

Setbacks in Arab League Mediation on Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Over the past week, Beirut has been rocked by violence yet again. On January 25, a Lebanese Internal Security Forces officer working with the UN investigation into Rafiq Hariri's assassination was killed by a car bomb. And on January 27, seven Shiite antigovernment demonstrators were killed by the Lebanese army. These incidents come only two months after pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud vacated his office, leaving a power vacuum in his wake. Despite vigorous Arab League mediation efforts, the prospects for electing a replacement appear bleak. And with no end in sight, Lebanon's security situation is likely to deteriorate further.

Presidential Crisis

At issue in this latest confrontation between the "March 14" anti-Syrian majority and the Hizballah-led opposition is the political orientation and underlying loyalties of Lebanon's president. The chief executive traditionally selects several cabinet ministers, approves the prime minister's choice of the rest, and overlooks the ministerial policy statement that guides the government. In essence, the next president will either consolidate or end the 2005 Cedar Revolution -- the pro-West independence movement that ended the twenty-nine-year Syrian occupation.

In early September 2007, the two-month presidential election process stalled over constitutional issues concerning how many parliamentarians constituted a legal quorum. The majority, which controlled 68 of the 127 seats, claimed that "half plus one" (65 votes) would be sufficient, while the minority argued that a two-thirds "consensus" vote was required. A tense standoff followed, with both sides vowing not to compromise.

Mediation Efforts

In an effort to break the logjam, Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa has been engaged for months in almost continuous shuttle diplomacy between Lebanon and Damascus. But to date, his hard work has achieved little. Ironically, the only real breakthrough came on November 28, 2007, a day after the Annapolis peace conference. In the weeks leading up to that summit, several top March 14 leaders had visited Washington to petition for U.S. pressure on Damascus to curtail its interference in the electoral process. When Syria wound up attending the summit, however, Beirut saw it as a sign that Washington had cut a deal. The next day, the March 14 coalition jettisoned its candidates of choice and agreed to the Arab League's proposal that included a consensus candidate -- current Lebanese Armed Forces chief of staff Gen. Michel Suleiman.

Following that development, the Arab League shifted its mediation efforts toward reaching a deal on the cabinet's composition. In Lebanon, two-thirds of the thirty-member cabinet is required to approve critical, or "national" government decisions. So the Arab League proposed a compromise in which no party would be able to impose or block a cabinet decision. In terms of numbers, the proposal specified that the March 14 bloc would select fourteen ministers, the opposition ten, and the new president six. The opposition rejected this arrangement because it had been demanding a "blocking third" of eleven ministers; recalibrating its demands, it made a counteroffer that called for each player to select ten ministers, believing that it would be able to influence the president's selections. The current government rejected the proposal, however, arguing that such an arrangement would undercut its political power and essentially overturn the results of the 2005 elections.

Syria and Its Allies Withdraw Support for Suleiman

For months, the pro-Syrian opposition had been pushing General Suleiman as a compromise candidate. Earlier this month, however, its tone changed, raising doubts about its continued support for him. The opposition became concerned about how many cabinet seats Suleiman would be apportioned if elected, and whether he could be counted on to select ministers who would reliably vote with the opposition. In other words, Damascus and its Lebanese allies do not trust the general. According to Suleiman Franjiyeh, former cabinet minister and pro-Syrian head of the Marada Party, "General Michel Suleiman . . . cannot assure me of a [blocking] third." The general's reported phone call to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad suggests that he recognizes his candidacy is on a precipice. Indeed, it is rumored that the Syrians have now shifted their support to the presumably more reliable former foreign minister Faris Bouweiz.

Given the lack of trust in Suleiman, the opposition has abandoned its previous cabinet "compromise" offer -- on January 17, Franjiyeh told the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar that it would not "accept a solution that doesn't give it eleven ministers in the coming government." Franjiyeh's views, not surprisingly, echo those of Hizballah. Similarly, Syrian foreign minister Walid Moualem has argued that the only solution to the crisis is a national unity government that "reflects representation according to the [ratio of] parliamentary blocs" -- a demand that goes well beyond giving the opposition a blocking third in the cabinet.

Mousa Under Attack

Despite these clearly articulated objections, Mousa has continued to press for Suleiman, in the process generating a great deal of criticism from the opposition. Earlier this month, Franjiyeh told the Kuwaiti daily al-Rai that Mousa's actions show he "is not the secretary-general of the Arab League, but rather the foreign minister of Egypt." And on January 21, the official Syrian daily Tishreen claimed that Mousa "cannot take any position that the U.S. administration does not give prior consent to, and therefore his initiative is destined to fail."

For his part, Mousa has told the Arab League that Syria and Iran are responsible for the ongoing impasse. According to the Lebanese daily al-Nahar, Mousa's most recent report to the Arab League Council of Ministers blames the two countries for scuttling a deal and extending the crisis. Mousa also predicted that Lebanon would not elect Suleiman as president during the next scheduled parliamentary session on February 11.

Washington's Response

In the aftermath of Annapolis and the collapse of the March 14 position, President Bush made several statements criticizing Syrian and Iranian interference in the elections. He also joined the majority in backing -- albeit tepidly -- the Suleiman presidency, stating, "[I]f that's what they want, that's who we support." But the White House statements have had little apparent effect. Since Annapolis, Lebanon has witnessed the assassination of its armed forces chief of operations, attacks on a U.S. embassy diplomatic convoy and the Irish contingent of UNIFIL, and the latest attack on the security officer assisting the Hariri investigation.

To best strengthen its Lebanese allies, Washington should pressure Damascus. The United States has all of the Arab League on its side except Libya and Syria. Capitalizing on Arab sentiment toward Syria, Washington should encourage Arab states to boycott -- or at least downgrade representation -- at the Arab Summit in Damascus in late March. More important, the administration must remain committed to, and be working to maintain international consensus in support of, the international Hariri tribunal.

Sadly, it may be too late for the pro-Western government of Lebanon to get a sympathetic president in office. But there is still time to save the March 14 coalition if Syria's wings can be clipped. The key is an expedited international tribunal. If the Hariri tribunal proceeds like the eight-year Yugoslavia tribunal did during the 1990s, the March 14 bloc may not be in power long enough to benefit from its results, and any indictments and convictions of Syria's pernicious role in Lebanon would at best stand as a Pyrrhic victory.

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