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THE “UNNECESSARY WAR”: SOME PRINCIPLES AND A ROADMAP

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Op-Ed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kostanian is committed to promoting reforms in Lebanon and regularly publishes articles and studies in various domains in addition to having been active in politics and policy making, with a focus on electoral laws. He is the co-founder of “Les Plus Beaux Villages du Liban”, an NGO aiming at the preservation of rural heritage in Lebanon. He holds an MSc from the HEC School in Paris and a BA in economics from the Saint-Joseph University in Beirut.

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The fifth Israeli-Lebanese war, the third war between Hezbollah and Israel on Lebanese soil or the war in support of Gaza, are all designations which do not do justice to the massacre that is finishing off Lebanon while the world watches. This massacre will go down in history as the “unnecessary war.” The “unnecessary war” because Lebanon is already drained dry, has reached the end of a hellish cycle of cataclysms, and has had its share of bankruptcies, explosions, disintegration, and above all contempt. An “unnecessary war” as Lebanon has been at war for too long (1975, 1969 or 1958, some would say). An “unnecessary war” because it could have been avoided, had Hezbollah not decided to drag Lebanon into the arrogant path of supporting Gaza. Or, for those who do not situate the beginnings on October 7, 2023, had the Hezbollah bet on the State and peace in 2000, during the liberation, its liberation, rather than turning Lebanon into an Iranian arms depot under the pretext of reclaiming Jerusalem. Today, the “unnecessary war” substantially means that Lebanon has been at war for more than 50 years and it is time for this to stop.

AN OPPORTUNITY?

It would be indecent to see an opportunity in the “unnecessary war.” The criminal barbarity of the Israeli war machine has already resulted in 2000 deaths, including dozens of journalists and rescue workers, more than a million Lebanese displaced, and entire villages razed. However, despite a certain degree of cynicism, it would be dishonest not to recognize the opening in this final flat line of the Lebanese post-war system. And this opening is based on the collapse of a myth: the deterrence of Hezbollah. Whatever the outcome of the war, it is taken for granted that Israel and the Western world will no longer accept a militia that can threaten Israel's security today and in the future. Internally, the collapse of this myth is just as structuring. The Lebanese have not only witnessed Hezbollah's inability to protect them, but they have also measured the danger of its project which led and would have inevitably led to war against a State as belligerent and murderous as Israel.

Given this new situation, on the internal and external level, a rescue opportunity emerges. But it must be based on solid principles to avoid a total collapse of the Lebanese edifice.

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The first of these principles is the need for the establishment of a modern State. And with it, the need to stamp out all practices that have led to the current non-State. Because in Lebanon, the absence of a State is a real political choice and not the result of random chance or the dire consequence of external aggression or the actions of a single political component, in this case Hezbollah. At the end of the civil war, Lebanese officials made a deliberate choice to perpetuate the war by peaceful means, and Lebanese have largely put up with the situation until recently, that is, until October 2019.

The need to approach the reconstruction of a national edifice in a unifying spirit, with no winners or losers, is a second principle. Following the successive dominations of Christians and Sunnis, the Shiite era is beginning to wane, possibly signaling the end of a cycle of communitarian domination which, if well managed, could lead to State building. Otherwise, we will be left with frustrations and treated to vengeful appetites which, on both sides, could lead to the much-dreaded internal conflict.

The third principle concerns the political system. As long as it remains vague, unequally accepted, subject to interpretation and incapable of ensuring good governance, Lebanon will remain under the influence of a parallel system, a kind of community-based agreement which is more akin to a criminal association aiming to distribute ill-gotten gains than to a mechanism for managing national affairs.

A ROADMAP

Ending the 50-year war is the only possible ambition today. For this, a coherent and comprehensive roadmap based on these national constants must be drawn up. It should be anchored in reality, taking into account the constraints and the balance of power with Israel, without however making concessions on the essentials. Temporality is also of capital importance here. We do not arise in a few weeks, from decades of war that have undermined the very foundations of society, but through well-considered steps, capable of building trust between Lebanese themselves and in their relationship with public affairs.

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The first step in a roadmap is obviously a ceasefire with Israel. This cannot be unilateral as it should also guarantee a cessation of hostilities on the part of Israel. It should be based on UN Resolution 1701 and the 1949 Armistice

Agreement, which are complementary and whose provisions are comprehensive and clear, but which the belligerents, notably Hezbollah and its proxies in the government, did not want to apply in the past. These agreements should therefore be supplemented by a strong commitment from the Lebanese government ensuring their proper application and should be accompanied by solid implementation mechanisms, in order to avoid the establishment of a security border strip and an aerial control as put forward by Israel at the expense of Lebanese sovereignty. The Lebanese government should therefore request the extension of the UNIFIL mandate so that it includes the implementation of Resolution 1701 and the Armistice, alongside the Lebanese army, especially in the south of the Litani River area. It will be equally necessary to seal off the porous borders and put an end to smuggling and arms trafficking by requesting the deployment of UN soldiers and the reinforced Lebanese army on land and airport borders.

These provisions would recover Lebanon's sovereignty, engage the State's responsibility, and allow to meet Israeli demands, without infringing on national sovereignty.

The second step is necessarily that of the election of a president of the Republic. It is now possible and essential to demand the election of a sovereigntist president, with solid backbone and a capacity to take up the significant challenges that await Lebanon. But this must be done without humiliating Hezbollah and its allies. The opposition's repeated and unheeded calls to the Speaker of the House to convene an electoral session, even though the Constitution, Article 74, allows members of parliament to meet without prior convocation and to proceed with the election, reveal how much consensus and the approval of

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the “other party” are necessary. The election of a president is therefore not the arena where the "new" balance of power following the debacle of Hezbollah should be demonstrated. Firstly, because it is almost impossible in practice - the party and its allies still have a significant strike force in parliament, especially if it concerns the election of the commander-in-chief of the army, which requires a prior constitutional amendment by two-thirds. Secondly, a forced process would undermine the mission of the president who will have to rebuild a State with the approval of all, including the representatives of the Shiite community.

The third step is the delimitation of the Lebanese land borders, the reconstruction, the return of the displaced and the arming of the Lebanese army. This must be led by the President of the Republic and by a competent and homogeneous government of mission. The restoration of national sovereignty should enable meeting these challenges more easily. Thus, the precedent of the Saudi donation of three billion dollars, granted in 2014 then cancelled in 2016 after the election of Michel Aoun to the presidency of the Republic and the latter’s statements in favor of the “resistance.” reveal that international assistance, even if interested, can still be provided. One should however avoid the trap of betting everything on seeking assistance, a true national sport since the 2000s. Reforms, particularly financial ones, which have been the subject of numerous studies and plans and which have a basis of consensus among serious specialists, should be implemented to avoid continually depending on external aid.

The final step is political reforms and the restoration of the monopoly on legitimate violence, that of large barter between communities so that they commit, together, to building a State. Relinquishing arms against a rotation or an alternation in the State’s highest offices (wrongly called presidencies); Abandoning the monopoly on certain functions against extensive decentralization, including financial prerogatives; The primacy of the individual and his rights against the sanctification of diversity and multiculturalism; The rehabilitation of public space, a major victim of Lebanese capitalism, against a fiscal pressure worthy of a modern State... These and other arbitrations must be discussed while remaining within the limits of the National Pact and the Taif agreement, two founding acts that embody the Lebanese spirit while providing flexibility of interpretation and mechanisms for evolution- particularly within the framework of Article 95 of the Constitution, which paves the way to all kind of possibilities in the area of political deconfessionalization.

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It is therefore high time for the Lebanese to be ambitious, to no longer tolerate a mockery of a State and a kleptocracy acting as a political class. This is the only meaning that can be given to the flood of suffering and death brought about by the “unnecessary war.” Let us aspire to make it a war to end all wars, the one that initiates the resurrection of a country that is now dead.



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