

PolicyWatch #1372

Showdown between Hizballah and Beirut

By [David Schenker](#)

May 9, 2008

This week, the democratically elected, pro-Western Lebanese government took the bold and unprecedented decision to confront Hizballah. Since its election in 2005, the government had avoided direct conflict with the well-armed Shiite militant political party, but several of the organization's activities -- including apparent preparations for yet another war with Israel -- led the government to provoke a showdown. In response to a May 8 cabinet statement that focused on Hizballah's "attack on the sovereignty of the state," the Shiite organization took to the streets. In the ensuing violence -- the most intense since Lebanon's civil war -- Hizballah began occupying parts of Beirut, leaving the future of Lebanon in doubt.

Background

The current violence in Lebanon should be viewed in the context of the ongoing presidential crisis. Despite months of Arab League mediation, the government has been unable to agree with the pro-Syrian, Hizballah-led opposition on a compromise presidential candidate. The position has been vacant since November 2007, and has fueled tensions ever since.

Last week, these tensions spiked when the government reportedly discovered a Hizballah surveillance camera at Beirut airport, and responded by removing the camera and ordering Brig. Gen. Wafiq Choucair -- a Hizballah sympathizer and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) officer in charge of the facility -- to be rotated. The move elicited swift condemnation from Hizballah, which called for demonstrations demanding his reinstatement.

On May 7, the cabinet met to discuss the matter and issued a ministerial statement the following day confirming its decision to remove Choucair. The cabinet likewise resolved that it would no longer tolerate Hizballah's dedicated fiber optic network, which the government considers "illegal."

Hizballah's Dedicated Fiber Optic Network

Years ago, Hizballah established a network of landline telephones as part of its military infrastructure. According to the Lebanese press in 2006, the phone lines extended throughout south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, the hub of Hizballah military operations. During the 2006 summer war with Israel, despite intense Israeli bombardments, these communications were not compromised.

Although UN Security Council Resolution 1701 mandated an expanded UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) presence south of the Litani River to monitor Hizballah and prevent its military reconstitution, the organization retrenched north of the river, building new bases and tunnel systems outside UNIFIL jurisdiction. As part of this new infrastructure, Hizballah -- supported financially by Iran's Fund For Reconstruction and Development -- built miles of new roads and fiber optic cable.

More disturbing to the Lebanese government, however, was the discovery in 2007 that this communications network extended to Beirut. Not only did these lines reach Dahyia -- the Hizballah-controlled Shiite southern

suburb of Beirut -- they also penetrated the heart of the city, including, according to Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamade, areas surrounding the seat of government. This presented both a security problem and an economic challenge to the state, which derives more than 38 percent of its revenue from telecom profits and taxes.

Intrigue at the Airport

It has been taken for granted for a long time that Hizballah controls Lebanon's international airport. As with Dahyia, where the central government exercises virtually no authority, the 2005 Cedar Revolution did little to change the dynamics at the airport. There is much speculation as to the purpose of Hizballah's surveillance camera, but at a minimum, this asset could assist Hizballah, Syria, and Iran to monitor the movement of anti-Syrian Lebanese officials, and perhaps even facilitate kidnappings or murders. "March 14" member of parliament and Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt suggested that Hizballah could employ this camera if it choose to target a civilian airliner with a surface-to-air missile.

Hizballah's Response

The May 8 ministerial statement was a red line for Hizballah, and the militia went immediately to the streets. Over the past two days, Hizballah forces have shut down the Beirut airport road, while government supporters have clashed with its fighters both inside and outside Beirut. Dozens of injuries resulting from gunfire have been reported, and on Thursday the violence appeared to intensify, with the use of RPGs and automatic weapons. By Friday, Hizballah had taken control of much of Beirut.

In a press conference on May 9, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah blamed the government for the crisis, describing its May 8 statement as tantamount to a "declaration of open war." He also criticized the government for engineering a potential confrontation between the LAF and Hizballah. Moreover, Nasrallah denied that Choucair was affiliated with the group, and said that his removal undermined the institution of the army. He then attributed the government initiative at the airport to a conspiracy to transform the facility into "a base for the CIA, FBI, and the Mossad." As for the targeting of the dedicated telecommunication lines, Nasrallah termed it an attack on the resistance "on behalf of the U.S. and Israel."

Nasrallah said that he hoped to resolve the current conflict through political means, whether through "dialogue, elections, or a referendum," yet at the same time, he upped the ante by conditioning the dialogue with the reinstatement of Choucair.

It is unclear what will happen if neither the government nor Hizballah backs down. At the press conference, Nasrallah repeatedly stated that the "weapons of the resistance" would not be used in Lebanon. But he followed these statements with the contradictory -- and ominous -- clarification that Hizballah would indeed use its military strength to defend "its weapons" and the resistance.

Timing of the Provocation

The timing of the confrontation suggests that March 14 and the Lebanese government recognize that time is not on their side. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the May 8 ministerial statement was issued just one day before a scheduled UN Security Council discussion of Lebanon. In this context, the government decision to emphasize Hizballah's violations of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 represents a call for deeper and more effective international action on Lebanon.

Another factor in the decision to provoke Hizballah is the impending establishment of the international tribunal investigating the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Senior Syrian officials are leading suspects so the Lebanese government may have concluded that it would be best to take the initiative rather than await a renewed campaign of assassinations geared toward toppling the government through attrition.

Finally, government action may have, at least in part, been driven by U.S. domestic politics. If Beirut saw conflict with Hizballah as inevitable -- as it probably did -- then it may have calculated that the Bush administration would be more likely to stand by the Lebanese government than a new administration.

Conclusion

Regardless of what drove the timing of the standoff, it appears the government miscalculated. Sadly, for Washington, there are few realistic policy options to reverse the Hizballah coup. It is highly unlikely that the UN -- which failed to even prevent the rearming of Hizballah -- would agree to more dangerous deployments in Lebanon.

Given the bleak prospects, all eyes are on the LAF, considering the pivotal role it could play on the ground. But so far, it has not intervened. The United States may have some influence with the LAF since Washington has provided it nearly \$250 million in assistance since 2006, including key logistical support. Last spring, Washington dispatched forty C130 aircraft loaded with military material to Lebanon that helped tip the balance in favor of the LAF in its battle against the al-Qaeda-affiliated Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared camp.

With so much at stake, now is the time for Washington to use whatever leverage it might have to encourage the LAF to fulfill its national responsibility to protect Lebanese institutions. Concerned about the potential fragmentation of the military, LAF senior leadership is typically loath to insinuate the army into this kind of affair. In this case, however, they should be pressed to make an exception because if the LAF does not act soon, Lebanese sovereignty may become a thing of the past.

David Schenker is a senior fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute.

Copyright 2008 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy