

## Time may play against Syria in Lebanon

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In recent weeks, a message has been coming out of Iran, one transmitted to Arab leaders and now through proliferating press reports. It is roughly this: Lebanon is in for a prolonged stalemate, but Tehran won't allow the security situation to get out of hand. The Iranians are buying time until a new administration arrives in Washington, but won't cross Syria in Lebanon by pushing for a solution to the political crisis in the country.

If one wants to see the cup as half full, this might be relatively good news. It means Iran is giving the Syrians latitude to return to Lebanon, but also paralyzing them by blocking any recourse to civil war - civil war the Syrians would readily push Hizbullah into were it not for Tehran's insistence on protecting its investment in the party. If one wants to see the glass as half empty, then all the Iranians are saying is that they will do nothing to end the debilitating stalemate in Lebanon, with the terrible consequences this might have for the country's economy and institutions.

But a question that needs to be answered is whether Syria actually benefits from a long Lebanese void. The conventional wisdom is that the regime of President Bashar Assad has nothing to lose. By imposing a vacuum it strengthens its hand; no new administration will be worse for Damascus than the Bush administration; and Arab divisions will, sooner or later, permit the Syrians to return to the center of regional politics, particularly if the situation in the Palestinian areas worsens and Hamas' armed struggle turns Syria into an inevitable interlocutor.

That may be true, but there may be another way of looking at things - one less advantageous to Damascus. For starters, Syria, while it can enforce a vacuum in Lebanon, is proving less able than ever to shape that vacuum. The problem with the Assad regime is that it is both too rigid and too hasty. It refuses to budge on army commander General Michel Suleiman's election, fearing it might lead to normalization Syria could not reverse. At the same time, it has shown itself incapable of presenting any alternative scheme. The Syrian plan is obstruction, nothing less, but also nothing more. Without that alternative - or rather without an alternative different than absolute Syrian rule in Lebanon - Assad will not get very far in advancing what he would like Syria's Lebanese role to be. That's as good a sign as any of the essential weakness in Syrian conduct today.

The second problem, Syrian hastiness, has been just as damaging. Assad is acting today much as he did before the botched extension of President Emile Lahoud's mandate in 2004. He is under the impression that intimidation alone will allow Syria to achieve its aims. Rarely does the Syrian leader bother to carefully prepare the terrain for his policies. Yet in the same way that he provoked a major crisis by forcing Lebanon's Parliament to keep Lahoud on, his insistence now on re-imposing Syrian hegemony in Lebanon has led to a regional and even an international crisis in which everyone is focused on denying Damascus any gains.

Time also plays to Assad's disadvantage in perpetuating a dilemma the Syrian regime never resolved after 2005. The choice, until now, has been a stark one: Lebanon or the Hariri tribunal. It was made clear to Assad in one way or another during the past two years that the only way he could expect a baroque deal on the tribunal sparing the top tier of his leadership was by accepting an end to Syria's domination of Lebanon. What he could not have, however, was Lebanon and the tribunal's disappearance. Yet that is precisely what the Syrians regularly demand, oblivious to the fact that the international community will never sign off on this.

Syria's leeway to choose between the tribunal and Lebanon is quickly evaporating. Within the next 10 months, Syria may well find several of its officials facing legal accusations they could have avoided not long ago. But the Assad regime, by repeatedly trying to thwart the tribunal, actually helped breathe new life into it and is today accelerating its formation. In early 2006, few were the Arab states that wanted to see Hariri's assassination go to trial. Today, the Saudis in particular, but not them alone, view the tribunal as the best means available to bring about a change in Syria's alliance with Iran, but also, and as important, in its destructive approach to Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories.

Time also doesn't play to Syria's favor inside Lebanon. One success of the March 14 coalition was to engineer a smooth

transfer of Lahoud's prerogatives to the Siniora government after the president's departure. The Syrian campaign of assassination has partly been destined to alter the balance of forces inside Parliament and the government; but its more pervasive impact has been to prevent the parliamentary majority from engaging in politics on the ground by forcing its representatives indoors. Yet by blocking Suleiman's election and hoping time will take its toll, Syria has allowed Siniora's government to stay in place, engage in politics, and strengthen its hold over key ministries such as defense, interior, justice, foreign affairs, and finance. This has allowed the majority to build up protective networks inside the army and security services, move ahead on the Hariri tribunal, and portray itself as the true representative of the state while Syria and its allies expose themselves as anti-state.

And finally time may be meaningless with respect to the coming administration in Washington. Assad errs if he imagines that a new American president will suddenly reverse course when it comes to Syria. First of all, the Syrian regime is infamous for being a lousy gamble - as US Secretary of State Colin Powell learned to his detriment when Assad lied to him about ending Syria's illicit trade with Iraq in 2001. No new president will make improving relations with Syria a priority issue so early in his or her presidency if the likelihood of embarrassment is high, especially as the more significant aim of opening up to Iran could be difficult to sell domestically if weighed down by a simultaneous opening to Damascus.

Second, Syria is unlikely to agree to minimal American conditions for a dialogue: accepting that its Lebanon interregnum is permanently over and ending Syrian support for Hamas and Hizbullah, but also for Al-Qaeda in Iraq. No administration could realistically enter into serious talks by demanding less than that, regardless of the irresponsible Democratic campaign rhetoric heard today. A new president will have to show something for risking talking to the Syrians, but Assad, as is his way, will doubtless open negotiations by demanding what the US can offer him.

Third, the Syrians shouldn't underestimate that President George W. Bush still has 10 months in which to take decisions on Syria that a new administration will have trouble reversing - assuming it wants to reverse anything. That includes economic sanctions, the bolstering of a consensus against Syria internationally, and actions in Iraq's Sunni areas that would make engaging Syria unnecessary. Most important, US efforts also include ensuring that the Hariri tribunal is established as soon as possible, and that Daniel Bellemare, the future prosecutor of the tribunal, issues his act of accusation before the US administration leaves office. This seems likely, according to diplomats in Beirut. As Bush knows, no successor would engage Assad once the Syrian regime is implicated in Hariri's murder, particularly if it rebuffs all cooperation with the tribunal.

So time may not be on Syria's side after all, even if Iran can afford to wait. That poses a question: Are Iran's priorities beginning to undermine those of Damascus, despite their close alliance? There is no obvious answer, but in an odd way Syria has never seemed so far from succeeding in its Lebanese endeavors, and playing out the clock may be its latest blunder.

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