LEBANON ON THE MARGINS OF THE ARAB SPRING: SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE CEDAR REVOLUTION

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MARWAN MUASHER: OK. I guess we can start. Welcome, everyone, to Carnegie. I’m Marwan Muasher. This has been a year since the uprisings, and a lot of people wonder why Lebanon has not been affected by the uprisings. We don’t see the kind of protests in Lebanon that we have seen in other Arab countries. And yet, of course, others point out to the fact that the Arab Spring may have started in Lebanon five or six years ago, with the Cedar Revolution, when other protests were not taking place in the Arab world.

And so, where is Lebanon heading? What effects would the uprising have on it? We’re witnessing major upheavals in Syria as we speak. A U.N. Security Council resolution might be passed tomorrow on Syria that might actually be a turning point in terms of calling for a transition, along the lines of the Yemeni model. What is the future of Hezbollah? A lot of questions that everybody has on their minds.

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And to answer all of them and more – (chuckles, laughter) –

MR. : That’s a simple task.

MR. MUASHER: -- I’m glad I’m not going to – (chuckles, laughter) – provide the answers – we have with us a very seasoned diplomat, politician, but also a colleague and a – and a dear friend. Mohamad Chatah, of course, has – there is no position in the Lebanese government he has not taken. (Laughter.) I like to point out to the fact that we both presented our credentials as ambassadors to the U.S. on the same day, September 8, 1997 – sounds like a long time ago. But Hamad of course has been, before that, deputy governor of the Central Bank, political adviser to Prime Minister Siniora, political adviser to Prime Minister Saad Hariri, minister of finance – I mean, I could – I could go on forever.

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And so, Hamad, it’s a real pleasure to have you here at Carnegie. Everybody is waiting to hear your views. What we will do is have you speak for whatever you want – 15, 20 minutes, 25 – however you want – and then engage in a discussion with Ambassador Chatah, and questions from the audience. So with that, I turn it to you.

MOHAMAD CHATAH: Well, thank you, Marwan. Indeed, Marwan is an old friend – well, is a young old friend, and – (laughter) – we indeed served together. But I also watched his career, and it’s an exceptional career – all over the world, actually. And I’m happy to see him in this capacity, because I know he’s doing great job gathering interesting interested people, and this institution, at a time where these gatherings, I believe, are very important, because a lot of question marks – more questions certainly than answers. So that’s where I come from.

Well, let me go right to it. I’ll make maybe eight or nine small observations or comments and leave as much time as possible for me to listen to questions and maybe comments as well. Let me start out by saying that the so-called Arab Spring – my mind, anyway – is not – is not a wave. It’s not something that comes and goes. It’s not even a
tsunami that comes and makes a huge – a huge mess or huge impact and then recedes. I look at it simply as a process of transformation.

And it – they call it the Arab Spring, but it’s not really Arab in the sense of nationalistic uprising of the type that has happened over the last two centuries, where nations come together and assert their nationalism. It’s not that way. It’s not even Islamic, and that may raise some eyebrows. I think the dynamics that have moved people to transform, to change, to seek the goals that they are seeking – these go beyond religion. They address basic, universal principles that have come to be accepted by vast majority of people as transcending, in a way, ethnic or religious background. Arab societies, which are mostly Muslim, are coming of age, are maturing, are in a way graduating to something that many, many – if not most – other societies have reached. That’s my first point.

And second point is that it – related to the first, that it’s quite telling that these principles, these values that I mentioned or alluded to, really have come – have become also the rhetoric of everyone, even dictators – I mean, you find everyone talking the same language. Everyone wants to respect diversity; they talk about accountability; they talk about participation; you know, governance and all of that. They do it, not necessarily because they believe it, but because they know that people want it. So this tells me that there’s no escape. This is a change, a process of change, that will succeed.

And, indeed, you can argue that the Arab societies we’re talking about should have reached this level a little earlier. Maybe so, and maybe we can – I mean, historians can discuss why now and not a few years back. We have a clue – I mean, each one of us has a – has an explanation. What is clear, though, is that these societies – especially the Mediterranean Arab countries – had reached a point in their social and individual human development – reached a point, a position in the spectrum in the – in this world – that should have put them at a better level of governance for some time.

So if you look at where they are, these societies – and there are indices that tell you where they rank. And it’s a – it’s a grade, like the Richter scale, from zero to 10 – and also a standard, like, this – the human development index, for example, is such an indicator. There’s also a democracy indicator that also ranks countries. And it’s curious that, if you compare the two, you find quite close correlation, not surprisingly – except for, like, few countries.

And the worst – the largest gap that exists between the two are those that belong to Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Venezuela and Iran. These are not the worst countries – I mean, there are some in Africa that are worse – but the largest gap – these countries should not have been here. And I’m talking about 2010 indices. So this is inevitable; it’s going to continue and succeed.

Third point, the change is a good thing. And it’s good for some obvious reasons, like freedom is better than dictatorship, and good governance is better than bad governance,
and human dignity is better than oppression. That’s obvious. And that’s good in its own right. But also, democracy means that the collective mind of society is making the choice, is correcting choices when they err. They choose who’s going to make the changes, correct, come to authority. This, by definition, brings about better policies.

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Occasionally you find dictators doing the right thing. I mean, this has happened all over history, right? I mean, dictators are not necessarily always choosing the wrong thing. But you cannot rely on singular minds to make choices. This doesn’t work consistently. System has to rely on the collective wisdom of people and the choices of people. So it’s a good thing.

And it means also a good thing materially. Good policies improve the standard of living. This is not just a — you know, a fiction. This is — and I’m an economist, and as — I know that most of these countries have performed way lower than they are able to. And this includes practically all of them. This includes Lebanon, of course — although Lebanon is — you know, there are many, many, many issues that I will not get into in detail.

But certainly, look at the per capita income in the Arab countries, for example, non-GCC countries: It’s about $3,500 a year. Pitiful. This is about one-third the standard of living in countries like Turkey or Brazil or — and there’s no reason why countries like Syria or others around the Mediterranean, Arab countries, should stay at this level. Better policies means better economic performance, better standard of living.

Point number four: Where does that put the Cedar Revolution, March 14, then and now? Actually, when you look at things this way, really it’s one and the same. I mean, March 14 — true, in the beginning, the event was about getting the Syrian administration, the Syrian army, out of Lebanon; regaining independence and decisions and so forth. But also, people — and I — you know, many of you have witnessed that — I’ve witnessed it — people were really after these very principles and values of having good government reflecting people’s desires and wishes and well-being, and a system that works.

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Lebanon had gone through 15 years of internal warfare, and then 15 more years of another regime across the border basically taking grip of the country and deciding for the Lebanese people. So seven years ago, people basically said, no, we want an end to this, and we want normal government. So in a way, what is happening in Arabia now, and what was happening in Lebanon then and continues today, is a quest for being normal. There’s no platform; it’s not like a revolution to bring a strange ideology, or it’s not a nationalistic thing, or — no. It’s about having normal governance and a normal state.

Of course, we may come from different angles. I mean, Lebanon starts with a weak state, for reasons I will not get into in detail, but most of you are aware of that. We want to build up the state to becoming normal. And some other countries, you have states that are too strong, authoritarian, deciding for you. And people want to bring the state back to size and to take things into their own hands as a – as a society.
Is Lebanon on the margin of what is happening now? Well, it’s difficult to think, frankly, of Lebanon being at the margin of anything in the Middle East. We’re always either the center or maybe eye of the storm – we don’t feel it – or, in any event –

MR. MUASHER: (Inaudible) –

MR. CHATAH: Huh?

MR. MUASHER: (Inaudible) – (laughter.)

MR. CHATAH: Yes; or feeling the echoes of pressures from the outside. I think everyone who is familiar with Lebanon would agree that Lebanon is like these plates, fault lines and – that anything that pushes on them, they start, you know, a disturbance. Yes, we’re vulnerable. However, Lebanon is vulnerable for the same reasons that make Lebanon a very special place that is able to be – and to contribute great things. I mean, it’s a small country, but it’s capable of contributing to human civilizations, to Arab civilization, to the good things that we all like to see.

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These same characteristics also make it fragile. And frankly, that fragility has been used, abused, exploited, by many parties. And I can name all of those who did that, of course, in the last 20, 30 years. A lot of that came from across the border – not that they were the only ones messing around Lebanon, but they had actual presence. And they ran the country. And they used the Lebanese theater for purposes that the Lebanese people had no say in deciding. Not that every Lebanese was in disagreement with some of these causes, but it’s one thing to have some sympathy with such a cause; it’s another to be forced, as a country, to be in the front line or as a theater or to be part of an alliance that they’re not asked to vote on or to accept.

Now of course, as I said, this is a quest for democracy. And I believe it’s going to succeed. Of course, some people will tell you, it’s not light at the end of the tunnel; it’s a train rushing at you. Now I don’t believe that; I don’t believe that, although I recognize the transition is big question mark – how long, how difficult, so forth. But beyond that, it’s a quest for democracy, but it has important implications for political Islam. I mean, that’s another rubric that people talk about all the time.

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And every time you say Islam or Islamist or Islamic parties, this raises all kinds of images and phobias and issues. I for one believe that there’s nothing special about Islam when it comes to this transformation of human society into a more universal set of values that we have all – not only accept, but know that they work better. It’s not a coincidence that countries graduate and reach these universal values of governance and stay there; they don’t go back. There’s nothing special about Islam.
There was a time where Catholics were considered to be different. They would not accept democracy, or – I’m sure there are many such examples that one can point to, where people thought: Well, this democracy applies to maybe Europeans or maybe even Protestant Europeans or white people. No, and this has become universal, and therefore Islam is not special.

But what is happening, I believe, is fundamental. It’s very important. It’s historic in the battle of Islam to define itself, and specifically political Islam. For decades, if not more, Muslim societies had been strangled – choked by dictators, by oppression, indignity. And what happens when people are choked? They start kicking and screaming. And when you kick and scream, often you hurt yourself; often you hurt the wrong people; but you give the impression that that’s the only thing you are capable of.

I really believe – without sounding too optimistic, because I know there are many bumps along the way – that our Muslim societies will undergo the same – not identical, but the same path towards normalcy, and join everyone else in these basic values that I mentioned earlier. When Islam or Muslim societies are allowed to breathe normally, they tend to be normal. Again, and “normal” is something that we – I mean, I’m – happen to be a Muslim Arab. I know what it means to be a normal Arab and Muslim Arab without kicking and screaming or doing what some of the extreme versions or the venting of this pressure that I – that I talk about.

Of course, there are other implications. So beyond democracy and the battle for Islam, there is a geopolitical issue that is of interest to most everyone in the world today – certainly to people in this country, certainly to people in our region. And Lebanon is at the center of that. And I’m talking about the fault line between Iran and its allies on the one hand, and all its adversaries on the other. And the list is a long one. Some on the other side are enemies; some are adversaries; some in the region, some outside the region.

We of course happen to be not a bystander or a country that observes what’s happening. We are a major theater of this confrontation that’s taking place. And as I said before, some people have certain sympathy towards Iran. I understand that. I mean, Iran has championed causes – some of us would say, have hijacked causes – they like the cause but not the substance of the cause. You know, Palestinian cause is a handy thing to exploit. But often you get the sense that it’s interest more in the cause than in Palestine.

But anyway, I don’t want to go too far in accusing, you know, sides of intentions. The point is, regardless of how just or how worthy their agenda is, Lebanon has never been asked, as a country, whether they want to be in a military alliance which not only – in our view anyway – puts the country in danger – that’s our viewpoint. We say it every day. I know many Lebanese do not agree with this, because on the face of it, that presence of Hezbollah has, in the past, done wonderful things in standing up to the Israelis. In the eyes of many, if not most, Lebanese, Israel is the real enemy. So anyone who stands up to Israel must, you know, must be doing something good. So there is some of that.
On the other hand, we’ve seen, over the years, Hezbollah’s presence persisting regardless of whether Israel is occupying Lebanon. They stayed after 2000 as a separate military power. They stayed after 2005 when the Syrians left. Between 2005 and the war of 2006, there’s over a year where the Lebanese army could not go to the south. After the 2006 war which, as I said, pitted Hezbollah against a powerful Israeli military machine and Hezbollah’s young fighters did a great job in standing up to Israel – and that, of course, is something that many Lebanese appreciated.

At the same time, the end of the war – end of 2006 war – at the end, we had an international force of sizeable proportion going to the south, separating Hezbollah from the border. Lebanese army went to the south, so we had 15,000 each – Lebanese army forces and uniformed forces. It’s 30,000 troops in a very small area. Hezbollah was north of the Litani. Nevertheless, Hezbollah not only stayed as a separate military power, but they used the end of the war – the way it ended – they – their ability to stand up to the Israelis and what they described as a victory, they used that to basically push or change the balance of political power in Lebanon and gradually move from being a minority to being a minority with a veto say in government to actually being the only government and having a government in which they have a majority.

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We, of course, find this unacceptable. And fundamentally, we do not accept that a separate military organization, powerful as it may be – irrespective of how well they stood up to Israel – to be separate from Lebanese authority, to be independent of the will of the Lebanese people, and an alliance with Iran – of course, with Syria – and that is a fundamental problem that we have with – now, we have not succeeded in changing the state of the affairs in the last seven years.

People recognize that our ambition of 2005 to have a normal country, meaning a normal government that has authority throughout the country, also allowing us to reform the system – and Lebanon does need a lot of reform. But you can’t even begin to talk about reforming the system when that basic sort of landscape is so distorted and so problematic, leading to what many of you witnessed over the last seven years – that is, moving from one crisis to another, from one problem to another, and not achieving the kind of normalcy that defines basically what we need.

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Now, one point on, I guess, mostly Syria, but this applies to others as well. You know, dictatorships always search for legitimacy. I mean, that – we’ve seen that in many cases. And the legitimacy of the Syrian regime has moved from the initial slogans of “waada, hurriya, ishtirakiya,” you know, unity, socialism, and freedom. After a while, I must say that this waned. I mean, this became difficult to sell, because instead of unity, you had the most disunited party in the history of the Arab world, the Baath Party. Instead of socialism, you had few amassing fortunes and the country getting poorer and poorer, so that
became so poor relative to war-torn Lebanon that you had these hoards of Syrian workers seeking very lowly jobs in Lebanon. And freedom, I mean, that’s difficult to sell.

So they moved from that to anti-Western rhetoric. But that also became difficult over time. They became the – what is the name? (Word inaudible) – is resistance. Whatever that means – resistance. And you know, as far as I know, the Syrian government had been trying to have peace with Israel. It’s Israel that’s resisting. (Chuckles.) So it’s not like they were saying no to peace. But anyway, they moved to that.

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And now – and this is the point I’m trying to make – now we have something else. We have an attempted legitimacy coming from their fight against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Now that’s a convenient source of legitimacy, because you get many people around you if you do that. You have the minorities – of course, the many minorities in the region, the Alawite minority, but you have also the Christian minority. This applies to the Christians of Syria, to the Christians of Lebanon. And frankly, you know, this has gained some ground because some people looked around them, and they were scared. They felt more comfortable with the warmth of the prison walls, as long as they’re protected. I mean, we all saw the – most of us – “The Shawshank Redemption”, right? (Inaudible) – you tend to accept that and think that the choices, really, between maybe Taliban on one side and the Assad regime and Khamenei on the other – I think if that’s the choice, I’d rather have Khamenei, frankly. But that’s a misleading choice. That’s not what we’re talking about – unless you really believe that there’s some chromosomal exception in the Islamic world that they would never be normal; they either go Taliban way or the way of dictators.

That’s something we struggle with, frankly, because it has great implications for Lebanon. The politics of Lebanon have been distorted over the last seven years, allowing the other side to gain a respectable portion of Christian public opinion. And that’s a problem. We’re trying to do something about it. Of course, it’s not only us. There are others who are involved with – outside Lebanon. And frankly, we like few things ever happening and that are pointing to Islam actually moving in the right direction, not going the extremist way. And Al-Azhar of Egypt, the foremost authority, has issued three declarations of historic – of historic significance – and I encourage you to look at those, I’m sure you’ll find them on the Internet – about freedoms, about political freedoms, individual freedoms, the arts. So there is something to be done here. And we’re trying in our little spot to do as much as we can.

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I’ll finish with one thought. The road ahead is difficult for many reasons. The transition is very difficult as it is. And in Lebanon, we’re trying to protect ourselves from being brought into this in a bad way. But beyond Lebanon, beyond the transition, we ask ourselves what is – what are the real dangers that lie ahead. Even if we have – even if we succeed and we have a move towards democracy, what is it that we should worry about it? Is there something that we should worry about? And then my answer is yes.
There are many things we need to worry about. But the two foremost weaknesses that we need to address – and I believe they need to be addressed in terms of being thought out and explored now – are, first, the economics of democracy. And I’m an economist, and I know that – and at times like these, expectations can be a killer. People expect results from the political change, and they want it fast. Now, of course, we can always say: But these things don’t happen fast. And we have to accept the fact that we have to wait. That’s not good enough. Maybe academically it makes sense, but something needs to be done to address this.

And I believe, in the Arab world – more than any other part of the world – this is possible. And it’s possible because the non-GCC Arabs have around them a group of countries called the GCC, who have such wealth and financial capability that if somehow brought into the picture in an effective way – I’m not talking about dishing money out – but the potential for a new paradigm, economic paradigm, a partnership that makes sense that will lift Arab economies in a way that is credible for constituencies, for people who vote, that can be done, but needs to be approached seriously as a – as a – as a – as a strategic objective with a lot of thinking out of the box.

The second thing is, what I haven’t talked about, is Palestine. I mean, it’s so – it’s so wrong to think, as some seem to do, that because the Arabs now are focused on their own societies, want to improve governments, want to have democracy that Palestine doesn’t really matter anymore; we can put this aside, and have the Arab-Israeli conflict continue forever and somehow move to a democracy in Syria and a democracy in other places, and we will all be happy without having to worry about this thing that’s so difficult to approach, that has burnt so many fingers. And besides, we have an election year now. Please, don’t bring Palestine. We’re happy that no one is raising the Palestinian flag – the flags in the street of Cairo or Damascus. That is not only wrong, that’s dangerous.

I truly believe that we’re going through such a historical transformation that the stakeholders need to think of this in those terms. It’s historic, requiring a new paradigm – political and economic. When after World War II, the U.S. had leaders who started a new – a new approach. I mean, you had institutions that were created – the World Bank, Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, NATO. And you need to think of this – at least, in our region – as a new – a new paradigm, requiring new thinking – and a comprehensive one. It’s not a piecemeal thing – OK, all we need to do is have democracy in Syria. I think a free Syria, in which people vote, is less likely – not more likely – is less likely to accept the status quo without the Golan or accept the status quo without a solution to Palestine.

It’s much more difficult to appease democracies than dictators. Dictatorships you did with one person or few people. In democracies you have to deal with political parties that go for votes, so you have to worry about public opinion. And these two Achilles’ heels, in a way, is something, frankly, that worries me, because I don’t sense the kind of strategic thinking that is required in these strategic and historic times. Thank you.
MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Hamad. (Applause.) Thank you for this really very important and broad overview of the region in general and of events in Lebanon as well.

I want to bring you back, if I may, to Lebanon and talk about two issues. One is what is happening in your neighborhood with Syria. I think that most people – most countries as well as analysts would agree that the Syrian regime is over, and that it is a matter of time before a transition is made to a new regime. If – I’d like you if you can to comment on what implications will that have on Lebanon – what in general and on Hezbollah in particular – the emergence of any new regime in Syria that would replace the Assad regime. That’s the first point I hope you can address.

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The second point has to do with political Islam that you mentioned. As you said, Lebanon tends to do things differently than in the Arab world. And political Islam in Lebanon is not different than that. Political Islam in Lebanon is characterized by certain characteristics that are different from other Arab countries. First, the major political Islamist force in Lebanon is Shiite, so it does not belong to the sort of Sunni majority in the Arab world. And it’s also armed, which is also sort of an anomaly that is not matched in the rest of the Arab world, except by Hamas; and is a force that is backed, as you said, by part of the Christian community, ironically, in the country. While the Sunni forces in Lebanon, unlike the rest of the Arab world, the Muslim Brotherhood does not play a big role in Lebanese politics. The Sunni leaders are mostly secular, including, you know, Prime Minister Hariri. And so how do you see the development of Lebanon in any sort of transition to democracy in the presence of a political Islam that, on one hand, is armed, but on the other hand, you know, a part of it is also secular and one that reaches out to other political forces in the country?

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MR. CHATAH: OK. In the way, the two questions somehow connect with each other on a certain level. Let me – let me start with political Islam in Lebanon. I think you put your finger on some – a fact that I think is significant. If you look at Muslim society in Lebanon – specifically let’s talk about the Sunni Muslim society of Lebanon because, as you said, most of the Arab world is Sunni – I think it tells you something about the likely course of Muslim societies elsewhere in the region when they’re allowed to express themselves normally.

I think no two societies in the Arab world are so similar as are the Syrian Muslims and the Lebanese Muslims. Remember, we were under the same sort of umbrella for hundreds of years. Proximity also makes sometimes the distinction so small that one has to wait for a certain vowel to be pronounced different to realize that the person is Syrian and not Lebanese. The Lebanese Muslims have expressed their views in many ways, not only in surveys and studies, but more importantly in the ballot box.

We’ve had elections every four years, including 2009, 2005, 2000. And Muslim parties ran for elections and the most they could win was like two out of, what is it, 32 –
sorry – about 30 Sunni deputies and 64 total Muslim deputies. So we’re talking – and the numbers, aside from how many seats they won, if you look at the numbers, how many people voted for Islamic parties – 5 percent, 10 percent, 15 percent? They never reached 15 percent. They could have. This tells you something about the type of Muslim society that is normal in Lebanon, which, I believe, is also the type of thing that will emerge in Syria as the – as democracy takes root, as people move from the initial inertia motivated presence of Islamic parties. After all, for many decades, the only group that could meet and talk were people who went to the mosque every Friday or every day. With democracy, it’s different. We’ll have a normal transition. So that’s one side of the – of the story.

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Of course, in Lebanon, the Sunni Muslims are only maybe 30 percent of the population, Shi'ite are about 30 percent with some minority Muslim groups, and a – maybe 35 percent Christian. That’s the makeup. So we’re all groups and we have to, you know, make the system that we have work. And I must say that the system in Lebanon, the political system, has failed to work in ways that serves people and also in ways that can withstand pressures when they happen from the outside. And we’ve always had pressures from the outside. And every time we receive such a pressure, we tend to either crumble or we have a crisis.

So there is an agenda of political reform that is needed. And frankly, it’s doable and urgent in a way. But can one approach this while there is a segment of the population with an army? And it happens to be – I mean, it’s not – I’m not talking about all the Shia community, but it happens to be mostly, if not totally Shia. So that creates a lot of difficulty, and people sitting around, serious people, and saying, well, we have distortions of the system that create a problem aside from any sort of regional issues.

But people, frankly, are not even sitting down to discuss these things. That’s a problem. That’s an added reason why we want Hezbollah to rethink the cost that we are all incurring in Lebanon – not in terms of dangers from outside, but the danger to the system from within that their exceptional presence brings.

Now, what happens when – and I’m not saying if, as you’ve said – I’m saying when the Syrian regime changes? Now, I don’t know how it will change, but let’s assume – or when I say how, I mean the path towards that – no one can really tell you exactly what’s going to happen. But what happens to Lebanon after that?

[41:15]

I, for one – unfortunately, I don’t expect the Hezbollah situation to change right away. It’s not like they’re going to turn around and say, well, now that this alliance is broken in the middle, we’re going to accept becoming part of the system and turning over our military assets to the army, and we’ll be a political party like everyone else. I hope that that will happen. I don’t, frankly, see it happening. What is the chance of this happening, or what can be done to, basically, bring them into the fold? Frankly, this takes me back to other issues I raised before.
I mean, the Christian allies of Hezbollah are being scared by regimes and by mouthpieces of the regime, and we need to work on this. We need to have the Christians of the Middle East – especially the Christians of Lebanon, in this case – to realize that it’s not a choice of being protected by one tyrant or being under the wing of another sort of theocracy. No, there is a better way, and we’re all allies in this.

I mean, the first victims to a theocracy, to a Taliban-like government, are not Christians. I mean, Christians would probably be tolerated going to church and having their own schools, because they’re not a threat. But ordinary Muslims would be the first to suffer as a result of that. So this is one angle.

[42:43]

The other angle – yes, it’s Palestine. I mean, Iran has entered the hearts and minds of many Arabs and Muslims because they were championing a popular and just cause. Now, some people think that that will not work anymore. Maybe, maybe not to the same extent – but it’s still something that is up there and can be raised again. The temperature can be raised again, and it will not take much for people’s hearts and minds to focus on Gaza, or Jerusalem, or settlements, and sort of forget the battle for democracy which will – which they will, by that time, have fought and won.

So yes, there is something to be done. And frankly, this is something that we try to tell people who listen – that if you ask us about Hezbollah, yeah, we may disagree with you – no, we may have different reasons why we disagree with Hezbollah, but in any event, we want Hezbollah to come to the fold and be under the umbrella of the joint government, the institutions, and so forth. But if there’s something that will help that happen, it is Palestine. And it is working all together to refute that false Christian phobia that’s being fueled on purpose.

MR. MUASHER: I’ll ask one more question, and then I’ll stop and turn it over to the audience. Suppose the Palestinian question somehow is resolved in a few years. I know, I know – it’s a big, big if. And I, myself, am not hopeful about it. But suppose it is, and suppose that the Syrian regime is changed and the support that Hezbollah gets is no longer there. Do you think that Lebanon then would need a new Taif Agreement?

[45:08]

MR. CHATAH: My personal view is that the political system in Lebanon needs serious reform. Now, not everyone from our side of the political, sort of, divide would say that. I believe that the system needs to change in certain substantive ways which I will not get into today. Taif, of course, ended the war, established certain principles, and I think the principles should stay.

There is a basic principle of equality between Lebanese Muslims and Lebanese Christians. And that equality should transcend, according to Taif, the numbers – because frankly, Christians today are a minority – a sizeable minority, but they are a minority. On the other hand, Lebanon has been founded on the equality between its two wings.
Now, what kind of system would respond to individual Lebanese as equal individuals, at the same time making the two communities equal? The mathematics doesn’t really work. That’s why one needs to go beyond the existing structure and try to address these two dimensions of the Lebanese national contract in two different instruments, and not one that we have today – which is a representation and a political quota in parliament that serves neither purpose.

[46:50]

That is something that I strongly believe in, and some of us are involved in thinking about this – not necessarily in the media, because frankly, in the media you can’t do that given the many touchy issues. And also, you can’t sit around a table with the president in some kind of a dialogue format and do this, given our other existential differences that still make it difficult to discuss this in a sane way. But you’re absolutely right on this. You’ve touched on an issue that I think is extremely important.

MR. MUASHER: OK, let’s open it up. I’ll take maybe three or four questions at a time and then allow Ambassador Chatah to respond. Please?

Q: (Off mic, inaudible.)

MR. MUASHER: If you can please state who you are and limit it to a question, please.

Q: (Off mic, inaudible.)

MR. MUASHER: No, no – sorry, sorry. Let’s allow the lady a chance, and then we’ll get to you, sir.

Q: Jinaba Rashid (sp), Center for International Private Enterprise. I wanted to ask you – and building on Mr. Muasher’s point – meaning that the questions have this one big fear, which is Sunni extremism, basically. And we see what happened in Egypt to the Copts, and we know what the biggest fear of the Christians in Syria is right now.

But what puzzles me is that the Christians of Lebanon have really – what, really, do they have to fear? I mean, Sunnis in Lebanon are mostly businessmen. I mean, it’s like – we don’t have a Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon. I know we have extremist groups in the north, maybe, but they amount to nothing compared to the extremist Shia that we have. So I really would like you, maybe, if you can elaborate, how do you understand this Christian support to Hezbollah?

[48:44]

MR. MUASHER: OK, sir, in the back?

Q: Hi, I’m Scott Bollinger (sp) from (Temonics ?). And I would like to ask a follow-up on these comments about the Taif system. And I wanted to ask if Mr. Chatah sees the popular movement against – or about reforming the Taif system as going anywhere.
MR. MUASHER: Can you speak up, please? Or maybe if you can – yes.

Q: Yeah.

MR. MUASHER: Closer to the microphone.

Q: I wanted to ask Mr. Chatah if he sees the movement about reforming Taif as going anywhere. I see quite a bit of chatter about this on social media. And I also wanted to ask, if the movement doesn’t – if it does go anywhere, what shape would it take if it gets social traction?

[49:25]

MR. MUASHER: Sir, your question? Alex?

Q: This relates to that. I’d be curious – any opinion polls – I mean, the idea of supporting a government – in other words, in my experience in Lebanon, people celebrate not paying taxes. And so the whole idea of actually believing in government, and also reforms – I mean, you’ve got, you know, monopolies and so forth because various factions get their cut. How do you change that if you cannot change the confessional system?

MR. MUASHER: OK, let’s take these –

Q: Can I add a question, since I had my hand raised from the beginning, which relates to that?

MR. MUASHER: Sure.

Q: OK. Talking about reform, there seems to be a psychological thing going on here in terms of making that shift. If we go back to the confessional system, parliamentary system that we have in Lebanon, with the quotas you mentioned, wouldn’t that be a way of breaking up this – the fears that Christians have of – which dates back to the French Mandate, obviously, and being told that, you know, we’re there – you know, your mother country – to protect you and all this.

So isn’t that kind of, almost a historical revolution we need to do in Lebanon, to change the whole mindset or paradigm, as you mentioned it, to make that reform that you talk about, which I do agree is so necessary?

MR. MUASHER: OK, let’s – let’s –

[51:13]

MR. CHATAH: Well, the first question was about Christian fears, which is puzzling to the lady there. I agree, in some ways it is, because it’s – first of all, it’s a historical shift of the Christians of Lebanon. In many ways, Lebanon was formed as a homeland – I don’t like to use these terms, but had there been no Christian, at that time, majority in that part of
smaller Lebanon, and certainly the concentration of Christians, Lebanon would not have been created as a separate country.

And Lebanon became associated with that – and maybe, at the beginning, associated with it too much, creating a sense of first-class citizen and second-class citizen in the first couple of decades after independence. But we’re way beyond that. Now the shift has turned the other way. But more to the point, how can one explain it?

[52:16]

Well, I think there’s a lot of propaganda, frankly. And that propaganda, in the last five, six years, has been purposeful – has been intended to create that belief. Before 2005, or even into the first half of 2005, a large majority of Christians felt differently.

After one political faction with a strong leader that dates back to the war, Michel Aoun, could not dominate and lead the Christian community, and saw himself, in a way, ousted from that initial government, he decided, apparently, that the only way to get authority – to have dominion, to really go up – would be to side with Hezbollah, and by extension, with the Syrian regime and with Iran. And that created a strange dynamic. I mean, it went from a narrow, political, convenient alliance to something close to becoming ideological. It’s strange.

But I think underlying that is a kind of principle, or a conviction, that the Christians of Lebanon can either be under the wing of this side or that side. The old agenda of Christians being – sort of, being Lebanon, being part of this country that has, you know, history and pride, and they’re equal partners and so forth – I think underlying the shift has been the sense that, you know, maybe it’s hopeless. Maybe we’ll either be under one or the other.

[54:14]

Now, of course, being under the other – meaning Hezbollah and their allies – one, you know, you’re in the wings of a strong party in Lebanon. I mean, we’re talking about somebody with, you know, means. And second, the Sunni Muslims of March 14 had close relations with Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia happened to be a Sunni country. So it all fell together. So you make Saad Hariri into a – strangely enough, into a fundamentalist Muslim who’s secretly, you know, bringing Wahhabism and Salafis into Lebanon.

And, you know, in politics sometimes you instill these strange ideas which are so counter-logical, and they contradict everything that one sees about Future Movement, or about Hariri, but it does work with some people. This is one major reason, and that is what we’re trying to fight, frankly – both in refuting that and also pointing to the fact that no, it’s not the choice of this or that. We have a different kind of country in mind and we can be together in this. But it’s been a difficult battle to fight, frankly.

The – I have to confess, the second question I didn’t hear fully – the social media question. I didn’t hear it. Maybe we’ll come to it later. The gentleman there I just couldn’t hear. Maybe it’s old age.
But now – believing in government, I mean, Lebanese are individualistic people and they like – I mean, they are libertarian, in a way, but not in a good way, I mean. (Laughter.) You know, it’s like – but the problem, of course, is compounded by the fact that you have communities, religious communities, that sort of take away the – sort of the governance umbrella, sort of the protection of individuals and sects. And that’s a problem. That’s precisely why one needs reform.

Of course, we can always say that we need to educate people and we need to make people think of themselves as Lebanese. I mean, all of this is nice, and there’s a place for that in the educational system and media, and so forth. But I really think the system itself creates the moral hazard of perpetuating this. So yes, you need a change in the system to make it sensible for people to approach their interests in a different way – to find their interests in a different way. And that requires, yes, a change in the constitution.

Now, as I said before, we are communities, but we are also individuals. To me, it makes sense and it’s needed to allay the legitimate fears of minorities. And we are all minorities in Lebanon. Now, how do you allay the fears? Well, you put it in black and white and you create a body that filters any threat to communities, where communities are equal regardless of numbers.

You can say this is a federal system. No, it is not a federal system, but there is a need for a body like a senate, in which communities are represented as communities – where communities vote for their own to represent them as Christians or Muslims or Maronite or whatever. And no change in the basic national contract can occur without each of these groups saying yes.

That’s a legitimate need that needs to be met. But to try to meet it through parliament, which has a convoluted election regime – that really gives you neither. It doesn’t treat people equally; neither does it provide that protection. That’s the kind of constitutional reform that is needed. And my own take on this is that the first order of business today in Lebanon is to sit down and agree on the establishment of a senate of this type.

That’s before talking about election law, before trying to square the circle of having a parliament that represents communities, yet equality between individuals. That is needed, and frankly, we are pushing for that. This – you may not find this high on the agenda of everyone. Many people are focused on the election law. And, you know, parties think of elections and how many seats – but that is needed.

And that will begin to address that dual need of comfort for communities, yet a democracy that works, where people then vote freely in parliament for political parties that have legitimacy and a platform and are accountable. And then you have executive branches that come and be able to govern, instead of like now. It’s ungovernable.
Sorry, just to go back to – I don’t know if this social media question can be repeated, or you understood it, maybe?

MR. MUASHER: I’m not sure I did either. We can go back to the gentleman, maybe, in the second round of questions. Yes, sir?

Q: Sahira Mashed (sp). It’s good to have you back in Washington, Hamad.

MR. CHATAH: Thank you.

Q: It that was a very good talk. My question really goes to the heart of politics in Lebanon. And I’m sorry to be so narrow-minded, but since you’re here I’m going to ask you that. You know, in 2005, the Cedar Revolutions happened, and the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon. And nobody – many, many people, including myself, would have never believed that the Syrian army would get out of Lebanon. So it was a big revolution in my opinion.

[01:00:30]

But I think March 14 – and you’re in the center of March 14, and I’m a big supporter of March 14 – but in my opinion, March 14 has done many mistakes. And I’m going to name them for you, and I’m going to see what is your reaction, whether –

MR. MUASHER: Is it a long list? (Laughter.)

Q: -- whether the March 14 leaders consider them as mistakes. In 2005, with all this that has happened, driving the Syrian army out, March 14 has made alliances with people who don’t think like (of themselves ?). In 2009, there was a clear elections – very clear issues in the elections. This is a – we’re with the arms of Hezbollah, we’re against the arms of Hezbollah – was very, very clear. And yet, again, March 14 agreed for the last six years, expect for the past year, to enter into coalition government – (governments ?) with the other forces in the country which has really hijacked, in my opinion, what they could have done during these last six years.

[01:01:34]

So do you consider these mistakes? If not, please explain. And if you don’t consider them mistakes, why not? (Laughter.)

MR. MUASHER: OK. (Inaudible.)

Yes, please. (Inaudible.) The gentleman over there.

Q: Hi. I’m Jesse Simmons (sp). I’m a student. You mentioned earlier about the Arab world needing to take collective action on the issue of Palestine. How do you see this happening? What is the most productive way the Arab world could act together to take action on Palestine? And how might the changes in government in Syria, if they come, and Lebanon affect this process?
MR. MUASHER: (Inaudible) – here.

Q: (Name inaudible) – FHI (ph). Thank you, Hamad, for a very strategic presentation – a new framework of transformation for Lebanon and the Arab world. My question: I think for your strategic framework to happen there are some conditions – also strategic conditions. You mentioned them. One of them is an understanding of Islam as normal.

And I think many of the questions about the fears of the Christians – be it the Christians of Lebanon or Syria or anywhere – are based on the fact that there isn’t a full understanding that Islam is normal. And there is a hijacking of Islam by the Islamists. Can you try to elaborate a little bit more and give us one or two proofs – indices, indicators of the normalcy of Islam, so you can appease the minorities? Thank you.

[01:03:22]

MR. MUASHER: There’s a lady – yes, in the back there, and then – and then we’ll take the next group of questions.

Q: I’m Sara Selman (sp). I’m a UNDP consultant and I’m currently a Ph.D. student. And I beg to differ that Lebanon is currently at the storm of the eye of the Arab Spring. I think we’ve very, very marginalized. And I would like to know how you could defend that, because basically the Arab Spring are people uniting against dictator and against a corrupt political elite, while in Lebanon people are basically supporting their elites because they’re sectarian leaders, and that those leaders have persisted over the past 20 years or more, for a lot of them. And there is no sign that those leaders are going to change any time soon.

And even if we want to assume – because you said political – you kept repeating: political reform is needed. But how will you bring about political reform, even if you assume that we found a good solution for Hezbollah’s arms – or a peaceful solution for Hezbollah’s arms – how will this – how will the Lebanese people be able to regenerate a new political elite that will bring this political reform that you are talking about? That’s my question. Thank you.

MR. MUASHER: Another set of provocative questions. (Laughter.)

MR. CHATAH: Yeah. Now, how are the Arabs going to somehow approach the Palestine issue? Well, I’ll say two things. First, clearly, the regimes in the Arab world, especially in the Arab world that matters more – who talked a lot about Palestine – did not serve Palestine well. And I mean, for 20 countries, 350 million people with so many resources, not to be able to reach a sensible resolution of this is a sign not only of intransigence and – but it’s a sign of real weakness. And I’m not talking about weakness in the – in the battlefield.

Generally, the Arab countries have failed Palestine precisely because they were dictators. They lacked both the legitimacy and the real strength from being democracies. I mean, look at Turkey. You may disagree with Turkey on many things, but Turkey today is
very relevant. It’s much more important as a player than it was, say, 25 years ago. Sure, they
had a NATO force and – but they lacked the legitimacy of Turkey of today.

[01:06:04]

And the same can be said about dictatorships that talked about Palestine but really
did not serve Palestine well. Democracy in the Arab world, aside from Lebanon itself, will
strengthen the Arab world – will put the Arab world in a better position to achieve their
goals – their legitimate goals. So that’s first thing I would say. And cooperation between
democracies is more likely to be effective and take place than those who raise the banners of
unity and do the opposite. We look at Europe 80 years ago, they were killing each other –
only when Democracy emerged in Europe that they created the Europe that we saw after
World War II. The Arab world has been very disunited, very weak, precisely because of the
things that people now are changing.

Now – but it’s not – it’s not only the Arab world, though. Palestine now, to me, is a
global issue – global on moral grounds, I would say global even on strategic grounds. If I
were sitting here in this town and thinking of the threats to the United States, you know,
Palestine cannot be off the table, because it is something that goes to the heart of those
threats – whether they’re terrorism or, you know, violent fundamentalism or, indeed, an Iran
that many here consider to be a threatening (world ?) power.

Un fortunately, many are not focused on Palestine. And that is distressing. And I
think it’s dangerous. Not that you can now sort of bring Palestine and find a solution, but
some thinking is needed in cooperation with the Arab world – in cooperation with the EU
and with Turkey, to really draw up something that makes sense so that we’re not taken by
the victory of democracy and find then the direction going in the – you know, in the wrong
way.

Now, understanding Islam, obviously that is something that’s important. And I
think many people are now either Googling Islam or going to Wikipedia and some are
getting information elsewhere. It’s important. I happen to believe that all religions can be
taken in practically any direction you want. This has happened before.

I mean, we had crusaders who, in the name of religion, did horrible things. The
Western-bound immigrants and – who took over Central American and other places – I
mean, look at South Africa, there’s always religion justifying the most horrendous things. Of
course, you can take that same religion and take it in another direction.

[01:09:08]

I think Islam is the same. And, frankly, in the case of Islam, even though it has
many, many sort of direct references and commandments and injunctions, yet there are
many things that can be focused on – emphasized more than others, therefore steering
political Islam in a direction. Islam talks about consultative government. I mean, you can
take that reference alone and say: Islam is based on democratic rule. Other religions don’t
talk about this. So if people want Islam to be democratic, they can. If they want Islam to be
otherwise, they also can.
Reform in Lebanon and the elite – you know, I – frankly, I never accepted the idea of elite. I mean, some people talk about the political class. Somehow, if you can get rid of these few dozen or few hundred people on top, then everything will be fine. I think the structure of the Lebanese system creates such moral hazard that needs to be corrected.

[01:10:31]

Yes, we need serious changes – serious reforms, as I said before. Are we now in a position to do this and to put everything on the table and draw up these changes? Unfortunately not – unfortunately not. And we're losing time, to tell you the truth. We do need to change that. The election law and the presence of a senate and removing sectarian quota from parliament, in my mind anyway – others may have better reforms – at least you begin to have a framework that makes sense, that gives people the incentive to do the right thing.

People always pursue their interests. I mean, I – you know, I never rely, as an economist, on the goodwill of people to do the right thing. You – no, I mean, seriously, one should rely on more powerful instincts, which are fear, which are self-interest, which are greed – but you make these work for you – “you” meaning everyone. That’s how the market system operates. That’s how democracy operates. Sure, there’s always room for education here and goodwill there and charity somewhere else. But these are not the things that create a system. A system should be such that self-interest also serves general interest. That’s a basic premise that applies everywhere. It applies in Lebanon too.

[01:12:04]

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. CHATAH: Oh, I’m sorry.

MR. MUASHER: Aha, didn’t get away – (inaudible, laughter).

MR. CHATAH: That was not intentional. Look, no doubt that we made many more mistakes than the ones you mentioned. First one to admit. But also, we have to remember that March 14 is not a party with, like, a setup that thinks out every step, that has coherence and that produces decisions that are anchored in good analysis. I mean, March 14 was everyone, really, in the spring of 2005 – everyone who was a believer in these basic principles. And there’s no party called March 14.

Now, leaders emerged – many of whom had already been leaders to begin with. They mutated or redefined themselves. And all fought in the battle more than others – battle of independence. But there’s no system or structure that always made sure that we took the right decision, and mistakes were made. I don’t want to draw analogies here, but the Syrian National Council’s often, you know, mentioned as an example where you need more coherence, you need a platform, you need more effectiveness.
I must say though, that notwithstanding these mistakes – and I’m not going to say there were none – what we had facing us was of such monumental proportions, of such coherence and purpose and resources that often we were disadvantaged. Sure, I can retrospect say that in 2005 what was done in terms of the electoral alliances was a mistake. And frankly, some of us were against that then. But, a view prevailed that now that we have removed the Syrian control from Lebanon – now that we can breathe again as a people – Lebanese people, all stripes – we’ll manage our problems. We’ll get together now that we’ve gotten rid of an administration that had lasted 15 years and a military presence that had lasted 30, or somebody said it was unthinkable for it to happen. True. And when the unthinkable happens, everything else becomes secondary.

Now, there were many people who thought in 2005 that, you know, now that we’ve done that, we need to come together, hold hands and move this country forward. If we have disagreements with Hezbollah, we’ll find a way of addressing them. That was the thinking. Now, seven years later, with Hezbollah still entrenched as a separate military power, yes, you can look back and say: No. In the momentum that was created in 2005, we should have addressed that too and come together to say, no, we will not have a separate army. Now we don’t have Syrian intelligence running us, and we have this Lebanese army that’s going to the south.

[01:15:25]

That didn’t happen. Instead it was, like, stretched. It had almost in a sense of victory. It’s like magnanimous – a magnanimous attitude. So I can trace the last seven years and tell you many, many things that happened, including the 2009 elections. But remember – and I will say – think of only this example to illustrate the difficulty – between September of 2006 and May of 2008, the government, which was taking the kind of position that you are alluding to, was besieged in this – (word inaudible) – with thousands of people around it threatening it every day.

I mean, my office was the target of floodlights and music being blared, and sometimes the situation was very threatening. Yet the government stayed – stayed until the spring of 2008. And of course, we know what happened in May 2008 when they resorted to basically violence in the streets that put people in a bad spot of either choosing violence or accepting the kind of joint government that emerged in 2008, which of course didn’t work well – could not have worked well. But under the circumstances, and given that we had no desire – we still have no desire to plunge the country in any kind of conflict – for now, the only thing we can do is resort to talking and trying to convince and make everyone be aware that we would be much better off as a normal country and not as one that’s hijacked either by a domestic military sort of organization or by others abroad who are their allies.

[01:17:34]

MR. MUASHER: Hamad, there are many, many more questions, but I’m afraid we’re out of time. I think you’ve managed to cover a whole range of questions that are important to Lebanon. Thank you so much. (Applause.) Please join me in thanking Ambassador Chatah.
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