

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE AND LEBANON RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION

LEBANON

THE SWING STATE OF A NEW LEVANT

U.S.-LEBANON DIALOGUE PROGRAM



Lebanon: The Swing State of a New Levant

*Report on the policy discussions at a
conference on U.S.-Lebanon relations on*

December 12, 2008

and possible ways forward.



U.S.-Lebanon Dialogue Program



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM WALTER ISAACSON	1
LETTER FROM ELI KHOURY	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
CONFERENCE REPORT	
Section One – <i>Lebanon and the Region</i>	9
Section Two – <i>Lebanese Politics and Elections</i>	13
Section Three – <i>Hezbollah</i>	17
Section Four – <i>Sunni Fundamentalism</i>	21
Section Five – <i>Making Democracy Deliver</i>	23

A LETTER FROM ASPEN INSTITUTE PRESIDENT WALTER ISAACSON

The U.S.-Lebanon relationship has historically ebbed and flowed. Administrations come and go and each must, to a certain extent, relearn the lessons of their predecessors. At times, U.S. policy in the Levant has appeared to be governed more by the news cycle than by the common values and interests that we share.

The 2005 Cedar Revolution woke Washington up to the possibility of real and lasting change in Lebanon, and perhaps the wider Middle East. It gave hope, not just to the people of Lebanon, but also to advocates of democracy all over the world. It demands our continued attention, and our support. Lebanon has struggled from Syrian occupation through war and civil strife, to the uneasy accord that now obtains. And as the events of this past May demonstrated, the democratic achievements of 2005 are still on shaky ground.

As Washington welcomes a new administration, and as Lebanon looks toward parliamentary elections and a new political reality of its own, we must ensure that the steps forward in the past few years are not for naught. We will endeavor to ensure that the relationships that have been built continue and grow. We will continue the dialogue in the hope that Washington can come to see Lebanon not as a source of threats or a piece in a regional game, but as an end in itself.

The conference that produced this report was the first event in a new policy program at Aspen, bringing together key policy makers and opinion leaders from the U.S. and Lebanon in order to build a robust and lasting dialogue on the common interests and values that Americans and Lebanese share. Those values include a free and democratic Lebanon with an open society, prosperous and governed by the rule of law.

Here, we begin to explore the future of the U.S.-Lebanon relationship in a new political era, and ask how Lebanon and the U.S. can build on the successes of the past few years. We thank our participants for their courage and commitment in being enthusiastic participants in the continuing dialogue of common interests, values, and good will between our two nations, and we hope that you are both educated and energized by their collective insights and wisdom.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Walter Isaacson', written in a cursive style.

Walter Isaacson
President and CEO,
The Aspen Institute

A LETTER FROM LEBANON RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION PRESIDENT ELI KHOURY

As the Obama administration begins to refocus American foreign policy it does so under immense international pressures, particularly in the Middle East: a fragile ceasefire between Palestinians and Israelis, an ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a nuclear ambitious Iran and growing Islamic radicalism to name a few.

One important, if often undervalued issue, is the status of Lebanon in the context of U.S. foreign policy. Lebanon is a place where many of the region's conflicts overlap and where American involvement has extended over several decades.

The collective decision by the great majority of Lebanese to regain their sovereignty through nonviolent, popular and democratic change in 2005 helps emphasize the potential for peaceful progress led by the Lebanese themselves when supported by the international community. And while the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon was a positive development for both the United States and Lebanon, there remains more work which can be done to strengthen American-Lebanese relations and build on this earlier success.

Seeking to capitalize and expand upon the Cedar Revolution and the impressive gains made, the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation (LRF) and the Aspen Institute have partnered to create a new policy program focused on raising American awareness of Lebanon. Working together we hope to strengthen ties between Lebanon and the United States, with particular focus on maintaining Lebanon's sovereignty and reinforcing its democratic values.

The United States deserves to have a constructive foreign policy that serves its interests and those of its friends in the Middle East. There is a lot of work to be done and both the LRF and the Aspen Institute are committed to elevating the ongoing debate about Lebanon in a manner that furthers the interest of both great nations..

Sincerely,



Eli Khoury
President and CEO,
Lebanon Renaissance Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American relationship with Lebanon has ebbed and flowed over the decades, as policy has tended to be reactive rather than driven by a clear sense of U.S. goals. More recently, the U.S. strongly supported the 2005 Lebanese independence movement against Syrian hegemony, known as the “Cedar Revolution” in the United States and the “Independence Intifada” in Lebanon, and continues to maintain strong ties to the ruling March 14 coalition which was born out of that movement.

The Cedar Revolution was a major victory for Lebanese independence but remained only the first step in a long and complex journey. Several militant groups still operate with impunity inside Palestinian camps and remote areas of Lebanon. Hezbollah poses a particular challenge, acting as both a heavily armed state-within-a-state, and as the predominant Shia party within the legitimate Lebanese political system. State institutions remain weak and are often ignored or out-competed by organizations and patronage networks loyal to powerful local or sectarian leaders.

With the arrival of the new administration of President Barack Obama, the U.S. is set to reengage throughout the Middle East. Even as the new president’s foreign policy team swings into action, Lebanon is gearing up for a major test of its current pro-Western alignment as it heads to parliamentary elections in June of 2009. The challenge in Lebanon will be to build on the gains made in the past few years while moving to this new regional approach.

With respect to consolidating gains for itself and for promoting regional stability, Lebanon offers both unique challenges and opportunities for the United States. Lebanon has an essential but complicated role in any hypothetical Syrian-Israeli peace deal. At the same time, Lebanon represents one of the best opportunities to demonstrate to the region that democracy and free markets can indeed deliver, despite the failures in Iraq and the global financial crisis. Those challenges must be addressed, and opportunities seized, if U.S. goals are to be met in the Middle East.

- 1. Consolidate Gains.** Lebanon’s progress towards full independence and sovereignty over its territory is incomplete and fragile. U.S. support for the Lebanese army and security services is an essential part of preserving and extending that sovereignty, but to be effective it must be carefully directed and accompanied by political reform and robust diplomatic engagement. U.S. involvement in Arab-Israeli peace talks and support of the “Arab Peace Initiative” will not only help bring a peace deal closer but also ensure that Lebanon is not ceded to Syrian control through any bilateral arrangements, which could destabilize the country. A U.S. move to resolve the lingering border issues with Israel would also promote moderate voices and reduce the appeal and rationale of Hezbollah as an extra-legal armed force.
- 2. Reposition the U.S.** The new administration has an opportunity to reinvent the badly damaged American profile in the Middle East. Lebanon is well positioned to be both a prominent example of, and laboratory for, such a shift. President Obama has already stated clearly that he intends to engage with America’s enemies. The U.S. can make things more difficult for Hezbollah by engaging constructively with those elements of Lebanese society who

have so far been skeptical of or hostile to American interests. By supporting broad, politically neutral reforms in Lebanon, the U.S. can strengthen the Western “brand” and sap the appeal of a militant “rejectionist” posture. By supporting reforms that promote independent Shia voices the U.S. can soften Hezbollah’s power base and make the case that the U.S. is a friend of all the Lebanese, not an enemy.

- 3. Strengthen State Institutions.** The upcoming parliamentary elections will be an important test of the progress made towards rebuilding the Lebanese state since the 2005 Syrian withdrawal. The U.S., Arab states, and other members of the international community who have supported that progress would do well to ensure that those elections are carried out without violence or foreign interference, so that the next Lebanese government has a clear mandate to rule. Demarcating Lebanon’s borders and promoting regular, normalized inter-state relations between Lebanon and Syria are non-partisan reforms that are key to that effort and essential to preserving Lebanon as a sovereign, stable and constructive regional player going forward.

CONFERENCE REPORT

SECTION ONE

LEBANON AND THE REGION



The most significant victory of the Cedar Revolution was the official withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. Nevertheless, Lebanon's independence remains fragile. Iranian arms and Saudi money continue to battle for influence in the country. Syria has not entirely given up on its desire to rule Lebanon from Damascus. And regional machinations have regularly allowed Syria and Iran to use Lebanon as a launching pad for attacks against Israel.

To move beyond this situation, Lebanon needs to accomplish a few basic goals:

- Normalize its relationship with Syria as two independent sovereign states and demarcate the borders.
- Resolve lingering border and July-War related issues with Israel.
- Enact reforms that strengthen state institutions and reduce the ability of external powers to manipulate internal Lebanese divisions.

Regional Power Players

Lebanon has often been the battlefield on which regional rivalries have played out. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs and former Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman summed it up, "Various groups of Lebanese for generations sought outside support to help check the power of other Lebanese. Regional powers have repeatedly intervened in Lebanon, with proxy competition stoking communal tensions with tragic results."

The present regional divide between Western-aligned Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the "rejectionist" axis led by Iran, continues to resound in internal Lebanese politics. While accusations of foreign influence and collaboration are the bread and butter of Lebanese politics, some things are clear:

- Hezbollah closely follows Iranian policies in the region. Iran created Hezbollah in the early 1980s in an effort to "export" their Islamic Revolution throughout the region. They continue to fund and arm them, using Syria as a conduit. March 14 Coalition MP Nayla Mouawad said, "The Iranians are interested in demonstrating that their theocratic system

cannot strictly be explained by Persian particularities but is rather a universally valid system of government that should be generally adopted and accepted, particularly in the Muslim world.”

- Saudi Arabia, for its part, has been very supportive of the pro-Western March 14 camp, and this has invited counter-allegations of foreign interference from March 14’s opponents. Opposition figures have also accused Saudi Arabia and its allies of funding and/or arming Sunni extremists as a counterweight to Hezbollah.

The parallel regional and internal political divides were apparent most recently in the split over a proposed Arab summit on Gaza in late January 2009. Hezbollah and its allies supported Syria and Iran in calling for the summit, while March 14 leaders sided with Saudi Arabia and Egypt in opposing the move.

Wrestling with Syria

Syria has vital and long-standing interests in Lebanon. Syria has long seen Lebanon as a “lost province,” a part of a Greater Syria. The Syrian regime believes that a subordinate or at least “friendly” Lebanon is vital to its national security. Syria’s occupation of Lebanon was very lucrative and its end has been bitterly resented in Damascus. And while Syria’s direct military hegemony over Lebanon is over, the two countries remain deeply intertwined.

In Lebanon, the proper nature and orientation of its relationship with Syria is a matter of fierce debate. Pro-Syrian leaders accuse their opponents of being beholden to American or even Israeli interests. Pro-Western leaders accuse pro-Syrian factions of wanting to give Lebanon back to Syria and by proxy, Iran. Yet while this may be a legitimate debate to have, pro-Syrian groups have used violence and assassinations to push their agenda. The various armed “resistance” groups in Lebanon are also supported by and allied with Syria, representing a major and ongoing system of interference in Lebanon’s internal affairs.

These actions and policies remain a direct and continuing threat to Lebanese independence and sovereignty, and they will not be easy to resolve. As Theodore Kattouf, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria argues, “Syria ... has proven it can play the spoiler role if it feels ignored or if it feels that its vital interests are threatened.”

Sparring with Israel

Lebanon has technically been in a state of war with Israel since 1948 and has long been used as a staging area for attacks against it; first by Palestinian nationalists and more recently by Hezbollah. Israel has invaded Lebanon three times and it occupied much of South Lebanon from 1982 to 2000.

While there may be spirited public debate over Lebanon’s relationship with Syria, there is a general consensus that Israel poses a threat. Political differences on the issue are largely confined to the best method of opposing Israeli policies and defending against its military might.

Hezbollah and its supporters defend its arms by saying they are a necessary deterrent to Israeli attack and a vital means of pressuring Israel on lingering border disputes and issues such as the location of cluster munitions dropped in South Lebanon in 2006. Yet as former U.S. Ambassador

to Israel and head of the Brookings Institute's Saban Center for Middle East Policy Martin Indyk noted, "Lebanese territory has been liberated to the extent that there are some minor border issues like the Shebaa Farms involved. The Lebanese people and the Lebanese government know that Israel is prepared to negotiate those issues."

It may be possible to resolve those lingering issues through negotiations, but the political sensitivity of Israel in Lebanese politics, especially in the aftermath of the conflict in Gaza, requires strong international and Arab political cover and a very delicate approach in order to move forward constructively.

The Role of the United States

Given the pattern of foreign interference in Lebanon, it is essential that the U.S. make it clear that, as stated by Feltman, "The United States, France, the moderate Arab states and Lebanon's other friends did not and do not seek to replace the role of Syria and Iran in Lebanon." The U.S. should, per Feltman, "find ways to protect Lebanon's independence through [its] institutions so that the Lebanese themselves, not the Syrians and not the Americans, are unequivocally in charge."

Pushing for official border demarcation and continuing to help build the Lebanese army as a robust national defense force fit this bill. Given the antagonism between the U.S. and Hezbollah and others, however, it is difficult for the U.S. to avoid being seen as meddling in Lebanon's internal politics if it takes an active and visible role. If the U.S. is perceived as equipping and training the Lebanese army to confront Hezbollah, rather than replace it, the army's nonpartisan character may be seriously damaged.

While the prospects for a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement appear far off at the moment, the subject will eventually return to the fore. Indyk noted that robust U.S. engagement could help ensure that Lebanese sovereignty does not get traded away for Syrian help in disarming Hezbollah. The U.S. can instead ensure that Syria understands that an independent Lebanon will not become a threat to its security and that engagement with the West will be far more lucrative than any violent reoccupation.

This does not prevent the U.S. from rightly demanding an immediate end to assassinations and other violence in Lebanon, and the promotion of normal inter-state relations between the two countries. Lebanese Minister of State Nassib Lahoud urged that, "Any international rapprochement with Syria should go hand in hand with a serious change of behavior by Syria in Lebanon."

The U.S. can also act to foster a negotiated settlement of the lingering border and conflict-born issues between Israel and Lebanon. A settlement reached through negotiation rather than "resistance" reduces the rationale for Hezbollah to retain its weapons outside Lebanese state authority. Such a settlement would also powerfully demonstrate the benefits of "playing by the rules," both in Lebanon and the region generally.

SECTION TWO

LEBANESE POLITICS AND ELECTIONS



The Political System

Lebanese politics are notoriously complex and yesterday's alliances may or may not bear any relation to either today's or tomorrow's. There remain a few relative constants, however.

- The three top national positions – president, prime minister and speaker of parliament – are reserved for Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims respectively. The deputy premiership and deputy speaker of parliament are reserved for the Greek Orthodox.
- The parliament and cabinet are apportioned along a 50-50 split between Muslims and Christians, with proportional representation of each sect within those two blocs. Other major political bodies are divided similarly, with varying levels of rigor.

The Political Divide

Most political parties are of one sect, due to the sectarian basis for apportioning political power and roles in Lebanon. Because of the prescribed representation of each sect in parliament, the parties must form alliances with each other to obtain a majority and form a government. The two major alliances at present are the pro-Western March 14 coalition, named for the date of the massive 2005 demonstration that toppled the last Syrian installed government, and the March 8 coalition, named for the date of the prior 2005 demonstration in support of Syria organized by Hezbollah, following accusations of Syrian guilt in the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri.

March 14 Parties

- March 14 Christian parties include the Lebanese Forces, headed by Samir Geagea; the Kataeb, or “Phalangist” party, headed by former president Amin Gemayel; and the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, including Minister of State Nassib Lahoud and MP Nayla Mouawad.

- Most of the Druze community, a heterodox offshoot of Islam, belongs to the Progressive Socialist Party, headed by March 14 heavy weight MP Walid Jumblatt.
- Lebanon's largest Sunni party is the "Future" Movement, led by MP Saad Hariri, the son of assassinated former premier Rafik Hariri. The Future Movement also incorporates a small number of Shia and Christian allies.
- There are smaller Sunni blocs, mostly based in the northern city of Tripoli, gathered around prominent Sunni figures such as former premiers Najib Mikati, Omar Karami and Economy Minister Mohammed Safadi. Of these, only Safadi's group, known as the Tripoli Bloc, is allied with the March 14 Coalition, though they all have attempted to position themselves as somewhat independent. Mikati is said to be aligning with the Future Movement heading into the elections.
- March 14 also includes a few smaller, non-sectarian parties like the Democratic Left, a few small Shia parties that have so far failed to gain any parliamentary seats along with various independents.

March 8 Parties

- Two major Shia parties make up the bulk of the March 8 coalition. They are Amal, headed by speaker of parliament Nabih Berri, and Hezbollah, headed by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah commands the lion's share of Shia political support.
- Two small Druze parties – the Democratic Party, headed by Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan, and the Arab Unification Movement, headed by former MP Wiam Wahhab – are allied with the March 8 coalition.
- March 8 includes several smaller non-sectarian parties like the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Baath Party, and the Communist Party. A few small Christian parties, such as Sleiman Franjeh's Christian Marada Party are also included.

The Change and Reform Bloc

- The Change and Reform bloc, led by General Michel Aoun, is separate from, but allied with, March 8. The bloc consists of the Free Patriotic Movement, the official Aounist party; the "Popular Bloc," which is local to the city of Zahle in the Bekaa Valley, headed by Agriculture Minister Elias Skaff; and various independent Christian MPs in alliance with Aoun.

Independents

- MP Michel al-Murr and the Armenian Tashnaq party form a bloc in the Metn district, just north of Beirut, that was allied with Change and Reform in 2005. They formally broke with Change and Reform in early 2009 to create an Independent bloc in declared support of

President Michel Sleiman. It remains to be seen which coalition they would caucus with in the next parliament, making them a key “swing” bloc, but there are strong signs that they may run in the elections in cooperation with the March 14 Kataeb party.

The March 14 Coalition, according to Qornet Shehwan MP Nayla Mouawad, “was and remains [committed] to the sovereignty of the State, freedom from any foreign domination, and the preservation of [the] democratic political system.” March 14 is aligned with the major Western powers and Western-aligned Arab states, but remains opposed to Israel’s policies. March 8 is aligned with Syria and Iran, is suspicious of or openly hostile to the West and its regional allies, and supports the “rejectionist” line against any peace with Israel.

The Change and Reform bloc is presently allied with March 8, through a memorandum of understanding signed by Aoun and Hezbollah. Change and Reform MP Ghassan Moukheiber stated that his bloc supported much of the same goals that Mouawad listed, but that “We have different means to reach those same goals.”

The Upcoming Elections

The new electoral districting that was passed by parliament re-divided Beirut, with one majority Sunni district predicted to go for the Future Movement, one majority Christian district and one district split roughly evenly between Sunnis, Shia and Armenian Christians. In the rest of the country larger and often bizarrely gerrymandered districts instituted under Syrian rule were divided up based on the smaller “caza” districts used before the civil war.

Given the near unanimity within the Shia and Sunni communities, Moukheiber predicted that: “the height of competition both in terms of words and electoral campaigning will happen within majority Christian groups.” Presently, only five parliamentary seats separate the March 14 majority from the March 8/Change and Reform coalition. With the recent shake-up in both the electoral districting and the Change and Reform bloc, it is uncertain which coalition will win a majority in these next elections. The redistricting in Beirut especially will make the Armenian community important power brokers both in the Metn and over several seats in Beirut this time around.

Further complicating the landscape, Religioscope researcher Patrick Haenni reported that some of the support for the Future Movement in the Salafi Sunni communities in Tripoli had slipped away to sometime rival Najib Mikati, raising fears over their electoral prospects there. Mikati is projected to ally with the Future Movement, however, and the Salafis are not an especially large bloc of voters.

Scenarios

Despite winning a majority in parliament in 2005, March 14 was prevented from governing as a majority. Doubt was cast on the legitimacy of the ruling coalition’s win because the elections were held under the old electoral law from 2000, devised by the Syrians to help their preferred candidates. Christian groups, who felt that it diluted their voices with Sunni votes, particularly abhorred the law. What’s more, March 14 had joined with Hezbollah and Amal, their ostensible rivals, in the “Quadripartite Alliance” to run on the same electoral lists in Beirut and South Lebanon.

Yet after the elections, with Amal and Hezbollah represented in the government, disagreements over policy brought government decision making to a crawl. Amal, Hezbollah, and Change and Reform began a full boycott of Lebanese government institutions in November of 2006, which only ended with the Doha agreement in May of 2008.

Should March 14 win the upcoming elections, they believe that they will be able to govern with a clearer mandate from the outset. As Mouawad opined, “this time our majority cannot be questionable.” With a new electoral law agreed on by all parties, there can be no quibbling over fairness, and in the present political climate there is little chance of another “Quadripartite Alliance” in these elections.

Hezbollah will vigorously, even forcefully oppose any moves it strongly disagrees with regardless of who wins. Facing a government with a clearer mandate would limit Hezbollah’s room for maneuver, however, especially after the loss of its “resistance” credibility following its May 2008 armed takeover of western Beirut.

Should March 8, in alliance with Change and Reform, win the elections, the present warm relations between Lebanon and the U.S. would be severely jeopardized, as Lebanon would likely realign with the Syrian-Iranian regional axis. But with new districting and the ongoing political realignments, both the March 14 or March 8 coalitions may emerge substantially altered by election day.

U.S. Options

If March 8 and Change and Reform win the upcoming elections, U.S. options will be limited, but not eliminated. Moukheiber opined that “a greater engagement with our parliamentary group would be very useful to alleviating many of the concerns” over a March 14 loss. The Change and Reform bloc includes many figures that previously fought Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon; it is conceivable that some of them could come to regret their alliance with March 8 once in power. Former Ambassador to Syria Theodore Kattouf speculated that the U.S. might “find ‘work-arounds’ to continue to support Lebanese institutions if Hezbollah and its allies win the next elections.”

In that regard, the U.S. and international community can first and foremost work to ensure that the upcoming elections proceed free of any intimidation or violence. Ultimately the victor must be able to govern effectively, without the stain of contested results or serious allegations of impropriety.

In the case of a renewed mandate for the March 14 coalition, the U.S. would have little problem continuing as they have to support reform and institution building efforts by the government. This would not mean that anti-American parties could be ignored, however. As Kattouf said, though Hezbollah’s armed takeover of western Beirut in May of 2008 was incredibly undemocratic, “I think all of us would acknowledge that Hezbollah is a mass movement with a loyal, enthusiastic following. It’s not a movement that can be ignored or should be ignored.”

Regardless of who wins the next elections, Lebanon will remain a country of diverse and contentious politics. Major decisions will be a matter of consensus-building and trade-offs. The U.S. must remain patient and avoid, as much as possible, being drawn in to internal political disputes in order to position itself as a credible force for general reform and institution building.

SECTION THREE

HEZBOLLAH



Resistance Force or Political Party?

Hezbollah was born out of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon; a Shia Islamic movement trained, armed and funded by Iran to fight Israel and spread the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. During the post-war era of Syrian hegemony, Hezbollah rose to fill the political leadership void in the Lebanese Shia community as well.

Today, Hezbollah is increasingly faced with having to choose between continuing its role as an extra-legal “resistance” force or playing by the rules of the Lebanese game as a regular political party. The U.S., for its part, cannot ignore the problems Hezbollah poses in Lebanon and the region.

Hezbollah’s Dual Roles

Hezbollah’s popularity stems both from its “resistance” role opposing Israel and as a powerful representative of the Lebanese Shia, a historically underprivileged group in Lebanon. These roles are intertwined and complicate the process of de-militarizing Hezbollah. Because of its dual role, calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah can be seen as an attack on Shia political power. Minister of State Nassib Lahoud emphasized that disarming Hezbollah “does not by any means aim to marginalize a large segment of the Lebanese population that supports Hezbollah, or to undermine the political and social rights.”

To elicit Shia acquiescence or support for disarming Hezbollah, some guarantees and/or alternatives within the Lebanese system may be necessary. Hezbollah itself, however, is unlikely to willingly disarm or negotiate over its weapons without a sea change in Shia political support for them. Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Steven Cook cautioned, “We in Washington tend to underestimate the extraordinarily powerful narrative of Hezbollah about resistance and Hezbollah’s central place in this idea of resistance, and it seems unlikely that they will voluntarily or in some sort of grand political bargain with other Lebanese factions voluntarily give up their arms.”

The December 2008-January 2009 conflict in Gaza demonstrates, however, that Hezbollah’s anti-Israel “resistance” role can take a back seat to its pragmatism as a political party. It is com-

monly believed that Hezbollah refrained from opening a second front with Israel over Gaza, despite furious condemnation and threats, in large part because they do not want to be seen dragging the country to war again just before the upcoming parliamentary elections.

A “Resistance State?”

Due to the complex sectarian balance of Lebanon’s political system, it is not possible for Hezbollah to gain a parliamentary majority or outright control of the Lebanese government. However, a governing alliance composed of the March 8 coalition—the Shia Hezbollah and Amal parties and smaller pro-Syrian groups, and the Christian Change and Reform bloc—would give Hezbollah a very strong voice in setting policy and direction in Lebanon.

Regardless of Hezbollah’s involvement, should the March 8 Coalition, along with the Change and Reform bloc, control the government, it will be difficult to continue the much closer U.S. relationship with Lebanon that has developed since 2005. As Former Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk remarked, “While we support free and democratic elections, that does not require us to deal with a government that is pursuing policies that are hostile to American interests and principles.”

This does not have to mean a total U.S. disengagement, however. Indeed, Hezbollah was part of the 2005 government of Fouad Siniora that the United States vigorously supported. Former Ambassador to Syria Theodore Kattouf speculated that should Hezbollah be part of the next winning coalition, the incoming administration could “find ‘work-arounds’ to continue to support Lebanese institutions and not give Hezbollah veto power over our ability to strengthen Lebanese institutions.”

A Lebanese Problem

Historically, it was thought that any peace deal between Israel and Syria would include a Syrian commitment to disarm Hezbollah and discontinue its support for the group’s anti-Israeli agenda. Syria was forced to officially leave Lebanon in 2005, however, and while Lebanese political factions strongly disagree over what relationship the two countries should have today, even Hezbollah’s allies are unlikely to welcome an official Syrian return. Change and Reform MP Ghassan Moukheiber stated, “We will not accept any return of Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, whether it be through military or political means.”

One consequence of the Syrian withdrawal is that disarming Hezbollah is now more complicated and essentially a Lebanese problem. Hezbollah’s arms are the subject of fierce debate in Lebanon. The ongoing “national dialogue” continues to focus primarily on formulating a national defense strategy and the question of whether and how to incorporate Hezbollah’s military capabilities into the Lebanese Army.

Re-evaluating U.S. Options

Forcibly disarming Hezbollah, even if possible, would very likely result in a new Lebanese civil war. Instead, Lahoud proposed that, “A gradual and consensual mechanism must be developed, aiming to integrate the military capabilities of Hezbollah within the framework of the Lebanese

armed forces leaving Hezbollah to continue solely as a political organization.”

The ongoing “national dialogue” could be such a mechanism. It continues to focus primarily on formulating a national defense strategy and the question of whether and how to incorporate Hezbollah’s military capabilities into the Lebanese Army, which is seen as insufficient to defend the country against attack.

A significant portion of Hezbollah’s support actually comes from positioning itself in opposition to U.S. policies. Given that, the U.S. can best diminish Hezbollah’s strength and aid the Lebanese efforts to demilitarize it by acting quickly and determinedly to support the Lebanese government in resolving the remaining issues with Israel; namely the lingering border disputes, the locations of cluster bombs in South Lebanon and Israeli reconnaissance over flights in violation of UNSCR 1701.

Absent these issues, support for Hezbollah’s militancy will greatly diminish and the party will be under much more pressure to negotiate a new role for itself in Lebanon. Demonstrating that these issues can be resolved without recourse to Hezbollah’s arms will also promote moderates and diminish voices calling for violent confrontation.

Promoting alternative voices within the Lebanese Shia community can play a productive role in reducing Hezbollah’s appeal, but the U.S. has less direct leverage in this respect. Supporting particular moderate or anti-Hezbollah parties can also be counterproductive, as this can damage their credibility in the eyes of Shia voters. Even in the best case scenario, there is no guarantee that the U.S. can predict which Shia figures will be the most successful politically.

Supporting reform efforts that provide openings for more diverse voices in the Shia community instead can promote alternative voices generally and allow the marketplace of ideas to do most of the “work.” It also helps make the case that the U.S. is a friend, not an enemy, of the Shia. A Shia community that feels well represented, with a voice equal to its demographic weight and that does not feel embattled will be less inclined to cling to Hezbollah’s weapons as a source of communal power and more willing to embrace moderate leaders.

SECTION FOUR

SUNNI FUNDAMENTALISM



A Small but Pernicious Threat

Sunni fundamentalists, or “Salafis,” are a small minority in Lebanon. They are primarily located in the North and in the Palestinian camps, where a potent combination of poverty and an absence of government authority make easy breeding grounds for extremism.

Despite the small size of the Salafi contingent in Lebanon, some Salafi groups have presented dangerous and dramatic threats to Lebanese state sovereignty. The groups give every indication of a continuing willingness to be used as proxies and pawns for external powers to meddle in Lebanese politics as well. The virulent anti-Americanism of these groups, especially in the more extreme and violent forms, require serious American attention.

Part of the Social Tissue

Salafism has never been particularly successful in Lebanon. Even the less extreme versions of Islamism, such as that of the Muslim Brotherhood, have had very limited success there. Despite its flaws, the pluralist, consensus-based Lebanese political system is simply incompatible with an extreme pan-Islamic agenda.

Religoscope researcher Patrick Haenni explained, “The golden age of Salafism in Lebanon, in North Lebanon and Tripoli especially, is now behind.” Salafism emerged in Lebanon in the 1970s primarily centered around the Chahhal clan, allegedly supported by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But beginning in 1996 Syrian authorities in Lebanon cracked down on the groups for preaching against the Alawi religion, the religion of Syria’s ruling Assad family. In the aftermath of 9/11 most Salafist groups found their finances drying up as well.

Yet Zghorta MP Nayla Mouawad noted that the Salafis are “part of the social tissue of the North.” She highlighted the difference between Lebanese Salafist groups and the al-Qaeda-style armed extremist groups that have appeared in some of the Palestinian camps and are often alleged to be funded and/or armed by Syria.

After the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005, faced with strong competition from local political bosses and lingering distrust and animosity towards the Alawi population of Tripoli, the Salafis

sought guarantees of protection from the Sunni Future Movement. The Future Movement turned them down however, because as MP Mouawad suggested, “It’s not their job,” but rather that of official Lebanese state security. But as violence erupted in the North during the breakdown in May of 2008, the Lebanese army and internal security forces were unable to fully quell it. As Haenni explains, “An important part of the Salafis, and we’re speaking about something like 43 institutions, went in search for protection to the political group who can really deliver it, which is Hezbollah.”

Mapping the Threat

Though the Salafi theology is an extreme form of Islam, Salafism is not exclusively represented by violent jihad. Those groups that have pursued a violent form of Salafism in Lebanon in recent years have found little patience for it among the Lebanese populace.

In 2000 the Lebanese army crushed a violent insurrection in the northern Dinnieh province. The three month battle with the al-Qaeda-linked Fatah al-Islam group in the northern Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared in 2007 saw an outpouring of support, respect and appreciation for the army unseen in Lebanon since before the civil war.

Though many of these factors mitigate the threat, they do not eliminate it. The Lebanese army was severely strained in its attempt to defeat Fatah al-Islam. Moreover, Fatah al-Islam and others like it have claimed responsibility for a number of bombings and assassinations over the past few years.

Despite their extreme views, Salafis have proven ideologically flexible and pragmatic. Taking a lesson from the Dinnieh and Nahr al-Bared conflicts, Salafis have generally accepted that Lebanon cannot become an Islamic state and have instead focused their attentions on combating Western and Israeli influence and interests. The willingness of some to broach a political agreement with Hezbollah despite considering Shias heretics and apostates, demonstrates a pragmatism that is both promising and worrying at the same time.

Neutralizing the Threat

Salafi groups are not only a threat but also a constituency in Lebanon. A stronger Lebanese army and internal security force would both reduce the urge of Salafi groups to seek allegiances with Hezbollah as well as ensure that any turn towards violence can be kept in check by the state authorities.

Better border control is also essential to preventing foreign fighters from infiltrating into Lebanon from Syria. This should be a grimly familiar phenomenon for U.S. officials who will recall facing similar groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere around the world. The length and ferocity of the fighting in Nahr al-Bared in 2007 demonstrates the seriousness of the threat that these groups pose.

Focusing on armed force can only contain the problem, however, not solve it. The historical experience of trying to contain militant fundamentalism shows that there will always be failures, with terrible and terrifying consequences. To weaken the networks that feed fanaticism at the root, according to Sciences Po researcher Ziad Majed, requires “political reforms, economic reforms, [and] education.” Building a state security presence in the North and in the Palestinian camps will work best in concert with fostering development and expanding economic opportunities to give these groups a stake in a strong, sovereign and united Lebanon.

SECTION FIVE

MAKING DEMOCRACY DELIVER



Strength in Weakness

It is an old cliché that Lebanon’s strength is its weakness. This saying originally referred to Lebanon’s military weakness, which kept it largely out of regional conflicts in the first few decades of its independence. In addition, the weakness of Lebanon’s central government saved it from some of its neighbors’ worst excesses in over-managing their economies and hindering free expression.

The blowback is readily apparent today. Lebanon’s military weakness has not kept it out of regional conflicts, but instead has allowed foreign backed groups to set up shop within its borders and drag it into wars with Israel. The weakness of Lebanon’s central government allowed local and sectarian leaders to take its place as patrons and protectors, inviting foreign interference and, ultimately, leading to civil war.

Some reforms have been implemented, but without careful efforts and strong international support it will be difficult, if not impossible, to see them through to their logical conclusion.

Bolstering State Institutions

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, “Democracy has to deliver. People want to vote and eat. And so the question is what can be done to make the non-Hezbollah parts of the Lebanese government be in a position to deliver?”

After thirty years of civil war and occupation, Lebanon is trying to rebuild itself into a strong state that can provide security and opportunities for its citizens. Lebanon’s economy has remained strong and resilient despite the national emergencies of the past several years, such as the assassination of Rafik Hariri and subsequent turmoil, the July War of 2006 and the year-and-a-half-long government boycott and obstruction of central Beirut by the opposition.

Lebanon’s economic vitality has not benefited everyone, however. There are still areas afflicted with deep poverty and many college graduates are forced to search for work abroad because entry-level salaries in Lebanon barely cover their basic needs. Continuing corruption and political patronage discourage those who wish to play by the rules, bleed the national treasury and entrench parochial and sectarian divides. Moreover, Lebanon’s post-war reconstruction has left the country with \$45.5 billion dollars in debt, a massive sum for a country of 4.2 million people and a GDP of \$24 billion.

Former Secretary General of the Higher Council on Privatization and current Beirut MP Ghazi Youssef said, “In order to weather the current economic storm as Lebanon did back in 2005 and 2006, Lebanon needs to do the right thing. The right thing is to remain fully committed to pursuing its economic reform plan verbalized in the Paris III conference in 2007.” The international community pledged \$7.5 billion in aid at the Paris III donor conference in January 2007, tying the aid to required institutional and economic reforms. These reforms have been hampered, however, by the continued political gridlock.

Stronger Security

Following the civil war the Lebanese army and internal security forces should rightfully have been rebuilt into credible national defense forces to maintain order and protect the nation. The Syrian occupation and control of the government resulted in the general neglect of these forces, however. Hezbollah was allowed to continue its armed resistance to the continuing Israeli occupation in place of any effort at the national level to resolve the issue. Palestinian militias inside and outside the official camps continued to be protected and supplied by the Syrian regime as proxy forces.

The security vacuum allows Hezbollah to argue that it must retain its weapons to defend against Israel. It also encourages other groups to arm themselves rather than depend on the Lebanese state. Sciences Po researcher Ziad Majed argued, “Having another army, with a confessional and religious ideology outside the state and outside the official army, encourages other groups, whether Sunni Salafists or others, to seek weapons as well to counter the power of Hezbollah.”

U.S. Options

The U.S. has an interest in a strong Lebanese state; a state which is capable of controlling its borders and internal security, as a reliably stable player in the region and on Israel’s northern border and as an example of how democracy can deliver. The U.S. can both create favorable conditions for reform and offer subtle encouragement in a myriad of ways; Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Steven Cook proposed that the U.S. “use a certain amount of external influence, like the European Union used with Turkey, in order to kind of manage [reform] from the outside.”

Reform in Lebanon is, however, essentially a Lebanese responsibility and must be driven by the Lebanese themselves. Reforms seen as being driven more by foreign, rather than Lebanese, interests are liable to become political “footballs” and fizzle out. Rather than actively lobbying for reforms, former Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman said, “Lebanon's friends have a different approach: transparently support the institutions of the Lebanese state ... so that the Lebanese themselves, not the Syrians and not the Americans, are unequivocally in charge.”

The U.S. can do this by vigorously supporting reforms that the Lebanese have openly agreed to and by keeping a lower profile on those that are still the subject of strong debate. Continuing to supply and train the Lebanese army and internal security forces is one well established way to bolster the government’s ability to control the country. However, if the U.S. is seen to be equipping the army in order to directly fight Hezbollah, rather than protect against non-Lebanese threats, it may quickly lose the national respect it currently commands. Transparency, clear goals and clear implementation plans are all key to a successful U.S. policy.

Ensuring that the upcoming 2009 elections are fair and unaffected by violence or intimidation would also help solidify the ruling mandate for the next Lebanese government. In addition to encouraging reform and delivering aid, the U.S. can also lead by continuing to be part of the change it wishes to see in Lebanon, strengthening state institutions by acting exclusively through official channels. Feltman reported that, “The philosophy that we have tried to take based on decisions made by the Lebanese themselves is for us not to put our own assistance and support through some of these local leaders as much as we may like their positions, but rather to work through the state.”

