



Security Council SC/8696

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

Security Council
5417th Meeting* (AM)

LEBANON'S HISTORIC TRANSITION NOT YET COMPLETE, BUT IMPORTANT PROGRESS

MADE TOWARDS SELF-GOVERNANCE, STABILITY, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Prime Minister Says Ongoing National Dialogue Has Reached Consensus on Broad Range of Issues, Including Relations with Syria

After many years of civil strife, Israeli occupation and Syrian presence, the great historic transition that the Lebanese people had started a year ago was not yet complete, but important strides had been made on the road towards self-governance, stability, democracy and increased prosperity, the Security Council was told this morning.

In his address to the Security Council, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora stressed the positive role of the United Nations in helping Lebanon move forward in its transition towards the achievement of its territorial integrity, full independence and sovereignty, updated the Council Members of recent developments in his country and shared his thoughts on a number of issues of common interest and concern.

Mr. Siniora said that the Conference of National Dialogue, which had been initiated last March, was a clear expression of his country's readiness to address difficult national issues in a serious and peaceful manner. Consensus had been reached on such matters as relations with Syria, the delimitation of all common borders between Lebanon and Syria, including, first and foremost, the Shaba'a farms area, as well as the policy towards Palestinians in Lebanon. Also addressed was the international investigation and judicial process relating to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his companions in February 2005. Politicians representing the Parliament's 14 blocks are to resume the National Dialogue talks next week, with the presidency of the republic and Hizbollah's weapons and their role in the defence of Lebanon among the remaining issues.

Putting the Lebanese-Syrian relations on the right footing would be a major challenge, he stressed, but the Conference on National Dialogue had unanimously agreed that the relations between the two sister countries should be strong and positive, based on mutual respect, parity and non-interference, and he personally strongly believed in that. "The scars left by the dramatic developments of the past 19 months, and the heavy-handed interference in Lebanese domestic affairs by the Syrian security establishment for many years, are not easy to heal," he said. However, for the sake of fairness, it was also necessary to admit that, for a long part of the past 30 years, Syria had played a very constructive role in putting an end to attempts to partition Lebanon and in helping his country to achieve the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000.

One of the priorities was the question of liberation of still occupied area bordering Syria's Golan Heights, referred to as Shaba'a Farms, he said. It was incumbent upon Israel to withdraw from it, hand over the Lebanese detainees, submit the maps of landmines it had left in the south, and stop its infringements of Lebanese sovereignty. He looked forward to an active role of the United Nations in helping his country to achieve those rightful demands. Agreeing with Syria on the border line separating the Shaba'a Farms from the Syrian Golan Heights would be an important step towards achieving full withdrawal of the Israelis from Lebanon to the internationally recognized borders in accordance with Council resolution [425 \(1978\)](#).

A statement was also made this morning by the representative of Syria, who expressed regret over the rumours that there was tension between the two fraternal countries. Bilateral relations between Syria and Lebanon were dictated by their history and geography, and no external factor could separate them. There was no problem in demarcating the border, as some had implied. As for the line in the Shaba'a Farms area, Israel must withdraw from the occupied territory before the two countries could demarcate it. The questions of exchange of ambassadors and demarcation were issues of sovereignty for Lebanon and Syria, and others should not interfere with them.

The meeting started at 10:35 a.m. and was adjourned at 11:10 a.m.

Background

Meeting to consider the situation in the Middle East, the Security Council this morning was scheduled to hear an address by the Prime Minister of Lebanon.

Statements

Prime Minister of Lebanon, FOUAD SINIORA, said that the Organization's support had been instrumental in helping Lebanon move forward in its transition towards the achievement of its territorial integrity, full independence and sovereignty. It was important not only to Lebanon, but also for the region. The United Nations positive role demonstrated that international institutions could be effective in protecting the legitimate rights of small countries, enabling them to achieve those rights through peaceful means.

The great historic transition that the Lebanese people had started a year ago was not yet complete, but, while a number of serious challenges remained, important strides had been made on the road towards self-governance, stability, democracy and increased prosperity. After many years of civil strife, Israeli occupation and Syrian presence, during which most major policy issues were managed either by non-Lebanese or were in some cases considered taboo or too sensitive to tackle, the Lebanese had started to engage in real and serious debate over all policy matters. Initiated last March, the Conference of National Dialogue was a clear expression of the readiness of the Lebanese to address difficult national issues in a serious and peaceful manner.

Participants in the process, which grouped 14 representatives of all parliamentary blocks, had already achieved significant progress, he continued. Consensus had been reached on such matters as relations with Syria, the delimitation of all common borders between Lebanon and Syria, including, first and foremost, the Shaba'a farms area, as well as the policy towards Palestinians in Lebanon. Also addressed was the international investigation and judicial process relating to the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and his companions. The Lebanese people had shown remarkable resilience in the face of systematic attempts to terrorize and intimidate them by means of bombings and the assassination of a number of pro-independence political figures and media personalities. They had demonstrated that they had moved a long way towards a united and stable country, a country that could not be easily fractured or intimidated.

It was a major challenge to put the Lebanese-Syrian relations on the right footing, he continued. The scars left by the dramatic developments of the past 19 months, and the heavy-handed interference in Lebanese domestic affairs by the Syrian security establishment for many years, were not easy to heal. However, for the sake of fairness, it was necessary to admit that, for a long part of the past 30 years, Syria had played a very important and constructive role in putting an end to attempts to partition Lebanon and in helping his country to achieve the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from most of the south in 2000. The Conference of National Dialogue had unanimously agreed that the relations between the two sister countries should be strong and positive, based on mutual respect, parity and non-interference, and he personally strongly believed in that.

Such relations required, first and foremost, an effort to re-establish confidence between the two countries, a genuine acceptance by the Syrian Government of a truly independent Lebanon, and a genuine recognition that a free sovereign Lebanon could have good relations with Syria. That was a challenge. In his view, a positive response by Syria on the steps agreed by all parties in the National Dialogue, including the establishment of diplomatic relations and delineation of the borders between the two countries, including the Shaba'a farms area, would be an indication that the Syrian Government was beginning to accept the idea that good relations were possible. Such relations were in the interest of both countries.

Israeli occupation of large parts of its territory since 1978, as well as several other invasions and aggressions, had resulted in major destruction and dislocation, he said. In May 2000, Israel had withdrawn from most of the occupied territories, with the exception of an area bordering Syria's Golan Heights, referred to as Shaba'a Farms. For Lebanon, liberation of that still occupied Lebanese land was a priority. It was incumbent upon Israel to withdraw from it, hand over the Lebanese detainees, submit the maps of landmines it had left in the south and stop its infringements of Lebanese sovereignty. He looked forward to an active role by the United Nations in helping his country to achieve those rightful demands.

Agreeing with Syria on the border line separating the Shaba'a Farms from the Syrian Golan Heights would be an important step towards achieving full withdrawal of the Israelis from Lebanon to the internationally recognized borders, in accordance with Council resolution 425 (1978), he said. The Syrian Government had already declared verbally that the Shaba'a Farms region was part of the Lebanese territory. Lebanon had approached the Syrian Government, in order to delineate the border, so that the two countries could deposit the border agreement with the United Nations. Lebanon was still awaiting a positive response from Syria. In any event, it would be requesting the Secretary-General to confirm specific steps required for the United Nations to recognize Lebanese sovereignty over the territory of the Shaba'a Farms.

He said that another Government priority was the implementation of the policies towards the Palestinians in Lebanon, including discussions to end all armed presence outside the refugee camps within six months and, subsequently, to address the issue of weapons and security within the camps — all in line with Lebanon's sovereignty and the State's obligations to provide security to all, throughout its territory, in accordance with the 1989 Taef National Reconciliation Pact.

He said the Government had also initiated a major effort to improve the living conditions of Palestinian refugees, in cooperation with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which embodied the international community's responsibility towards those refugees, who had been forced out of their country at the establishment of Israel. For many years, Lebanon's relations with the Palestinian refugees had been difficult, involving armed conflict in certain periods. The difficult living conditions in the refugee camps had allowed them to become breeding grounds and safe havens for various armed factions, and Lebanon intended to do its utmost to help change those conditions, in cooperation with the international community and donor countries. Discussions had started with the Palestinians to address economic and humanitarian needs, in addition to the issue of arms and security.

Another challenge was agreement on two remaining issues, the first of which was the presidency of the republic, he said. Currently, the majority in Parliament considered the September 2004 extension of President [Emile] Lahoud's term for three more years to have been the result of interference and coercion by Syria, which had wielded great influence over the Lebanese Parliament at that time. Because the majority in Parliament was not sufficient to constitutionally shorten the President's extended term, thus paving the way for the election of a new President, the issue had been referred to the National Dialogue with the hope of reaching a consensus. The National Dialogue would convene on 28 April to take up that issue again.

The other issue to be taken up by the National Dialogue was Hizbollah's weapons and their role in the defence of Lebanon, he said. While there was consensus in the country on the important role that the resistance, spearheaded by Hezbollah, had played in forcing Israel's withdrawal from the south in May 2000, as well as on the fact that the Shaba'a Farms remained occupied, the future role of Hizbollah's weapons in defending Lebanon was a matter of national debate, which would be carried out in the context of a strategy agreed among the Lebanese on how best to defend the country against the backdrop of the Taef Accord, United Nations resolutions on Lebanon, the continued occupation of the Shaba'a Farms and the long history of Israel's incursions into, and violations of, Lebanese territory. Reconciling those considerations with the natural obligations of the State to provide security to all its citizens and residents, and the State's right to a monopoly over arms and the exercise of its full authority throughout the country, was a major challenge to be addressed in the period ahead.

Regarding the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri, he said the success of the Independent International Investigation Commission in uncovering the perpetrators and bringing them to justice was important not only for the Hariri assassination, but also because Lebanon had suffered most in the region from political assassinations over the past two decades. Revealing the truth and serving justice on those found guilty would be a major deterrent to those who might contemplate such heinous crimes in Lebanon, or elsewhere. In order to ensure continuity in the investigation and help bring it to a successful conclusion, Lebanon would strongly support an extension of the Commission's term, as deemed necessary. With regard to the establishment of a tribunal of international character, Lebanon stood ready to conclude discussions with the United Nations legal team as soon as possible, to ensure that the investigation would be phased smoothly into the tribunal.

What happened in Lebanon had a significant impact on the whole region, he said, noting that, as part of the Arab and Muslim worlds, the Lebanese had every interest and responsibility to work together against the forces of extremism and despair, by addressing the reasons that lay behind them. Lebanon wished to return to the principles of moderation and tolerance that had characterized the region and the religions that had emanated from it. The international community had an interest and responsibility to help the people of the region to shake off the feelings of helplessness and despair, and to contribute to regional efforts in building more democratic and prosperous societies.

He said the increasingly widespread prejudice and stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as violent or inherently hostile to the West only fed into the pervasive sense of humiliation and anger, as did the international community's failure to correct the great injustice done to the Palestinian people. Spanning more than six decades, that sense of grave injustice had undoubtedly provided fertile ground for extremist and violent minds to engage, in the name of religion, in activities against innocent people, which contradicted the principles of all religions. On the other hand, Israel continued to refuse the Arab Peace Initiative, thus maintaining instability in the region and throughout the Muslim world. Cooperation and mobilization of joint efforts to achieve a just and comprehensive peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, as well as with other Arab countries, would contribute to the cause of democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

MILAD ATIEH ([Syria](#)) said that his delegation had requested to speak to explain his country's position on certain points mentioned by the Prime Minister. Bilateral relations between the two countries and peoples were dictated by their history and geography, and no external factor could separate them. He regretted the attempt of certain parties to undermine those relations by spreading rumours that there was tension between the two fraternal countries. Syria had helped to bring stability to Lebanon and sacrificed many of its sons in defence of that country. The Prime Minister had spoken about the constructive role of Syria against the attempts to divide Lebanon.

On the demarcation of the border, he said that there was no problem in doing that, as some had implied. His country had stated that it was willing to demarcate the line, and Syria's Prime Minister had sent a letter to his Lebanese counterpart on that subject. As for the delineation of the border in the Shaba'a Farms area, Israel must withdraw from the occupied territory before the two countries could demarcate that border.

Regarding the diplomatic representation between the two countries, he said that Syria reaffirmed its respect for the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. If there was a mutual desire to renew diplomatic relations, that matter should be considered by the parties themselves. Syria affirmed its support for the National Dialogue in Lebanon, and hoped it would be crowned with success. All the questions discussed by the Lebanese should be left to them, so that they could reach agreement without external interference.

Syria had implemented the provisions of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004) when it withdrew all of its troops and personnel from Lebanon, he said. Some parties had stated that the question of the demarcation of borders and exchange of ambassadors had been rejected by his country. However, the questions of exchange of ambassadors and demarcation were issues of sovereignty for Lebanon and Syria, and others should not interfere with them.

In conclusion, he said that peace in the Middle East would come from complete withdrawal of Israel from occupied territories to the lines prior to 4 June 1967. Some had taken advantage of their presence on the Council to ensure Middle East resolutions were implemented in a selective manner, but that was contrary to the interests of the Middle East. The Council needed to insist on the implementation of resolutions relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

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* The 5416th Meeting was closed.

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