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Lebanese presidential hopeful a visiting prof  
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BY ROBERT STERN

PRINCETON BOROUGH -- When the long-running conflict between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia erupted into a 33-day war this summer, Lebanese presidential hopeful Chibli Mallat put out an S.O.S. call of sorts to a couple of his friends who teach at Princeton University.

Within 10 days or so, the two Princeton professors made arrangements to bring Mallat, along with his wife and their two teenage sons, to the United States from their besieged city of Beirut, he said.

The trans-Atlantic temporary refuge mission -- spearheaded by Kim L. Scheppele, director of Princeton's program in law and public affairs, and Princeton anthropology professor John Borneman -- had a scholarly angle as well.

It has given Mallat several joint visiting research and teaching posts at Princeton for the current academic year, cobbled across various programs and departments to share the cost for his yearlong stint.

"It was an extraordinary response," Mallat said in an interview from his office in Princeton's Bendheim Hall yesterday.

The 46-year-old vocal human-rights lawyer and outspoken critic of both the Syrian-backed Hezbollah group and Syrian interference with Lebanese affairs was a key player in Lebanon's so-called "Cedar Revolution." That's the protest movement that, at least temporarily, drove the Syrians from the country after Syria's suspected involvement in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which Syria has denied.

Princeton visiting professor Daniel Kurtzer, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Egypt who teaches in the university's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs where Mallat holds a visiting researcher's post, introduced a public lecture by Mallat yesterday, referring to him as "one of Lebanon's most distinguished scholars and politicians."

Mallat said Hezbollah instigated the summer war with Israel and demonstrations in recent weeks against the U.S.-backed government of Prime Minister Fuad Saniora in a bid to undo Lebanon's fledgling democratization.

He hopes to further nurture that democracy and strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty by winning the presidency through parliamentary elections that are supposed to take place next September or October -- or, Mallat hopes, even sooner -- although the elections have not yet been scheduled.

With Lebanon possibly on the brink of civil war, it's not clear when and if that country's 128-member parliament will choose a successor to its current president, the Damascus-allied Emile Lahoud.

Lahoud is in his ninth year in power -- three more than the Lebanese constitution allowed when Lahoud first became president, Mallat said.

"My sense is that the reason there is all this Hezbollah activity is to prevent this (presidential election) from happening anyway," Mallat said.

"The country is in a very delicate moment right now," he said.

"What we witness today is a very direct consequence of the coup d'etat that started this summer by Hezbollah," Mallat said. He described the sectarian violence and tensions in Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere as the symptoms of a dangerous new kind of world war, one made all the more grave by the asymmetric warfare that non-state groups like Hezbollah wage .

Like Lebanon's current president and any other candidates who might seek to succeed him, Mallat is a Christian Maronite. That's because Lebanon's constitution designates the presidency only to Maronites, the prime ministership only to Sunni Muslims and the parliament speakership only to Shiite Muslims.

Although Lebanon has not had an official census since 1932, it is estimated that about 60 percent of the population is Muslim -- divided fairly evenly between Shiites and Sunnis, and about 40 percent is Christian, Mallat said.

By profession, Mallat is a lawyer and professor who received his master's degree in jurisprudence from Georgetown University. He is an internationally respected expert on Islamic law.

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