

# Lebanon's Lesson for Arab Leaders

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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On Monday in Beirut, despite a ban on public demonstrations, 25,000 people took to the streets, chanted "Syria out" and triggered the resignation of the pro-Syrian prime minister and his government. Since the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister, on February 14, the Lebanese people—Christians, Muslims and Druze—have found their collective voice and lost their fear of the Syrians.

Whether the Syrian leadership, elements of its security apparatus or those in Lebanon who rely on Syrian dominance bear responsibility for Hariri's assassination, it is clear that whoever did it profoundly miscalculated the consequences of killing the former prime minister. They wanted to intimidate other Lebanese leaders by signalling they would die if they promoted Security Council resolution 1559—and its implicit call for withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. But they have produced the opposite effect.

Walid Jumblatt, who learnt from the assassination of his father not to challenge the Syrians, is at the forefront of Lebanese calls for the withdrawal of Syrian forces. Lebanese across the political and ethnic spectrum have united in protest against Syrian occupation, and they know they are not alone in the region. Al-Jazeera, the Arabic-language broadcaster, has reported polls suggesting that 77 percent of Arabs believe the Syrians were behind the assassination and should withdraw from Lebanon. Such expressions of Arab public opinion only embolden the Lebanese public.

Something significant is happening within Lebanon that has implications not just for Syria but for authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East. When people lose their fear of such regimes, these regimes have very little to sustain them. Some say—Mr. Jumblatt included—that Iraq's elections inspired the Lebanese, who saw that Iraqis would not give into fear.

But it is not just the "Iraq effect": it is Palestinian elections and the paradox, as Arab commentators have observed, that only where there is external occupation are Arab peoples gaining a voice in shaping their future. Does it take occupation, they ask, to empower Arab individuals?

Empowerment is taking place elsewhere, and there is little doubt that the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine appears to have had a profound effect on the psychology of the Lebanese. Note how the Lebanese have borrowed from Kiev's example by creating a tent city at the site of the assassination and refusing to leave until the government resigns and

the Syrians withdraw. The Ukrainian people captured the world's imagination not with violence but with their collective stand against the authorities. The Lebanese, having also lost their fear, are now making their own statement. Will they succeed? The Syrian regime and its dependents believe they must hold power and wealth or they will lose everything. But their options in Lebanon are clearly not attractive. A massive crackdown that results in the killing of demonstrators will bring the world's wrath down on Syria, making isolation and collective—not simply American—sanctions likely. A more selective targeting of leading Lebanese politicians might only generate more mass demonstrations. The use of Hizbollah to try to foment internal tensions or even divert attention by triggering a crisis with the Israelis would reveal the Lebanon-based militia group as serving foreign, not Lebanese, interests. Hizbollah's first priority has always been Lebanon, and it may now be reluctant to be seen as doing Syria's bidding. Not surprisingly, given his poor options, Bashar al-Assad, Syria's ruler, is already offering a partial withdrawal. If he thinks it will help, he may also sacrifice Emile Lahoud, the Lebanese president who was Hariri's nemesis. Perhaps that will work, especially if the Lebanese become convinced that sectarian violence might yet be triggered. But having been repressed for so long, and now seeing that as a people they can change their reality, the Lebanese public may insist on nothing less than complete Syrian withdrawal.

Certainly the more George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac keep up the drumbeat of their support, and the more they insist on the Security Council fulfilling its call in resolution 1559, the more the Lebanese are likely to believe they can succeed. The future of the Middle East may now be played out on the streets of Beirut even more than it is in Baghdad—which after all will still face an insurgency and the less than pristine reality of coalition politics. If the Lebanese succeed, which Middle Eastern leader will sleep easily knowing his people are no longer afraid? Indeed, should it become clear that "velvet" or "orange revolutions" are possible not only in eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union but in the Middle East as well, will we soon see Arab leaders embracing reforms for real?

The writer, a former US envoy to the Middle East, is author of *The Missing Peace* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and counsellor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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