

# Going Backwards in Beirut

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## Beirut

"If you think you understand Lebanon," a friend counseled me as I prepared for my first trip to her native land, "somebody's just explained it badly." Six days in Lebanon confirmed her wisdom. They also confirmed that the United States can ill afford to neglect this tiny, beautiful, strife-ridden country, which is in the Arab world but not entirely of it, and which since the 1980s has served as a battleground in Iran's quest for hegemony in a region critical to vital American national security interests.

My host on the trip was New Opinion Group, a Lebanese NGO. Created in the wake of the March 2005 Cedar Revolution, it is dedicated to "achieving a nonsectarian, democratic, and sovereign Lebanon." The small group of American journalists, policy analysts, and scholars of which I was a part met with civil society activists, professors, journalists, TV personalities, and leading politicians representing Lebanon's major sects.

Our conversations gave a sense of the elusive depths of the tribal, ethnic, and religious divisions that crisscross the country. They also made clear that the question of Hezbollah trumps all others in Lebanese politics today. A Shia-based and Syrian-backed Iranian proxy, Hezbollah operates not merely as a political party and military force but as a state within a state in the Shia dominated south of Lebanon. It holds in its hands the power to again drag Lebanon into a ruinous war against Israel or another civil war.

In addition, our meetings brought into focus the elements of Lebanese exceptionalism. The country is about 28 percent Sunni, 28 percent Shia, and 39 percent Christian, but all told it contains 18 constitutionally recognized sects. Under the constitution, the president must be Christian, the prime minister Sunni, and the speaker of Parliament Shia, while cabinet positions must be evenly allotted to Christians and non-Christians. Further, France's persisting influence--French is widely spoken--and the impact of the Christians, who form the single largest community, give a particular prominence to Western ways.

Geography and climate also give Lebanon its special feel and flair. Occupying a sliver of land bordered in the south by Israel, in the north and east by Syria, and to the west by the Mediterranean, Lebanon is shaped by the sea, mountains, and valleys. Its capital, Beirut, is a natural deep water port. Because of the commerce it nourishes, people are constantly coming and going, acquainting the Lebanese with the wide world beyond their shores. Its natural attractions and cosmopolitan spirit also make Lebanon a favorite regional vacation

spot. In the summer, Saudi princes and the middle class from around the Gulf enjoy Lebanon's beaches and cool mountain air, and in the winter they take to its excellent ski slopes and unwind at fancy mountain resorts.

In discussing Lebanese exceptionalism, one mustn't slight Beirut's famous nightlife. In the evenings Sunni, Christian, and Shia put aside political differences to dine on fine food, and to drink and smoke until all hours. There is nothing in the Middle East quite like the exuberant cabaret-style nightclubs where patrons begin to trickle in around 10, dinner is served at 11, and near midnight the curtain goes up on a succession of performers who effortlessly interweave Middle Eastern, European, American, and Latin American music. Soon patrons pour out into the aisles or hop up on chairs, tables, and even bar counters to dance.

Despite the worldwide financial crisis, Lebanon's economy, which is built around banking, tourism, and other services, is growing at a 6.5 percent clip, but the good times coexist with the constant threat of political crisis. Government had been on pause here since the June 7 elections. But on November 9 the majority and minority coalitions finally struck a deal to form a national unity government with Saad Hariri as prime minister. The March 14 bloc--a moderate, pro-Western, pro-democracy coalition led by Hariri--upset expectations in June and obtained a small parliamentary majority. To understand why Hariri had been unable to form a government for almost half a year, it is necessary to appreciate the significance of two other dates--March 8 and May 7--which have become synonymous in Lebanon with pivotal political moments.

In February 2005 a massive car bomb killed Rafik Hariri, Saad's billionaire father, along with more than 20 others. The elder Hariri had made his fortune in Saudi Arabia in the construction business. After Lebanon's 15-year civil war ended in 1990, he returned to his native land to spearhead the rebuilding of Beirut. His success led to his 1992 election as prime minister. He served until 1998, and then again from 2000 to 2004. It was widely assumed that his assassination was engineered by Syria, which continues to serve as the conduit through which Iranian arms flow to Hezbollah. And it was commonly understood that the assassination was meant to dramatize the cost that Syria and Hezbollah would exact from those working toward a Lebanon free of foreign tutelage. Four weeks after Hariri's murder, on March 8, 2005, approximately 500,000 people, mostly Shia, held a rally in Beirut to reaffirm their pro-Syria loyalties.

Six days later, on March 14, a Sunni, Christian, and Druze crowd of more than 1 million--a quarter of Lebanon's population--shook their nation by gathering in downtown Beirut to outdo the pro-Syria demonstrators and show their devotion to a sovereign Lebanon. The stunning upsurge of pro-liberty and pro-democracy sentiment in what became known as the Cedar Revolution combined with international indignation over the Hariri assassination compelled Syria, which had occupied the country for 29 years, to withdraw its forces by the end of April. The forces of freedom exulted.

Three years later, on May 7, 2008, however, the March 14 coalition suffered a huge blow. Hezbollah forces, carrying little more than light arms but backed by a formidable guerrilla machine in the south and the threat of far more devastating force, rolled into Beirut and took over the city in a matter of hours. Lebanon's liberals and democrats were devastated by the failure of the United States and Europe to come to Lebanon's aid even as its cosmopolitan capital was overrun by ragtag fighters equipped by, and loyal to, Iran's Islamic revolutionaries. Hezbollah lifted the siege at the end of the month with the signing of the Doha Agreement, which, most importantly, gave it, a minority party, a veto over government action in a new national unity government.

A little over a year after this trauma, with the implications of Hezbollah's takeover still very much up in the air, the June 2009 elections turned on the single issue of whether Lebanon would submit to Hezbollah and the political authority of Syria and Iran, or build a free and democratic state. Despite eking out a narrow parliamentary majority, the March 14 coalition could not form a government for five months because Hezbollah blocked it--formally, by means of the powers it obtained through the Doha Agreement, and informally, through threats and intimidation. The newly announced national unity government gives 2 of the 30 ministerial port-folios to Hezbollah politicians.

One hears from all sections of Lebanese society that Israel is the key to reining in Hezbollah. Many Sunnis say this; so do significant parts of the Christian community as well as some Druze, in addition to Shia who are not aligned with Hezbollah or Amal, a Shia party friendly to Syria. According to this common line of thinking, Hezbollah's claim to uphold "resistance" would be substantially weakened by an Israeli decision to negotiate with the Lebanese government to leave the Shebaa Farms, some eight square miles of strategically important land on the slopes overlooking southern Lebanon, which almost everybody in Lebanon contends Israel occupies illegally. And Hezbollah's status would be weakened decisively, from this point of view, were Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories and allow the approximately 400,000 Palestinians living in Lebanon--half of them still in refugee camps 60 years after the armistice Lebanon signed with Israel, and all of them facing restrictions on the kinds of jobs they can hold--to return to an independent Palestinian state. Once all illegal Israeli occupation ends, so the argument goes, Hezbollah's reasons for existing as a fighting force will vanish.

But our New Opinion hosts, and several of the liberal Shia to whom we spoke, adamantly rejected this analysis. For Hezbollah, they persuasively argued, resistance does not refer merely to armed struggle against Israel's occupation of this or that piece of land, or even the battle against Israel's very existence, but a fight to the death against the claims of liberty and democracy in Lebanon and throughout the region in the name of Islamic law as dictated by the Iranian mullahs.

In these difficult circumstances, the United States can take several steps to advance America's interests in Lebanon, which, as it happens, would also advance the interests of liberty and democracy. First, the Obama administration can stop encouraging the widespread view, rooted in decades of pan-Arab rhetoric, that the key to Middle East peace is solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians should be assiduously pursued, but to suppose that the absence of a final agreement between them is what stands in the way of security and stability in the Middle East is to play into the hands of Arab governments that cynically use the conflict to shift their people's attention from their own countries' internal failings and destabilizing ambitions.

Second, the United States can expand programs to support civil society in Lebanon, particularly K-12 education, and also economic development, particularly in the south, since one way to loosen Hezbollah's grip is to enable the Lebanese government to better provide the social services and financial support that, thanks to Iranian financing, Hezbollah now delivers. Third, the administration can redouble efforts to degrade Iran's ability to deliver cash and transfer funds electronically to Hezbollah. Fourth, it can place at the heart of engagement with Syria an insistence on cutting off the enormous flow of ammunition, machine guns, bombs, rockets, and missiles that Iran pumps through Damascus to southern Lebanon.

When all is said and done, notwithstanding its daunting complexity and multifaceted exceptionalism, Lebanon--like the Arab Gulf monarchies and Israel too--faces one looming national security challenge that encompasses all others, and its name is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Regional stability depends most of all on crafting strategies to thwart Tehran's export of Islamic revolution. In the near term, that task depends most of all on thwarting Iran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons.

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