

Learning from Lebanon's Cabinet

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Articles & Testimony

Michael Singh, focusing on the current situation in Lebanon, cautions on the fragility of fledgling democracies.

This week, Lebanon served up a reminder for the United States and the partisans of the Arab uprisings: don't count your democracies before they've hatched. Having thrown off the yoke of Syrian occupation in 2005 after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Lebanon once again finds itself under the control of Iran and Syria. Allies of these two countries, including Hezbollah, control the majority of the posts in the new Lebanese cabinet announced on Monday.

This development is a blow to freedom and sovereignty in Lebanon, and a setback for U.S. interests in the region. It holds, however, two lessons which, if taken to heart, can help Arab democrats and U.S. policymakers successfully entrench democracy in places like Egypt and Tunisia.

The first of these lessons is that extremists are capable of exploiting democratic institutions to undermine democracy itself. Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and the departure of Syrian forces were negative developments for Hezbollah and Lebanese allies of Damascus. Their patrons had departed or faded into the shadows, many of their compatriots were jailed for crimes committed under Syrian rule, and their longtime foes were politically ascendant.

But rather than hang their heads, Hezbollah and its allies changed tactics. Hezbollah had three powerful advantages. First, it enjoyed a not-insignificant degree of popularity amongst Lebanon's Shia community. It bolstered this popularity by erecting a patronage network fueled by Iranian financial support, and using intimidation and violence to silence Shia rivals. Second, Lebanon's explicitly sectarian political system allotted to the Shia -- and thus to Hezbollah or its proxies, given its domination of the Shia political landscape -- a sizable role in the country's political institutions. Thirdly and most importantly, unlike other Lebanese militias, it had not disarmed following the Lebanese civil war, but instead used the pretext of "resistance" against Israel (despite Israeli forces' withdrawal from Lebanon) not only to retain its weapons, but to build an arsenal surpassing that of many national armies. Hezbollah also erected a formidable command and control and logistical network, putting airports, telecommunications, and

other infrastructure at its disposal.

Leveraging these advantages, Hezbollah became active in national politics and for the first time placed its members in the Lebanese cabinet. When it could not achieve its aims through politics, however, Hezbollah did not hesitate to resort to outright violence. In 2008, when its control of telecommunications was challenged, it turned its arms on fellow Lebanese and launched a war against the Lebanese state, seizing Beirut in the process. When its members were threatened with exposure and indictment in 2010 for their alleged role in the Hariri assassination, they brought down the Lebanese government.

Hezbollah's actions illustrate the dangers of not excluding from democratic participation extremist groups which act as proxies for foreign powers, reject democratic values as a matter of principle, or fail to renounce violence.

Hezbollah is a creature of Iran, conceived and built by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Many of its cabinet allies are themselves clients of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, with which Hezbollah coordinates closely. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this cabinet was formed just as the Assad regime finds itself in crisis. Facing pressure domestically, it is seeking strength (or at least to create distractions) outside its borders, whether by sending protesters to the Israeli border or maneuvering in Lebanon.

Many outside observers have hoped that serving in the government would moderate Hezbollah. Those hopes have gone unfulfilled and will continue to be dashed as long as Iran and Syria see advantage in destabilizing their neighbors and Hezbollah itself sees the ballot box as a complement to rifles and rockets.

The second lesson of Hezbollah's ascendancy is the need for sustained U.S. engagement with nascent democracies. The Cedar Revolution of 2005 was less a victory for democracy than the beginning of a long, hard battle for it. Following the success of the March 14 forces in expelling Syrian troops and the rise of the pro-sovereignty government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, the U.S. and our allies engaged in diplomatic trench warfare against Iran and Syria for the future of Lebanon. U.S. support for Lebanese democrats from 2005-2008 included a steady stream of Lebanese visits to the White House and U.S. visits to Lebanon, increasing U.S. economic and security support for the Lebanese government, and U.N. Security Council resolutions and other measures designed to safeguard Lebanese sovereignty and beat back efforts by Iran and Syria to reassert control.

As Washington's focus in the Middle East shifted more squarely to the pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, however, the U.S. took a different approach to Lebanon. U.S. rhetoric changed little, assistance increased, and visits (including a particularly successful one in 2009 by Vice President Biden) continued, albeit at a slower pace. But Lebanon tumbled down Washington's list of foreign policy priorities, and support for Lebanon was subordinated to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. For the Obama administration, making progress on Middle East peace meant improving relations with Assad. Assad's support was seen as vital for bolstering Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas against his Hamas rivals, who were nurtured and hosted by Damascus. It was also seen as important to the administration's ambitions of achieving a "comprehensive" peace between Israel and all of its neighbors.

Ironically, therefore, pursuing statehood for Palestinians meant putting aside Lebanese sovereignty, as Assad could not be placated as long as the U.S. campaign to counter Syrian aims in the country continued. Ultimately, the new U.S. policy has proven futile -- no progress has been made toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the man whom Washington hoped would help them achieve it is on a seemingly inexorable trajectory toward history's dustbin. Many lessons can be taken from this experience, but the most important for Washington in dealing with today's Middle East relates to democracy, whether Palestinian, Lebanese, Egyptian, or Tunisian. We cannot build democracy through shortcuts, Faustian bargains, or wishful thinking about extremists and their patrons. We must engage in a long, determined slog to build institutions and defend democrats against those determined to thwart them.

For Lebanon, it is not too late for the U.S. to learn these lessons and change course. While the cabinet has been formed, it still may crumble if it cannot agree on a common platform and secure parliamentary approval for it. If the cabinet holds together, it is unlikely that U.S. assistance to the Lebanese state can continue, with Hezbollah in control and the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry both in unfriendly hands. But the U.S. can continue to assist Lebanon by supporting those who are struggling for its freedom and sovereignty, interdicting Iranian support for Hezbollah and bringing to account the perpetrators of the Hariri assassination, and pressing for the international isolation of the Assad regime in Syria. Doing so will send the message not only to Lebanon, but to Arab democrats across the region, that democracy is not democracy without the freedom, rights, and values that imbue it with its unparalleled resilience and vitality.

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