

Israel will pay price

Possible takeover of Lebanon by Syria supporters heralds bad news for Israel

Prof. Eyal Zisser

Just like well trained soldiers, hundreds of thousands of Shiites throughout Lebanon rose up to Hizbullah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah's call to fill the streets of Beirut and demand the resignation of Fouad Siniora's government. But this is by no means surprising, because clearly Hizbullah is currently enjoying the support of the majority of Shiites, the largest community in the country.

Even the restraint demonstrated by the protestors is not surprising. Hizbullah has proven in recent years that it powerfully rules its supporters: At will Nasrallah is able to call massive rallies in an orderly and calm manner, and at will he sends them to war.

The only surprise the mass rally provided over the weekend was the identity of the key speaker – Maronite General Michel Aoun: In the distant past Aoun was a sworn enemy of the Syrians in Lebanon but he is now their ally. He has become Nasrallah's devoted partner and hopes to pave his way to the presidential palace at Baabda through his support of Nasrallah.

The demonstrators' restraint, as well as the fact that they chose to hide behind General Aoun, demonstrated that Nasrallah's sights are not set on a bloody civil war. Nasrallah is simply seeking to subdue Fouad Siniora and to force him to surrender to his demands.

At this point in time, Nasrallah will also suffice with Siniora's partial surrender to his demands, the highlight of which is the establishment of a new cabinet where Nasrallah and his allies from the Shiite camp will have influence and veto power regarding every decision.

This is Nasrallah's objective for the time being, because in the long term he has long been setting his sights on taking over Lebanon, a notion premised on the fact that the Shiite sect is the largest community in Lebanon.

However, Nasrallah has patience and restraint and is prepared to wait it out until the time is ripe for the big step. Siniora is demonstrating extraordinary courage in face of Nasrallah's display of intimidation. He is enjoying the support of the majority of the Sunni, Maronite and Druze communities, the international community and the support of the majority of the moderate Arab states.

However, this is not enough. In the event that Nasrallah and his supporters continue the boycott of his government, Siniora will find it extremely difficult to continue functioning. After all, the Lebanese system cannot perform in a situation whereby almost half the population is boycotting its institutions.

Typical Lebanese bazaar

What can be expected, therefore, is a typical Lebanese bazaar, where both sides will ultimately emerge only partially appeased: Siniora will be forced to surrender to some of Nasrallah's demands and Nasrallah will have to detract some of his other demands.

This would suffice to postpone, albeit not to prevent the next crisis and the one following it, because the fight for controlling Lebanon will remain without a clear defining factor.

But in Lebanon as in Lebanon, rationale does not necessarily determine the evolution of events. The quiet protests by Hizbullah supporters may get out of control, and alternately Siniora may find himself being forced to resign. However, what is more likely is that Pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud will submit his letter of resignation to Siniora.

As it's currently difficult to imagine the reigning Lebanese parliament finding a majority for a different cabinet to that of Siniora's, the only respite from this crisis would be to hold new elections.

If the situation does warrant new elections, it may end with Syrian supporters having the upper hand (Damascus does after all have proven experience in assassinating potential rivals and in fixing election results in Lebanon according to its interests.) So far Washington has blocked Damascus's attempts to regain power in Lebanon, and in wake of the deadlock in which the Americans are caught up in Iraq, calls are being made for dialogue with Syria.

In the event that Syrian supporters do regain power in Lebanon, those who will pay the price will primarily be the courageous Lebanese people who had hoped that Lebanon would adopt the path of democracy and freedom. Next would be Israel, which would ultimately discover that it had succeeded in distancing Hizbullah from its northern border but will have to face it as the deciding factor in Lebanese politics and in the next government in Beirut.

Finally, the US will also have a price to pay, because Siniora's downfall will symbolize the end of its adventure in Lebanon, pointing the way to an American withdrawal from Iraq and the end of President Bush's vision regarding a new Middle East.

Professor Eyal Zisser is the head of the Department of Middle East and African Studies at Tel Aviv University