

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**Middle East Series**

**07/03**



# Balancing Lebanon

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**January 2007**

**Defence Academy of the United Kingdom**

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## **Key Points**

- \* The precarious balance prevailing in Lebanon has been upset through recent developments. It should be restored for the sake of Lebanon's future.
- \* Lebanon's Shi'a have genuine political and economic grievances that need to be dealt with. Doing this will increase the legitimacy of the state and thereby decrease the need for Hizballah as an alternative to it.
- \* A non-inclusive government will not be able to make decisions on vital matters. A national unity government needs to be established to deal with paramount issues like the Hariri tribunal, the Paris III donor conference, and Hizballah's military presence.
- \* Lebanon is too fragile a state to be used as a tool in a greater geo-political power struggle. Extrenal pressure on Lebanon should be eased to allow it to work out its own problems.
- \* Another conference on power sharing, in the vein of the Ta'if Conference of 1989, is to be recommended.

# Balancing Lebanon

**Pieter Koekenbier**

## **Introduction**

Lebanon is in trouble. It has enjoyed 15 years of relative stability since the end of the 1975-1990 war. But recent developments – the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the ensuing Syrian withdrawal, the 34-day Israel-Hizballah war of summer 2006 – have allowed fissures to come to the surface again, fissures that had been glossed over but never mended. A prevailing mood of optimism in the wake of the 14 March 2005 demonstrations has rapidly evaporated and has been replaced by despair over the future – so much so that able Lebanese are once again leaving the country to build up lives elsewhere. These fissures have to be owned up to if they are not to tear Lebanon's fabric apart once again.

## **Lebanon's failing system**

Lebanon, since its independence in 1943, has been governed through a consociational system. Its largest communities<sup>1</sup> are guaranteed a share of government and legislative power, originally loosely based on demographic proportionality. Since there hasn't been a census since 1932, however, this proportionality is now utterly disproportionate. The Lebanese civil war was partly the result of pressures on this rigid system (and partly of more external pressures, as we shall see below) and the 1989 Ta'if Accord which ended it modified the rules of political engagement. By doing so, however, it once again set the new rules in stone, thereby preventing any change to the system.

It is true that Ta'if is officially committed to the abolishment of political sectarianism. This, however, is an impossibility without the simultaneous abolishment of popular sectarianism. If the current political quotas are abolished, but people do pledge their electoral allegiance along sectarian lines, this will turn the elections themselves into a kind of demographic census. Instead of doing away with sectarianism, then, such an election will only alter its proportions. This is a likely outcome in Lebanon for several reasons. First of all, despite the fact that Lebanon is much more democratic than most countries in the region, it has a severe lack of traditional, ideological political parties. Rather, its parties are more often mono-communal power blocks dominated by a single family clan. Second, the fear and apprehension many people have of other communities (not surprising after 15 years of war, and, if anything, only rekindled by recent developments) will often make them vote for members of in-group, rather than out-group communities. The recent trend of re-confessionalisation, apparent throughout other countries in the Middle East, only exacerbates this phenomenon. For these reasons, even if political de-confessionalisation were attempted, it would not lead to an end of the sectarian system. Those communities who stand to lose most are acutely aware of this and will try not to implement this provision of the Ta'if Accord.

The effect of this is that the Lebanese political elite, still disproportionately made up of old powerful Christian, Sunni and Druze families, has been committed to preserving an imbalance of power. This is one of the underlying reasons for the current crisis. Because a static system cannot accommodate current demographic, political and military changes, these changes threaten to damage the whole edifice, with grave consequences.

### **Unfinished business: Lebanon's Shi`a**

It is the position of Lebanon's Shi`a that currently puts most stress on the system. The Shi`a did not benefit much from the changes that Ta'if brought about. While the Sunnis increased their share of power through a larger role for the traditionally Sunni Prime Minister, and the Maronites, although losing some, held on to most of theirs, the Shi`a did not make much headway.<sup>2</sup> Relatively, their situation was even worse, as they now formed the single largest demographic group in the country, but had very little to show for it. The south of Lebanon, where the largest numbers of Shi`a live, remains economically backward, with the state failing to provide necessary services and infrastructure that are even more desperately needed after the July 2006 war.

It is the war that has done most to change the balance in the country. Hizballah, perceiving the outcome as a victory,<sup>3</sup> has been emboldened in its political stance towards the rest of the country. Both their self-esteem and their cause as sole champions of Lebanon's Shi`a have been given a boost, resulting in the adoption of a much more vocal and demanding role in domestic politics. Other developments that have contributed to a new assertiveness among Lebanon's Shi`a are the rise in power of their Iraqi co-religionists, and Iran's newfound defiance of Israel and the US. At the same time, fears of Hizballah have increased among other Lebanese, who often blame its actions for the war and the resulting devastation in Lebanon itself. In this situation, the stakes of the game have been raised.

The resignation of the five Shi`a government ministers and a Greek-Orthodox minister allied to President Lahoud in November 2006<sup>4</sup> over the issue of the international tribunal charged with determining culpability over Hariri's assassination<sup>5</sup> should be seen in this light. Although the treaty proposing the establishment of the tribunal was subsequently passed by the rump cabinet, the President, an ally of Syria, is refusing to ratify it. Moreover, it is unclear if a cabinet that excludes one of the main communities is allowed to take decisions on such vital matters. Although this is ambiguous legally, it is clear that it contradicts the tradition of communal consensus established by the 1926 Constitution, the 1943 National Pact, and the Ta'if Accord. These combined provide for a parliament and government consisting of all the main communities deciding on important issues. The current government, lacking a quarter of its ministers and excluding representatives of the single most numerous community in the country, is most definitely not a representative government.

Here, it is perhaps instructive to go back to 1983. A government under Amin Gemayel had, in that year, signed a peace treaty with Israel under heavy military and political pressure from the Jewish state, which still occupied half the country. This treaty was resolutely opposed by the Shi`a and their organisation Amal (headed by now speaker-of-parliament Nabih Berri) who had suffered most under previous Israeli attacks but who were not part of the government. They, allied with the Druzes of Walid Jumblatt, decided to challenge the government's authority by opening up a new round of fighting in Southern Beirut and the Chouf. Amin Gemayel managed to prevail with the help of the Americans for a while, who thus

officially allied themselves with an utterly non-representative government. But when the Lebanese army came apart under the stress, and the Americans left, mostly as a result of the devastating bombing of their marine headquarters, Gemayel had no choice but to abrogate the treaty and to form a more representative government, including Berri and Jumblatt as ministers.

Fortunately, the situation is very different now, and I am certainly not implying that Hizballah is about to march on Beirut or bomb the American embassy. But the previous paragraph does show the danger and ultimate futility of a less-than-representative government adopting treaties, as well as the stupidity of Western powers supporting such a government in order to advance their own interests. In this respect, the visit of British Foreign Minister Margaret Becket to Beirut in December 2006 to pledge her support for Siniora's rump cabinet was particularly ill-informed.

The good news is that the Tribunal Treaty of 2006 is less controversial than the Israel Peace Treaty of 1983. Hizballah, nor Syria for that matter, have never categorically denounced the establishment of a tribunal. It is rather the perceived political use of such a tribunal that scares Damascus. Compromise agreements on the establishment of a tribunal have already been proposed by the Arab League. Moreover, the US might possibly be coming around to the view that it is better to work with Syria than against it in certain areas.<sup>6</sup> There remain opportunities, therefore, for the establishment of a de-politicised tribunal that will deal with the assassination of Hariri. On the establishment of the tribunal itself, however, there should not be a compromise. It is too important to Lebanon, for reasons involving both justice and deterrence, to be sacrificed in the interests of political appeasement, either Lebanese or international. But Lebanon should not be used as a stick to hit Syria either. There is too great a chance that the stick will break before Syria even feels the impact.

## **Unity**

The demand for a national unity government, then, is not an unreasonable one. Nor is it a new one; it was actually articulated before the war. What has changed is that Hizballah now feels stronger than before, and it therefore voices its demands more boldly. But the demand for one-third-plus-one of the seats in the cabinet, variously called a participating or a blocking third depending on the speaker's viewpoint, is not out of proportion for a community that probably forms close to 40 percent of Lebanon's population. Moreover, Hizballah is not claiming the seats for itself, but for all opposition parties.<sup>7</sup> If nothing else, this stance echoes Hizballah's profoundly ambivalent attitude towards participating in national politics.

If a unity government is formed, it will have to deal with several pressing issues. First and foremost among these is the issue of the tribunal. Then there is the upcoming Paris III donor conference. Paris I and II were conferences aimed at securing financial support, in the form of pledges of gifts, loans and investment, to support the Lebanese economy. Paris III is planned for 25 January 2007. As with the issue of the tribunal, however, there is a major risk that any reforms pledged by a non-inclusive rump government in order to secure loans will be opposed by Hizballah and the current opposition. The issue is not that no reforms are needed. Rather, it is that reforms have to be decided upon by an inclusive government. With the the need for reconstruction and development in the south especially, this is of vital importance. If not, there will be contention over the reforms, with the result

that they will not, or only halfheartedly, be implemented. This will doom Paris III to failure.

Then there is the issue of Hizballah's military position in the south. There has been much emphasis on the need to disarm all militias, meaning Palestinian militias in the camps but mainly Hizballah, according to UN Resolution 1559. Since the summer, however, it is once again abundantly clear this cannot be accomplished through military means. The Israeli Defence Force could not do it; the UN definitely will not do it,<sup>8</sup> and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), should they ever be ordered to try, will probably fall apart under the strain.<sup>9</sup> It is clear, then, that the only way forward is political. In this respect, the fact that the LAF's deployment in the south for the first time proper since 1969<sup>10</sup> took place smoothly and without any disturbances is encouraging. What needs to be done now is streamlining communication and coordination between the Lebanese military and Hizballah. Eventually the goal should be integration of Hizballah into the military, something that has reasonably successfully been attempted with two other large wartime militias, the *Forces Libanaises* and the National Movement.<sup>11</sup> Even Nasrallah has hinted at the eventual end of the need for a separate resistance movement. However, if anything, this summer's war has diminished the chances of such an integration happening any time soon. Hizballah will now argue more forcefully that its aim is not only liberating every inch of Lebanese soil from occupation<sup>12</sup>, but resisting Israeli aggression, too. Lebanese critics of the party beg to differ; they question Hizballah's *de facto* authority to decide on matters of war and peace for the rest of Lebanon, such as effectively happened this summer with the abduction of two Israeli soldiers that started the war. These arguments are eerily similar to arguments about the Palestinian resistance in the south in the 1970s, a situation that eventually helped cause the 1975-1990 war. The big difference is that unlike the Palestinians, Hizballah is essentially an internal Lebanese phenomenon, despite its international ramifications, and an internal solution can therefore be found for it. A *rapprochement* in the South between the LAF and Hizballah is a first step along this long road.

### **Ta'if II, not Paris III**

In the longer run, a rigidly interpreted Ta'if Accord will not be able to accommodate change within Lebanon. There needs to be a recalibration of the power balance in the country. History has shown that Lebanon can only work if its numerous communities work together. This includes the large but still disenfranchised Shi'a community. Paradoxically, by giving the Shi'a more power in the government, and thereby presumably giving more attention to the south, the state will be strengthened in the eyes of southerners who now distrust it. This may indeed lead to a stronger Lebanese state, and to a decreasing need for Hizballah as an alternative to the state. This will not mean the end of Hizballah, but it will ease its transition to a more political and inclusive version of itself.<sup>13</sup>

Any such recalibration of power should start with a government of national unity, but should not be limited to it. One of the main issues is that of the electoral law, which in a system as fractured as Lebanon's has a great influence on the outcome of elections, and which is currently of rather clumsy design. In this respect, another conference specifically devoted to issues of power sharing is certainly not a spurious luxury. In a sense, Ta'if II is more urgent than Paris III. Lebanon's leaders, however, have traditionally been good at looking away from major problems and avoiding swallowing bitter pills until the disease was too far developed to ignore. It is to be hoped that they will not let it get that far this time.

What has complicated matters, now as in the past, is foreign interference. Although Lebanese coalitions are currently clashing with each other, these are supported by foreign powers and symbolic of larger geopolitical rivalries. In this case, Western countries, the US and France foremost among them, are supporting Siniora's rump cabinet, while Iran and Syria are on the side of Hizballah. Once again, it should be stressed that Lebanon is too fragile a state to be wielded as a weapon in a larger power struggle. Only by reducing external pressure, not by increasing it, can the Lebanese be allowed to solve their own problems. Let us give them a chance to do so.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> They are Maronites, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druzes, Greek-Orthodox and Greek-Catholics.

<sup>2</sup> The gain in the Sunnis' power was largely due to the Ta'if conference being held in Saudi Arabia, organised by the Arab League. The Shi'a did raise their profile slightly through the enlargement of the powers of the Speaker of Parliament, but he remained subordinate to both President and Prime Minister.

<sup>3</sup> Because Israel's goals for the war (destroying Hizballah) were much more ambitious than Hizballah's (not being destroyed by Israel), the inconclusive outcome could be interpreted both as a victory by Hizballah, and as a failure by many in Israel.

<sup>4</sup> They are Foreign Minister Fawzi Sallouk (Independent), Energy and Water Minister Mohammed Fneish (Hizballah), Labour Minister Trad Hamadeh (Hizballah), Health Minister Mohammed Jawad Khalifeh (Amal), Agriculture Minister Talal Sahili (Amal), and Environment Minister Yaaqoub Sarraf (Independent).

<sup>5</sup> The tribunal is of immense importance to Syria, which feels it is being used as an instrument to pressure, or even bring down, its regime. It is therefore putting pressure on its allies in Lebanon to frustrate its establishment. This is a cause of embarrassment to Hizballah, who for internal reasons do not want to be seen as hampering justice but who do not want to endanger their vital link with Damascus either. See International Crisis Group: Lebanon at a Tripwire, December 2006 pp. 10-11

<sup>6</sup> This attitude is suggested for example by the Baker-Hamilton Report about the issue of Iraq, although President Bush does not seem to have much faith in that particular report.

<sup>7</sup> This arguably opportunistic coalition includes Hizballah, Shi'a Amal, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Communist Party and others.

<sup>8</sup> The UN have consistently interpreted Resolution 1701, which established UNIFIL II, very conservatively. They will certainly steer well clear of any confrontation with Hizballah.

<sup>9</sup> The Lebanese Army fell apart twice during the 1975-1990 war, in 1976 and in 1984.

<sup>10</sup> In that year, the Cairo Agreement between the PLO and the Lebanese state established the Palestinians' right to set up armed units in the border region with Israel, thereby severely damaging the Lebanese Army's influence in the region. Subsequent Israeli occupation and Hizballah domination had kept the south off-limits to the LAF.

<sup>11</sup> The Forces Libanaises were a mainly Maronite militia under Samir Geagea. The National Movement was an umbrella organisation comprising, among others, Walid Jumblatt's PSP and Nabih Berri's Amal.

<sup>12</sup> Hizballah, the Lebanese government and Syria claim the still-occupied Shebaa Farms are Lebanese territory, and the 2000 pullout was thus incomplete. Israel and the UN regard it as part of the Golan and thus Syrian, as it was occupied in the six-day war in 1967.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of Hizballah's gradual shift to a more political organisation, see J. Alagha: The Shifts in Hizballah's Ideology, Amsterdam University Press 2006, available at <https://dare.uvu.vu.nl/bitstream/1871/10197/1/6746.pdf>





## **Want to Know More ...?**

See:

International Crisis Group: Lebanon at a Tripwire, Middle East Briefing No 20, Beirut/Brussels, 21 December 2006, available at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle\\_east\\_north\\_africa/arab\\_israeli\\_conflict/lebanon/b20\\_lebanon\\_at\\_a\\_tripwire.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east_north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/lebanon/b20_lebanon_at_a_tripwire.pdf)

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ISBN 978-1-905962-03-7



**Published By:**

**Defence Academy of the  
United Kingdom**

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

Defence Academy of the UK  
Watchfield  
Swindon  
SN6 8TS  
England

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**ISBN 978-1-905962-03-7**