

The Real Battle for Lebanon Will Take Place at the U.N.

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Articles & Testimony

This past week, Lebanon witnessed its most intense internal violence since its 1975 civil war. Fighting between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Fatah Islam, as well as three bomb attacks in Beirut, have taken a heavy toll, raising concerns about Lebanon's stability.

Like most of the tensions in Lebanese politics, this spate of violence is not primarily a domestic affair. Indeed, in addition to being populated with al-Qaeda fighters, Fatah Islam has close ties to Syria. The movement of emissaries between Fatah Islam and Damascus is well-documented; the Arab world's newspaper of record, Al Hayat, even reports that much of Fatah Islam's leadership is made up of Syrian officers.

Given the Syrian connection, the timing of the violence is no coincidence. Last week, the pro-West, pro-democracy, anti-Syrian Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora petitioned the U.N. Security Council to establish an international tribunal under Chapter 7 -- meaning it can be militarily enforced -- to prosecute the killers of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri. A few days later, the United States, France and Britain formally proposed the resolution to the Security Council.

Syrian officials are leading suspects in the 2005 murder, and Damascus virulently opposes the notion of a tribunal; should senior regime officials be implicated, it would almost certainly shake the foundations of the authoritarian regime. In this context, the strife in Lebanon appears to be a Syrian-orchestrated attempt to destabilize Lebanon and scuttle the international court.

Syrian President Bashar Assad knows Washington needs help on Iraq, and he's hoping to leverage this for a free hand in Lebanon and the end of the tribunal.

Even so, Washington has few illusions as to the unproductive role Syria is playing. The challenge for the Bush administration will be how to reconcile its priorities without sacrificing Lebanon.

At present, administration support for Beirut vis-a-vis Damascus is solid. But even if the LAF manages to get a handle on Fatah Islam, ongoing Syrian contacts with other Sunni fundamentalist groups and with the Shiite militia/political party Hezbollah suggest that Syrian meddling will remain a problem.

Because of this dynamic, the real battle for Lebanon will not take place in Beirut but in New York, behind closed doors in the U.N. Security Council. Syria's strategy appears to be to kill the tribunal resolution via a Russian veto.

Countering this offensive will require heavy U.S. diplomatic lifting at the United Nations. Since 2005, Washington has closely coordinated its Lebanon/Syria policy with the Europeans, and France in particular. The council's debate on the tribunal will be the first real test for newly inaugurated French President Nicolas Sarkozy. U.S. diplomacy and coalition building will be critical -- if not necessarily determinative -- to passing the resolution.

The key to constraining counterproductive Syrian behavior and ensuring Lebanese sovereignty is seeing through the international tribunal, letting the chips fall where they may. Justice for Hariri is really justice for the Lebanese people and should not be traded as a card either to jump-start still hypothetical Israeli-Syrian peace talks or to rent Syrian

assistance on Iraq.

In 2005, nearly one of four Lebanese rallied in Beirut and forced an end to the 30-year-long Syrian military occupation. Nonetheless, Syrian ambitions remain undeterred. To consolidate the gains of 2005, the international tribunal is a must. Until there is a real cost for supporting terrorism and destabilizing Lebanon, Syria will continue to control its smaller, weaker neighbor and, through Lebanon, undermine U.S. interests in the region.

As this past week demonstrated, Lebanon's government is doing its part to protect Lebanese sovereignty. Now it is up to the United States and its allies on the U.N. Security Council to do theirs.

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