

Lebanon in Political Crisis: Three Months After the War

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On November 20, 2006, David Schenker and Nohad el-Machnouk addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Schenker is a senior fellow at the Institute specializing in Arab politics and former Levant country director at the Pentagon. He had just returned from Lebanon prior to the forum. Mr. el-Machnouk served as a senior advisor for political affairs to the late Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri throughout the 1990s and has played a leading role in the anti-Syrian "March 14 coalition." He is currently a columnist for al-Safir. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

DAVID SCHENKER

Several interesting and potentially explosive developments have unfolded in Lebanon recently. Hizballah and Amal ministers, and one minister allied with Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, left the cabinet. In their absence, the remaining anti-Syrian ministers approved a draft agreement to create an international tribunal on the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Hizballah is threatening to go to the streets to pressure the government to resign. This suggests that Syria has committed to end the tribunal process because it fears what the UN might discover. Given the attention to detail and financial resources devoted to the UN investigation, led by Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, there is a sense that it will ultimately implicate the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad.

Lebanon always seems to be on the verge of crisis, but the current situation is beyond the range of even Lebanese normality. What we are witnessing is a struggle for the future of Lebanon, and, to some extent, a struggle to preserve the Asad regime in Syria. Hizballah might take to the streets, and, if the demonstrations become violent, this could lead to a broader Sunni-Shiite confrontation. But violent confrontations risk delegitimizing Hizballah and canceling the political gains of its summer war with Israel, especially in the eyes of Sunni Arabs across the Middle East. Because of this, Hizballah may try to steer away from violence, but it may not be able to control demonstrations once they start.

Several Lebanese ministers and members of parliament expressed concern about the results of the U.S. midterm elections. One said they were a "catastrophe" and that the United States was poised to abandon Lebanon; he specifically cited the Iraq Study Group's anticipated call to engage Syria. Specifically, Lebanese leaders are concerned that Hizballah will exploit possible U.S. efforts to engage Damascus in order to undermine the March 14 movement and the government of Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora.

For their part, the March 14 forces understand that they cannot make any concessions that would allow Hizballah to acquire more cabinet seats and a "blocking third" in parliament, as Syria had in the past. Nor can they permit Hizballah to force a compromise that would eviscerate the Hariri tribunal. Shiite cabinet ministers left once before, in December 2005, to protest cabinet discussions on the tribunal, but this time the stakes are higher, as the tribunal could really hurt Syria. Siniora has not accepted the current Shiite cabinet ministers' resignation, and their status is in limbo. They are unlikely to return under current political circumstances, however, and Hizballah continues to threaten that it will bring down the government. Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah says he wants "clean government" in Lebanon. This is part of the group's new domestic focus, which he announced during his "divine victory" speech on September 22.

Hizballah is also working to undermine the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in the south. Locals appear to be pleased with the UNIFIL presence because it fuels the economy. However, Hizballah has evidently used misinformation and other tactics in an attempt to delegitimize and eventually oust the force. For example, after Spanish UNIFIL troops stopped to ask a woman for directions near Khyam, rumors spread that she was either accosted and raped or that the troops had entered her house. Protests soon followed, egged on by Hizballah. Fortunately, the woman in question defused the rumors, but Hizballah may try to exploit similar incidents.

What if the government fails? If new elections are held, Hizballah would again ally with Maronite leader Gen. Michel Aoun and possibly gain additional seats. In any case, the current situation is a standoff in which no side is willing to compromise, and, given heightened tensions, it is reasonable to assume that conditions will degenerate into violence. It is also likely that Syria will renew its campaign of assassination to scuttle the Hariri tribunal.

On the positive side, the March 14 forces have finally made a stand. Regrettably, it may be too late in the game.

NOHAD EL-MACHNOUK

Over the past twenty months, Lebanon has witnessed four strategic political events that put the country of only four million citizens near the top of the international agenda. The first event was the assassination of former prime minister Hariri; the second was the withdrawal of Syrian troops and intelligence services from Lebanon; the third was the Israel-Hizballah war this past summer, which lasted thirty days but only achieved marginal strategic gains for Israel; and the fourth is the current struggle to create an international tribunal to prosecute those involved in the Hariri assassination.

Hariri's killing was not merely an act of revenge. It would be simplistic to assume that he was assassinated simply because of his wish to see Lebanon free from Syrian tutelage. In fact, he was also an opponent of Iran's strategic designs in the region. This is not to say that Iranian intelligence gave orders to assassinate him, but Tehran may have inspired the act. Hariri was a man of great dreams, a leader whose desire for an influential role in the Middle East and beyond made him a major player in regional politics, and this ambition may have sowed the seeds of his assassination.

Moreover, it was clear from day one that the political leadership of the Shiite community opposed the alliance that grew out of March 14. Even before the alliance of the Cedar Revolution, Hizballah and its allies took up the defense of the Syrian regime. What is remarkably new in Assad's political discourse is his public appraisal of Iran's role in the region as a supporter of Arab rights. This was never clearer than when he called the Arab stance in the summer war that of "half men." Lebanese Shiite cabinet ministers decided to withdraw because Hizballah's relationship with the Syrian regime does not allow the group to sit in any cabinet that approves an international tribunal that may implicate Damascus.

The Iranians were quite successful in filling the void that the Syrian withdrawal left in Lebanon. Decisions concerning war and peace and the upcoming veto power were taken over by Hizballah. This is not surprising, since the Iranians have been building their political capitol in Lebanon for more than twenty-five years. Although it is true that U.S. policy has partly succeeded in limiting the scope of Hizballah's armed activities, Washington has failed to answer Hizballah's claim that it serves to secure the south. Israel has not been behaving constructively in this matter either, and has demonstrated little willingness to cede the Shebaa Farms to the UN or end its daily air operations in violation of Lebanese airspace. This behavior undermines Lebanon's sovereignty and endangers the security and stability of the Siniora government.

In any case, it is impossible to separate Syria's regional status and political attitudes from Iranian imperial designs for the region unless Damascus is pried from Iran's orbit, whether through negotiations or the use of force. If neither tactic is adopted, the struggle over Lebanon is set to last many painful years.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Etan Schwartz.