



## *USIPeace Briefing*

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# **Half Full or Half Empty: *Assessing Prospects for Peace in Lebanon***

By Alistair Harris

On the surface, peace has broken out in Lebanon, bringing to an end the 18-month political impasse between the governing March 14<sup>th</sup> coalition and opposition March 8<sup>th</sup> parties. Following a week of sectarian violence in Beirut, Tripoli and the Chouf mountains—the worst since the end of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war in 1990—the opposing sides agreed to undertake talks in Qatar to resolve their longstanding political stalemate. The Qatari-sponsored Doha Accord that broke the logjam paved the way for the May 25 election of former Army Commander Michel Suleiman as a consensus president, to be closely followed by the formation of a national unity government and the adoption of a revised election law. The re-invigoration of Lebanon’s political institutions, the opening of parliament and ending of the presidential vacuum are welcome signs of a return to what passes for normalcy among Lebanon’s confessional elites; they are not however a return to the *status quo ante*. For many months Arab League Chairman Amr Moussa, like French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, had tried to cajole the Lebanese belligerents into a compromise deal based on the much-vaunted concept of “no victor, no vanquished”. These efforts failed. The fact that Doha succeeded where others did not is a clear indicator that there were indeed winners and losers. Therein lies the potential for future conflict.

### **The Opposition’s Long Game**

The Hezbollah-led opposition has played a masterful hand. With the Doha Accord-stipulated cabinet division of 16 ministers for the government, 11 for the opposition and 3 selected by the president, Hezbollah has achieved its goal of securing a veto on cabinet decisions by ensuring it can use its “blocking third” to quash decisions with which it disagrees. This, coupled with the violent events that erupted on May 7, 2008 and no mention of Hezbollah’s weapons in the Doha Accord, confirm that there will be no discussion of disarming Hezbollah’s resistance fighters in the immediate future.

There have been claims that the dramatic takeover of West Beirut by the opposition forces of Hezbollah, Amal and the allied Syrian Socialist National Party was a clever trap set by March 14<sup>th</sup> and their U.S. and Sunni allies. According to this argument, by crossing the red line of using their weapons against fellow citizens, the Hezbollah-led resistance has been de-legitimized in the eyes of the Lebanese. Yet whether this logic holds depends on very differing perspectives. Through its actions Hezbollah has confirmed that it is not only the pre-eminent armed force in Lebanon, capable of routing the amateurish fighters of Saad Hariri’s *Al-Moustaqbal* (“The

Future”) movement in a matter of hours, but also that it is equally capable of increasing its political share at the cabinet table. While Hezbollah’s impressive military arsenal remains intact and evidently unassailable militarily, it has also ensured sufficient political capital to veto any Lebanese government decision. Set against these realities, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s statement that the Hezbollah militia had been weakened by recent events looks decidedly optimistic.

### **Decline and Fall: March 14<sup>th</sup>**

Despite an impressive array of supporters, from the U.S. and European powers to Lebanon’s traditional Sunni power-brokers, once the opposition walked out of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora’s Cabinet in late 2006, the March 14<sup>th</sup>-led government’s days were numbered. Many external actors failed to understand that this contest did not simply reduce to a struggle between the forces of democracy and an Iranian/Syrian-backed illegitimate Shiite militia. Notably, Lebanon’s Christian population was split between the government and the opposition. While it has become common practice to equate the March 14<sup>th</sup>-led government with the democratic forces that participated in the March 2005 Cedar Revolution, the largest Christian political block, General Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement, was both central to the Cedar Revolution and later a key opposition stalwart.

Although the parties’ true electoral strength will only be apparent following next year’s parliamentary election, the Hezbollah-led opposition likely represents a plurality, if not outright majority, of Lebanon’s citizens. The March 14<sup>th</sup> forces’ decline has been inexorable as the opposition slowly suffocated the political, social and economic life of Lebanon. The walkout of the opposition’s cabinet ministers in November 2006, coupled with the closure of parliament by Speaker and opposition leader Nabih Berri, paralyzed Lebanon’s political institutions. Besieged in his office, surrounded by razor wire and an encampment of opposition protesters that forced the temporary closure or relocation of much of Beirut’s central business district, Prime Minister Siniora appeared increasingly powerless. The government’s attempts to replace the Hezbollah-affiliated head of security at Beirut airport and investigate a Hezbollah-operated non-state communications network provoked a vociferous response from Hezbollah, which gained control of much of Beirut in a massive show of its military might and forced the government to back down from its demands. That Lebanon’s Civil War was resolved in the Saudi city of Tai’f, but the latest round of violence concluded in the Qatari capital, confirmed the diminished role of the regional Sunni supporters of the March 14<sup>th</sup> alliance.

### **E Pluribus Unum<sup>1</sup>: The Role of the Lebanese Security Forces**

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces have been heavily criticized for their passive posture during the violent clashes in early May. The army defended its stance stating that its unity would be threatened if it intervened in what was essentially an internal conflict. Nonetheless, many senior officers expressed their shame at the army’s inactivity, concluding that the army had indeed taken a position by being unwilling to protect private citizens and property in West Beirut, thus violating its claim to be for the people, even if it was neutral. As armed opposition elements handed seized ground to the LAF, seasoned Lebanese joked that the army had become the civilian wing of the resistance. In Tripoli, Sunnis disgusted with the military performance of their coreligionists in Beirut commented that it was a mistake to extinguish the Sunni militant *Fatah al-Islam* group last year; their hatred of the Shia could have

been put to good use. The opposition's sweeping military success coupled with the army's non-interference holds several potential consequences. Most significantly, re-arming across Lebanon's confessional lines may continue as communities conclude that they cannot rely on the state's security forces to defend them in any future confrontation. More ominously, extremist Sunni groups may flourish in response to the perceived increased threat to their community.

### **Securing Lebanon: The Quest for National Identity**

Traveling to Beirut's airport and seeing the posters for U.S. fast food chains jostle with placards commemorating Imad Mugniyeh, the assassinated former head of Hezbollah's Special Operations unit, one could be forgiven for thinking Lebanon had an identity crisis. The key to conflict prevention is inclusive dialogue and participatory and equitable modes of governance underpinned by agreement on national identity. The challenge for the leaders of Lebanon's diverse communities will be to build consensus around these questions free from external influence. This will not be easy with Lebanon seen by many as a proxy battleground for the U.S.'s confrontation with Syria and Iran, and the rise of the opposition as a threat to U.S., Israeli and regional Sunni interests. Much of course depends on Hezbollah's bottom line and perceptions of their recent actions. To some, the resistance's actions were an armed coup, a step that will be consolidated by an increase in Hezbollah ministerial portfolios. This is seen as a victory for the reactionary forces in Iran and Syria, a threat to Israel's national security, a challenge to regional Sunni interests and a grave danger to Lebanon's confessional balance. In a speech the day after the presidential election, calls by Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah for Israel's destruction and support for attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq will likely exacerbate concerns. Others will stress Nasrallah's comments that Hezbollah does not wish to run Lebanon and that as such the post-Doha era will be characterized by a more equitable power-sharing agreement that protects Lebanon's ability to resist Israel and secure full territorial sovereignty.

### **The Role of Institutions**

The incoming Lebanese president's emphasis on the importance of Lebanon's resistance to Israel will make many uncomfortable. But President Suleiman stressed the value of resistance within a national defense strategy. This can be interpreted as an attempt to promote national over sectarian interests. The challenge is to broaden the concept of national struggle or resistance from the narrow preserve of a particular group to a national drive to resist all forms of external manipulation of Lebanon's democratic institutions and revisit the urgent need for a national defense strategy.

Seen from one perspective, the election of President Suleiman, a new and more representative national unity government and electoral law reform offer opportunities to further political dialogue and move closer to the 1989 Ta'if Agreement goals of abandoning political sectarianism in Lebanon, promoting institutional development and achieving a true national identity—Lebanon first.

The other interpretation is less positive. In a protracted coup, Hezbollah and their external backers have consolidated their grip on the Lebanese state. They will control all key government decisions, from the weapons of the resistance to the U.N.-sponsored International Tribunal to try the killers of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Their military prowess is unassailable and

their ability to smuggle weapons by land or air unchallenged. Recent events have confirmed that the Lebanese Armed Forces will not move against the resistance, regardless of the stipulations of U.N. Security Council Resolutions.

A comparison of President Suleiman and Hassan Nasrallah's speeches signals, however, that a new opportunity exists for Lebanon to launch a consensual debate around the need for a national defense strategy. As part of this process, Lebanon must focus on key national security issues that will enhance consensus, support institutional cohesion and promote national identity:

- The role of non-state weapons
- Security sector reform
- The International Tribunal and the wave of political assassinations that have plagued the country
- Border demarcation with Syria
- Resolving the Shebaa farms dispute with Israel
- The threat posed by Sunni militant forces within Lebanon targeting Lebanese security forces and international peacekeepers alike.

Over half of all states emerging from civil war slip back into war within five years. Lebanon's post-civil war position was frozen until 2005 by the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Since the Syrian departure in 2005, the clock has started counting down again. As the celebratory gunfire fades away, the leaders of Lebanon's confessions need to respond to the wake-up call that left dozens dead earlier this month. If Lebanon cannot or is not permitted to peacefully negotiate a *modus vivendi* based on a common understanding of national security, interest and identity, as well as the promotion of state institutions at the expense of traditional confessional oligarchs, the presidential celebrations may well be short-lived.

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<sup>1</sup> "E Pluribus Unum" is Latin for "Out of Many, One."