

Promoting a Community of Shared Future

Dialogue on China-Lebanon
Relations and the Middle East
Peace Process

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Editor's Note: The landmark visit of President Xi Jinping to the Middle East in January 2016, along with the new policy paper on China-Arab cooperation issued by the Chinese government, symbolized a brand new era for relations between China and the Arab world. To enhance understanding of regional developments and promote the exchange of ideas between China and Middle Eastern countries, Professor Yang Jiemian, President Emeritus of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) led a delegation to Lebanon in March 2016, and attended dialogues with Mr. Amine Gemayel, President of Lebanon from 1982 to 1988, and Mr. Michel Suleiman, President of Lebanon from 2008 to 2014, respectively. Their dialogues focused on the ongoing Middle East peace process, China's dynamic relations with Lebanon and the Arab world, and the evolving world order.

Pragmatic Cooperation to Enhance China-Lebanon Relations

Yang: Thank you very much for your warm welcome, Your Excellency. The Chinese government in January 2016 issued its first Arab Policy Paper, which attaches great importance to the exchanges between Chinese and Arab think tanks. We are here to learn from you, and we'd also like to have better communications with our Lebanese friends and colleagues.

Gemayel: It's our great pleasure receiving you in Lebanon. I have very good relations with China. I visited China a long time ago and have friends close to Mao Zedong in China, like George Hatem. He visited us in 1973. And we had the opportunity to also receive his son^a three years ago. He is now a member of the parliament or something like that.

We really admire your country. You're doing an important job and making improvements in many fields. It's no secret in Lebanon that China is becoming a great power and very influential in the strategic, economic, and political fields. That's why we, the think tanks, would like to have regular contact with you to improve relations between our two countries. We also hope that we will be able to have permanent exchanges between our think tanks.

Yang: I would appreciate it very much if you can share with us your wisdom on China's relations with Lebanon and the current complicated regional situation as well. For example, how can we promote our pragmatic bilateral relations so that China can contribute more to the domestic reconstruction process in Lebanon?

Suleiman: Let's explore together how to develop China-Lebanon relations. I think that China-Lebanon relations have been greatly improved in recent years. China is the largest developing country with experiences in science and technology, environment protection, as well as many other areas. Currently, Lebanon is burdened with refugee problems. We are receiving refugees as a consequence of the Syrian crisis in addition to the Palestinian refugee problem, which has been existing for many years. Lebanon needs assistance from outside countries, particularly from China. Why do I stress China? Because China has been persistent in its reform and opening-up policy, and has been adhering to its humanitarian values.

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Globalization has been accelerating because of the advancement of science and technology. As is known, Lebanon is a nation with various sects and social strata. Lebanon is also being integrated despite these differences. But we need assistance to sustain the current trends of integration. Refugees are equal to half of Lebanon's population, which is a serious challenge to Lebanon's social structure. Syrian refugees and Lebanese people have different approaches and values. The Lebanese adhere to the principle of building a shared society and community. Lebanon could be categorized as a model of a nation within the context of globalization. It stands for social integration with diversity.

China's humanitarian assistance is valuable to Lebanon's refugee resettlement and social integration.

Yang: I cannot agree more with you. You said that Lebanon needs China's help, at the same time, China also appreciates Lebanon's help and support, for instance, in Taiwan and Tibetan issues, etc. Mr. Xi Jinping has been President of China for three years. His visit to the Middle East in the past January signifies that he has covered all the important parts of the world on his

first round of overseas visits. The cooperation between China and the Middle East in energy and other areas is growing and deepening. China would be all ears for your advice on what China's policy toward the Middle East should be for our mutual benefits.

Suleiman: You are quite right. We are in great need of China's experience in energy, especially that of alternative energy. We need to strengthen our cooperation in alternative energy. China has a big project in Lebanon, the Tripoli port project. Unfortunately, this project has been facing difficulties, and I think the fault is with the Lebanese government.

China's Contribution to the Middle East Peace Process

Yang: Your Excellency, as you know, with China's rise, its involvement and exchanges with the Middle East are increasing as well. From your perspective, how can China make greater and more positive contributions to peace, stability, and development of the region?

Gemayel: As we were saying, China is a great power with political and economic influence all over the world including the Middle East. You have

a lot of sound relations with several countries, even superpowers like Russia, the United States, and Europe. China can be very helpful in pushing these countries to be more active and prudent in the region. It is important that China understand better what's going on and play a constructive and positive role. Unfortunately, the Russians are taking military actions that may help the Assad regime. The United States is very active in helping the opposition. Neither has an objective, neutral view or a very constructive approach to the crisis. China could be helpful, because it doesn't have strong interest stakes there. You can work with the region to promote the spirit of peace and reconciliation. It's easier for you, because you are not at war with the Russians or Americans and can use your influence to bring those influential powers to talks on reconciliation. In the meantime, here in the region, you have good relations with all countries. You're not biased. That's why you can play an important role.

I suggest, for instance, to conduct independent research to assess the current situation. You already have various contacts who can ask relevant questions for you and obtain answers. Perhaps the first thing for China to do is gain an insightful look into the situation of the Middle East. After sufficient research and survey, you can then propose constructive general ideas to solve the problem. We need such an approach as long as other partners have partisan approaches. Strategically, you are the only neutral country compared to the other superpowers already involved. So, first of all, the idea of commitment or structure is to study the case, to explore what can be done; and then have a more dynamic figure, the initiatives, something that China can accomplish—to show to other powers that China also has interests and you have a role to play and you can bring about some positive results.

Yang: Thank you for your advice. Recently, there have been some new developments in this region, for instance, the ceasefire in Syria and the new roles of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, plus the United States, and Russia. So, which direction do you think the regional situation is going? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about it?

Gemayel: As I mentioned at the beginning, there are two parts of the problem. First is the international dimension, namely the American and the Russian positions in the area. Then we have regional countries actively involved like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and others. For

any approach to be fruitful, it would require concerted actions from both dimensions.

Concerning Iran and Saudi Arabia, they are experiencing very heavy and deep—if not bloody—conflicts between themselves. That's why China has a role to play to appease the situation. The Russians and Americans have tried to ease the tension too, but the Russians are a close ally to Assad while the Americans are taking sides with the opposition. You are a superpower not involved in this conflict, and you can help Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two regional powers in this case, to live together side by side.

For the Arab states in question, they are neighbors with common borders. You are the country that is able to tell the Iranians that after the Khomeini revolution, Iran should keep calm and stop intervening into the affairs of other countries, not to be involved in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, or in Lebanon any more. We can actually work together, because our foreign policy in the region is also for peace. We are close to Saudi Arabia, but in the meantime we respect the Iranians. We don't have the ability to help conciliate or find a peace solution between these two countries. We have good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, so we can help—if you want, for instance, space for somebody to study and research on this issue, or we can work together on how to handle this phenomenon. This is one of my suggestions.

As a disinterested party, China can play a unique role in pushing for cooperation among global powers to mitigate Middle East conflicts.

Yang: Thank you. Because you are a great and esteemed friend of China, we especially need your wisdom and advice. China is learning, and needs to know more to contribute to the region. So this kind of dialogue is very useful. This past January, President Xi Jinping visited the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt. Almost at the same time, the Chinese government issued a policy paper on China's cooperation with the Arab world. These two events mark a new

milestone in China-Arab world relations. Nevertheless, China is not very experienced. As you know, China was a little bit detached. (**Gemayel:** You were, but not anymore.) But now China needs to shoulder more international responsibilities: on one hand, we need to maintain good relations

with all the parties involved; on the other hand, we need to pursue a more proactive policy. It's a matter of balance. Our talk can help a lot. May I suggest that our first video conference [to be held between both think tanks] be on China's new role in the Middle East, so that we can make preparations for China's future engagement in the region, as well as for exploring our cooperation with your think tank?

Gemayel: You are very modest in saying that you are inexperienced with what is going on in the Middle East, which is not the case. You have very good relations with various countries involved in the crisis, and you know exactly what should be done. For the present, we are all working for peace, but it may be that you don't have the means to achieve peace. But in the meantime, we know that we need to put in effort to convince the Saudis, Iranians, Syrians and others to appease conflicts.

China's Grand Vision of the Future World Order

Suleiman: I would like to exchange ideas with you on the topics of world order and its implications for the Middle East. The fourth industrial revolution, also dubbed as the digital revolution, will have profound impacts on the world order in the coming two decades. The global political order we have today is based on Western democratic values, but it is worthy of further consideration whether this will continue to be the case 20 years later. The global financial and social orders are in a similar situation. The interactions between different people and nations will surely deliver changes in values. As the existing world order fails, terrorism is threatening the world.

Some attribute terrorism to a certain nation, which is not true. The occurrence of terrorism is against globalization. The digital revolution has made it easier for us to exchange ideas, slogans, and services. With a small mobile phone, we can do all of these. Globalization is creating impact on all aspects of human life, which will further push for huge changes in the current world order. The current status cannot last long. With the rapid advances in science and technology and industrial development, we don't even know what kind of life we are going to have at the end of this year, early next year or the year after the next. We don't know what will happen to major big cities since people living there have more frequent communications. I think in the coming 20 or 30 years, the whole world will become much like a shared country, and people living in it can be called world citizens

since they have the features of being world citizens. The changes as a result of the fourth industrial revolution will make the world more and more open.

It is my belief that major world powers have the capability to draft new systems for our future generations, and they also have such responsibility. Major powers, in particular, the capable powers, should be prepared. If not, turmoil will happen before stability takes root. In addition, small countries should not be excluded from the process. They have the legal rights to participate in the process despite being small. And if they are excluded and their rights are neglected, they will most likely express their requests by extreme means, just like what terrorists are doing today. Academic institutions should conduct research on what is real democracy that can be effectively implemented and on how to include the more vulnerable groups in globalization. If the rights of those vulnerable in the Middle East are neglected, the Middle East will be continuously fragmented, which will produce tremendous negative effects.

The right direction of globalization should be openness. The borders between the European Union and Arab countries should be open though we do not need military and cultural expansion. If the world is not moving in the right direction, we should stop in our steps and reduce the frequency, and we should more pragmatically solve the problems like poverty and disease. These are my views about the Middle East and the world.

Last but not least, I would like to discuss with you about the model of

The UNSC-centered model should be upheld in combating terrorism and saving the Middle East from being fragmented.

the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Nowadays, many countries want to change this model. We do not hope that the Security Council becomes sectarian. If the five Permanent Members (P5) cannot even exterminate terrorist organizations like Daesh (ISIS), it will lose its legitimacy. If the institution cannot solve such a problem, what is the sense for its existence?

Also, the UN Security Council should take actions to stop the further fragmentation of the Middle East—whether it is sectarian or ethnic. There appeared a point of view last year that those countries in disorder should be further divided into smaller countries. This proposal originated from Israel. They want to divide Arab countries and to further disunite them. By this proposal, they mean to divide Lebanon,

which is a combination of various sects. As we know, Lebanon is a diversified country, and external forces are tearing it apart like a piece of cloth. The different sects of Lebanon used to be united and integrated, but they are hostile toward each other now and are fighting against each other. Regional countries should not benefit from dismembering another country. This process has lasted for decades, and it should not continue into the future since it is poisonous.

Yang: Many thanks for Your Excellency's profound analysis. I agree with you that the UN Security Council should be strengthened but reformed. Britain and France are among those which are worried about losing their seats since almost all the plans of reform request that the EU should become a permanent member. Meanwhile, China is developing, and China should take up much more international responsibilities. We hope that the world, including Lebanon, can work together to make the UN more representative.

I would also like to make three points in response to your analysis. **The first point is that we need great strategists in the face of a world with increasing challenges.** Talking with you reminded me of another short dialogue I had with Lee Kuan Yew, the late Prime Minister of Singapore, a dozen of years ago. Singapore is among the smallest countries in Southeast Asia. But the rise of great thinkers does not necessarily depend on the size of the country they are living in. We need both philosophical ideas and pragmatic solutions to the problems of our own countries, our own regions, and the world.

My second point is about some basic Chinese perceptions of the current international system and world order. China thinks that today's world is characterized by political multipolarization, economic globalization, cultural diversification, and information-based society. Due to these four features or trends, the world is seeing great changes in the international power structure and international system. Lebanon was one of the fifty founding members of the United Nations more than seventy years ago, and was particularly among the very few founding members coming from

Representing the interests of developing countries, China embraces the vision of building a fair and equitable international community.

the community of newly independent Asian, African, and Latin American countries. But the world has changed. Today, we have about 200 countries in the world. We should stick to those principles that have proven to be right. For instance, every member, big or small, should equally have one vote. Some big powers feel uncomfortable. They call it “majority tyranny” since the majority of UN members often vote against the United States, which makes it unhappy.

But on the other hand, those ideas or institutions which are obviously out of date, for instance, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, should be changed. Therefore, China proposed to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS New Development Bank. When President Xi Jinping was visiting the United States last September, President Barack Obama hinted that China and the United States can dominate the world if the two join hands. He meant to build a G2 model though he didn't say it explicitly. President Xi Jinping immediately said no to his proposal. China would always stress that China is the only developing country among the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, and China should represent the interests of small and medium-sized countries, as Your Excellency mentioned.

My third point is about the future of the world. Or to put in another way, what the world that we are working for will look like. We Chinese think that it will take another 50 to 100 years or even longer time to realize a common world. President Xi calls for the building of three communities: first, a community of common interests, then a community of common responsibilities, and lastly and most importantly, a community of shared future. That is the thinking of us Chinese. He also proposed the Belt and Road Initiatives. The Middle East with Lebanon as an important part is one of the crucial part of the community of shared future. We will expect more support and understanding from Your Excellency and the Lebanese people in the decades to come.