

Moderates at Risk in Election

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Articles & Testimony

Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s visit to Beirut last week underscored the enormous stake America has in parliamentary elections that Lebanon will hold June 7. The country's governing majority -- moderate, pro-Western, supported by Washington -- is running neck and neck with a coalition dominated by Hezbollah, the militant Shiite group controlled by Iran, backed by Syria and considered by American intelligence to be perhaps the world's most capable terrorist organization.

The Obama administration should continue doing everything it can to avert this looming strategic setback.

Lebanon's government is led by the March 14th movement -- a diverse coalition that takes its name from the date of the massive demonstration in 2005 that triggered the so-called Cedar Revolution, which ended nearly 30 years of Syrian military occupation. The protest itself erupted on the heels of the murder of Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, in a terrorist attack widely blamed on Damascus.

Since its election in 2005, March 14th has been committed, albeit imperfectly, to limiting the malign interference of Iran and Syria while re-establishing Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Central to this effort has been a desire to implement U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for the dismantling of Hezbollah's powerful militia.

For its part, Hezbollah, with Iranian and Syrian backing, has worked assiduously to reverse the Cedar Revolution. Though blame never was formally affixed, a systematic assassination campaign targeting March 14th officials paralyzed Lebanon's political system. Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel left Lebanon devastated but Hezbollah claiming victory. Finally, in May 2008, Hezbollah's forces rampaged through Beirut's streets attacking elements of March 14th. When the fighting was finished, Hezbollah and its allies had secured through bullets what had been denied them by ballots: enough seats in Lebanon's Cabinet to block any major decisions -- including, of course, the disarming of Hezbollah.

With elections just weeks away, Lebanon's fate hangs in the balance. Will Hezbollah's coalition succeed in formally taking control of the Lebanese state? Will the country's politics come increasingly to be dominated by Hezbollah's brand of Iranian-style religious extremism at home and confrontation with Israel and America abroad? Or will March 14th be able to maintain its popular edge and continue the struggle to preserve Lebanon's identity as a Middle Eastern outpost of tolerance, diversity and moderation?

Make no mistake: Hezbollah's triumph would constitute a major U.S. defeat. Despite the Obama administration's overtures to Iran, it remains the case that across the Middle East, the battle for Lebanon is understood as part of a much larger struggle for power being waged by Washington and Tehran.

The formal collapse of the Cedar Revolution would send shockwaves throughout the region, providing powerful confirmation of Iran's ascendancy and America's decline. It would dramatically embolden Teheran at a time when Washington hopes to negotiate an end to Iran's nuclear weapons program, its support for terrorism and its escalating efforts -- frequently using Hezbollah operatives -- to subvert pro-U.S. governments across the Arab world from Iraq to Egypt to Morocco.

With the stakes so high and the elections still too close to call, the Obama administration should throw caution to the wind and do what it can to tip the balance in March 14th's favor. While the United States generally refrains from intervening in foreign elections, an exception should be made in Lebanon -- where the consequences for U.S. national security are potentially so grave and America's enemies (read Iran and Syria) already are interfering heavily to secure an outcome harmful to U.S. interests.

Moreover, the odds actually are good that a U.S. embrace of March 14th could make a positive difference at the margins. As in much of the world, President Obama is extremely popular in Lebanon. Were he to act boldly to demonstrate America's unequivocal preference for March 14th, it could be decisive in moving key constituencies off the fence and against Hezbollah. Mr. Biden's visit to Beirut was an excellent step.

More dramatically, the president could arrange a snap Oval Office meeting with March 14th's leader, Saad Hariri (the slain prime minister's son), and use it to underscore the depths of his personal commitment to the Cedar Revolution's ideals as well as his concern for the future of U.S.-Lebanese relations should the government fall to Hezbollah -- a group, after all, that notoriously has American blood on its hands, including that of the 241 Marines who lost their lives when Hezbollah bombed their Beirut barracks in 1983.

It would be tragic indeed to look back and wonder what more the United States could have done to save Lebanon. Time is short. However, if Mr. Obama is prepared to spend some of his substantial political capital, he could indeed provide the Lebanese people with the encouragement they so desperately need to resist Hezbollah's Iranian-backed juggernaut. In doing so, he also would be advancing America's vital interests in a more stable and secure Middle East.

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