

IS LEBANON HEADED FOR CIVIL WAR?

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On November 21, 2006, the eve of Lebanon's Independence Day, the Minister of Industry Pierre al-Jumayyil was assassinated. He was the son of former President Amin al-Jumayyil (1982-1988), and the nephew of Bashir al-Jumayyil, who was similarly killed in September 1982 just prior to assuming the Presidency. Pierre was one of the leaders of the "Cedar Revolution" coalition, a bloc of pro-Western and anti-Syrian forces that emerged in February 2005 in the wake of the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Shortly thereafter, in March, the coalition helped achieve the expulsion of Syrian forces from Lebanon. It then dominated the elections to the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies and has since ruled the country. Pierre Jumayyil had worked alongside Sa`d al-Din al-Hariri, the son of the murdered prime minister and leader of the Sunni community, and Walid Junblat, the leader of Lebanon's Druze. He was one of the country's most outspoken opponents of Syria and a sharp critic of the Lebanese Shi`ite Hizballah organization.

Jumayyil's assassination took place at a moment when Lebanon was already sinking into its most severe political crisis since the end of the 14-year civil war in October 1989. The immediate

background to the crisis was the resignation, just one week before Jumayyil's murder, of six pro-Syrian government ministers, five from the Shi`ite Amal movement and Hizballah, and one Christian supporter of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud. The pretext for the resignations was the government's decision to adopt a resolution enabling the establishment of an international court to try the accused in the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. The defendants had not yet been named, but senior Syrian figures were widely understood to be implicated in Hariri's murder, and the demand to bring them before an international court was liable to complicate even further Syria's already problematic relations with the West, particularly the United States.

However, the establishment of an international court was only one of the issues in dispute between Hizballah and the Lebanese government, headed by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the leaders of the "Cedar Revolution." Hizballah demanded the formation of a national unity government so as to include additional ministers from the Shi`ite community, as well as the Maronite General Michel Aoun, formerly a bitter opponent but now an ally of Syria and Hizballah. Such an expansion of the government would almost certainly lead to



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Hizballah's Secretary-General, Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah, gaining veto power over any important political decision.

Nasrallah's demands, delivered as an ultimatum, were rejected by the Siniora government and supporting coalition. In response, Nasrallah threatened paralyzing street demonstrations, beginning on the day after Independence Day, until the government fell. Jumayyil's murder postponed his plan. Nonetheless, the crisis is still at its height.

Nasrallah's demand for veto power would entail a complete change in the character of the Lebanese state, particularly in the framework established by the Ta'if Agreement of October 1989, which brought an end to the civil war. Ta'if was defective, in Nasrallah's view, because it squashed his vision of turning Lebanon into an Islamic republic closely tied to Iran, but also because it ignored the Shi'ites, who had become Lebanon's largest community.

The current dispute between Siniora and Nasrallah can perhaps be settled, but it would hardly provide a fundamental cure for Lebanon's underlying ills. These became more acute in the wake of the "Cedar Revolution," and intensified further in the wake of the summer 2006 Israel-Hizballah war. The Shi'ite masses in southern Lebanon and south Beirut were the ones who paid the dearest price for the war. They demanded compensation for their sacrifice and suffering, not from Nasrallah, who had provoked the hostilities, but from the Lebanese government.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's opposing factions are preparing for armed conflict. In a speech delivered before thousands of supporters, Nasrallah called upon the Shi'ites not to be afraid of a possible civil war, for "only the weak side is afraid of such a possibility, and we are not weak." Hariri and Junblat quickly responded that they were not afraid of a confrontation either, and would act to preserve the achievements of the "Cedar Revolution." Indeed, Nasrallah's opponents are not rushing to capitulate and

promise to fight back fiercely, understanding that any concession to Nasrallah will turn him into the kingmaker and unmatched strong man of Lebanese politics. It is, in fact, this very desire which lies behind Nasrallah's threats.

To be sure, Nasrallah is not interested in a civil war. On the contrary, he prefers a period of quiet and stability that would enable him to restore Hizballah's power and heal the wounds sustained during the war with Israel. However, Nasrallah is a gambler by nature, and he is betting that in the end his opponents will capitulate to him. This bet, incidentally, is reminiscent of the failed gamble he made in July 2006 when he gave instructions to kidnap Israeli soldiers, on the assumption that Israel would not respond, and for which he paid a heavy price.

The problem is that none of those playing this particular version of "Lebanese poker" has anything left to lose. Siniora, Hariri, and Junblat did not travel the long road they have in order to place the government in Nasrallah's hands. It is possible that some saving compromise will be found at the last minute and everyone will continue on their merry way – until the next crisis. But it is also possible that Lebanon is destined to fall into a severe crisis that will deteriorate into a new civil war.

For Israel, the conclusions to be drawn from this crisis are clear. First, the situation created on Israel's northern border in the wake of the recent war and in the shadow of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 is a fragile and shaky one. With the first exchanges of fire in Beirut, the Lebanese and international forces which have deployed in the south are likely to quickly abandon the region. Second, Nasrallah's willingness to threaten the stability of the Lebanese political system testifies to his supreme self-confidence, and perhaps his belief that he can regain the power and status he lost in the fighting with Israel. This being so, Israel has to be concerned that sooner or later Nasrallah will try to restore the situation along the Lebanese-Israeli border to what it was prior to July 12, 2006.