

# A Changing State?

## An Introduction to Lebanon, the US, and the Middle East after the summer of 2006

Rami Khouri  
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*Interview by Brian McLoone*

*Rami Khouri, a Palestinian-Jordanian and US citizen, is the Director of the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. Mr. Khouri is an internationally syndicated political columnist, author, and editor-at-large of The Daily Star, Lebanon's premier English newspaper. In November 2006, he was awarded the Pax Christi International Peace Award for his efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the Middle East. Possessing personal knowledge of the culture and policies of the United States as well as having a vast repertoire of experience in Lebanon and the broader Middle East, Mr. Khouri provides a unique perspective on the significant issues faced in the Middle East and in the US today. The New Initiative for Middle East Peace would like to personally acknowledge and thank Mr. Khouri for providing vision and insight to this year's fact-finding delegation to Lebanon. NIMEP had the privilege of working with Mr. Khouri in preparation for and during their 2007 research trip.*

**Brian McLoone :** In what terms do you understand the current strife in Lebanon? Do you see the protests and civil disobedience as acting within democratic parameters?

**Rami Khouri:** Generally it's existed within democratic parameters. There have been some cases where there's been a bit of bullying and people sort of imposing themselves on others. But broadly speaking, it's been within the bounds of the acceptable, except where people started shooting each other and things like that. But generally speaking it's been peaceful and reasonable.

**McLoone:** How has Hezbollah's popularity varied from the beginning of the protest to what is going on now?

**Khouri:** It's hard to tell that exactly. The polling data suggests that its popularity has slipped a little bit. Just living here, and talking to people, I think they've lost a little support, as have some of their allies, like Michel Aoun. But at the same time, so has the government. There's just been more polarization of the society, there's very few people left who are right in the middle or left on the fence. I think there's been a little bit of shifting back and forth.

**McLoone:** In particular, I'm interested in how younger Lebanese are viewing Hezbollah right now.

**Khouri:** There isn't one view. The country is very divided, and they even reflect the attitudes of their parents; some are big supporters of Hezbollah, others are very critical. But what is clear is that many young people are having a hard time getting a job in this environment where the economy is slowing down severely. A lot of young people are thinking of moving abroad to find work and giving up hope on the country in the short run. That's a big problem.

**McLoone:** I was curious as to how Lebanese and Arab media have been covering Lebanon recently. What kind of message do you think it's sending about sectarian politics, for instance?

**Khouri:** The media, the Arab and Lebanese media, is very, very diverse. There isn't a single answer to that question. The media reflects the political spectrum of views all over the Middle East. Many in the media have looked at this in sectarian terms; others have looked at it in ideological and political terms. Still others have seen it as a global struggle with Iran, the US, and others from outside the Arab world. So there really has been a wide range of perspectives in the media, which I think pretty accurately reflects the opinions of people in the region. It depends really where you stand because where you stand will determine how you see the conflict and how you report about it. I think it's pretty clear to everybody that there isn't one single dimension to this conflict. It's not just a local Lebanese power struggle, and it's not just a regional struggle between regional powers, and it's not just a global struggle between Iran and the US. It's really all three of these things together.

**McLoone:** How do you see Hezbollah's growing popularity and political strength affecting Israeli-Lebanese relations, particularly as they use violent tactics? What is the possibility of another cross-border conflict?

**Khouri:** Well, I would be very careful with the first part of your question. I mean you had a bunch of loaded assumptions there. I'm not a Hezbollah fan or enemy, but I think you have to be very careful with your questions because they are full of assumptions that Hezbollah may use more violence and that it's dangerous to get them involved in politics. I think you should be more neutral in your questions. The assumption is that Hezbollah and its allies are already getting more involved in politics, they have been for some years, since the early Nineties, and I think most people find that this is perfectly normal. What people are careful to maintain is a type of democratic system, where decisions are made by consensus or a democratic process, nobody forces their decisions on others.

**McLoone:** How do you perceive the assertion that the level of Syrian power in the region relies heavily on the state of the Arab-Israeli conflict?

**Khouri:** That's a difficult equation to make. Syria is part of the Arab-Israeli conflict and has suffered from it, but like most of the players in the region, it uses its status as a player to act diplomatically and in other ways, and to engage people, either positively or negatively. So I think it's a little unfair just to single Syria out like that. I think it's Israel and the other people in the region who do the same thing. Certainly Syria uses the Arab-Israeli conflict as a lever for its national interest, but I think most people do the same thing. So it's not exclusive to Syria.

**McLoone:** Do you feel that instability in Lebanon invites foreign influence? And if so, what would be your projection regarding this current crisis?

**Khouri:** Part of the reason that you have instability is that you have foreign influence; it's not the other way around. It's kind of the chicken and the egg. Instability and foreign influence go hand in hand and feed off each other in many ways. This is one of Lebanon's problems: that it has been so open to foreign interference and manipulation that many Lebanese groups allow themselves to become agents or proxies of foreign governments. It is one of the chronic problems and weaknesses of the country, and you have a situation where the international and regional issues get superimposed on top of one another which make them more difficult to solve.

**McLoone:** What is the role of Iran in Lebanon in light of increased Shiite political activity?

**Khouri:** Iran is deeply involved in Lebanon, mostly by Hezbollah. The extent of its involvement is debated. People debate it very intensely. But clearly it is structurally linked to Hezbollah, and it helps it in many ways, with money, and arms, and religious connections, social services, training, technical training. So Iran is a player obviously, but so are most of the other powers. So are the Saudis, the Americans, and the Israelis used to be, years ago. Both

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sides are getting support from foreign groups, such as Syria, Iran, the US, and others. Again, it’s important to see that Iran is involved in Lebanon, but not to single them out.

**McLoone:** How has America’s image changed among Lebanese from the spring of 2005 to the summer of 2006 to now?

**Khouri:** The war [in July/August 2006] caused many Lebanese who had been favorable to America’s role in Lebanon to become a little bit more skeptical, because the US helped Israel so explicitly in attacking Lebanon. Many Lebanese who thought the US was really helping Lebanon started to change their minds. They thought, ‘The US doesn’t really care about Lebanon, it just uses us because it thinks we’re a tool they can use against Syria and Iran.’ So I think there’s mixed feelings about what the US really feels about Lebanon. But others in Lebanon still firmly support the US. They think it can help Lebanon protect itself against Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, against others. So you have mixed feelings. But most people in Lebanon are skeptical of what the US’ real commitment to Lebanon’s well-being, freedom and independence is.

**McLoone:** What is the best role for the US in Lebanon, if it should have a role?

**Khouri:** It’s perfectly normal for a superpower like the US to be involved and engaged in a country like Lebanon, but I think it has to do so according to certain basic principles that are, first of all, worked out with the Lebanese, and second, are universally applied. Promoting freedom, promoting democracy, promoting UN resolutions all those are fine things for the US to promote, but it has to do so consistently. It can’t talk about promoting

freedom and then give Israel time, money, ammunition, and fuel to destroy Lebanon, as it did last summer. The inconsistency in the US policy is the real problem, which leads people to see the US as hypocritical. The best thing the US could do is agree with the majority of the Lebanese people about what defines the best possible relationship and apply principles or standards consistently across the region.