The purpose of this study is to capture U.S. perspectives on Lebanon. The study is NOT a Lebanese case. The purpose of this work, and how it is applied to the U.S. foreign policy system itself.

Perhaps the most important feature of this system is the instability of policy outcomes. The dynamics of the system ensure that policy decisions are rarely stable. Instead, they are subject to reversal, reinterpretation, obstruction, and the push and pull of competing interests. The constants of the system are bargaining, competition, and volatility, where today's winners can easily become tomorrow's losers.

The limited capacity of key agencies, including the State Department and the National Security Council, produces intense competition for the time and attention of decision makers: important policy decisions are often rushed, based on limited or flawed analysis, and disconnected from the broader context of the countries the U.S. seeks to influence.

The recent history of U.S. intervention in Lebanon is one of many examples used to support this perception of America as a powerful but disruptive if not destabilizing presence in the Arab world. Neither of these conceptions would strike American policy makers as recognizable. Instead, the dominant perspective from inside the system is one in which policy making is rarely coherent, is marked by ambiguity and fragmentation, and often fails to achieve stated objectives. The policy process is seen as heavily influenced by inter-agency rivalries, bureaucratic politics, and interpersonal relationships among senior officials. Statements and actions may not carry the weight with which they are understood by Lebanese actors. Indeed, rapid turnover among decision makers means that officials often have short time horizons, focusing on near-term issues at the expense of long-term goals.

The findings presented in this report by US expert analyst Steven Heydemann and researcher, Hesham Sallam reflect how the U.S. foreign policy system works, and how it is applied to the Lebanese case. The purpose of this study is to serve as one of many knowledge resources on Lebanon's external challenges. The intention is to capture US perspectives on Lebanon.
LEBANON–U.S. AGREEMENTS 1943–2010

Since Lebanon’s independence in 1943, the governments of the United States and Lebanon signed numerous agreements. The United Nations Treaty Series lists over 40 documents relating to bilateral agreements and exchange of notes between the two countries. Documents include agreements for the sale of U.S. agricultural products to Lebanon, air transportation between the two countries, U.S. military and economic grants and assistance to the Lebanese government, as well as various agreements concerning the status of United States troops in Lebanon in 1958 and during the 1980s.

“Exchange of notes constituting an agreement between the United States of America and Lebanon relating to the recognition of the independence of Lebanon and to the rights of the United States and its nationals.” Concluded: September 7, 1944, United Nations Treaty Series Volume 124

U.S. System Challenge: How to deal with Political Islam?

Islamist politics pose what might well be seen as the most significant and complex set of foreign policy challenges that the U.S. has faced in the post-Cold War era. At the same time, these challenges have been exceptionally resistant to efforts to impose coherence on U.S. responses to Islamists, to the often-intense frustration of those who prefer to cast the world in black and white terms, or to force policy into simplistic containers such as the global “war on terror.” U.S. policies toward Islamist challenges so often seem to be at odds with themselves, and are so often inconsistent in ways that leave the U.S. exposed to charges of hypocrisy in its relations with Muslim societies and Islamist movements. They are also central for understanding why what is often referred to by ideologues as “the Islamist challenge,” or concepts such as Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” are inadequate starting points for understanding the dynamic of U.S. debates and the struggle to shape policy responses to the challenges of Islamist politics.

Instead, I would argue that it is more useful to think about policy debates in terms of six distinct elements and to understand how the interplay of these elements defines the organization of U.S. policies in various settings where the U.S. confronts the challenges of political Islam. These six elements are:

1. Engagement, represented by a range of policy instruments that encompass formal and non-formal dialogue with key allies and extend to public diplomacy efforts, attention to issues of inter-faith dialogue, and other related strategies. These approaches have not been terribly effective in changing the attitudes of Islamist actors toward the U.S., and has been subordinated to other policy elements when it comes to Islamist groups and parties identified by the US as terrorist organizations.

2. Accommodation, which tends to prevail in settings where security and economic interests are felt to be centrally at stake. This is how U.S. relations with the governments of Muslim majority states.

3. Negotiation figures more prominently in cases where the U.S. perceives a benefit in seeking the realignment of local actors as a way of responding to Islamist pressures.

4. Containment or Isolation, which have emerged as a central instrument of U.S. policy over the past several years, notably in response to the electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine, the perceived threat of Iran's nuclear program, and in efforts to contain Hezbollah’s role in Lebanon and internationally.

5. Confrontation, which continues to define U.S. policy toward extremist groups and terrorist networks.

6. Coordination, an element of U.S. policy that includes efforts to develop joint approaches toward Islamist actors with governments in the Arab world, with European and other allies. These six elements offer insights into policy debates in the U.S. about how to approach policy toward extremist groups and terrorist networks.

ANALYSIS:

Viewing these six elements as a kind of a matrix—and recognizing that the components of this matrix often overlap—offers insights into policy debates in the U.S. about how to respond to the challenges of militant Islam. These debates are organized around reasonably predictable efforts by identifiable elements of the policy elite to determine which elements from this matrix should be deployed in any given case; how they should be sequenced; what would trigger a move from the engagement-accommodation-negotiation side of the matrix toward the isolation-containment-confrontation side (e.g. the effort to establish benchmarks for judging Iran’s compliance with UN Security Council directives); but also about which agencies within the policy system, notably the State Department or the Pentagon, will take the lead in defining and executing policy in any given instance.

In considering the U.S.-Lebanese relationship as seen from the U.S. perspective, and in exploring the opportunities and challenges this relationship presents for Lebanon, it is imperative to keep in mind the effects of the U.S. policy system on America’s management of foreign affairs, and on the conduct of its foreign policy.


Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the complexity of U.S.-Lebanese relations, the critical challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. in Lebanon are not hard to define. The central challenge for the U.S. is to contain and mitigate possibilities for Lebanese actors to undermine its regional interests, either within Lebanon or through relationships with U.S. adversaries in the region. The central opportunity is to consolidate Lebanon’s status as a stable, moderate, democratic Arab state that contributes to the maintenance of a moderate regional order and, ideally, is able to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel.

The legacies of the 1975-1990 civil war and the embedded sectarianism that provided it—including the absence of a coherent and fully sovereign state, the emergence of armed non-state actors, the persistent dependence of Lebanese political actors on foreign patronage—pose huge constraints on the capacity of the U.S. to advance its overarching aims in Lebanon, and challenge its regional objectives, as well.

At the regional level, the diagnosis leads toward policies that reflect a deeply ambivalent fit with current U.S. regional interests and priorities. On one hand, U.S. efforts to consolidate a stable, effective, and fully sovereign Lebanese government will be helped if the U.S. maintains a regional posture that diminishes U.S.-Lebanese friction, and weakens the incentives of actors such as Hizballah, Syria, and Iran to play the role of anti-U.S. spoilers in Lebanon. On the other hand, however, such an approach would require the U.S. to adjust its approach on a variety of fronts—Arab-Israeli issues, U.S.-Syrian relations, policy towards Hizballah, and U.S.-Iranian relations—in ways that cut against deeply held views of long-term American interests in the region, and would expose the Obama Administration to significant domestic backlash from powerful interests.

The gap between U.S. policy and Lebanese preferences may become wider or narrower at different moments in the U.S.-Lebanese relationship, but it will not disappear. As a result, we have to recognize that one of the core challenges confronting the U.S. in Lebanon will be the ongoing need to manage the divide between U.S. policies and Lebanese preferences about the role the U.S. should be playing in the region.

For those responsible for U.S. policy in Lebanon, the challenges associated with bringing coherence to the inter-agency process, working effectively with Lebanese diaspora groups and other interested actors, and managing relationships with Congress are no less daunting than those associated with the actual implementation of policy.

Nonetheless, the truly critical challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. are those located within. When U.S. policies and Lebanese preferences about the role the U.S. should be playing in the region.

Photo source: http://online.wjs.org/article/581244811902111523.html

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Until these are comprehensively addressed, and as noted above the U.S. faces significant challenges in its capacity to make progress on these issues, the current profile of U.S.-Lebanese relations is unlikely to change.
Lebanon-U.S. Economic Ties

- The United States is one of Lebanon’s most important economic partners, though in some respects U.S.-Lebanese economic ties rank somewhat modestly when compared to Lebanon’s economic relations with other countries. Between 2000 and 2008 the U.S. was on average the 9th largest recipient of Lebanese exports, falling well behind countries like Switzerland and Turkey. The U.S., however, has been the 2nd largest exporter to Lebanon between 2000 and 2008, exporting on average $774 million/year during this period.

Lebanese imports from the United States have increased since 2006, ranging from 9-11% of total annual Lebanese imports between 2006 and 2008. Imports and investments play a significant role in a number of sectors in the Lebanese economy, most notably the medical sector and equipment sector, in which U.S. imports held 27% of the market share in 2008. That same year U.S. imports were 16% of total imports to Lebanon in the automotive sector. U.S. exports and investments also play a considerable role in the air conditioning and drugs and pharmaceuticals sectors.

2005, in part due to Washington’s efforts to support the March 14-led government, and as a result of U.S. aid for reconstruction after the 2006 war. Following the war, the Bush administration pledged $230 million in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. Between 2006 and 2009, Washington provided Lebanon with over $300 million in Foreign Military Financing grants and $60 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement assistance. Washington also authorized $184 million to support peacekeeping activities in Lebanon in 2007.

The two countries have reportedly signed an agreement in 2008 setting up a joint military commission to enhance bilateral military cooperation. News reports also indicate that in recent years the two countries have signed an agreement concerning security cooperation. To the knowledge of the authors, the texts of these agreements are not publicly available.

Links to Lebanese Political Parties

- The U.S. has historically maintained good relations with Lebanon’s Christian community in part due to its strong ties to Lebanese-Americans — the largest Arab population in the United States. While Washington has been broadly sympathetic to mainstream Christian and Sunni political actors, relations with Druze and Shi’a leaders have often been tense. If the political makeup of the Lebanese groups tended to oppose U.S. policies in Lebanon and the region.

- The contemporary American orientation toward Lebanese political parties took shape after the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces. Washington has maintained friendly relations with the parties constituting the March 14 alliance, which has held the parliamentary majority since the June 2005 elections. These parties are strongly opposed to Syrian and Iranian influence in the country, which still holds the American goal of limiting the regional influence of Tehran and Damascus.

- Meetings between U.S. diplomats in Lebanon and March 8 figures are restricted to non-Hizballah officials, such as parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. The United States Government considers Hizballah a terrorist organization and does not engage in an official capacity with any figures officially affiliated with the group.

- It is unclear whether continuation of positive U.S.-Lebanese relations contingent on the March 14 parties control over government, and if the U.S. would attempt to isolate Lebanese diplomatically should Hizballah and its allies gain control of government (in the future).

Why a Relationship With Lebanon Matters?

The factors and considerations that have shaped U.S. policy toward Lebanon since the postwar period have had surprisingly very little to do with Lebanon. In fact, many of what observers would consider historic U.S. decisions in this country, including the deployment of American troops in 1958 and 1982, were grounded in a fairly shallow understanding of Lebanese domestic realities. U.S. policy vis-à-vis Lebanon has more often than not reflected Washington’s concern with permeating international threats, such as Soviet influence during the Cold War, as well as its broader interests in the Middle East, including managing Arab-Israeli hostilities. Indeed, Washington’s Middle East policy, including those pertinent to Lebanon, have often been the culmination of a series of swift reactions to various crises and unexpected shocks rather than the product of a coherent well-thought-out strategy. Yet U.S. interpretation of these crises and (by implication) its ensuing responses, as reactive as they may have been, were all colored by U.S. perceptions of these broader international and regional threats and their corresponding objectives.

While international and regional conditions have greatly influenced the evolution of U.S.-Lebanese relations, domestic conditions in the U.S. and even local realities in Lebanon still played a role in shaping American policy towards Lebanon. These include the historic ties between U.S. missionary movements and Christian communities in Lebanon, U.S. perceptions of Lebanon as a pluralist democracy with a vibrant market economy, and the role of Lebanese Diaspora in humanizing Lebanon for some Americans. However, the extent of their influence over the course of America’s Lebanon policy has usually been limited in large part by broader threats and interests that go well beyond Lebanon. This theme is underscored in the following section, in which we provide an overview of American-Lebanese relations, highlighting the most important perceptions of threats and interests that have shaped the trajectory of their evolution.

The story chronicles U.S.-Lebanese history from World War II until 2010 and captures the dynamics and changes in bi-lateral and regional relations.)
U.S. Role in War and Peace in Lebanon

- Since World War II U.S. official engagement in Lebanon has taken on a variety of forms, ranging from direct military intervention to delicate diplomatic balancing between Lebanese groups and various outside actors. Over the years, the U.S. has also attempted to support Lebanon's peace and stability through economic and military aid, though aid levels tend to decline when Lebanon drops off of Washington's priority list.

- The U.S. waged two military interventions in Lebanon, one in 1958 and another during the period between 1982 and 1984. Aimed by the overthrow of the pro-Western pro-Nasser domestic opposition, U.S. troops were back in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 initially for American, French, Syrian, Israeli and Lebanese representatives by the two sides, and established a committee comprised of American, French, Syrian, Israeli and Lebanese representatives to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

- The massacre of Sabra and Shatilla in September 1982 under-scored U.S. failure to live up to its promise to guarantee the safety of remaining Palestinians in Lebanon. National reconciliation talks, which the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement mandated, failed to yield an inclusive outcome acceptable to all Lebanese factions. The May 17, 1983 peace agreement negotiated between Lebanon and Israel under U.S. auspices did not succeed in securing the evacuation of PLO forces from Lebanon, and later to separate Israeli forces from Lebanese armed groups.

- The war's major failure is the U.S. failure to live up to its promise to guarantee the safety of remaining Palestinians in Lebanon. National reconciliation talks, which the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement mandated, failed to yield an inclusive outcome acceptable to all Lebanese factions. The May 17, 1983 peace agreement negotiated by the two sides, and established a committee comprised of American, French, Syrian, Israeli and Lebanese representatives to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

- The constitutional crisis of 1968 and the uncertainty it introduced into Lebanese politics resulted in U.S. fears of a return to intense fighting that could potentially lead to Syrian-Israeli military confrontation. The United States continued its hands-off policy on Lebanon, but supported the efforts of the Arab League to carve out an agreement between the country's warring factions.

- The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and Syria's support for a U.S.-led coalition to eject Iraqi troops from Kuwait reinforced Washington's rapprochement with Damascus and made Washington more tolerant of a strong Syrian role in Lebanon. Thus resulting in the death and wounding of hundreds of civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. The military campaign, dubbed by Israel "Operation Grapes of Wrath," was finally contained through another understanding brokered by the two sides such that Hizbollah would cease attacks against northern Israel and in return, Israel would refrain from attacking civilian targets in Lebanon. Hizbollah-Israeli hostilities precipitated a similar crisis in April 1996 when Israeli forces attacked various Lebanese targets, including Beirut, the second highest levels of education among Arab communities developed more recently in California and Texas. About 30% of all Arabs in the United States are Lebanese, followed by Egyptians (17%) and Syrians (12%).

- Lebanese Americans constitute the largest Arab-speaking community in the United States. About half a million or 0.1% of the U.S. population identify their origin as Lebanese according to 2007 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, but the Arab American Institute Foundation estimates that at least one million Americans are of Lebanese heritage. Three fourths of Lebanese in the country were born in the United States and 93% of them are U.S. citizens. Lebanese Americans constitute the largest Arab population in the country. Over 30% of all Arabs in the United States are Lebanese, followed by Egyptians (17%) and Syrians (12%).

- Although early Lebanese immigrants were concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest regions, today Lebanese communities are found in almost every American state. Lebanese American communities developed more recently in California and Texas. About 37% of all Lebanese Americans live in five states, Michigan (11%), California (9%), Ohio (6%), Florida (6%), and Massachusetts (5%).

- Lebanese Americans have held senior appointments in the U.S. government during successive administrations. Donna Shalala served as Secretary of Health and Human Services under Clinton. Spencer Abraham, who represented Michigan in the U.S. Senate from 1995-2001, was President George W. Bush's secretary of energy, and former U.S. Representative from Illinois Ray LaHood currently serves as secretary of transportation. Former mayor George Mitchell is a special envoy to the Middle East for the Obama administration. Also of Lebanese origin, career diplomat Philip Habib served as an advisor to the Reagan administration and was dispatched frequently to Lebanon during the 1980's to broker agreements between warring factions during the civil war.

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