After the Hariri Assassination:

Syria, Lebanon, and U.S. Policy

Mar 10, 2005

Brief Analysis

When Bashar al-Asad assumed power in 2001, there was widespread optimism that he would, by virtue of his British education and Western outlook, modernize the Syrian government and expand individual and political rights. Yet, after a short period of preliminary change, dubbed the "Damascus Spring," Asad proved unwilling or unable to implement the types of reforms he had hinted at, and the initial reforms were largely reversed. Over time, he showed that his true interests lay in appealing to Arab opinion rather than to the West. Indeed, the regime soon devolved to the point that it came to resemble something out of Mario Puzo's The Godfather.

On the international stage, the regime's often confrontational policies -- perhaps attributable to pressure from the late Hafiz al-Asad's old guard associates -- have been exacerbated by Bashar's own political ineptitude. His first political blunder occurred only a year into his presidency: during a historic May 2001 visit by Pope John Paul II, Asad delivered a speech interpreted by Western media outlets as anti-Semitic. The regime made similar missteps on the economic front. At one Euro-Med Summit, nearly every nation in the Mediterranean basin left with some sort of trade agreement with the European Union except Syria, which felt it was entitled to special treatment. In the end, Damascus had to agree to tougher terms than it could have obtained if it had acted earlier.

The regime's actions have drawn particular ire from Washington. During the course of the Iraq war, Syria permitted insurgents to enter Iraq through its territory. This and other actions led to the passage of the Syria Accountability Act in late 2004. Asad has paid little mind to the legislation, however; believing that the United States set the bar too high for Syria, Damascus has maintained a policy of noncooperation, evidenced by its harboring of former Iraqi Baath leaders and its intentionally lackluster performance in stemming the flow of insurgents across its border.

Similarly, Asad's blatant interference in extending the mandate of Lebanon's pro-Syrian president, Emile Lahoud, sparked widespread international condemnation, culminating in an unprecedented show of U.S.-French solidarity behind UN Security Council Resolution 1559. Following the February 14, 2005, assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the Lebanese people forced both Syria and the international community to take heed. Whether or not this assassination was engineered by the Syrians, it served as the catalyst for a massive anti-Syrian movement in Lebanon.

WALID PHARES

The Syrian occupation of Lebanon, which began in June 1976, was purportedly initiated to quell civil strife. Syria's true intentions were revealed only a month later, however: in a speech at Damascus University, then-president Hafiz al-Asad indicated his desire to integrate the two countries, for which he offered ideological, economic, and social justifications.

The occupation drew its rationale from three factors. Broadly speaking, it garnered validation under the guise of Cold War politics. On the regional level, Israel's 1978 and 1982 invasions of Lebanon and subsequent occupation of the southern part of the country gave justification for a continued Syrian presence. Yet, the factor that allowed Syrian hegemony to fully take root was the civil war and concomitant fragmentation of Lebanese society.

In return for its cooperation during the Gulf War in 1991, Syria received carte blanche from the United States regarding its occupation of Lebanon. As the 1990s progressed, however, a combination of U.S. impatience with the regime's policies and Syria's decreasing strategic importance in Iraq led Washington to begin pressuring Asad to withdraw. The pressure intensified after the sole remaining rationalization for the Syrian presence in Lebanon -- the Israeli occupation of the south -- ended in May 2000. Later that year, increasingly vocal opposition to the Syrian presence emerged, spearheaded by Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir and supported by a mobilized Lebanese diaspora. By 2004, a unified opposition movement began to coalesce in Lebanon, with Rafiq Hariri and the Sunni community on the threshold of joining the movement. As calls for Syrian withdrawal intensified, Damascus embarked on a last-ditch effort to regain control by engineering Hariri's assassination. Initially described as a strategic blunder, it was in fact the last remaining Syrian option to prevent a broad-based opposition bloc from materializing.

Just as the situation in Lebanon was turning against Syria, Washington announced its policy of democratization in the Middle East, beginning with Iraq. Damascus knew that a successful democracy in Iraq could give Shiite communities throughout the region an alternative to the Iranian theocracy, and that a show of successful Iraqi elections could inspire Lebanese Shiites to move toward that goal as well. Damascus also inferred that such success could encourage calls for democracy in Syria, signaling the regime's end. For this reason, Syria took steps to prevent the establishment of a stable, democratic Iraq. Damascus supported the Iraqi insurgency by recruiting fighters and establishing its border as an entry point for them. In this manner, the regime hoped to sabotage the Iraqi elections, prove them a failure, and prevent democratic reform from taking root in the region.

As it stands now, the situation for Damascus is precarious. The international community is calling for a complete withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, which would remove Syria's last bargaining chip with Israel. A withdrawal would also destroy both a key source of capital for the regime and the principal source of income for hundreds of thousands of Syrian migrants in Lebanon, most of whom would otherwise be unemployed.

Nevertheless, the Lebanese opposition and the international community are focused on one goal: to rid Lebanon of Syrian occupation. The enormity of this task will ensure unity for the time being. Yet, the long-term integrity of the coalition will depend on the condition of Lebanon after the Syrian withdrawal, especially with regard to the Shiite community. Some issues will be tricky to resolve. For example, although Hizballah must give up its military role, it should not be dismantled as a political party, as it enjoys a relatively high level of support among Lebanese. In general, the United States must encourage immediate planning for the future of postoccupation Lebanon.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Mark Thomas. ❖

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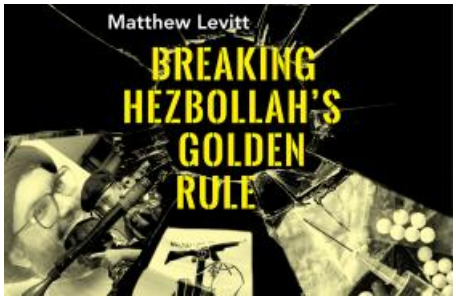

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