

*Viewpoints*  
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# American Policy in Lebanon: Stability Through Dissociation

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Lebanon is finally getting Washington's attention after spending the last four years languishing on the back burner. The Lebanese are now hopeful that maybe the days when Lebanon was a priority in Washington are upon them once again. The signs are significant that the American administration is realizing that leaving Lebanon to the status quo did not preserve stability or guarantee the absence of the political vacuum that Washington feared.

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After the Lebanese felt neglected by their American friends, they are now hopeful that maybe the days when Lebanon was a priority in Washington are upon them once again. The signs are significant that the American administration is realizing that leaving Lebanon to the status quo did not preserve stability or guarantee the absence of the political vacuum that Washington feared.

When the Obama administration took over after the 2009 elections, Lebanon was still enjoying a prominent position on the American foreign policy chart. The Lebanese were proud that for the first time there was an American-Lebanon policy separate from Syria. But the new Obama administration had a different agenda. The peace process was the priority of the president and not the first Arab revolution. The policy of the new administration toward Lebanon went through two phases, the pre-Syrian revolution (2009-2011) and after the Syrian revolution (2011 until today).

Before 2011, the new Obama administration continued the same policy of the Bush administration toward Lebanon. Support for Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and stability remained the American policy, as did support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). The level of economic and military aid to Lebanon continued at the same levels because the goals of the American assistance did not change. America's strategic interests in Lebanon have always focused on meeting the challenges that Hizbullah and Sunni extremist groups pose to the United States and its allies in Lebanon and the region, especially Israel. The Obama administration not only continued the Bush administration's programs of helping the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and curb the influence of Hizbullah and extremist groups, but it made them the heart of its policy toward Lebanon.

### **U.S. Policy Prior to the Syrian Crisis**

This U.S. security-centered approach, which focused on the twin threat of Hizbullah and extremist groups, had implications for Lebanon and U.S. policy objectives. It did not respond equally to the needs of the two American policy constituents: the military-security establishment, which enjoyed an excellent relationship with the Americans, and the political establishment, especially America's allies who, though appreciative of its support for the army and the ISF, became critical of American policy. Lebanese leaders, journalists, and activists I spoke with describe the Obama administration's policy toward Lebanon, prior to the Syria crisis, as "passive," "reluctant," "lacking comprehensive strategy," and "keeping its allies at bay, while treating them and their opponents as if morally equivalent." They complained about what they termed a "lack of a Lebanon policy" in Washington, as well as the same commitment

to Lebanon that the Lebanese experienced before. By the fall of 2010, the Lebanese press was lamenting the lack of Washington's attention to Lebanon as Hizbullah's pressure on the Lebanese government intensified to end its support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

The Obama administration came to power with a peace agenda. The peace process was a top priority, and in that agenda Syria figured high because of the interest in restarting a Syrian-Israeli track. The Obama administration's engagement of Bashar al-Assad instilled fear in the Lebanese that this engagement will be at the expense of Lebanon. But in reality, the engagement of Assad started during the last two years of the Bush administration when Syria was invited to the Annapolis Conference peace talks.

The democratically elected government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri was toppled at the beginning of 2011, when Hizbullah and its allies withdrew from the government over the STL. The United States expressed disappointment and contemplated stopping military aid to pressure a future government under Hizbullah's rule. Instead, the administration counseled a "wait and see" approach and declared that it was in America's interest to assist the Lebanese military. As for Hizbullah, no price was exacted from them, and the party felt emboldened. The initiative was slipping from the hands of the United States to the hands of its opponents, which further weakened its allies.

### **Dissociation Policy**

A new government was formed by Najib Mikati, under a new majority controlled by Hizbullah and its allies. The new cabinet presented a challenge to Washington because 17 out of the 30 cabinet ministers were Hizbullah allies. But Washington was concerned about stability and a political vacuum in Lebanon. The Syrian revolution had started, and growing fear of a spillover into Lebanon was worrying Lebanon's friends.

Washington's strategy to deal with the regional implications of the Syria crisis was to shore up Syria's neighbors and America's allies, and to preserve stability. Preserving Lebanon's state institutions and security while keeping Lebanon out of the Syrian conflict became a priority. This prompted the administration to reject calls by some in Congress to cut off aid to the Lebanese army and security forces. When Congressional leaders put a hold on lethal assistance to the army, the Department of State succeeded in lifting it.

The support for the Mikati government created a rift between Washington and its allies who called the government "Hizbullah's government." The Lebanese media spoke of America accepting the new status quo in Lebanon. A political editor noted that this "reflected the balance in power in the region which tipped strongly in the favor of Hizbullah, Syria and Iran." Washington "coexisted with that reality," he opined.

The increased involvement of Hizbullah in the conflict in Syria, the influx of thousands of refugees, and the instances of Sunni extremists crossing into Syria to fight with the rebels left Lebanon in a precarious situation. The country was hovering over the brink of civil war between those who support and oppose the Syrian regime.

The Lebanese government publicly adopted a neutral policy toward the conflict in Syria. All the Lebanese political parties, including Hizbullah, met at the presidential palace in Baabda on June 11, 2012 and endorsed a “dissociation” policy to keep Lebanon out of the Syrian conflict. This Baabda Declaration received wide American and European support, including from President Obama.

### **Political Vacuum**

Washington and its Lebanese allies did not see eye-to-eye on the meaning of stability and on whether a government controlled by Hizbullah is better than a political vacuum in the country. The United States had a communication problem with its friends in Lebanon. Washington was becoming critical of its allies for “lacking a plan” or a “strategy.” Its allies felt the same about American policy.

When the head of the intelligence unit in the ISF, General Wissam Hassan, was assassinated, the opposition wanted nothing less than the resignation of the government.

The opposition, furious over the killing of Hassan, felt betrayed by its ally when the American ambassador joined the P5 ambassadors (ambassadors of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) in a visit to President Michel Suleiman and appeared to oppose the resignation of the government. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Derek Plumbly expressed on behalf of the group their “determination to support the government of Lebanon.” But an ambassador attending the meeting said that Plumbly misspoke. He meant the Lebanese “state,” instead of “government” in Arabic. It was obviously a mistake, but it sent the wrong message. Mikati and the Hizbullah camp interpreted the P5 statement as a Security Council endorsement of the government. Mikati never resigned, believing, as did Hizbullah, that there was international consensus around him.

Washington went to great lengths to correct the impression that the P5 meeting created in Lebanon, but the damage was done.

The government survived and the opposition felt abandoned by the international community. A Middle East expert believes the impression is that Washington’s distancing itself from its allies out of fear of inflaming Hizbullah has emboldened the party to intervene in Syria, free of pressure on them.

Hizbullah’s growing involvement and fighting inside Syria made Lebanon a part of the Syrian policy in Washington.

A rise in Hizbullah’s global activity and accusations of attacks in Europe brought about a new aggressive policy toward the party. New designations of Hizbullah’s leaders by the U.S. Department of Treasury, pressure on Europe to designate Hizbullah as a terrorist organization, and a new look at the Lebanese government ushered in Washington’s new policy focus on

Lebanon. Syria was the fulcrum for a shift, but the Lebanese were ready for the change and for the resignation of the Mikati government, which came on March 22, 2013.

Lebanon has been without a government for six months. The political and security situations are deteriorating. The spillover from Syria is more real than ever.

But Lebanon's friends are stepping up their efforts and support, especially Washington. The latest sign of the new American activist policy toward Lebanon is the International Support Group meeting at the United Nations, held on the margins of the General Assembly, with the foreign ministers of the five permanent UN members and international organizations including the World Bank. Attended by the president of Lebanon and the Secretary-General of the UN, the meeting represented the international consensus to help Lebanon stay out of the Syrian conflict, and to offer it political, economic, and humanitarian support.

President Obama met with the Lebanese president and pledged full support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, as he "strongly rejected" Hizbullah's "deep involvement in the Syrian conflict." He pledged new money in humanitarian support for Lebanon: \$74 million to help the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and \$8.7 million to help the Lebanese army. The Department of State announced an additional \$30 million for projects.

The United States and Russia, surprisingly, have been cooperating on Lebanon and reaching consensus inside and outside the Security Council on Lebanese issues.

The United States vowed to be a partner with the Lebanese who share the vision of a Lebanese state that controls "Lebanese territory and borders," and "must have monopoly of arms," and be "accountable to all Lebanese citizens." These words were received with guarded optimism in Lebanon because as Secretary Kerry said, it is important that "friendship with Lebanon," will not "be expressed in words only."

The United States appointed a new seasoned ambassador in Lebanon, David Hale, and once again is vowing commitment to Lebanese stability, but Lebanon cannot be stable for long if Syria remains in turmoil.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*



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