

Why a Multinational Force is Essential in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

As Lebanon plunges deeper into ruin and chaos as a result of Hizballah's "gang war" tactics against Israel's expanded military campaign to degrade the power of the Islamist party, Hizballah, Syria, and its allies in Lebanon are devising plans to subvert an international agreement on a multinational force to guard the Israel-Lebanon border. They are also preparing for a political comeback in a postconflict Lebanon by riding the wave of the victory Hizballah is sure to claim whatever the outcome—a supposed triumph that in reality will be at best a Pyrrhic victory.

Hizballah's Political Offensive

From the time the hostilities erupted between Hizballah and Israel on July 12, following a cross-border Hizballah attack on Israeli soldiers, Lebanon's political parties have attempted to sound out a reformed relationship between Hizballah and the state. Hizballah leaders brushed aside these concerns as untimely and divisive at a time when the country is under attack. But as the government of Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora tried to come up with a ceasefire plan, these concerns evolved into sharp disputes threatening the collapse of the government. At the heart of these concerns are interconnected questions about the nature and mission of the international force that would police the Lebanon-Israel border pursuant to a diplomatic resolution of the conflict and whether Hizballah would employ its "projected victory" in a postconflict Lebanon to change the political equation.

Sensing the charged political atmosphere, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah tried to allay the concerns of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition. In a calculated gesture he signed off on Siniora's plan to help bring about a ceasefire, which included provisions to extend the authority of the Lebanese state throughout the country and to strengthen and expand the role and mission of UN forces along the Lebanon-Israel border. In a televised speech, Nasrallah appealed to all Lebanese "not to be afraid from the victory of the resistance." This prompted Druze and March 14 coalition leader Walid Jumblat to ask "to whom Hizballah would give its victory," an implicit reference to pro-Syrian forces in Lebanon.

Though Hizballah had signed off on Siniora's plan, it expressed reservations about expanding the mission of the UN forces and it rejected out of hand an international force with power to intervene. Simultaneously, Syria also rejected the idea, depicting the prospective force as an occupation force. Syria's foreign minister, Walid Mouallem, predicted that Lebanon could become another Iraq, "attracting the al-Qaeda organization to fight the occupation forces

(international force) in the event they were deployed without a consensus from all Lebanese parties.” He also forewarned that the fighting could spread and involve Syria.

This coincided with a flurry of activities apparently designed by some Lebanese parties to undermine Siniora’s plan and thus potentially lead to the collapse of Siniora’s government. At a time when France has been trying to help set up an international force, which some countries have already expressed reservations to join, President Emile Lahoud lambasted the idea as a “new French Mandate over Lebanon.” He also implied that French and American troops could become targets by stating that “he does not want to see the 1982 bombings repeated,” a reference to suicide bombings against the French and American troops who were then part of a multinational force to pacify Beirut. At the same time, Aounist leader Michel Aoun called for an emergency government to replace Siniora’s government, and pro-Syrian leader Suleiman Franjeh announced that the March 14 coalition had been defeated and called upon them to recognize their defeat. He also supported Aoun’s call for an emergency government.

All these activities are related to Hizballah’s plan to capitalize on its Pyrrhic victory in postconflict Lebanon; Hizballah seeks to change the country’s political equation by strengthening its pro-Syrian allies and depriving the March 14 coalition of the political capital it needs to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559. Not surprisingly, Muoallem’s statements show that Syria has never given up on Lebanon, nor it has accepted Resolution 1559, which calls for Syria’s complete withdrawal from Lebanon and Hizballah’s disarmament. In fact, one cannot rule out a plan by Iran, Syria, and Hizballah to provoke this conflict to help each party achieve its strategic objectives. The Syrian regime has historically relied on its strident nationalist discourse and regional confrontation with Israel to buttress its rule at home and silence its opposition. With its regional role reduced to insignificance following the loss of Iraq as a strategic partner and its humiliating evacuation from Lebanon, Damascus has been trying to reclaim its regional role, especially in Lebanon. In fact, prior to the eruption of hostilities on July 12, a series of subversive activities, bearing the fingerprints of Syrian intelligence, almost plunged Lebanon into chaos.

The Cedar Revolution in Jeopardy

Notwithstanding that the UN accused Syria of smuggling weapons into Lebanon, “unidentified” rockets were launched in early 2006 into Israel. All fingers pointed to the pro-Syrian Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which has a presence in south Lebanon. Moreover, in January 2006, members of PFLP-GC shot two Lebanese municipal workers outside the Palestinian base in Naameh. In May, the pro-Syrian Fatah-Intifada attacked a Lebanese patrol unit in the area of Eita al-Fakhar-Yanta near the Syrian border. All of this coincided with heated debate in Lebanon about disarming Hizballah and Palestinians outside of their refugee camps. Meanwhile, Hizballah extended its initial assertion that it would keep its arms until all Lebanese territories are liberated from Israel’s occupation to an insistence on keeping its arms to defend Lebanon’s sovereignty against Israeli aggression.

Taking all this under consideration, it becomes clear that Syria has been trying to instigate a crisis to revive its regional role. However, all these plans and activities could hardly be achieved with an international force with the power to intervene, strengthening the political will of the March 14 coalition to disarm Hizballah.

Therefore, it is safe to argue that Hizballah, which has emerged as a champion in the Muslim world, will have little incentive to disarm or to incorporate its armed wing into the Lebanese army if a ceasefire is reached without an international force strong enough to keep the peace. In fact, Hizballah may ride the wave of its Pyrrhic victory not only to impose its will on Lebanon and cement the Iran-Syria-Lebanon axis but also to reverse the progress of democracy in the region in the interest of safeguarding the Syrian and Iranian regimes. Similarly, by reclaiming its role in Lebanon, Damascus and its pro-Syrian allies would have returned Lebanon to Syria’s “trusteeship” and put the final nail in the coffin of the Cedar Revolution, which many Lebanese celebrated as a democratic rebirth for Lebanon.

Commenting on Hezbollah's role in the ongoing developments in Lebanon, Jumblat said, "We will be a weak state next to a very strong militia. Our government will be like the government of Abu Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] next to Hamas—or maybe worse, like the government of [Nouri al-] Maliki in Iraq."

As U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice speaks of a "new Middle East," the reactionary forces there are planning their own dark vision of the region's future. This is why an international force strong and committed enough to deny Hezbollah the freedom to operate militarily and to prevent rearmament from Syria or Iran is essential to protect the peace for both Israelis and Lebanese.

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