

Lebanon's First Republic: The 1943 National Pact and Different Visions of Lebanon

Prior to Lebanon's proclamation of independence and the articulation of the National Pact in 1943, parts of the political establishment held different visions of their state. Certain elements of Lebanon's "Christian" population preferred the continuation of the French Mandate because they believed that French colonial protection was still needed vis-à-vis the large Muslim population of the region, and because they wished to retain their relatively privileged status under the mandate. By 1943, however, most of these Christians accepted the formalization of the Lebanese state, considering it a vehicle by which they could guarantee their collective security and independence in a Muslim-dominated region. On the other hand, a large segment of the population -- the majority of Muslims as well as pro-independence Christians -- welcomed independence, viewing it as a step toward Lebanon's integration into the region. The National Pact managed to reconcile these two visions of Lebanon, but the pro-West versus pro-Arab orientations continued to divide the Lebanese on the question of their country's regional identity: "Is Lebanon Arab or not?"

Some participants interpreted the National Pact as if it were a marriage built on a "double divorce": " 'no' to close alliance and protection from France, and 'no' to merger with a larger Arab entity. It outlined what policies were not to be followed without indicating what policies were to be followed."³ Paul Salem argued that the pact's vagueness was one of the prime reasons for the instability of Lebanon's foreign policy since independence. Furthermore, regional events began to overtake the pact's foreign policy provisions: "The conflict between pro-French and pro-Arab orientations soon became outdated with the collapse of French colonial power; this 1943 arrangement had nothing

³ Not all participants agreed that the National Pact was this nebulous. Raghid el-Solh argued that the pact did outline a foreign policy direction for Lebanon: independence from France and all other foreign domination; brotherly relations with Syria based on equality; membership in the Arab League and the international community. The pact's intent was to encourage Lebanon's active participation within the Arab collective system, to promote Arab cooperation and interrelations. A confused interpretation of the pact equates Lebanon's "Arabness" with its closeness to Syria: "Drawing closer to Syria means Lebanon is Arab; drawing away from Syria means that Lebanon is not Arab." el-Solh completely rejected this interpretation.