

Israel, Don't Undermine Beirut

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Developments in Lebanon are being viewed with great concern in Israel. In the aftermath of Hizbullah's recent military and ostensible political victories, many Israelis are saying that Beirut has gone the way of Gaza. Lebanon is now "Hizbullahstan" -- just like Gaza, only worse.

This assessment is alarmist, defeatist, and premature. No doubt, the events of early May were a setback. The militia's blitz on Beirut was a humiliation not only for the pro-West March 14 ruling coalition, but for Washington, which could do little to protect its ally in its time of need. Hizbullah emerged strengthened from its showdown with the government. Still, the government in Beirut is not finished -- yet.

Hizbullah's modest gains have come at a considerable price. By turning the "weapons of the resistance" against the Lebanese people, the Party of God undercut much of its local and regional legitimacy. Moreover, while the mediated agreement has provided Hizbullah with a "blocking third" of the cabinet, and thus the ability to veto major government decisions, this "gain" only formalized the militia's extant veto power, changing little in the status quo.

Today, in the aftermath of the Doha agreement, the future of the March 14 coalition lies in the balance. And its survival -- indeed, the future disposition of Lebanon -- depends at least in part on what Israel does. Israel, like its Arab neighbors, has a lot at stake on what happens in Lebanon. The struggle in Lebanon today is nothing short of a battle to shape regional trends, a fight between moderation and militancy.

While Washington has sided with the government of Lebanon against Hizbullah, it would be unseemly if not counterproductive for Israel -- technically still at war with its neighbor -- to publicly pick favorites in local Lebanese politics. Nevertheless, given its pro-Western stance, it's difficult to understand Israel's ambivalence toward the disposition of the Saniora government and the Cedar Revolution vis-a-vis Hizbullah.

Supporters of the Lebanese government have long claimed that Israel is actively protecting the Assad regime in Syria and, in the process, undercutting the Saniora government. The recent announcement of the resumption of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations in Turkey -- coming so closely on the heels of the Syrian-backed Hizbullah military offensive -- has been yet another blow to the morale and survivability of the March 14 coalition.

In Beirut, it's widely feared that an Israeli-Syria deal would come at the expense of Lebanon. This view has merit: many current and former Israeli officials and academics make no secret of their belief that an agreement could be facilitated by recognizing a return of Syria to Lebanon and by ensuring somehow that the Assad regime be insulated from the sanctions which would accompany the regime's implication by the International Tribunal in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri.

Even if Israeli-Syrian talks don't come to fruition -- and there is little to indicate they will considering Damascus' repeated declarations that it will not undertake a strategic reorientation from Teheran to the West nor change its relationships with Hamas and Hizbullah -- peace talks with Damascus undercut those who oppose the agenda of Hizbullah and Syria in Lebanon. Negotiations alone stand to erode international support for the tribunal, one of the few real levers of pressure held by the majority. This is what the March 14 coalition fears, and of course, this is why the Syrians are so interested in talking with the Israelis now.

The ultimate nature of the government in Beirut -- whether pro-West or aligned with Teheran and Syria -- should be an important policy concern for the Israeli government. A Lebanon under Damascus means increased Hizbullah influence in Beirut and thousands of rockets permanently aimed at Israel. Israel should by all means make peace with its neighbors, but negotiations now prejudice the work of the Tribunal and only alleviate political and economic pressures on the Assad regime. By voluntarily taking steps to remove these pressures without extracting a single concession, Israel is effectively strengthening Damascus' hand at the negotiating table.

For Israel, peace with Syria no doubt has some allure. Given current regional dynamics, however, it is all but guaranteed that the collateral damage of these peace talks will be the March 14 coalition. If the democracy argument does not sway the Israeli government, national interests should. While the weak government in Beirut is not by any means optimal, the alternative -- a Syrian and Iranian-backed Hizbullah-dominated state -- is even less appealing. And when the talks with Syria eventually break down - as they undoubtedly will when the topic of strategic realignment is broached -- this is what waits in the wings.

The US and Israel do not see eye to eye on Lebanon. Washington sees real value in preserving the only democratically-elected pro-west Arab Government. If Israel doesn't start to recognize the significant, but fleeting moment of March 14 soon, this fragile bulwark against Iranian hegemony in the Levant may disappear.

Although it is a bitter pill for peacemakers in the Jewish state to swallow, by trucking with Syria now, Israel risks inadvertently contributing to the eventual establishment of Hizbullahstan on its northern border.

The writer is a senior fellow and director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as the political affairs advisor for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. ❖

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