

Political tensions in Lebanon threaten civil war

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The massive car bomb in Beirut on September 19 that killed Antoine Ghanem, a leading Christian Maronite MP from the far-right Phalange, and five others has further eroded the slim majority of Fouad Seniora's government and delayed the selection of the next president.

It has intensified longstanding political tensions that threaten to erupt into all out civil war in Lebanon. The country is now the focal point in a regionwide contest between the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, France and its allies, and Syria, Iran and its allies, Hezbollah and Amal within Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine.

Washington's objective is to reduce the country to a virtual US protectorate as a precursor to regime change in Syria and Iran in order to establish its own hegemony in the oil-rich region. Its machinations take place against the backdrop of Israel's war against Lebanon last year that killed more than 1,200 people and destroyed vast swathes of its infrastructure and tens of thousands of homes, as well as constant US provocations against Iran, an unexplained Israeli air strike against Syria and a major military build-up in the Gulf.

Ghanem was the sixth politician allied to the pro-Washington government to be assassinated since the murder in February 2005 of the billionaire prime minister, Rafiq Hariri. Dozens of innocent bystanders have perished in this wave of bombings for which not a single person has been charged.

The assassinations have widely been attributed in the international media to Syria or Syrian-allied factions within Lebanon, although no evidence has been put forward to substantiate such claims, and Syria has strongly denied any involvement.

The Syrian government is more than capable of carrying out the assassination of its political opponents, but it is hard to see why it would exacerbate tensions at a time when it is seeking an accommodation with Washington that would avert the threat of war. In 1996, the neo-cons now in the Bush administration outlined plans in *A Clean Break: Securing the Realm* for neutering Syria via Lebanon. They called for the containment of Syria, citing its support for Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, and rejected any "land for peace" deals on the Golan Heights. More recently, the US has sought a United Nations tribunal to investigate Syria's involvement in Hariri's murder.

It is also entirely possible that the killing was a provocation organised by Israeli or American intelligence agencies to create a pretext for carrying through an assault on Hezbollah and Syria under the cover of the UN. In a country awash with security forces, it is hard to believe that suspects would not by now have been rounded up and charged if the government or its allies were not in some way complicit.

Under UN Security Council resolution 1701 that ended Israel's 33-day bombardment last year, UNIFIL's expanded forces in Lebanon, which include NATO personnel, are to assist the security of the Lebanese government and prevent the import of arms. Once again, the UN is providing a fig leaf for Washington's military operations in the region.

Ghanem's death brought to 68 the number that Seniora's US-backed coalition government could muster in the 128-member Chamber of Deputies, which has all but ceased to function since Hezbollah members pulled out of the coalition government and boycotted the Chamber in December of last year.

The Islamists had backed most of the government's neo-liberal policies, but fell out with Seniora over their demand for greater representation in the government and constitutional changes in line with their electoral and demographic support, Seniora's support for an international tribunal to try suspects in the assassination of Hariri, and opposition to the disarming of Hezbollah's militant wing.

Support for Hezbollah grew in the wake of its defiant opposition to the Washington-backed bombardment by Israel, while the government was widely seen as collaborating with Israel against Hezbollah.

Hezbollah has also opposed the draconian terms of the Paris donor conference last January, which demanded that in return for aid—yet to materialise—for "reconstruction" after Israel's bombing campaign that cost Lebanon at least US\$15 billion, value-added tax must be raised from 10 to 12 percent next year and 15 percent in 2010. This comes on top of fiscal measures, the sale of state-owned assets and "labour market flexibilities" to pay for Lebanon's massive US\$41 billion public debt, the legacy of the Hariri government.

Such measures would fall hardest on the impoverished Shia and Palestinians living in squalid refugee camps that are the

Hezbollah's social base. Far from financing the reconstruction of Lebanon, the Shia would be servicing Lebanon's debt and paying for the army to suppress Hezbollah militants and their own communities in southern Lebanon.

Much of the little aid that Lebanon has received has come from Iran, which has further bolstered Hezbollah's support, while the Seniora government's paltry compensation for damaged homes and property has discriminated against the Shia.

Hezbollah has since January mounted massive demonstrations against the government and camped outside government buildings in downtown Beirut.

Locked in a power struggle with Hezbollah and backed by Washington, Seniora is anxious to replace the pro-Syrian president, Emile Lahoud, due to leave office on November 24, with someone more sympathetic to his own party.

Tensions were further heightened last Tuesday when several thousand soldiers, police and tanks cordoned off the parliament building for the session to elect a replacement for Lahoud. Security forces escorted anti-Syrian legislators to the parliament from the Phoenicia Hotel on the Corniche where they had been staying under armed guard.

By convention, the president must be a Maronite Christian, most of who are anti-Syrian.

While the ruling Sunni Muslim, Druze and Christian coalition, known as the March 14th Alliance, wants someone from their own camp, such a candidate would be an anathema to the impoverished Shias, who make up more than one third of the electorate. The rules require a two-thirds quorum of the 128 legislators for the first round of votes.

There are three candidates from the ruling coalition: Boutros Harb, a lawyer and former minister; Robert Ghanem; and Nassib Lahoud, a cousin of the present president and former ambassador to the US. Washington's preferred candidate is Riad Salameh, long-time governor of the Bank of Lebanon. But he is barred as a government employee from standing.

Army commander Michel Suleiman suppressed the Fatah al-Islam uprising in Nahr Al-Bared, the Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, with the backing of the US, the European powers, the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians. He is seen by some, including Hezbollah, as another possible candidate. But he too is barred as a government employee from standing.

Former General Michel Aoun of the anti-Syrian Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) made a tactical alliance with his former enemies, the Shiite Moslems, in February 2006, as a means of gaining the support needed to get himself elected president. Aoun is widely distrusted. He ran a virtual military dictatorship in the Christian enclaves in opposition to an elected Muslim government during the last years of Lebanon's civil war from 1989 to 1991, until he was defeated by the pro-Syrian forces and driven into exile in France, where he remained until the Syrians left Lebanon in 2005.

Washington is determined that a pro-US candidate wins the

presidency. The US ambassador, Jeffrey Feltman, a vocal supporter of the March 14th Alliance, said that Lebanon was a strategic partner for the US in the Middle East, and has prolonged his stay in Lebanon until after the election, while his replacement has remained in the United Arab Emirates. The Syrians see this as an attempt by the US to manipulate the elections via Feltman.

Unable to reach an agreement with the government on a consensus candidate, most of the 58 opposition MPs from Hezbollah, Amal and Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) boycotted the session in order to prevent Seniora's allies from selecting a pro-US president and thus gaining complete control of Lebanon.

Nabih Berri, the Speaker drawn as the constitution requires from the Shiite community, adjourned the Chamber of Deputies for four weeks, in order to give the parties more time to agree on a compromise candidate.

The current standoff has the potential to produce two rival governments and reignite civil war. If the chamber is unable to elect a president by November 24, the outgoing president could name an interim administration—setting the scene for dual power. Lahoud has threatened to appoint a military government if no agreement is reached.

The ruling clique has already threatened to elect a president with the simple majority it still commands in the chamber, even if there is no agreement on a consensus candidate.

In a country that has seen the assassination of two Lebanese presidents before they could take office and interventions by the US, Israel and Syria to try to secure the presidency for their own puppets, an attempt to bypass the two-thirds rule could ignite civil war.

The opposition has declared that such a move would be illegal and tantamount to a declaration of war. Aoun warned against such a vote, saying, "Our message is clear. The issue of the legal quorum is not open to discussion and countries that support such a president [elected by a simple majority] would have to send in their armies to protect him."

Whoever becomes president will face the increasingly difficult task of imposing an economic and foreign policy agenda dictated by international capital that is inimical to the broad mass of the population, under conditions in which the US is determined to find a pretext for attacking Syria and Iran.



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