

# Lebanese National Dialogue:

## Avoiding the Hard Questions?

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Mar 24, 2006

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On March 22, leaders from across the Lebanese political spectrum completed another round of the ongoing National Dialogue. The talks, which started earlier this month, have touched on some of the more salient topics in Lebanese politics. Conspicuously absent from the agenda, however, has been a discussion of disarming militias, such as Hizballah, a key element of UN Security Council Resolution 1559. The indefinite postponement of this critical issue will make it difficult for the United States to continue to actively support its democratic allies in post-Syria Lebanon.

### National Dialogue Consensus

The 128 parliamentarians elected in May and June 2005 broke down into three rough blocs: (1) the Future Movement, an amalgam of Sunni, Druze, and some Christians led by Saad Hariri (the son of assassinated former prime minister Rafiq Hariri) and Walid Jumblatt, took 72 seats; (2) the Shiite Amal-Hizballah bloc, led by Nabi Beri and Hassan Nasrallah, secured 35 seats; and (3) the Free Patriotic Movement, an overwhelmingly Christian bloc led by Gen. Michel Aoun, took 21 seats. Nearly one year after elections, Hariri's anti-Syria bloc is pitted against the combined Aoun and Shiite blocs. This political alignment led to an impasse on several key issues, necessitating these talks.

Participants in the National Dialogue include luminaries of Lebanese politics: Hariri, Jumblatt, Nasrallah, Aoun, and Beri, as well as current Lebanese prime minister Fuad Siniora, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and former president Amin Gemayel. The group ostensibly reached consensus on three issues.

Syria. Participants agreed on the need to normalize bilateral relations with Syria, including the unprecedented step of establishing Syrian and Lebanese embassies in Beirut and Damascus, respectively. Relations with Syria are complicated by the ongoing investigation into the murder of Rafiq Hariri -- and several other prominent anti-Syrian Lebanese -- in which the Syrian government is a leading suspect.

Palestinians. The group agreed to collect Palestinian weapons outside of refugee camps within six months. The acknowledgement that there are in fact weapons outside the camps is tacit recognition of the limited capabilities of

the Lebanese Armed Forces to operate with authority throughout Lebanon. In any event, the agreed policy will have little practical effect, as Palestinian groups -- like Fatah -- have already indicated they will simply move their weapons inside the camps.

Replacing President Emile Lahoud. On what is euphemistically called the "regime crisis" -- the removal of Syrian holdover Lahoud -- the group agreed to discuss a replacement candidate. While Michel Aoun remains the most popular Christian politician in Lebanon, the majority Hariri bloc considers Aoun to be a sectarian jingoist, and has made it clear it will not consent to an Aoun presidency. The Hariri bloc has instead chosen its own slate of acceptable Christian candidates. Aoun remains committed to becoming President, and at seventy-one years old, this is likely his last chance. Should Aoun not give way, the Hariri bloc lacks the two-thirds majority required to remove Lahoud from the presidency. Continued Syrian meddling further complicates the matter. Indeed, it is widely believed that Hizballah and Amal (among others) will not approve an alternative candidate without first receiving the blessing of Damascus. As such, Lahoud's position appears secure for the time being.

#### More Difficult Questions

Without exception, participants in the National Dialogue have avoided discussion of Resolution 1559, and in particular the question of disarming militias. The concern has been that Hizballah would bolt from the talks. Instead, the focus has been on Resolution 1559's call for the "extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory," a formulation widely interpreted in Lebanon as pointing to Shebaa Farms.

In June 2000, UN secretary general Kofi Annan certified Israel's complete withdrawal from occupied Lebanese territory as required by Security Council Resolution 425. Annan's position about Shebaa Farms, which he reiterated in October 2005, is, "The Shebaa farms area claimed by Lebanon could . . . not be considered Lebanese territory." At the same time, Annan left open the possibility of bilateral negotiations between Syria and Lebanon about where exactly is the border -- recognizing that the issue is between those two countries, and does not involve Israel.

Lebanese officials continue to claim that Shebaa is Lebanese territory, providing documents and citing a May 2000 statement from Syria's then-foreign minister Farouq Sharaa, who opined that one solution would be for Shebaa to be "returned to Lebanon." Former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad and his son and successor Bashar have to date declined to clarify the Syrian position for the UN, but according to Agence France-Presse, in October 2000 Bashar told Iran's foreign minister, "The Shebaa Farms are Lebanese land occupied by Israel."

Senior Christian and Sunni participants in the National Dialogue maintain that Syrian acquiescence on ceding Shebaa Farms would set in motion a process eventually leading to the disarmament of Hizballah. The logic is as follows: should Syria cede Shebaa and the territory become "Lebanese," it will immediately be incumbent on Israel to withdraw. After an Israel withdrawal, so the argument goes, Hizballah will lose its *raison d'etre* as a "resistance" organization, disarm, and become a political party.

Little is known about Hizballah's position on disarmament -- whether the decision would eventually be made by Hizballah alone or with the input of its patrons Iran and Syria. Nasrallah did sign a joint paper with Aoun on February 6, 2006, stipulating that Hizballah disarmament be discussed "within the framework of a national dialogue" and contingent on the liberation of Shebaa and the release of Hizballah prisoners from Israeli jails. Yet in recent years, Nasrallah has cited other prerequisites for disarming. It seems that whenever it appeared an earlier set of conditions might be realized, Nasrallah raised the bar, adding even more requirements. Hariri and Aoun are betting that at the end of the day, Hizballah will be more a Lebanese organization than a group beholden to Syria and Iran. Given the track record, this confidence in Hizballah is misplaced.

#### U.S. Equities

After the April 2005 Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon became a showcase of sorts for the U.S. freedom agenda in the

region, and accordingly, the U.S. government is demonstrating financial support. In fiscal year 2006, the United States is slated to provide Beirut \$35 million via Economic Support Funds, \$700,000 in international military education and training (IMET), and, for the first time since 1972, \$1 million in foreign military financing (FMF). Additionally, the State Department provides funding for democratic and social development in Lebanon via the Middle East Partnership Program. There are indications that some of these amounts, particularly military-related fields, could be targeted for substantial increases: U.S. Central Command recently completed a comprehensive assessment of the Lebanese Armed Forces' capabilities. Based on the findings, the FMF program could see a substantial increase in future years.

## Conclusion

The Lebanese inclination to link Hizballah disarmament to a resolution of Shebaa Farms holds implementation of Resolution 1559 hostage to a lengthy -- if not interminable -- process. If left to fester, the issue of Hizballah weapons could become an irritant in an otherwise promising U.S.-Lebanese relationship. Indeed, it will become increasingly difficult in Lebanon's post-Syria and post-Israel era for the United States to provide assistance if Lebanon remains sanctuary to an armed Hizballah militia and longtime member of the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations.

Within the U.S. government, there had been a grudging tolerance of Hizballah's armed presence in Lebanon during the years of Syrian occupation. With Syrian troops now gone, however, the clock is ticking. There are already hints that Capitol Hill might withhold funding for Lebanon in the absence of progress on Resolution 1559. Should Lebanon continue to punt on implementation of Resolution 1559, more could be at stake than just U.S. financial and political support for Lebanon. In the long run, Lebanon could find itself designated a state sponsor of terror.

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Policy #1089

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