

Adib F. Farha's Remarks at M.I.T.
on
The Lebanese-Syrian Relations
February, 22, 2005

**Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is an honor to address you this evening and to participate in the same lecture series that includes such eminent scholars as Dean Philip Khoury and Professor Naom Chomsky. I am indeed grateful to the organizers of this timely and relevant lecture series for bestowing this honor on me and for inviting me to exchange ideas with you from the perspective of someone who witnesses the imperfect relations between two close Arab neighbors firsthand.

To understand the nature and the complexity of Lebanese-Syrian relations, one has to familiarize oneself with the history of the region. Although I realize that you did not come here this evening to hear a history lecture and that Dean Khoury and Professor Chomsky have already addressed this aspect at length, nevertheless it remains important to go over certain relevant facts before we delve into the problems that shroud the said relationship these days. So please bear with me for a few minutes to set the stage for the core subject of these remarks.

There are Syrian-loyalists in Lebanon for whom Syrian presence in Lebanon is acceptable, to one degree or another. There are also those, however, who view Syria's role in Lebanon as nothing short of occupation or, at least, political and economic hegemony.

To Lebanese who are characterized as Syrian-loyalists, even the tight relationship between Lebanon and Syria falls short of their aspirations. Their long term goal is the unity of the Arab world. Their position is vociferously criticized by proponents of Lebanon's "freedom, sovereignty and independence"-- who are commonly referred to as "the opposition". They insist that Syria has long overstayed its welcome and that its continued dominion over all aspects of the public sector, its meddling in the private sector, and its alleged illegal business transactions in and through Lebanon that some estimate to be in the magnitude of US \$ Two Billion must end immediately. The opposition insists that "the combined Syrian-Lebanese business mafia" as well as "the collusion of Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services" must be dismantled without delay.

Arab Nationalism, a notion that was advanced and promoted in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century primarily by Lebanese Christians considers all Arabic-speaking people to be Arabs. That era is sometimes referred to as the "Arab awakening", which coincides with the title of a book by an Arab Christian, George Antonios, who was among the earlier promoters of Arab Nationalism. To them, Arabic-speaking people, who have been segregated throughout history by a succession of colonial powers into what they consider to be artificial

states whose boundaries were drawn as a result of various compromises among various foreign nations, form one nation. The Arab world, they maintain, has several components that determine its distinct identity as a nation. These include language, common history, common interests, common economic interests, and—since the establishment of the State of Israel, a common destiny. However, the fact that most Arabs are Muslims was not considered by the founders of Arab Nationalism to be among those components. In fact, there are those who believe that it was no coincidence that the notion of an Arab Nation was advanced by Christian Arabs. Promoting Arab Nationalism is sometimes thought to have been a way for Arab Christians to insure their integration within their milieu of predominantly Muslim compatriots. Perhaps it was their way of avoiding becoming "outsiders" in a sea of Muslims.

More recently, particularly after Hassan el Banna and Sayyid Kutub advanced the concept of an Islamic Nation, some Arab Nationalists started to confuse the concepts of the Arab Nation and Muslim Nation. Since then, and although the initiators of Arab Nationalists never considered the commonality of faith among most Arabic-speaking people to be a component of the Arab Nationalism, the notions of an Arab Nation and of a Muslim Nation have come to mean one and the same thing to a growing number of "Arabs". Naturally, this caused non-Muslim Arabs considerable anxiety and fear. "If being Arabic meant that one is a Muslim, what does that make of Arabic-speaking Christians", they wondered.

On the other hand, another Arabic-speaking scholar advanced the notion of a Syrian Nation whose boundaries are essentially what has traditionally been referred to as the Levant, meaning Lebanon, Syria, what they refer to as Palestine, what is now called Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and, oddly enough, Cyprus. To the founder of Syrian Nationalism, Antun Saadeh, the Syrian Nation is a distinct nation "bound by a common socio-economic cycle of life". He added, however, that the Syrian Nation should ultimately become united with what he saw as three other distinct Arab nations to form an "Arab Front". Yet, more than seventy years after Saadeh wrote his book, "The Rise of Nations", which summarized his Syrian Nationalism theory, his idea has only found followers in Lebanon, mostly among Lebanese Christians, and-- to a much lesser degree-- in Syria and Jordan. A Christian himself, he too was accused to have promoted Syrian Nationalism to insure that Levantine Christians were well-integrated in "the sea of Muslim neighbors". His ideas were well-received in Lebanon, although until the present post-civil war era, his party only once succeeded in gaining a seat in the Lebanese Parliament. It was also accepted by some Syrians, albeit in a much lesser percentage than in Lebanon.

Some Lebanese characterize themselves as "Arabs from Lebanon" or the "Arabs from Lebanese entity".

There exists, therefore, some Lebanese who characterize themselves as "Syrians from the Lebanese entity", others who consider themselves "Arabs from the Lebanese entity" and others yet who characterize themselves as Lebanese, period. To the latter group, Lebanon is a nation in and of itself. They refer to themselves as Lebanese Nationalists.

The identity crisis played a significant role in the inter-communal conflict from which the Lebanese suffered in the years 1975 to 1989. Most Lebanese Muslims, for example, viewed the loss of Palestinians of their land and their homes in what has now become Israel as a loss of an integral part of a nation to which they belonged. Despite the excesses of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon in the years leading to Lebanon's civil war, Lebanese Muslims were more willing to tolerate these excesses. Of course, the fact that Lebanese Muslims felt that the power-sharing formula gave them less rights than their proportionate right and the fact that the P.L.O. was then a mighty military power on Lebanese soil through which they could increase their share in the system and correct the perceived grievance, contributed to their sympathy with the Palestinian cause. It made many of their leaders apologists for the Palestinian excesses and for the growing Palestinian political and military power in Lebanon, whereas their Christian compatriots believed that the P.L.O. had created in Lebanon "a state within the state".

Ladies and gentlemen,

With this as a background, let us now address the current state of Syrian-Lebanese relations, a very complex and convoluted relationship, to say the least.

During the Lebanese civil war, Syria took different sides at different times. Its intervention was initially allegedly to be aimed at "saving the Christians of Lebanon" who were about to be overwhelmed by the combined Palestinian and Lebanese-Muslim fire power "from an imminent defeat". There are those who believe that the Syrian leadership committed some of its military forces to Lebanon in 1976 because the late Syrian president was keen on maintaining the fragile sectarian balance in Lebanon.

Others yet believe that the late Syrian President Hafez el Assad was motivated by concern that if the rightist Christian alliance was overwhelmed, a radical leftist regime would rise in Lebanon and become a destabilizing force to his dominance in the Levant. There are also other who believe that Hafez el Assad saw the inter-communal fighting as a chance to reach the Syrian dream of re-incorporating Lebanon into Syria. Indeed, there are many in Syria-- and a significant number of Lebanese—who believe that the current state of Lebanon is "an artificial state" created by the former colonial power in the Levant, France and Great Britain at the end of the First World War when they carved-up the Levant in the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Naturally, Lebanese who subscribe to the notion of Arab Nationalism or Syrian Nationalism saw only noble objectives in Syria's role in Lebanon. Until recently, many of them truly believed that Syria would withdraw its forces from Lebanon when the Lebanese authorities ask for its withdrawal. They maintained this belief even after two former Lebanese presidents, Amin Gemayel and Elias Sarkis, officially called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops while they were still in office and yet the withdrawal never took place.

Nevertheless, a growing number of Lebanese who might have been grateful for, or at least tolerant of, Syrian presence in Lebanon had already started to view Syria's intervention in Lebanon and its continued military presence there despite the terms of

the Taif Agreement as "a creeping Anschluss to absorb a country no pan-Syrian or pan-Arab nationalist has ever really accepted as a stand-alone entity", as David Gardner characterized it in an excellent and very well-researched article in The Financial Times on February the 5th. The Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war in 1989, stipulated that Syria would redeploy its army to the Bekaa Valley two years after the Lebanese parliament would have incorporated the reforms stipulated in the said Agreement, after which the Lebanese and Syrian Governments would set-out a time-table for a complete withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon. These reforms were enacted in 1989-- yet Syria's presence in Lebanon continues fourteen years after the scheduled redeployment.

It is noteworthy, however, that the call for a complete Syrian withdrawal has become an increasingly widespread demand in Lebanon. Until recently though, it was only whispered in private settings. However, it is now publicly demanded by many Lebanese political leaders as well as people on the street of various religious faiths.

The funeral procession of the assassinated former prime minister of Lebanon Mr. Rafic Hariri, who is widely believed to have been a victim of a joint plot by the Syrian security apparatus and its Lebanese counterpart, was a clear manifestation of the growing rage against Syrian presence in Lebanon and its hegemony over various aspects of life in Lebanon. While it would have been almost impossible to imagine anti-Syrian slogans in predominantly-Muslim west Beirut, traditionally a cradle of Arab unity, last Wednesday's funeral turned into a hitherto unimaginable demonstration calling for the Syrians to get out of Lebanon immediately.

The straw that seems to have broken the camel's back was Syria's role in coercing the Lebanese Council of Ministers and, subsequently, the Lebanese Parliament to amend the Lebanese Constitution, which prohibits a sitting president from standing for a second term, to allow the extension of the Lebanese President's term for three additional years. It is common knowledge in Lebanon, evidenced by earlier public statements by the majority of Lebanese cabinet ministers and members of the parliament alike that there was a majority among them who were opposed to the extension of President Emile Lahoud's term. Yet, under perceived Syrian coercion, a majority of cabinet ministers as well as an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians, most of whom had been on record opposing the said (unconstitutional) constitutional amendment grudgingly voted to extend his term.

To make things more complicated for Syria and in Lebanon, the United Nations Security Council had passed Resolution 1559 on September 2, 2004, only one day before the Lebanese Council of Ministers voted to extend Lahoud's term, warning against tampering with the Lebanese Constitution and calling for several additional demands that would considerably reduce Syrian power and influence in Lebanon.

To Syria, UNSCR 1559 was considered to be an unjustified American- and Israeli-inspired international interference by the United Nations in Lebanese internal affairs. Naturally, Syrian loyalists among Lebanese leaders towed the Syrian line and echoed its positions repeatedly. On the other hand, a steadily rising number of Lebanese, and a significant number of members of Lebanon's parliament, welcomed the said Resolution, at least in their hearts initially. More recently, however, Syrian non-interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs has become a demand by an increasing

number of Lebanese leaders, Muslims and Christians, pan-Arab Nationalists, pan-Syrian Nationalists and Lebanese Nationalists. Nevertheless, even the staunchest opponents to Syrian meddling in Lebanese internal affairs insist that, while they want a cessation of the intervention by Syria and its intelligence apparatus in Lebanon's domestic affairs, they are all for "distinguished political, economic, and defense relationships between the two neighbors". Regrettably, the Syrian leadership remains belligerent.

But since the assassination of the late prime minister in a heinous act of terrorism ten days ago, political calls rapidly metamorphosed to a far more outspoken stand by Lebanese groups that no one would have ever imagined could become openly opposed to Syria. Although their accusation might be unfounded--except in circumstantial evidence--, most Lebanese are firmly convinced that the Syrian intelligence service is the culprit, either directly or through its Lebanese counterpart that is seen as a tool of its Syrian masters. And while it would have been inconceivable as recently as ten days ago to hear audible voices on the traditionally pro-Syrian Sunni Muslim street calling for an end to Syria's military presence in Lebanon, throngs of Sunni mourners were heard yelling racist anti-Syrian slogans during the funeral procession of the assassinated leader, demanding an immediate pullout of Syrian troops, un-inhibited nor intimidated by the live TV coverage of the events of the sad day.

The slowly but silently deteriorating Lebanese-Syrian relations have suddenly been catapulted into a frenzy of articulated anger. This could very well be the spark of successive developments leading to the restoration of normalcy, freedom, sovereignty and independence to Lebanon. More than likely though, things could get far worse before they get better.

On the bright side, though, the terrorist attack on Mr. Hariri's convoy and his subsequent death has forged an unprecedented national unity. It has been noteworthy to witness nuns praying next to the late prime minister's tomb with their rosaries in hand standing next to Muslim women with their hands open up to heaven reciting verses from the Koran or appropriate Muslim prayers.

This display of national unity appears to be growing by the day. The rally commemorating one week since the massacre on Monday attracted Lebanese Christians and Muslims aside. The slogans and placards reflected this newfound unity in no uncertain terms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Lebanon is currently witnessing a dangerous and critical moment in its history these days. The international community, led by the United States and France and under the auspices of the United Nations, has been solidly behind Lebanon's revival-- but its solidarity has amounted to little more than words so far. Pro-independence Lebanese expect escalated pressure from the international community in the form of concrete steps to rescue what some members of the US Congress have characterized as a "captive state" from its thirty years of incarceration and to restore the oldest democracy in the Middle East.

The future of Lebanon depends on at least two factors at this stage. Foremost among these factors is the ability of the growing pro-democracy movement to maintain its solidarity and widen its support base. They appear to be on the right path in this respect.

The second factor, which is beyond their control, has to do with external support. How determined the friends of democracy in the world are to free the hostage state remains a primary concern. The corollary to that is whether or not the United States might end up trading off its support for the cause of Lebanon's democracy for its interests elsewhere in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq or in Palestine. These factors could very well determine the course of Lebanon's future, which would itself affect the cause of democracy and moderation in the turbulent Middle East.

One final note. Why should all of this matter to you?

For those among you who are Lebanese or Americans of Lebanese descent, your interest and your concern are perfectly understandable. But why should it matter to our American friends? The answer is simply that whether or not the battle for the restoration of democracy to Lebanon, the oldest democracy in the Middle East, succeeds will reflect on the potential for success of America's much-appreciated efforts to spread democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Lebanon has always been a model for moderation, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among various religious and ethnic groups. It has always been a country that the rest of the Arab world emulates. At the risk of repeating myself, but for additional emphasis, let me remind you that should the efforts to restore the democratic process to Lebanon fail, the likelihood of success in bringing democracy to countries that have no experience with it, such as Iraq and the emerging Palestinian state, would have a significantly higher probability of failure. Moreover, the failure of democracy would give rise to the continued spread of fanaticism and terrorism. As we have all discovered since the despicable and cowardly terrorist attacks of 9/11, America is not the isolated island, immune from the troubles of the rest of the world. The dire consequences of the absence of democracy in the Middle East could very well come back to haunt you again.

Clearly, our interest and yours in the revival of democracy in Lebanon are intertwined. I hope that we can all cooperate to restore the democratic process in Lebanon and restore Lebanon's independence.

Thank you for listening. I would be happy to entertain any of your questions now.