

Seven Questions: Back to the Brink in Lebanon

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The United States is sounding the alarm about a possible coup in Lebanon, and Hezbollah is threatening to flood the streets with its supporters if it doesn't get more cabinet seats. FP spoke recently with regional expert David Schenker about the country's fragile politics, whether Hezbollah is rearming, and Syria's true intentions.

Foreign Policy: Why do you think the United States issued its warning about a possible coup in Lebanon?

David Schenker: The statement coincides with the visit of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt [to Washington] and his meetings with senior administration officials. Clearly the administration got the message. But more importantly, it coincides with developments on the ground, most prominently Hezbollah's announcement of a series of rallies to occur next week pressing for increased representation in the [Lebanese] cabinet. The threat is credible and there would be significant ramifications. A lot of people on the streets would destabilize the government.

FP: Who would Syria like to see running Lebanon?

Schenker: The Syrians have a trusted ally in Hezbollah. It's an outgrowth of their strategic relationship with Iran. However, Syria has always had its own independent sources of power in Lebanon. There are still high-ranking people in the government who are agents of Syria, the most high profile being Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. Moving forward to the next round, one of the leading candidates to succeed Lahoud is Riad Salameh, who is the director of the central bank and widely thought to be very close to the Syrians. So, the Syrians are not out of the game.

FP: What role is the investigation into the assassination of Rafik Hariri playing in this intrigue?

Schenker: There's no doubt that it's playing a major role. The Syrians at various times in the process have felt very concerned and at other times they've felt that they've dodged the bullet. It's clear that the conclusion of the [U.N. Mehlis] report will implicate the Syrians at a very high level. The Syrians are concerned about that, so they're pressing Lahoud to undercut what was a national consensus -- even Hezbollah acceded to the request for an international tribunal. Now they're revisiting it because the heat is being turned up and it appears more and more likely the Syrians will be fingered. It is also likely a reason why Hezbollah is militating so much now for a new government and a change in the structure. If they have additional cabinet seats, they'll be able to block the

international tribunal.

FP: But the tribunal could go ahead even without Lebanese support, right?

Schenker: That's true, but the tribunal will have a lot more legitimacy within Lebanon and the region if it's seen having an active Lebanese role. Personally I believe it's essential for the Lebanese people to play an active role. It is part of a process of national healing. It would also help to transform the long-standing and troubling relationship between Syria and Lebanon.

FP: These events are occurring against the backdrop of the Baker Commission's recommendations to negotiate with Syria about Iraq and Tony Blair's efforts to initiate contact with Syrian officials. How are these competing currents going to play out?

Schenker: It is no secret that there's a great push right now from many quarters to engage the Syrians. It becomes harder to have effective isolation of Syria when the Baker Commission recommends engagement and when the European Union moves ahead on its Economic Association agreement with Syria. I think all these recommendations really would prejudice the Hariri investigation and they're all premature. You have to wait and see what the results of the investigation are before you move forward. It's OK to talk to Damascus but it is counterproductive to start giving them rewards or easing pressure before the investigation concludes.

FP: How actively is Hezbollah rearming?

Schenker: U.N. Special Representative Terje Roed Larsen stated recently that they are rearming. That fact probably accounts for Israel's latest flyover of Beirut and the trial bombing runs. There's a question as to whether the rearming going on now involves heavy weapons, but it is probably headed in that direction. The degradation of Hezbollah's missile capability was the one accomplishment that Israel could point to from the war and if that has eroded, then the war was all for naught.

FP: Has UNIFIL had any impact on Hezbollah's ability to rearm?

Schenker: No. In fact, UNIFIL has made it very clear that they will not do anything in this regard. [UNIFIL commander Alain] Pellegrini was asked recently what he would do if Hezbollah were about to launch a rocket. He said he would beg them to stop. There's also a great article in the New York Times that describes in great detail how UNIFIL operates a checkpoint that allows all cars to pass and can't do anything to stop them. There's no doubt there is some benefit in having the increased number of UNIFIL troops and the deployment of the [Lebanese Army] to the south, even just in terms of international attention, but much of what Hezbollah is doing in terms of rearming and readying themselves for the next round is not over.

David Schenker is senior fellow in Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Previously, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as Levant country director. ❖

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