

# MERIA

## THE FUTURE OF LEBANON Panel Discussion\*

The U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs (IIP) in Washington D.C., the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, and the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center jointly held an international videoconference seminar focusing on both domestic and foreign affairs in Lebanon. Israeli and U.S. experts examined the balance of and struggle for power in the country, external factors, and future prospects.

Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article. This seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series.

**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini:** Hizballah will have to decide whether it will remain within the country's framework; or whether it wants to pull another " Hamas," seize the territories it controls, and run them as a quasi-independent state. This could happen as a fact which is formally ignored or as part of a situation in which Lebanon has two governments.

There is no question that Hizballah represents the Shi'a on two counts only: It is the protector of all the gains that the Shi'a have made from 1975 until now, and the Shi'a are determined to maintain these gains. Two, there is no question that when it comes to Hizballah vs. Israel, the Shi'a community will back Hizballah. But Hizballah, in my opinion, has lost a lot of prestige in Lebanon—and in the Arab world—since the summer of 2006, due to its war with Israel as well as later events in which there have been clashes between communities.

As a result, everybody in Lebanon now views Hizballah as a Shi'a militia interested only in protecting Shi'a and Iranian interests. They no longer see Hizballah as "The

Liberating Movement." They are not liberating anything. An attempt by Hizballah to bring down an elected and representative Sunni prime minister is not accepted anywhere in the Sunni world. Statements have also been made by well-known Shi'as who violently disagree with Hizballah.

Hizballah, however, can wait. Seventeen years from now they will double in numbers, whereas the other Lebanese communities will not. But I think that the decision is not entirely for Hizballah to make. Iran and Syria are also involved in it. Syria in particular has less patience, since it wants to undermine Lebanon's current government to get rid of the possibility that an international tribunal will try Syrian leaders for assassinations in Lebanon. But I continue to say that the decision is really in the hands of Hizballah.

**Dr. Omri Nir:** The strengthening Shi'a community in Lebanon is not merely a matter of political mood or tactics, but also reflects the country's real situation. Given the demographic shift, I believe this is a kind of slow social and political revolution, which will eventually make the Shi'a the leading community in Lebanon. Neither the West or Israel is likely to have any influence on this process, though the Syrians could. Equally, it does not seem likely that there will be a serious alternative Shi'a leadership to Hizballah in the near future.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I hope, though, that no one underestimates the forces opposed to Hizballah within Lebanon. Clearly, the government coalition was not deterred by assassinations or other attacks, and the fact is that this side could well represent 60 to 65 percent of the population. They are not going

to give up and may well be able to resist a Hizballah takeover or letting that group have veto power. This will be especially true if the Lebanon government gets a sufficient amount of external help, which, after all, would only balance out the external help Hizballah is getting from Iran and Syria.

**Lee Smith:** A majority in Lebanon has stood up to Hizballah and seems willing to do so even at the risk of civil war.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** Again, I want to stress the importance of not considering a Hizballah takeover to be inevitable. Here are some mistakes made by Hizballah:

First, it threw away the chance to build an alliance with the Sunnis. By siding with the Syrian army's continued presence and being a client of Damascus—at a time when Syria was almost certainly involved in killing Rafiq Hariri, the most important Lebanese Sunni leader—Hizballah put itself up as an enemy of the Sunnis. Discarding the possibility of a Muslim front and pushing the Sunnis, most Christians, and Druze together made it far harder for Hizballah to manifest power over a Lebanese government.

Second, the 2006 war against Israel is less popular in Lebanon—at whose cost it was fought—than anywhere else in the Arabic-speaking world. There are deep and bitter resentments, enhanced by Hizballah's lack of follow-through regarding the reconstruction program. Another war with Israel is not going to promote Hizballah's domestic agenda.

Third is Hizballah's repeated showing of more loyalty to Syria and Iran than to Lebanon. For example, Hizballah did not walk out of the Lebanese government in order to demand better living standards for the Shi'a or more state investment in their neighborhoods but rather to kill the tribunal on Syria. While it might not be primarily an Islamist revolutionary movement, it also does not act as a Lebanese patriotic one. Hizballah acts as a Shi'a communal movement that is highly responsive to the interests of Damascus and Tehran.

Finally, after a long effort coupled with many threats, Hizballah did not succeed in expanding its power over the government. In other words, while Hizballah might do better in the future, its strategy and tactics have not been brilliantly successful.

**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini:** This brings us to a “wild card” development that greatly worries me. As a result of Hizballah's efforts to bring down the government, many jihadists and terrorists have been infiltrating Lebanon; not only the Nahr al-Barad clash, but also in Beirut, Sidon, and the north. All these are coming in with the supposed support of NGOs and money from the Gulf. The Sunnis, as we all know, never had a militia. What worries me is that if this threat continues, these jihadists may take the street away from Hariri and Siniora. I'm sure Hizballah is aware of this. That is why I say that the key is in their hands. Either they find a way to stop undermining the government or have two governments, which I really think is the beginning of partition.

**Dr. Omri Nir:** Regarding the situation in Shi'a politics, there are some new opposition voices to Hizballah. But these rivals don't have mass popular support. The only potential alternative is AMAL, which seems will continue to be weak in the short term. Still, AMAL controls 15 seats in the Lebanese parliament while Hizballah controls only 14. In south Lebanon, AMAL controls 84 village councils while Hizballah controls 87, which isn't much more.

The question is, what is preventing AMAL's leader Nabih Berri from being the alternative? There are reasons for such. The current political crisis is actually helping Hizballah. It prevented the possibility of the government, which had traditionally identified with AMAL, from leading a reconstruction effort, and thus left all projects to Hizballah and its Iranian funding. In contrast, Hizballah is the second largest employer in Lebanon after the government. More than 35,000 families receive salaries directly from Hizballah.

The other reason is that Berri has taken on a role as a mediator among factions, a situation that Hizballah accepts as benefiting itself. This is both his power and his weakness.

**Dr. Jonathan Spyer:** Israel's immediate concerns vis-à-vis Lebanon focus on what it considers excessively limited and partial implementation of UN Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, with regard to preventing arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanon border and strengthening the mandate of UNIFIL to enable it to take an active role in preventing Hizballah from rearming in the south.

It is now generally accepted that large-scale smuggling of arms from Syria to Hizballah has taken place since the ceasefire. A UN assessment team submitted its report to the Security Council to this effect. The Lebanese army, according to this report, lacks the experience, equipment, and unity necessary. And UNIFIL has failed even to deploy on this border. Thus, Hizballah has been rearmed contrary to the UNIFIL mandate.

There is also considerable evidence that Hizballah has largely rebuilt its military infrastructure from the damage suffered in the war, despite the presence of 8,800 UNIFIL and 12,000 Lebanese army forces ostensibly to prevent this. Israel wants to see UNIFIL deploy on the Lebanese-Syrian border and acquire rights to raid and inspect urban areas in the south—with a mandate under Chapter 6 instead of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter—enabling UNIFIL to engage Hizballah more forcefully. Whether or not this is feasible, without this happening, we can expect more crises and cross-border attacks in future.

Israel views events in Lebanon through the prism of its larger regional threat assessment, which sees Iran and its clients as the main regional threat. Lebanon, from the Israeli standpoint, is one of a number of regional theaters in which Iran and its clients are seeking to increase their power, with the threat of violence against Israel growing as their strength grows. Israeli officials consider that

none of the actors in this Iranian-led alliance want to initiate an immediate conflict with Israel. But this alliance has a strategic goal of opposition to Israel's existence, and the building of its strength in Lebanon is seen as a part of this stage in the long war and strategy. With Hizballah rearmed, it is therefore possible that renewed conflict is only a matter of time.

Regarding UNIFIL, it seems that its forces have accepted an extremely limited role, and a cynic could describe them as under the protection of Hizballah to an extent. It is not a question of them collapsing, but of them not doing anything. An Italian official told us that the UNIFIL forces were engaged in a number of laudable activities such as distributing toys to children, but when it came to Hizballah, he was very open: "We don't have the political will in Italy to have body bags come home."

If it comes to war again, the possibility of a deeper Israeli incursion is realistic. That means the possibility of Israel clashing with Syrian forces is very real.

**Lee Smith:** There is another problem with UNIFIL. If it proves ineffective, it will increase Syria's belief that the UN resolutions that pushed its army out of Lebanon and mandated an investigation of alleged Syrian terrorist attacks inside Lebanon can be disregarded. And European fear of having their forces in UNIFIL come under attack could also undermine European resolve regarding Middle East issues. This is a very dangerous situation.

Turning to U.S. policy, Lebanon is an extremely important example of how we can help a Middle East state behave like a state. A parallel—or contrast—should be drawn between the Lebanese government and the failed Fatah rule, through the Palestinian Authority, over Gaza.

Note the difference between the Lebanese government's performance now and what happened there in the 1970s. At that time, the Sunnis would not act against radical forces but rather took for granted that these groups and ideologies had to be treated as allies. In dealing with the Fatah al-Islam group, today,

however, a Sunni-led government in Lebanon—with the backing of the Gulf States and with general approval of Egyptians and Jordanians—went into the camps and took on a Palestinian militant group.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** There may not be any country in the world where external forces play such a major role as in Lebanon. My view is that Syria's number one priority is to get rid of the tribunal, and the number two priority is to regain control of Lebanon. We can discuss this in strategic, historic, and ideological terms, but we shouldn't forget economic terms. The asset of Lebanon is what has made up for failed Syrian policy to develop a workable economy.

Therefore, if Syria wants to get control of Lebanon, what strategies does it use? Syrian has many instruments in Lebanon, including Hizballah, Aoun, and a number of veteran politicians. There are also assets for violent actions including Hizballah, the Syrian National Party, Fatah al-Islam, and Syrian intelligence itself.

The approach has been to say to the Lebanese: "As long as Syria is not playing a principle role in Lebanon, you will know no peace; assassinations and acts of terror will show you that only under Syria's wing can you have quiet." In political terms, they have really pushed forward in support of Hizballah, and that may have been a major mistake. Perhaps they should have put more emphasis on traditional mainstream politicians they could control. After all, the president of Lebanon is a pro-Syrian politician. If they had played it that way, they could say to the Lebanese, "Look, we're not going to bring Shi'a control or an Islamist state that will threaten your way of life or communal interests." Instead, they have become entangled with a revolutionary movement belonging to one particular community. Yes there is Aoun, yes there are the old Sunni politicians, but they have really pinned their strategy on one sector.

For Syria, as for Hizballah, fighting Israel and taking over Lebanon can be very contradictory strategies. How much emphasis does Syria want to put on turning Lebanon into a point of military pressure against Israel? Here we have this very interesting series of developments on the Syrian diplomatic front. Using a diplomatic instrument, the Syrian regime goes to Europeans and the United States, telling them, "We will talk about getting the Golan Heights back but if you really want to buy us off, if you don't want another war with Israel or our making trouble for you in Iraq or instability in Lebanon, then give us the primary roles of Lebanon and in exchange get rid of the tribunal. Let us come back into Lebanon and become the hegemonic power, and then we can do things for you in other areas."

U.S. policy for the present has basically rejected that, but people are playing with the engagement idea. If there is a Democratic president in 2009 who wants to try that, we will see what happens. But I don't think the United States is going to hand Lebanon over to Syria. That is why I think talks with Syria would ultimately break down. The Syrians went to the Saudis and demanded too much in Lebanon, and the Saudis would not accept it. Then they went to the Europeans. In some cases, there are hints that they would accept such a deal though ultimately I don't think anything like that would happen.

So Syria is playing on violence, diplomacy, and internal Lebanese politics to promote its hegemony there.

In political terms, Iran is less important than Syria. The Iranian role in helping Hizballah through arms and money may be more important, but Iranian interests are more general regarding Lebanon itself. Sure they want a strong Hizballah to hit Israel, partly as a threat if anyone hits their nuclear program. We should never forget that Mr. Nasrallah is the official representative of Iran's supreme guide in Lebanon. But what does Iran want Hizballah to do in Lebanon?

Finally, in discussing external factors, it is absolutely essential to ask what sort of international support the Lebanese

government has. Are the Europeans, is the U.S., going to stand with Lebanon to counter Iranian and Syrian influence?

The Lebanese government is the most reliable U.S. ally in the Arab world. Despite what they say, the Egyptians and Saudis are not so willing to stand up to Iranian influence. But by the nature of their situation, the Lebanese government doesn't have a choice. It is on the front lines, and it has to combat them in order to survive. The importance of the Lebanese government from a U.S. policy point of view is extremely important and, I think, much unappreciated.

**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini:** Let me begin by saying there is a distinct difference between Hizballah and AMAL. As far as the Shi'a community as a whole, they look at Hizballah as a religious link with Iran. It has that kind of legitimacy. AMAL is seen basically as purely a Syrian instrument and nothing more. There is no doubt that Nabih Berri has been able to use his position to get many Shi'a employed in the government, in big business. There isn't a single hotel, airline, or casino, and whatnot that have not been forced to hire Shi'a employees. But the Shi'a community as a whole has no great respect for Nabih Berri.

In contrast, the Syrians have full trust in Nabih Berri, because he is their man. They created him, they continue to support him, they are the architects of the electoral alliance between AMAL and Hizballah that allowed Nabih Berri to get the number of votes that he got. It was imposed on Hizballah. The Syrians, on the other hand, do not trust Hizballah, because they see its loyalty to being with Iran much more than Syria.

As for the Lebanese army, it held together in recent years, because everybody in Lebanon wanted it to. The minute a Lebanese party like Hizballah decides it doesn't care about whether the Lebanese army unravels, the Lebanese army will unravel. It's as simple as that.

The army does not have the training or equipment to control the border and stop arms smuggling. They are stretched between Nahr al-Barad, the south, and keeping order in

Beirut. There is no way the Lebanese army is going to take on Hizballah in order to disarm them, because aside from the lack of political will to do so, it would lose. The Lebanese army doesn't know how to fight insurgency. It took them a whole month to get rid of 300 jihadists in Nahr al-Barad. It is not going to be able to go down into the strongholds of Hizballah.

As far as Israel and Hizballah, I am very convinced that Israel cannot beat Hizballah without first taking on Syria. Period. Israel can go all the way to Beirut and push back Hizballah, and Hizballah will fall back and fall back and end up in the Christian areas with nobody being able to stop them. But ultimately, Israel has to withdraw. And ultimately, Hizballah will come back. The only way to change the equation in Lebanon is to change the equation in Syria. Without that, any war with Hizballah is a losing war as far as I am concerned. It produces temporary results, but gets you nowhere.

Now everybody is convinced that if there will be a coup in Syria it is going to be the Sunni Islamists who take over. Well, maybe. But I am convinced that if there is a successful coup in Syria, it would lead to a civil war in the country between Alawites and Sunnis, which could last ten to 20 years. And it may give the region time to organize some peace while this is going on. But I see no way that anybody can win in Lebanon without first attacking Syria, one way or the other. And I don't see the Syrians changing. As far as I am concerned, as long as George W. Bush is in the White House, and as long as there are 160,000 soldiers in Iraq, the Syrians will feel threatened. So they will continue the game they play.

I do not believe that Iran has the same interests in Lebanon that Syria has. And I am sure the last thing the Iranians want at this stage is for Hizballah to engage Israel in another war, because they would prefer to save this card for a situation in which Israel attacked the nuclear sites in Iran. Then, I believe, Hizballah will start launching its missiles at Israel. And I don't think the

Iranians want a wasted war again, as last summer's war was from their standpoint.

I very much appreciate the efforts of the U.S. government to back the Lebanese government, and it certainly helps a great deal. But in the end, I don't think the United States has a policy as to whom and how there might be a president of Lebanon who is not pro-Syrian. We are hoping somehow that the March 14 alliance can somehow put it together and come up with something, and I think the March 14 alliance is sending us a lot of hot air on that issue because they keep telling us, "Wait until mid-November, and by then the March 8 alliance will give in and we will elect the person we want." I don't see Hizballah giving in. Why should they give in?

**Dr. Omri Nir:** I believe that right now most Shi'as see Hizballah as the best platform to promote their social and political ambitions. We saw that in a very short period of time in the mid-1970s, many Shi'as moved from supporting Communists to supporting AMAL, which had strong Shi'a religious elements and a very Lebanese orientation; and within a few more years, most of them had moved on to support Hizballah, which ideologically is the opposite of the Communist party.

Hizballah had to water down its Islamist ideology from where it was at the beginning, in the mid-1980s. There is hardly a difference between Hizballah's official statement to the Lebanese public and the AMAL ideology, which hasn't changed since the mid-1970s on domestic issues, internal Palestinian issues, its attitude toward Israel, and on many other points. Hizballah moved toward "Lebanonism" and adopted most of AMAL's ideology while most of the Shi'a public moved from AMAL to Hizballah.

Prof. Rubin said that Lebanon is perhaps the state that has been most interrupted by international forces in modern history. There is a reason for that. The political balance brings Lebanon to a situation in which the central authority has to be weak. Otherwise, there will not be a balance. And because it is so weak, it is actually inviting outside intervention.

The process in which the Shi'as will become the hegemonic group in Lebanese society and politics is unavoidable. And in light of this assumption, the only way that the West, the United States, and Israel can assert a certain degree of control over this natural process is through Syria. The paradox here for the Americans, as Mr. Smith said, is that some day, the regime in Syria will become Sunni. Thus, you are supposed to put your money on a regime that at some point in the future will no longer exist. Lebanon is also a battlefield in this struggle between the Iranian challenge and American hegemony.

In addition, it is involved in the greater regional struggle between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. And again, the United States is faced with a dilemma here. If it supports the Sunnis, it has to deal with the fact that most Islamist groups in the region are Sunni; and if it backs the Shi'a, this is taking the side of Iran. So it is not a choice between good and bad, but rather a choice between bad, very bad, and very, very bad.

**Lee Smith:** That is an interesting way to end it, between bad and very bad, but I wanted to comment on a couple of things in Dr. Nir's presentation. Lebanon is important to Syria, it is important to Saudi Arabia, it is important to Iran, but it is not any of those places. This is why Lebanon is a somewhat hopeful place in the region, although as Dr. Spyer said, it is a theater for a very dangerous war. One of the things we saw is that the United States began to understand that although it was trying to balance different interests, it finally came to the realization that the Iranians were fighting very hard throughout the region.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I think the central point in this discussion has emerged. What we ought to focus on is, whether or not the fall of the current government and the replacement by the hegemony of Hizballah, however tight or loose, take place. I'm not convinced it is going to happen. I'm not convinced their victory is inevitable. But clearly this is the most important issue and an essential one for

policymakers to focus on, because if Hizballah were to become the main factor in the government of Lebanon, this would be a tremendous triumph for radical forces, Iran, Syria, and the Islamists.

**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini:** Barry, I agree with you. I don't think Hizballah is going to become the dominant force in the next year, or even the next three or four years. There is no question that if Hizballah wanted to take Beirut, it could do so tomorrow. Sixty percent of the Lebanese army is Shi'a, half of them owe allegiance to Hizballah, and moreover it has its own forces, of course. But trying to seize power and holding it means civil war with the Sunnis, Christians, and Druze united on the other side. Even Michel Aoun would have to abandon Hizballah.

With Hizballah representing Shi'a interests in Lebanon, it is attempting to have a stronger voice in Lebanese affairs, to consolidate the gains they have made, and to make sure they are enshrined in a new understanding. I think the Shi'a would like a new political formula for Lebanon: one-third Shi'a, one-third Sunni-Druze, and one-third Christian. I think Syria would love to come back and play a role. But Syria knows that 90 percent of the Lebanese, including the Shi'a, don't want them physically back in Lebanon.

My concern is basically that when November arrives, there is no way to get out of that crisis. I worry about the threat of having two governments. That to me is the beginning of partition. I very much worry about the emergence of private security services all over Beirut and other Christian places. That is the beginning of militias. There is also the arrival of jihadists from all over the Arab world. I am beginning to worry that maybe one tactic for Syria and Hizballah is to create partition with the army acting as a neutral force, preventing them from fighting each other. That is where I see we are going.

**Lee Smith:** To say a few quick things on the Shi'a role in Lebanon, Dr. Nir says that he believes it is inevitable that at a certain point the Shi'a will constitute the majority and

dictate the future direction of Lebanon. That is not the way the Lebanese system works. I don't think that the Lebanese will permit that to happen. Certainly it is prevented by the constitution. I don't see that happening, because the rest of Lebanese society wouldn't permit it.

Dr. Jureidini says that he believes what the majority of the Shi'a want is for their rights to be enshrined in Lebanese politics and Lebanese society, as Hizballah and AMAL have helped do in the last 20 years. I don't know that is what a majority of the Shi'a want. I think Hizballah just wants to block the tribunal. They want veto power.

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**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini** is a consultant to a number of corporations and private business enterprises. He is also director and senior associate of Jureidini & McLaurin. From 1975 to 1995, Dr. Jureidini served as Vice President at Abbott Associates. From 1961 to 1975, he was at the American Institutes for Research, where he filled the positions of director of the Middle East Center in the Center for Research in Social Systems as well as chief of the Middle East/Africa Branch in the Cultural Information Analysis Center. In addition to articles and research studies, Dr. Jureidini has authored seven books on the Middle East and has been a substantial contributor to six others.

**Dr. Omri Nir** is a lecturer at Tel Aviv University, Hebrew University, and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His fields of expertise are Lebanese politics, Lebanese Shi'as, and Shi'as in the Arab world. Among his publications, he has written "The Shi'ites during the 1958 Lebanese Crisis," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (November 2004). Forthcoming publications include "Shi'ite Politics in Lebanon: Between Arabism, Shi'ism and Lebanonism", and a political biography of Nabih Berri.

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**Lee Smith** is a visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC and a journalist who contributes to a number of different publications on Arab and Islamic affairs, including *The New York Times*, [Slate.com](http://Slate.com), *The Boston Globe* and *Wired*. Smith, who has been based in the Middle East most of the last six years, covered Israel's war against Hezbollah last summer and has extensive first-hand knowledge of the Lebanese political arena, having lived there for two years. Smith's book on the Middle East, *A Wilderness of Tigers: Politics, Society, Culture and the Clash of Middle Eastern Civilizations*, is forthcoming from Doubleday in the Fall of 2008.

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