Assessing the Bush Administration's Policy of 'Constructive Instability' (Part I):

Lebanon and Syria

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Brief Analysis

The Bush Administration's policy of "constructive instability" in the Middle East is facing a critical juncture in Lebanon. Taking advantage of a rare confluence of events and international interests, President George W. Bush has focused U.S. efforts on one plank of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559 -- the withdrawal of Syrian forces -- as the first order of business. Defining the next steps requires a policy mix of persistence and incrementalism, identifying and pursuing high-priority, short-term goals, the very achievement of which will lay the foundation for the next set of objectives.

Monitoring Elections

The administration has cited the holding of parliamentary elections, under international observation, as the necessary second step in Lebanon, and it has said that such an election cannot meet the "free and fair" standard without full Syrian withdrawal.

As President Bush noted in his March 8 National Defense University address, international monitors for Lebanon's election are essential; it is hard to see how the election can be free and fair unless monitors ensure that Syria does not retain a behind-the-scenes role. To do their job properly, international monitors have to be in place during the election campaign, not just on the day of balloting. It would be a sham if international groups, such as the Carter Center (which has already been invited) went to Lebanon just in time for the balloting, since that is not when past Lebanese elections have been rigged. A fair election under international monitoring, therefore, can only happen if the Syrian forces have withdrawn well before the parliamentary vote, which is scheduled for May after already having been postponed a year at Syrian insistence. Pressing on these issues is crucial, because without considerable pre-election monitoring by international observers, there is a great risk that the voting will result in a strong showing by the forces subservient to Syria, especially if the elections are held under the deeply flawed proposed new election law. The legacy of the past is that the "international community," such as it is, usually ends up working with the beneficiaries of flawed elections and other constitutional charades; witness the continued recognition of current Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, whose rigged extension in office activated the Lebanon file in the first place.

Given the surprising strength of the international consensus on the importance of full Syrian withdrawal, there is a reasonable chance the administration will be saved the headache of dealing with this electoral conundrum. An interesting indicator will be the coming Arab League summit meeting, scheduled for March 22 in Algiers, capital of the Arab country, on the UN Security Council whose abstention on UNSCR 1559 was key to its passing without dissent. Will Syrian president Bashar al-Asad travel to the Arab capital that gave Arab legitimacy to 1559? Will Arab leaders distance themselves from him? Or will they endorse his partial and phased withdrawal on the grounds that it complies with the letter -- if not the spirit -- of the Saudi-brokered Taif Accord, though not with UNSCR 1559? Most likely is an Arab punt, in the form of some statement noting Syria's withdrawal "in line with 1559," language the world will choose as critical of Damascus but which actually is lifted directly from Asad's parliamentary address.

Disarming Hizballah

For the administration, the most important next test concerns the linkage between Lebanese elections and the other requirements of 1559. Specifically, the test concerns how the United States and its partners apply the principle of "withdrawal of foreign forces" to Iran's deployment of 100 or so Revolutionary Guard troops and military trainers; how they apply the requirement for the disarmament of all militias to Hizballah; and how they apply the requirement for the Lebanese army to extend its authority over the entire country, including control of the Lebanon-Israel border zone.

Recognizing the difficulty of achieving these objectives all at once, it is important to prioritize the different elements of disarmament. The most destabilizing aspect of Hizballah's arsenal is its possession of several hundred long-range rockets. By reaching Tel Aviv and other Israeli population centers, Hizballah has the power to trigger regional conflagration, and with the departure of Syrian troops, Israel will no longer turn to Damascus as the address to be held responsible for Hizballah's irresponsible behavior. Getting those missiles out of Hizballah's hands -- and out of Lebanon altogether -- is a high strategic desideratum. With their departure should go the Iranian military advisors, who should not be allowed to remain in Lebanon under some other guise (e.g., a training mission attached to the Iranian embassy), as well as any mechanism that allows further supply of military goods to Hizballah.

A second near-term objective of disarmament should be to end Hizballah's freedom to operate as an independent force throughout south Lebanon. Hizballah reportedly has several hundred "regular" forces and up to 3,000 militia-type reserves that can be called upon in special circumstances. An important step on the path to full disarmament would be to limit all Hizballah deployments to specified bases and training sites, none of which should be within katyusha range of the Israel-Lebanon frontier. This step would limit the potential for cross-border exchanges and allow the deployment of Lebanese Army troops into the area.

Why should Hizballah and its Iranian and Syrian patrons accede to these requirements? Because accepting limitations on military capabilities and deployments allows Hizballah to conserve some of its assets -- such as unit cohesion and light arms, which are plentiful in the country anyway -- without testing to see whether the Security Council actually has the mettle to implement its own demand for disarmament through coercive measures. Neither Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, nor Ayatollah Ali Hossein Khamenei, nor President Asad can want to risk seeing thousands of U.S., French and other troops in Lebanon, knowing that the soldiers coming ashore will do everything possible to prevent a repeat of the ignominious 1982-1983 experience.

For their part, Washington and Paris would welcome Hizballah's assent to what can be termed the first phase of disarmament as a way to avoid a bloody showdown and elicit progress on all three outstanding aspects of 1559. These old-new honeymooners may eventually part ways over some aspect of policy toward Lebanon but no one can be so certain that this is the trigger for a transatlantic rupture that he/she should be confident about calling the bluff. Hizballah's assent to even this limited disarmament will still require the deployment to Lebanon of international monitors to verify compliance, perhaps even the stationing of an ongoing presence at Beirut's airport and other

border crossings to prevent the shipment of banned weaponry. (A private firm, Lloyd's of London, played this role in the Gulf of Aqaba to help prevent illegal shipping to Iraq during the 1990s, for example.)

Importantly, this issue of disarmament is separate from the question of Hizballah's political role in Lebanon, over which neither the UN nor the United States should play any role in bargaining. It is also separate from the issue of Hizballah's designation as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) -- to which the European parliament added its voice last week. The number of parliamentarians Hizballah can claim has no bearing on whether the group deserves its FTO designation. Indeed, even if Hizballah were to emerge as the largest political party in Lebanon, there is no necessary reason for the United States to reconsider its view of it as a terrorist group.

The Road to Damascus

As the administration works through the daily diplomacy on Lebanon, it needs to keep one eye on events in Damascus. The Asad regime is probably the most brittle in the Middle East; while the Egyptian and Saudi regimes, for example, may bristle at U.S. pro-democracy efforts, there are built-in brakes on U.S. pressure as well as deep reservoirs of institutional support in both countries. Syria, however, is different. The United States has no interest in the survival of the Asad regime, which itself is a minoritarian regime built on the fragile edifice of fear and intimidation. Cracks in the Syrian regime may quickly become fissures and then earthquakes, in a way that the same cracks in other countries could be contained.

Given how remarkably puerile Syrian foreign policy has been under Bashar al-Asad, it would be useful for U.S. planners to dust off old studies of possible sources of domestic instability and their likely implications. Events could take any number of routes: Alawite elders, aghast at how Bashar has placed Syria in the international crosshairs, may decide to replace him with someone who truly inherited Hafiz al-Asad's political acumen; some brigadier general, outraged at the embarrassment of Syria's forced departure from Lebanon, may try to move against his corrupt superiors; thousands of Syrian workers, kicked out of Lebanon by emboldened Lebanese patriots, return to Homs, Hama, and Aleppo to find no jobs and no safety net and vent their frustration in antiregime riots. Once these processes start, no one can know for sure how they end and what the repercussions really are.

Surely, neither a more effective Baathist dictatorship nor the empowerment of Syria's long-repressed Sunni Islamist militants is a preferred outcome, and Asad will use the specter of both to ward off international interference against his hold on power. However, to do so will be to play on decades-old impressions of what Syria is about. For now, Washington should focus on three items:

• Invest in intelligence about the dynamics of political, social, economic and ethnic life inside Syria. There is no reason to think that U.S. intelligence services know more about domestic politics in Syria that we did about Iraq or Iran; indeed, because Syria lacks the analogue of an Iraqi Kurdistan (an opposition free-zone inside the country) or its own Mujahedin-e Khalq (an opposition group, though highly problematic, that has thousands of supporters and has been a source of sometimes credible information on the regime for many years), U.S. intelligence may actually know less about Syria than those other two countries. At a moment when it is important to know more about the Alawite elders, the Syrian Kurds, and the real strength of the local Muslim Brotherhood, that is an especially scary thought.

• Start talking about democracy, human rights, and the rule of law inside Syria. Once the Syrians depart Lebanon, Washington should turn the spotlight on Syria's egregious behavior toward its own citizens. Since the United States is championing the concept of "choice" in promoting multi-candidate elections in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, a good place to start might be the Syrian constitution, which vests the Arab Baath Socialist Party with sole control of the country's political leadership. Bashar's first seven-year term expires in 2007 and it is not too early to start a campaign to pry open that political system.

• Offer no lifelines to this regime. Traditionally, the Syrians have used the Arab-Israeli peace process as a way to avoid being lumped in the same category as the axis of evil states. Now that the regime is under pressure, Washington should not accede to any peace process gambit that enables the Syrians to claim insurance from persistent international pressure. Only two potential but highly improbable Syrian initiatives deserve some attention from Washington -- a visit by Asad to Israel to address the Israeli people directly on the issue of peace or a verifiable expulsion of all anti-peace terrorist organizations and their members from Syrian territory combined with a public renunciation of violence -- "armed struggle" or "national resistance," in the local lexicon -- as a means to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Short of paying these entry fees to the peace process, Washington should not be interested in Syrian peace-sounding entreaties.

Conclusion

Lebanon and Syria are places where the administration's policy of "constructive instability" is being put to an early test. Before this policy has run its course, America and its local allies are sure to suffer tactical defeats and nightmarish moments. But if the administration is able to maintain a dogged, incremental persistence -- neither overplaying its hand nor recoiling at the first sign of setback -- then the prospects for continued positive change remain strong.

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