

LEBANON, HIZBOLLAH, AND THE HARIRI TRIBUNAL

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:

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SPEAKERS:

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Visiting Scholar

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Transcript by Federal News Service

Washington, D.C.

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MARINA OTTAWAY: We are missing the second speaker still. We'll give it a few minutes and if he does not show up we will start with Paul and then we'll continue with him. But give us a few minutes please. Thank you.

(Break.)

(00:00:23)

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Good morning. I'm glad to announce that we have all the speakers. I am Marina Ottaway. I'm the Director of the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

And we are very glad that you came here to listen to this very interesting panel, which could not have been timed any better, because as you all know Ahmadinejad is in Beirut today. So there's, you know, a lot of things are happening in the country. Unfortunately not necessarily good things are happening in the country. To discuss the issue we have two speakers, Paul Salem, who is the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, which is based in Beirut. He is a long-time observer of the Lebanese scene. He has written about it a lot, he has talked about it a lot, and I think we are all going to benefit from his insights.

The second speaker is Aram Nerguizian, and I hope I'm pronouncing it half-correctly, who is a visiting fellow with the Berkeley chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He works with Anthony Cordesman on issues of the military balance in the region, particularly the Israel/Syrian military balance. He is the author of a study which is forthcoming with CSIS shortly called the "Lebanese Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon" and we hope that it's post-Syria Lebanon – (chuckles) – and that it stays that way for the sake of the title of your – (inaudible, chuckle).

Okay, without further ado, Paul?

(00:02:23)

PAUL SALEM: Thank you, Marina, and thank you for showing up early this morning. The talk is about the current crisis in Lebanon over the international tribunal, although of course with President Ahmadinejad's visit that started today to Beirut and is extending through Friday, so three days, quite a long visit. It is a very historic visit, a very important visit. We can talk about that later if you wish, but today's topic is about a crisis which is the most acute that Lebanon has faced certainly since May 2008, possibly since the momentous events of 2005 themselves, which were triggered by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

And the crisis we're seeing now relates to the tribunal that's looking into that assassination. So in a way many of the events in Lebanon over the past five years have revolved around the issue of the assassination and the tribunal and the many crises in '05, '06, '08 and now '10 are revolving around this very serious issue. So it's a very, very serious situation that Lebanon faces.

Tensions in the country are extremely high and have been very high for about two months with fears of possible outbreak of violence between the two main camps, one led by the Prime Minister Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister, and one led by Hizbollah, which also falls along the fault line of Sunni Shiite communities in Lebanon and tensions that could become sectarian.

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The issue of the tribunal is officially, was officially part of a national consensus. It was a part of agreements between all parties in 2006 to support the investigation, and the investigation was set up under Chapter 7, as was the tribunal by the Security Council of the UN and the Lebanese government officially supports that position. However, actually in real politics there have been serious disagreements over support for this tribunal. Disagreements over that led to the withdrawal of a number of ministers in 2006 and to a drawn-out crisis, a paralysis of government and parliament for a year-and-a-half that ended in clashes in the streets in Beirut in May 2008.

The early leaks from the investigation or statements by the investigators pointed the finger at Syria. As you all know, the March 14 movement, led by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister, and including other parties in Lebanon publicly blamed Syria for the assassination and led a very strong anti-Syrian campaign in Lebanon backed by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, the UAE and definitely the United States and some members of the Western Community.

So those early leaks from the investigation really set the scene for the politics of Lebanon for a number of years, as very, very anti-Syrian. In the past year, again, the leaks – nothing official, but leaks or serious chatter on the diplomatic and political grapevine indicating that the investigation and tribunal is no longer pointing the finger at Syria, but pointing the finger at Hizbollah. This has obviously impacted the politics of the situation.

Saad Hariri, the prime minister, has a few weeks ago apologized to Syria and said that accusing Syria was a mistake, blaming Syria for the assassination was a mistake and he has made up and rebuilt his relations with Syria after years of being hostile enemies. This partly maybe reflects the findings or the leaks from the investigation. It also reflects a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Syria, which we can talk a bit about later.

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Hizbollah now being in the cross hairs of the investigation, again official chatter on the grapevine has it that the indictments from the tribunal will come out before the end of the year, and that they will point the finger at members of Hizbollah. Hizbollah charges that the investigation itself has been politicized and has been manipulated. It points to the early accusation towards Syria, which was buttressed by a number of witnesses, which later appeared to be false witnesses or they claimed later that they were not telling the truth.

This created a major issue in Lebanon over the false witnesses that provided information to the tribunal and the investigation early on to point the finger at Syria. Hizbollah is saying that these witnesses have rendered the investigation tainted or marred and they charge that the U.S., Israel and other countries are manipulating the tribunal politically, first to try to pressure Syria and now to try to pressure Hizbollah.

Indeed the credibility of the tribunal is a bit strained; even for supporters of the tribunal in the sense that it is, you know, curious to say the least that there was strong accusation of Syria in the early years and that all of that has sort of gone away. Questions such as, did Syria make a deal with somebody? Was there some underhanded agreement that led to Syria being taken off the hook, and currently also question marks about the indictment of Hizbollah in the sense that very few people that I know in Lebanon can imagine that Hizbollah undertook such an assassination without, you know, either did it with Syria or it didn't do it. It's very difficult to imagine it doing it alone.

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So it is the case that the tribunal is, since all of the investigations on it remain technically secret and because of the things that have gone on in the past few years there is some decline of credibility, I would say, towards the investigation. Most people are waiting to see whether the indictments that come out will be buttressed with strong evidence or whether they will simply be indictments for which the evidence will be revealed later on.

Hizbollah and the opposition has been demanding that Prime Minister Hariri launch immediately an investigation into the issue of the false witnesses. Hizbollah indirectly sort of charges that perhaps the prime minister and others were behind these false witnesses to put the blame on Syria, and also Hizbollah demands that the Lebanese government stop funding the tribunal and break its links with this tribunal.

The tribunal is a special tribunal; it's called the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. It includes international judges and Lebanese judges. It includes international funding and Lebanese funding. The prime minister so far is holding firm, saying that the issue of the false witnesses will be investigated by the tribunal itself after it issues its indictments, and that he is not willing to compromise over the Lebanese government's relationship with the tribunal.

Whether Lebanon continues to fund the tribunal or not, the tribunal will continue. It's an international instrument; it was set up under Chapter VII, so even if Lebanon cuts its relations with the tribunal, other countries can and probably would provide funding and the tribunal would go on, but it would lose that relationship with the country involved.

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This standoff, which started a couple months ago, as I said, has created very acute fears in the country, very serious tension. Attempts to find a compromise between the two parties have failed because it's very difficult to find a middle ground between supporting the tribunal and breaking ties with the tribunal. There have been many attempts, both from within the country and from outside the country and these attempts are continuing to try to see if there is a compromise between the position of the prime minister, backed by Saudi Arabia and others and the position of Hizbollah, backed by Syria and Iran and local allies.

So far nobody has been able to come up with an actually compromise that could satisfy both sides. If no compromise is reached, and particularly after the current, you know, visit, we've had a period of calm for a number of weeks for reasons relating to first the visit of President Assad and King Abdullah, which took place in late July which gave Lebanon through the month of Ramadan a period of calm.

Now the visit of President Ahmadinejad also before his visit created calm because Hizbollah and the opposition didn't want to cause internal tension before this historic visit of Ahmadinejad. So there are fears that after the visit is over and done with the internal politics and tensions will resume. If a compromise is not found, I think we might be heading into a period similar to that in 2007, which at least would include a paralysis of government decision-making, possibly paralysis of Parliament and the instruments of state in general, might include civil disobedience, closure of roads, possibly closure of the airport.

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Non-armed ways to quickly raise the pressure on the prime minister raise the pressure on the government. It's possible that if that does not bear fruit, armed conflict could be an option. There is no balance of power in Beirut; there is no balance of power in the country in general. Hizbollah is by far dominant and has very, very strong backing. And Hizbollah wants this issue resolved quickly before the indictments comes out.

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The next step, if these means don't bear fruit, probably, as I said, could be various forms of armed conflict. No doubt that the prime minister is in an extremely difficult position, between giving in on the tribunal, which is looking into the assassination of his own father, or facing a contest with Hizbollah, which is extremely uneven and which he knows he cannot win.

The option of resignation exists, but it is not an attractive option for either side. The prime minister himself is not, like any prime minister, probably not eager to resign and leave government, particularly because if he did the entire political movement and sort of political structure and economic base that has been built over the last 20 years starting with his father, might, if he's no longer prime minister, might be undermined, might be lost. So it's not simply a matter of not being prime minister for a year or two, but it might be something much more serious than that.

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For Hizbollah and the opposition, also, the option of the prime minister resigning is not attractive because they want the concession regarding the tribunal to come from him because he's the son of the aggrieved party. He's the only one credibly who could give that concession. Hizbollah and the opposition could bring down the government. They have enough members of government that if they resigned the government would technically fall and the president would try to name another prime minister from another government, but that is not an option that the opposition favors.

Syria has made it clear that it wants Lebanon to break ties with the tribunal. It has backed Hizbollah and other Syrian allies to raise the pressure on Hariri, while at the same time, having good relations with Hariri. But separating the issue of their good relations with Hariri from the issue of the tribunal, which they've been clear about. In the last 10 days, the Syrian court issued arrest warrants for 33 individuals, 31 of whom are Lebanese officials, journalists, judges and security personnel, almost all of whom are part of Hariri's team.

These arrest warrants are part of charges, and ongoing charges by people who were imprisoned early on in the tribunal investigation. These arrest warrants certainly made the threat to Hariri and Hariri's assistants very clear, because these are naming names and accusing them or indicting them of certain crimes. A number of these people have left Lebanon already, fearing for their lives, so the Syrian role has been stepped up recently.

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Syria has said that if the tribunal indicts any Syrian security officials or Syria individuals, Syria will deal with them itself through its ways, through its courts and so on and so forth. Hizbollah has not said the same; Hizbollah has said they reject any indictments. They will not accept them. There are no rogue elements in Hizbollah; nobody in Hizbollah was involved in the assassination, end of story, whereas Syria had said something different.

Saudi Arabia, as I was mentioning, has certainly rebuilt ties with Syria over the last year and a half, largely as Saudi attempts to manage Sunni interests both in Iraq and in Lebanon. After a period of trying to support Sunni interests in those two countries by containing Syria or opposing Syria or pressuring Syria the last year, they've chosen to try to work with Syria. That has been a mixed bag for the Saudis. In Iraq it led to support for the Alawi list, which included, obviously many Sunni supporters, but at the end of the day Syria went along with Maliki as the prime minister, something which has upset the Saudis and hurt ties over the last month between the two.

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With regard to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia leaned on the Prime Minister Hariri to rebuild ties with Syria, and this has been the case. The Syria president and Saudi king visited Lebanon a couple of months ago to try to calm the crisis. Indeed it did provide temporary calm, but clearly there was no resolution of the tribunal issue. And Syria has made it fairly clear that while it enjoys strong relations with Saudi Arabia and will be friendly and supportive of Saad Hariri, the issue of the tribunal is not part of the bargain and that they want the tribunal – that Lebanon's links to the tribunal to be broken.

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Iran, sort of in a similar position, certainly backs Hizbollah very much and shares Hizbollah's view of the tribunal as some Western plot to hurt the resistance and so on. Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon, a very historic visit coming at this delicate time, might have some impact on this crisis, particularly as it's expected or reported that Ahmadinejad has extended his visit for one day through Friday, waiting for the expected visit of the Turkish prime minister on Friday, with rumors in Lebanon that between the Lebanese, the Iranians and the Turks they also might take a stab at trying to find a resolution for this tribunal issue.

Ahmadinejad today visiting Lebanon visited also the prime minister, Saad Hariri, with whom historically obviously the relationships have not been very warm, but Ahmadinejad in his statements today very much emphasizing national unity and the need – you know, to preserve the stability and unity of Lebanon, and it's possible that after the attempts of Saudi Arabia, Syria and Qatar a few weeks ago to find a relation to the tribunal issue, which did not succeed. Perhaps a Turkish-Iranian-Lebanese attempt might make some headway.

And this certainly indicates how the Middle East is changing and how these new players are playing a very important role. Iran and Lebanon are signing a number of cooperation agreements in these couple of days, mainly on energy, electricity and oil and gas exploration, not on military issues, because of the sanctions

The U.S. and the West of course back the tribunal and will probably see it through, even if Lebanon reneges on its cooperation. Israel so far has been trumpeting the tribunal and sort of crowing over the fact that Hizbollah might be indicted. It certainly improves Israel's case against Hizbollah in any future confrontation, which may or may not take place, but Israel is really not expected to do anything in the next few months, since Hizbollah is facing problems of its own.

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End games for this crisis, a few scenarios. Well, there could be a compromise, a face-saving formula that is reached. No one yet has come up with a formula that even theoretically would square the circle, but given that the prime minister really is unable to confront Hizbollah and is in a very, very difficult situation, certainly he would be possibly looking for a way to have a compromise, but nobody has found what such a compromise could be. But that remains a possibility.

If this compromise is not found, the crisis that could emerge could be short and sharp, like May of 2008, which was over in a few hours with the victory of Hizbollah and led to talks in Doha, Qatar, and a new arrangement. It was all over in a matter of days. After a short and sharp confrontation, Hariri might accede to Hizbollah's terms under slightly revised language to save face, or he could resign. Not an attractive option but one that remains open to him and a number of his followers and advisors are advising him to do so.

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Alternatively, if the conflict is not short and sharp and doesn't lead to a concession or resignation, the country could drift into an extended conflict, in which the conflict erupts but doesn't resolve the situation. This would be very worrisome. It might lead to months or years of open-ended paralysis and various levels of confrontation. It could resemble Iraq in the last few years in the sense of having a drawn-out Sunni-Shiite confrontation using various sorts of means of blowing up things and things of that nature.

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There is a current that favors – a very small Sunni current, in Lebanon, but there is a current – which says that they should stand up to Hizbollah and so on and that there are ways to do that. This is an unlikely scenario, but it remains a very serious risk. If so, Lebanon would enter a very open-ended crisis, which might lead to the collapse of the Taif Agreement and the whole arrangement that has kept the country precariously together for the last 20 years.

In terms of recommendations, very difficult to say because there is very little influence, you know, over the situation in Lebanon because of the military imbalance. But I would say certainly that the Arab community, the international community should continue to support the tribunal, whether Lebanon is able to continue or not. Currently it should continue to support the government and the Lebanese prime minister in maintaining its support for the tribunal. This is an international agreement that Lebanon has entered into and that it is obligated to be part of.

If the prime minister, given the choice between civil war and some compromise on the tribunal, ends up conceding on the tribunal issue, it's very important in my mind that the international community continue to support the tribunal and go through with indictments moving forward. I think it's very important for Lebanon that this process go forward even if the players in the country in a sense being held hostage by overwhelming force are not able to continue as well.

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I also think it's important that if the prime minister and the government is forced, effectively, at gunpoint to renege, this should not create sort of a break or a backlash in the U.S. or the West against the Lebanese government or against the prime minister. In other words, not to punish the hostage for what is taking place, but rather in addition to maintaining support for the tribunal, maintaining support for the Lebanese state, the Lebanese government, maintaining good relations.

I've written previously, as has Aram, about support for the Lebanese armed forces. In other words not to interpret this event, if it happens, as a cause of breaking relations with Lebanon. Of course this would be exactly what Syria and Iran and Hizbollah would want, and of course they probably were very encouraged that there was voices in the U.S. Congress, as, you know, calling for all support to Lebanon to be ended, military support. That would be what they want, and I think it would be bad for Lebanon and bad for regional, you know, security and for Western interest for that to be the case.

In closing, beyond this current crisis over the tribunal, which is a big one, which we all are watching closely, the major threat facing Lebanon remains the major threat, the risk sometimes next year or the year after of a war between Hizbollah and Israel. That remains sort of the existential devastating risk that the country faces. And in this vein, the tribunal and the indictments, to my mind, should not be used if they come out against Hizbollah as an excuse to rush to war by Israel sometime next year against Hizbollah, because effectively it would be a war that

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would utterly devastate Lebanon, yet again would not eliminate Hizbollah but would certainly destroy much of the country and much of the institutions of the state and the economy.

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The tribunal, even if it comes out against Hizbollah, which is very significant, should not be used as a rush to war. At the end of the day, Lebanon's troubles, which have been acute since the late 1960s, will only be solved not by more wars but by a breakthrough in the peace process. That remains the only way that Lebanon can get out of the role of being a proxy arena for conflicts between Syria and Israel and between Iran and Israel.

And it's the only hope for Lebanon to get out of its four decades of collapsed sovereignty basically. Thank you for your patience, and I look forward to your questions after Aram's presentation.

ARAM NERGUIZIAN: Thank you to Carnegie and Marina for inviting me. And actually I have changed the title of my book because post-war Lebanon will probably have more long-lasting implications. I will be supplementing Paul's excellent presentation, mainly by focusing on the security politics of the current crisis, focusing on the mechanics of strategic competition in Lebanon, the LAF's deployment in November 2010, whether or not Hizbollah has modified their own strategic posture in the country, debating some of these maximalist positions about what will happen in the event of an indictment against Hizbollah. And then some scenarios and also implications for the U.S. and actors in the region, including Israel.

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It's important to remember that the sectarian system in Lebanon, especially in the post-war context, has primacy. One of the ramifications of that is quite simply that every sectarian actor of prominence is the center of gravity within a given community, and the center of gravity across the board when it comes to prior politics. Unfortunately, when talk about state-building and institution-building in Lebanon, the primacy of the sectarian system makes it very difficult.

It also means that the primary unit is the sectarian community, sectarian actors. Now they are buttressed by regional alliances, so it's a two-level competition in Lebanon, where domestic actors compete for power in a zero-sum struggle. And they are buttressed by regional ties. Now it's also important to bear in mind that there is a very high level of dependency on the regional order, so whether it's the March 14 movement, March 8th, Hizbollah – they are deeply dependent on the position of their regional patrons.

It truly is a robust clientalistic system, and this has important implications for how the different actors will operate over the next few weeks, how will they position themselves vis-à-vis security politics in Lebanon? And with that, it's important also to bear in mind that there are wild cards at the regional level, being, as Paul mentioned, the regional war option. There's also the LAF wild card.

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The Lebanese Armed Forces has had a mixed record in terms of managing domestic and regional politics. It is in many ways a representation if not an amalgamation of decades of militarization in society of the fragmentation of society. And that does not exist in a political vacuum. Now the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces is important to factor in because it gives us some context about how it perceives the current security

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posture in the country, and despite the heightening rhetoric in the country, the deployment of the LAF from the summer of 2010 until now has not shifted dramatically.

You have upwards of 11,000 troops that are deployed south of Beirut. Now, the bulk of those forces are in the broader south, to say, the Litani all the way up to the Awali River. So there is an overwhelming force posture oriented towards the regional deterrents positioned that the LAF has been trying to articulate – this idea that they're playing an important role in maintaining the domestic piece, but crucially, that they're also managing Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Now, beyond that, you've had a very robust deployment in the broader Mount Lebanon area. You have the majority of Lebanon's special forces units that have consolidated their position from the northern segments of Beirut all the way through to Batroun. So you have the classical Christian stronghold, in many ways, has been encircled by some of the most elite forces in the LAF. You also have a relatively robust deployment in the Beqaa and Hermel but not as robust as during the June 2009 elections.

The bulk of the forces in the LAF have been positioned along the coastline and in the south – a very different deployment from that of June 2009 in that you had a much more refined and delicate deployment of forces in the Beqaa and more towards the north.

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The change is a reflection of the fact that the LAF-Syrian military coordination on border management on continuing security issues and managing the border lands between the two countries has moved in a generally positive direction. The bulk of forces continue to focus on Mount Lebanon and also Beirut.

Now, one of the challenges the LAF has had is that you have two relatively maximalist positions about how security politics will evolve. In the March 14 narrative, whereby you have the Hizbollah sword of Damocles, essentially, resort to violence, a potential limited or even contracted civil confrontation that will lead to bloodshed. Then you have, of course, the March 8th maximalist position which is that any indictment would be – is considered a nonstarter and there would be an authentic reaction to that.

Now, the LAF has tried in the public arena to assert the position whereby, we hear what you are all saying, we don't agree with this radical interpretation of security politics; we will not accept devolution to violence in the streets of Beirut or across the country. And there have been quiet but public signals by the LAF that they will act to secure the country's internal integrity.

In many ways, the 2006 war and May 2008 have made it very difficult for the LAF to do anything but commit itself to managing security politics, because in the minds of the Lebanese, we remember the '70s, wherein the LAF had opportunities to assert itself and was caught off guard or backed off at moments of critical importance to security and eventual conflict in the country.

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So the LAF looked at this incident on August 3 as being one such example of a scenario where they cannot back off at the regional level and they're making the point publicly that at the internal level they also feel they cannot back off. Now this is an important signaling game, but it's not clear whether or not the LAF will actually be able to

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deliver on this position that they will secure the country, secure internal security, position themselves between the different antagonists.

And there is doubt, frankly, that the LAF can secure the country beyond the quote, unquote, “Christian heartland” in Mount Lebanon. There is this sense of certainty that the LAF can manage security in the event of an indictment within Mount Lebanon but there is no certainty about its deployments in the north, managing Tripoli and Akkar and no certainty about its deployment south of Beirut.

Now, Hizbollah’s deployment has not changed dramatically either. They continue to maintain their base of operations in Darhail (ph). They have supplemented their position in – (inaudible) – and this is mainly linked to the Ahmadinejad visit. (Inaudible) – for those who don’t know is a small neighborhood in Beirut. There is a hotel there Ahmadinejad is staying. The force deployment has adapted to provide additional security and force posture.

Hizbollah has also strengthened their position and their posture near Saida and on the Beirut side of the highway, so in essence, sending the signal that we manage the link between the South and the capital. Any attempt to use the so-called Palestinian card in any kind of an internal conflict will be micromanaged by this deployment between Beirut and the south. So there’s a lot of important signaling going on there.

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Now in essence this picture whereby you have the commitment to the tribunal, the implications that Paul lined out about how things would play out in the event there was an indictment, how the government perceives the indictments, these are all part of a high-stakes poker game between the opposition, the March 14 forces and the LAF, which often gets lost in the debate because there’s an attempt to make it unclear.

It’s important to bear in mind that these two swords of Damocles, the tribunal for March 14 and the resort to weapons on the part of Hizbollah, these are not static clearly defined automatic positions. There’s a tendency now to assume that de facto there will be an indictment, de facto the March 14 government will roll with whatever the tribunal says. There is also de facto interpretation that Hizbollah will resort to violence.

These are dangerous assumptions, in part because there is an underlying layer of bargaining going on. The players in country are deeply sensitive to their regional patrons. They are sensitive to any consensus that might emerge between Saudi and Syria, and they are sensitive to how U.S. policy will evolve and how Iran’s visit will go over the next few days. And they are very sensitive to the real costs that could be incurred in any domestic contest that includes violence.

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So there are only two scenarios from the standpoint of the Syrians. On the one hand, the Hariri government can meet Syria’s expectations, which include not just disavowing publicly the tribunal’s role against Syria, but just the tribunal’s legitimacy overall, and this would be part of what they consider to be a regional compromise. The other narrative is that the Hariri government can meet Syria’s expectations much later, but that that would be through internal conflict, competition, potentially force of arms.

In many ways as Paul mentioned, the balance of power in the country is severely skewed. The regional actors are also positioned in a way that makes it very difficult for the Hariri to margin a maneuver, and these all inform the security choices of these institutions. There is also a danger that the tribunal could further harden the

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sectarian red lines in the country, could further radicalize both sides and the fringes on both sides about how to manage conflict in the country, how to manage sectarian relations.

If Hizbollah does take to the street it will only serve to further discredit the organization both in the country and regionally. There is a sense of moral vindication in Hizbollah, but at the same time that is counterbalanced by the fact that a growing chorus of Lebanese feel that this is going in a direction that is unsustainable, that could hurt Shiite interests across the country, and no matter how Hizbollah manages security politics, even if it's just to the benefit of the regional consensus if not its regional patrons, Syria and Iran, there will be a cost for Hizbollah domestically.

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And despite the posturing, there is no guarantee that the LAF can decisively manage an internal flare-up. Now there's also a regional dimension we have to factor in, and this incident brought a lot into context. Despite the headlines about confrontation on the blue lines, one of the most important side effects of the Hadace incident between the IDF and LAF is that the blue line has been relatively calm. There is a very protracted and quiet consensual effort to demarcate the blue line with indirect green lights from the Israelis, from Hizbollah with the support of the LAF.

So in many ways, the regional escalation card can backfire both against the Lebanese and against Israel. If anything, as Paul mentioned, any confrontation would only serve to mutate Hizbollah, and will not ultimately solve the underlying imbalance in the regional asymmetric military balance between the Israelis and Hizbollah.

U.S. policy also finds itself in a very precarious position. It's important not to mischaracterize – there is a U.S. security assistance relationship with Lebanon. Most of it is on funding from fiscal year 2009 and before. However, perception drives the feat and success in Lebanon, and the perception in Lebanon is that the United States has been effectively ejected from Lebanon by Israel, by Hizbollah, and other actors in the country.

And this is a dangerous position to be in for U.S. policy because it essentially reduces in the mind's eye of the Lebanese, U.S. policy to the tribunal. And there is a tendency in Washington to also vacillate in that position as well, whereby okay, we are losing Lebanon. However, there are regional prerogatives that are important, regional objectives that must be pursued, and if the tribunal can play a role in that, well, then it's worth considering.

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This is dangerous because we've been here before. We've been here in the '80s; we've been here over decades of confrontation and contest in Lebanon that pitted domestic actors with their regional patrons. And it doesn't generally work particularly well for the United States.

It's very important for the United States to be at the regional table in the Levant on security politics, and reducing U.S. policy to the tribunal would have the effect of making the U.S. a non-player in security politics in the Levant because how events would play out would be determined by local actors and the dominant regional players.

So no one truly benefits from a security standpoint on escalation on the blue line, or from internal conflict within Lebanon, which ultimately will only serve to further harden and mutate the battle lines. So with that I think I'll hold off and leave some of the points for the Q&A. Thank you.

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MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Thank you very much for giving us a very exhaustive, complicated view of both the political and the military situation in Lebanon. It never gets any easier than – any simpler than it has been in the past. I'll open for – to the floor now, and please identify yourself.

Q: (Off mike.)

MS. OTTAWAY: Just wait for the microphone. We are recording, so it's not –

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Q: (Inaudible,) Question for you, Paul, about the tribunal. Hizbollah, Iran and Syrians, as you know, are now saying that it's totally absurd that the tribunal never even entertained an Israeli connection in the assassination of Hariri. How absurd do you think that is? And a question to Aram if I may. The sanctions slapped on Iran by both the United States and the United Nations, what sort of impact do you think those have had on Iran's to manage its Lebanese connection financially and militarily? Thank you.

MS. OTTAWAY: Let me take a second question and then we can – yeah.

Q: Eli Lake, Washington Times. This is a question for Mr. Salem and Mr. Nerguizian. Can you give your assessment of what the objectives of U.S. diplomacy with Damascus has been under Obama, and also your assessment of how effective it has been. Has it in any way mitigated Syria's role as a spoiler in Lebanon or Syria's role in sort of fomenting the sectarian divisions?

MR. SALEM: Well, on the tribunal issue, and did they – why didn't they investigate the Israeli possible connection, of course that's what Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hizbollah called for, and he presented some videotape and other bits of what he called evidence to do that. The tribunal apparently has not as far as we know investigated that connection. I don't have any particular, you know, insight into that. The tribunal remains very professionally secretive in its operations.

There's been no official statements from the tribunal one way or the other. I would say the reading in general in the region, at least, is that as I mentioned before there are some question marks about the credibility of the tribunal because of the shifts in its course. But also a sense that many people are waiting to see the amount of evidence that's revealed with the indictments, if that's revealed, and to make the judgment at that point.

It's very hard for people to imagine – people I mean by you know talking to people in the region – yes, it's conceivable that Israel may have, you know, anything is conceivable but the fact that this assassination was part of a string of assassinations in Lebanon, all of whom were opposed to Syria and Hizbollah, it's very almost inconceivable to imagine that Israel would have assassinated all of the people which Syria and Hizbollah were saying are Israel's friends in Lebanon.

(00:45:40)

So Hizbollah's statements about that have had traction with Hizbollah supporters but not much traction with other people. But the cloud of questioning over the tribunal remains and judgment is reserved.

On the issue of U.S. diplomacy with Syria, I mean beyond the obvious attempts you know between the Obama administration trying to name an ambassador and that being delayed because of the politics in the U.S. for obvious reasons, I think the more, you know, fundamental situation is as follows:

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First of all, the Syrian position remains rather antagonistic to Israel and the U.S. as long as Israel continues to occupy the Golan Heights. In other words, the expectation that by reengaging Syria, Syria would fundamentally change its politics is simply a misreading of Syrian strategy. The Syrian strategy has been for a number of decades that it's very serious about the peace process, but it's only interested in a breakthrough, it's only interested in the final result of regaining the Golan Heights completely and within that context considering a peace treaty and then a possible shift in strategy.

This means that until that happens, Syria's relations with Iran, with Hizbollah, with Hamas and with effectively forces that are opposing American influence and opposing certainly Israeli policy in the region will remain there.

(00:47:21)

The peace mission as it were of the U.S. led by Sen. Mitchell certainly started off very much downgrading the Israeli-Syrian track, very great emphasis in the first year as maybe it should have on the Israel-Palestinian track. I must say that in recent months, there's been a bit more of a balance, more visits to Syria trying to get Syria more on board. But given that the situation is not promising in terms of any real breakthrough, I don't think simply the resumption of diplomacy even if an ambassador is named and goes will fundamentally change the situation.

In terms of Syria's influence in Lebanon is certainly dramatically regained a lot of that influence. Part of that was simply the exhaustion of sort of the Bush expansion by 2006, 2007 and certainly the departure of the Bush administration, the entry of the Obama administration which was not interested in confrontation or supporting sort of local allies in a confrontational way led to a shift of political calculations in Lebanon, Jumblatt and others led to a shift in calculations by Saudi Arabia that if the U.S. is not going to be pressuring Syria, Saudi Arabia can't do it alone so let's make friends with Syria and completely shifted the chessboard in a way which Syria has regained a lot of influence. Not alone, shares influence with Iran, with Saudi Arabia, Turkey to some degree, but certainly Syrian influence is very strong with all communities in Lebanon.

MR. NERGUIZIAN: Now vis-à-vis the first question on the impact of sanctions on how Iran navigates Lebanon, utilizes its assets in Lebanon. It's important to remember that the Iranian/Hizbollah relationship is not a five-year relationship, it's taken decades of nurturing financial investment.

(00:49:15)

It's interesting because the Department of Defense has this concept called Building Partnership Capacity. Well, Iran has taken that to a maximalist conclusion, it has committed itself to equipping and training Hizbollah in a way that the West been unable to match or constrained in matching vis-à-vis the LAF. So we're not just looking at it in the context of the last five years.

Now, while UN Security Council resolutions impact how Iran could potentially provide military aid to the LAF, for example, that has no impact on how Iran supports Hizbollah. The way, the mechanics of funding the pots of many as it were are not in the state budget so to speak of. They're at the discretion of Khamenei, which means that the mechanics of assistance are different, they're less constrained, they're more fungible in essence.

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So really, Iran's ability to assist its allies is unconstrained, has not been impacted by United Nations Security Council resolutions in any meaningful way. If anything, the main constraints are the other regional actors such as Syria, Israel, the broader international community and so on.

(00:50:35)

Now on the question of the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy towards Syria, I have to agree with Paul that there has been a fundamental misreading of what Syria perceives to be its own interests. On the one hand, supporting the Shiite-led opposition in Lebanon, it's backing some of the Sunni players in Iraq, it's constantly positioning itself in this balance of power, whereby it manages its alliance with Iran, it keeps its large Sunni population quiet, and in essence there has been this interpretation in Damascus that the U.S. does not understand just how tied in Syria is in Lebanon, to Lebanon which it considers to be its front yard in the Levant. And in Iraq as well as we saw in the government formation process.

While some perceived the shuttle diplomacy between Baghdad and Damascus as Damascus backing one side or another, it's more a testament to the prestige game that Damascus has been playing rather effectively in the Levant to shape the perception that look, we are an active party to regional stability and in stability we can either help or spoil efforts to manage security in the border of the Levant and in Iraq.

And in that sense, the U.S. has to catch up in essence to a Syria that has been very proactive in pursuing its own interests in an environment where the U.S. is increasingly perceived as having no policy towards Lebanon. Having economic support and U.S. military aid does not constitute a policy, it constitutes a process of assistance. And there is that debate taking place today in Washington and the regional allies and opponents of Washington understand that and take advantage of that or fail to take advantage of that, depending on the position.

(00:52:36)

So really there's nothing to be gained by not having an effective and realistic U.S.-Syria track that creates at least a space for communicating the different interests. Especially given that Syria looks at its own interests vis-à-vis the Israeli/Syrian track as being, okay, these are all our interests, we don't deal with them on an itemized basis, it's all or nothing.

And as far as the Palestinian-Israeli tribe goes, well, the Syrians will always have a hard time accepting a positive conclusion to the Israeli-Palestinian track because – well, because it makes it difficult from their standpoint when the time comes to negotiate their dynamics, vis-à-vis peace and normalization with Israel.

So there's a spoiler rule there that is tied into this broader maximalist view of Syrian interests in the Levant.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Thank you.

Before I reopen it to the floor, let me, put out a question myself and then I'll take another couple questions from the floor.

(00:53:49)

And this is really more specifically for Aram although maybe Paul wants to comment as well. You talked in your discussion about the LAF. But to what extent you know, we talk about where it's deployed and the role it

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might play and so on, but the question is to what extent can we really talk about the LAF as a cohesive force? I mean, this has only been a major question in trying to evaluate that part of the, you know, the possible role that the Lebanese Armed Forces are going to play.

So I'd like you to address that issue. And then I'll take a couple of questions from here, please.

Q: My name is Daniel Moro from the Transatlantic Institute here at Johns Hopkins. Just a question. What is the rule if there is any, of the UNIFIL troops in south Lebanon? Thank you.

MS. OTTAWAY: Yes.

Q: Mona Yacoubian, U.S. Institute of Peace. A question for both Paul and Aram. You both touched a little bit on sectarian tensions and politics in Lebanon. But I'm wondering if both of you could elaborate on how the interplay between the tribunal and these long standing sectarian tensions and the extent to which the tribunal in fact becomes almost an existential issue for various confessions in Lebanon.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay.

MR. SALEM: Well, you go ahead.

(00:55:27)

MR. NERGUIZIAN: Well, on the issue of the LAF, I just came back from a month-and-a-half long trip in country where August 3 made it such that I was busy pretty much every day after that. It's actually walked away with a much more positive view than the one you tend to get in Washington. Forced cohesion is not really a problem for the LAF. In essence, that is a reflection of two things.

Number one, it is the only institution where all communities actually exist and feel that they have a stake in maintaining a modicum of stability and coexistence.

The second is that the LAF is probably the only institution with cumulative knowledge, and what I mean by that is unlike the warring feudal lords that masquerade as politicians these days, the office isn't the LAF. Look at 2008, 2006, the events of the civil war, '76, '73, all the way back to the moment of inception. Through the lens of a continuum, this is a deterministic journey for military; it is one that they feel that they have to learn from. It tempers their behavior.

And there has been a lot of talk especially over the last few months that the LAF is deeply penetrated by Hizbollah or deeply penetrated by the Shia. Well, the LAF resides in Lebanon, which means that every community in the absence of a third party regulator, the role that Syria had from 1990 to 2005, is constantly being penetrated by the different sectarian actors. That includes the Shiites, it includes the Sunni, it includes the Maronites.

(00:57:07)

The way civil military dynamics have evolved in Lebanon, the Shia and the Maronites have the greatest perception of stake in the military, despite the fact that the Sunnis constitute the largest single group within the LAF, outnumbering the Shia by several thousand. So there's a perception struggle here about what the LAF is, whether it's a unified force.

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Now of course tension and internal insecurity will lead to in some aspects paralysis or at least a second guessing. And this, again, to my point about this high stakes poker game where really everyone is bluffing a little, you know, Hizbollah is bluffing up to a point, their opponents are bluffing up to a point, and the LAF as well is hoping not to have to show its cards.

In essence, the communities are regulating indirectly the behavior of the LAF. That does not constitute fragmentation, but rather temperance. Now in terms of UNIFIL, really the UNIFIL is probably the most important silent partner of Lebanese military development, especially in the – (inaudible 58:16:7) – it provides resources for training, it provides resources in terms of logistics and fuel, but it's also increasingly been playing a role in helping the LAF try to imagine itself as a leading security actor in the country.

A lot of folks will look at what happened on August 3 and say well, UNIFIL didn't play a role. Well, UNIFIL probably averted the third Lebanon war on August 4, and this is something that needs to be taken stock of.

(00:58:44)

In essence, it is the regional punching bag that avoids the escalation to regional war, it allowed for the Israelis and the LAF who both felt they could not back down, the opportunity to do so and to regulate tensions.

So the LAF and UNIFIL in the context of 1701 and in the broader context of security in Lebanon, they are vital components of stability in Lebanon. And until the LAF can expand and consolidate its deployment south of Beirut in a manner that translates to the population as an effective national security posture, it will be very difficult to replace UNIFIL. And UNIFIL is probably the first to admit that, even though they actively try to promote a scenario where the LAF can be self-sustaining, self-sufficient and no longer a guest in the south.

It's important to bear in mind as well that deploying five to 15,000 troops depending on deployment of the LAF to south Lebanon is relatively new. You don't have the infrastructure to support it, you don't have barracks, you don't have training ranges. These are all things that the government of Lebanon, the LAF, must factor in into their long term development and UNIFIL plays an important role in shaping that debate.

Now, there was a third question and I would ask that it be asked again because I wasn't able to jot it down.

Q: Basically just how do you see the interplay of sectarian politics in Lebanon with the tribunal? To what extent does the tribunal itself take on a bigger role, a bigger almost a life of its own within each of the confessions that they view it in existential terms?

MR. NERGUIZIAN: Thanks, Mona.

(01:00:23)

In essence, you had 15 years of Syrian occupation and domination of the political/social stream in Lebanon, you have an unfreezing of an otherwise frozen sectarian struggle that defined a civil war that was portrayed as not being purely sectarian, but really when you go back and read some of the diplomatic chatter between Beirut and Washington for example, some of the statements of the leading politicians of the day, it was fundamentally a sectarian struggle to manage the power balance in the country.

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It goes back to the national power of the constitution and how power is distributed in Lebanon. So really the post 2005 period from my standpoint anyway, is just part of a broader continuum to maximize the amount of space every community can occupy in order to guarantee their interests within the sectarian context. The tribunal falls into that in that it is an important bargaining chip or a tool to be used to coerce one's opponents. And also the reaction to the tribunal is also an important tool in trying to coerce one's opponents.

So really it's this dual sword of Damocles model whereby everyone is trying to say I have something over you, what I'm really getting at is renegotiating the power distribution in the country. In essence, the Shiite got one part of the step forward in terms of their undeclared veto in the cabinet in the post context. It is clear that Saudi would at least like to have something similar set up to defend Sunni interests in Lebanon.

So really the tribunal fits into this calculated game of high stakes poker about negotiating the sectarian distribution of power and managing the distribution of sectarian seats in government and official office.

(01:02:19)

MR. SALEM: A few comments. I mean, about the army, I think the army is effective in putting out brush fires but cannot put out forest fires. In the sense that the army is very important, very effective in maintaining calm and security and responding to isolated threats to that internally, as long as there is consensus about that role from the main players. And that is a very, very significant role, very important role; it's the reason Lebanon while not fully a sovereign state is not fully a failed state, either. It's what, you know, prevents Lebanon from becoming like Afghanistan or Iraq or Somalia or other places.

And that really is the institution of the army, which is very effective in the south with UNIFIL as Aram mentioned and also very effective in internal security up to a point.

If there is a major move by Hizbollah as happened in May 2008 and as might happen if they choose sometime in the next period the army cannot stand up to, you know, the army cannot prevent that and will not be able and will not chose to do that. So the army's role is effective up to a point. If Hizbollah chooses to act as it did in May '08, the army as I said will not be able to prevent it but might be important in picking up the pieces after such an event and providing the security for a post event, like happened after the Doha agreement, the army was very important in helping provide the stability for the new status quo.

(01:04:05)

MR. SALEM: – in picking up the pieces after such an event and providing the security for a post-event like happened after the Doha Agreement. The army was very important in helping provide the stability for the new status quo.

In terms of the Sunni/Shiite situation, obviously that's what the whole fear is about. And the issue one as you mentioned certainly is existential in the sense that on one side – I mean this is the worse-case scenario from when 2005 started. People in Lebanon were fearing, well, it might be the Syrians, it might be somebody. But the worse-case scenario would be if Hizbollah were indicted or were involved because that would pit these two communities against each other. It's a highly charged issue, the assassination of Hariri was built up to, you know, the core identity issue for the Sunnis of Lebanon, continues to be whipped up as the issue.

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And for the Shiite community, Hizbollah's confrontation with Israel and the U.S. and now over the issue of the indictment is also viewed as almost an existential issue. I mean to them it's viewed as a kind of an arrest warrant which will then be a prelude for an Israeli war backed by the Arab world and the U.S. to eliminate the Hizbollah and so on. So this is an extremely delicate and very explosive and highly charged issue.

And it comes on the back drop of a situation where Sunni-Shiite relations are not resolved, are not balanced. The Taif Agreement which organizes power-sharing in the country was agreed to certainly by the Maronite movement and by the Shiite community who remain players in that negotiation. However, in the post-Doha situation, they have continued to be dissatisfied with the Taif arrangement. They don't exactly say why or how or in what way they would like to change it. But they have articulated since the Syrians left in 2005 where Hariri and the future movement sort of dominated the government – the executive branch from their point of view, there certainly has been this sense from Hizbollah and the Shiite community to some degree that there's some dissatisfaction there.

(01:06:15)

Also the fact that Hizbollah has such overwhelming military power and not commensurate political power is a destabilizing factor. The fact that what happened in Iraq, this dramatic sort of dominance of the Shiite community there is also something that tugs at, you know, some and maybe among the Shiite why don't we, you know, push the advantage and renegotiate the Taif Agreement or something of that nature.

But I compare the situation to the Christian/Muslim problem in Lebanon which, you know, started and really began to be serious in the '50s and took all the way to 1989 to be resolved in which sort of Muslim dissatisfaction at the power-sharing formula in Lebanon was largely expressed in dissatisfaction but ideologically – Arab nationalism and all kinds of things without really addressing the rather, you know, unexciting issue of wanting more power in the Lebanese government.

I find a similar situation today. The Shiite community mobilized around, you know, liberating Jerusalem, the resistance and so on when in fact a big part of the dissatisfaction is about power-sharing in the country. And my fear is, like the Sunni community in general from the '50s, '60s, '70s, it took decades to sit down with the Christian community and say, well, it's really about power-sharing. The Shiite community is so ideologically charged they do not talk about the Taif Agreement or its renegotiation.

(01:07:53)

That's where I fear this tension over the Lebanese formula of power-sharing, by not being expressed openly, might drag on for years and decades in this sort of, you know, the Shiite community having its own state effectively and not really participating in the Lebanese state because they feel they're not really full partners in it. That's what some of them feel. But they don't propose an alternative to this sort of open-ended crisis.

MR. NERGUIZIAN: Could I add to the positions? When we talk about the tribunal and this regional competition, we tend to forget that there's a sectarian volcano in Lebanon. The events in Bourj Abi Haida between Hizbollah and the Sunni Ahabash pro-Syrian movement has been portrayed as an Iranian-Syrian struggle over Lebanon and their policies in Lebanon; little, you know, disagreements. But really I think that is a case of wishful thinking.

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You have a scenario today not unlike that of the '70s whereby domestic actors have at the top level a layer of communication, entente, coordination and crisis management. But you have at the street level in a dense urban space a Shiite population that wants to let bygones be bygones with the Sunnis at the level of managing tensions.

And then you have a Sunni community that is increasing radicalized by the events of May 2008, and that's irregardless (sic) of their alignment with or against Syria which means that, as we calculate how to manage the regional order, this domestic sectarian volcano is not being checked appropriately.

(01:09:39)

So there needs to be a regional entente about how to manage Lebanon or else the possibility for miscalculation becomes that much worse. And then we'll stop talking about the tribunal and start talking about a civil contest, if not a civil war in Lebanon, to, as Paul said, to redraw the political distribution of power in Lebanon.

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you. Okay, yes.

Q: This is Dr. Sevil Hardi (sp) from Arab Institute for East and West Beirut, Lebanon. First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Paul and Dr. Aram for their lectures. I have a comment and a question for Dr. Salem. The comment on the structure which is really outstanding, would it not mention two elements are very important, the element of time and the element of legality.

The element of time, I do believe that Hizbollah and the people working with them, they're applying the strategy of time as the Syrians are too weak and the Iranians in order to gain more power and more ground. And this element of time they are trying really to delay the indictment of the international tribunal. And at the same time, they are preparing their new election for the parliament which these elections are going to be held on the beginning of 2014 because they discovered that the use of force as happened in 2008 on the 7th, 10th and 11th of May did not succeed, and the seizing of camp in Beirut did not succeed.

(01:11:52)

So I do believe that they are trying to win the elections and to appoint the new government, the new prime minister. Mr. Abdullah Himrod is ready. President Omar Karami is ready and even Matasumi Orta Amslam (ph). My question; Do you believe in this course of action, Dr. Salem, through the legal way through the parliaments and through the government really to corrupt and to prevent the consequences of the tribunal? Thank you.

Q: Hi, Susan Riggs, Department of State. I had a question about the role of Iran. On the one hand, you've got its client possibly being discredited in the eyes of the Lebanese if members of its organization are indicted in the assassination of Hariri. However, on the other hand, you've got Hizbollah as a potential wing of the Iranian army to attack Israel if Israel were to strike at Iran's nuclear capabilities. And so it has interest in not seeing Hizbollah get involved in a civil war in Lebanon. So where do you think they're going to try to use their hand in what's going on?

MR. SALEM: Well, I mean the Iranians certainly recognize that this tribunal issue is very bad for Hizbollah, very bad for their proxy force. They have been, according to the statements of Ahmadinejad, I think the Hizbollah strategy is to do a lot of saber rattling, a lot of threatening and then hope that the prime minister will climb down without action, without armed confrontation, without losing face on the street.

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Certainly, an indictment, if it comes out, will hurt Hizbollah's image in Lebanon and in the Arab and Sunni Muslim world considerably. However, that is not necessarily of great import. Hizbollah is not – its power is not because of its popularity. Its importance for Iran is because of its missile capacity and its ability to hurt Israel. It's an added benefit that it's been popular.

(01:14:10)

Within Lebanon, the friends of Hizbollah are and will remain friends of Hizbollah, and the opponents are and will remain opponents of Hizbollah with or without the indictment. The lines are so clearly drawn in Lebanon that the indictment will not probably change, you know, that very much.

It's also the case that those like Walid Jumblatt who said openly that, you know, his father was killed meaning indirectly by the Syrians, but he's gotten over it and politics is politics and you have to move on. So the separation between indictment, who did what to whom at what point and then your political choices need not be one and the same.

Certainly, the situation in Saudi Arabia which is Saad Hariri's main patron finds itself in, it finds itself in need of Syria's help, unable to confront Syria, unable to confront Iran directly neither in Lebanon nor in Iraq and hence not able to engage in a full confrontation in any one of those arenas.

So the overall situation would imply that the Saudis at some point would opt for a negotiated outcome to this. The tribunal itself will not bring actual fruits to Saad Hariri or to the Saudis. Even if indictments come out and even if the Lebanese government is still a member of this tribunal, it's clear to everybody in Lebanon that nobody's going to go and arrest members of Hizbollah. Nobody's going to be able to do anything to Hizbollah even if Lebanon maintains its relationship with the tribunal.

(01:15:54)

So in a way, the tribunal for Lebanon has already been defeated as it were because of the force on the ground. So I think Iran, as I indicated, and maybe in the next few days will try maybe with the Turks and with the Syrians and others to, you know, pull a rabbit out of the hat and find a compromise which would be satisfactory to Hizbollah and to Syria and Iran but would be somewhat face saving to the prime minister and to Saudi Arabia. Iran wants to expand its influence in that part of the world, would prefer to do that without making more enemies which would not be helpful for it.

On the issue of the legality and time and so on, I think the option of forming a different government which you mentioned is an option, but I think it's not the number one preference of Hizbollah because, as I mentioned in my talk, I think that and it's somewhat clear that they would prefer that the concession and the decision over the tribunal come from Saad Hariri and from his government because "wali dem" (ph), which in Arabic means, you know, the right of blood – it was his father who was killed. He can, in sort of tribal – you know, he can say, okay, I make the compromise. It's my family. I can do that.

Also, the issue now has become, as I was saying earlier, whipped up to such a fever in the Sunni community in Tripoli and in the north and in Beirut, it won't be that easy for Omar Karami to come right away and say, okay, I give in on the tribunal. It might be possible, but it's not terribly easy.

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So I think it is an option, but it's not the preferred option. They will try to squeeze Hariri and to get it from him. Either he will give it, or he will be attacked and squeezed further to give it or he will resign at which point then they have option number two which is to have a new government. All of this would happen in a matter of weeks or months, hence would not go through the issue of parliamentary elections which are years away. But a change of government could happen within a few weeks.

MR. NERGUIZIAN: I tend to concur with Paul's assessment of how the politics would play out in the legal context. Of course, ideally you would have a cabinet with teeth that could do – it could implement the affairs of state. But there's no state to speak of. This is more about the sectarian calculations of the Sunni community, how they want to defend their interests. The fact that really Saudi Arabia in many ways has lost Iraq means that Lebanon has become that much more important.

In terms of at least securing some of Saudi's interest in Lebanon which have more to do with the sustainability and survivability of Sunni interests in post-war Lebanon. So really the current set up whereby you have a Hariri government is one the Saudis want, one the Syrians want and one Hizbollah wants for all the reasons that Paul mentioned. He also has to factor in that now that he is in cabinet, unfortunately the lessons of geopolitics are such that difficult positions are de facto, and there aren't any good options for any Hariri government at this point given, A, the domestic balance of power and, B, their regional order vis-à-vis Lebanon.

(01:19:24)

In the absence of a regional shift and frankly a war would not bring a regional shift that would change and redress the balance of the country, what you have essentially now is exactly the events between 2005 through 2008 recycled and sent against the March 14 forces whereby the opposition is essentially dismantling the post-Hariri legacy trying to rewrite the narrative.

And there's this contest over Lebanon's future. But at the political level, nobody wants to really have anything but a Hariri government to deliver on some of these policy positions from the Syrian and Iranian standpoint. They would like Saad because essentially he would vindicate any effort to climb down from the tribunal and from the Saudi standpoint, well, right now there's nobody else that can carry that banner without killing the legitimacy of the Sunni community or undermining Saudi's interest. So there needs to be a bargaining process.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Now I'm afraid we don't have time for any more questions. It's time to wrap up the meeting. Please help me thank the speakers for a very, very interesting presentation. (Applause.)

MS. OTTAWAY: And thanks to all of you for coming.

(END)