



The Middle East Institute

Viewpoints

No. 4

March 2008

Viewpoints are a moderated dialogue between experts expressing opposing or differing opinions on a topic of contemporary relevance

Lebanon Is Not Two Camps

This edition of Viewpoints features youth voices from the region focusing on the political situation in Lebanon.

The Bush Administration steadfastly supported Israel in the July 2006 war in Lebanon and a year later congratulated the Lebanese army for its “victory” following the 105-day battle in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. The United States must now manage the “aftershocks” of these misguided policies. This requires above all a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of Lebanese politics. Contrary to the picture often painted by US officials, Lebanese political forces are not neatly bifurcated into two camps — pitting terrorists against non-terrorists, Shi’ites against Sunnis, and supporters of one regional agenda against the other. The Bush Administration frequently paints a black and white picture of what is a much more complex and diverse reality on the ground. Supporters of the Siniora government are regarded as trusted friends, whereas the opposition consists of “terrorists” or Hizbullah supporters. The policy that flows from this thinking alienates a majority of Shi’ites who support Hizbullah in Lebanon, including the moderate educated factions of Lebanese Shi’ites.



Rima Merhi

It is important to distinguish between Hizbullah — as a military force linked to Iran — and Hizbullah supporters, who mainly consist of Shi’ite Lebanese but also include Maronite Christians and Druze. Support for Hizbullah derives partly from the credit it earned as a resistance movement for ending 18 years of Israeli occupation in south Lebanon in the year 2000. It is therefore not surprising that many regard UN Security Council Resolution 1559 — calling for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese “militias” — as inapplicable to Hizbullah. When the Winograd commission reported that the Israeli army failed to reach its military objectives in the July 2006 war, it arguably added to the appeal of Hizbullah as a resistance movement from a Lebanese, and possibly “Arab,” perspective.

Hizbullah is undoubtedly a potent and legitimate political force: In the June 2005 elections, Hizbullah supporters won 14 seats in the Lebanese government. By honoring the election results, the Lebanese government sought to build a more democratic and representative government. The substantial grassroots support for Hizbullah, it must be emphasized, derives from the fact that it is a service-driven organization with massive social and humanitarian outreach to Lebanese Shi’ites, particularly in the south of Lebanon. With the US unable or unwilling to take strong steps to address the humanitarian crisis raging in Gaza amongst other serious human rights violations, it is very hard to sell Hizbullah as a “terrorist” organization in the Arab world. Meanwhile, the resignation of Hizbullah representatives from the Lebanese government in November 2007 lies at the heart of the political stalemate that threatens to return Lebanon to civil war. Under these circumstances, it is clear that US pressure aimed at sidelining Hizbullah is both unrealistic and injurious to the stability of Lebanon.

Nor can the crisis in Lebanon be explained simply as a Sunni-Shi’ite sectarian struggle. This interpretation of the current political landscape is simplistic, misleading, and potentially dangerous. First of all, at the root of the conflict in Lebanon is a political system that fails to mirror the country’s changing demographic profile. The contentious debate over the power sharing formula stipulated by the Taif Accord in 1991 and electoral law reform is a manifestation of this discrepancy, especially in light of the fact that the last census was conducted in 1932. Second, both the government and the opposition are supported by Muslim, Christian, and Druze factions. Furthermore, not all Shi’ites support the opposition, while not all Sunnis support the govern-



ment. Third, as confirmed by recent student elections, there is a growing number of Lebanese “Independents,” who refuse to endorse the government or the opposition, and call for moderation, reform, and an end to rising sectarian tensions. Fourth, a significant number of Lebanese are only nominally affiliated with the government or the opposition due to social pressure, family affiliation, personal interests, or religious background. Lebanese officials cannot afford to portray the political crisis as part of a wider regional Sunni-Shi’ite struggle, lest this mortgage the country’s future to the conflicting agendas of regional powers and the ill-advised grand strategy of the present US administration.

Many Lebanese Independents are generally weary of extremists on both sides. They recognize that the majority of March 8 supporters do not oppose the March 14 agenda, but rather they mistrust their alignment with the United States in light of its failing policy in the region. By the same token, March 14 supporters look with suspicion and fear at the opposition’s alleged alliance with Iran and Syria. The March 8 and March 14 camps actually agree on many fundamental points. Both seek an end to an era of impunity that must begin with a fair and independent international tribunal that secures justice. Both want to shield Lebanese sovereignty and independence from foreign interference. Both are equally susceptible to the threat of an attack from Israel, and would have suffered even worse repercussions had Hizbullah not defended Lebanese soil in July 2006. Both parties will suffer dire consequences if the political deadlock flares into a full-fledged civil war. And both have an interest in self-regulating their respective media outlets, lest this exacerbate political and sectarian tensions. Thus, the depiction of the Lebanese political arena as divided into two irreconcilable camps, each firmly allied to a foreign patron, is a gross distortion.

Although the Lebanese people and their representatives in government are primarily responsible for the deadlock, no one would dispute the strong influence of the US on the region. At the heart of the presidential crisis is a competent and credible judicial system that is undermined by Lebanese political culture. By developing an independent judicial system, judges and specialists (not politicians) would interpret the binding principles of the Lebanese constitution, and provide legal and expert advice to resolve disputes, particularly regarding the details of the international tribunal. To break the deadlock, parliament doors need to open for real dialogue, with the genuine intent of electing a president after four months of delays, whilst putting an immediate end to the futile opposition demonstration that has crippled the most commercial heart of Beirut for more than a year.

The United States needs to communicate respect for the Lebanese version of democracy — one that clearly needs to integrate Hizbullah supporters into mainstream politics, whilst internally managing the arms of Hizbullah within the context of a medium to long term defense strategy that gradually empowers the Lebanese army — not US warships — to protect Lebanese soil. The US administration and particularly the Lebanese cannot afford to ignore the lessons from Iraq, and clearly need to develop policies to effectively integrate Shi’ites into mainstream politics. Without adopting measures to reform electoral laws according to a new census, foreign powers will continue to exploit the situation and pressure the Lebanese government — despite national consensus to the contrary — to settle a largely Sunni Palestinian population in Lebanon.

Despite many differences among the Lebanese, Lebanon’s sovereignty and independence remains sacred for all. March 8 and March 14 leaders continue to enjoy widespread support and legitimacy from their followers, but need to better appreciate the dynamics of the region and employ tactful diplomacy to further consolidate and unify their support bases at home. The rise of Independent voices, too, is encouraging — these voices serve as a potential force for leveraging these common interests in ways that nudge Lebanon towards a political accommodation. The US administration can either persist in sharpening divisions within Lebanon, or display a keener appreciation of them and exercise restraint.

Rima Merhi is a researcher at MEI and the Library of Congress, former UN staff and member of media and relief committee presided by PM Siniora to manage crisis at Nahr el Bared, Representative of Lebanese youth in a testimony in the US congress (July 2005), spokesperson in international media during the Israeli invasion in 2006, and freelance journalist. She holds an MBA and MA in political science from the American University of Beirut, with a background in international human rights law from Oxford.



Kamal Chaitou and Thaer Ghandour *Akhbar Newspaper*

The March 8 Movement is an alliance between the parliamentary political and popular opposition blocs who are against the American project for a “new Middle East.” On March 8, over a million Lebanese held a demonstration in support of this alliance.

Ever since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, senior officials in the US have closely followed events in Lebanon. Given the number of official public statements made on Lebanon and the number of officials coming from all ranks (including high level security officials) who swarm in and out of Beirut on a regular basis, it would come as no surprise to learn that Lebanon is a priority on the agenda of this administration.

In July 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon with the approval of the Bush administration and the blessing of the Lebanese government headed by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. During this tragic war, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made numerous public statements calling on the state of Israel to persist in its war against the Lebanese resistance movement represented by Hizbullah. At the end of July 2006, Rice refused the national efforts for an immediate ceasefire, giving the excuse that “it is necessary to handle the cause of violence” and thus destroy Hizbullah in the south of Lebanon. For many Shiites, this message clearly communicated the US administration’s intent to wage a war on Shi’ites in general. As for Lebanese government officials, it is no secret that in the wake of the second massacre at Qana, they were dining with ex-Ambassador of the US to Lebanon, Jeffrey Feltman, and Condoleezza Rice to coordinate internally about the war tactics to be employed to exert pressure on Hizbullah.

The ongoing support of the American administration for the Lebanese government perhaps finds its best expression in the international tribunal set up to investigate the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and punish the culprits through international decisions issued by the Security Council. The American administration did not take into consideration the political realities on the ground concerning the international



Kamal Chaitou

Lynn Zovighian *Boston Consulting Group*

The March 14 movement was created in February 2005 following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005. Under its leadership, the Syrian troops in Lebanon have withdrawn and an international tribunal is underway to bring to justice those responsible for the Hariri assassination.



Today, the March 14 movement and the March 8 movement, the opposing bloc, are deadlocked as the country enters its fourth month without a president following the end of President Emile Lahoud’s term.

March 14, the movement in Lebanon that currently holds majority power in the government and parliament, is branded by the media and international community as being an instrument and product of American foreign policy. This image is an oversimplification of the dynamic that exists between the March 14 movement and the United States, and has created a sharp dichotomy between March 14 and its political opponent, March 8. It has fostered the impression that the two blocs are merely pro-American pitted against anti-American political forces, a static image that fails to embody the actual complexities of Lebanese politics.

Rather than being spoon-fed American policy, the relationship between March 14 and the American government is based on a convergence of interests; it is an alliance rather than a one-way allegiance, a partnership rather than a patron-client interaction.

The international community’s support of March 14 has helped forge this perceived pro-American stance. The expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanon in May 2005, with the help of the Americans, is testimony to this relationship. March 14’s embrace of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 1559 and 1701, and its strong interest in promoting a sovereign and independent Lebanon, free of Syrian tutelage, are initiatives that have been strongly supported by the United States. Furthermore, Hizbullah’s anti-Israeli



Chaitou and Ghandour...

tribunal, and the importance of reaching national consensus on important details that will ultimately protect Lebanese sovereignty and independence of the Lebanese judiciary. It is the policy of the American administration to turn all important national decisions over to the international arena, as is the case with the international tribunal. The US is not an impartial broker in the Lebanese case, and the Bush Administration is clearly supporting one party against the other by capitalizing on every point of contention in Lebanese politics to implement its plan for a “New Middle East”— a vision proposed by Condoleezza Rice during the July war in 2006.

In Lebanon, ex-Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman continues to receive his instructions from the American administration and seizes every opportunity to interfere in insignificant as well as important issues that concern Lebanon. At one point, he asked Parliamentarian Michel Aoun (who represents the wider majority of Lebanese Christians) to end his alliance with Hizbullah, despite the fact that this alliance was the product of a Memorandum of Understanding approved by both parties. The implementation of this MoU would lead to stability in Lebanon, and includes a solution to the weapons of Hizbullah, within the framework of a defense strategy that would protect Lebanese soil. Even at the heart of the conflict between the government and the opposition, and despite the efforts of European and Arab neighbors to break the political stalemate, ex-Ambassador David Satterfield arrived on the scene to mock the Arab initiatives offering a solution to the crisis, and made it a goal to hinder all French attempts to reach a solution.

The more alarming side of the US agenda for Lebanon involves the military and security of Lebanon. The US administration has a history of using all means to implement its strategy in the region, even when its actions stand in clear violation of international human rights law and UN security resolutions. By safeguarding the right to veto, the US ensures that the UN remains a toy that it can play with as it pleases. Within this context, the last violation committed by the US was disclosed by ex-minister Michele Samaha: following an executive decision by President Bush, the American embassy in Beirut (Awkar area) has turned, over the last few weeks, from an embassy to a unit for organizing military operations in Lebanon. Towards this effect, two prominent leaders from the executive unit for special operations in Kabul were transferred to the American embassy in Beirut. This information coincided with the arrival of the guided-missile destroyer

Zovighian...

and anti-American stance also furthers March 14’s relative pro-American position. However, although March 14 is certainly backed by the American government, it is important to place US support within the broader context of international backing.

The European Union, Russia, and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have provided March 14 with clear and unquestionable support, as shown by their backing of the disarmament of Hizbullah and the holding of presidential elections. The notion that March 14 is being spoon-fed American policy, in a manner similar to the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, is misleading. Evaluating its relationship with the United States, Lebanon is more like a Saudi Arabia than it is like an Iraq; although the interests of both sides clearly overlap, there is room for disagreements.

The interests of March 14 and the United States are convergent. It is in the interest of March 14 to have a disarmed Hizbullah, controlled borders with Israel and Syria, and presidential elections. All of these priorities are directly in line with American interests, but for different reasons. Whereas March 14 needs this agenda to maintain political legitimacy and fulfill its responsibilities as leaders of the country, the United States has an interest in protecting Israel, keeping Syria and Iran in check, and maintaining a certain level of regional stability in order to avoid further destabilizing Iraq. However, overlaps in incentives remain: Both March 14 and the United States want March 14 to stay in power, an end to Syrian political manipulation, and a stable Lebanon.

Understanding this dynamic in terms of a convergence rather than a hegemonic one-way imposition of American policy also helps explain why, at times, the Siniora government has not been on the same page as the United States. In the recent February 14 demonstration, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and a March 14 founder, Walid Jumblatt, both condemned the assassination of Imad Mughniyya, one of America’s most-wanted terrorists. Two days later, Parliament majority leader MP Sa’d Hariri specifically articulated that March 14 would never accept being spoon-fed policy by the United States. Additionally, the Siniora government is explicitly against peace with Israel and has done nothing to further the possibility of Syrian-Israeli peace talks. These clear moments of divergence cannot be



Chaitou and Ghandour...

USS Cole near the Lebanese coast in what appears to be a clear and provocative message to antagonize the Lebanese people at large, despite the public's knowledge that this took place with the support of the Lebanese government. The "USS Filbayn C" and a guided missile destroyer "USS Ross" and a fuel warship have replaced Cole, and they will be followed by other warships in the coming days.

Another American attempt to support the Lebanese government was revealed through the sudden attention to the Lebanese security apparatus, especially the intelligence unit for national security that constitutes the government's main intelligence unit. It is important to point out that the US is supporting the national security forces by providing them with hi-tech equipment, training, and relatively developed machinery, including a supply of arms and ammunition that is entering the country both legally and illegally. In February 2007, the US provided equipment and military clothes (security vests and electric guns amongst other supplies) through 750 containers that went through Beirut international airport, and were declared by customs as containers containing "electrical appliances." Is this an example of how far President Bush is willing to go to support the Lebanese government through "any means" available?

In light of this scandal, it becomes legitimate to question the source of weapons that suddenly appear with political factions supporting the government, particularly in scenes of domestic strife where a simple discord escalates into a catastrophe as a result of the weapons that suddenly appear in the grips of government supporters. This is what happened during the violent student riot outside Beirut Arab University at the beginning of this year — a fiasco which began as a political argument between two people that turned violent, leading to the death of 3 people from the opposition and the injury of 133, thus launching a strike by the opposition on January, 23, 2007. Also, the illegitimate security check points that appear now and then (deemed necessary by the Lebanese government to protect national security), indeed resemble scare tactics with the intent of silencing the opposition despite a genuine intent on their part to break the deadlock and join hands with the Lebanese government within the framework of a strategy that rejects regional and international intervention in Lebanese domestic affairs.

The Bush Administration seeks to support illegitimate militias that are aligned with the government in an indirect

Zovighian...

understood or appreciated if the Lebanese political scene is viewed as a simplistic pro- versus anti-American dichotomy.

Unfortunately, March 14 is much at fault for the persistence of this distorted image. The movement has not done enough to take Lebanese ownership of their agenda. This has affected March 14's support base, where many supporters view the Iraq War as an invasive American occupation and not as a democratic campaign to win Iraqi freedom against dictatorship and terrorism.

March 14 is aware that many supporters have trouble reconciling their support for the movement with their views on American interference in the region. This has made it easier for Hizbullah to place Israel, the United States, and March 14 on the same pedestal, which further brands the Siniora government as pro-American. March 14 understands it must better articulate its position *vis-à-vis* American foreign policy and knows it has lost precious time in doing so.

Looking forward, it is important that March 14 crystallizes its relationship with the United States as one that is friendly but not intrusive. The United States and the international community also have the obligation to respect March 14's independence of thought and action.

For the consumer of epic media encounters and the Lebanese voter, the March 14 movement's success will be measured against its ability to self-sufficiently and proactively declare Lebanese policy. Taking ownership of its *raison d'être* should be March 14's immediate priority. This can be accomplished by defining an independent Lebanon that is nationalistic and Arab and that welcomes friendly foreign partners. For these results to happen, it is important that March 14 be given a fair hearing, not just by the international community, but more importantly, by the Lebanese people.

Lynn Zovighian is an Associate in the Dubai Office of The Boston Consulting Group. She is a Middle East and North Africa columnist in the University of California Davis International Update. Lynn holds a Bachelor's of Arts in Political Studies and a double minor in Islamic History and American Studies from the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. The views contained in this essay are those of the author



Chaitou and Ghandour...

manner that includes the transfer of colossal funds and assistance through “moderate countries” that would in turn train these militias in, for instance, Arab military compounds. Despite the fact that the American government made a donation worth \$60 million to the Lebanese government, history shows that this increase in US funding and assistance aims to accentuate internal divisions or perhaps set the stage for a regional war. In all cases, the US support for the Lebanese government entails a “hidden agenda” that is beyond Lebanon and in no way represents a strategic, timely partnership imposed by circumstances. According to President Bush, the protection of Lebanon begins and ends with constraining its capabilities to fight Israel. It is important to point out that some of this money is partially assigned for training purposes, such as trainings that are taking place in military complexes in the Arab world under the supervision of American military commanders who specialize in mafia techniques, with the intent of bringing these trained military units back to Lebanon under the protection of tens of national security companies that are increasing in number, even though they may all fall under the auspices of American Black Water Company.

American foreign policy in Lebanon revolves around two main issues: the first seeks to put an end to the arms by Hezbollah — a resistance movement that has gained wide scale recognition and respect for defending Lebanon, and putting an end to Israeli occupation of Lebanese soil, namely in Shebaa Farms and the hills of Kfarshouba. And the second objective is to break part of the Shi’ite crescent in Lebanon, and ensure that its demise brings forth the American project for a “New Middle East.”

The Lebanese share one message, one dream: We only wish to live in peace; we have no passion for war, or desire to die... We simply want to live with dignity, freedom, and real sovereignty and independence.

Kamal Chaitou and Thaeer Ghandour are journalists in a daily opposition newspaper affiliated with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The views contained in this essay are those of the author alone and not those of Akhbar Newspaper or any other institutional affiliation or support of the author’s. This essay was translated and truncated from the original Arabic. To read the original Arabic version, please [click here](#).

Zovighian...

alone and not those of Boston Consulting or any other institutional affiliation or support of the author’s.