

## Beirut calling

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Lebanon, not Egypt, may determine the fate of democracy in the Middle East.

Despite the media's recent focus on Egypt, events in Lebanon may well tell us more about the troubled prospects for Middle Eastern democracy. The fall of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government, replaced by a Hezbollah-dominated coalition, dramatically imperils Beirut's democratic Cedar Revolution.

Financed and dominated by Iran, terrorist Hezbollah has consistently refused to disarm and become a legitimate political party. Instead, it enjoys the best of both worlds, contesting elections while retaining the military ability to enforce its will against uncongenial results. History will rightly blame the West for the tragedy of the takeover in Beirut, because of its unwillingness to stand against Hezbollah and its Iranian puppet masters. Washington must withhold recognition from any Lebanese government that relies on Hezbollah support.

In mid-January at The Hague, the prosecutor for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon submitted long-awaited indictments regarding the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Although the indictments are not yet public, they are widely expected to finger top leaders in Hezbollah, Syria and potentially Iran, and they are doubtless behind Hezbollah's decision to assert itself by collapsing the government of Hariri's son.

Rescuing Lebanon from radicals and terrorists will require strong action, noticeably absent in recent U.S. policy. We can no longer pretend that the special tribunal's existence is an adequate response to the real problem in Lebanon: Tehran's long-standing drive for regional hegemony. It was always a mistake to confuse the effectiveness of an international criminal court with courts of real constitutional governments, and harmfully naive to think that the special tribunal could operate in a vacuum, as the events in Lebanon make painfully clear.

Of course, Hezbollah's toppling of the Lebanese government is just the latest of its cancerous efforts in its home base. And it remains a continuing threat to innocent civilians in Israel, to other Arab governments in the Middle East and increasingly to other nations around the globe.

For years before Hariri's February 2005 murder, the West explained away or ignored Hezbollah's clear role as an active agent of Syrian and Iranian influence. Western dupes and sympathizers noted Hezbollah's support for schools and hospitals among Lebanon's Shiite Muslims as if it were a different Hezbollah from the one terrorizing Israel and subverting and intimidating Lebanon's faltering efforts at representative government. Hezbollah's diaphanous justification for its military capability &mdash; expelling Israel from Lebanon &mdash; in effect ended in 2000 when Israel complied with U.N. Security Council resolutions by withdrawing its forces from southern Lebanon. Of course, protecting Lebanon is legitimately the responsibility only of the Lebanese armed forces, which in fact Syria and Hezbollah have also been working to bring under their control.

Western support for Lebanese democracy has been for the most part limited to a series of Security Council resolutions, particularly Resolution 1559, calling for Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, and Resolution 1595, creating an international investigation commission to assist Lebanon in prosecuting the Hariri assassination. But Hezbollah foiled these efforts in 2006 by provoking war with Israel. The Security Council ultimately imposed a cease-fire and called for "the disarming of all armed groups in Lebanon," for an embargo against rearming Hezbollah and for Lebanon's government to take control of its entire territory, in order to eliminate Hezbollah's state within a state.

But, as so often before, the West did not follow through. Instead, Iran and Syria rearmed and restored Hezbollah to greater strength (unequivocally demonstrating that Hezbollah was their proxy).

The West must insist on enforcing the Security Council resolutions in support of Lebanese sovereignty and peaceful, representative government, or stop engaging in meaningless gestures. This is our last opportunity before Hezbollah's armed capabilities swallow democracy in Lebanon, perhaps permanently, and dramatically increase the risk of renewed hostilities throughout the region.

President Obama's reaction is crucial. Unlike Washington's repeated prior failures, we must refuse to recognize any Hezbollah-dominated government as legitimate, at least until Hezbollah fully disarms and becomes a real political party. This may well mean committing to more than an impotent U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon. Hezbollah's 1983 bombings of U.S. and French forces in Beirut caused their withdrawal, a rare failure of will by then-President Reagan,

leading to today's crisis. We stand aside again at our peril.

The White House has been obsessed for two years with pressuring Israel to make concessions to Palestinians instead of focusing on the manifestations of Iran's menace. Perhaps the humiliation of Hezbollah's collapsing of Saad Hariri's government as Hariri was meeting in the Oval Office will help spur Obama into meaningful action. If not, the lights will be going out in Lebanon for a long time to come, with devastating consequences in the broader Middle East.

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