

Saudi-Iranian Mediation on Hizballah: Will a Lebanon Deal Come at Syria's Expense?

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Brief Analysis

On February 20, the Lebanese cabinet -- with a Hizballah-led opposition boycott -- extended the term of the UN commission investigating the February 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. While the commission's work can now continue for as long as one more year, any future decision about organizing an international tribunal to try those indicted for the murder remains hostage to a vote -- requiring the opposition's assent -- in the paralyzed Lebanese parliament. Meanwhile, Hizballah continues to press its demand for increased political power within a "national unity" government, threatening civil disobedience should its demands not be met.

Amid such rising tensions, many are focusing on the latest mediation efforts of Saudi Arabia and Iran. A recent flurry of diplomatic activity has heightened speculation that a crisis-ending deal may be in the works. The general framework of the potential bargain -- more political power for Hizballah in exchange for the opposition's parliamentary approval of the international tribunal -- has been under discussion for weeks, but the details remain contentious. Should a deal eventually be reached along these lines -- and it is far from certain that this will occur -- the big loser would be Iran's strategic ally, Syria, the leading suspect in the Hariri assassination.

Background

The Hizballah-led opposition left the Lebanese government in November 2006, protesting a lack of power sharing. Specifically, the faction demanded a "blocking third" -- one-third plus one of all cabinet seats -- that would give it the ability to veto government initiatives. The opposition also articulated reservations about the establishment of an international tribunal to try Hariri's killers. For the Lebanese government, led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the anti-Syrian "March 14" forces, the tribunal is a top priority. However, Siniora is equally adamant that he will not provide Hizballah with a blocking third.

The resulting standoff culminated in a January strike in which the opposition closed key roads in Lebanon, temporarily crippling the state. Despite such pressures, the opposition has not yet been able to force Siniora to meet its demands. Indeed, during the January strike, Siniora traveled to Paris and won unprecedented international aid commitments for Lebanon. Hizballah is now deciding whether to press ahead with a new round of so-called civil

disobedience actions, once again placing Lebanon on the verge of civil war.

Saudi-Iranian Mediation

Since last year, Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa has been trying to mediate a solution to the impasse. More recently, Saudi Arabia and Iran have begun to mediate on behalf of their Lebanese allies (the March 14 forces and Hizballah, respectively) out of concern for the country's rising Sunni-Shiite tensions. From late January through mid-February, Saudi National Security Council chief Prince Bandar met several times with his Iranian counterpart, Ali Larijani, to discuss the crisis. Top Hizballah officials -- including Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem -- as well as March 14 leader Saad Hariri and Amal Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri also traveled to Saudi Arabia for meetings with senior officials.

The basic deal seems to be more power for Hizballah in return for ending the possibility of a renewed Syrian role in Lebanon through a tribunal exposing Syria's involvement in the Hariri assassination. Still, based on press accounts, an agreement remains uncertain. According to the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat, as of February 21, Riyadh and Tehran had crafted a proposal that was being vetted with Damascus. Meanwhile, Nabih Berri had delivered the opposition's notes on required modifications to international tribunal law for Saudi review. Cabinet composition is still under discussion, according to al-Hayat, with the opposition sticking to its demand for a blocking third.

Just how far apart the sides remain was highlighted by Naim Qassem's glib remarks of February 20, when he stated, "There is no tribunal without a government of national unity." In other words, the Hizballah position essentially remains that the opposition must first be granted veto power, and only then can a discussion of an international tribunal proceed. Of course, once in power, Hizballah would be able to scuttle any tribunal.

Even so, the remote possibility that a compromise deal may yet emerge between Tehran and Riyadh has Syria concerned. At present, the key obstacle to achieving a deal involves the tribunal, an issue of primary if not existential import to the Syrian government. Should tensions increase -- and the February 23 discovery of nineteen sticks of dynamite in the Beirut neighborhood of Ashrafiyeh suggests they are rising -- many fear that Tehran will decide to prioritize a de-escalation in civil strife and an increase in Hizballah's political influence over Syrian concerns about a tribunal.

Syrian Concerns Allayed?

Ubiquitous reports on the Saudi-Iranian mediation efforts in the Lebanese and pan-Arab press have been a source of concern to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. On February 17, Asad traveled to Tehran for two days of meetings with Supreme Leader Ali Hossein Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. Although official press announcements do not provide much insight into what actually transpired at the meeting, the timing suggests that Asad was looking for reassurance that Tehran would protect Syrian interests.

Aside from routine public attestations of the bilateral relationship's strength, the only substantive development during the trip was the report (published in the Arabic electronic daily Elaph) of a Russian arms deal with Syria, to be financed by Iran. Then, a day after Asad returned to Syria, Iranian foreign minister Manusheir Mutaki told the Lebanese daily al-Nahar that "there are no differences of opinion between Tehran and Damascus" on Lebanon.

Can Saudi Arabia Sweeten the Deal?

It is not clear that the Saudis will be able to convince Iran or Hizballah to back down from demands for a blocking third or opposition to the tribunal. Unlike the Fatah-Hamas national unity government deal brokered by Riyadh earlier this month, \$1 billion in funding may not do the trick. Moreover, it seems implausible that Iran and Hizballah will be lured into a deal merely by the carrot of avoiding civil war. If money and fears of Sunni-Shiite violence are not enough to convince Iran to allow the tribunal to proceed, this round will likely fail, just as the Arab League mediation

did.

It is also worth considering whether Riyadh's interests coincide with those of Washington on this issue -- particularly in light of the Saudi role in mediating the Palestinian national unity government. While that accord was in Saudi (and Palestinian) interests, it undermined U.S. policy because the resulting national unity government legitimized Hamas and did not meet the Quartet requirements that it abandon violence and recognize Israel.

Conclusion

For the time being, it appears that Iran and Hizballah will not sacrifice Syria for a Lebanon deal. Ultimately, however, if a deal is to be reached and Lebanon is to avoid civil war, Hizballah will have to consent -- even if only temporarily -- to approve the tribunal in parliament. The framework of the deal, as currently structured, essentially forces Hizballah to choose between securing its local interests (more political power in Lebanon) and protecting its Syrian ally (by opposing the tribunal). While Hizballah and Iran would like both, it seems likely that, at the end of the day, they will choose to prioritize political power. And this is what troubles Damascus.

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