

Lebanon on brink of civil war

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Lebanon stands on the brink of all-out civil war. A general strike by the leading trade union to protest rising prices and demand an increase in the minimum wage has led to armed conflict between the pro-Western Sunni and Druze-based government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the Shia-based Hezbollah and its ally, Amal.

For the past two days, the conflict has constantly escalated. On Wednesday, supporters of the Hezbollah-led opposition blocked roads in the capital Beirut. About a dozen people were injured in stone-throwing by rival pro- and anti-government gangs of young men.

On Thursday, Sunnis and Shiites exchanged gunfire in the village of Saadnayel in the eastern Bekaa Valley—a crossroads linking the Hezbollah stronghold of Baalbek with central Lebanon and Beirut.

Supporters of Hezbollah have blocked the road to the country's only airport, closing it. Burning tyres and earth blockades have been erected, paralysing the capital city.

Heavy fighting broke out in the al-Mazraa district of West Beirut between Sunni and Shia fighters. Opposition gunmen used rocket-propelled grenades to destroy an office belonging to the pro-government Future Movement. Its weapons and ammunition were seized.

The army was deployed in key thoroughfares and crossroads dividing Beirut from the Shia-dominated suburbs in the south. Troops in riot gear stood between rival stone-throwing youths in the mixed Sunni-Shia Mazraa district.

Lebanon's army command has warned that a "continuation of the situation... harms the unity of the military establishment."

The conflict brings to a head a 17-month stand-off between the US- and Saudi-backed government and Hezbollah, which has the support of Iran and Syria. Lebanon's presidential election has been postponed 18 times. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri has designated May 13 as the date for the next attempt to elect a new president after this month's failure to secure a compromise by Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa.

The ruling March 14 group, though appearing as the victim of an offensive by Hezbollah, has, in fact, been working for months towards an open conflict with the Hezbollah-led March 8 Alliance, which also includes the Christian Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun. It has done so in collaboration with

the United States and Israel, both of which have made clear their intention to resume hostilities against Hezbollah, and threatened Syria and Iran.

Lebanon has long been the focal point of a regional contest between the US and its allies—Israel, Saudi Arabia and France—and Syria, Iran and their local allies, Hezbollah and Amal. Washington has repeatedly blocked any compromise with Hezbollah because it wants Lebanon to function as its protectorate and as an extension of its main power base in Israel. This would, in turn, be a precursor to possible regime change in Syria and Iran to establish US hegemony in the oil-rich region.

Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. But Israel made clear its continued designs on the country when, targeting Hezbollah, it declared war against Lebanon in July 2006, during which more than 1,200 people were killed, many more were injured and vast swathes of the country's infrastructure were destroyed.

Israel's inability to defeat Hezbollah created a major political crisis in Jerusalem, while winning Hezbollah further popular support amongst the Shia masses.

Since that time, the US has been anxious to create a pretext for conflict with Hezbollah, Syria and, ultimately, Iran, blocking tentative peace talks between Israel and Syria and mounting repeated provocations against both Damascus and Tehran. Last September, Israeli warplanes bombed Syria, with unnamed US sources claiming that the target was a partly-constructed nuclear reactor.

On February 28, the USS Cole was stationed off Lebanon's coast, joined later by the Nassau battle group, which includes six vessels, including amphibious landing craft, and a contingent of over 2,000 Marines. A top US official declared at the time, "The United States believes a show of support is important for regional stability. We are very concerned about the situation in Lebanon. It has dragged on very long."

That same month, the Bush administration announced a further round of sanctions against Syria, directed at unnamed individuals alleged to have played a role in supporting the resistance in Iraq.

On April 24, the Bush administration released intelligence claiming to prove that Damascus was building a nuclear reactor, with the assistance of North Korea, at the site targeted by Israel's air force last year. A White House statement

ominously warned that Syria's alleged covert construction of the reactor was "a dangerous and potentially destabilising development for the region and the world."

The US justification for Israel's earlier bombing paves the way for similar measures to be undertaken. The allegations also chime with the repeated accusations that Iran is developing a nuclear weapons program.

For its part, following on from its September 2007 air raid, Israel assassinated senior Hezbollah leader Imad Mughniyah in Damascus on February 12 of this year, an action widely seen as aimed at provoking retaliation and providing the pretext for another Israeli war in Lebanon.

On May 8, amidst the escalating conflict in Lebanon, President George Bush said he was again extending for one year US sanctions against Syria, using the charge that it was trying to secretly build a nuclear reactor. The sanctions include a freezing of Syrian assets and an embargo on several imported goods. Bush accused Damascus of supporting terror, continuing its interference in Lebanon and Iraq, and attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.

The provocative actions of the Siniora government against Hezbollah can only be viewed as an extension of this US/Israeli-led offensive. In a televised February 10 speech, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt threatened Hezbollah: "You want disorder? It will be welcomed. You want war? It will be welcomed. We have no problem with weapons, no problem with missiles. We will bring them to you."

Last week two moves were made towards doing just that.

At the weekend, Jumblatt accused Hezbollah of monitoring Beirut International Airport with security cameras in preparation for a possible attack or kidnapping. On Tuesday, the government ordered the commander of security at the airport, Brigadier General Wafiq Shuqeir, to return to the Army Command, accusing him of sympathising with Hezbollah and failing to deal with the secret camera it allegedly set up overlooking the main runway.

Shuqeir is close to Nabih Berri, the parliamentary speaker and leader of Hezbollah's coalition partner, Amal. It is this action that prompted the barricading of roads to the airport.

In the same speech, Jumblatt also accused Hezbollah of setting up its own private telecommunications network to eavesdrop on calls made in Lebanon. This was followed on Tuesday by a government declaration that Hezbollah's telephone network was "illegal and unconstitutional" and a threat to state security, referring a dossier on the issue to the judiciary.

Targeting the network was bound to illicit a strenuous response. Hezbollah does indeed operate an extensive fixed-line telecommunications network.

According to Time-CNN, "Hizballah had some time ago installed its own, in-house dedicated fiber-optic telephone network, connecting its headquarters in the southern suburbs of Beirut to its offices, military posts and cadres as far south as the

Israeli border. During the summer 2006 war, Israel had jammed cell phone signals throughout south Lebanon and monitored the Lebanese telephone system, but Hizballah's internal communications channels had survived thanks to its private fiber-optic system.

"Since the war, however, Hizballah has expanded the network to cover its new military frontline north of the United Nations-patrolled southern border district, and into the Bekaa Valley to the east. Part of the system incorporates a WiMAX network allowing long-distance wireless access for the Internet and cell phones.

"More recently, Hizballah has dug trenches for fiber-optic cables in the mainly Christian and Druze Mount Lebanon district and in north Lebanon, according to Marwan Hamade, the Lebanese minister of telecommunications."

An attack on this network would severely curtail Hezbollah's ability to defend itself from Israeli aggression or from an attack by its internal opponents. The provocation had the desired effect. On Thursday, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah gave his first press conference since 2006, stating that the decision to close down the organisation's private telecommunications network was a "declaration of war."

Describing the network as the most important weapon against foreign aggressors, he said, "This decision is first of all a declaration of war and the launching of war by the government... against the resistance and its weapons for the benefit of America and Israel. Whoever declares war against us and who launches a war against us even if he's our father or brother, or just a political opponent, we have the right to confront him to defend ourselves, to defend our weapons, to defend our resistance and to defend our existence."

He demanded the government rescind its decision and also reinstate Brig Gen Wafiq Shuqeir.

US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe yesterday demanded that Hezbollah "stop their disruptive activities" and choose whether to be "a terrorist organization or be a political party."

Bush is scheduled to meet with Siniora at the end of next week at Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm el Sheikh, following his attendance at Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations and a visit to Saudi Arabia to celebrate 75 years of US relations with the kingdom. For its part, Saudi Arabia has accused unnamed "foreign extremist sides" of fomenting the present conflict.



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