

# Lebanon Today: Internal Politics and the Arab Spring

by [Hisham Melhem \(/experts/hisham-melhem\)](/experts/hisham-melhem), [Michael Doran \(/experts/michael-doran\)](/experts/michael-doran)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hisham Melhem \(/experts/hisham-melhem\)](/experts/hisham-melhem)

Hisham Melhem is Washington bureau chief for Al-Arabiya,



[Michael Doran \(/experts/michael-doran\)](/experts/michael-doran)

Michael Doran is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.



Brief Analysis

**O**n April 13, 2011, May Chidiac, Michael Young, Hisham Melhem, and Michael Doran addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ms. Chidiac, president of MCF Media Institute, was for decades a news anchor and on-air personality for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation. Mr. Young is opinion editor for the Beirut Daily Star and author of *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle*, which was awarded the silver medal in The Washington Institute's 2010 Book Prize competition. Mr. Melhem is Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya and Washington correspondent for the Lebanese daily al-Nahar. Dr. Doran, a visiting professor at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service, served as a deputy assistant secretary of defense and a senior director at the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## May Chidiac

**T**oday marks thirty-six years since the start of the Lebanese civil war. Just six years ago, on March 14, 2005, the fight for a sovereign Lebanon continued when the country's citizens demonstrated against the Syrian occupation. Today's protests across the Arab world echo the spirit of the Lebanese model. Arab youths have abandoned traditional ramblings against Zionist conspiracies and Western imperialism for legitimate demands: economic opportunities, political freedom, and an end to corruption and regime exclusivity.

Despite violence perpetrated by Syria and its Lebanese allies, the March 14 coalition ousted the Syrians and won parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2009. With international help, it set up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to prosecute the killers of former premier Rafiq Hariri and deployed the Lebanese army to the south for the first time in decades.

Hizballah's political culture and vision are vastly different from those of the March 14 coalition, and are rooted in violence and religious extremism. Najib Mikati has become prime minister in a bloodless coup -- but the blood

flowed three years ago, when Hizballah took over Beirut in May 2008, a campaign that paved the way for Mikati's premiership. In facing off against Hizballah, March 14 must defeat political insurgents who subvert the truth and believe the ends justify the means.

March 14 now belongs to the opposition, but the movement is alive and well, as evidenced by the large turnout for the March 13 events commemorating the sixth anniversary of the Cedar Revolution. Now more than ever, the coalition needs the support of the United States and the international community.

## Michael Young

**A**s the events of the Arab Spring continue to unfold, three key lessons emerge from Lebanon's experience, especially as it relates to Syria. First, foreign intervention is often necessary for liberation movements to achieve their goals. Taking the historical long view, even the American and Russian revolutionaries did not succeed without outside assistance. The events in Lebanon in 2005 may have reflected an emancipation rather than a revolution, but foreign intervention played a role all the same, just as it did in removing Saddam Hussein and stopping Muammar Qadhafi at the gates of Benghazi.

In 2004 and 2005, Lebanese opposed to the Syrian occupation drew on international legal and political frameworks to sustain their domestic revolt. They helped spur the creation, for example, of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarmament of nonstate actors such as Hizballah and Palestinian militias. And through Security Council Resolution 1595, they helped establish an independent investigation into the Hariri assassination. Although the U.S. invasion of Iraq had no direct impact on the spread of freedom in Lebanon, the U.S. military presence on Syria's eastern border reminded Lebanese citizens of their neighbor's vulnerability.

The second lesson is that the narrative of emancipation may clash with Western interests. Even as the 2005 emancipation in Lebanon was peaceful, driven by popular will, and successful in reaching its initial ambitions, regimes and citizens alike across the Arab world did not back the reformers. Arab leaders disliked the notion of international investigations into political assassinations. Shapers of public opinion, meanwhile, including Arab satellite television channels such as Aljazeera, could not embrace movements against the so-called resistance axis formed by Syria and Hizballah. Arab publics, caught between unhappy regimes and poor media coverage, were unmoved by Lebanon's emancipation.

Even today, Arab satellite channels overlook the 2005 events in Lebanon. This is because many Arab regimes and publics still view a weak Syria as benefiting the United States and Israel. In addition, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad remains a popular figure among Arabs who look favorably on Arab nationalism. In turn, Al-Arabiya and Aljazeera have been reluctant to cover the protests in Syria.

Arab realities often crush the narrative of liberty. Take, for instance, 1988 and 1991 in Iraq, 1982 in Syria, and the 1990s in Algeria and Egypt. Some of those revolts were Islamist in nature and hardly championed freedom, making them difficult for Westerners to support. This illustrates the difficulty in gaining Western backing for Arab freedom without inserting caveats. Even so, the West must let the foul machine of regional tyranny collapse. More bluntly, American benefits are ancillary at the moment: for the first time since the colonial period, Arab societies are trying to find themselves.

The third lesson from Lebanon is the importance of luck. At some point, someone will make the wrong decision that results in the right outcome. For example, Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, while tragic, gave immediate meaning to regional grievances. Similarly, the assassination of Rafiq Hariri spurred George Bush and Jacques Chirac to find common ground on Lebanon after their divergence over Iraq, and the Lebanese aptly seized the moment. Asad's conceit showed when he attempted to extend then president Emile Lahoud's mandate. This

resulted in a moment of luck, and capturing it is essential to the success of any emancipation effort.

## Hisham Melhem

**T**he overall outcome of the Arab Spring remains uncertain. In Egypt, for example, after a successful initial revolt, remnants of the old regime persist in the social, political, and security spheres. The army's activities are deeply enmeshed in the economy -- everywhere from factories to bakeries -- with its role resembling that of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran.

The events of Lebanon circa 2005 are distinct from those of the Arab Spring in that the former did not represent a social or political revolution but rather an emancipation from foreign occupation. And despite a brief moment of enthusiasm following Syria's departure, the Lebanese unfortunately have now reverted to sectarianism, a position hardened by assassinations and the ineptitude of old-guard politicians who have failed to realize the hopes voiced by the nation's youths in Martyrs Square.

Syrians seeking change have found themselves on what feels like a long and bloody road. Without U.S. intervention, the situation may well remain bloody. Even though President Obama has paid a political price for his timid response to the 2009 demonstrations in Iran, his response to the Syrian situation has been similarly meek. The administration must change course by sending an explicit message promoting change, reform, and accountability, and making clear that mass killings will be met with consequences similar to those now facing Iran, which finds itself increasingly isolated on the international stage.

A more sympathetic political leadership in Syria could mean improved dynamics with Lebanon, Palestine, Israel's peace camp, and Iraq, not to mention freedom for the Syrian people. Because of its location and history, Syria is a pivotal state holding influence throughout the region, and it must be a part of the debate in Washington.

## Michael Doran

**D**espite a highly complex political scene in Lebanon, top U.S. decisionmakers often embrace simple solutions to meet what they believe are American interests. In this sense, they are essentially placing bets -- at the expense of the Lebanese people. Engaging the Lebanese situation in a way that serves U.S. interests entails grappling with the nation's fundamental complexity.

In 2005, the events in Lebanon surprised the Bush administration. Then, as now, Washington's Lebanon policy was unclear, becoming subordinate to U.S. policies toward the Arab-Israeli peace process and Syria. This was in part because American interests in Lebanon are difficult to define. But dealing with Lebanon means dealing with its distinctness as a nation.

U.S. policy has long been ineffective in dealing with the problems posed by Syria. Damascus continues to play a critical role in the region, having the capability to disrupt regional dynamics whether within Lebanon, between the Israelis and Palestinians, or in Iraq. Yet it often lacks the clout to truly be helpful in these arenas. The Syrian leadership knows it is not the primary focus of senior U.S. policymakers and thus often benefits by playing both sides of an issue -- as arsonist and fireman. For example, it has facilitated the movement of insurgents into Iraq while offering to help Washington stabilize the state.

In recent years, the United States has seen the tide in Lebanon and Syria turn, at times, in its favor -- though not as a result of forward-thinking U.S. policy. The 2005 Cedar Revolution aligned with U.S. priorities, and now protesters throughout Syria suggest the possibility of a change for the better in Damascus. Yet U.S. decisionmakers remain preoccupied with other matters such as Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the overriding fear of chaos.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖*

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