LEBANON IN US FOREIGN POLICY

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The Middle East in US strategy

There is no question that the region of the Middle East will remain of primordial importance to the US strategy, security and interests.
The danger that religious fanaticism emanating from the region would reach our shorelines or, indeed our heartland, the fallout from the war in Iraq, the geo-strategic importance of that entire region and the existential threat to Israel represent crucial challenges that cannot be ignored. Thus the Middle East will have to top the foreign policy agenda of the next President and Administration.

Despite the many setbacks, US policies promoting peace, stability and moderation and encouraging freedom, democracy and reforms do have many friends and advocates in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the enemies of America, traditional and novel, are ruthless, determined and powerful. Iran, Syria and a myriad of radical militant groups continue to present a formidable threat for the US, its friends and its allies in the Region.

Importance of Lebanon in US Strategy

The principles of an independent, sovereign, and democratic Lebanon must remain firmly anchored in any future US strategy for the region. Such a policy is in the best national interests of the United States for several reasons most notable of which are:

- ***The Arab-Israeli Peace:*** As long as the US is determined to pursue a fair and long-lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, it will need the Lebanese to be free from the influences of Iran and Syria and empowered to fully commit to the peace effort. A free and sovereign Lebanon will embrace genuine peace, regional stability and neighborly relations, whereas a Lebanon controlled by Iran and Syria, directly or through their proxies, will take the path of endless wars and continuous confrontations.
- ***The Democracy Agenda:*** Lebanon, freed from the harmful intrusions of Iran and Syria will quickly regain its standing as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, and will undoubtedly help in promoting the US agenda of advancing democratic principles, respect for human rights and constructive reforms.
- ***The Terrorism Threat:*** A Lebanon that is under the control of Iran and Syria will become a fertile breeding ground for terrorists and radical militias endangering the stability and security of the region and the world including the US.
- ***The Inter-Religious Coexistence:*** An independent, sovereign and democratic Lebanon can present a unique example of religious co-existence, and it is in the interest of the US that this inter-religious experiment yields successful results not only for the sake of Lebanon itself but also for regional harmony and world peace.
- ***The Interaction of Civilizations:*** Lebanon has long been a bridge between East and West, with a mosaic culture enriched by centuries of interaction with regional and distant civilizations and

cultures, and by the historic presence of large Lebanese communities all over the world. The concept of moderation and openness embodied in the Lebanese model presents a living challenge to the radical and destructive views of the enemies of the US and the free world.

- ***The US-Lebanon relations:*** It is only under the occupation and the negative influence of the enemies of the US, specifically Syria and Iran, that anti-American sentiments and anti-West activism flourished in some parts of Lebanon. Lebanon has been traditionally a friend to America, sharing democratic ideals, liberal culture, tolerance, pluralism and basic human freedoms, very much similar to the founding principles of the United States of America.

Obstacles to Peace and Stability - *Iran, Syria, and their Lebanese militias*

Despite the determination of the Lebanese to revitalize their democratic systems, rebuild their civic institutions, and reenergize the county's economy, Iran, Syria, the Hezbollah militia and their allies are determined to thwart these efforts.

- ***Syria***, whose 30 year domination of Lebanon came to a crashing end in 2005, covets a comeback for the control of the country's political, social, economic, and judicial systems. Although their military occupation of the country has ended, the Syrians continue to meddle in Lebanon's internal affairs through their proxies.
- ***Iran***, on the other hand, has been seeking to export its radical ideology in the Middle East since the inception of their 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Iranian Regime has repeatedly affirmed that the objective of its unlimited financial and military support to Hezbollah in Lebanon is to defeat America and its friends in the region.
- ***Hezbollah***, along with the local remnants of Syria's agents, seek to alter the path of democracy in Lebanon. Funded, armed, and trained by the Iranian regime, Hezbollah has made it clear that their objective is the establishment of an Islamic regime in line with the Khomeini's revolution.

Standing up to these elements of disruption and backwardness will require continued US commitment in the region and adequate support for its allies.

Guiding Principles of the US Approach towards Lebanon

The US foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular has historically been, somewhat inconsistent and, in many instances, unfair. Years of abandonment prior to 2003 had resulted in Syria's assuming complete control over Lebanon and creating militant groups on Lebanese soil committed to anti-US activism.

The US approach regarding Lebanon should be permanently based on the following uncompromising principles:

- Non-interference in Lebanese affairs by regional powers and the shielding and disengagement of Lebanon from all regional conflicts
- Sustaining a consensual democracy that guarantees the rights of individuals and communities in a pluralistic society that is inherently comprised of minorities.

Specific Policy Recommendations

The United States, in coordination with its allies in the region and in the world, should pursue the following existing and proposed policies in order to complete the Lebanese recovery and regain Lebanon as a friendly and peaceful nation.

1. Continue to require the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions such as 1559, 1680 and 1701, which call for the disarmament of Hezbollah and of the Palestinian camps as well as the cessation of military aid from any state to militias within Lebanon.

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2. Consider international sanctions on Iran and Syria for violating United Nations resolutions and international laws by persistently arming and financing Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias operating in Lebanon.
3. Pressure the Syrian government to cooperate fully with Lebanon and UN's demand for the demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border.
4. Ensure the monitoring of the Syrian-Lebanese borders to stop the flow of Iranian and other military material and personnel from Syria to Lebanese militias, and enroll the assistance of international and Arab forces for this purpose.
5. Assist in strengthening the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces to enable them to counter the illegal and foreign-supported militias; to contain the threat of civil unrest; to prevent assassinations and other terrorist acts;
6. Exert all necessary efforts to expedite the work of the international tribunal that would try the assassins of former PM Rafic Hariri and other prominent Lebanese leaders.
7. Support the enactment of a reformed and equitable legislative election law to achieve a true representation of the various components of the Lebanese population
8. Reject the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon since Lebanon's peculiar religious and demographic considerations exclude the viability of naturalizing these refugees.
9. Continue the current aid programs and make further economic assistance conditional on compliance with international and US demands for democratic reforms and for anti-corruption measures.
10. Continue to engage, empower and assist the political leaders, non-governmental agencies and individuals in Lebanon who genuinely share our principles and unequivocally support the freedom and democracy of Lebanon.
11. Defend the basic rights and individual freedoms in Lebanon and address the humanitarian issues of those Lebanese who (1) were displaced during the civil war, (2) were forcefully exiled from Lebanon into Israel and other countries, and (3) are still detained in Syrian jails.

The Lebanese-Americans

Of the estimated 3.5 million Arab-Americans, around 60% are of Lebanese descent (The Economist). Other notable distinguishing factors of the Lebanese-American community are that 90% of its members are Christians and approximately 80% of them are regular voters.

While Lebanese-Americans are highly assimilated into the American way of life, the majority still regards their country of origin as a key factor in their voting decision and, unlike what some fundamentally flawed statistics presented by some organizations and polling institutes claim, Lebanese-Americans are very appreciative of the US' support to Lebanon.

Conclusion

The next US President will have to address the problems facing Lebanon's recovery since it is an integral part of the solution to the conflict in the Middle East and of the fight against terrorism. It is therefore imperative that the US remains steadfast in its support for a free and democratic Lebanon.

For this purpose, the next President will be able to capitalize on:

(1) the congruous international positions and numerous UNSC Resolutions,

(2) the solid bipartisan support and multiple resolutions and Acts in Congress, and

(3) the backing of a very appreciative Lebanese-American community.

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