Next Steps in Lebanon:

Key Variables in the Growing Confrontation with Syria

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Brief Analysis

The fall of the Omar Karami cabinet in Beirut on February 28 marked an important development in the brewing confrontation between an energized civil society in Lebanon and the country's Syrian-backed government. While Damascus will likely try to staunch the bleeding of its occupation of Lebanon by redeploying troops—and perhaps even withdrawing them altogether—such measures may no longer be enough to silence the thousands of courageous Lebanese who took to the streets this week. In the midst of this crisis, the role of the country's Shiites—about 30 percent of the population—remains a key variable.

In the Wake of Hariri's Assassination

Following the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, two scenarios that observers feared would occur did not, in fact, transpire: Lebanon did not descend into sectarian infighting, and the country's already ailing economy did not experience a catastrophic collapse. On the contrary, two countervailing developments unfolded that buoyed the prospects for a constructive push toward change. First, Lebanese Sunnis joined the previously Christian- and Druze-led opposition to Syria's continued stranglehold over the country and gave it a welcome infusion of new blood. Second, the international community—represented by the UN and Europe and led by Washington and Paris—focused intense attention on Lebanon and the presence of Syrian forces there.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Shiites were conspicuously absent (at least in large numbers) from the Hariri funeral and subsequent popular protests. The two primary Shiite political factions, Amal and Hizballah, are staunchly pro-Syrian. Large as they are, however, they do not comprise the totality of Lebanese Shiites; the rank and file, along with many of the more prominent Shiite families (e.g., the Assads, the Baydouns, the Usseirans, the Khalils), have expressed passive sympathy with the protestors while staying at home. Moreover, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, arguably Lebanon's leading Shiite cleric, has been curiously silent on the question of Syrian control over Lebanon.

As Lebanon's only remaining paramilitary militia group, Hizballah (with its eleven parliamentarians) wields considerable power. Yet, it does not present the same dangers for Lebanon as did the armed Palestine Liberation Organization in 1975. The latter had no qualms about undermining and destroying the country that hosted it. In contrast, Hizballah's members and leaders include many who are, in their own way, genuine Lebanese patriots. Such elements would think very carefully before embarking on a reckless, potentially self-destructive course.

Another crucial domestic development in the period following Hariri's murder was the vacillation and weakness of the Karami government. For weeks prior to the killing, government figures had repeatedly accused the opposition of treason, calling them “Zionist agents.” When the opposition blamed the assassination on the regime and its Syrian patrons, government officials went on the defensive and began to ask for dialogue with the opposition. Moreover, they hesitated to accept calls for an international investigation into the murder and then pretended to follow up on dubious leads that led nowhere. At one point, Karami hinted at the possibility that further demonstrations would lead to a split within the army along sectarian lines—something his late brother Rachid had helped engineer thirty

years earlier at the outset of the Lebanese civil war. In response, voices of consternation arose from all sides; even the army commander, Gen. Michel Suleiman, issued a reassuring statement to the effect that such a split was inconceivable. In the end, the large-scale demonstrations and parliamentary opposition overwhelmed the government. Any chance that it might have had of containing the situation ended when the army and internal security forces—while obeying orders to maintain calm and even disrupt the flow of protestors to the downtown area—refused to prevent demonstrations from taking place. Instead, they remained on generally amicable terms with peaceful protestors carrying the national flag and pictures of the slain Hariri.

How Did This Happen?

The most confusing aspect of the rapidly unfolding events is the speed with which Syria's standing has eroded. After three decades of maintaining an iron grip on Lebanon, how could Damascus's position unravel in a matter of days? Indeed, in just a matter of months Syria has managed to do everything possible to replace Saddam Hussein's late regime in the "axis of evil." The regime of Bashar al-Asad has wreaked violence and mischief on virtually every front, from its harboring of Iraqi insurgents, to its support for anti-Israel terrorists, to its ham-handed extension of Emile Lahoud's presidency in Lebanon, to its transparent attempt to destroy the budding anti-Syrian protest movement by targeting leading Lebanese Druze politician Marwan Hamadeh. Three developments in quick succession—the Hariri assassination, which was widely attributed to Syria; subsequent threats by Damascus that "negative consequences for the Lebanese" would follow any widespread calls for Syrian withdrawal; and the announcement of a deepening Iran-Syria strategic partnership—only served to galvanize local, regional, and international outrage at Syrian behavior and raise questions about the underlying thinking of the country's leadership.

Clearly, this is a different Asad—the late Hafiz would never have pursued such a series of rash acts, which have only invited international condemnation and intervention. Bashar seems bent on compounding errors, not deflecting negative attention. He seems to lack any appreciation of the momentous impact of the September 11 attacks on Washington's strategic thinking, any sense of U.S. commitment to persevering in Iraq, and any sense that the Bush administration might be serious in its pursuit of democracy and reform in Arab societies. Unlike autocratic Arab leaders in Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere, who have taken steps to accommodate and perhaps reorient U.S. policy, Bashar's regime more closely resembles a Middle Eastern version of totalitarian Brezhnevism, mired as it is in old thinking, tired ideologies, and brutality as national strategy.

In this environment, the success of Lebanon's effort to win liberation will depend on two factors: continued peaceful protests by the Lebanese people and sustained U.S. and Western resolve to see Syria and Lebanon decoupled. Neither factor can achieve the hoped-for result alone; both internal and external action is necessary. While the Lebanese understand the stakes, it is important for Americans to recognize that this is more than just a humanitarian mission. A free, open, and pluralist Lebanon will advance the reform agenda throughout the Arab Middle East. At the same time, reducing the long arm of Iran in the Levant while severing the key Syrian link between Tehran and its Hizballah allies in Beirut is an important strategic imperative. Where strategy and principle meet, U.S. policy in Lebanon stands the chance of bearing fruit.

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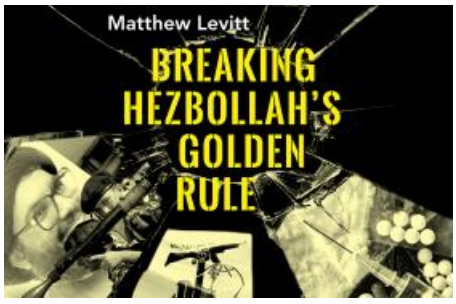

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