

MONDAY MORNING

The Case for Lebanese neutrality

Analyse signée par le chercheur Claude Khoury » parue à la même époque sur les pages de « Politique Internationale » du Monday Morning



The Israeli invasion of Lebanon has given birth to a new Lebanese movement which has already established its presence in major American and European cities and is trying to reach the top decision-makers of Lebanon, the west, the Soviet Bloc and the Arab World.

The “Neutral Lebanon Movement” is pushing for Austrian- style neutrality which would pull Lebanon out of the Arab-Israeli conflict without costing it its Arab identity and extricate it from the East-West Struggle without sacrificing its status as a member of the free world.

The Founder of the new movement, international business Lawyer Roger Edde, is the deputy secretary of the Lebanese National Bloc, the party headed by the Member of Parliament Raymond Edde.

But he emphasizes that the National Bloc has nothing to do with the Neutral Lebanon Movement. He is hoping to get the party to adopt the neutrality policy before the end of 1983, he says, but the movement is lobbying the National Bloc just as it is lobbying the rest of Lebanon’s many political clusters.

In Beirut for a brief visit last week, Roger Edde explained to me the neutrality goal as he and his movement have been presenting it in private meetings, seminars, panel discussions, lectures and interviews in the Arab World, Europe and the United States for the past four months :

MADE IN AUSTRIA

The movement, he said, was preaching Austrian-type neutrality because it wanted Lebanon to remain a member of the U.N. and the Arab league and part of the free world.

“Austria’s neutrality has allowed it to remain in the United Nations despite the fact that U.N. decisions can be made by majority vote” he said. “It has faced situations where it could not apply U.N. decisions – like sanctions resolutions, for instance – without putting its neutrality in question. Because of the Austrian precedent, it is now understood that the U.N.- or any other international or regional body- recognizes a neutral country’s right not to apply decisions which could be perceived as contrary to its pledge of neutrality. Lebanon should seek that kind of status at the U.N.

“Austria has also remained part of the western free world and has a special agreement with the European economic community- an agreement which is in fact purely economic and has nothing to do with political neutrality. In other words, the Soviet Union.

Didn't insist that neutral Austria be ideologically neutral, and the Soviet Union was one the key factors in the neutrality of Austria negotiated the question with Moscow before it negotiated it with Washington.

“In the same way, we would like Lebanon to remain not only part of the free world but also- and more so- part of the Arab World, committed to Arab solidarity and Arab causes, ideologically free to keep in the region and in the world's geopolitics.

It is easier for a neutral Lebanon to maintain its membership in the Arab League than it is to remain in the U.N. Edde believes, “ because unlike the U.N., the Arab League takes its decision by unanimity, not by majority.

“And a neutral Lebanon is not obliged to be economically neutral” Edde Said. “In other words, it would remain committed to the boycott of Israel imposed by the Arab World as long as the Arab World, on which 80 percent of the Lebanese economy depends, maintains that boycott.”

Austria secured its neutrality by signing bilateral agreements with the powers concerned, but Lebanon should go a step further, he added.

“ We should have our neutrality established through the endorsement of the U.N. Security Council, because that would allow us to have our neutrality recognized even by countries with which we have no diplomatic relation, like Israel. A unanimous or majority endorsement of Lebanese neutrality by the Security Council without Israeli opposition would be a de facto Israeli recognition of Lebanese neutrality. The U.N. needs to play this role, if only to enhance its image as international peace – maker – an image which suffered a setback when Israel invaded Lebanon, ignoring the U.N.'s moral presence in the South.”

In addition to Security Council endorsement of its neutrality, Lebanon could sign “Conventions of protection” with various international powers committed to this neutrality, Edde said. “We could, for instance, sign conventions of neutrality with each of the countries which are supplying Lebanon with peace-keeping forces. The conventions could be signed before these peace-keeping forces leave the country, keeping in mind that they must not leave before Lebanese sovereignty is fully reestablished and the Lebanese army is once more the only military power in Lebanon- an army disciplined and strong enough to dissuade any regional power which could challenge our neutrality.”

So far, Edde said, the call for a neutral Lebanon had drawn “positive reactions” from some Arab and European states. He singled out France as the European state from which his movement has received the most favorable response: “In France, I was told at the very top level that neutrality may be the only solution for Lebanon.” And where the Arab world was concerned, he pointed out, the Egyptian government “Has been going out of its way to talk openly about the necessity of neutralizing Lebanon.”

THE ARAB POSITION

It was noteworthy, he said, "that so far, I have not had any negative reactions from any of the Arab countries concerned, like Syria or Saudi Arabia."

As for the Palestine Liberation organization, it should have no objections to a neutral Lebanon. "The PLO leaders have repeatedly said that they have definitely given up the idea of using Lebanese land for any military activities against Israel. They have said this to the Lebanese government, I have heard from reliable and high-ranking PLO leaders, and we have to consider this pledge as serious and sincere. There is no question that a neutral Lebanon cannot allow the PLO to maintain any military force in Lebanon or to use Lebanon land to strike against Israel or any other country".

Regarding current Palestinian presence in Lebanon, Edde said special efforts were needed to settle that matter.

"Lebanon must by all means help the Palestinians to have their rights recongnized, to have an identity and a state of their own. However, we must recognize the fact that we have a number of Palestinians to have little chance to go and live in Palestinian land – in Israel, in Jordan, in the West Bank. This is a problem that the Lebanon alone cannot resolve; it must be solved in a realistic approach in coordination with our fellow Arabs.

"To begin with, we must give these Palestinians a feeling of security. We should not forget that the Israelis are now trying to convince the Palestinians living under their occupation in South Lebanon that Israel is their only protector and is in a better position than any Arab country to give them a decent life – housing, social rights, economic rights. Israel may be able to manipulate these Palestinians with the carrot and stick policy, and we should not be surprised if after a while Israel starts saying, "I'm staying in South Lebanon to protect the Palestinians who asked for my protection".

That would be a disaster for the Palestinian and Arab world. We must therefore study the question of Palestinian presence very seriously : how to give them security, how to secure their social and economic rights, how to help them join their families elsewhere in the Middle East and live in acceptable economic and social conditions as they wait for the day when they will hopefully cease to be refugees.

It was true, Edde said, that neither the Palestinians nor any Arab state had come out enthusiastically in favor of Arab neutrality, but this could be partly due to the fact that the Lebanese government it self had not adopted a position on the subject. At any rate, absence of "aggressive Arab support "for the idea could be counter-productive at this point, since it would probably stiffen Israeli resistance to Lebanese neutrality and weaken the American ability to influence Israel on that matter, should America decide to try.

But whether the Arabs had discovered the benefits of a neutral Lebanon or not at this point, a neutral Lebanon would be a boon for the Arab world, he said, summarizing the advantages the Arab world would reap from Lebanese neutrality as follows:" If Lebanon is declared neutral, the Arabs will lose nothing, but they will recuperate an Arab country from Israeli occupation or direct Israeli influence. And Lebanon is an Arab country.

A quasi-majority of the Lebanese have Arab feelings of identity, and Lebanese neutrality would further strengthen Arab-Lebanese ties by eliminating the fears of some of Lebanon's minorities. Neutrality would reassure the Lebanese minorities, specifically the Maronite minority, who have been living in fear of forced Arab unity – a Greater Syria unity, for instance.

This reassurance would certainly help the Maronites to be more open and forthcoming in their Arab identification and reduce the chances of success for an isolationist trend. What we would have then would be a free, stable Arab Lebanon, and the Arabs would certainly prefer such a Lebanon to one which is unstable and always on the defensive towards them.

A neutral Lebanon would give the Arabs back their forum, their meeting place of refuge that Lebanon used to be. It would also relieve the Arabs of the financial responsibility of helping Lebanon rebuild itself: the dynamics of peace and stability of neutrality would attract Arab and international capital to Lebanon, which would spare the Arabs the need to subsidize this country's reconstruction.

"Furthermore, a neutral Lebanon would be an example for the Arab world to follow. If neutrality is successful in Lebanon, it could be enlarged to cover the entire region, a region which could spark World War III – because of the importance of oil and because of the emotional and political links between Israel and the United States.

"As we see it today, the Soviet design appears to be to move towards a share of this region's oil by exploiting the Iranian-Iraqi conflict, perhaps by dismantling Iran through infiltration of the Toudeh Party and through its influence in Baluchistan, Azerbaidjian and some of the kurds, and by using the using the Iranian revolution as a regional destabilizing factor. The risk of an East-West confrontation is not imminent, in my opinion, but it should not be excluded in the future. If there is one region in the world where the superpowers could clash one day that region is the Middle-East. The only solution that could avert that is a neutral Middle-East.

"Neutrality would also allow the region to develop economically. The Arab decline which was brought on by 400 years of Ottoman rule has not ended yet; no renaissance is possible in the Arab world as long as the pressure of the Israeli-Arab and Iranian-Iraqi wars is maintained.

Those, Edde said, were the benefits the Arabs could reap from Lebanese neutrality, and they were all the more overwhelming because they were not balanced by any disadvantages. It was not true, for instance, that a neutral Lebanon would become "Israel's gateway to the Arab world."

"Israel's gateway to the Arab world is without question the West Bank and Jordan – certainly not Lebanon. Israel is bound to use its Arabs, and not the Lebanese, as intermediaries with the Arab world, because Lebanon is Israel's natural competitor. In fact, Lebanon must start preparing itself as of now for Israeli competition in the Arab world. We have to prepare to meet Israel's agricultural and industrial challenge if we want to maintain our economic position in the area. And we have to prepare to meet Israel's educational challenge as well: the American university of Beirut is lagging 10 to 15 years behind the times, especially in the management and technological fields, and the other Lebanese universities are far behind AUB."

Considering this Lebanese-Israeli rivalry and Israel's reported designs on Lebanon, why, I asked, would Israel support – or not oppose – a Lebanese bid for neutrality?

THE ISRAELI FACTOR

“If Lebanese neutrality is internationally guaranteed, and if its is accompanied by demilitarized Syrian- Lebanese and Israeli- Lebanese borders controlled by multi-national forces acceptable to Lebanon, Israel and Syria, it would give Israel the security it wants on its northern borders”, Edde said.

“A Neutral Lebanon could be Israel’s way out of the possible Vietnamization of its involvement in Lebanon. Israel is taking risks in the quagmire of Lebanon’s internal politics. The Israeli may be sure of the themselves no, but they cannot be sure of the future, especially if there is a new Soviet Policy to turn Lebanon into Israel’s Vietnam. If a situation develops that forces Israel to mobilize 60,000 or 100,000 in Lebanon, instead of 30,000, and if large numbers of Israelis begin to be killed, no Israeli government can survive; Israel would be forced to withdraw on shameful conditions, as the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

“I don’t want to sound optimistic about this sort of thing. We as Arabs, should not go around speculating that we are capable to turning Lebanon into Israel’s Vietnam, because it is equally possible that Israel would use such a situation to go further than it has, occupy all of Lebanon threaten the unity and stability of Syria, Israel must consider, however. That there is a fifty-fifty risk that its involvement in Lebanon will be very costly for its government and its people.”

But the signals Edde has been getting through American diplomatic channels indicate that Israel would be opposed to the neutral Lebanon proposition.

“I have had serious discussions with the U.S. government on this subject, and the first reaction coming from Israel through diplomatic channels was negative, because Israel wants to impose a peace linked to a protectorate agreement with Lebanon, “he said.

Part of the Neutral Lebanon Movement’s lobbying effort has been directed at U.S. “think tanks where American Jews are very actively working to influence the policy- making of the U.S. government.” Judging by those contacts, Edde says that liberal Jews appear to favor the neutral Lebanon idea, but hardliners reject it out of hand.

“I had very positive reactions from liberal circles – those know to be closer to the Israeli Labor Party and the Peace Now Movement,” he said, we have had no chance of scoring anything with the hardliners of the Amos perlmutter kind, whose position is the position of begin and Sharon: peace now with another Lebanon on Israeli terms.”

Edde said the establishment of the neutral Lebanon Movement was his answer to Israelis withdrawal-for-peace barter proposal to Lebanon. “The answer, in effect, is that the Israelis asked for security, and they got security; they are asking for peace in Lebanon, and they will get peace I Lebanon, but not forced peace with Lebanon. Let us first re-establish ourselves- be liberated, resume our democratic process, recover from our suffering- and then we can, from a position of sovereignty, evaluate when and how to upgrade our relationship with Israel-an upgrading which cannot be dissociated from the Middle Eastern peace process.”

He added: "Both Israel and Syria have spoken about a 'security zone' on their borders to justify their presence in Lebanon. Though neutrality, we would be offering them security in all of Lebanon. After their withdrawal from Lebanon, and when the middle-eastern peace process allows it; we would be ready to negotiate a convention of neutrality with each of our neighbors, clearly defining our relations and reinforcing their commitment to our neutrality.

This will be easier with Syria, because you have no problem negotiating with Damascus right now, but it may be more difficult with Israel as long as the middle east peace process is frozen and as long as the only direct channel of communication with Israel is the armistice agreement-an agreement which, in fact, has given Lebanon and Israel mutually recognized borders since 1494"

But it was obvious, Edde said, that Israel not only opposed the neutral Lebanon proposition but would also do its utmost to stay in Lebanon for the next two or three years- it's not to bring Lebanon under its control, than to use Lebanon is as a stepping stone towards the final annexation of the West Bank.

"The Israelis will continue to create difficulties for the American peace-keeping effort in Lebanon until they stop President Reagan's pressure to freeze the Jewish settlements in the West Bank – and for that Israel needs to buy at least two to three years," Edde said. "Because within the next 36 months, Israel will have brought to the West Bank more than 100,000 new Jewish settlers and most of these will not be from the extremist Gush Emunim but from the liberal parties, like the Labor Party and the Peace Now Movement.

Those people will be lured to the West Bank by economic advantages, like housing subsidies, that are not available in Israel.

They will probably justify this move to their conscience by telling themselves that if the West Bank is given back to the Arabs, they will be compensated financially and will then leave willingly. But in fact, after three years of this policy, you will not find one substantial Israeli leadership ready to give the West Bank back in return for peace. The West Bank and Gaza will not be negotiable any more, and then the only option will be a dual Israeli state, with the Arabs denied the right of Israeli Arabs, and those Arabs will eventually be used as Israel's intermediaries with the Arab world."

The future of Lebanon, and obviously the proposed neutrality of Lebanon, hinges on a swift Israeli withdrawal from this country, and a swift withdrawal, Edde says, is still possible.

THE SUPERPOWER INCENTIVE

"It can be brought about in the next months, and it must - because time is not our side," he said. "The only way to bring it about, and to force Israel to accept the neutrality of Lebanon, is to undertake a strong campaign to influence the U.S. policy-makers to keep up the momentum of peace-making..."

“At this point, the Neutral Lebanon Movement supports the Lebanese government’s efforts to liberate and unify the country. We would like to see the Lebanese government more aggressive and more efficient in its national and international policies to encourage the dynamics of peace; to show U.S. public opinion the contrast between the safety in the Lebanese areas where the multi-national force is present and the unrest in the areas under the control of occupation forces; to drive home the point that it is worthwhile continuing the effort to enlarge the area controlled by the Lebanese government and the multinational force and to get the occupying troops put of Lebanon. We need to keep the momentum, and the momentum cannot be kept without a very strong lobbying effort in the U.S. specifically.”

The U.S may be persuaded to pressure Israel into pulling out of Lebanon, I said, but what interest would it have in accepting Lebanese neutrality or persuading Israel to accept it?

“There is no question that a liberated, neutral Lebanon would be a fantastic success story for the Reagan administration,” Edde said. “It would give the Reagan Administration the momentum to go ahead with its Middle Eastern peace -keeping effort and show that America is capable of delivering peace.”

As for the Soviet Union, a neutral Lebanon might not be a success story, but it would still give Moscow a host of advantages, he added.

“A neutral, free, democratic Lebanon should be a place in the Middle East which has a free press and an intelligentsia, where political parties can thrive and express any ideologies. It would be a place where a well-staffed Soviet embassy can be established to keep its ear to the ground in the Middle East, a place which is the nerve center to Middle Eastern opinion-making, a place which provides access to the intelligentsia of the Arab World.

“Furthermore, the Soviet would have in such a Lebanon, as they did in the past, a market through which they could sell their goods to the Arab countries with which they have no direct diplomatic or economic relations. Most of the Eastern Bloc goods sold to the gulf area for the last 20 years were sold through the Lebanese economic system.”

And a long-range advantage for the Soviet Union: “The neutralization of the Middle East could start with a neutral Lebanon. The Soviet Union supported Austrian neutrality in 1955-56 with precisely this goal in mind: that a neutral Austria could be the first step towards neutralizing other European states, like Germany. It didn’t work out that way, of course, because of the gold war, but it could work in the Middle East, which is different from Europe. The Soviet Union is led by Europeans, and the relationship between Moscow and the European countries is a historical, emotional relationship. The Soviets’ relationship with the Middle East is more of a cold, economic, strategic relationship. The Soviet considers the Arab world and Israel to be a part of the U.S. sphere of influence, and for them a neutral Arab world would be better than an aligned Arab world.

“Now, the Soviet Union may prefer other choices in Lebanon, but if they have to choose between a stable, free, democratic, neutral Lebanon and an Israeli-satellized Lebanon, they will opt for Lebanese neutrality.”

THE LEBANESE PRIORITY

But before selling Lebanese neutrality to anyone, the idea must be sold to the Lebanese themselves.

“And I expect that a majority of the Lebanese will support the idea,” Edde said. “It would be hard for any faction in Lebanon to reject it. The neutrality of Lebanon was initially a Christian dream; because the Christian minority felt that neutrality would protect Lebanese independence from ideologies would protect Lebanese independence from ideologies coming in from the Arab world and the Moslem world.

But now, Israeli factor has been introduced as a challenge to the Arab world, and Israel has advanced from the stage of establishing its presence in the region to the phase of expansion, to the phase of imposing its imperial leadership over minorities in the Middle East. In this situation, we would see the leaders of the Moslem and non-Maronite communities supporting the idea of neutrality, because neutrality is Lebanon’s shield against Israeli hegemony. We in Lebanon have been caught between two different powers, and we have all become defensive minorities.”

For the Lebanese majority to rally around the neutrality proposal, Edde said, the Lebanese government must adopt the idea.

“The Lebanese government has not declared a position on this question yet because it is engrossed in the bargaining going on through the U.S. negotiator,” he said. “I believe, however, that a government position on this question is needed even as the bargaining is under way, to define it, announce it to the U.N. and the Arab League and ask the U.S. to negotiate within its framework. We must affirm that neutrality is what we are offering, that we would be grateful if the U.S. helped in the mechanics, but that we cannot offer more.

“Neutrality must not be used as a tool to impose an Israeli peace, because an imposed Israeli peace would rule out Syrian and PLO withdrawal by negotiation. That would mean another round of Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian war in Lebanon, and no one could guess what the future of Lebanon’s independence and Lebanon’s identity- and the identity of Syria- would be after another round.”

Edde said that there were some officials in the present Lebanese administration “who have privately expresses to me their support of Lebanese neutrality and indeed, some of them, like (Lebanese’s U.N.) Ambassador Ghassan Tueni adopted public positions on the subject before I declared the program of the Neutral Lebanon Movement.

“But that is not enough. The Lebanese government must come out of the closet and tell the world not only what it does not want but also what it wants. It must take a firm position in favor of neutrality;

A neutral Lebanon could be the first step toward a neutral Middle East, which would avert a possible world war

and I am certain that the Lebanese would rally around it.”

Edde said that he himself had so far avoided talks with high-level Lebanese officials on this subject, “because I feel that I should not personally interfere in their process of negotiations.” But there are indications that several Lebanese personalities, possibly members of the Neutral Lebanon Movement, are mounting a lobbying effort aimed at the highest echelons of Lebanese officialdom.

Exactly who the members of the Neutral Lebanon Movement are Edde is not ready to reveal as yet.

“When we apply to the Lebanese authorities (to register the new movement), we will give a full list of the members, and we do intend to apply. The movement is now present in many cities in the U.S. and Europe. We started it abroad because it was the only way Lebanese of all communities, Moslem and Christian, could meet, agree on something and start.

A Lebanese majority would support neutrality, but the Lebanese government must first adopt the idea and announce it as a policy

Contacts with the foreign governments which have been playing a role in Lebanon- like France, the U.S. and some Arab countries. However, we want the movement to be based in Lebanon, and I plan to return to Lebanon soon to structure it here. Until then, I would prefer not to name any members.”

He was, however, prepared to say this : “For the time being, we are structuring the movement with people from the National Bloc and other political parties and with nonpartisan Christian and Moslem personalities from all Lebanese regions...

“We think we have a good chance of rallying Lebanese who would be reluctant to support any idea promoted by a specific political leader. We hope to be able to avoid the limitations of Lebanese village politics. We have avoided any major political name because we don’t want any political personality to limit the accessibility of the movement. A movement such as this will have less of a chance to succeed if it is organized around political leaders or if it is organized as a political party. When Israel’s peace Now movement, for instance, tried to venture into the electoral process and operate as a political party, it was a disaster, and the movement quickly retreated, going back to being an intellectual political pressure group working to establish a network of personalities and young-generation militants from all political parties and of people not committed to any political party.

The same is true of West Germany’s Green Movement, and the same applies to us. We want to avoid being a new political party or a cluster made to be the tool of any political personality.

“Our movement is self-financed and will remain self-financed. It must keep the moral prerogative, because without it, it cannot challenge ruthless militaristic factions and ruthless political regimes. And because we have to keep the moral prerogative, the quality of the people in our movement is one of our main concerns: the members of the movement must be totally ‘clean’. Only those people can make the difference.

Roger Edde, whose law office in Beirut was destroyed when the Lebanese war started in 1975, has spent the past seven years shuttling between Cairo, Riyadh, Paris, and Washington. In 1980, after a visit to Washington with Raymond Edde, he decided to stop his law practice and devote his time to lobbying for Lebanon, covering his own expenses.

“I am not involved in any business activity now, and will not be,” he told me, “because I am to be mobilized full-time for the movement”.

He left Beirut shortly after I talk to him last week and is now in the United States preaching Lebanese neutrality.

Some Arab and European States have supported Lebanese neutrality, and top-level French Officials have called it the best solution for Lebanon.

Lebanese neutrality must be endorsed by the Security Council and can be reinforced by bilateral agreements with the states contributing the Multinational force.

A Neutral Lebanon would remain part of the Arab League and the free world, with diplomatic relations with Israel for the time being.