

Crisis in Lebanon:

Hizballah, Siniora, and Arab League Mediation

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Brief Analysis

Six weeks into the standoff between Hizballah and the government of democratically elected Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora, Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa returned to Lebanon today to continue his mediation efforts. Preliminary signs suggest that an Arab League-brokered deal may be gaining traction. On December 15, at the end of his last trip to Beirut, Moussa told the Lebanese daily al-Nahar that he hoped to conclude a deal “in the next two weeks.” Even if an agreement is eventually reached, however, in typical Lebanese fashion the “solution” will likely be a temporary compromise that puts off the most contentious issues now facing Lebanon.

Background

On November 11, six mostly Shiite pro-Syrian cabinet ministers resigned from Siniora’s government, protesting what Hizballah described as a lack of “power sharing.” What they were demanding, in fact, was at least one-third—plus one—of the total cabinet seats. This is known as the “blocking third,” and would allow Hizballah and its allies to stymie any significant future government initiatives. Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned that Siniora would either establish this national unity government or be brought down. For Siniora and the anti-Syrian “March 14” coalition, the blocking third was a red line. With veto power, Hizballah would scuttle the international tribunal on the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in order to insulate Damascus from being implicated in the crime. Veto power would also enable Hizballah to bring down the government, since the constitution says the government falls once more than a third of its ministers resign.

Ten days after the resignations, anti-Syrian minister of industry Pierre Gemayel was assassinated, raising the possibility that Hizballah and its allies would topple Siniora through attrition. In the aftermath of the Gemayel killing, cabinet ministers responded by moving into the seat of government, known as the Sarail, to protect themselves. Meanwhile, Hizballah took to the streets, bringing several hundred thousand protestors to Beirut for three demonstrations in December. Hundreds if not thousands of Hizballah supporters remain camped out near the Sarail, symbolically placing the government under siege.

Rising Tensions

On December 14, pro-Syrian Lebanese president Emile Lahoud told the Egyptian daily al-Ahram that “it’s not possible that we will allow under any circumstances a return to civil war.” Despite such protestations, many in Lebanon are concerned. Undercover Hizballah security agents roaming the crowds in downtown Beirut have, so far, managed to maintain discipline. Aware of the volatility of the situation, Nasrallah, during a speech broadcast at the massive December 8 demonstration, told the crowd to “avoid firing bullets in any direction. . . . [A]nyone who fires bullets after the end of the speech tonight is an infiltrator who wants to harm me.”

Still, tensions are rising in Beirut, in some part fueled by incendiary speeches made during the opposition rallies. Speeches delivered by Hizballah official Naim Qassem and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun at the December 1 demonstration were particularly provocative. Qassem, for example, led the crowd in chants of “death to America and Israel” and accused Siniora of collaborating with the United States. Making matters worse, on December 3, one protestor, a Shiite member of Amal, was killed by Lebanese security forces, giving the opposition their first “martyr” of the struggle. In this environment, chances for miscalculation and inadvertent clashes are heightened.

Even though Aoun has thrown his lot in with Hizballah, the opposition is widely perceived—both in Lebanon and elsewhere—as Shiite with Christian window dressing. The dynamic in Lebanon has therefore been reduced to Shiite versus Sunni, a shift from the historic Muslim-Christian division in Lebanese politics. During his speeches, Nasrallah has tried to portray the demonstrations to unseat Siniora as bipartisan affairs crossing sectarian and ethnic lines. But even with his great powers of persuasion, he has been unable to convince many that the opposition is broadly based.

Mediation Efforts

Maronite mediation. Responding to the demonstrations and the increasingly threatening tone of opposition speeches, on December 6, Maronite patriarch Boutros Sfeir issued a statement appealing for calm lest Lebanon face another deterioration à la 1975. The statement urged a return to dialogue and called for the implementation of UN resolutions, an end to incendiary rhetoric, and—most controversially—early elections for a new (Maronite) president to replace Emile Lahoud (indeed, member of parliament Boutros Harb subsequently revealed that the patriarch had sent a letter to Lahoud asking him to step down). Two days after the patriarch’s statement was released, Nasrallah described the initiative as “positive.” Since then, the patriarch has offered his fine offices as a mediator, meeting separately with a stream of factions ranging from Hizballah members and Aoun loyalists to representatives of the prime minister.

Arab League. Amr Moussa traveled to Beirut several times in recent weeks in his efforts to extricate Lebanon from the current crisis. Given the diametrically opposed positions of the government and the opposition, there has been little common ground on which to maneuver. The Arab League proposal currently on the table—which according to the Beirut Daily Star has received preliminary Hizballah approval—involves the establishment of a national unity government. The initiative is a work in progress, so details remain sketchy, but the general outlines of the agreement are for an enlarged cabinet of thirty ministers. These would include nineteen Siniora (or March 14) allies and ten oppositionists (Hizballah, Amal, and Aounist). In addition, one “neutral” cabinet member—to be determined—would not be allowed to resign. As part of this deal, the opposition would grant parliamentary approval to proceed with the international tribunal.

This configuration would not provide Hizballah with the blocking third it has requested, but it would also not provide the government with the two-thirds majority required to pass a decision by vote. At the same time, because the one “neutral” minister cannot resign, Hizballah would constitutionally be unable to precipitate the collapse of the government. What this scenario does not include is any stipulation that Aoun would be president. It would also almost certainly end his presidential chances. Concerned about the implications, Aoun is reportedly trying to mend

the fences with Washington damaged by his February 2006 alliance with Hizballah.

Conclusion

Arab League mediation may ease Lebanon back from the precipice of civil war, but the costs of compromise for Siniora and the March 14 forces will be high. The government will no longer control two-thirds of the cabinet, limiting its ability to push difficult political and economic initiatives forward. Likewise, given its alliance with Syria and Iran, Hizballah will almost assuredly try to find a way to stall or gut the international tribunal in the future.

Perhaps more troubling, the mediation does not raise the issue of Hizballah weapons, a critical obstacle in Lebanon's efforts toward strengthening the rule of law. The Israeli (2000) and Syrian (2005) withdrawals from Lebanon provided moments of opportunity to press for disarmament. Instead of contending with this controversial issue after Syria's departure, though, the March 14 forces tiptoed around the issue in the national dialogue and instead laid bets that an Israeli withdrawal from the Syrian-occupied Sheba Farms would place Hizballah in a corner and compel the militia's disarmament. But Israel did not withdraw, and, even if Israel had, it has become increasingly clear that Hizballah has no intention of disarming. Indeed, Hizballah political bureau head Mahmoud Komati told the Associated Press last week that the blocking third was critical so the majority would "not be able to impose its decision [on disarmament] on us." Meanwhile, the UN is reporting that Hizballah is actively rearming.

Given the high stakes involved in the Hizballah-Siniora standoff, most Lebanese are pinning their hopes on Amr Moussa's mediation efforts. But the Arab League initiative does not really address the underlying disagreements that sparked the current conflict. So, while Moussa's mediation may close this latest impasse, it is unfortunately only a matter of time before the next crisis in Lebanon.

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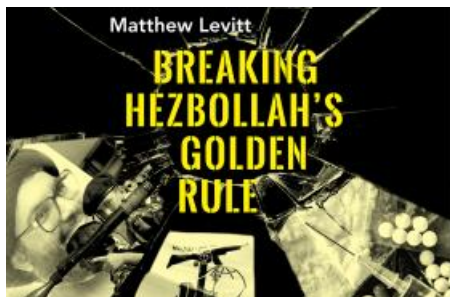
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