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CSS Papers

*Which Hezbollah will
emerge post-June 7th?*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the internal and external factors that may affect the outcome of the Lebanese Elections scheduled for June 7th. It highlights the importance of three internal political dynamics; the impact of the Hariri assassination, Hezbollah's electoral campaign and recent statements regarding U.S. aid to Lebanon. There are also three external factors; Israeli military exercises, the arrest of an Hezbollah operative in Egypt and the new attempt to form links with the European Union (EU) and The International Monetary Fund (IMF). These factors will decide the shape of the Hezbollah party that will emerge after these crucial elections.

As June 7th draws nearer, tensions are increasing up between the competing parties. Leading up to the elections, it seems that two Hezbollah's have emerged. On one side, there is a party that is exceedingly populist, promoting good governance, and showing respect for Lebanon's ethnic and religious diversity. On the other side, there is the fear-mongering, defiant combatative Hezbollah. Some believe that electoral success may have the effect of emboldening the Hezbollah leadership to continue down the path of the resistance movement of old. It may increase their resolve to resist dismantling the organization's military wing. It may also re-affirm their role as an Iranian proxy power. In addition to trafficking arms to Hamas, Hezbollah's leaders may begin to more aggressively undermine neighboring governments. On the other hand, there is some hope that an opposition victory may have a moderating influence; that a more tolerable, negotiable Hezbollah may emerge as it will be forced to work within the Lebanese political system. Which Hezbollah will materialize depends of several internal and external political factors. First, it is important to look at three important internal political dynamics, Hezbollah's electoral campaign, the impact of the Hariri assassination, and recent statements made regarding future U.S. aid to Lebanon. Additionally, there are three external factors that should be considered. These include the effect of the Israeli military exercises, the impact of the Hezbollah operative arrest in Egypt, and lastly the significance of Hezbollah's reaching out to the EU and the IMF. Analysis of both these internal and external factors will help us gauge which Hezbollah will emerge post-June 7th. Hezbollah's parliamentary ally, the Aoun-led Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) are expected to maintain their 65 seats. This outcome would provide the March 8th coalition a slim majority in the 128 seat Lebanese parliament. However, because of the confessionalist political system currently in place, there will likely be no monumental shift in policy regardless of who possesses the majority. A victory for the March 8th group nonetheless carries much significance. With the elections less than a week away, it's important to examine the potential political impact of both the internal and external factors mentioned above. This will provide us with clues as to which Hezbollah will emerge post-June 7th, and how this may affect U.S. policy moving forward.

Internal Factors

With the Hezbollah leadership attempting to bolster their Christian parliamentary ally AFP, many have noted the relatively low-key campaigning that's been undertaken. In an attempt to reach out to Lebanon's non-Shi'a voters, Hassan Nasrallah and his advisers want to assure Lebanese Christian voters that Hezbollah respects the country's ethnic and religious diversity. It seems that do not want any electoral success to be misconstrued as an Islamist take-over. As one Hezbollah MP Candidate stated, "The aim is not to win seats, but rather to change the established order".¹ The party has gone so far as to forfeit some of their safe seats, and promote parliamentary allies in particular areas. So it appears that Hezbollah would like to be perceived as a politically-evolved organization that garners legitimacy by working within the current political system. The question remains however if this would have a moderating influence on the organization post-June 7th. Currently Hezbollah represents a significant majority of the Lebanese population, dealing with a host of issues including economic development in rural areas, financing basic goods and services, and distributing resources. Some believe that perhaps the responsibilities of governance that come with electoral success on June 7th will necessarily induce the moderation that many desire. Hezbollah officials have spoken to the idea of forming a National Unity government with their opponents following the elections. Additionally, a prominent Shi'a cleric, and spiritual inspiration to Hezbollah, has stated that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) should be the nation's sole protector.² It is possible however that the tone taken by Hezbollah's leadership may be purely electioneering. Any statements that speak to openness and diversity in Lebanon may simply be a ploy to cater to Lebanese Christians, the voter block which will likely determine the victor on June 7th. Some have even speculated that electoral victory is not Hezbollah's primary goal; that the movement would prefer to work behind the scenes while leveraging the position held by their chief parliamentary ally, the Aoun-led FPM.

1 Amir Taheri, "Lebanon and the Best Schemes of Mice and Men" *As-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 22, 2009.

2 Wang Guanqun, "Top Shiite clergy says Lebanon has turned into intelligence center" *China View*, May 17, 2009.

In May 2009, the Hariri assassination case has received renewed attention as the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, recently reported that operatives with close ties to Hezbollah have emerged as primary suspects in the assassination of the former Prime Minister. In turn, Hezbollah officials have released statements lambasting the allegations as “baseless” and “nothing more than fabrications cooked in the same black room that has been keen on fabricating such narratives for over four years”. Hezbollah officials have alleged that these reports are nothing more than Western attempts to downplay the arrest of Israeli operatives in Lebanon, and an attempt to turn the Lebanese people against Hezbollah in the run up to June 7th. The Future Movement party, headed by the late Prime Minister’s Hariri son, has said it would refuse to comment on the allegations unless they were validated by the official UN tribunal which has been investigating the assassination. Without adequate proof, or sources to validate the claims made in *Der Spiegel*, the March 14th coalition is unwilling to politicize the issue, but this may not be necessary as the Western media has already endeavored to do so. It appears however that the motives behind a Hezbollah-sponsored assassination are not very strong. It seems that the late Prime Minister’s agenda never directly clashed with Hezbollah. While he fought ardently for Lebanese independence, Hariri never posed any threat to Hezbollah’s military infrastructure.¹ In any event, the UN Tribunal investigating the case is already widely viewed by many Lebanese voters as favoring the pro-Western March 14th bloc. The tribunal is increasingly viewed by many as a tool to put pressure on the Iranians and Syrians, and in turn their Hezbollah proxy. Regardless of what eventually comes of the Hezbollah linkage, or the so-called “*Der Spiegel* Theory”, these allegations will not affect the outcome on June 7th. If these claims are eventually substantiated however, it would be a significant shift in terms of Hezbollah’s position within Lebanon, and how the movement is viewed internationally. It would likely have a degenerative effect that could threaten the very survival of the movement itself.

In the last several weeks, the Obama administration has dispatched both Secretary Clinton and Vice President Biden. They have expressed their desire for free and fair elections, and solidarity with the Future Movement led-March 14th coalition (albeit behind closed doors), and lastly provided an important caveat with regard to future U.S. aid to Lebanon. Future U.S. policy toward Lebanon has yet to be

¹ Andrew Lee Butters, “Did Hezbollah kill Rafik Hariri?” Middle East Blog, Time Magazine, May 26, 2009.

articulated as it seems the administration is taking a “wait and see” approach. However, contrary to initial anonymous statements made by U.S. officials, Vice President Biden has stated that future U.S. aid will be determined based on both the composition and policies of the post-June 7th Lebanese government. However, some senior Western diplomats have opined that if Hezbollah comes to assume key positions in either the ministries of defense or the interior, U.S. military aid will be significantly decreased or couched altogether.¹ In the aftermath of summer 2006 war, U.S. policymakers had hoped that by building up the Lebanese army, they might induce Hezbollah to disarm its military wing. Now with Hezbollah officials attuned to the possibility of significantly diminished American aid, they have and will continue to promote the resistance as the only Arab force capable of deterring the Israelis.

External Factors

In the aftermath of Biden’s statements regarding future U.S. aid, Hezbollah officials have reportedly reached out to both the IMF and EU regarding future financing arrangements. The IMF chief denies any direct correspondence with Hezbollah, stating that there was some outreach to Lebanese politicians and think-tank officials, but none directly with Hezbollah. European governments on the other hand have shown an increased willingness to engage the movement in political dialogue. Recognizing its political evolution, governments in Britain, France, and Denmark have warmed to the idea of selectively engaging Hezbollah. As a result, the movement’s officials see an opportunity to reach out to the EU as a potential source of funding should U.S. aid be significantly decreased. This move on the part of Hezbollah is not just economically motivated though; procuring aid from the EU would also bring enormous political legitimacy for the movement. In this context the new deal to transfer up to 35 billion cubic meters of gas from Iran to Europe through Turkey may become beneficial politically to Hezbollah. This could happen through easing tensions between the EU and Iran, which consequently may improve the image of Hezbollah as Iran’s ally. The current lack of policy coordination between the U.S. and its EU allies is something which Hezbollah may well seek to exploit. Hezbollah may be presented with a unique opportunity

¹ Hugh McLeod, “Likely Hezbollah electoral victory in Lebanon raises prospect of new tensions with Israel”, *Telegraph*, May 30, 2009.

to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies. There is no doubt that Lebanon may experience major economic strain post-June 7th. Hezbollah is trying to pre-empt this possibility by reaching out to potential international donors. Nonetheless, the enormous political advantages of procuring funding from Europe are not lost on Hasan Nasrallah. While Lebanon with a Hezbollah-led March 8th majority is unlikely to secure a sizable amount of funding from the IMF, the EU is a much more likely candidate. If the elections have a moderating effect on the movement, Hezbollah could score major political points by securing funding from European governments.

On Sunday 31 May 2009, Israeli forces launched their largest ever military exercise, meant to simulate a three-front war with Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Syrian army. Leading up to the exercise, Hezbollah leadership has boasted the recent acquisition of anti-aircraft weaponry that is meant to threaten Israeli fighter planes which regularly conduct flyovers of Lebanese sovereign territory. While the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has served adequately as a buffer on the Israel-Lebanon border since the summer 2006 War, they have not prevented the reconstruction of Hezbollah's military infrastructure in southern Lebanon. Some experts believe they may now possess more rockets than they did at the outset of hostilities in 2006. In the aftermath of that conflict, Hezbollah proclaimed a "divine victory" in repelling the Israeli aggressors. Now with the unfolding military exercise, the leadership will continue to promote itself as the ultimate guarantor of Lebanese sovereignty. This has the effect of boosting the Hezbollah-led parliamentary bloc leading up to June 7th. Hezbollah has and will continue to tout the threat posed by the Israelis in an effort to garner support for the organization's military wing. The March 14th political opposition has repeatedly made statements deploring the "fear-mongering" employed by the Hezbollah leadership. Nevertheless, the military exercises and concerns regarding Israeli's war-footing play right into the hands of Hasan Nasrallah.

The recent apprehension of the Hezbollah operative in Egypt has generated a great deal of concern from the West and Sunni Arab allies in the region. Despite Hezbollah's claims that its agent solely supervising the transport of weapons to Gaza, the presence of agents on Egyptian soil has aroused great anxiety regarding both Hezbollah's ability and intent to foment revolution abroad. The Obama administration condemned what it termed "Hezbollah's involvement in Egyptian internal affairs" and called for the group's immediate disarmament. Given that Hezbollah now publicly flouts its support to Hamas in Gaza, and is suspected of efforts to de-stabilize the Egyptian government, Hezbollah is increasingly perceived as an Iranian agent by the U.S. and its regional allies. As a proxy of the Islamic Republic, the so-called "Child of the Revolution", has yet again proven its ability to project its influence beyond Lebanon's borders. Many fear that the Iranians will continue to exercise their supra-national ambitions in the Sunni Arab world through Hezbollah. The elections in Iran, scheduled just five days following elections in Lebanon, will therefore carry a considerable amount of weight in determining U.S. policy vis-à-vis Hezbollah in the future. A March 8th victory, in tandem with an Ahmadinejad re-election will produce a more unyielding, intransigent Hezbollah.

Conclusion

As the impact of the fore-mentioned internal and external factors are examined, it is clear that two Hezbollah's co-exist in the run-up to these elections. On the one hand, there is an evolving political party that is seeking to garner legitimacy by promoting good governance, respect for Lebanon's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character and the idea of national unity and tries to approach international donors. On the other hand, there is a Hezbollah that resembles the old resistance movement that was born out of the early 1980s. This is a Hezbollah that touts itself as the sole guarantor of Lebanese sovereignty, whose resistance movement is the only Arab force capable of keeping the Israelis at bay. This Hezbollah amplifies the threat posed by the Zionist entity, and cautions against Western plots to undermine the Lebanese elections. Moreover, there is Hezbollah as non-state actor, providing arms to Hamas in Gaza, and allegedly seeking to de-stabilize neighboring governments. The question remains, which Hezbollah will emerge post-June 7th and how, will this affect U.S. policy?

The most likely scenario is that Hezbollah will seek to perpetuate this sort of split

personality while leveraging a slight parliamentary majority behind the scenes. If the elections have a moderating effect, they will likely draw greater support from EU governments, and perhaps the Obama administration may eventually warm to the idea of selective talks with their parliamentary ally, the FPM. If the elections produce a defiant, emboldened Hezbollah, Lebanon will find itself increasingly isolated. The policy options for the Obama administration will not be cut and dry. It also remains to be seen what kind of effect a Hezbollah-led March 8th victory will have on the Iranian elections. A March 8th win may well empower the conservatives forces. If this is the case, an Ahmadinejad re-election will prove detrimental to future U.S. policy vis-à-vis Lebanon. In the long term however, progress along the diplomatic tracks with both the Iranians, and the Syrians will likely be the only way to resolve the Hezbollah issue.