

Lebanon: Hezbollah makes show of strength against Siniora government

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Hezbollah has handed control back to the Lebanese army, but only after surrounding Beirut's international airport and taking over much of West Beirut. The main opposition party's show of strength followed an outbreak of sectarian fighting that left more than 38 people dead and many more injured. The army stood aside, reluctant to get involved.

Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian Shia movement, was pitched against the pro-US Sunni Muslim-led government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The government's humiliation is a major setback for the Bush administration, which has made its backing of the Siniora government a key plank of its ongoing conflict with Iran and Syria.

After months of increasing political anxiety in Lebanon following the failure to elect a president, tensions rose last week, in what appears to have been a calculated challenge to Hezbollah on the part of the ruling coalition.

Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader who heads one of one of the factions in the government, accused Hezbollah of monitoring Beirut International Airport with security cameras in preparation for a possible attack or kidnapping. On Tuesday, the government dismissed the head of airport security, Brigadier General Wafiq Shuqeir, a political ally of Nabih Berri, the parliamentary speaker and leader of Hezbollah's coalition partner, Amal. The government accused him of sympathising with Hezbollah and failing to deal with the secret camera which Hezbollah had allegedly set up overlooking the main runway.

Jumblatt also accused Hezbollah of setting up its own telecommunications network, claiming that it was being used to eavesdrop on calls made in Lebanon. The network had proved crucial in Hezbollah's resistance to Israel in the 2006 Israeli attack and would play a similar role should the Bush administration take military action against Iran, Syria or Lebanon. On Tuesday, the government decided to close down Hezbollah's telecoms network, declaring it "illegal and unconstitutional" and a threat to state security.

A general strike had been called for Wednesday over rising prices and low wages. The government met some of the strikers' demands in an attempt to isolate Hezbollah, and went on the offensive. But angry clashes broke out that soon escalated into fierce street fighting between government supporters and oppositionists.

Hezbollah quickly took control of all roads leading to the airport. The port was also closed down.

On Thursday, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah held a televised news conference. He warned that the government's decision to illegalise Hezbollah's telecommunications network was "tantamount to a declaration of war... on the resistance and its weapons in the interests of America and Israel."

Within minutes of his broadcast, Hezbollah gunmen and Shia fighters appeared on the streets with rocket launchers, grenades and M16s.

But if the Siniora government intended a showdown with Hezbollah, the army did not feel prepared to mount one. It withdrew and refused to implement the government's measures against Hezbollah.

The military feared Lebanon would be plunged once more into full-scale civil war—this time with even more bloody conflict between rival Muslim groupings as well as between Muslims and Christians, and with Hezbollah possessing by far the best armed and organised militias. This, in turn, could provide the opening for intervention by the US, Israel and other major powers in a proxy war against Iran and Syria.

Even in the few days that conflict raged, Shi'ite supporters of Hezbollah's ally, Amal, set fire to Future, the business headquarters and television station owned by Said Hariri, the son of the murdered prime minister, Rafiq, and leader of the Sunni Future movement, the main bloc in the ruling coalition. Hariri owns a vast media empire that is almost indistinguishable from his political activities.

Gunmen from the pro-Syrian Socialist National Party had earlier forced *Future News*, the news channel, off the air. Hariri's home was hit by a rocket propelled grenade, although Hariri himself was unharmed.

Hariri called on Nasrallah to take his fighters off the streets and end the "siege" of Beirut. He indicated that the government would pull back on its actions against Hezbollah, provided it accepted the election of the army chief, General Michel Suleiman, as president. Hezbollah has blocked his election, with which it agrees in principle, in its efforts to secure a better political position for itself.

Hezbollah soon had control of Muslim West Beirut, including the Sunni neighbourhoods where both Hariri and Jumblatt live. Prime Minister Siniora and several of his ministers were reportedly holed up in their offices, unable to leave.

Siniora declared that Lebanon could not tolerate Hezbollah having weapons. His government issued a statement saying, "The armed and bloody coup which is being implemented aims to return

Syria to Lebanon and extend Iran's reach to the Mediterranean." However, his call to the army to restore law and order and to remove gunmen from the streets went unanswered.

Samir Geagea, leader of the right-wing Lebanese Forces, appealed to the Arab regimes to help reverse the coup by putting pressure on Iran and Syria. He also demanded that "world leaders," meaning the US and France, intervene. But Amin Gemayel, leader of Kataeb, a Maronite group also allied with the government, urged Christians to stay away from the fighting.

On Saturday, Nasrallah handed over West Beirut to the army. He was clearly anxious to avoid providing a pretext for Washington or Jerusalem to intervene, having secured an agreement that the government's decisions would be overturned. However, his supporters maintained the blockade of the airport. A spokesperson said, "All issues are linked. Beirut will remain shut until there is a political solution."

Fighting died down as defeated government supporters handed in their weapons to the army. While the army has stepped in to prevent overt instances of sectarian fighting, it has taken no steps to remove Hezbollah's control of the airport.

Despite the US and the Gulf countries funnelling money and weapons to their allies in anticipation of just such a conflict, the Sunni-dominated government forces were defeated within less than two days. The conflict has left the government and the Future movement reeling from the shock.

The danger is of sectarian tensions exploding once again.

Michel Aoun, a Christian leader allied with Hezbollah, indicated that Hezbollah does not want the situation to escalate into a broader conflict. He said, "The derailed carriage is now back on track. We hope from this point things will fall back into the normal course." For his part, Hariri has said it was all a "misunderstanding" and urged gunmen on all sides to withdraw and save Lebanon from another civil war.

However, the situation in Lebanon remains tense and fighting has broken out in the northern city of Tripoli. Irrespective of any temporary lull, the essential political deadlock has not been resolved.

Jumblatt, whose provocations had precipitated Hezbollah's show of strength, admitted, "I did not anticipate such a strong response from Hezbollah, but... yes... the group is much stronger than other armed militias." But, he added, in a clear appeal for US support, "If you want to know what the next move for Hezbollah will be, ask [Iranian President] Ahmedinejad. This situation goes beyond the Lebanese borders."

There is every possibility of US and Israeli intervention in Lebanon. Washington and Jerusalem have suffered setbacks in Iraq and now Lebanon. US efforts to set up a series of proxy regimes, the Maliki government in Iraq, Siniora's in Lebanon and that of Mahmoud Abbas in the Palestinian Authority, were meant to secure its control of the region's strategic resources. Instead, they have served to strengthen the opposition of the Arab working class and peasant masses and increase support for the Islamic parties which are seen as resisting the US and Israel.

As far as the US is concerned, it is completely unacceptable to have Hezbollah control Lebanon. With its military forces bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Israeli government on the

point of collapse as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert faces five ongoing investigations into corruption, its options are limited. Nevertheless, Washington must seek to formulate a counterattack—a political imperative that will dominate President Bush's talks with Israel and Egypt this week.

Syria has denied all responsibility for recent events, saying the crisis in Lebanon was an "internal affair," while Iran blamed "the adventurist interferences" of the US and Israel for the violence. Such statements were dismissed by Israel, with President Shimon Peres declaring, "It is a new chapter of the battle led by Iran to control all of the Middle East."

The Bush administration also accused Iran and Syria of stoking the conflict by inciting Hezbollah to attack Lebanon's shaky coalition. In an ominous statement, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed Washington's backing for the Siniora government, saying, "Backed by Syria and Iran, Hezbollah and its allies are killing and injuring innocent citizens and undermining the legitimate authority of the Lebanese government and the institutions of the Lebanese state. Seeking to protect their state within a state, Hezbollah has exploited its allies and demonstrated its contempt for its fellow Lebanese. We will stand by the Lebanese government and the peaceful citizens of Lebanon through the crisis and provide the support they need to weather this storm."

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the US had evidence that Iran and Syria were beginning to take an active role in encouraging the violence. "It is becoming more apparent now that the linkages that we know exist and are ongoing between Hezbollah and Syria and Iran are starting to manifest themselves in the current crisis," he said. "At the beginning we didn't see it, but we are now," he continued.

He claimed that "Groups that are linked to Syria and that are in Lebanon right now are taking a much more active role in fanning the flames and violence and attacks that are destabilising the political situation".

As with all of Washington's allegations of Syrian and Iranian interference, he refused to specify which groups or individuals were involved, or what evidence the US had of specific Iranian support beyond Tehran's general support for Hezbollah. A White House spokesman added that "The United States is consulting with other governments in the region and with the UN Security Council about measures that must be taken to hold those responsible for the violence in Beirut accountable."

Saudi Arabia—one of the main backers of the Siniora government—and Egypt have called an urgent meeting in Cairo of Arab foreign ministers to discuss the crisis.



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