educating in the statecraft of mediation, arbitration, and conflict resolution. Such diplomats can become important mediators amid rising regional tensions.

Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli argues that political fortunes are shaped both by "*virtù*" (skills and adaptability) and "*fortuna*" (developments beyond control).³³ Hence, successful diplomats need to be pragmatic to

³³ Berridge GR. Machiavelli: human nature, good faith, and diplomacy. *Review of International Studies*. 2001

adapt to changing circumstances with pragmatism rather than dogmatism. As such, skilled diplomats and mediators would help build trust between states, defusing potential tensions, negotiating agreements, and representing their country's interests abroad. Moreover, preparing future mediators aiming to navigate cultural differences and geopolitical complexities would help diffuse potential tensions and foster mutual compromises, avoiding zero-sum games. This is where the role of the 'fire detector' approach comes into play, to identify threats and address them accordingly. Such diplomats are essential to have a pro-active diplomacy springing from positive neutrality. Given the rising challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean (maritime demarcation and competition over energy resources being one major example), the need for mediation will be essential for Lebanon's diplomacy. By becoming a mediating actor in the region, Lebanon will have a strong security umbrella respected by regional and global actors, which would invest in its stability and preservation of territorial integrity.

Conclusion

Adapting foreign policy processes and tools of diplomacy in light of shifts in regional and global power dynamics is essential for restructuring Lebanon's foreign policy-making. If a state and its institutions, such as the foreign ministry, do not adapt to these changes, they risk becoming inefficient and unable to safeguard or advance their national interests. Without such reforms, the ministry also falls behind in digital and cultural diplomacy, as well as nation branding.

Today's diplomacy is no longer confined to closed rooms. This is why diplomats need to engage directly with their foreign audience, media, diasporas, businesses, cultural associations, academic institutions, think tanks, and NGOs. Here is where public diplomacy plays its crucial role.

However, these reforms will face serious challenges if Lebanon fails to adopt a concrete state-centric foreign policy based on positive neutrality and pro-active diplomacy. These two pillars are essential for state-building in Lebanon.

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