America and the Lebanon Issue

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Articles & Testimony

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The U.S. can protect us from another superpower but not from a regional power like Israel or Syria. The U.S. is not ready to escalate the battle to the degree Syria is.1-- Former Lebanese Ambassador to Washington Abdullah Bouhabib

A small and weak state with few natural resources and no oil, Lebanon has not traditionally been considered a U.S. national security policy priority in the Middle East. In fact, with the notable exception of crises involving two military interventions, in recent decades Lebanon has been somewhat of a backwater of U.S. policy.

Since the 1950s, the United States has sporadically demonstrated intense interest in developments in Lebanon. Twice -- in the 1950s and 1980s -- Washington deployed troops to Lebanon to protect what were defined as U.S. national interests. And more recently, in 2007, the U.S. government deemed the stability of Lebanese government to be so important that levels of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) were increased more than sevenfold, making Lebanon the second largest per capita recipient of U.S. military assistance worldwide.2

Despite these significant commitments, however, historically U.S. involvement in Lebanon has been reluctant. Given that country's presumed negligible strategic value, Washington has largely preferred where possible to steer clear of the Byzantine world of Lebanese politics. More often than not, Washington's policy toward Beirut has been reactive, driven by crises rather than by a proactive effort to enhance the bilateral relationship or by abiding strategic necessity.

Perhaps more detrimental to both Lebanese and U.S. interests, for much of the past 20 years Washington has largely viewed relations with Beirut through the prism of Damascus, and specifically through the lens of Israeli-Syrian peacemaking. In this context, Lebanon -- with Washington's blessing -- was essentially diplomatically reduced to the status of Syrian appendage. Without regard to Lebanon's sovereignty or national interests, the United States ceded

Lebanese decision-making to Damascus in hopes of forging an Israeli-Syrian deal.

When the United States has been interested in Lebanon, it has largely been at times when Beirut was threatened by outside states and non-state actors seeking to permanently alter the orientation of the state. Lebanon has been a perennial battleground for regional and ideological influence. In part, external meddling has been so prevalent because Lebanon comprises alternately competing and conciliatory religious and ethnic communities. With no demographically, politically, or militarily dominant community, these communities have traditionally sought out alliances with states and non-state actors for protection, inviting intervention and, not infrequently, foreign occupation.

Not surprisingly, this complex dynamic of internal Lebanese politics and outside intervention has proven a challenging environment for Washington to understand, much less navigate. Consequently, although the United States has had exorbitant influence in the Middle East in the past 50 years, the U.S. impact on Lebanon has been limited.

The absence of a focused, consistent, and ongoing U.S. role in Lebanon constitutes an opportunity missed. For Lebanon, while small, is an intellectual center of the Middle East and has a significant impact in shaping regional trends. This influence, as well as Lebanon's central geographic position, accentuates the strategic import of Beirut to Washington.

What follows is a discussion of U.S. policy toward Lebanon, with a focus on Washington's policy in the aftermath of the 2005 Cedar Revolution. To explain Washington's current disposition toward Beirut, however, it is first necessary to discuss U.S. military interventions in Lebanon in 1958 and 1982. These two developments -- with profoundly differing consequences -- inform the context of U.S. policy vis-a-vis Lebanon today.

This chapter also discusses the following topics: • 1958 Military Intervention • Eisenhower, the United Nations, and Rationale • U.S. Involvement in Lebanon in the 1980s • The Dark Years: The 1990s • Lebanon and the Bush Administration • Diplomatic Support at the United Nations • Bush Administration's Financial Support to Lebanon • U.S. Military Assistance to the LAF • Further U.S. Activities in Support of the Government of Lebanon

Conclusion

The 2005 Cedar Revolution and the subsequent election of the March 14-led government presented Washington with both opportunities and challenges. From the beginning, it was clear that Syria, Iran, and these states' Lebanese allies led by Hizballah would look to undermine the government at every turn. The administration viewed the struggle in Beirut as a microcosm of the larger battle of ideas in the region -- a conflict between moderate pro-West states (a group that included Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) and militant anti-West states led by Syria and Iran. Committed as a matter of policy to the Freedom Agenda, the Bush administration was compelled to protect its embattled ally in Beirut.

Yet Washington's policy options were limited. The situation on the ground in Lebanon was not dissimilar to 1958 and 1983: A moderate government in Beirut had requested U.S. assistance to help it withstand its opponents who were receiving strong backing from external powers. For Washington, leaving March 14 to the mercy of Hizballah, Syria, and Iran was not an option. At the same time, however, the experience of 1983 had left the United States with a bitter aftertaste, with an understanding of its limitations in playing Lebanese politics. Even if the United States had not had over 100,000 troops on the ground in Iraq, deployment of American soldiers in Lebanon again was out of the question. In Washington, this was an issue on which there was overwhelming bipartisan consensus.

Thus the administration was compelled to find effective tools to strengthen the weak government without using U.S. force. What it chose to do was to try and bolster the March 14 coalition through provision of robust financial support to Lebanese institutions. This meant providing economic grants to Lebanon, particularly in the aftermath of the

summer 2006 war, and more prominently, by establishing a close working relationship with the LAF.

Of course, Washington was under no illusions as to the potential short-term effectiveness of the LAF as a protector of national institutions. Clearly, no one in the U.S. government believed that the LAF could be called upon to "disarm" Hizballah. Although nationally respected, it was well understood that the organization was largely representative of Lebanon's demographics and as such subject to the same political problems facing the country writ large. Washington knew that the LAF was unlikely to be deployed in politically controversial matters, lest it fragment along religious lines. Nevertheless, the primary avenue employed by the administration to insulate the central government from threats and ensure its survival was the LAF.

Given the prevailing assessment of the Lebanese Army's disposition, it was unclear exactly what Washington expected of the organization. When Hizballah established its tent city in 2006, effectively closing down Beirut and surrounding the Grand Serail, the LAF took no actions; when Hizballah militarily attacked Beirut in 2008, the LAF was missing in action. Whatever faith the administration had in the LAF was either misplaced or premature. Building the kind of capacity and loyalty to the state that trumps sectarian identity is, at best, going to be a long-term project.

The other avenue pursued by the administration to secure its allies in Beirut was to pressure Syria: by working to keep the Hariri tribunal and violations of UN Security Council resolutions center stage at the international body; by senior administration officials making pronouncements at home and abroad; and via the implementation of a broad range of unilateral sanctions against Damascus. While administration statements proved irritants to Damascus, the sanctions were a bust. Sanctions imposed under the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2004 were grossly ineffective: Trade between Washington and Damascus tripled over a three-year period.

U.S. efforts to keep Lebanon in the limelight within the international framework between 2005 and 2008 were more successful. Notably, Washington was able to build and maintain -- at least through the summer of 2008 -- a broad coalition to isolate Syria in anticipation of the international Hariri tribunal and in support of Lebanon. However, the longer the tribunal takes, the shakier the coalition becomes. By July 2008 France, which had proven the strongest of U.S. partners on the Lebanon-Syria front, seemed to be poised to welcome Damascus back into the international fold, thereby threatening the unified front.

Washington's support for the international tribunal is a key element of U.S. support for Beirut. Should the court implicate senior Asad regime officials, the hope among March 14 is that it will weaken the regime and chasten its behavior regarding Lebanon. This may be true, but it will accrue little benefit if March 14 is no longer in power and if there is a shift in Washington's disposition vis-a-vis Beirut.

As for the status of the government of Lebanon itself, the administration backed the March 14 coalition-led government when it came to power in 2005, even though the government essentially was a national unity government with Hizballah. In 2006, Hizballah bolted from the government in a cabinet dispute surrounding the international tribunal. Yet as of July 2008 -- in the aftermath of Hizballah's May 2008 takeover of Beirut and the negotiated agreement a month later in Doha -- the Shi'a militia and its allies are once again in the government. Furthermore, the policy statement guiding this national unity government includes a recognition of Hizballah's right "to resist" (i.e., conduct military operations against Israel), outside of government control.3

For now, despite the reintegration of Hizballah into the Lebanese government and the problematic ministerial statement, Washington will continue to back the government majority. However, it is unclear that Washington would continue to do so if the March 14 coalition does not again win a majority in the elections scheduled in spring 2009. U.S. support for Lebanon, including financial and materiel support to the LAF, is to a large extent based on the pro-West orientation of the government. Should this calculus change -- and if Hizballah and its allies control the

government -- in the view of Washington, Lebanon would start to bear a striking similarity to Gaza ca. 2008, under Hamas. In short, many in the United States would likely start to view Lebanon as a terrorist-controlled state.

Since the late 1950s, U.S.-Lebanese relations have vacillated between intense bilateral involvement and detachment. Given what is currently at stake in Lebanon -- the survival of the only pro-West democratically elected government in the Arab world -- continued U.S. interest and robust bilateral ties are all but assured for the immediate future. The defeat of March 14 would be a real setback for both Washington and Beirut. Based on the historical pattern, it would also signal an end to the renaissance of the U.S.-Lebanese relationship that started in 2005.

Footnotes

1. Former Lebanese ambassador to Washington, Abdullah Bouhabib, quoted in Lally Weymouth, "Mideast: How the United State Skewed the Outcome in Lebanon," Los Angeles Times, March 11, 1994.

2. Alfred B. Prados, CRS Report for Congress: Lebanon, Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2007.

3. "Bayan Wizari," Government of Lebanon, Ministerial Statement, August 5, 2008, http://www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=53639&MID=114&PID=46 ❖

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