

How the Syrians Can Best Help Lebanon

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Articles & Testimony

In less than two months, Lebanon will celebrate the two-year anniversary of Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon. Following the February 14, 2005, assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, international pressure forced Syria, thought to be behind the killing, to remove its troops.

In Beirut in early 2007, however, we are still seeing the effects of Syria's 30-year presence in the country.

The Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990 handed then-Syrian president Hafez Assad his dreams on a silver platter. Assad had always looked for a way to dominate the Levant, and when Lebanese president Suleiman Franjeh asked his good friend in Damascus to step in and defuse the violence in 1976, Assad interpreted the move as an open-ended invitation.

Syria forged alliances with various militias to secure its sovereignty in Lebanon, most notably supporting Hizbullah in its successful expulsion of the IDF. In 1990, in exchange for supporting the US-led invasion of Iraq, the United States gave Syria the green light to occupy Lebanon.

Today Lebanon is wracked by violence that has many asking if it will once more fall into civil war.

Many are thinking back to the 1990s; Syria plundered the country under its harsh rule, but at the same time gave it the peace and quiet needed to rebuild. This "peace," however, came at a price.

Among other acts of bribery, extortion and corruption, Syrian business leaders with government connections manipulated the Lebanese phone system, rerouting cellular and fixed phone calls, driving up prices for regular Lebanese; Syrian intelligence plundered the Casino du Liban; and Syrian officials used the Lebanese Bank al-Medina as their personal ATM, causing it to collapse.

With his vast fortune, then-prime minister Hariri used bribery to placate the Syrians and advance his construction and political agendas, remaining a helpless victim of Syria's Lebanon policy until late in his life.

Lebanese politicians continued to squabble in an effort to protect their local spheres of influence while Syria and Iran provided Hizbullah with the weapons and financing required to make it the most organized political and military machine in the Arab world.

Syria's soldiers have left Lebanese soil, but they left three indelible marks on the country. First, the current chaos allows the Syrians to remind the world of the stability they provided in Lebanon, and without a strong force on the ground, the violence and turmoil will only continue.

Second, the Syrian leadership's rapacious greed encouraged this tendency among Lebanon's political class, already known for corruption and exploitation. During a recent visit that included interviews with a number of parliamentarians and political leaders, not once did I hear the words "Lebanese people" mentioned.

Nearly all those interviewed were more concerned about their own sectarian constituencies, and worried that other, rival religious sects would dominate Lebanese politics.

Third, Syria's alliance with Iran and its provision of weapons to Hizbullah over the past two decades has made the Islamist organization unstoppable. As seen in the recent upheavals in Beirut, Hizbullah has the resources to start and stop strikes, protests, road closures and other forms of civil disobedience with unmatched precision and coordination. It continues to regard Syria as a close ally, a sovereign nation that possesses a "close and special relationship with its sister nation, Lebanon," in the words of one Hizbullah parliamentarian.

The question now on the minds of most Lebanese is whether Hizbullah will plunge Lebanon into a civil war, which would require Hizbullah to aim its guns at fellow Lebanese.

Syria left through the door but came back in through the window. The products of Syria's iron-fisted rule of Lebanon, continued support of Hizbullah, and the self-interest of the Syrian leadership all are visible today on the streets of the embattled capital. The majority of Lebanon's leaders are far from thinking about those outside their narrow regional or religious constituencies.

In this crisis, the one clear winner is Syria. Its leaders see politicians from the United States and Europe coming to visit the Presidential Palace in Damascus in droves. The continuing violence in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, and Lebanon's uncertain future, only strengthen the claim that Syria can be a positive force, because it is a domestically stable country that is located in a minefield.

But stability is not always positive. Syria took advantage of the stability in Lebanon for over a decade. Syria can help by staying out of Lebanon and not fulfilling the vision of the late president Assad. Yet unless Hizbullah is neutralized and the elected government is strengthened, Syria's footprints in Lebanon will not disappear.

The writer, who recently returned from a visit to Lebanon, is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He reported for the Jerusalem Post from Iran last year. ❖

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