

One Year after the Cedar Revolution: The Potential for Sunni-Shiite Conflict in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Acting Lebanese interior minister Ahmad Fatfat arrived in Washington June 20 for his first official visit in his new capacity. The U.S. trip comes one month after a radical Sunni Islamist organization was legalized in Lebanon, and just weeks after thousands of Shiite Hizballah supporters rioted in Beirut after the broadcast on LBC television of a comedy skit satirizing Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah. These developments highlight growing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon. Unchecked, this dynamic could lead to a resumption of the type of conflict that has long plagued Lebanon and threaten the gains of the Cedar Revolution.

Rise of Fatfat

Fatfat, a Sunni Muslim member of Saad Hariri's Future Party and a dual citizen of Lebanon and Belgium, was elected to parliament in 2000 as representative from Lebanon's northern District 1, an area encompassing Akkar, Besharre, and Danniyeh. He was the leading recipient of votes in the constituency. In 2005, Fatfat was appointed minister of youth and sports in the government of Fouad Siniora.

In February, Hasan Sabaa, then minister of interior, authorized demonstrations against the publication of Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Given the groups participating in the demonstrations—Jaysh Muhammad, Jund al-Islam, Palestinians from the Ein al-Hilweh camp, and Hizb ut-Tahrir—violence had been widely anticipated. Nevertheless, Sabaa argued, "The organizers vowed that the demonstrations would have a civilized and peaceful aspect." In the resulting melee, the Danish consulate building was burned and churches in the largely Christian neighborhood of Ashrafiyyeh were attacked. Sabaa subsequently resigned. While Siniora never formally accepted Sabaa's resignation, he quickly appointed Fatfat acting interior minister. Fatfat's official appointment to the cabinet is said to be imminent.

Fatfat's most significant decision to date came in May, when he granted a political-party license to the pro-caliphate Sunni Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party). While the U.S. Department of State does not list Hizb ut-Tahrir as a designated foreign terrorist organization, the group's stated aim is to "lead the ummah [Islamic community] into a struggle with kufr [infidels], its systems and its thoughts so that Islam encapsulates the world."

Sunni Radicalism in Lebanon

The legalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir is part of a trend toward increased Sunni radicalism in Lebanon. The group espouses a vision of an Islamic world unified under one political leader, a caliph. Until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, its rulers claimed the title of caliph, though the claim had become symbolic. Hizb ut-Tahrir proselytizes with Wahhabi literature and espouses largely anti-Shiite themes (which is not surprising, as historically, Shiites did not recognize the caliph's legitimacy). Because its stated objective is so radical, the party is outlawed in nearly every state in the Middle East, and now exists in the region primarily as a secret organization of linked cells. Today, members of the group languish in prisons throughout the region.

Lebanon's legalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir is remarkable, but it did not come as a surprise. Indeed, according to the Lebanese daily *An Nahar*, the organization had been lobbying political leaders and government officials for some time, and had applied for legal status in August 2005. On May 11, 2006, Fatfat issued an order legalizing eleven parties as legitimate "political organizations," including the Lebanese Peace Party, Nature Party, Reform Party, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Responding to queries about the wisdom of this move, Fatfat's press office issued a statement saying, "It's not possible for freedom and democracy to be partial or discretionary." At a press conference on May 19 attended by representatives of Hizballah and Jamiya Islamiya, the Hizb ut-Tahrir spokesman called for "the implementation of the system of just Islam in the country [Lebanon], uniting the entire community [as] a caliphate country."

Another troubling sign of Sunni Islamist gains in Lebanon recently reported by the *Washington Post* is the emergence of al-Qaeda in northern Lebanon, a trend that started under the Syrian occupation and has accelerated since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Hizballah Flexes Its Muscle

On June 2, Beirut was rocked by riots organized by Hizballah protesting the broadcast of a sketch on an LBC television program lampooning the Shiite militia's position on disarmament, implying that Hizballah would make any excuse to avoid laying down its weapons. Hizballah supporters poured into the streets of Beirut, burning tires and shutting down the airport road. The show's producer apologized, but the demonstrations did not end until Nasrallah himself appeared on Hizballah's own al-Manar network and appealed for calm.

Last week, top leaders of Lebanon's political establishment completed the eighth round of the National Dialogue with a session focusing on the defense of Lebanon. In addition to discussing a "code of honor"—a document focused on promoting public civility and discourse following the June 2 Hizballah demonstrations—the group conferred about a "national defense strategy," a codeword for dealing with the disposition of Hizballah weapons. Little progress was made on the issue, largely because Hizballah is no hurry to give up its weapons. Not only do the weapons support the party's "resistance" credentials, the Shiite party also likely sees its arms as an insurance policy.

Hizballah has reason to want insurance. During the March meeting of the National Dialogue, for example, conferees reached consensus to disarm Palestinian weapons outside of the refugee camps. Under pressure, Sunni Palestinians agreed to move their weapons inside the camps, maintaining their military capabilities. For Shiites, the entrenchment of al-Qaeda in Lebanon poses a second, more serious concern. Before his death, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi called for the disarmament of Hizballah, describing the organization as a "shield protecting the Zionist enemy against the strikes of the mujahedin in Lebanon." Distrust toward Shiites was emblematic of Zarqawi during his lifetime, and is a prevalent sentiment among al-Qaeda. Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged the danger of this "Zarqawi phenomenon" during interviews in February and June 2006. The presence of anti-Shiite al-Qaeda forces will only stiffen Hizballah's resolve to retain its weapons, which it sees as essential to defending the Shiite community.

Conclusion

The April 19, 2006, UN report on the progress of implementing Security Council Resolution 1559 commended Lebanon's initial steps on Palestinian weapons as "a first step . . . toward full disarmament," but it reiterated that "carrying of arms outside the official armed forces [i.e., by Hizballah] is impossible to reconcile with the participation in power and in government in a democracy." Given recent developments in Lebanon and a lack of consensus within the National Dialogue, the next Resolution 1559 status update in October will likely reach no new conclusions.

Hizballah's decision regarding disarmament will not just be based on "resistance" and the status of Shebaa Farms; it will also be based on the environment in Lebanon. With Hizb ut-Tahrir newly sanctioned by the government, al-Qaeda setting up shop in northern Lebanon, and Palestinians retaining their military capabilities, prospects for Hizballah disarmament become even slimmer. More troubling, though, is that the convergence of these developments suggests the potential for open Sunni-Shiite tension. For Lebanon, a state with a rich and bloody history of religious and ethnic conflict, this trend should be cause for concern.

It should likewise be cause for concern in Washington. To some degree, of course, the trend in Lebanon reflects wider regional developments. But Washington can work to reverse this trend by pressing harder in the UN and in its representations with Lebanon's leaders to fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and disarm all militias in Lebanon. Ahmed Fatfat's visit to Washington today would be a good time to start.

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