

Summer Heats Up in Lebanon

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Jul 27, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Six weeks after the pro-West March 14 coalition defeated the Hizballah-led alliance in Lebanon's parliamentary elections, no new government has been formed in Beirut. Although March 14 leader Saad Hariri was given a mandate back in early June to become prime minister and form a cabinet, he has still not completed the sensitive and contentious negotiations with the opposition. Hariri's difficulties in allocating seats among his coalition allies and political adversaries were anticipated, and to a certain extent are routine for Lebanon. But the calm that followed the free and fair elections is eroding, as Hizballah and its allies in Damascus press for more political concessions from Hariri. These developments, coupled with the apparent failure of Saudi-Syrian reconciliation efforts, are elevating tensions, threatening a banner tourism season, and raising the possibility of a return to violence in Beirut.

Background

On June 7, Lebanese voters went to the polls for the first parliamentary elections since 2005. In a stunning outcome, the March 14 incumbents defeated the heavily favored Hizballah-led March 8 alliance, garnering 71 of 128 parliamentary seats and the right to form a new government. Although Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah said he would "accept the will of the people," senior officials of the organization have insisted on the establishment of a "national unity government" that provides the opposition with "effective and decisive participation" in the decisionmaking process -- a euphemism generally understood as a demand for veto power in the cabinet. The veto power, known as a "blocking third" -- control over one-third plus one of the cabinet ministries -- would enable Hizballah and its allies to stymie all major government initiatives.

To date, Hariri has resisted pressures to provide the opposition with this perquisite. Instead, he is believed to favor a formula that would give his majority sixteen seats, the opposition ten -- just one short of the blocking third -- and President Michel Suleiman four picks of his own. Even this compromise, which is unacceptable to Hizballah, is problematic for March 14; if just one of Suleiman's cabinet picks is sympathetic to the Shiite militia, the March 8 alliance would achieve its coveted veto.

Saudi-Syrian Rapprochement

Last March, Egypt, Kuwait, and Syria attended a mini-summit hosted by Saudi Arabia, aimed at improving Riyadh's ties with Damascus, which deteriorated significantly after the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier (and Saudi national) Rafiq Hariri. Over the past four months, discussions have continued between Riyadh and Damascus, and reports in the Arab press suggested that the two states might be on the verge of a rapprochement. In early July, this trend seemed to be confirmed by Saudi Arabia's appointment of a new ambassador to Damascus, a post that had been vacant since 2008.

This summer, discussions between Riyadh and Damascus focused on postelection politics in Beirut, specifically on the composition of the Lebanese government. During these talks, Syria reportedly advocated for a blocking third for its Lebanese allies as well as for some kind of formal agreement that would legitimize a Syrian role in Lebanon along the lines of the 1989 Taif Accord. Damascus was apparently seeking to leverage its rapprochement with Riyadh to reinstitute the previous "condominium" arrangement that left the management of economic matters to Saudi Arabia and its Lebanese allies, and security-related affairs to Syria and Hizballah.

By the end of June, the Lebanese Broadcasting Company was reporting that a Saudi-Syrian summit was in the offing, to be attended by Saudi king Abdullah, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, and Saad Hariri. But then the detente hit a snag, as Hariri was unwilling to accept the Syrian-March 8 demands. Not only would the deal have effectively erased March 14's election victory, it would have given the impression, via Hariri's trip to Damascus, of Syrian innocence in the murder of his father, Rafiq. Still others, however, are blaming Cairo -- frustrated with Syria's role in obstructing the Egyptian-brokered effort to foster a Hamas-Fatah national unity government -- for the aborted reconciliation. Regardless of the reason, by late July, Lebanese sources indicated that a visit from the Saudi monarch to Syria was off the table.

Meanwhile, the al-Asad regime is frustrated with the pace of diplomatic progress with the United States and appears to be sending Washington the message that it can play a potent spoiler role. Accordingly, in mid-July, in the wake of a spate of suicide bombings in Mosul, four armed men with Syrian passports were arrested in northern Iraq. On the same day the arrests were announced, al-Asad met in Damascus with Muqtada al-Sadr, an anti-American Iraqi Shiite militia leader with close ties to Tehran. Syria likewise continues to play an unproductive role vis-a-vis a potential Hamas-Fatah reconciliation. Most recently, some have speculated that Damascus encouraged its ally, Fatah leader Faruq Qaddumi, to issue the explosive claim on al-Jazeera that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas conspired to assassinate longtime Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat.

Hizballah Ups the Ante

Predictably, as cabinet negotiations in Beirut drag on, Lebanon's southern border with Israel is heating up. On July 14, a large explosion rocked Khirbet Slim, a small village nine miles north of the Israeli border. The explosion was alternately described as occurring at either a Hizballah arms cache or an advanced defensive position. When the investigating UN Interim Forces (UNIFIL) tried to ascertain whether the detonation was in any way a violation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, residents of the village -- reportedly at the instigation of Hizballah -- threw stones, burned tires, and fought the peacekeepers to prevent the inspection. The soldiers were eventually turned away.

Then on July 17, Nasrallah delivered a speech marking the one-year anniversary of the release of the Israeli-detained "dean of the prisoners," Samir Kuntar, an event precipitated by a Hizballah kidnapping raid that sparked the 2006 summer war with Israel. During his speech, Nasrallah praised the kidnapping operation for returning Lebanese captives, and then raised yet another grievance -- and perhaps a casus belli -- against Israel. "Now what remains," he said, "is the file of Yahya Skaff," a terrorist killed in the 1978 Coastal Road massacre in Israel. Although Israel has rendered Skaff's remains to Lebanon, the DNA results, according to Nasrallah, were inconclusive and the family maintains he is "still alive in Israeli prisons." Noting that Hizballah was "committed to the family's decision," Nasrallah added, "We have a responsibility to these people, to liberate them."

Adding to the tensions along the blue line, the same day Nasrallah gave his speech, fifteen Lebanese civilians crossed over the frontier and planted Hizballah and Lebanese flags on Israeli soil -- indeed, atop an unmanned Israeli observation post -- a violation that allegedly was witnessed by UNIFIL soldiers. This incident prompted a formal Israeli complaint to the UN as well as a debate in Lebanon about the authority and efficacy of 1701. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams described the border crossing and the Khirbet Slim clashes as a "clear violation" of UNSCR 1701. Meanwhile, Hizballah parliamentarian Nawaf Mussawi claimed that "It is not within UNIFIL's mandate to conduct investigations." In any event, the Shiite militia is hinting of more to come. On July 22, Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, the senior Hizballah official responsible for the south, told the Lebanese daily al-Nahar, "We are not waiting for UNSCR 1701 to liberate the occupied lands."

Hizballah activities are not solely responsible for increased tensions in the south. On July 21, the Lebanese Armed Forces announced that it had arrested ten people -- allegedly tied to Fatah al-Islam -- suspected of targeting UNIFIL. If rumors prove true of impending European troop withdrawals from UNIFIL -- to fulfill peacekeeping commitments in Afghanistan -- it would further erode confidence in the already embattled force.

Conclusion

After a brief postelection respite, tensions in Lebanon are on the rise. Despite reports that prime-minister-designate Saad Hariri is making progress toward forming a government, Hizballah and Syrian-generated pressures are complicating the already difficult task, raising the specter that March 14 will fail to consolidate the gains of its impressive June 7 election victory. While cabinet negotiations are a domestic Lebanese affair, the Obama administration should leverage its diplomatic engagement with Damascus to prevent and/or mitigate egregious Syrian meddling in the process, thus insulating March 14 from external pressures. Yet even with a diminished Syrian role, March 14 will still be left to contend with Hizballah. Regrettably, even in a best-case scenario where Hariri and March 14 hold their political ground, given Hizballah's track record, the summer boon in Beirut -- like the previous three -- may soon go up in smoke.

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