

Sulaiman Meets Obama as Washington's Lebanese Allies Face Crisis at Home

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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 Brief Analysis

On December 14, Lebanese president Michel Sulaiman is scheduled to meet with President Barack Obama at the White House. It is widely anticipated that during his visit, Sulaiman will request administration support for an increase in U.S. military assistance. Despite concerns that U.S. materiel will leak to Hizballah, Washington will likely agree to augment this funding, given the Lebanese Armed Force's excellent security record with equipment of U.S. origin. The question of U.S. military funding for Lebanon highlights recent developments in Lebanese politics that point to the resurgence of Hizballah -- and its Syrian and Iranian backers -- in Beirut. Although the pro-West March 14 coalition scored an impressive electoral victory in June, six months later, the government that has emerged constitutes a setback for Washington and its Lebanese allies. The scope of the setback -- for both the coalition and the United States -- was recently summarized by Syrian Ambassador to the United States Imad Mustafa, who said, "We love it!... It is exactly the sort of government we think should rule Lebanon."

A New Government

Following the victory in June, prime minister designate Saad Hariri began the arduous process of cabinet negotiations with the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hizballah-led opposition. Not only was the opposition holding out for "blocking third" veto power in the cabinet, Hizballah's Christian ally, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, was demanding the reappointment of Aoun's son-in-law and political heir apparent Gibran Bassil -- who failed to win a seat in parliament -- to his previous post as minister of telecommunications. These demands were so unpalatable that at one point Hariri resigned.

Although Hariri was reappointed, facing pressure from his Saudi backers and the specter of yet another round of Hizballah violence -- as in the May 2008 invasion of Beirut by Shiite militia -- he ultimately acceded to nearly all the opposition's demands. Hariri's March 14 coalition was apportioned fifteen cabinet seats, the opposition ten, and the allegedly "neutral" president, Michel Sulaiman, five. While on paper this allocation did not provide Hizballah the eleven seats required for a blocking third, it is widely assumed that the Shiite militia can count on at least one of the president's ministers to secure the veto power. While Bassil did not ultimately get the telecommunications post, he was consigned the energy and water resources ministry.

Hariri was forced to make these concessions due to, at least in part, the weakening of his coalition. Shortly after the elections, Druze leader and March 14 coalition stalwart Walid Jumblat -- perhaps sensing the shifting political sands -- distanced himself from the coalition. It also appears that Riyadh, hoping to patch up relations with Damascus in an effort to decouple the state from Iran, pushed Hariri to make a deal. As part of the Saudi arrangement, Hariri will soon travel to Syria to meet President Bashar al-Asad, the man widely believed to have ordered the murder of Hariri's father, Rafiq, the former Lebanese premier.

Ministerial Statement

In early October, Saudi's King Abdullah traveled to Damascus, and less than a month later, a cabinet was announced in Beirut. For the past month, the March 14 coalition and the opposition have been wrangling over the ministerial statement's content. Published on December 2, the statement was for the most part uncontroversial by Lebanese standards. The sole point of contention has been Article 6, referred to as the "resistance clause," which affirms the "right of Lebanon's people, its army, and its resistance [i.e., Hizballah]" to "defend Lebanon by confronting any [foreign] aggression" and to "liberate Sheba Farms, Kfar Shouba, and the Lebanese portion of Ghajar." In addition to being an apparent violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which stipulates the "disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon," several Christian March 14 parliament members consider the clause a violation of the constitution.

Hizballah Resurgent

The new government of Lebanon represents a reversal of fortune for the Shiite militia. Since its high point in 2006, the "resistance" has lost much of its luster. In September 2009 Hizballah's chief local financier was arrested for running a Ponzi scheme that cost the party a reported \$680 million; a few months earlier, a report in Der Spiegel implicated the group in the Hariri assassination; and in May 2008 the organization turned its weapons on the people of Lebanon when it invaded Beirut, undermining the organization's "resistance" credentials. In addition to these difficulties and the June election defeat, Hizballah cells have been arrested in Azerbaijan (2008) and Egypt (2007), and fighters reportedly killed while backing Houthi rebels in Yemen (2009).

Notwithstanding these setbacks, in November 2009 Hassan Nasrallah -- backed with a fatwa from Iran's Supreme Leader -- was reelected, despite the prescribed two-term limit, to his sixth three-year term as secretary-general of Hizballah. At the same time, the organization adopted a "new" political manifesto updating its 1985 program. While much of the document reflects longstanding Hizballah positions, a few points deserve mention:

- The United States is still an enemy. The 1985 document said that Hizballah was "moving in the direction of fighting the roots of vice and the first root of

vice is America." The new manifesto continues the language of "confrontation" with the U.S., noting that "American arrogance leaves our nation ... with no choice but the choice of resistance."

- Israel must still be destroyed. As with the 1985 platform -- and in opposition to the government's ministerial statement -- the new document rejects the option of a negotiated settlement with the "Zionist entity." Notably, while Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque were not mentioned in the 1985 document, in the new manifesto their liberation is characterized as a "religious duty and human and ethical responsibility."
- Emphasis is on "consensual democracy." Hizballah calls for the end of the sectarian political system in Beirut, but so long as the system is in place, according to the manifesto, "consensual democracy remains the fundamental basis of governance" in Lebanon. This formulation amounts to the militia's demand for permanent veto power in the cabinet.

Conclusion

In the six months since the March 14 coalition's election victory, the momentum in Lebanese politics has once again shifted in favor of Hizballah and its allies; the pendulum promises to swing even further in this direction following Hariri and Jumblat's visit to Damascus. As Hizballah consolidates its political gains, it is reportedly also improving its military capabilities on the ground. Notwithstanding Israel's November interception of the Francop -- the ship that attempted to transfer some 500 tons of weapons to Hizballah via Syria -- it is widely believed that the militia has attained advanced Russian SA-24 Iгла-S anti-aircraft weapons. Israel considers these MANPADS (man portable air defense systems) to be a "gamechanger."

Four years after the Cedar Revolution, it is increasingly apparent that Syria and its allies have regained the upper hand in Lebanon. To date, the Obama administration appears to have done little to stem the tide, but given the stakes, Washington should act quickly to reverse the trend.

First, Washington and Saudi Arabia need to be on the same page: improved relations with Damascus -- at the expense of Beirut -- will not insulate Riyadh from the Iranian threat and is counterproductive. The administration should also attempt to reinvigorate UN discussion of Security Council Resolution 1701, to draw attention to the continued destabilizing movement of weapons to the Shiite militia. At the same time, Washington should highlight with its European allies -- in particular Great Britain -- the November 2009 indictment of Hizballah political committee member Hassan Hodroj on charges of purchasing weapons on behalf of the militia. Hodroj's arrest should put an end, once and for all, to the fiction that Hizballah is divided into political and military "wings."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Washington should make it clear to Damascus that in addition to undermining stability in Iraq, continued Syrian meddling in Lebanon -- and Syria's ongoing support for Hizballah -- will prevent a U.S.-Syrian rapprochement. Today, Syria is openly advocating a "Middle East of resistance," even as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell is saying that "if Syria truly wants a better relationship with the U.S....it must end its support for terrorist groups." This past August, a "high-ranking U.S. official" -- believed by many to have been Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman -- told the Lebanese daily al-Nahar that "the Syrians are mistaken if they think that their relations with us will not be affected as a result of what they are doing in Lebanon." Given the latest developments in Lebanon, it's about time that Washington imposed a price.

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