
(Lebanon, Syria, Israel (1991–2000): illusory negotiations)

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Amal Nader wrote her book Lebanon, Syria, Israel (1991–2000): illusory negotiations as part of her PhD in communication, which she defended at Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle. It studies a tripartite relationship in a negotiation context. The first milestone she chose was 30 October 1991, the opening date of the Madrid conference. This date is also justified because it was at the end of the Lebanese civil war and the Gulf War, during which Damascus participated in the coalition against Saddam Hussein. That episode paved the way for the Madrid peace conference, while leaving the Syrians free rein in Lebanon. That was the “new world order” called for by President Bush, characterised by relative optimism regarding the negotiations. The period ended with the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, following the failure of the Assad-Clinton summit in Geneva.

For her book, Amal Nader chose the prism of the written press. In doing so, she was able to benefit from her status as a journalist, her knowledge of the Lebanese environment and the trust she had built through informal interviews. Her analysis is based on a sorting software devised by the author herself, which organised and analysed the front-page articles of two Arabic-speaking Lebanese daily newspapers considered representative of the Lebanese press. An-Nahar (The Day), founded in 1933 by Gebran Tueni, appears to be pro-Christian and a defender of Lebanon’s independence. As-Safir (The Ambassador), founded in 1974 by Talal Salman, is pro-Arab and supports resistance against Israel and Syrian policy, particularly on the subject of negotiations. Both are comparable in terms of their distribution, estimated at 32,000 copies. Based on the “citation rates”, the author identifies two denser periods: 1994–1996 and 1999–2000. The study is conducted horizontally, event by event, year by year, and vertically, by newspaper and by author.

The book contains a preamble providing a general historical and geopolitical overview. At the end of the book, there is an index with the names of people and places, and a useful appendix for presenting newspapers and a table of the personalities and journalists mentioned.

The main body of the study comprises six chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a historical overview of Lebanon, with its relations with neighbouring States serving as a common thread. Using Ghassan Tueni’s expression of “war
of others”, the author reviews the arrival of Palestinian refugees, the weakness of the Lebanese State, the civil war that broke out in 1975, the intervention of Syrian troops in 1976, the Israeli invasion in 1978 and the establishment of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), considering that the Lebanese were “between the Israeli anvil and the Syrian hammer” (p. 37). The chapter shows the impact of these interactions on Lebanon until the “Syrian peace” formalised by the Treaty for Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination, signed between Damascus and Beirut on 22 May 1991, following the Taif Agreement. The treaty provided for a common destiny. For her analysis, the author considers the formation of a “strategic coupling” between the two countries during the negotiations (p. 42).

The second chapter is devoted to the Lebanese press’s coverage of the country’s international position during the period. Her aim was to identify the repetition of terms in the discourse of four actors: the Lebanese, the Syrians, the Israelis and the Americans. As a sign of the end of the Cold War, Russia is absent. From this quantitative approach, conclusions are drawn. First of all, her approach makes it possible to situate the appearance of words – and therefore claims – in time, such as “normalisation” during the Syrian-Israeli exchanges of 1994. Secondly, Lebanon’s silence is strongly emphasised – the author speaks of “limited sovereignty” (p. 83) – by the very absence of statements by Lebanese political leaders in the press. The main interest is, then, to perceive the way in which journalists managed to carefully deplore the situation. That was particularly the case with An-Nahar. At the 1994 Clinton-Assad summit, Ghassan Tueni invited Lebanese leaders to take the initiative. In 1999, Sahar Ba’assiri deplored the absence of a coordination meeting between Lebanon and Syria before the Washington meeting, at least for the country’s dignity. These veiled criticisms are always accompanied by a sentence welcoming the coupling of Syrian and Lebanese issues in the negotiations. Finally, attention to slogans helps to show their evolution. Indeed, both the political and media worlds are sensitive to the concise and striking nature of slogans. In 1991, Hafez al-Assad launched the slogan “land for peace” – that is, the recovery of the entire territory lost in 1967 – and a few years later, the “peace of the brave” (salam ach-chaj’an), when he accepted to negotiate with Israel. Yitzhak Shamir’s slogan “peace for peace” echoed that slogan, revealing an irreducible gap between both positions. Lebanon’s absence is even visible in the words: its leaders did not devise any of the slogans taken up by the press. We thus find the genesis of outdated slogans, the author underlining the repetitions, associated with the lack of progress. While the term “comprehensive peace” seems to have been accepted by all after 1991, it covers such diverse realities that it is unable to reconcile their positions.

Chapters 3 to 6 propose a chronological approach to the nine years studied. Chapter 3 deals with the period in which Lebanon participated in the negotiations on its own behalf, from 1991 to 1993. The Madrid episode ended in failure. The two newspapers reported on it under the title “No party in Madrid” (la ‘id fi Madrid), thought up by Talal Salman in As-Safir. The recognition of that failure led journalists to praise the Syrians and Lebanese for their reluctance to participate. Yitzhak Rabin’s assumption of power in Israel made it possible to envisage negotiations on the Golan question and reach an agreement with the Palestinians through the Oslo Accords in 1993, which had a huge impact, even though they were described by Ghassan Tueni as a “peace of fear”. As a result, Lebanon’s voice was no longer heard (p. 112) and only “Israeli-Syrian” negotiations are mentioned. This created a new form of
negotiation: “the Lebanese negotiator is no longer part of the architecture of these negotiations” (p. 113), Lebanon remaining a central issue in the discussions.

Chapter 4 begins with the US-Syrian summit in January 1994 and continues with direct negotiations between Syria and Israel until the Wye Plantation round in February 1996. Lebanese President Elias Hrawi released one of his rare statements on the subject to An-Nahar, feeling the need to specify that the Syrian President was going to Geneva to “defend all Arab causes”. On the occasion of the signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan on 26 October 1994, Bill Clinton made a visit to Syria, the first for an American president since 1974. Ghassan Tueni took the opportunity to recall that the Lebanese presidential palace was still located in Lebanon (p. 138).

Chapter 5 reports on the peace process after Rabin’s assassination. Shimon Peres used the direct negotiations held at Wye Plantation to try to dissociate the Syrian-Lebanese couple, stating “it is up to Lebanon to decide whether it wants to be a state within another state”. In both newspapers, however, the subject was poorly covered, not exceeding one article per issue. In order to fully understand, we can add that, unlike in previous negotiations, delegations were isolated from the press. Benjamin Netanyahu’s rise to power led to a freeze on negotiations between 1996 and 1999. This period, and in particular after Operation Grapes of Wrath, led to the emergence of Hezbollah as an actor in the press. Its role was particularly approved by As-Safir, as part of the Resistance and a precious strategic card (ouaraqa thamina).

Finally, the last chapter deals with the latest direct Syrian-Israeli negotiations. An-Nahar was waiting for the Lebanese track (p. 189), even revealing the names of the members of the Lebanese delegation. It also includes analyses by journalists of Palestinian origin such as Nabil Khoury, who, in his article, appreciated that Damascus was not making the mistake the Palestinians had made in Oslo, and knew, thanks to Lebanon, how to recreate a balance against the Israelis. Talal Salman even praised Farouq al-Chare’, Syrian Foreign Minister, for using Lebanon as ammunition (zakhira). The last meeting, held between Assad and Clinton in Geneva in March 2000, failed, as both newspapers incriminated American policy, which was in line with the Israeli ally. The result was a unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon by the Israelis, moving from “Lebanon first” to “Lebanon only”.

This chronological approach makes it possible to highlight processing differences between the two newspapers. First of all, throughout the sequence, Amal Nader notes optimism in An-Nahar at each negotiation, and pessimism in As-Safir, which willingly covered demonstrations of dissatisfaction during the conferences. In addition, the hierarchy of information differs. An-Nahar focused on events affecting Lebanon, trying to anticipate the opening of a Lebanese track of negotiations. Conversely, As-Safir relayed official Syrian information, using its correspondent in Damascus or favouring exclusive statements such as that of the Syrian ambassador in Washington, Walid al-Mu’alleem. Finally, the community dimension that appeared at the end of the 1990s widened the processing gap between the two newspapers. After Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Gebran Tueni wrote an editorial entitled: “Where are you?” to request the deployment of the Lebanese army to protect the population, the majority of whom were Christian. In contrast, As-Safir blew the whistle on collaborators or fugitives, rejoicing at the victory of the resistance and the role of Shia Hezbollah. That “return to identity” created a new polarisation of the Lebanese media, which went beyond the subject of the negotiations. Nevertheless,
both newspapers were particularly attentive to American politics, an omnipresent mediator, perceived as the only one likely to bring peace in the region.

Throughout this panorama, the absence of Lebanon in the negotiations makes this a particularly stimulating case study. The press mirrors Lebanon’s silence, either deploring or justifying it. We would like to add that Syria’s leadership in the Syrian-Lebanese-Israeli negotiations was acknowledged by the American mediator. When James Baker, US Secretary of State, visited Damascus in 1991, he received the Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, effectively accepting that Lebanon was subordinate to Syria. It is also possible to deduce the differences in political regimes from the study, as negotiations were affected by the Israeli and American elections, which contrasted with the longevity of the political staff and the constancy of the Syrian position.

However, it is perhaps a downfall that the approach is sometimes too linear, accentuated by the repetition of the negotiation themes, sometimes preventing the identification of inflections. Moreover, the specificity of the author’s approach is not sufficiently exploited. In particular, the contribution of her software, the methodology of “media studies”, and, more generally, the journalistic prism for understanding the sequence, are somewhat lacking. The author’s profile also makes us curious about the exchanges she had with journalists, whose comments could help the reader to understand the red lines that should not be crossed, particularly with regard to Syria. Without multiplying the elements of the comparison, an incursion into the French-speaking Lebanese press could occasionally be enlightening, as the negotiations regularly made the headlines in the newspaper L’Orient-le-Jour, for example, including during the freeze period (1996–1999). Finally, the author would benefit from a greater use of the literature on the negotiations, including in English. This would help to conceptualise, from her observations, the notions of triangular negotiation or Syrian-Lebanese “couple”. For example, the American “two-track approach”, aimed at creating a dynamic reconciling the Arab demand for an international conference and Israel’s demand for direct negotiation with the various parties, could enrich her research. These remarks do not detract from the merit of the approach adopted, but would rather consist in developing it in greater detail.

Beyond that, this book is all the more interesting as it takes place in a context of uncertainties regarding the status of the press in Lebanon, following the definitive closure of As-Safir in early 2017. It helps the reader to perceive the processing of information by a press marked by a tradition of freedom, described as a “forum”, but of course unanimously supportive of the slogans of the Arab side, taken up without detachment. In particular, the extent to which these negotiations were accompanied by public diplomacy, i.e., exchanges through statements in newspapers, is very clear. The press also played a role of disclosure. That was the case with the Israeli press, which revealed the content of Rabin’s proposal to withdraw from the Golan heights, which was supposed to be confidential. This book is, above all, an incursion into an Arabic corpus that appears in the original language in the footnotes. This direct access to sources is invaluable. We then discover, or rediscover, with pleasure the writings of the great editorial writers of the Lebanese press, during a key chapter in the history of the region. They appear both as witnesses and influencers of their time. The press combines an informative and analytical dimension and, in this dual role, gives us access to perceptions and
representations, as well as events. Above all, the comparative dimension enables us to understand what the consensus was in Lebanese society. And, on the other hand, to understand how political or confessional diversity can explain editorial choices. We cannot emerge from this incursion into the Lebanese press without considering the continuation of the historical sequence and the new sources of polarisation, as well as the fate of some of the country’s journalists. Therein, too, lies the interest of this book.