

From Lebanon to Hezbollahstan

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On Friday, Hezbollah gunmen set fire to the Beirut offices of Future TV, a Lebanese broadcaster. On a purely symbolic level, it was an apt demonstration of where the Party of God stands in relation to the future itself.

But that wasn't the worst of what has happened in the past week in Lebanon, where scores of people have been killed in interfactional violence. More ominous was the role of the Lebanese army, avowedly neutral and nominally under civilian control. "An army officer accompanied by members of Hezbollah walked into the station and told us to switch off transmission," an unnamed Future TV official told Reuters. So much for army neutrality.

The army also countermanded government orders to dismantle Hezbollah's telecommunications network at the Beirut airport and remove the brigadier responsible for airport security, who is said to be a Hezbollah pawn. "I have called on the army to live up to its national responsibilities . . . and this has not happened," Fouad Siniora, Lebanon's increasingly irrelevant prime minister, said on national TV.

Future historians will look for the precise moment the Lebanese Republic began to transmogrify into Hezbollahstan. Was it the June 2005 murder of anti-Syrian journalist Samir Kassir — the earliest sign that Syria, whose 29-year military occupation of its neighbor had ended just two months before, intended to reinsert itself by stealth and terror (and with the connivance of Hezbollah)? Was it the role played by the Maronite Gen. Michel Aoun, a hero of the last Lebanese civil war, who returned from exile in 2005 intending to play the part of de Gaulle only to become, after striking a bargain with Hezbollah, another Pétain?

Was it the summer war of 2006, when Israel failed to destroy Hezbollah militarily and, in so failing, gave Hezbollah an aura of invincibility? Was it the unwillingness of international peacekeepers to patrol the Lebanese-Syrian border, thereby allowing Hezbollah to rearm itself after the war? Was it the absence of an effective, or even intelligible, American policy toward Lebanon, epitomized by Condoleezza Rice's decision to rehabilitate Damascus by inviting it to November's Annapolis Middle East conference?

The answer is all of the above: An accumulation of policy mistakes, political dodges and moral atrocities that have nearly killed the "new" Lebanon in its crib.

Demography has also played a role. Christians in particular have been fleeing Lebanon for decades. And though a census hasn't been taken in Lebanon in 75 years, Nizar Hamze of the American University of Beirut estimates that there are between eight and nine live births per Shiite household. The comparable figure for Lebanon's Sunnis is about five; for Christians and Druze, about two. These numbers must ultimately count against an outmoded constitutional order geared to favor Christians first, Sunnis second, Shiites third.

But even if Lebanon cannot escape its Shiite destiny, it is not ordained that it must also become a Hezbollah state, taking its orders from Tehran. So what are the U.S.'s policy options?

Inside Lebanon, they are few. No American president will send American troops back to Beirut and risk a reprise of 1983. Supplying the Lebanese army is a nonstarter; it is no longer clear whose side that army is on. Should the U.S. arm the anti-Hezbollah factions in the event of an all-out civil war? Some of them, like Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, have well-earned reputations as war criminals.

A more productive thought comes from Dwight Eisenhower, who observed that "if a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it." The reason the U.S. lacks for options in Lebanon is because it has no policy toward Syria.

In 2003, Congress passed the Syria Accountability Act, but the administration has observed only its weakest provisions. They could be enforced in full. A Syria Liberation Act, similar to the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, would be a step forward. So would international sanctions for Syria's violations of the Nonproliferation Treaty, exposed by Israel in its raid last year on an unfinished nuclear reactor. Bombing the runway of the Damascus airport for the role it plays in serving as a conduit for Iranian arms to Hezbollah would also be an appropriate signal of American displeasure.

None of this is likely to happen, however. U.S. policy toward Syria will continue to vacillate between partial engagement and partial ostracism, achieving neither. And Lebanon will continue its transformation into Hezbollahstan, a sad fate for a country that might have stood for something fine.

GLOBAL VIEW

By BRET STEPHENS

ABOUT BRET STEPHENS

Bret Stephens is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board. He joined the Journal in New York in 1998 as a features editor and moved to Brussels the following year to work as an editorial writer for the paper's European edition. In 2002, Mr. Stephens, then 28, became editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Post, where he was responsible for its news, editorial, electronic and international divisions, and where he also wrote a weekly column. He returned to his present position in late 2004 and was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum the following year.

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