Lebanon: Between Israel's Rock and Syria's Hard Place

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From the time the UN Security Council ordered Syria to withdraw from Lebanon in February 2005, the Assad regime appears to have done everything it can to undermine the new Lebanese government's efforts at restoring Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Among other things, Syria is reported to have seized Lebanese fishermen, temporarily closed the Syrian border to Lebanese truckers, smuggled weapons to Palestinian militants, and, as if these were not enough, allegedly ordered the assassination of several Lebanese Syria critics. More recently, Syria threatened to choke off Lebanon's fragile economy by shutting down its border with Lebanon should an international force patrol the Syrian-Lebanese border. What explains Syrian jingoism vis-à-vis Lebanon? Can't Syria just let go of its former fiefdom?

Some argue that the Assad regime still thinks in terms of "Greater Syria" and is trying to create the necessary conditions (civil strife) to return to Lebanon and restore Syria's privileged position there. Others argue that Syria's forced withdrawal was so humiliating that the Assad regime is out to seek vengeance.

Although these may be factors in Bashar Assad's decisional calculi, they are only minor ones. Though Syria has still not formally recognized Lebanese sovereignty, Damascus did withdraw most of its troops from Lebanon, albeit gradually, before the passage of UNSCR 1559. Between 2000 and 2005, Syria drew down its 40,000-man contingent in five separate redeployments to 14,000, a drop of 65%. All indications are that Syria intended to leave Lebanon altogether, regardless of 1559.

If history is any guide, the Assad regime's current ferocious behavior towards Lebanon has more to do with its fear that, absent Syrian influence, Lebanon's independent-minded Fouad Siniora government will eventually embark on a separate deal with Israel -- Siniora's denials notwithstanding. From a Syrian perspective, a split between Syria and Lebanon ultimately weakens Syria's negotiating position vis-à-vis Israel and undermines its ability to recover the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights. For Damascus, US-French actions in Lebanon are reminiscent of Henry Kissinger's Machiavellian step-by-step diplomacy that led not to a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict as Washington had promised, but to a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in the late 1970s. It was precisely this fear that prompted Syria to torpedo the May 17, 1983 agreement between Israel and Lebanon. In sum, this explanation sheds more light on the Assad regime's stubborn effort to maintain Syrian influence in Lebanon (through the support of its local allies) than do others.

In retrospect, many of the ills that have befallen Lebanon since Syria's withdrawal (including the recent Hizbullah-Israel confrontation) would not have occurred had there been peace between Syria and Israel. This is not an illusion. During the Syria-Israel peace talks at Shepherdstown in January 2000, Syria accepted the principle of normalization of relations with Israel, including the establishment of diplomatic relations and the free flow of people and goods and services across the Syria-Israel border; a mutual security regime; and the establishment of a joint water-sharing mechanism. In so doing, Syria was fulfilling its share of the deal, i.e., the "peace" component of the land-for-peace resolutions upon which the peace talks were based. In return, Israel was expected to commit itself to a total withdrawal from the Golan Heights, as required by the "land" component of the same resolutions. That did not happen. Nor did former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak rectify his country's position in March 2000 during the Clinton-Assad summit meeting in Geneva. Had Barak then committed to a total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, or alternatively, had former President Clinton then leaned on Barak, even slightly, to fulfill Israel's part of the deal, there would have been peace between Syria and Israel, relieving Syria of the need to use Hizbullah as one of its instruments of power (or Lebanon as its crutch) against Israel.

Fixing the Syrian "problem," as Washington has come to call it, is not difficult. If the Bush administration were to press Israel to fulfill its part of the land-for-peace bargain, a Syrian-Israeli deal on the Golan would have a positive outcome for many. Peace between Syria and Israel isolates Iran. Peace between Syria and Israel marginalizes Hizbullah. It also ensures stability in Lebanon.

This, however, will unfortunately not happen. Instead of pressing Israel to abide by the land-for-peace formula and, simultaneously encouraging Syria on the path to peace Damascus had hitherto adopted, the Bush administration encouraged Israel to shun Syria and, as part of its "war on terrorism," imposed unilateral economic sanctions against Syria; torpedoed the EU-Syria trade agreement; conspired with France to push Syria out of Lebanon; and more recently, stopped short of calling for a regime change in Damascus. In a nutshell, the Bush administration pushed Syria further into the arms of Iran, making a Syrian-Israel agreement less likely.

In sum, like it or not, Lebanon is caught between the Israeli rock and the Syrian hard place. As long as a just and lasting settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict is not achieved, Lebanon will remain the battlefield of choice in the Syrian-Israeli confrontation. Nor are Lebanon's problems purely external. As long as the Lebanese body politic is divided between those who view Beirut as Hong Kong - an international center of freewheeling capitalism, and those who perceive it as Hanoi - a symbol of popular resistance against imperialism, Lebanon will continue to be the object of external manipulation.

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