

## Nassib Lahoud on how he would lead Lebanon

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Presidential candidate says he wants to see hizbullah's fighters integrated into the army

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### Interview

BEIRUT: Hizbullah's fighters and arms should be blended into the Lebanese Army and security forces, presidential candidate and Democratic Renewal leader Nassib Lahoud told The Daily Star in an exclusive interview. Lahoud, a 62-year-old engineer who was educated partly in England, has been put forward with MP Butros Harb by the ruling March 14 coalition as its two consensus presidential candidates. At his home in Achrafieh, Lahoud spoke at length about what he would do as president regarding Hizbullah, Syria, Israel, UN Security Council resolutions and a number of other significant issues.

Q: What is your position on UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of all non-state militias in Lebanon? (Resolution 1559 was adopted after Syrian pressure forced the Lebanese Parliament to extend the term of outgoing President Emile Lahoud in November 2004 for three years.)

A: As for 1559, I support its implementation, but I consider that the article of 1559 which is related to the weapons of Hizbullah, should be dealt with according to a Lebanese mechanism, according to ... two basic principles.

Principle number one: The Lebanese state should be the sole custodian of weapons in the country. Two: The Lebanese state should be the sole decision-maker in matters of war and peace.

Under these two principles, I would like to see the Lebanese state benefit from the defense capabilities that Hizbullah has developed, through an integration process into the Lebanese Army and other security institutions. The mechanism ... should be decided by dialogue between the political factions in the country.

Q: What is your position on UN Resolution 1757 and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon? (Resolution 1757, adopted on May 30, establishes the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to try suspects in the February 14, 2005, assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The March 14 Forces have long blamed the killing on Syria, which has denied involvement.)

A: I fully support the tribunal with two objectives: One: Bringing the criminals to justice. Two: Providing a deterrent against further assassinations - and that would be a deterrent that would function in favor of all political factions and all Lebanese and not just the majority. We do not want to see the tribunal politicized.

On the other hand, I do not want to see the tribunal be used in any form or manner in the regional struggle that would involve attempting to change the regime in Syria. I think the Syrians are the ones who decide what kind of regime they want to live under. It's not the business of the Lebanese to be involved in that.

Q: What is your position regarding Lebanon's relations with Syria?

A: I think Syria should treat Lebanon with the respect that is due to Lebanon as a sovereign and independent state and not interfere in its affairs.

Syria [should] cooperate with the international tribunal [and help deal with] the Palestinian bases on the Syrian-Lebanese borders. [Also], an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries, cooperating to delineate the Lebanese-Syria borders, including the Shebaa Farms. And solving the problem of the Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons.

If Syria were to cooperate on all these issues, I think this could lead to normalization of relations between Lebanon and Syria, and there are large areas of cooperation between the two countries that could open up as a result.

Q: What is your position on UN Security Council Resolution 1701, in particular regarding the disputed territory of the Shebaa Farms? (Resolution 1701 ended the 34-day summer 2006 war with Israel. The Shebaa Farms, occupied by Israel, are claimed by Lebanon with Syria's consent, but Israel has argued that the area has historically belonged to Syria and that Syria and its Lebanese allies are using the region as pretext to allow Hizbullah to keep its arms.)

A: I fully subscribe to the implementation of [Resolution] 1701, and I consider 1701 a source of stability and protection for

the people of South Lebanon specifically and the people of Lebanon in general.

I think 1701 provides a UN mechanism for solving the Shebaa Farms dispute. After the [Lebanese-Syrian] border [has been] delineated, the Lebanese government has suggested that the Lebanese part of the Shebaa Farms should be put in the custody of the United Nations pending a peace agreement. I support this mechanism and I support the efforts of the UN to reach such an agreement.

Q: The March 14 Forces have been feuding with the Hizbullah-led March 8 opposition since November 2006 over nearly all substantive political issues, with the presidency the latest source of friction. The outgoing president's term expires on November 24, and leaders of the squabbling political camps have been meeting almost daily in the search for a consensus candidate. Without an agreement, the Constitution allows MPs to meet anywhere during the last 10 days of a president's term and elect a successor with a simple majority of the chamber's deputies. Would you accept the presidency if elected by a simple majority of deputies and the opposition declared it would not accept a president so elected?

A: Before the Parliament meets in this fashion [in the last 10 days before November 24], a lot of water is going to have flowed under the bridge. First, we're going to have exhausted all these efforts to reach an agreement with the opposition. If the opposition persists in boycotting the elections and continues to drive the country toward a constitutional void at the level of the presidency, then the majority would have to meet closer to the end of the term of the current president and decide what are the steps in the interest of the country - leaving the country to sink into a presidential void or vote for a president with a simple majority. That's a decision I will take together with my colleagues in the majority.

We would assess the situation very closely at the time and decide what is in the best interest of the country.

Q: Do you consider yourself a consensus candidate for the presidency? How would you describe a consensus candidate?

A: I think that the vision for Lebanon that I submitted with my candidacy takes care of the apprehensions and ambitions of all political factions. I think I have presented a vision that can be considered as consensual. On this basis, yes, I could be considered a consensual candidate, even though I am part of the majority group and I am a part and parcel of the majority group, and this is something I do not deny.

If elected, I think I could be at equal distance from all factions in Lebanon.

A consensus president is a president that can understand the need to give assurances and guarantees to political factions that are not his own. Somebody who can understand the need for the opposition to be adequately represented in a national unity government, the need to have an agreement between the majority and the opposition on a fair electoral law, a Lebanese mechanism for resolving the question of the weapons of Hizbullah and a fair economic policy. A president ... who is able to conciliate between an aggressive modern economic policy and the need to alleviate the social differences between the different areas of Lebanon.

Q: Why or for whom would you be willing to relinquish your quest for the presidency?

A: The main idea behind the majority bloc proposing two candidates is to allow some flexibility in the process. We presented two candidates to try and reach a consensus with the opposition on one of these candidates. If the opposition is willing to back Butros Harb, I will certainly withdraw and give him my full support.

Q: What is your position regarding Lebanon's relations with Israel?

A: To see Lebanon as part of an international conference that would resolve all the remaining issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict, namely in the Syrian front, the Palestinian front and the Lebanese front, paving the way to a comprehensive and lasting solution. That would be the way Lebanon would see this. We would like to have a comprehensive solution involving all Arab countries.

Q: What is your position regarding Lebanon's relations with the US?

A: I think the US role is essential to help Lebanon and the countries in the area [with] the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States is central in any efforts like that. Of course I would like to see the United States in general play an active role in securing a comprehensive peace agreement.

I think I would like to see the United States support ... the strengthening of the Lebanese Army to make it an effective defense force for Lebanon, a force that is able to defend the borders and provide security. I believe that the United States have played a major role in the success of the Paris III conference, either by direct grants or by encouraging other countries to provide financial support.

Q: What is your position regarding Lebanon's relations with Saudi Arabia?

A: First of all, let me say that Saudi Arabia has had a tradition of noninterference in internal Lebanese affairs. Saudi Arabia has maintained deeper relations with all political factions and has never taken sides with one presidential candidate against the other. Saudi Arabia has also been supportive of Lebanon by providing more economic aid than any other country has provided and also by improving job opportunities for the Lebanese inside Saudi Arabia.

Q: What is your position on the draft of the electoral act presented in June 2006 by the National Commission on Parliamentary Electoral Law Reform, headed by former Minister Fouad Butros? What is your position regarding the Taif Agreement and the confessional power-sharing system? (The commission proposed that the 128-seat Parliament, elected through a majority-voting system, would see 77 deputies elected by majority vote and 51 through a proportional system, according to the draft.)

A: I do support the changes that have proposed by the Fouad Butros commission, whether on the enhancing women's participation [establishing a quota of 30 percent of female candidates for all parties' candidate lists for the next three elections], reducing the electoral age to 18, having an independent electoral commission, holding all the elections in one day.

And I think that most of the Lebanese, the great majority of Lebanese, are supportive of these changes.

Let's go to districting and the voting system. I think that adopting an electoral system which is partly based on small districts and a majority system and partly based on a larger districting and a proportional representation does take care of the complex interests of the Lebanese in the way they vote. So I do support this proposal. But if we fail to get consensus on this proposal, I would support going back to the 1960 electoral law, based on the qada as a compromise.

Q: What is your position regarding the status of Palestinians in Lebanon? (According to the 1969 Cairo Agreement, Palestinians have controlled the security in Lebanon's 12 refugee camps, and the Lebanese security forces did not enter the camps. On May 20, Fatah al-Islam militants at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli attacked an army base outside the camp, triggering a three-month battle that killed more than 400, displaced the camp's 31,000-plus residents and destroyed much of the camp. In addition, armed Palestinian groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, operate military bases in the remote, mountainous areas of the Lebanese-Syrian border.)

A: Lebanon has to have full sovereignty on every inch of its territory. Now, inside the Palestinian camps I'd like to see an agreement between the Lebanese state and the Palestinian Authority and the PLO on the means of implementing this principle in a manner that satisfies our need to be fully sovereign on our territory and ... to satisfy the Palestinian concern for their security.

As for the living conditions in the camps, I think that it's only properly humanitarian to address this issue. The [Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee], headed by Ambassador [Khalil] Makkawi, has been doing work in this respect and I fully support it.

The Palestinians groups outside the camps is an issue that the Dialogue Committee has agreed unanimously that should be resolved within six months. We expect the next national unity government to implement the decision of the Dialogue Committee.

Q: Labor laws prevent Palestinians from being employed in more than 20 occupations, including medicine, the law and engineering. What is your position regarding this ban?

A: We can certainly give it another look. There are trades which Lebanon needs non-Lebanese manpower, so yes, I would support revisiting this, but in the light of also protecting the interests of the Lebanese manpower. I'm willing to revisit that and see how we can improve it without damaging the interest of Lebanese nationals.

Q: Throughout Lebanon's history, political leaders have been the targets of assassination attempts. Are you worried?

A: Positions of power put you at risk, and positions with less power put you at risk. A lot of people who have died were not in exceptionally powerful positions. They were just trying to do their jobs and provide a service for their country. I look forward to the day when politics in Lebanon would not put either the politicians or the Lebanese citizens under a constant death threat.

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