

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

MICHEL AOUN'S PRESIDENCY:
A NEW ERA IN LEBANESE FOREIGN POLICY?

by
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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Mazen Wissam El Hassan for Master of Arts
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Lebanon's foreign policy historically can be categorized as fragmented. The establishment and independence of Greater Lebanon with politicized sectarianism reinforced the role of sub-state actors in the state. Accordingly, these sub-state actors who participated in every government since independence formed external relations that serve their own social, economic, and political interests. Consequently, this caused an absence of a unified foreign policy and a disintegrated understanding of national interests on the formal, informal, and sub-state level.

The following project addresses Lebanese foreign policy under Aoun's presidency and whether this era presents a continuity of fragmented foreign policy or a rupture. The study focuses mainly on Lebanon's relations with Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Israel. The findings suggest that there is major continuity from previous foreign policies with slight rupture in relations with Israel.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

With the current political and economic crisis that Lebanon is facing since 2019, the foreign policy and the actions of the Lebanese government are an essential and critical step to dealing with this crisis. Lebanon's external relations with other states, the power dynamic that exists in the Middle East overall, and the entirety of the foreign policy strategy that the government has been adopting since President Aoun came to office in 2016 is quintessential to understand whether Lebanon can maneuver and manage this ongoing crisis. Indeed, foreign policy has a major impact on the economic, political, social, and cultural structures of societies and communities¹. Therefore, a solid foreign policy that could represent the interests of Lebanon would complement a strategy that allows Lebanon to manage the ongoing crisis in a better position. Otherwise, a desynchronized and lack of unified foreign policy could push Lebanon further in its current crisis.

More importantly, the historical evidence on Lebanon's foreign policy since independence in 1943 has been problematic in the sense that it is not unified on many issues². Indeed, understanding the Lebanese foreign policy requires an understanding of the different competing political groups in power and their different interests intertwined

¹ Gunther Hellmann, *Andreas Fahrmeir, and Milo Vec, The Transformation of Foreign Policy: Drawing and Managing Boundaries from Antiquity to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

² Nassif Hitti, "The Foreign Policy of Lebanon: Lessons and Prospects for the Forgotten Dimension", *Center for Lebanese Studies*, 1989, 3.

across regional and international actors³. Rarely did Lebanon provide a unified national consensus on an issue and acted accordingly formally, informally, and on a sub-state level. When President Aoun came to office in 2016, many questions have been raised as to whether this disintegration in foreign policy will persist or will it change. Therefore, this study mainly aims to understand the foreign policy adopted by the Lebanese government in Aoun's era. With many ongoing conflicts and issues that Lebanon is involved in, it is key to understand whether the state has been adopting a unified foreign policy strategy or has it been chaotic and desynchronized.

1.2 Research Question(s) / Aim(s)

To critically understand the foreign policy of the Lebanese government during Aoun's era, the study will raise one major question under which many sub-questions can also be raised. More specifically, this study questions to what extent does Michel Aoun's presidency represent a rupture or a continuity from previous foreign policies? A continuity from previous foreign policies would suggest a less unified foreign policy where many sub-state actors would present conflicting statements and policies towards Lebanon's foreign relations. A rupture from previous foreign policies is more likely to suggest that the current Lebanese foreign policy is unified on many levels and represents a united stand across formal, informal, and sub-state levels.

To answer this question, several sub-questions can be raised. Has Aoun's presidency and the different governments during his era presented a rupture and structural change in Lebanon's foreign policy? Has Lebanon adopted a unified foreign policy during this era? Did Aoun's era represent similar state behavior when it comes to foreign

³Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 17.

relations and policies? Was there disintegration and desynchronization amongst Lebanese officials when it came to different issues pertaining to Lebanon's foreign policy? All these questions are critical to ask if we are to comprehensively assess Lebanon's foreign policy during Aoun's presidency.

To present a more focused approach, this project will focus on three primary countries that Lebanon must deal with in terms of foreign relations. They include Syria, Israel, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All topics pertaining to these countries will be discussed from three critical perspectives to show whether there is a unified foreign policy in theory and practice or not. These three perspectives include the formal, informal, and sub-state stance. Thus, the aim of the study is to tackle the foreign policy of Lebanon during Aoun's presidency and assess whether it is more unified in comparison to prior foreign policies or not. Accordingly, the study will be able to conclude on whether Aoun's era as president represents a continuity or rupture from disintegrated and desynchronized foreign policies of the past.

1.3 Rationale and Significance

The importance of this study is that it offers a comprehensive insight on Lebanon's foreign policies across different eras. This comprehensive approach allows for a comparative perspective as to whether Lebanon has had a single form or strategy when it comes to foreign policy or does it actually change across eras. The paper aims to address the historical foreign policies of Lebanon pertaining to major issues in general to show whether there was unity and synchronization on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. The historical timeline is divided as independence up to 1967, 1967 up until 1990 marking the beginning of the civil war and pre-war era, and finally 1990 up until 2016 which

represents the Ta'if post-war era and marking the election of President Aoun. This historical approach allows for establishing and clearly defining what does continuity or rupture in previous foreign policies would represent. It would also reinforce the argument that historically Lebanon has not presented a unified foreign policy for various reasons, including the constantly divided political regime that represents different interests. Addressing these historical phases in Lebanon's foreign policy will be mainly focused on the Lebanese relations and policies towards Syria, Israel, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This provides a balanced approach for comparative analysis to the data collection during Aoun's era.

Aoun's era that starts from 2016 will be addressed across three major issues that Lebanon faces. First, it addresses the foreign policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during this era and compares it with prior foreign policies. Second, the conflict with Israel will be addressed and how the different statements and actions across different political sides are presented. Third, Lebanese relations with Syria will be addressed primarily in terms of Lebanon's stance to the Syrian war and refugees in Lebanon. The project will collect articles and sources that present the official speeches, words, and statements of public officials in Lebanon during the 2016 era to be analyzed.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Data Collection

Desk research is the main data collection method in this project. Desk research will allow for gathering primary and secondary sources that help establish the aims of this study and answer the presented research questions. No interviews or surveys will be conducted as a form of data collection as the study mainly focuses on already published

content and does seek any content from primary sources specific to this paper only. Indeed, the data collection through desk research will entail articles and sources that present official statements, policies, speeches, and words mentioned by Lebanese officials on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. Secondary sources will also be used to establish a comprehensive insight on Lebanon's historical strategy in foreign policies as well as support in analyzing the official statements, policies, speeches, and words mentioned by Lebanese officials.

1.4.2 Data Analysis

The project will primarily use content analysis to answer the research questions that were raised and achieve the aims of the study. Content analysis allows to compare the collected statements, policies, speeches, and words and establish an insight sufficient to answer the major research question and all the remaining sub-question⁴. By analyzing the contents of such primary sources and concluding the impact of these statements, speeches, policies, and words on Lebanon's foreign policy, comparative analysis can then be conducted to understand whether Aoun's presidency represents continuity or rupture from previous foreign policies⁵.

1.4.3 Ethical Consideration

This study assures all forms of ethical consideration that pertain to conducting any form of research. The project ensures primarily that no harm is done to any individual, group, or community. Moreover, the paper aims to practice all forms of scientific research

⁴ Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (California: Wadsworth, 2013), 296-297.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 314-319.

to the highest extents to ensure objectivity in addressing the concepts and issues being raised. The study also aims to present the least forms of bias when addressing this topic. Finally, I will ensure that no form of plagiarism will be practiced throughout the process of this research as all sources, arguments, or statements used will be fully referenced.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will be divided into two major parts. First, there will be a part that addresses the foreign policy as a concept in international relations. This part will help in understanding the significance and impact that foreign policy has on the economic, political, social, and cultural structures of communities and states. The second part of the literature review deals with the historical perspective on Lebanese foreign policies. As mentioned before, it will be divided across different eras. This will allow for establishing the base of the historical practices of formal, informal, and sub-state factions in Lebanon's foreign policy. More importantly, it will emphasize what would present a continuity and rupture to Lebanon's foreign policies when compared with Aoun's presidency.

2.1 Foreign Policy in International Relations

2.1.1 Conceptualization

Foreign policy is considered a major element of international relations that became a central concept to be studied and practiced by states following the end of World War 2. While the concept dates back prior to World War 2, perhaps back to the start of civilization, it became widely addressed following the establishment of the United Nations and Treaty of Westphalia⁶. There is a unanimous agreement that every state in the world has its own foreign policy, including those who decide to isolate their country

⁶David Held and Anthony McGrew, *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 14.

to a great extent (that is also described as a foreign policy)⁷. Charles Hermann defines foreign policy as “the discrete purposeful action that results from the political level decision of an individual or group of individuals. It is the observable artifact of a political level decision. It is not the decision, but a product of the decision”⁸.

Deborah Gerner adds to this definition by suggesting that any action, statements, intentions, or policies taken by an actor, not necessarily a state, towards external actors could be defined as a foreign policy⁹. This suggests that foreign policy, while often established and practiced by the state, can be also practiced by sub-state groups. This definition fits well into the Lebanese context given that political divisions in the country could sometimes establish contradicting statements and practiced foreign policies. James Rosenau dissects foreign policy into five levels of foreign policy: individual, role, governmental, societal, and systematic¹⁰. Therefore, foreign policy of one state can be disintegrated and not unified if any of those five levels are not on the same page concerning a particular issue. Indeed, Thrice adds that interest groups could partake and influence a country’s foreign policy as they are defined as auxiliary groups that mediate between the government and the masses through networks of communication¹¹.

⁷ Feliks Gross, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1945.

⁸ Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 9.

⁹ Deborah Gerner, “The Evolution of the Study of Foreign Policy” in *Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in Its Second Generation* by Laura Neack, Jeanne Hey, and Patrick J. Haney, (New Jersey.: Prentice Hall, 1995), 18.

¹⁰ James Rosenau, “Pre-theories and Theories of Foreign Policy” in *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics* by Barry Farrell, 27-92, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 27-

30.

¹¹ Robert Thrice, “Foreign Policy Interest Groups: Mass Public Opinion and the Arab-Israel Dispute”, *Political Research Quarterly* 31 (1978): 238-252, 238-240.

2.1.2 Leaders and National Interests

Foreign policy has been defined as the actions of one state or group towards external factors to achieve particular ends. Two important elements of foreign policy include leaders and national interests. McGinnis mentions a very important argument when defining “leaders. He suggests that individuals a personal human being have no relevancy to leadership in the sense of personal values; leaders can be replaced with the term regime because people coming to power are socialized and educated in a particular way that forces very common national interests¹². While personal traits and ideological differences could be possible amongst different statesmen, Morgenthau argues that all statesmen argue and think rationally in terms of interest defined by power¹³. As such, the foreign policies should align with established national interests which is why different statesmen could bring in different foreign policies in line with similar national interests¹⁴.

National interests in this sense intertwine to a great extent with the concept of leaders in foreign policy. Leaders are expected to carry out actions and policies that achieve, protect, and reinforce pre-defined national interests. In this sense, Neack defines national interests from a realist perspective by suggesting that it is persistent long-term goals that complement the nation’s economic, political, social, and cultural interest reinforced by history¹⁵. Given the structure and formation of Lebanon in the post-colonial

¹² Michael D. McGinnis, “Rational Choice and Foreign Policy Change: The Arms and Alignments of Regional Powers” in *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change* by Jerel A. Rosati, Joe D. Hagan, and Martin W. Sampson III, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 69.

¹³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 5.

¹⁴ Michael D. McGinnis, “Rational Choice and Foreign Policy Change: The Arms and Alignments of Regional Powers” in *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change* by Jerel A. Rosati, Joe D. Hagan, and Martin W. Sampson III, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 69.

¹⁵ Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 33.

era following 1943, it becomes more complicated as to what could be the historical long-term and persistent value of Lebanon that would define its national interest. Moreover, given the internal actors' connections and association with external ones, defining unified and common national interests became more complex given that each actor sought their own economic, social, political, and cultural interests.

2.2 Lebanese Foreign Policy Historically

2.2.1 Time Period between Independence to 1967

This specific period in Lebanon signifies the transformation of Lebanon from a colonial extension of French colonialism into an independent state. This section covers the era from independence to the time right before the Arab Israeli war in 1967. Lebanon's foreign policy as an independent state can be traced back to the initiation of the National Pact; an implicit agreement between the Lebanese elite, agreed upon with the French, British, Syrian, and Egyptian sides, to establish the identity of Lebanon in terms of the confessional system, along with a compromise between the Arab identity and the Lebanese, primarily Maronite, identity¹⁶. Traboulsi states that this particular point emphasizes Lebanon's future in foreign policy represented by a constant compromise between regional and international powers¹⁷. This provides an idea on Lebanon's role in the region as an independent state where its foreign policy has been dictated by many factors, beyond the national interest as pointed out earlier. Wilkins also suggests that following the National Pact and the initiation of this new Lebanese identity signifies the

¹⁶ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 64.

¹⁷ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (Beirut, Pluto Press, 2012), 108.

beginning of the power relationship that exists between the system, the state, and the sub-state¹⁸.

An important element that needs to be discussed in order to understand Lebanese foreign policy is the establishment, legitimization, and reinforce of sectarianism in all of Lebanon's political, economic, social, and cultural structures. The National Pact politicized sectarianism further and integrated into the political system of Lebanon, building upon its pre-existence during Ottoman Lebanon¹⁹. The pact's goal was to establish a unified multi-confessional society but instead exacerbated communal difference and re-emphasized differences along sectarian lines²⁰. As such, Lebanon became divided into different sub-state groups represented by sectarian elite with different regional and international connections. This sets the stage for an un-unified foreign policy with unclear national interests led by different "leaders".

The officially recognized foreign policy of Lebanon during this era was "neutrality" which aimed to compromise between Western orientation signified through the Christian elite and Arabism represented primarily by Muslim elite²¹. The National Pact in this sense suggests that Lebanon is an independent and Sovereign state with an "Arab face" where it prioritizes relations and interests with other Arab states on the

¹⁸ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 65.

¹⁹ Bassel Salloukh, *Security Politics, State-Society Relations, and Democracy in Lebanon*, (Unpublished Work: Lebanese American University, 2009), 3.

²⁰ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 65.

²¹ Tom Najem, "Lebanon and Europe: The Foreign Policy of a Penetrated State" in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* by Gerd Nonneman, (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 102,

condition that Lebanon's autonomy is respected²². The predominance over Lebanon's foreign policy in this sense became dictated by a constant compromise between the "Christian and Muslim sides" as not to upset, alienate, and oppress the other group²³. It is key to point that this dichotomy is primordial in the sense that it essentializes Lebanon's social and political relations along sectarian lines exclusively. More importantly, sectarian elite benefit extensively from such exclusivity as it legitimizes their political power and transforms any challenge towards them as an attack on the "sect", thus protecting their political, economic, and social interests. Hirst proceeds to suggest that this political atmosphere was primarily built upon compromise between both sides: Muslim elite agreed to give up on the idea of reintegrating Lebanon into Syria while Christian elite agreed to give up to a certain extent European protection and recognize the Arab identity of Lebanon²⁴. As such, Salem analyzes this logic as a double negation suggesting that Lebanon's foreign policy is constantly reactionary and formed on negative basis as all policies are formulated based on what Lebanon cannot do²⁵.

A very important aspect of Lebanese foreign policy to be discussed is the concept of neutrality. In the formal realm, neutrality in the sense of Lebanon's un-intervention in the region's conflicts and issues was the official foreign policy. However, the behavior of the state and more importantly, sub-state actors did not fall in line with such a foreign

²² Bassel Salloukh, "The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon" in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalisation* by Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), 285.

²³ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon Battleground of the Middle East*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2010), 11.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Paul Salem, "Reflections on Lebanon's Foreign Policy" in *Peace for Lebanon? From War to Reconstruction* by Deidre Collings, (London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 70.

policy. Salem suggests that the context under which Lebanon was found, and the overall context of the Middle East disallows Lebanon to be a neutral state as it is not tolerated²⁶. As mentioned earlier, sub-state groups represented by different sectarian elite established different relations with external powers which did not allow them to express this relationship in the official foreign policy of Lebanon (neutrality); therefore, these sub-state groups became acting independently from the Lebanese official foreign policy to emphasize, protect, and reinforce their interests vis a vis external powers²⁷. Accordingly, external powers initiated and reinforced their influence within Lebanon through such proxies, compromising Lebanon's "neutrality". More importantly, the different interests of these sub-state groups also compromised the concept of national interests as defined in the previous section. There is no longer a unanimous understanding of what the national interest is. Thus, Lebanon became functioning through different sub-state groups based on different national interests in line with these groups.

In terms of favorability of one side over the other in the 1950s and early 1960s, Lebanon's favorability to one side caused instability on the security level of Lebanon. For example, in 1957, Lebanon accepted to Eisenhower Doctrine indicating a closer foreign policy towards the West in comparison to the Arab states, primarily the rise of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser²⁸. Moreover, the 1958 civil war was triggered by President Chamoun's alliance with the United States on the expense of Egypt's Jamal Abdel Nasser, triggering opposition amongst Muslim elite and other secular groups such

²⁶ Ibid., 72.

²⁷ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 68.

²⁸ Paul Salem, "Reflections on Lebanon's Foreign Policy" in *Peace for Lebanon? From War to Reconstruction* by Deidre Collings, (London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 74.

as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and Lebanese Communist Party²⁹. Salamé states that this favorability of one side was stabilized under Fouad Shehab's era (1958-1964)³⁰. The neutrality of Lebanon remained the officially adopted policy yet sub-state actors continued to play a critical role in pushing their interests through their relations with external powers.

2.2.2 Time Period between 1967 to 1990

This part tackles Lebanon's foreign policy and the concept of neutrality from the beginning of the 1967 Arab Israeli war right to the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. It is key to note that following Chehab's presidency, external intervention in Lebanon, compromising its neutrality and sovereignty continued primarily by the United States along regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Lebanon's geopolitical status placed Lebanon in a very critical and significant position as an oil transit country pushing for multiple regional and international interest into the country³¹. Najem describes this period prior to the Lebanese civil war in 1975 as a very fragile time given that Lebanon's military was very weak, political tensions were exacerbated by sectarianism, and more importantly, Lebanon's national identity was highly fragmented by various regional and international conflicts, ideologies, and issues³².

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ghassan Salamé, "Is a Lebanese Foreign Policy Possible?" in *Toward a Viable Lebanon* by Halim Barakat, (Washington DC: Crook Helm, 1988), 355.

³¹ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 70.

³² Tom Najem, *The Politics of a Penetrated Society*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 19-21.

Two main structures in the 1960s and 1970s influenced Lebanon's inability to pursue neutrality. First, the rise of pan-Arabism spearheaded by the popular Gamal Abdel Nasser gained wide popularity amongst certain elite and many people in Lebanon which technically opposed western hegemony in the Middle East³³. Another major impactful structure during this context that also pushed Lebanon away from neutrality is the Arab Israeli conflict that took place on one of its borders³⁴. With that being said, Lebanon's official foreign policy established since its independence based on compromise and neutrality was constantly penetrated on the informal and sub-state level through different groups. In this sense, pan-Arabism and the Arab Israeli conflict created a dichotomy in Lebanon between those favoring the west and those who were supportive of the Palestinian cause along with pan-Arabism. Therefore, the concept of national interest and a unified foreign policy practiced on the formal, informal, and sub-state level was continuously fragmented.

The Palestinian factor played a critical role in threatening Lebanon's neutrality, which was never practiced since independence, further. Following King Hussein's expulsion of Palestinians in 1970 and the already existing Palestinians in Lebanon who were part of the Palestine Liberation Organization clashed directly with Israel between the years 1970 and 1990³⁵. In Lebanon, many people were supportive and opposing such actions thus jeopardizing further Lebanon's foreign policy of neutrality. On one hand, opposition to engaging in the Arab Israeli conflict and pan-Arabism represented by the Maronite elite was mentioned as against Lebanon's national interest given that its security

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 71.

is breached. On the other hand, those supportive of the Palestinian groups and pan-Arabism supported the attack on Israel under the pre-text that one cannot be neutral towards an already aggressive state. Thus, Lebanon's foreign policy was very fragmented on so many levels. Combining this division, with growing inequalities between classes resulted in the Lebanese civil war.

During the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), Lebanon's sub-state groups fueled by sectarianism took control of regions and took part of a very deadly war fought on so many levels, preventing Lebanon from taking formal decisions regarding its foreign policy³⁶. Salloukh adds that the civil war was not fought along sectarian lines and regional and international connections only, he suggests that the war included an element of challenging the unbalanced system that favored Maronite elite³⁷. Traboulsi emphasizes the element of inequality and concept of class struggle as also an important factor fueling the civil war covered by sectarianism so that sectarian elite could maintain and protect their political, economic, and social interests³⁸. Therefore, the conflict was very complicated and highly fragmented thus dividing Lebanon into different sub-state groups each of which formulated its own national interests of Lebanon, along with its foreign policy. Moreover, regional and international factors also supported each of these different sub-state groups such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, France, Britain, United States, and the Soviet Union. Thus, Lebanon's foreign policy during the period of

³⁶ Barbara Robertson, "The Challenges to Lebanon in the Future Middle East: An Introduction", *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 1-9, 2.

³⁷ Bassel Salloukh, "The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon" in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalisation* by Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), 296.

³⁸ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (Beirut, Pluto Press, 2012), 229.

the Lebanese civil war can be best described as highly fragmented representing different versions of national interest and very disintegrated foreign policies.

2.2.3 Time Period between 1990 to 2016

Lebanon suffered extensively due to the civil war that destroyed major parts of the country, killed thousands, forced many families to migrate, and substantial damage was done to the country's infrastructure and economy. The war was fought by many groups and many international and regional powers also participated in this war through their proxy actors. Lebanon's foreign policy in this sense was fragmented on so many levels without any proper or clear direction for the state. For example, the Amin Gemayel as president in the late 1980s was pro-American and formulated Lebanon's foreign policy, accordingly, was also opposed by many sides within Lebanon thus reinforcing this fragmentation between the formal, informal, and sub-state level in terms of foreign policy and national interest. Other factors also undermined Lebanon's sovereignty such as the presence of the Syrian army along with Israeli occupation of the South until the year 2000. This section addresses the status of Lebanon's foreign policy in the post-war period marked by the initiation of the Ta'if Agreement.

The Ta'if Agreement was initiated in the year 1990 marking the end of the civil war. The agreement, as described by Salloukh was similar to the National Pact in the sense that it forced a different sectarian distribution of power along with regional and international interference and compromise³⁹. This reinforces the continuity of previous foreign policies of Lebanon where sovereignty is breached, and foreign policies are

³⁹ Bassel Salloukh, *Security Politics, State-Society Relations, and Democracy in Lebanon*, (Unpublished Work: Lebanese American University, 2009), 9.

reactionary rather than representative of national interests. Moreover, it is also a form of continuity of the fragmented foreign policies represented by different sub-state actors, national interests, and policies.

The Ta'if Agreement amended certain executive powers and reestablished a different sectarian distribution of power. Wilkins states that it reorganized power through sectarian balance by “weakening the role of the Maronite president, increasing the power of the Sunni prime minister and the Shi’a speaker of parliament and establishing equal parliamentary representation between Christians and Muslims”⁴⁰.

Thus, the understanding of the political, social, economic, and cultural structures of Lebanon were still established along sectarian lines reinforcing the role of sub-state actors. These sub-state actors would continue to play a role in disintegrating and fragmenting Lebanon’s foreign policy on a formal, informal, and sub-state level. More importantly, it continued to create misalignment along these three dimensions where the formal position of the state is something, while the informal and sub-state dimensions are acting differently causing fragmentation.

Salloukh states an important element that the Ta'if Agreement introduced which is the need of agreement on major issues by the Head of Parliament and Prime Minister along with the Republic’s President known as the Troika system, unlike pre-Ta'if where the president held that executive power⁴¹. Moreover, the Ta'if Agreement states that Syrian Army is to hold control of certain regions and withdraw progressively. This directly impacts Lebanon’s foreign policy and the concept of sovereignty. The period

⁴⁰ Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 76.

⁴¹ Bassel Salloukh, “The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* by Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), 287-288.

between 1990 and 2006 is characterized by heavy penetration of Lebanon's sovereignty by various regional and international actors, thus reinforcing the continuity of an un-unified foreign policy on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. Moreover, it has reinforced sub-state actors' role in Lebanon thus fragmenting any possibility of a unified foreign policy or understanding of "national interest(s)".

Indeed, since the 1990, Najem mentions that there are several penetrating factors to Lebanon's sovereignty thus, impacting its foreign policy: (1) Syrian army presence in many Lebanese regions until 2005 (some have called this an occupation); (2) the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon up until the year 2000; (3) growing influence of Iran in Lebanon through proxy groups, primarily Hezbollah; (4) Saudi Arabian influence in Lebanon through proxy actors such as Rafik Al Hariri and other elite; (5) rentier economic interests of many non-Lebanese in Lebanon such as Syrian and Gulf businessmen (for example Solidere); (6) Maronite elite connections with the west; (7) asymmetric economic relations with the European Union; (8) and growing national debt primarily after the year 2000 through Paris conventions led by Rafik Al Hariri ⁴². Hinnebusch describes the foreign policy of Lebanon during the period of Syrian military presence as very fragmented given the influence and control Syria had over Lebanon's foreign policy, political system, and defense policies ⁴³. Mubarek reinforces this argument and suggests that Lebanese foreign policy during this period reflected Syria's geopolitical aims and interests through adopting a pan-Arab political orientation ⁴⁴. Finally, Syria's support of

⁴² Tom Najem, *The Politics of a Penetrated Society*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 109-115; Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*, (London: Hurst, 2016), 57-61.

⁴³ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Pax-Syriana? The Origins, Causes and Consequences of Syria's Role in Lebanon", *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 137-160, 140.

⁴⁴ Walid Mubarek, *The Position of a Weak State in an Unstable Region: The Case of Lebanon*, (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003), 40.

Hezbollah and providing an unlimited supply line of arms to its combatants represented a clear proxy connection between a regional power and an internal sub-state group, undermining the unified foreign policy of the state, its formal stance, informal stance, and other sub-state actors.

Prior to the 2006 July war between Hezbollah and Israel, the assassination of Rafik Al Hariri characterized a time where political powers were split along two sides: 14th and 8th March alliances. Thus the different sub-state actors within both alliances remained acting along different foreign policies representing their own interests which further fragmented Lebanon's possibility of having a "unified" foreign policy. Moreover, the tribunal that the 14th March alliance called for to hold the perpetrators of the assassination of Rafik Al Hariri accountable became a widely disputed topic between both alliances, each of which acting upon their interests. On one hand, 14th March alliance, well-connected with Gulf countries and the West, sought the tribunal not only for accountability purposes, but to also place pressure on 8th March alliance, primarily Hezbollah (Syria's biggest ally in Lebanon)⁴⁵. On the other hand, 8th March alliance suggested that the tribunal is "rigged" and "biased" as it is a tool of control by the west and its alliance to attack Hezbollah primarily⁴⁶. Moreover, the arms of Hezbollah became a popularly disputed issue following the 2008 May tensions that arose in Beirut and parts of the South as many militias engaged in violent action against one another, blamed primarily on Hezbollah. This context primarily characterized the period following the

⁴⁵ Robert Bosco, "The Assassination of Rafik Al Hariri: Foreign Policy Perspectives", *International Political Science Review* 30, no. 4 (2009): 349-361, 357-358.

⁴⁶ Marieke Wierda, Habib Nassar, and Lynn Maaloud, "Early Reflections on Local Perceptions, Legitimacy, and Legacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 5, no. 5 (2007): 1065-1081, 1066.

July 2006 war. In conclusion, the absence of a unified foreign policy and different variations of national interest based on sub-state interests can be used to describe Lebanon's foreign policy since the Ta'if agreement up until 2016, prior to Aoun's election as president.

2.3 Conclusion

Overall, the Lebanese foreign policy since independence up until 2016 can be categorized as not unified, disintegrated, and fragmented. Tracing back the foundations of Lebanon that are built on politicizing sectarianism purposely to protect elite interests, there was no unified national identity. To the contrary, the emphasis on communal ties along sectarian lines have reinforced the role of sub-state actors. Each of these sub-state actors aimed to protect and reinforce its interests through regional and international support, thus, creating multiple foreign policies and different national interests. The persistence of politicizing sectarianism gave more power to sub-state groups thus overlooking any form of unified, independent, and sovereign state and foreign policy. Korany and Dessouki characterized the Lebanese policy under this context as "ethnicized"⁴⁷. This also led to further independence on external factors, thus, reinforcing further breach and penetration of Lebanese sovereignty.

⁴⁷ Bahgat Korany and Ali Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalisation*, (Egypt: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), 491.

CHAPTER 3

FOREIGN POLICY WITH KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

The literature review established that Lebanon since independence in 1943 up until 2016 does not have a unified foreign policy in theory and practice on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. To the contrary, the sub-state actors and players have established interests of their own along with foreign relations that reinforce these interests. This has fragmented any form of unified foreign policy along with different understandings of national interest. Due to Lebanon's sectarian political and social structures that the elite have benefitted from since independence and after the Ta'if Agreement, the sub-state actors remain vital players in the daily lives of all the Lebanese along with Lebanon's foreign relations. Consequently, this section addresses Lebanon's relations with Saudi Arabia since 2016, the year Michel Aoun was elected as the Lebanese Republic's President. By tackling Lebanon's formal, informal, and sub-state relations with Saudi Arabia, the study will be able to establish whether there is a continuity of previous foreign policies or rupture during Aoun's era.

3.1 Formal Level

The formal level in foreign relations represents the officially adopted policies of the state through presidential and ministerial speeches, votes, statements, and decisions. It is key to mention that during Aoun's era, there were several governments that were established and resigned due to political instability and deadlock. This part will attempt to cover comprehensively the formal relations of the Lebanese state with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia across all these governments.

In 2016, all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries labeled Hezbollah, a major sub-state actor in Lebanon, as a terrorist organization⁴⁸. This represents a major event that creates tension in relations between the two countries. Another major event that took place in 2017 between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia is when crown prince Mohamad Bin Salman held several key businessmen and politicians as hostages in Saudi Arabia, including Prime Minister Saad Al Hariri⁴⁹. Moreover, as many statements suggested, that Hariri resigned from Riyadh under Saudi pressure⁵⁰. In the first 2 years of Aoun's presidency, there were very heightened tensions between the two countries on the political level. The push during Aoun's era in terms of foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia was supposedly representing Lebanon's national interest. However, these events have pressured Aoun and his administration alongside other officials to take a clear position.

Hariri withdrew his resignation that was announced in Saudi Arabia when he was held by Prince Mohamad Bin Salman⁵¹. Prior to the withdrawal, Aoun strictly mentioned that "We will not accept (Hariri) remaining a hostage whose reason for detention we do not know"⁵². Gebran Bassil, Foreign Minister during that time, mentioned that what was

48 Joe Macro, "Aoun in Riyadh: A Test for Lebanon's Foreign Policy", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 25 January, 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/aoun-in-riyadh-a-test-for-lebanons-foreign-policy/> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

49 Elliot Abrams, "The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 November, 2017, 1.

50 *Ibid.*, 3.

51 Al Jazeera, "Hariri: What Happened in Saudi Stays in Saudi", *Al Jazeera*, 28 November, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/28/hariri-what-happened-in-saudi-stays-in-saudi/> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

52 Lisa Barrington, "Lebanon Accuses Saudi Arabia of Holding its PM Hostage", *Reuters*, 15 November, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-idUSKBN1DF18A> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

going on was “not normal” but however we do want good relations with Saudi Arabia⁵³.

It is important to point out these two statements by Aoun and Bassil as they Lebanon’s official stance from the ongoing political crisis involving Hariri. However, even during the times where tensions were running high, Bassil did mention that he is still working, at least formally, towards good relations with Saudi Arabia, thus acknowledging the role of Saudi Arabia and its influence on Lebanon’s political, economic, and social structures. In other words, while Aoun’s words were straighter to the point to ensure that Hariri was being held and that his resignation is not accepted until he explains why, Bassil reinforces the state’s official stance towards Saudi Arabia which is the need to have good relations with the Kingdom, regardless of the current context. Bassil’s statements are raised primarily under his knowledge of the importance and influence that the Kingdom plays in Lebanon. It is mentioned that the Kingdom has a significant bargaining power in Lebanon due to its 860-million-dollar investment in Lebanese banks to stabilize the currency, gulf tourist inflows, and Lebanese citizens income

generation in the Kingdom that constitute 15% of Lebanon’s GDP in 2017⁵⁴. This indicates in the first place inconsistency on the formal level where the Aoun as a president mentions one position that is critical of the Kingdom while Bassil tried to be more appeasing. In the overall sense, this is the first time Lebanon provides a critical display of Saudi Arabia on the formal level. In other words, this could represent a form of rupture in the historic appeasement of Saudi Arabia by Lebanese officials.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hanin Ghaddar, *PolicyWatch 2891: Saudi Arabia’s War on Lebanon*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-war-on-lebanon> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

Hezbollah's presence and their close ties with Iran remain an issue in the Lebanese Saudi relations in the context of the regional Saudi Iranian conflict and power game. One of Saudi's objections to Lebanon's foreign policy is Aoun's inability to control Hezbollah in terms of intervention in Syria⁵⁵. This issue has caused tension and positioned Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah in Lebanon, in a difficult position where the official policy is to ensure good relations with Saudi Arabia are maintained due to economic interests, while on the other hand, Saudi Arabia constantly pressures Lebanon to limit Hezbollah's regional intervention and influence. With that being said, Lebanon's formal position regarding this issue was clear and supportive of the Kingdom's claims: Aoun, Hariri, and Gebran Bassil have mentioned clearly in 2017 that Hezbollah should not intervene in the Syrian war and should withdraw its troops⁵⁶. Therefore, Lebanon's formal stance is indeed supportive of the Kingdom's position towards Hezbollah.

In the years after 2017, many incidents and rising tensions between Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia have also caused troubles for the government. One of these events included Foreign Minister-then Charbel Wehbe who suggested that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq and Syria is a result of Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia⁵⁷. Aoun responded directly that these statements do not reflect the Lebanese government's official stance on Saudi Arabia while Prime Minister Saad al Hariri suggested that such

⁵⁵ Elliot Abrams, "The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 November, 2017, 4.

⁵⁶ Joe Macro, "Aoun in Riyadh: A Test for Lebanon's Foreign Policy", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 25 January, 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/aoun-in-riyadh-a-test-for-lebanons-foreign-policy/> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

⁵⁷ France 24, "Saudi Furious Over 'Insulting' Remarks by Lebanese Minister", *France 24*, 18 May, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210518-saudi-furious-over-insulting-remarks-by-lebanese-minister> (accessed 17 April, 2022).

statements are abnormal to diplomatic relations ⁵⁸ . This reinforces Lebanon’s formal position in constantly seeming to emphasize the importance of good relations with Saudi Arabia. However, it also shows a slight incompatibility within the same government where one minister makes a statement and is denied by other public officials.

The biggest event during Aoun’s period was when Information Minister George Kordahi criticized the Saudi-led alliance and its activity in Yemen ⁵⁹ . Moreover, Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah reinforced this criticism by suggesting that Saudi Arabia is a terrorist state that falls in line with Hezbollah’s historical criticism of Al Saud in general ⁶⁰ . As a response, all GCC countries withdrew their ambassadors from Lebanon to protest these accusations placing major pressures on Lebanon. However, prime minister Najib Mikati released an official statement suggesting that Hezbollah and Kordahi’s statements do not reflect the government’s official position from Saudi Arabia ⁶¹ , thus reinforcing Lebanon’s formal policy of “good relations” with the Kingdom. Not only did Mikati criticize these statements and alienated them from Lebanon’s official position from Saudi Arabia, president Aoun added that all Lebanese players should not be “interfering in matters that do not concern the Lebanese” as a way of criticizing Hezbollah’s statements ⁶² . More importantly, Aoun constantly reinforced the notion that Lebanon’s interest lies within good relations with Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries in general by dismissing any criticism placed by any sub-state group towards Saudi

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Kareem Chehayeb, “Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah Accuses Saudi Arabia of ‘Terrorism’”, *Al Jazeera*, 3 January, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/3/hezbollahs-nasrallah-accuses-saudi-arabia-of-terrorism> (accessed 16 April, 2022).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Arabia⁶³. Thus, Lebanon's official stance since the Ta'if Agreement towards Saudi Arabia has changed only during Hariri's detention in Saudi Arabia by Aoun's public statements criticizing Saudi Arabia. However, following this crisis, Aoun constantly mentioned Lebanon's interests in maintaining good relations with the Kingdom thus reconstructing the historical continuity of Lebanon's formal foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Informal Level

The informal implementation of the foreign policy is different than the formal position. The government has constantly claimed to prioritize good relations with the government but has failed to translate these official statements into actual strong policies on the ground. Saudi Arabia, having the upper hand on Lebanon due to its economic and political influence, has constantly pressured Lebanon and its officials to limit, minimize, and abolish Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon and in the region. A good example of such pressures includes pushing Lebanon to formally reject any interference in the Syrian war by Hezbollah. As mentioned earlier, the formal position of the state was primarily in line with such Saudi demands⁶⁴. It is key to note that the governments since 2016 have formally mentioned contradicting remarks towards Saudi Arabia. Ministers Charbel Wehbe and George Kordahi have both publicly criticized Saudi Arabia along with constant criticism by Hezbollah officials within the state and outside it. Regardless, the

⁶³ Al Jazeera, "Lebanon wants 'best relations' with Saudi Arabia, GCC, Aoun says", *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/lebanon-wants-best-relations-with-saudi-arabia-gcc-aoun-says> (accessed 16 April, 2022).

⁶⁴ Elliot Abrams, "The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 November, 2017, 4.

statements of Aoun and the overriding formal policy remained that which is supportive of Saudi demands. However, informally, the state has failed to abide by such policies.

The importance of many ministers having criticized Saudi Arabia in official statements suggests that there is to a great extent incompatibility or absence in a unified stance towards one foreign policy or understanding of national interests. This is primarily manifested in Lebanon's inability of taming Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts like the war in Syria. Indeed, it was clear that Aoun's theoretical foreign policy included that the Lebanese government would mention its opposition to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as an official stance but will not act to prevent it⁶⁵. Certainly, this is what happened where Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was not faced or challenged by the Lebanese state. In this sense, the informal actions of the government contradict to a great extent its formal position which are more catered towards Saudi demands.

Other informal behavior by government officials that shows incompatibility with the formal and official foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia can be represented mainly by Hezbollah and Amal Movement. Indeed, Hezbollah's involvement in the government through Members of Parliament and Ministers is primarily associated with protecting Hezbollah's status in terms of military, intelligence, and infrastructure; they would use their political power to veto any decision that threatens their essential structures⁶⁶. Since Aoun's election as president, he's agenda was clear in always trying to ensure that Lebanon's foreign policy is accommodative to Saudi interests due to Lebanon's reliance

65 Joe Macro, "Aoun in Riyadh: A Test for Lebanon's Foreign Policy", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 25 January, 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/aoun-in-riyadh-a-test-for-lebanons-foreign-policy/> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

66 Hussein Ibish, "Can Lebanon Repair Relations with Saudi Arabia?", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 13 January, 2017, <https://agsiw.org/can-lebanon-repair-relations-saudi-arabia/> (17 April, 2022).

on GCC, particularly Saudi, investments and aid. However, all the government that have existed since Aoun's presidency have never really challenged Hezbollah, their arms, and their involvement in regional wars. To the contrary, Hezbollah officials have ensured no policy or decision is taken against Hezbollah's critical structures. In this sense, the government informally has not translated its formal stance against Hezbollah's involvement in Syria as Hezbollah continue their battles on Syrian grounds⁶⁷. This reinforces the disintegration in Lebanon's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia as the formal stance suggests accommodative policies to Saudi interests, while informally the state has not taken one step to fulfill these accommodative policies.

Another example of how the informal actions of the Lebanese government during Aoun's era is not in line with its formal and official statements is the sustainable shipping of arms to Hezbollah from Iran through Syria. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is strategically calculated as they seek to protect their geo-strategic ally that supply arms. Indeed, Syria remains a strategic line for Iranian shipment of arms to Hezbollah that present a strong influence of Iran in the region and its competition with Saudi Arabia⁶⁸. Saudi Arabia's interest is to limit Hezbollah's power and influence in Lebanon which *de facto* limits Iranian influence in the region⁶⁹. However, this has not happened practically even though the formal and official statements of the government have suggested that Lebanon is against Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. This implies two major points. First,

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ellen Francis, "Aoun, Hariri's Hezbollah comments lay bare Lebanon's political divide", *Reuters*, 14 February, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-hezbollah-idUSKBN15T2FX> (accessed 18 April, 2022).

⁶⁹ Joe Macron, "Saudi Arabia's Third 'Shock and Awe' Move in Lebanon", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 9 November, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-arabias-third-shock-and-awe-move-in-lebanon/> (accessed 17 April, 2022).

there is incoherence between the formal and informal positions of the Lebanese government towards relations with Saudi Arabia. The formal stance suggests good relations and policies accommodative of Saudi interests, while informally and practically, these policies have not been adopted that would have limited Hezbollah's influence, and in turn, Iranian influence. Second, this incoherence reinforces the role of sub-state actors in pushing for their own interests within the state, thus creating different foreign policies and perceptions of national interests. With the persistence of the sectarian system in Lebanon and clientelism, sub-state actors remain heavily connected with external allies that protect these actors' interests. This reinforces the absence of a unified foreign policy and understanding of national interest as each group seek to protect, reinforce, and maintain their political, economic, and social interests.

3.3 Sub-State Level

The sectarian system under President Aoun has not changed much. Sectarian elite still control most of the state's resources and its distribution granting them a significant role in communal, economic, societal, and political relations. With this sectarian narrative of position of powers, the sectarian elite, each representing a sub-state actor in the state, have established their own foreign relations, and accordingly behaved to their established "self" interests. This has further reinforced disintegration and fragmentation in Lebanon's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia.

As mentioned earlier, Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon has established stronger Iranian influence in the region which has directly threatened Saudi Arabia's interests. Hezbollah has constantly attacked Saudi Arabia and criticized its rule and policies in the

region, particularly in their war on Yemen⁷⁰. Hezbollah can be recognized as one of the most influential sub-state actors in Lebanon which has strong ties with Iran that constantly provided financial, military, and intelligence support to the group to ensure its sustainability and protection. As such, Hezbollah as a sub-state actor has behaved in accordance with their interests regardless of Lebanon's official position against intervention in the Syrian war. This can be considered the epitome of how sub-state actors behave according to their own interests regardless of the formal position of the government from an issue. Thus, Hezbollah is acting against Saudi interests directly in Lebanon and Syria by allowing for Iranian influence in the region thus contradicting Lebanon's formal position.

Another example of sub-state actors in Lebanon that have contradicted Hezbollah's behavior and policies include mainly the Lebanese Forces and Future Movement. Both of these parties have relied heavily on western and gulf support to push for their own interests. In return, these parties have also echoed interests and accommodating policies of Saudi Arabia which include the disarmament of Hezbollah and their immediate withdrawal from the Syrian war. Indeed, Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, insisted on the importance of the disarmament of Hezbollah to resolve Lebanon's crisis and states that "It is time to take the initiative in making a difficult but correct decision to put yourself at the service of Lebanon and its people... instead of the Islamic Republic of Iran"⁷¹. Hariri has also attacked Hezbollah's role in

⁷⁰ Kareem Chehayeb, "Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah Accuses Saudi Arabia of 'Terrorism'", *Al Jazeera*, 3 January, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/3/hezbollahs-nasrallah-accuses-saudi-arabia-of-terrorism> (accessed 16 April, 2022).

⁷¹ Joseph Haboush and Omar Elkatouri, "Put Lebanon ahead of Iran and stop Arab interference, Geagea tells Hezbollah", *Al Arabiya News*, 7 September, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/09/07/Put-Lebanon-ahead-of-Iran-and-stop-Arab-interference-Geagea-tells-Hezbollah> (accessed 17 April, 2022).

Syria and called for the disarmament of all weapons that are not controlled by the legitimate state, implying the need to disarm Hezbollah⁷². Such statements but two other significant sub-state actors during Aoun's era have also challenged Hezbollah's policies and actions. Accordingly, the Lebanese Forces and the Future Movement have reinforced Saudi interests in Lebanon by calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah. Therefore, these three sub-state actors in Lebanon have further reinforced Lebanon's absence of a unified foreign policy and the significance of sub-state actors in pushing for their own interests regardless of the formal position of the state. In this sense, there is a major form of "continuity" from previous foreign policies in Lebanon in the sense that a unified foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia remains absent.

72 Ellen Francis, "Aoun, Hariri's Hezbollah comments lay bare Lebanon's political divide", *Reuters*, 14 February, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-hezbollah-idUSKBN15T2FX> (accessed 18 April, 2022).

CHAPTER 4

FOREIGN POLICY WITH SYRIA

The Lebanese foreign policy during Aoun's era represents a continuity of previous foreign policies in terms of relations with Saudi Arabia. Absence of a unified foreign policy on the formal, informal, and sub-state level and different interpretations of Lebanese national interests constitute this continuity in foreign policy. This section mainly addresses Lebanon's foreign policy towards Syria under Aoun's era to assess whether it is a similar form of continuity or has there been a rupture from previous foreign policies. This includes primarily the state's position on the Syrian war.

4.1 Formal Level

The Syrian war began in 2011. However, Syria's influence and presence in Lebanon has been historically identified, particularly after the Ta'if agreement which gave Syria the legitimacy to be present in Lebanon and retreat progressively. Finally, Syrian presence in Lebanon ended in 2005 following the assassination of Rafik Al Hariri. All sub-state actors in Lebanon took different opposing positions concerning Assad's regime following the 2011 Syrian war. On the formal level, Lebanon adopted primarily a neutral position from the war in Syria. The relations between Lebanon and Syria, particularly in terms of the Syrian war, cannot be disassociated from Lebanon's relations with Saudi Arabia. As mentioned earlier, Lebanon formally adopted a policy of maintaining good relations with Saudi Arabia due to its economic interests. However, on the informal and sub-state level, these policies were somehow working against Saudi Arabia such as the failure of the state to stop Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, cutting

down Iranian influence through Hezbollah, and maintaining a form of neutrality from the war in Syria.

It is mentioned that the formal theoretical framework of Lebanon's official foreign policy included: (1) Lebanon will continue to play a role in fighting ISIS on the Lebanese Syrian border which is complementary to the regional consensus on fighting ISIS; (2) Lebanese government will mention its opposition to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria but will not act to prevent it; (3) Lebanon will remain neutral in feuds between any Two Arab countries⁷³. Therefore, in the general sense, Lebanon adopts a form of neutrality in the Syrian war where the government does not publicly and formally support or oppose Assad's regime. In 2018, both Hariri and Aoun attempted to find a middle ground concerning the war in Syria where they did not want to publicly denounce Assad's regime while at the same time not encourage Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian war⁷⁴. Thus, there can be said that there is an attempt to maintain a middle ground of "neutrality". This formal position of the Lebanese state was threatened to a great extent on the informal and sub-state level.

4.2 Informal and Sub-State Level

While the formal position of Lebanon remained "neutral" as presented by Aoun's statements, the informal and sub-state actors since 2016 have provided highly contradicting notions, statements, speeches, and opinions. A very significant point to be

⁷³ Joe Macro, "Aoun in Riyadh: A Test for Lebanon's Foreign Policy", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 25 January, 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/aoun-in-riyadh-a-test-for-lebanons-foreign-policy/> (accessed 15 April, 2022).

⁷⁴ Paul Shinkman, "Lebanon's Precarious Place in the Lebanese War", *US News*, 16 April, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2018-04-16/lebanons-precarius-place-in-the-syria-war> (accessed 18 April, 2022).

mentioned is that the Gulf states, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, held back on financial support and aid to Lebanon including during the period of the recent economic crisis that began in October 2019⁷⁵. The importance of this policy resides in the reason behind the halting of the Gulf aid to Lebanon. Saudi Arabia perceives Lebanon, since 2016, as an Iranian outpost given Hezbollah's growing influence within Lebanon and regionally⁷⁶. Thus, even though the formal position of the state is to maintain neutrality towards the Syrian war, the practice on the ground by many sub-state actors as well as Gulf countries show that there is neutrality is not being practiced.

Several sub-state groups have informally behaved differently towards relations with Syria in terms of war. First, Hariri who sometimes appeared to adopt a "neutral" position alongside President Aoun towards the Syrian war, has frequently criticized Assad's regime. Prime Minister-then Hariri who heads one of the biggest parties in Lebanon constantly described Assad's regime as criminal given the war the regime launched against the Syrian people⁷⁷. Another major influential person in Lebanon who voiced his opinions on the matter is Patriarch Rai; he states that neutrality is the only way to prevent Lebanon from being part of a regional conflict that is being carried out in Syria⁷⁸. In other words, the patriarch, who is considered a very influential Christian figure

75 Maha Yahya, "Lebanon: Not Expecting Gulf Aid to Come Back", *CARNEGIE Middle East Center*, 9 June, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/06/09/lebanon-not-expecting-gulf-aid-to-come-back-pub-82009> (accessed 18 April, 2022).

76 Imad Harb, "Lebanon's Other Problem: Neutrality in Regional Affairs", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 3 August, 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/lebanons-other-problem-neutrality-in-regional-affairs/> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

77 Ark News, "Hariri stresses that the problem in Lebanon is not with Syrians and criticizes the presence of Hezbollah terrorist in Syria", *Ark News*, 12 February, 2019, <https://www.arknews.net/en/node/7560> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

78 Imad Harb, "Lebanon's Other Problem: Neutrality in Regional Affairs", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 3 August, 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/lebanons-other-problem-neutrality-in-regional-affairs/> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

and has close ties with Christian elite, is criticizing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria which aligns with the formal foreign policy of Lebanon but contradicts what's practically happening. Former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora reinforced the neutrality argument that Rai mentions and states "What Hezbollah is doing is very dangerous and undermines all national principles and contradicts the Constitution, [national] laws, the Baabda Declaration, international agreements and the policy of disassociation adopted by Lebanon"⁷⁹. Lebanese Forces, spearheaded by Samir Geagea, is a long-time contestant of Hezbollah and has also constantly criticized the party's involvement in the Syria war and overall alliance (or described as loyalty) to the Iranian regime⁸⁰.

With that being said, many sub-state actors have denounced Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war and called for neutrality. These arguments and speeches fall in line with the formal position of Lebanon, neutrality. However, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is also supported by various sub-state actors which to a certain extent represent the informal behavior of the state given that they are part of the government itself. In the primary seat, Hezbollah officials have constantly defended Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and justified it as a national interest to protect Lebanon from ISIS, western hegemony, and Israel⁸¹. Other groups who are allied with Hezbollah have also provided support and reinforced Hezbollah's argument on their intervention in

⁷⁹ MEPC, "Hezbollah's 'Foreign Intervention' in Syria", *Middle East Policy Council*, 2020, <https://mepc.org/commentary/hezbollahs-foreign-intervention-syria> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

⁸⁰ Middle East Online, "Lebanon's sectarian tensions threaten Hezbollah-Aoun alliance", *Middle East Online*, 19 October, 2021, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/lebanon%E2%80%99s-sectarian-tensions-threaten-hezbollah-aoun-alliance> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

⁸¹ COAR, "Conflict Analysis – Lebanon: National Level", *Center for Operational Analysis and Research*, 14 January, 2022, <https://coar-global.org/2022/01/14/conflict-analysis-lebanon-national-level/> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

Syria and those include Marada Movement, Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and Amal Movement⁸².

This suggests that there's a conflict in understanding and unifying Lebanon's national interest. This also alludes also to the continuity from previous foreign policies that historically had fragmented understandings of national interest as well as absence of a unified foreign policy on the formal and informal level. Moreover, this reinforces the argument that the sectarian system that emphasizes the sectarian identity of the people has similarly reinforced sectarian identities and political affiliations. Accordingly, sub-state actors who are part of the government in the sectarian consociational system remain powerful and influential players in Lebanese foreign policy, at least on the informal level. Therefore, Aoun's era in terms of Lebanese-Syrian relations does not represent any form of rupture in the general sense given that the continuity of fragmented foreign policies and various understandings of national interests still exists.

⁸² COAR, "Conflict Analysis – Lebanon: National Level", *Center for Operational Analysis and Research*, November, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Conflict-Analysis-Lebanon-National-Level.pdf> (accessed 19 April, 2022).

CHAPTER 5

CONFLICT WITH ISRAEL

The foreign policy of Lebanon towards Syria and Saudi Arabia during Aoun's era represents a continuity of previous foreign policies. This continuity represents the absence of a unified foreign policy on the formal, informal, and sub-state level while also representing different perspectives on the understanding of Lebanese national interest. As such, analysis of the formal and informal behavior along with Lebanon's sub-state actors shows that the sectarian system has reinforced the role of sub-state actors which reflected directly on the absence of a unified foreign policy. The following section tackles the last major topic of this project which is whether Aoun's presidency represents a rupture or continuity of former foreign policies associated with Israel.

5.1 Formal Level

Historically, Lebanon like many other Arab states has considered Israel an enemy and any individual, group, or party that engages with an Israeli citizen, party, group, or organization, can face legal repercussions⁸³. This has been historically the formal foreign policy, at least after the Ta'if Agreement given that many sides did interact with the Israeli government during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). As such, continuity in such foreign policy towards Israel would suggest that Lebanon considers Israel an enemy and deal / interacting with this state could cause legal repercussions. From a formal and legal

⁸³ Nadim Koteich, Majd Harb, Hanin Ghaddar, and Joseph Braude, "Anti-Normalization Laws: A Powerful Weapon in the Fight against Peace", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 24 June, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/anti-normalization-laws-powerful-weapon-fight-against-peace> (accessed 20 April, 2022).

perspective, there has been no change in terms of relations with Israel on the formal level as those aforementioned legal repercussions still apply.

Moreover, there have been several public statements condemning Israeli actions and policies. For example, Ex-Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil responded to Netanyahu's claim that "he would fight Iran in Lebanon (as in attack Hezbollah)" by stating that Israel is justifying its violation of other states' sovereignty and is reinventing excuses to launch military campaigns⁸⁴. Furthermore, there have been public complaints filed by Lebanese officials against Israel for violations of Lebanese sovereignty. Lebanese foreign ministry stated that Israeli warplanes flew close to the capital on the 19th and 20th of August as the statement mentions: "a complaint has been sent through Lebanon's representative to the UN, Ambassador Amal Mudallali, regarding the Israeli violations and called for the necessity of deterring Israel from committing these violations again"⁸⁵. Besides direct violation of Lebanese sovereignty, Lebanese foreign ministry has also condemned Israeli attacks on Palestinians in 2021 and "the brutal attack on innocent worshipers with sound bombs, gas and rubber bullets, in blatant violation of human rights and International laws and chart"⁸⁶. Thus, on a formal level, Lebanon under Aoun's presidency seems to show continuity in considering Israel an enemy as several complaints were filed against Israel. Moreover, there have been no change in laws criminalizing individuals, groups, or

⁸⁴ Al Arabiya News, "Lebanon's Foreign Ministry Condemns Israeli Remarks on Hezbollah", *Al Arabiya News*, 28 September, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2018/09/28/Lebanon-s-foreign-ministry-condemns-Israel-remarks-on-Hezbollah> (accessed 20 April, 2022).

⁸⁵ Naim Berjawi, "Lebanon Files Complaint with UN Over Israeli Aggression", *Anadolu Agency*, 20 August, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lebanon-files-complaint-with-un-over-israeli-aggression/2341231> (accessed 20 April, 2022).

⁸⁶ Reuters, "Foreign Affairs Ministry Calls for Urgent Action against Israeli Attacks against Palestinians", *LBC*, 8 May, 2021, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/589825/foreign-affairs-ministry-calls-for-urgent-action-a/en> (accessed 20 April, 2022).

organizations that interact or engage with Israeli enterprises, individuals, organizations, and government.

5.2 Informal and Sub-State Level

The formal level seems to show that there is continuity in considering Israel as an enemy state. In this sense, Aoun's era has certainly provided continuity of previous policies rejecting any form of normalizing relations with Israel. However, on the informal and sub-state level, there seems to be a slight rupture in terms of how the government and sub-groups that constitute this government are practically dealing with Israel. The reason this section combines the formal and sub-state actors together is because they overlap to a great extent. Sub-state actors are traditional sectarian parties spearheaded by sectarian elite who have built foreign relations and formulated their own economic, political, and social interests. These same sub-state actors have formed and participated in every government since Lebanon's independence. As such, the behavior of sub-state actors reflects to a great extent the informal practices of Lebanon's foreign relations and policies.

The slight rupture that the government has informally headed to comes within the context of a severe economic crisis represented by major devaluation of the currency and inflation of prices. In 2020, Lebanon and Israel began indirect negotiations through the United States as a mediator over a disputed maritime land (860 square kilometers in the Mediterranean Sea)⁸⁷. This can be described as a form of rupture in the way the government behaves towards Israel. Initiating talks with Israel over disputed maritime lands marks a new milestone in Lebanon's foreign relations as it is the first time Lebanon

⁸⁷ Al Jazeera, "Lebanon and Israel Talks Resume Over Disputed Maritime Border", *Al Jazeera*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/4/lebanon-and-israel-talks-resume-over-disputed-maritime-border> (accessed 21 April, 2022).

practically negotiates with Israel over a public issue. On the formal level, Israel is still described as an enemy, yet the government has been carrying out talks through mediators to resolve. This can certainly be described as a “rupture”.

Through these mediation talks, several sub-state actors have behaved differently, thus, simultaneously reflecting a continuity in absence of a unified position in a new government behavior. The talks with Israel do represent a rupture from previous foreign relations and policies towards Israel. However, the absence of a unified stance on the informal and sub-state level complements to a great extent previous foreign policies, thus, reinforcing continuity. For example, Gebran Bassil called for a change of delegation during these talks which implies that his political party was not satisfied with the suggested resolutions⁸⁸. This shows how the Lebanese side in the negotiations are disagreeing with one another which represents fragmentation in providing a united stance. One of the latest reports suggests that the talks that were halted following the Beirut blast in 2020 were resumed in January 2022⁸⁹.

No significant sub-state actor criticized any of these talks or considered it any form of normalization even though some Lebanese people have mentioned that peace talks should not be abandoned completely given Lebanon’s economic status⁹⁰. Therefore, on the informal and sub-state level, there can be considered a rupture from previous foreign policies towards Israel under Aoun’s presidency as Lebanon enters for the first

⁸⁸ Najia Houssari, “Lebanon Resumes Maritime Border Talks with Israel in a Weak Position”, *Arab News*, 2 May, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1852201/middle-east> (accessed 21 April, 2022).

⁸⁹ Reuters, “Israel to Resume US-Brokered Lebanon Maritime Border Talks – Ministry”, *Reuters*, 26 January, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-us-brokered-maritime-border-talks-with-lebanon-resume-next-week-2022-01-26/> (accessed 21 April, 2022).

⁹⁰ Sina Schweikle, “Lebanese Divided Over Hopes of Wider Peace with Israel”, *Deutsche Welle*, 21 October, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/lebanon-israel-relations-beirut/a-55345009> (accessed 21 April, 2022).

time ever after Ta'if talks with Israel. Formally, however, Lebanon still perceives Israel as an enemy and legal repercussions still fall on those who interact with any Israeli body. There still seems a form of continuity from previous foreign policies and relations where inconsistency and absence of unity can be vividly seen.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The following study investigated the foreign policy of Lebanon under Aoun's presidency and whether it represented a rupture or continuity from previous foreign policies. The paper first establishes a thorough and comprehensive understanding of Lebanon's historical foreign policy. It has been categorized as "neutral" most of the times in many issues. More importantly, the political system of Lebanon characterized as sectarian has reinforced sectarian identities over the "national" identities, thus, giving more power to sub-state actors. These sub-state actors are represented by traditional sectarian parties and their elite who have established relations with foreign countries. As such, each sub-state actor began working for protecting, maintain, and reinforcing its own social, political, and economic interests through its foreign connections. As a result, Lebanon's foreign policy historically has been fragmented with absence of unity on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. Moreover, there is no consensus over the definition of Lebanese national interests given the fragmentation of sub-state actors and their own perspectives on national interests.

Continuity from previous foreign policies would suggest then the absence of a unified foreign policy and understanding of national interests. This translates into fragmentation on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. The paper explores Aoun's presidency in terms of three major foreign relations: Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Israel. Firstly, the study has shown continuity in relations to Saudi Arabia and Syria. The formal position stated good relations need to be maintained with Saudi Arabia while Lebanon should remain neutral towards the Syrian war. A small rupture occurred when Hariri was

detained in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, through President Aoun, criticized this action. However, after this incident, the formal position of Lebanon remained consistent with the historical approach of attempting to maintain good relations with KSA. The informal position contradicts these statements to a great extent as Saudi demands in Lebanon were not fully respected and accordingly, there has been a halt in terms of foreign aid to Lebanon. On the other hand, Hezbollah has extensively been engaged in the Syrian war. Moreover, many other sub-state actors have criticized Saudi Arabia on one hand as being criminal (such as Hezbollah); on the other hand, other sub-state actors have criticized Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and overall loyalty to Iran. Overall, Lebanon's foreign policy under Aoun towards Saudi Arabia and Syria represents a continuity from previous foreign policies.

Relations with Israel, however, represent a rupture under Aoun's presidency. Talks that began in 2020 over disputed maritime land present the first talks ever with Israel, thus, manifesting a rupture from previous foreign policies towards Israel. On the formal level, Israel is still regarded as an enemy. Informally, the government has held several talks through the United States as a mediator with Israel, thus, alluding to some form of recognition. This is considered a rupture from previous foreign policies. However, the fragmentation in foreign policy between the formal, informal, and sub-state level remains similar to previous times. It is key to mention that Lebanon's context (economic crisis) has somehow forced the Lebanese side to hold these negotiations with hope of retrieving valuable resources that could act as a form of solution to the crisis⁹¹.

Future foreign ministers, public officials, and governments must establish a unified foreign policy on the formal, informal, and sub-state level. This step could be

⁹¹ Ibid.

established by abolishing the sectarian system that gives more power to sub-state groups who control the government. By abolishing the sectarian system, officials can establish a common ground for a unified understanding of national interest which allows Lebanon's to deal with external powers based on interest on the national level, and not on the sub-state level. Accordingly, Lebanon's economic and political interests are reinforced and displaces Lebanon from being an extension for proxy interests, conflicts, and

This study has one major limitation which is associated to the overall format of the project and limited time as a resource. This limitation is that the project does not tackle a strategic plan that could pull Lebanon towards a unified foreign policy that serves well-defined national interests. However, the study is highly significant in showcasing continuity and slight rupture in Lebanese foreign policy since 2016, the beginning of Aoun's presidential era. More importantly, the study contributes to the literature of foreign policy in general, and Lebanon's, in particular. Further research could build on this study and explore the impact and contribution of the sectarian system on the fragmentation of Lebanese foreign policy.

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