

PolicyWatch #1375

Lebanese Crisis Ends: Hizballah Victory or Temporary Truce?

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On May 21, after five days of mediation, Qatari officials announced a compromise solution to the Lebanese crisis between the pro-Western government and Hizballah-led opposition backed by Iran and Syria. According to preliminary reports, the negotiations centered on presidential elections and electoral reform, yet avoided the critical issue of Hizballah's weapons. Although details are still emerging, the broad outline of the agreement suggests that Hizballah has translated, at least temporarily, its May 7 military victory into a political victory. But given the potential outcome of the 2009 parliamentary elections, the Shiite group's victory may be short lived.

Background

In early May, the Lebanese government, led by the "March 14" ruling coalition, objected to Hizballah's telecommunications network and its control over Lebanon's international airport. The cabinet subsequently decided to remove the network and install an airport officer that was not sympathetic to the Shiite organization. In reaction, Hizballah cried foul and demanded that the government back down.

When the coalition stood its ground, Hizballah forces temporarily occupied Beirut. Nearly one hundred Lebanese were killed and 250 were wounded in the worst fighting since the country's fifteen-year civil war that ended in 1991. After three days of fighting -- which included Hizballah's failed attempt to storm the Shouf mountain preserve of March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt -- the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) stepped in and enforced a de-escalation. However, in the face of Hizballah's overwhelming military might, and the LAF's unwillingness to protect national institutions, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his coalition capitulated to Hizballah's demands on May 14, and revoked the cabinet decisions. This constituted a humiliation for the already weak Lebanese government.

While the military operation demonstrated Hizballah's planning and operational experience, the militia's reputation was also severely diminished. By turning the arms of "the resistance" against its fellow countrymen -- something the militia swore it would never do -- Hizballah effectively undercut its regional and local legitimacy. It also ended the longstanding fiction that the Shiite party was committed to Lebanese democracy.

Perhaps the biggest loser in recent weeks, however, was Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Although politically allied with Hizballah, he watched the fighting from the sidelines. Lebanese surveys, the 2007 by-election results, and a large body of anecdotal reporting suggest that Aoun's popularity among his Christian constituency has slipped since he signed a February 2006 memorandum of understanding with Hizballah. The occupation of Beirut was extremely unpopular among the majority of non-Shiite Lebanese, and will undoubtedly take a further toll on Aoun's political fortunes.

The Anatomy of the Deal

The Qatari-brokered deal contained four main provisions:

National unity government. When the Siniora government was established in 2005, Hizballah controlled several key cabinet ministries. But in November 2006, the organization left the government to protest the majority's support for the international tribunal investigating the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri. Since then, Hizballah has demanded the formation of a "National Unity Government" -- codeword for an opposition veto (or "blocking third") -- in the Lebanese cabinet. The March 14 coalition had long resisted this demand, but in Qatar, the government agreed to give the opposition eleven of the thirty cabinet seats. With more than a third of the cabinet, the Shiite group can block major government initiatives.

Presidential elections. For months, the Arab League was trying to broker a compromise on the Lebanese presidential elections. The post, which must be held by a Maronite Christian, has been vacant since November 2007. Months ago, a parliamentary consensus was reached to elect LAF chief of staff Michel Suleiman, but the agreement unraveled in the face of Syrian opposition, which at that time deemed him unreliable. In Qatar, Hizballah and the government agreed to immediately elect Suleiman as president. Following the LAF performance during Hizballah's May offensive, Syria and Hizballah appear to have accepted Suleiman, who was selected as chief of staff by Damascus nine years ago.

Electoral reform. A longstanding contentious issue in Lebanese politics has been electoral reform. The 2005 parliamentary elections that brought the March 14 coalition to power were conducted under a law designed by Damascus to strengthen pro-Syrian elements in Lebanon. In Qatar, Hizballah agreed to a redistricting and reapportionment of parliamentary seats in Beirut. These changes should work in favor of the March 14 coalition and to the disadvantage of Aoun. It is unclear whether the system that ultimately is adopted throughout the state will be the 1960 law or some other plan, such as that devised by former Lebanese minister of parliament Fouad Boutros. It is likely, however, that the new electoral system will not address longstanding Shiite grievances about gerrymandering that has resulted in underrepresentation in parliament -- an issue that fuels Shiite support for Hizballah.

Discussion of weapons. In the aftermath of Hizballah's "coup," the group's weaponry was a top agenda item for the government, but both the Qataris and Hizballah prevented any serious discussion on the issue. In the end, it was agreed that a national dialogue -- chaired by incoming president Suleiman -- would discuss "weapons of organizations." This "solution" suggests that nothing will be done about Hizballah's weapons anytime soon.

A Hizballah Victory?

The Doha agreement gives Hizballah its top priority -- a "blocking third" in the cabinet -- without making any real concessions on its weapons. Essentially, its modus operandi of using its military power to wrest concessions from the government was validated.

For the March 14 ruling coalition, this deal, while setting a problematic precedent, does not really change the status quo on the ground. As the May showdown with Hizballah demonstrated, even without the "blocking third," the Shiite militia is able to veto major government decisions. Hizballah's increased role in the cabinet will not change this dynamic. On the plus side, changes in the electoral law may place March 14 in a slightly better position for the May 2009 parliamentary elections.

The apportionment of cabinet seats, while not optimal, is also not as bad as it could have been. March 14 clearly mistrusts Suleiman, and as such, limited his selection of cabinet seats to three. Even if Suleiman appoints Hizballah-sympathetic ministers, the opposition will still not control a majority of the seats in cabinet, and consequently will not be able to make decisions at will. The wild card is who will be placed in charge of which ministries -- particularly defense and interior.

U.S. Policy Implications

For Washington, these developments should prompt a reevaluation of how it supports the Lebanese

government. Since 2005, the administration's strategy to strengthen Beirut has been primarily to support the LAF: from 2005 to 2008, Washington provided more than \$250 million in military assistance to the army, making Lebanon the second largest per capita recipient of U.S. military funding in the world. However, during the crisis, the LAF did nothing to protect the government and national institutions because of the fear that intervention would cause the army to fragment along sectarian lines. Support for the LAF is a long-term project, but will do little in the short run to help U.S. allies in Beirut.

Given the stakes, it is imperative that Washington move beyond rhetoric and develop effective measures to support its pro-Western allies. Particularly important will be ways to enhance the electoral prospects of Siniora and his political allies in advance of the 2009 parliamentary vote. In the meantime, Washington should continue to work with the Lebanese government, avoiding contact with Hizballah ministers -- but working with lower level ministry officials -- as it did in 2005-2006. In addition, the administration should find ways to highlight the emptiness of Hizballah's "resistance" rhetoric, focusing on the fact that the Iranian and Syrian-backed group used its weapons against other Lebanese. For now, civil war has been forestalled, not avoided. Washington needs to do what it can in the time before elections to see that democracy hoists Hizballah by its own petard.

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