

The Washington-Beirut-Damascus Triangle (Part II)

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler), [Magnus Norell \(/experts/magnus-norell\)](/experts/magnus-norell)

Mar 17, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



[Magnus Norell \(/experts/magnus-norell\)](/experts/magnus-norell)

Magnus Norell is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute



Brief Analysis

On March 13, 2009, Andrew Tabler, Magnus Norell, and John Hannah addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the Washington-Beirut-Damascus triangle. Mr. Tabler, the cofounder and former editor-in-chief of Syria Today, is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute. Dr. Norell is a Fulbright scholar and visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Mr. Tabler and Dr. Norell's remarks. A summary of Mr. Hannah's remarks was published as [PolicyWatch #1493](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3030>).

Andrew J. Tabler

After suffering through the worst period of U.S.-Syrian relations in history, Washington and Damascus are talking once again. The most recent meetings are the product of behind-the-scenes discussions that have gone on for years. Initially, prospects for engagement appeared rather bleak, given the preconditions set forth by Syrian officials and spokesmen. Damascus also was not pleased with recent congressional visits, which raised issues like Syrian support for U.S.-designated terrorist groups. More recently, Damascus was annoyed by the selection of acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, as the chief U.S. interlocutor. Feltman, the former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, was the chief U.S. supporter of Lebanon's anti-Syrian March 14 coalition while serving in Beirut.

What arguably angered Damascus the most, however, was that the United States failed to revise its list of longstanding grievances against Syria. These include its support for Hizballah, Hamas, and jihadists entering Iraq; its efforts to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty; its weapons of mass destruction programs; and its poor human rights record. Nevertheless, the talks, which both sides say were "constructive," moved forward. After two rounds of discussions, Washington is considering the next steps, which might include another high-level meeting, an easing of

sanctions, or even the return of a U.S. ambassador to Damascus.

U.S. allies in the region know what is happening and are acting accordingly. Most significantly, this past week Saudi Arabia and Egypt took steps to reconcile with Syria. In this context, all eyes are now focused on the upcoming Arab summit in Doha, which includes a high-stakes agenda of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and the June elections in Lebanon.

Both Riyadh and Damascus are apprehensive about Lebanese balloting. While Saudi Arabia wants the elections to take place peacefully, Syria is focused on institutionalizing the "blocking third" of deputies for the Hizballah-based opposition, which effectively provides a veto on government decisions. This sentiment was expressed by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad during his most recent interview with the Emirati newspaper al-Khaleej. Damascus believes that maintaining the blocking third for Hizballah will ensure its interest in Lebanon and have a mitigating effect on the international tribunal investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri.

In the coming months it will be interesting to note whether Syria posts an ambassador to Lebanon, a high-priority item on Paris's diplomatic agenda with Damascus. Many believe that al-Asad will not send an ambassador to Beirut until after the June elections, since Syria is hoping that the pro-West March 14 government will be replaced by the Hizballah-based March 8 coalition. It will also be interesting to see Syria's reaction to the possible indictment of its Lebanese allies by the Hariri Tribunal. Depending on the outcome, Syria will either maintain a common front with these parties or realize that its interests diverge with its Lebanese allies, setting the stage for the kind of broad regional realignment Washington wants to see from Syria.

Magnus Norell

Since the end of the 2006 summer war, Hizballah has strengthened its position in Lebanon both politically and militarily. Regardless of the upcoming election's outcome, it will be a very tight race. Hizballah, no doubt, is capable of handling either defeat or victory at the polls. Although Hizballah's relationship with Syria will remain important, particularly given that Syria is the chief transit point for the organization's materiel, the movement's bilateral relationship with Iran is paramount, a fact well known by all three parties.

Since the end of the war, Hizballah has attempted to downplay its relations with Syria by highlighting the organization's "independence" and emphasizing its Lebanese nature -- an important message it is selling ahead of the June elections. Hizballah is aware that it does have constraints, and that it is necessary to present itself as a Lebanese movement. Hizballah, however, is not fooling anyone, as it is very clear that it would not be where it is today without Iranian and Syrian support.

Iran is by far the most important actor in Hizballah's equation. Relations between the two remain very tight, evinced by the opening of offices in Lebanon by some Iranian ministries. Iran knows about Hizballah's operations in Lebanon and has allegedly taken on a greater role in its client's activities since the assassination of senior Hizballah operative Imad Mughniyah.

Discussions in Washington and, to a lesser extent, in Europe are ongoing about how to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran, possibly using Hizballah as a tool to that end. Unfortunately, there is little hope of successfully exploiting Hizballah in this manner. The relationship between Hizballah, Syria, and Iran is deep-rooted, and although a Syrian deal with Israel might have some impact, it is unlikely that Syria would end its relations with Hizballah to achieve this outcome. And since it is even less likely that Hizballah would downgrade its ties to Tehran, the relationship between Hizballah and Iran will persevere.

Hizballah believes it is on a winning streak. It is a slick movement: it knows what it is up against and has a good grasp of Israeli politics. The organization has a clear ideological program and knows what it wants in the long run, namely, a preponderant place in Lebanese politics and ultimately the establishment of an Islamic state. Hizballah believes it

is very well positioned to emerge from the elections even stronger.

Domestically, Hizballah faces some constraints. The way in which the Lebanese elections are constructed, for example, makes it very difficult for Hizballah to gain more seats in parliament than it already has. Nonetheless, if the March 14 coalition wins, the worst that can happen, from Hizballah's point of view, is that there will be a narrow coalition government in which Hizballah continues to hold a "blocking third." In this event, it will still be able to influence and constrain government policy.

Regardless of whether Hizballah wins, it will continue to maintain its position in Lebanon, possess weapons, and control the finances, politics, and communications in the south. The organization has been incredibly successful over the years and possesses enough power to unilaterally make decisions of war and peace for Lebanon.

The latest vogue in Europe and Washington is to utilize engagement to produce change. While the model has merit, it probably will not work with Hizballah: an organization that views itself as a winner will see little benefit in making concessions. Regrettably, Hizballah is an example of how terrorism pays.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Becca Wasser, a Schusterman Young Scholar. ❖

Policy #1494

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

- Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)
- U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

- Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)
- Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)
- Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)