

Lebanon's Price in Washington Rises

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Two Tuesdays ago, Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt spent 35 minutes with the president of the United States. In many ways, the meeting was unusual. First, protocol dictates that President George W. Bush meet with his counterparts; he does not typically meet with foreign parliamentarians. Moreover, between 2003 and 2005 Jumblatt lost his visa to travel to the US after he bemoaned a failed attempt by Iraqi insurgents to kill then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Finally, the meeting was lengthy. By comparison, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's November 2006 meeting with Bush lasted 45 minutes.

Of course, Jumblatt is more than just a parliamentarian. He is a driving force behind the March 14 coalition and a key supporter of the Lebanese government. His meetings in recent months with Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Steven Hadley, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggest that the success of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government has increasingly become a priority in Washington. For the Bush administration, Lebanon represents not only the democratic potential of the Middle East, but a chance to affect the outcome of the regional struggle between what it sees as moderates and militants. Given the stakes, the US is investing heavily in terms of time and money to ensure Lebanon's success.

The change in focus has been profound. Once a backwater of American foreign policy interest, Lebanon today is at the forefront of the Bush administration's Middle East agenda. In an administration once racked with policy divisions, by all accounts there is unanimous agreement on the urgency of supporting the Lebanese government. Remarkably, this consensus extends to Congress, where there is broad and deep support for the political agenda and economic reforms advocated by Siniora's team.

In a sense, this convergence of congressional and administration sentiments has contributed to making Lebanon a "new Jordan" -- an issue on which broad agreement has opened the door to significant financial assistance. Last year, the administration committed \$230 million to Lebanon, including nearly \$30 million in funding to bolster the capabilities of the Lebanese Army. And just weeks ago in its fiscal year 2007 supplemental request, the administration asked Congress to approve some \$770 million for Lebanon to meet Washington's Paris donor conference pledges. When this is approved, Lebanon will become the third largest recipient of US assistance per capita. Before the Cedar Revolution, Washington provided some \$35 million per year to Beirut.

But US support for the Lebanese government is not just limited to money. If reports in the Israeli press are true, Washington has taken the extraordinary step of advising the Israeli government to delay opening negotiation channels to Damascus, probably until the completion of the United Nations investigation into the assassination of Rafik Hariri. If so, this is because any Israeli-Syrian engagement would mitigate pressures on the regime of President Bashar Assad and undercut Lebanese government efforts to curtail continued Syrian meddling in Lebanon. Engagement now would also risk prejudicing the investigation and the establishment of the mixed tribunal to try Hariri's killers.

Washington's widespread support for the Lebanese government is perhaps best illustrated by its universal boycott of the pro-Syrian Lebanese ambassador Farid Abboud. Abboud, who was appointed eight years ago by President Emile Lahoud, has been virtually quarantined by the Bush administration. In the past six years, save for one meeting (scheduled by mistake) with then-Deputy Defense Secretary-designate Gordon England, as a matter of policy the administration has refused to meet with Abboud. Instead, it has chosen to deal with the deputy chief of mission, Carla Jassar, a professional diplomat whose loyalties lie with the government. For all intents and purposes, during the past several years and until ambassador-designate Antoine Shadid arrives in Washington, Jassar has been and remains the charge d'affaires.

Despite the positive trend in the US-Lebanese relationship, some potential pitfalls remain. For example, how will Congress and the administration react to Hizbullah's efforts -- in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 -- to reconstitute its military capabilities in the South? How will the Lebanese government respond, and perhaps more importantly, what will US expectations of the government be? While these kinds of questions may turn into short-term irritants in the bilateral relationship, US support for the Siniora government, given its stated objectives, including economic reform, is likely to endure.

International support for the Lebanese government will do a great deal for advancing the cause of democracy and helping avoid civil war. Lebanon's opposition -- bolstered by Iran and Syria -- will continue to condemn Western and particularly US support for the government. The Bush administration has wisely determined not to abandon the Lebanese to the tender mercies of Iran and Syria, which represents an important development toward ensuring the government's success.

David Schenker is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006 he was the Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestinian affairs adviser in the office of the U.S. secretary of defense. ❖

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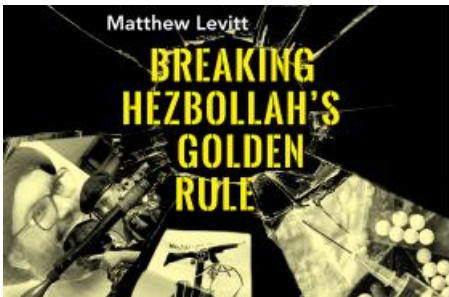
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