Lebanon Foreign Relations Essay, Research Paper

Lebanon s Foreign Policy and Neighborly Relations Lebanon’s foreign policy reflects its geographic location, the composition of its population, and its reliance on commerce and trade. Lebanon hopes to reestablish good ties with Western countries and in the Middle East as it once did during the first thirty years of its independence. Today, Lebanon remains friendly with Western countries and Syria, which maintains forces throughout parts of Lebanon, also heavily influences its foreign policy.Contemporary Lebanon is a prosperous liberal country that is very unique in the third world. After its independence of 1943, Lebanon was considered a complete society. Its strategic Middle Eastern location and relatively stable government made it a major trade and financial center. During the first three decades of Lebanon s independence, the one main feature of its foreign policy was its friendly relations with its neighboring countries; Syria, Israel and Iran. Today, it is a country recovering from the aftermath of civil wars. Overall, Lebanon has undergone a long and hostile history, but has always followed a delicately balanced policy with its neighbors and major powers.Two flaws have damaged Lebanon s chance for lasting peace. The first cause for conflict was the unbalanced power-sharing arrangement. Control rested with the right-wing Christian part of the population while the Muslims, who made up 50% of the population, were excluded from real government. A second problem arose as Lebanon was gradually drawn into the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the country did not participate militarily, Palestinian Muslim refugees flooded into the country and continued their attacks on Israel from Lebanese bases.In 1975 all-out civil war broke out between the Muslim coalition allied with Palestinian groups and the Christian militias. In addition, in 1976, a cease-fire was forced upon the two sides when Syrian military forces intervened at the request of the Lebanese president, Suleiman Franjieh. Nevertheless, violence did continue and in 1978 Israel invaded southern Lebanon attempting to eliminate Palestinian bases. Withdrawing three months later after a United Nations peacekeeping force was sent to the area, they reinvaded in 1982, occupying Beirut and forcing the PLO to evacuate its headquarters. For seven weeks the Israelis bombed the Muslim half of Beirut by air, sea and land.After the assassination of president-elect Bashir Gemayel, Israeli-backed Christian militias were still fighting with the Palestinians. A year later Israeli troops withdrew to southern Lebanon. Fighting then broke out between Lebanon’s Christian and Druze militias, and terrorist attacks, by the Palestinians, on the multinational force including the US marine headquarters at Beirut airport. After 300 US and French troops were killed in 1983, the Western forces pulled out. Fighting still persisted and Westerners in Beirut became the targets of Shiite Muslims from Iran. With the help of the Syrians, the Lebanese army took control of Beirut and by 1992 under pressure from Iran and the US, all the foreign hostages captured several years earlier were finally released.During the 1975 Civil War, the central government was only one of many domestic actors involved in the making of foreign policy. It shared this role with the various alliances and militias that were formed. The government, combined with the other militia s worked together to make foreign policy. Combined, they had an official role in foreign policy decisions. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, Syria, Israel, the Palestinians and Iran also seized foreign-policy-making roles, although the first two were the most influential.At one point in time, Syria and Lebanon (as well as some other countries) were considered one territory called “Greater Syria.” In 1920, while under the French mandate, Lebanon was separated from the larger state. This is why Lebanon and Syria have had strong bonds in recent years. Following World War II, after both had become independent, they shared a common currency and customs. Moreover, the two had always been active trading partners, and when political disputes arose, each country often used economic ways to pressure the other.In the 1950s and 1960s, Syria was battling its own internal problems and was unable to focus on Lebanon’s domestic problems. In the late 1960s the rise of Palestinian guerrilla activity in southern Lebanon contributed to tense relations with Syria. Since the Syrian government was hesitant to permit guerrilla attacks to originate from Syrian soil (fearing Israeli revenge), it was preferable to see such activity occur in southern Lebanon. Consequently, in 1973, when the Lebanese Army finally engaged in fighting against the Palestinians, Syria closed its borders in protest.Since the 1975 Civil War, Syrian involvement in Lebanon has been essential. First of all, the regime of President Hafiz al Assad has opposed the permanent fragmentation of Lebanon, fearing that the creation of a mini Maronite state would lead to the establishment of “another Israel.” Israel is an “all Jewish” state, without any other diversity in it, and Lebanon would have been very similar to Israel and their policy decisions, except favorable for the Maronites. On the other hand, Syria has opposed the formation of a left-wing state on its western border. Since Syria had to deal with its own Muslim fundamentalist rebellion in the late 1970s and 1980s, it was concerned that a radical Islamic state in Lebanon would have a negative impact on the state.During the Civil War, Syria acted as arbitrator because they arranged several cease-fires. In 1976, as the battle was going badly for the Christian Lebanese, Syria moved to prevent its total collapse, using Palestinian units under its control. By January 1977 about 27,000 Syrian troops were in Lebanon.During the 1980s, Syria was the dominant external actor in Lebanon. “It physically controlled much of the country, over which it imposed its will. At times, Syrian inaction, such as allowing one faction to war on another, had just as much impact as its active measures.” Nonetheless, Syrian influence has had its limits. Its ability to impose stability, that was Assad’s intention, has been discouraged by the large amount of factions. These limitations were evident during the 1982 invasion when Syria opposed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Lebanese territory. “Although it acquitted itself well, the Syrian Army was unable to halt the IDF advance or to prevent its own ejection from Beirut. Later, the insertion of the Multinational Force (MNF) also reduced Syrian influence for a time.” In 1983, when Israel pressured the government of Amin Jumayyil to sign an accord, called the May 17 Agreement, that would make relations between the two countries a lot better, Syria denied it. It wanted the formation of the National Salvation Front, a coalition of pro-Syrian groups of both Christian and Muslim groups, to oppose the agreement. The Syrian s got their wish, and on March 6, 1985, Jumayyil revoked the May 17 Agreement and Israel withdrew some of its forces from parts of Lebanon. As of late 1987, Syrian troops were back in Beirut trying to keep peace, and Syrian influence was again significant. Even so, a true Syrian-imposed stability had not been achieved.Lebanon joined the battle against the creation of Israel with other Arab nations in 1948. Nonetheless, because of the small size of its armed forces, their help would have little effect. During the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanese politicians recommended leaving Lebanon out of the Arab-Israeli dispute. With its booming economy and high standard of living, the Lebanese upper class had much to lose. Lebanon remained neutral from the conflicts of 1956, 1967, and 1973.Israel had always been more concerned about Palestinian guerrilla attacks launched from Lebanon, rather than attacks from Lebanon itself, because it never presented a serious military threat. Since the 1960s, there has been a pattern of Palestinian guerrilla attacks on Israel and IDF attacks on Palestinian targets. In the aftermath of the 1975 Civil War, the collapse of Lebanon’s central government provided opportunities for Israel to act. During that time, Israel sponsored the creation of a backup force called the Free Lebanon Army, later renamed the South Lebanon Army [SLA], led by Lebanese Christian Major Saad Haddad. The force s intentions were to prevent infiltration into Israel of Palestinian guerrillas. In 1978 Israel invaded Lebanon, clearing out Palestinians. Another consequence of the Israeli invasion was the establishment in southern Lebanon of the United Nations Interim Force.

The 1982 Israeli invasion affected all of the southern half of Lebanon as far north as Beirut. This action had several consequences. First, “it resulted in the deaths of several hundred Palestinian fighters and the expulsion of several thousand more, not to mention several thousand Lebanese and Palestinian casualties and massive destruction.” The Israeli occupation promoted the creation of the MNF, made up of military units from Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, which supervised the Palestinian evacuation and kept the peace.There were several less direct consequences as well. The occupation of Muslim West Beirut allowed Christian forces to enter the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, where they massacred several hundred civilians. Lebanese Shias, who were severely affected by the invasion and occupation, turned their hatred on the Israelis. “As a show of support for their coreligionists, the government of Iran, with Syrian approval, dispatched a contingent of the Pasdaran to the Biqa Valley.” In addition, the anti-Israeli Shia opposition participated in several suicide-bombing incidents perpetrated against IDF positions.In 1987 Israel’s relations with Lebanon continued to revolve around the issue of security. Israel kept its support of the SLA’s activities in southern Lebanon, maintained its ties to the LF, and continued its policy of attacking Palestinian and Lebanese targets that Israel labeled “terrorist” bases.The Palestinians have been a central part of the Lebanese policy since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, when many of them fled to Lebanon. This refugee population increased after the June 1967 War and the 1970 eviction of the PLO from Jordan. By 1987 there were about 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon.During the late 1960 s, Palestinian guerrilla activity launched from Lebanon against Israel increased, giving rise to serious security and political problems for the Lebanese government. “The PLO forces in southern Lebanon created what amounted to a distinct Palestinian entity, outside the control of the central authorities. PLO transgressions (tajawuzat) against the Lebanese populace and Israeli military attacks made the situation critical.” Political battles between Christians and Muslims increased; therefore, Palestinian guerillas that were effectively conducting foreign policy had severe consequences for the Lebanese government. The 1969 Cairo Agreement was an attempt to reduce tensions by limiting the extent of Palestinian actions in Lebanon, which was never successful.The Palestinian population in the Beirut area suffered extraordinarily during the 1975 Civil War, as Christian militias troubled urban refugee camps. In contrast, some Palestinian liberation groups were in the middle of the fighting and imposed considerable damage on the Lebanese. Furthermore, the PLO increased its dominance because its forces controlled areas out of the reach of the Lebanese Front.Throughout the 1980s, Palestinian fortunes in Lebanon diminished. The Israeli invasion was a serious setback, followed by the Shatila and Sabra massacres. “In 1983 intra-Palestinian hostility was particularly pronounced, as factions battled near Tripoli; in the process, pro-Arafat forces were evicted by Syrian-backed elements.” Moreover, the war between Palestinians in the refugee camps of Beirut and the Amal militia that began in 1985 had not ceased by late 1987. This tragic situation portrayed the complexity of Lebanese political events, showing that hostility to the PLO was not confined to Christian groups. Regardless, by late 1987 the PLO still enjoyed control of much of the Sidon region and retained a strategic basis in Lebanon.The importance of Iran to Lebanon’s foreign relations increased in the 1980s. Following the success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini was eager to spread its message to other Shias. Therefore, its message was delivered to Lebanon’s small Shia community, providing financial and inspirational support to several Lebanese Shia organizations. Then, in 1982, as a show of solidarity against the Israeli invasion, “a contingent of the Pasdaran” arrived and established a base near Baalbek in the Biqa Valley. These units not only operated as a defense force, but also gave medical aid to the local population.Iranian sponsored groups made efforts to gain support amongst the Lebanese Shias by providing social services and desperately needed economic relief, during the 1980 s. These groups, one in particular Hizballah, reported to be receiving substantial financial aid from Iran, were able to use Iranian resources to run hospitals, pay families’ school fees, remove refuse, and participate in housing reconstruction. These actions drew supporters away from Amal, allied to Syria. Amal simply was unable to distribute the same level of aid as Hizballah did.Lebanon’s foreign policy reflects its geographic location, the composition of its population, and its reliance on commerce and trade. Lebanon hopes to reestablish good ties with Western countries and in the Middle East as it once did during the first thirty years of its independence. Lebanon remains friendly with Western countries and Syria, which maintains forces throughout parts of Lebanon, also heavily influences its foreign policy. Lebanon did not participate in the 1967 or 1973 Arab-Israeli war or in the 1991 Gulf War. Lebanon and Israel are now conducting bilateral negotiations in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Things have calmed down in Lebanon, and there is hope that the situation will continue to improve as the chance of lasting peace in the Middle East gains momentum.

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