

The forgotten side of Resolution 1559

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UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's words in his report issued last Friday on implementation of Resolution 1559 and the extension of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's mandate should be saluted. If taken up seriously by the Security Council this week, they provide a missing ingredient in response to a perennial problem that has afflicted the Middle East during the last four decades: the absence of a regular, nonviolent alternation of power at the top.

To quote from Annan's report (written by Terje Roed-Larsen, who nevertheless was quoting from a previous statement of the secretary general), "governments and leaders should not hold on to office beyond prescribed term limits."

I commend Annan because I have repeatedly had my differences with the secretary general on his points of emphasis in various matters Middle Eastern. He has not been forthcoming enough in opposing the positions of the Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, though it has systematically undermined the efforts of the Quartet in its search for a comprehensive peace. On Iraq, Annan was too often ambiguous in his dealings with Saddam Hussein: In 1998, for example, he personally engineered a diplomatic exit for the Iraqi leader at the time of the imbroglio over inspections of the presidential palaces, unnecessarily delaying a showdown with the Iraqi regime. More importantly, Annan was unable last year to chart a way out for the UN amid divisions in the organization over Iraq, culminating in its post-war departure from the country after the bomb attack against its headquarters in Baghdad.

Many in Syria and Lebanon have already brushed aside Annan's statements on Resolution 1559. However, that does not really matter, as much depends on what the Security Council will do this week with the secretary general's devastatingly accurate diagnosis of the Syrian-Lebanese relationship.

It is important that there be no letup by the Security Council in addressing, first in order of priority, the regional political deadlock, and second, the assured deadlock in Lebanon in the coming three years thanks to Lahoud's undemocratic extended mandate. Indeed, the Lebanese deadlock claimed its first victim on Friday, in the terrible attack against the former minister, Marwan Hamade, which could have easily killed him, and in which his guard died. Only Parliament's reversal of Lahoud's extension, through the election of an alternative figure before the constitutional end of the president's mandate on Nov. 24, can defuse the increasing tension inside Lebanon.

It is plain that the clauses in Resolution 1559 on the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hizbullah will remain matters for international concern in the years to come. Until the Syrians pull their soldiers and intelligence agents out of Lebanon, and until Hizbullah is integrated into some sort of official Lebanese military structure, or simply disbanded, Resolution 1559 will remain unimplemented. Put more strongly, the Lebanese and Syrian governments will stand in violation of international law, and it was always naive to think that Annan's report would conclude anything else in light of the language adopted by the Security Council in resolution.

However, from a Lebanese, indeed from an Arab, perspective, this was not the most salient point in a month of unusual diplomacy. What was outstanding was the acknowledgment through a Security Council resolution, and now further underlined in the Annan report, that Lebanon, and in due course Syria and the rest of the Arab world, will stand afoul of international legitimacy if there is no recurrent change of executive power at the head of states.

In this context, one can appreciate the groundswell of opposition to the assured prolongation of the mandates of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and of President Zine el-Abidine ben Ali of Tunisia, as their terms formally come to an end this month after two decades in power. However harsh it will be to the ears of the eternal incumbents in the Middle East, these leaders' desire to stay in office indefinitely will only weaken their societies and perpetuate political deadlock in them, encouraging more foreign intervention - especially by Israel. This reality must be grasped as much by Emile Lahoud as by Syrian President Bashar Assad, who must recognize that their mandates can no longer be extended at will.

As seen from New York, the short paragraph in the Annan report on the need for societies to be provided with alternations of power holds the key to reversing the characteristic stalemate in Middle Eastern societies occasioned by the presence of absolutist leaders for life. If Kofi Annan wants to leave behind one thought for posterity, his statement on the matter may be the most powerful.

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