

Can Lebanon's March 14 Reverse the Tide?

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Brief Analysis

This week, Lebanon's new national unity government is slated to announce its ministerial statement (bayan waziri), the policy document that will define Beirut's working parameters and agenda through the spring 2009 elections. For the pro-West majority March 14 coalition, the priority will be to incorporate into the statement a reference to UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, which prohibits weapons movement to Hizballah and expands government sovereignty throughout Lebanon. Hizballah, for its part, will look to maintain the legitimacy of "the resistance." Although March 14 still maintains a government majority, three years of hostility and self-inflicted wounds have left the ruling party dramatically weakened, making it unclear whether the coalition will be able to prevent Hizballah from consolidating further political gains.

A Weakened March 14

Recent months have not been kind to the anti-Syrian, pro-Western government in Beirut. After it provoked a showdown with Hizballah in May, the militia responded by storming the capital city (see [PolicyWatch #1375 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2883\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2883)). Under the gun a month later in Doha, March 14 acceded to the opposition's demand to establish a "national unity government," which provided the Shiite militia and its Christian allies eleven out of the thirty cabinet seats. The deal not only increased the opposition's de jure power, it also sparked infighting among March 14 members for the remaining seats, damaging egos and morale.

Then in early July, French president Nicholas Sarkozy invited Syrian president Bashar al-Asad -- a leader who had faced diplomatic isolation since the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri -- to the Mediterranean Union meeting in France. Paris had been a pillar of support for March 14 and a leading advocate for the UN's International Tribunal established to prosecute Hariri's assassins. But the Turkish sponsored Israeli-Syrian negotiations apparently proved too enticing, and the French now appear to be taking steps -- supporting Syria's entry into the EU Economic Association for example -- to rehabilitate Syria without regard to the tribunal. Sarkozy is scheduled to travel to Damascus in September.

But the coup de grace for the March 14 coalition came on July 16, when Israel engaged in a prisoner swap with Hizballah. The deal exchanged the remains of two Israeli servicemen for the remains of two hundred Palestinians and Hizballah members, as well as five Lebanese prisoners, including the notorious terrorist Samir Kuntar. By delivering Kuntar, Hizballah vindicated its tactic of kidnapping Israeli soldiers, legitimized the continued possession of its arsenal, and seemingly reestablished some of its previously lost credibility. At the same time, by actively participating in the welcome celebrations for Kuntar, who is best known for murdering an Israeli father and his four-year-old daughter in 1979, senior March 14 officials will almost certainly undercut goodwill in Washington, the government's leading ally.

Ministerial Statements

Ongoing discussions regarding the ministerial statement take place in the shadow of Kuntar's release. Despite the shift of momentum toward the opposition, Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora has not publicly lowered expectations for the document. Indeed, last week he suggested that the new statement might prove even more favorable to March 14 than the July 2005 document, which was also drafted following the establishment of a government with Hizballah.

The only references to Hizballah contained in the 2005 statement were a call to "preserve our brave resistance," and conduct a "dialogue" on how Lebanon could best counter Israel's "occupations and ambitions." While this formulation seemed innocuous enough, its deliberate lack of clarity -- typical of Lebanese government consensus documents -- allowed for creative interpretation, and eventually served as the quasi-legal justification for the continuous arming of the Shiite militia.

When the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) seized a truckload of Hizballah weapons in February 2007, the militia protested, claiming that the 2005 ministerial statement "clearly established the right of the resistance to continue its actions." A year earlier, when the LAF seized and released a convoy of weapons in Lebanon, then chief of staff Michel Suleiman indicated that government policy actually prohibited the military from interdicting Syrian weapons bound for Hizballah.

A Fight for Language

Because the 2008 ministerial statement will again represent a consensus between March 14 and the opposition, the ruling coalition will no doubt be more cautious about language. Given the divergent worldviews, however, the attendant risks remain: both March 14 and Hizballah see the ministerial statement as a tool to constrain their rivals.

In addition to language that references UNSCR 1701, according to Lebanese daily al-Nahar, March 14 seeks references both to the Doha Agreement, since it stipulates an end to violence for political gain and advocates for state sovereignty throughout the country, and to President Suleiman's inaugural speech, because it articulates the development of a national defense strategy that "take[s] advantage of the resistance's capabilities and put[s] them to the service of this strategy." Hizballah signed the Doha agreement, and Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah has said he "agree[s] with every word" of the president's address.

For its part, Hizballah is focused on enshrining the concept of "resistance" within the statement. In this regard, the militia differs with President Suleiman's formulation that Lebanon will "liberate land militarily if diplomacy fails," arguing that "resistance" and diplomacy should be simultaneous. According to Hizballah's deputy secretary general Naim Qassem, Lebanon will not be in a position to benefit from diplomacy "if it is not accompanied by resistance." The red line for Hizballah in the statement will likely be the inalienable "right to liberate the land."

Relations with Syria

Another focus of the negotiations is the future disposition of Lebanese-Syrian relations. March 14 leaders state that they seek "good relations between Syria and Lebanon as two independent countries." In the aftermath of Kuntar's release, March 14 officials have also argued that the statement should refer to the Lebanese "missing" who are presumed to be in Syria. According to Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), 643 Lebanese have been imprisoned by Damascus since the 1970s. The Lebanese parliamentary committee charged with investigating these detainees believes ninety-one remain alive.

March 14 leaders have also been adamant in their demand that the Syrian-Lebanese border be demarcated. In addition, another March 14 leader, Walid Jumblatt, has stated that the Higher Syria-Lebanon Council -- a Syrian tool to manipulate Lebanon's defense and foreign policies -- be abolished and its agreements abrogated. Damascus and its ally Hizballah oppose these demands, however, so it is unlikely that these points will reach the final text.

National Dialogue -- Again?

Reports this week suggest that the new ministerial statement could be released as early as today. Yesterday, however, Lebanese press reports pointed to snags in the talks over bilateral relations with Syria and the weapons of the "resistance." If March 14 and the Hizballah-led opposition do not find acceptable language in the coming days, the most contentious issues will be referred to a national dialogue chaired by President Suleiman. Given the precedent of ineffective Lebanese national dialogues, this "solution" promises to be a prescription for deferred conflict (see [PolicyWatch #1089 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2454\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2454)).

Regardless of the outcome of the ministerial statement, it will constitute at best only a temporary ceasefire in the battle between the March 14 coalition and the opposition. While the compromise nature of the document will ensure that no party is entirely satisfied, it will also leave critical questions about Lebanon's future unresolved. No doubt, many Lebanese will breathe a sigh of relief when the statement is published, and start to look forward to the parliamentary elections -- and a new government -- next spring. But given developments of recent months, a weak statement will offer little comfort for March 14 and its constituent groups. Instead of providing a respite, these groups will likely focus on preparing -- arming and training -- for the inevitable next round with Hizballah.

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