The Washington-Beirut-Damascus Triangle (Part I)

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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. Hannah, senior fellow at The Washington Institute and national security advisor to former vice president Dick Cheney, focused his remarks on U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria. The following summary draws from his presentation. A summary of the presentations by Andrew Tabler and Magnus Norell was published as **PolicyWatch #1494 (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3031)** .

The Stakes in Lebanon

Lebanon's fate has become part of a larger struggle for power and influence that is playing out across the Middle East, a struggle pitting the United States and its friends against Iran and its proxies. The outcome of that struggle will have strategic implications for the United States that extend well beyond Lebanon.

Whether or not the U.S. government sees events in Lebanon this way, the rest of the Middle East will have their scorecards out in the days and weeks following Lebanon's June elections to determine which side won. Based on that tally, the region will proceed to draw broader conclusions about the correlation of forces in the region that will have real consequences for U.S. interests.

A clear-cut electoral victory for Hizballah would greatly undermine U.S. prestige and credibility in the region, while providing a major boost to the perceived power of America's adversaries. The strategic dilemma that Hizballah's strength already poses would escalate dangerously should the terrorist group -- with Iran and Syria behind it -- come to dominate virtually all the institutions of the Lebanese state. The result could well be the consolidation of a permanent Iranian military outpost on the eastern Mediterranean and a major presence of Iran's Qods (Jerusalem) Force -- a special unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps -- directly on Israel's northern border, with all its deadly capabilities and intentions.

A total collapse of Lebanon's Cedar Revolution would complicate the Obama administration's overarching strategy of engagement. Not only would it make the already difficult task of trying to convince Iran to discontinue its nuclear program much harder, it would also make sustaining engagement over time more difficult if the American public concludes that such diplomacy requires sacrificing the interests of America's friends on the altar of some hoped-for rapprochement with its enemies. In this sense, Lebanon's elections will most likely become the first real test case of engagement's viability as a strategy for protecting U.S. interests more broadly.

Risks of Engagement

The Obama administration needs to remain acutely sensitive to how U.S.-Syrian engagement impacts Lebanon's elections. Lebanon is poised on a razor's edge, with a significant bloc of voters on the fence, not wanting to be caught on the losing side. In a close election, a perception that the United States is once again ready to sacrifice Lebanon's independence for a deal with Damascus could tip the balance in the wrong direction.

Syria will almost certainly try to exploit U.S. engagement for exactly that purpose. Just after President Obama's inauguration, a Syrian commentator close to the al-Asad regime declared that "The new Obama administration knows that the plans of the previous U.S. administration have been defeated and that Syria played the primary role in ensuring that defeat. Syria is not in a hurry to pick the fruits of its policies. It is up to the defeated to present his menu and up to the victor to present his demands." Especially in the context of what is seen to be a dramatic U-turn in U.S. policy from isolation to engagement, this narrative of Syrian strength and U.S. defeat, with Washington coming to Damascus on bended knee, could resonate in the region -- unless it is aggressively countered by the United States.

To its credit, the Obama administration has done an admirable job so far of balancing its outreach to Syria with a strong effort to reassure the Lebanese government. Both the president and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made strong statements in February supporting Lebanon's independence and reaffirming U.S. support for the Hariri tribunal (the international tribunal created to investigate the 2005 assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister). Congressional delegations rushing to Damascus have been encouraged to include Beirut on their itineraries as well. The first high-level U.S. envoys to Syria in four years included Jeff Feltman, who more than any other person in the U.S. government has been identified with the struggle for Lebanon's independence, and Dan Shapiro, who helped draft the Syria Accountability Act. The administration should also consider whether its messages of reassurance to the Lebanese public need to be coupled with a warning about the potential consequences for U.S. and international support of a Hizballah electoral victory.

Washington should aggressively use its engagement with Syria to deter Damascus from resorting to violence in Lebanon, either in the run-up to elections or in their aftermath. In mid-March, President Bashar al-Asad gave an interview in which he issued veiled threats against Lebanon should the Hariri tribunal reach the wrong conclusions or should the March 14 coalition win the elections and actually attempt to govern as a democratic majority. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that violence remains an integral part of Syria's strategy. The Obama administration should act now to put the Syrian regime on notice that the relatively smooth passing of Lebanon's elections will be a critical metric by which the United States assesses the value of engagement going forward.

Challenges of Engagement

Pursuing engagement in a way that meets U.S. objectives, rather than simply addressing Syria's narrow agenda, will not be easy. The thinking today is that dealing with Syria must no longer just be about "land for peace" with respect to the Golan Heights, but rather "land for strategic realignment" with respect to Syria's alliance with Iran. But ensuring that the wide range of U.S. concerns vis-a-vis Syria are dealt with in a meaningful and systematic way will be much easier said than done. Syria will likely do everything it can to limit its engagement to resuming U.S.-sponsored peace talks with Israel to recover the Golan, with strategic realignment to follow at some point in the distant future.

What will happen if Syria insists on pursuing its version of engagement rather than ours? Will the Obama administration be able to stop and declare the process a failure after having made engagement its signature initiative -- especially with the allure of an ongoing Israeli-Syrian peace process, if not peace itself, to claim as a major diplomatic achievement?

If Engagement Fails

It will be important for the administration to have -- and for Syria to know that it has -- a contingency plan should engagement be given a fair trial and shown not to address key American concerns. At a minimum, such a contingency should include the option of significantly ramping up multilateral pressure and sanctions against the al-Asad regime. In this regard, the administration should do everything in its power to ensure that the two most important levers available -- the Hariri tribunal and the International Atomic Energy Agency investigation of Syria's secret plutonium reactor -- remain robust and hanging over the head of the al-Asad regime. Syria will no doubt seek to use engagement to neutralize those threats, and the Obama team must resist. History suggests that only pressure that threatens the al-Asad regime's survival is likely to trigger the kinds of strategic Syrian shifts that advance U.S. interests.

While Washington is focused on the potential merits and promise of engagement, it bears remembering that the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon four years ago -- arguably, the high point of American policy vis-a-vis Syria in the past several decades -- was itself the product of a policy of intensely focused confrontation, multilateral pressure, and veiled threats against the al-Asad regime. Such an approach may indeed be out of fashion. Although the Bush administration proved unable to sustain this policy over the long term, it was undoubtedly effective at that particular moment in history. For this reason alone, it may be a model worth keeping in reserve. ❖

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