

## Web Commentary

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# Lebanon Resists Security Threats but Must Revive National Unity Government

By Paul Salem

The decision by the United Nations Security Council to establish a Special Tribunal to try suspects in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and others under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter has dramatically raised tensions in Lebanon. Security Council Resolution 1757 was adopted on May 30, after Lebanese parliament Speaker Nabih Berri failed to convene the parliament to vote on the tribunal issue. Both Syria and the pro-Syrian opposition opposed the setting up of the tribunal under Chapter VII, claiming it constituted interference in Lebanese internal affairs, and warned that pushing ahead with the decision would bring 'chaos' to Lebanon. This fear was echoed by the five members of the Security Council who abstained from the vote, including Russia, China and Qatar.

The escalation has taken a number of forms, but so far the country--and particularly the national army--has responded well to the challenges. However, there are fears that the security challenges that began in mid-May could escalate beyond the state's ability to cope. There are also fears that pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, whose term expires in the fall, might appoint a rival government, leading to internal division and collapse similar to what has recently happened among the Palestinians. Lebanon has so far weathered the serious security challenges effectively, but it needs regional and international assistance to continue to protect its security, move toward the formation of a national unity government, and avoid the collapse of state institutions.

### **The Internal Security Challenge**

The main security challenge has come from a radical Islamist group, called Fatah al Islam, based in the Naher el Bared Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon. The group launched a surprise attack on the Lebanese army in mid-May that led to large-scale battles in and around the camp; after a month of fighting, the army defeated the insurgents. The group, which espoused al-Qaeda style ideas, was apparently planning large scale terrorist attacks against Lebanese and UN targets in Lebanon. The leaders of

the group had made their way into Lebanon from Syria, and the government charged Syria with planting and backing them. Syria denied any involvement. A similar outbreak of violence by another radical group, Jund al Sham, in the camp of Ayn al Hilweh in South Lebanon was quickly contained through cooperation between the Lebanese army and friendly Palestinian armed groups in that camp.

Other challenges to Lebanese security were posed by a series of car bombs targeting civilian and commercial neighborhoods in and around Beirut that sowed terror among the population. The attacks were followed by the assassination by car bomb of anti-Syrian Member of Parliament Walid Eido on June 13. A few days later, a number of Katyusha rockets were fired into northern Israel from an area known to be used by Ahmad Gibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, a group close to Syria. On June 24, a car bomb in South Lebanon killed five members of the Spanish contingent of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL II), put in place by UNSCR 1701 to end the Israel-Hezbollah war of last summer.

The set of attacks were apparently designed to overwhelm the Lebanese security forces by dealing a blow to the army in the north, triggering hostilities between the Lebanese army and the Palestinians, sowing terror among civilians and politicians, reigniting clashes along the Israeli-Lebanese border, and shaking the resolve of UNIFIL troops. So far, this strategy has not worked. The army resoundingly defeated the Fatah al Islam insurgents in the North, and has in fact been considerably strengthened by the engagement: recovering from the early blows, the army pulled together and responded with exceptional *esprit de corps*, not seen for many decades, and achieved rapid victories. As a result, the army has become again the symbol of national unity and state authority, enjoying widespread support among the population. Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who initially warned the army not to go into the camps in order to avoid a Lebanese-Palestinian confrontation, stopped raising objections once the operation proceeded successfully. Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun, in the first clear breach with Hezbollah, came out early and robustly in support of the army. Arab and foreign governments have also expressed strong support for the Lebanese army, stepping up their aid. Indeed, the decisive defeat of Fatah al Islam is seen by some in Lebanon as a rebirth by fire of the national army, and hence as the possible cornerstone for the gradual reconstruction of state authority on the basis of strict national sovereignty.

If the clashes fomented by Fatah al Islam were designed to spread to other Palestinian camps as had happened in the early 1970s, the design also failed. The main Palestinian groups, including both Fatah and Hamas, moved quickly to distance themselves from Fatah al Islam. They instead worked closely with the Lebanese authorities to isolate the group, evacuate civilians from Naher al Bared, and prevent similar outbreaks in other camps. Indeed, the incidents in the Naher al Bared camp have brought government and Palestinian leaders closer together. Despite their clashes in the West Bank and Gaza, which broke out while the fighting in Lebanon was already under way, Fatah and Hamas leaders in the camps continued to work together and with the Lebanese government. There are fears that the Fatah-Hamas clashes might spread to Lebanon, unraveling the important progress made between Palestinians and Lebanese. This would be calamitous for Palestinian refugee communities in Lebanon and would

probably lead, in the currently tense domestic and regional environment, to clashes that would shatter the security of both the Palestinians and the Lebanese. So far, however, Fatah and Hamas leaders in Lebanon have continued to work together.

## **The Regional Challenge**

The Katyushas launched across the border also do not seem to have served their purpose. Hezbollah quickly denied any responsibility for the attacks, and the Israelis announced that they would not be dragged into a staged confrontation. Neither Hezbollah nor Israel is interested in another war at this time, and provocations of this type are not likely to trigger any all-out conflagrations at this point; the presence of the 32-nation UNIFIL II force along the border, as well as 15,000 Lebanese army troops, also serves to dampen tensions there.

The attack on UNIFIL troops in late June, the first of its kind against this new force, has been feared for some time and appears designed to shake the resolve of that force. The attackers are possibly probing the resolve of this force after the surprising resilience of the Lebanese army, which had been the first target. The Spanish government was quick to affirm that the attack would not affect its decision to stay in Lebanon. However, unlike the Lebanese army, the 32 national contingents in the UNIFIL II force came to Lebanon only as peacekeepers. They were aware that the assignment would have its challenges, but they will probably have serious second thoughts if their areas in the south turn into war zones with repeated attacks of this kind. Their current response will probably be to reduce their exposure to such attacks by hunkering down in their bases and leaving most of the patrolling to the Lebanese army; but if such attacks become a common occurrence, the long term fate of the force might be in question. Both the Lebanese state and Hezbollah have an interest in preventing such attacks, and jihadist groups are unlikely to find much protection and traction in the Hezbollah-dominated south; however, the challenge might still be a daunting one.

The prominence of al-Qaeda style groups in the new wave of incidents and attacks in Lebanon shows that such groups have indeed infiltrated into Lebanon. The fear is that high-profile actions, which are garnering regional and world headlines, might confirm Lebanon as a new front in the global jihadist confrontation with Israel and the West, and might attract new fighters from Iraq and elsewhere. Although some blame Syria for allowing such groups to cross its borders into Lebanon, the situation could quickly move beyond anyone's control. Such groups could trigger another Israeli-Lebanese war, as they could trigger a Sunni-Shia war, state failure and general terror and instability. This new element in the Lebanese and regional equation is of great concern to all Lebanese groups, including—and particularly—Hezbollah, as well as most regional and international players; it requires urgent political and security movement before things indeed go beyond the point of no return. Lebanon is so far coping with the latest wave of challenges, but as Lebanese see what level of insurgent and terrorist violence has been wrought in Iraq, they fear that more challenges for Lebanon might lie ahead.

## **The Domestic Political Challenge**

The crisis has renewed pressure to find a solution to the political stalemate that has paralyzed the government for months. Most immediately, the government has taken steps to protect itself against violence directed at undermining its political viability and its constitutionality. It has responded to the renewal of assassinations against its parliamentary deputies by dramatically increasing their protection, sequestering some in a safe zone in Beirut, and trying to relocate others temporarily to Egypt or other safe locations. The government has been under pressure since November of last year when the five Shiite ministers and one Christian minister, resigned from the 30-person cabinet in protest over the handling of the international tribunal issue. The opposition charged that the resignation of all Shiite ministers automatically rendered the government unconstitutional because a clause in the preamble to the constitution states that anything that “runs counter to the pact of communal coexistence is unconstitutional.” A cabinet in which one confessional group was not represented was in violation of the pact, according to the opposition. The government has relied instead on another clause in the constitution that says that the government is considered to have resigned only if more than one third of its ministers resign.

A government minister, Pierre Gemayel, who was also a member of parliament, was assassinated later that November, bringing the number of ministers down to 23 from the original 30, and reducing the pro-government’s slender parliamentary majority from 5 to 4. With the latest assassination of deputy Eido, the majority is further reduced, and the government fears further assassinations might eliminate it altogether. It has thus called for by-elections on August 5 to fill the seats left empty by the deaths of Eido and Gemayel and to counter the strategy of majority-erosion through assassination.

While important, these are palliative measures. The main question is whether the political challenge can be overcome by the formation of a government of national unity. After the UN Security Council decided to set up the Hariri tribunal under Chapter VII, thus taking the decision out of Lebanese hands, initiatives had resumed to form a national unity government. A formula gaining traction was that Fouad Siniora would remain prime minister, but that the cabinet itself would be reshuffled so as to give the opposition 11 out of 30 ministerial posts. The opposition would thus gain veto power over key decisions that it disagrees with. Both sides had some misgivings about this formula. The Siniora government feared that the opposition veto power would paralyze all decisions, and that the opposition could then constitutionally bring down the government simply by resigning. The opposition feared that by joining a national unity government it would legitimize the tribunal and lend legitimacy to Prime Minister Siniora and the anti-Syrian majority. Nevertheless, there was enough interest in finding some form of common ground to keep the proposed solution alive.

The proposal also enjoyed guarded outside support. The US was willing to accept Hezbollah’s participation in government and its armed presence in certain areas of Lebanon, and in fact saw the national unity government as a means of decreasing Syrian influence by closing fissures between government and opposition that Damascus could exploit. Furthermore, the U.S. believed that Christian opposition politician Michel Aoun,

whose ministers would necessarily make up a significant portion of the opposition's bloc in the new government, had a separate agenda from Hezbollah, making it more difficult for the opposition to exercise its veto as a solid bloc. The plan also enjoyed the backing of Saudi Arabia, which wanted to avoid the disintegration of Lebanon, and seemed to be acceptable to Iran, which wanted to keep Hezbollah in the government so it would have legitimacy and protection.

The momentum to form a national unity government, however, was torpedoed by the assassination of pro-government deputy Eido, because the pro-government coalition refused to pursue national unity talks while its members were under direct attack. The collapse of these talks has revived fears that, if no agreement is reached, the president, whose term ends in November, might appoint an alternative government on the ground that the present one is unconstitutional. Opposition figures have warned that this could happen as early as mid-July.

According to the constitution, the formation of a government requires a complex process. First, the president must conduct binding consultations with the members of parliament; if the majority of deputies consulted names a particular individual he is constrained to name that individual as prime minister designate. The designate then proposes a cabinet to the president, and if the president accepts it, the new cabinet is presented to the parliament for a vote of confidence.

In deciding whether to call for a new government, President Lahoud faces difficult choices. If he decided to follow the process mandated by the constitution and holds consultations with members of parliament, he would be constrained to name the prime minister of their choice—not his own. If he did not hold consultations, and name a prime minister of his choice, he would be clearly violating the constitution. The current parliamentary majority would also face difficult choices. If it participated in consultations, it would be implicitly acknowledging that the current government is indeed unconstitutional and must be considered dissolved; it would also implicitly recognize Lahoud as legitimate president, despite its previous claims that his mandate was unconstitutionally extended in 2005. A refusal to participate in the consultations is also risky for the present parliamentary majority: Lahoud would then consult only with opposition members and name a new prime minister of their choice, who would form a pro-opposition cabinet. Since such a cabinet would not obtain a parliamentary vote of confidence, the country would be left with two competing governments, one backed by Syria and Iran, the other by the United States, Europe, and most Arab governments. Lebanon could quickly find itself in a situation similar to that existing in the Palestinian territories.

## **A Government of National Unity is the Only Way Forward**

To avoid such an outcome, it is in Lebanon's interest to form a national unity government. The Arab League is currently pursuing an intensive mission to achieve exactly that objective. France also has launched an initiative in that regard. Saudi Arabia, the United States and even Iran are reported to favor a national unity government solution. Only Syria appears still opposed to an outcome which would effectively give

local and regional legitimacy to the UN tribunal decision, create a government which would still have an anti-Syrian majority, and have their allies in Lebanon participating in a government backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia. Syria is already concerned about the possibility that Iran might make a deal with the US over Iraq, or with France in other areas and it does not want to be sidelined in Lebanon as well.

The governing coalition in Lebanon is understandably distressed about the resumption of assassinations against their members, but they must still be strongly encouraged to move ahead with the formation of a national unity government. Such a government would enable the rebuilding of trust and communication among Lebanon's competing parties; it will also provide a framework of cooperation on which to proceed to the election of a new president for the country. It will reinforce much-needed national unity at a time when a host of external pressures are converging on Lebanon to try to bring down the state, rekindle civil strife, and create chaos in the country.

It is important for Lebanon's Arab and international friends to intensify their efforts to bring about a national unity government. Lebanon must avoid the fate of Gaza and the West Bank. Lebanon is a weak, but not a fully failed, state. The recent achievements of the army indicate that Lebanon has a chance to rebuild the sovereignty that it lost forty years ago, and the blanket popular support for the army's actions indicate that there is important common ground to build on.

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