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## Lebanon's Future at a Crossroads

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Following a destructive war in July 2006 and tumultuous two years of political upheaval, Lebanon's future is back in the throes between strongly entrenched opposing political forces abetted by regional and international powers. Just like in the seventies, Lebanon's role as proxy battleground for outside powers is in a tug of war between various political actors that define the new political scene in the country. On the one hand, the US and Saudi-backed March 14 coalition is fighting to survive a stranglehold on its government by the Hezbollah-led opposition which includes a major Christian faction and is backed by Syria and Iran. The country finds itself in a state of quasi-paralysis as a result of the drawn-out political standoff that has pitted the opposition against the government in a bid to overthrow the latter and re-draw Lebanon's political map. But the internal competition within the March 14 coalition will sooner or later stand in the way of future compromise, just as denouncing the Taef agreement might be the only implicit common ground that is keeping General Aoun's group and Hezbollah's alliance together.

### Overview

Lebanon's recent political woes started with the issuance of UNSCR 1559 in October 2004 and intensified after the violent assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a massive car bomb in downtown Beirut in February 2005. Since then, the accelerated events saw the pullout of all Syrian troops from Lebanon, the holding of legislative elections which brought to power the then-opposition

coalition formed on March 14, 2005 and the issuance of subsequent UNSCR resolutions calling for the establishment of an international investigative commission and a tribunal with international character to pursue the assassins of Hariri. Meanwhile, Lebanon witnessed a series of car bombs and assassinations that targeted the best and brightest of the country's intelligentsia including the incumbent ministers of defense and industry and prominent journalists.

The March 14 coalition formed a government excluding the major Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and with an official statement acknowledging Lebanon's right to resist occupation and free its prisoners in Israeli jails. Both the exclusion of the FPM and the controversial support to the resistance are seen retrospectively, as costly mistakes. One of the new government's major priorities is to support the international investigation into the murder of Hariri and to speed up the establishment of the tribunal for that purpose. The government proceeded with the implementation of its agenda, benefiting from unprecedented international backing led by the US and France, and seeking to address controversial and potentially explosive issues such as the re-drawing of borders with Syria, exchange of diplomatic relations with Damascus, the international tribunal and the future of Hezbollah's weapons among others.

Leading up to July 2006, the major political actors were engaged in a series of stalled dialogue sessions with thorny and polarizing agenda items, only to be caught by surprise when on the 12<sup>th</sup> of that month Hezbollah launched a cross-border operation that triggered a 33-day Israeli war against Lebanon resulting in widespread havoc and mayhem.

### **Recent Political Events**

The summer war ended with the passing of UNSCR 1701 which dictated among others, the restoration of Lebanese military sovereignty along the borders with Israel and beefing up the UN Peacekeeping forces there. Nine months following the passing of the UN Resolution the military movements and activities of Hezbollah seem to have been curtailed significantly. In fact, the Party has provided a major concession, part of its *raison d'être*, by vacating important observation and monitoring posts along the borders. It is the manning of such posts for

years that had allowed Hezbollah the ability to plan and time the cross-border attack of July 12. Giving up these positions inevitably means that the Party of God can no longer gather the necessary intelligence and launch significant attacks against Israel – at least for the time being. It would be a mistake, however, to consider Hezbollah's military role anywhere close to being finished. The Party is still re-arming as its secretary-general has declared and as evidenced by the impounding in March of weapons shipment destined towards Hezbollah's warehouses.

With the southern front *de facto* quieting down, though no formal ceasefire has been agreed, Hezbollah has turned its attention towards internal politics which the Party sees it necessary to control in order to assuage the loss of the military maneuverability at the borders. In fact, the Party of God begrudgingly agreed to the stipulations of UNSCR 1701 under immense pressure and after it made sure that the resolution did not pass under the UN's Chapter VII which would have authorized the use of force. Since the Resolution stipulates the surrendering of the Party's weapons as part of its full implementation, sooner or later this issue will have to make its way to the negotiation table. Hezbollah's only way of delaying this process and stalling it indefinitely is by increasing its influence on state institutions the most difficult of which is the council of ministers. Against this backdrop, the opposition's intransigent demands and subsequent escalatory steps beginning last fall can be interpreted.

Feeling that it had won the military confrontations with Israel, an emboldened Hezbollah is suspected of seeking a constitutional and legitimate takeover of the government. Among its closest allies, Hezbollah counts President Emile Lahoud, one of Syria's staunchest allies in the country in addition to parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a leading member of the

opposition. Both Lahoud and Berri have managed to stall government decision by either refusing to sign decrees or delaying indefinitely parliamentary sessions. Hezbollah also exerts significant influence over one of Lebanon's top security agencies, the *Sûreté Générale*, which oversees among others the borders with Syria. Hezbollah's insistence on the blocking minority vote in the council of ministers will complete the circle of acquiring a veto power over future decision making and hence sideline any future discussion of its weapons. With this scenario in mind, Hezbollah would circumvent any attempt by its foes to whittle down its military maneuverability, interrupt its weapons shipment or simply negotiate freely with the international community.

In addition to protecting the fate of its weapons and hence its *raison d'être*, Hezbollah's other goal for wanting to control the government is the frustration of the process of the establishment of the tribunal to try the assassins of the late Rafik Hariri. The Party of God fears the tribunal would establish an international precedent that might one day be replicated to try its leadership for its role in the early eighties (particularly for the bombings of the US and French barracks of the then Multinational Force in October 1982 for which Hezbollah claimed responsibility). The tribunal would also significantly weaken Hezbollah's major ally – the Syrian regime – its only conduit of military and material support from Iran. The Syrian leadership is the only suspect so far in the killing of Hariri. Ever since the UNIFIL forces have acquired control of the sea and airport entry points, Syria has become Hezbollah's only lifeline. If the international investigation leads to sanctions against Syria, the Party of God will be hard-pressed for alternative gateways for the passage of weaponry and other material sent by Iran.

Currently, major obstacles stand in the way of Hezbollah's completion of its plans to control the government. Obviously, the Party of God and its coalition of opposition forces miscalculated when they thought that the government would crumble in the first weeks of the sit-ins that were staged in downtown Beirut since December 1. By the end of April, the sit-ins which were preceded by the resignation of six opposition ministers, will have completed five months with no apparent signs that the government's collapse is imminent. The latter, though under an unprecedented siege, has stood fast in the face of the opposition's pressure and has managed to clinch a major achievement in the success of the Paris III Donor Conference. With unprecedented backing by the international community and heavyweight Arab states, the Siniora government is pursuing business as usual in an effort to wear down the opposition's campaign to topple it.

Amidst the escalatory rhetoric, the violent clashes that took place in Beirut in January over two separate days displayed an ominous sectarian character and provided a close caption of the new fault lines if another civil war were to erupt. The exchange of violence has proven to the opposition the prohibitive cost of attempting to change the balance of power by force. Lebanon's history has always been predicated on the age-old axiom of "No Victor, No Vanquished". The attempts last January to do away with this wisdom and impose the opposition's political changes drew new redlines in the political battlefield with the government coalition. The high cost of the two bloody days which were mainly led by Sunni and Shiite demonstrators, has forced the opposition to recalculate and draw the conclusion that street violence is out of the question, at least for now, as a tool for political change. Though the specter of a civil war still hovers over Lebanon as sectarian tensions remain alarmingly high, the opposition will

have to make do for now with the nonviolent sit-ins in the city center.

The festering stalemate that resulted from the current crisis has alienated the government from the opposition to the point that it will be difficult to restore relations to normalcy anytime soon. Benefiting from a rare moment of international and regional backing, the Siniora government is pushing for the quick establishment of the international tribunal having come to the realization that the opposition will not allow it through regular constitutional channels. If the government's plans for the tribunal go unhindered, it will be able to strip the opposition of one its main negotiating cards and potential pressure points hence concentrating its forces to wage equally decisive political battles such as the election of a new president in the fall.

### **Lebanon's Political Actors**

The July 2006 war resulted in a crystallization of positions between the various poles of the new balance of power in Lebanon that was formed after the Hariri assassination. On the one hand, the coalition of March 14 represents a constellation of key politicians some of whom were until not long ago erstwhile enemies – such as the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and the Maronite head of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea – and the Lebanese Sunnis who had managed until then to stay off the confrontational course of politics. The traditionally diffident Sunni community led by the late Hariri and now by his son, Saad, forms the backbone of the March 14 coalition and is now leading the showdown against the opposition. The coalition also includes a host of Maronite political figures and presidential hopefuls who have built an anti-Syria reputation in recent years and is supported by the historically powerful Maronite Patriarchate. The coalition swept through the legislative

elections of 2005 and secured a parliamentary majority of 71 MPs out of 128 and which now stands at 69 parliamentarians following the assassination in November 2006 of MP and incumbent minister Pierre Gemayel, and of Walid Eido in early June 2007.

Backed by the US and the international community at large, and benefiting from unprecedented Arab support from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, the government coalition is engaged in a fateful political crisis the results of which will either seal its fate or enhance its control of Lebanese politics. Like many similar coalitions, March 14 displays a delicate balance between the dovish leadership of the young Hariri and with him Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and the hawkish political swashbuckling of Jumblatt and Geagea. The wily Jumblatt, a longtime master of self-preservation, leads the coalition's uncompromising anti-Syria line and defines its negotiating agenda insofar as the possibilities of compromise and negotiation tactics. His keen political sense and unparalleled ability at successfully reading changes in international and regional politics have rendered him the most counted upon leader of the coalition. The equally hardnosed Geagea whose efforts to regain the confidence of Christian public opinion continue ever since his political comeback two years ago, is no less inflexible when it comes to dealing with the pro-Syria opposition and particularly with his chief rival there, Michel Aoun. Geagea and Aoun have a historical score to settle in their battle to monopolize Christian leadership going back to 1988 when they both led inconclusively the last violent chapter of the civil war.

While the government coalition's demands are united in the insistence on the enactment of the international tribunal, the disarmament of Hezbollah and the de-entanglement of the current political crisis, priorities differ within the coalition. The

tribunal is unquestionably the strongest common ground between the coalition's leaders not the least because four of its members have been targets of assassinations since 2004. The tribunal is not only perceived as the main vehicle for enacting justice in a land where political violence goes unpunished, but it is also the only tool that the coalition predisposes of to keep the Syrian regime at bay and prevent its comeback to Lebanon. The tribunal would also deprive the opposition from a much-needed ally in Damascus and hence curtail its influence on politics in the country – not to mention that it has become an Arab and an international, seemingly irreversible demand. Following the war in summer 2006, the hardliners in the government coalition have become more vocal in their criticism of Hezbollah and the call for its disarmament, while moderates in the coalition see the commitment to the implementation of UNSCR 1701 a satisfactory progress on that front.

More distinct are the government coalition's differences on the acceptability of a political compromise that would acknowledge the opposition's political weight and allow Hezbollah and the FPM a concrete win by forming a new government that would include representatives of the latter. Such an expansion would have to come at the expense of the Lebanese Forces by ceding cabinet posts to the Aounists. It would also mean a much stronger opposition representation in government that would counterbalance and at times challenge the majority leadership of March 14. This is the case even if the opposition does not acquire the blocking minority vote that it is demanding.

There remains the internal competition between the various leaders of March 14 whose personal agendas will sooner or later stand in the way of future compromise. Geagea's political quest will remain to contain the rising star of Michel Aoun by chipping away at his chances to win the

presidency. Geagea will rely on his partners in March 14 as well as the support of the Maronite Patriarch to do so. Jumblatt whose interest is to guarantee a sustainable share in any potential compromise would need to keep the number of seats he controls in government. Hariri and the Sunni community will resist any attempt to change the post-Taef arrangement of power sharing which transformed the Sunni leadership into a powerful and decisive political force in the country. All of this will mean for Hariri that he will continue to walk a political tightrope between keeping his coalition together by herding the cats of March 14 and negotiating with the opposition.

### **Lebanon's Predicament**

In many ways, Lebanon's political crisis is a *déjà vu*. The woes of consociational democracy have always plagued the Lebanese state system and perpetuated its structural weaknesses which are reflected in the fragility of state institutions and their inability to perform. Lebanon's required political consensus has always been the subject of too much pressure by outsiders and a belief by the various local communities in the country that they can renegotiate a bigger share in the system. Hezbollah's rise to prominence can be seen as a natural development of the revival of the political Shiism in the region. It does not come, however, without justified demands for a renegotiated power sharing agreement. Following the speech of Hezbollah's Secretary General on April 8 in which he clearly stated that the Shiites of Lebanon deserve "more than this", it is likely that sooner or later the Party will call for drastic reforms of the Taef system of power sharing.

Hezbollah and its major ally in the opposition, Michel Aoun have never declared their commitment to the Taef agreement. Aoun had denounced the

agreement in the past and made every possible effort to prevent its signature, a stance for which he spent fifteen years in exile. Denouncing Taef might be the only implicit common ground that is keeping Aoun's FPM and Hezbollah's alliance together. The former's political program is predicated on a secular state system, market economy and a center-right view of Lebanese politics all of which are diametrically opposed to Hezbollah's ideology. Hence FPM and Hezbollah's alliance is one of convenience that is helping the latter to dilute its confessional coloring and promising the former the necessary Shiite vote in his stronghold of south Mount Lebanon.

Lebanon today is facing its most serious political crisis since the end of the civil war in 1990. As in many previous crises, however, this one will either end up in a political compromise or degenerate into mass violence – at the moment the latter option seems remote. In 1958, Lebanon experienced a brief civil war between Nasserite and anti Nasserite camps which pitted Sunnis against Maronites. The 1975-1990 civil war was largely fought between pro-Palestinian (primarily Muslim) forces and pro-Western Christians. Today's political standoff is fought along the lines of Sunni-Shiite schisms, despite the fact that each political camp enjoys the backing of other sects. This is abetted by the fact that the country is suffering a severe crisis of leadership and a painful absence of nonsectarian, national discourse. Hezbollah accuses the government coalition of being puppets in the hands of the US, while March 14 accuses the Party of God and its

supporters of being the agents of Syria and Iran. The merits to these accusations notwithstanding, Lebanon is being pushed back into the role of proxy that it played in the seventies, only this time to host the showdown between the US and Iran.

The current crisis reflects also the post-Taef institutional paralysis in the absence of a powerful arbitrator or a preconceived consensus. The former role was filled by the Syrians during their presence and the latter seems impossible to reach with the deep entrenchment of each side's positions. A muscled mediation is badly needed for the parties to move away from their positions and begin serious negotiations. There needs to be, however, some confidence building measures before any serious negotiation can take place. Now that the tribunal issue is taken up directly by the Security Council and has been withdrawn from local currency, in the short term there needs to be an agreement on mutual steps that would end the crippling sit-ins in Beirut's downtown in return for discussions on government expansion and a new electoral law. If these negotiations succeed under the auspices of influential mediation, the next step would be to agree on the election of a compromise president whose leadership would be able to rally people together and rebuild the lost social peace. In the long term, renegotiating the implementation mechanisms of the Taef agreement as well as pondering ways to implement its hitherto shelved provisions will be necessary to enact serious reforms, rebuild state institutions and pave the way for a sustainable consensus on the future of the country.

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