



What Happened to the Cedar Revolution?

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They were all smiles the first day. The key players of Lebanese politics - assorted sectarian warlords and pin-striped politicians - first gathered in early March around a roundtable in Beirut's parliament building to begin talks on their country's future. Samir Geagea, the frail-looking Maronite warlord freed from prison last year, even smiled and shook hands with Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah of Hizbullah.

The ongoing national reconciliation talks are the first of their kind since the 1989 Taif Accords, which brokered an end to Lebanon's 15-year civil war - and that conference was orchestrated by the Syrians. Now, with the Syrian troops gone from the country, the Lebanese must solve their own controversies, such as the presidency of Emile Lahoud and militias like Hizbullah. It hasn't been easy.

The Shi'ite alliance briefly boycotted the talks after former pro-Syrian Druse leader Walid Jumblatt said on a visit to Washington that Hizbullah should disarm. Meanwhile, election tactics have pushed Gen. Michel Aoun, who made his name fighting the Syrians, into Nasrallah's camp.

And so, the merry-go-round of Lebanese politics spins. But what happened to the Cedar Revolution? Following the assassination of ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri, 1 million Lebanese took to the streets of Beirut on March 14, 2005, demanding freedom and independence. The Syrians left - and their ally Lahoud might yet be removed, too - but disarming Hizbullah and turning Lebanon into a sovereign country will be much harder. Still, optimists keep hope.

The Independence Intifada

Hariri's relationship with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was a "Shakespearean tragedy," says one Beirut journalist. The Sunni tycoon-turned-politician wanted to work with the young Syrian leader; he endured years of interference in Lebanon's attempt to revive its economy. But, says the source, Assad was "blinded by a pernicious whispering campaign by Syrian intelligence in Lebanon and Syria's Lebanese allies..."

The Syrians, who dominated Lebanon for three decades, finally overplayed their hand. In August 2004, Assad bullied Hariri into amending the Lebanese constitution so the local Syrian stooge in Beirut - Lahoud - could serve another three-year term. Then Assad tried to reconfigure the government in Beirut, prompting Hariri to resign and begin a new election campaign in the fall.

Tension came to a head in February, when a 500-kilogram bomb exploded under the motorcade of Hariri, killing the former prime minister and more than 20 others. At first, a heretofore unknown al-Qaida faction claimed responsibility for the assassination, but few believed it. On March 14, a million Lebanese - Sunnis, Christians and Druse - took to the streets waving flags and demanding freedom.

"About a third of the country showed up," says Nadim Shehadi, a Lebanon specialist at London's Chatham House. "This would be equivalent to 20 million British demonstrators showing up at Trafalgar Square."

By contrast, Hizbullah and Amal opposed the Independence Intifada (or, as the Americans billed it, "The Cedar Revolution") and rallied to the side of the Syrians. During that same month, three mysterious blasts struck Christian areas. But these attacks did not intimidate the UN Security Council, which demanded the Syrians abide by Resolution 1559 and withdraw all their troops from Lebanon. The last soldiers left at the end of April.

What now? Clearly, the March 14 forces did not want the status quo, but no one knew what they wanted specifically, or how to harness those dreams.

"There has been a transformation in society," says Shehadi, "but the politicians have not caught up with a political program."

Reshuffling the deck

Lebanon held parliamentary elections after the Syrians withdrew, and the 128-seat house is now divided into three rival blocs. The dominant Future Movement, led by Hariri's son Saad, holds 75 seats and comprises Sunnis, Druse and those Christians who hold a grudge against the former exile, Aoun. Next in size comes the Shi'ite bloc; finally, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has 21 seats.

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However, those who hoped the Cedar Revolution would shake up the political order were disappointed. The same haggard faces were back: Druse warlord Jumblatt, Lebanese Forces commander Geagea, Nabih Berri from Amal, etc. Even the beleaguered Lahoud has managed to hold on to his presidency, despite being treated as persona non grata by Washington.

"It was back to good, old Lebanese politics, where the confessional elite struck alliances and backroom deals, some of them very bizarre, to ensure that they remained in control," says a source.

Without a doubt, one of the strangest alliances is between Aoun - the Christian generalissimo who lost a "war of liberation" against the Syrians in 1990 and then spent 14 years in exile - and Hizbullah, a Syrian-allied Islamist militia.

"Aoun is trying to become president," explains Robert Rabil, a Middle East Studies professor at Florida Atlantic University, "but he knows that some Christians won't support him." Hence, his declaration that Hizbullah should not be disarmed and ostracized.

Then there is Jumblatt, an ex-Syrian lackey who once cheered on American deaths in Iraq but, in a stunning turn of events, stands accused by the Party of God of having a "Western agenda." Jumblatt (allying with Geagea, who fought alongside the IDF!) now calls for the removal of President Lahoud and the disarming of Hizbullah, while declaring the Mount Dov region (Shabaa Farms) Syrian - not Lebanese - territory.

But observers warn against putting too much stock in current positions. "Everything changes in Lebanon," says Eyal Zisser, a Lebanon expert at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies. "Aoun wants to be president. That means allying with Hizbullah, but when he becomes president, he will want to disarm it. Then Jumblatt will oppose [disarming] it."

National reconciliation

Still, the Lebanese have tried to make a go of tackling some of the issues that have, until now, divided them. Beginning in early March, leading politicians convened in Beirut a series of national reconciliation meetings, which are scheduled to run until the end of April. The very fact that everyone has gotten together is a positive first step, says Rabil.

"Throughout Lebanon's history," says the Florida Atlantic University professor, "you didn't have so many different people, from all the factions, sitting together and discussing serious issues from a Lebanese point of view. The Taif Accords were brokered in Saudi Arabia."

The meetings have broached sensitive issues, such as the demarcation of borders between Lebanon and Syria (which is a roundabout way to decide who really owns, and therefore should fight for, the Shabaa Farms) and the fate of militias meant to disarm according to UN Security Council Resolution 1559. But the question remains as to whether the Lebanese can solve these issues without sparking a civil war.

On a positive note, Berri, the Parliament speaker, has already told reporters that Lebanese leaders have agreed to disarm Palestinian groups outside the confines of the country's dozen refugee camps. Then again, the Palestinians are hardly a major political-military force on the scene.

"They are an easy target, a few hundred at most scattered in remote camps mainly along the Lebanese-Syrian border," says the source in Lebanon. "I have visited several of these camps, and apart from the PFLP-GC which are a fairly tough bunch and have the potential for mischief, the rest resemble retirement homes for grey-haired veterans of the Palestinian revolution."

Getting Hizbullah to surrender its weapons will be trickier. The party uses its role as a "resistance movement" to keep the loyalty of the Shi'ites and a central role in Lebanese politics, but it also knows the country wants the militia disarmed.

"They are looking for a face-saving solution, perhaps to serve as an auxiliary of the Lebanese army," says Marius Deeb of Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

It's a position also floated by UN special envoy Terje-Roed Larsen. But its success depends on a delicate balance of not cornering Hizbullah while, at the same time, not losing the March 14 majority of Druse, Christian and Sunni constituents.

Choosing paralysis

In a similar vein, Deeb has suggested that, as a consensus position, the Lebanese might accept the legal fiction that Shabaa Farms is Lebanese while leaving its "liberation" to diplomacy rather than guerrilla warfare. But again, this is avoiding the heart of the matter.

Shehadi, from Chatham House, says no one has the stomach for more fighting, which is what would occur if the Lebanese army tried to forcibly shut down Hizbullah or go into the refugee camps.

"In a nutshell, national reconciliation offers two choices: internal confrontation or paralysis," he says. "I think the Lebanese will choose

paralysis."

Whatever the hopes of the Cedar Revolutionaries and the intentions of the politicians, Syria and Iran still hold the keys to Lebanon's domestic tranquility. And just as Syria has been ducking the UN investigation into the Hariri murder, it - along with Iran - will continue to make trouble with Hizbullah and the Palestinian rejectionists.

"Nothing good will come of the national reconciliation meetings," says Zisser. "The Lebanese may get rid of Lahoud, but he only has a year left to his term anyway."

By Erik Schechter
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