



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

May 22, 2008

Lebanon and the Weakening of the Arab Order

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

After considerable hemming and hawing, the heads of Lebanon's various factions have negotiated an end to the extended impasse which had left the country without a president since November, shut down central Beirut for 18 months, and brought the country to the verge of all-out civil war. The agreement renders official the consensus choice of Army Chief of Staff Michel Suleiman as president, and includes the formation of a national unity government, commitment to electoral reform ahead of next year's parliamentary elections, and a tepid willingness to discuss the issue of weapons held by non-state actors. It reflects the fundamental changes in the internal and regional balance of power which have taken place: in favor of the Lebanese Shi'ite community, represented first and foremost by Hizballah, at the expense of the traditional power centers based in the Maronite, Sunni and Druze communities, and in favor of Hizballah's patron, Iran, at the expense of the central axis of the Arab state system - Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the institution of the Arab League. The fact that the agreement was brokered by Qatar's Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifah al-Thani, following repeated failures by Arab League Secretary-General `Amru Musa, constitutes a further blow to Saudi and Egyptian prestige. For Syria - the other traditional patron of Hizballah and Palestinian radical movements, ally of Iran, and stubborn opponent to Saudi and Egyptian blandishments - such an outcome leaves a number of unanswered questions.

From its inception, Lebanon's delicate internal political fabric has been linked to broader regional currents, and particularly to Syrian interests. Syria acquiesced to Lebanon's independence in 1943 with the agreed-on stipulation that Lebanon would have an "Arab face", i.e. not orient itself away from its

Arab neighbors and towards non-Arab regional and global powers. By the late 1950s, the existing Lebanese power-sharing formula dominated by the Maronite elite was being challenged by forces attracted to Nasserism, resulting in considerable violence. The status quo was restored, but came apart in the mid-1970s, as the Arab-Israeli conflict intruded onto Lebanese soil and the internal balance of Lebanese forces was ruptured. Ironically, it was Syrian intervention which brought an end to more than a year of civil war, as Syria imposed its will on the various feuding Lebanese and Palestinian factions, and established a hegemony which would last 30 years.

Syria's fellow Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq, were never comfortable with Syrian domination of Lebanon. Indeed, the Riyadh and Cairo Arab summits of 1976 compelled Syria to acquiesce to collective Arab oversight of Lebanon, via the entrance of additional, albeit symbolic peace-keeping forces which would serve alongside Syrian troops, all of whom were deputized as the "Arab Deterrent Force". But the others soon departed, and Syria was left alone in Lebanon, without Arab legitimacy. Arab unhappiness with Syria's role in Lebanon and its overall oppositionist stance in regional affairs was periodically demonstrated, e.g. via the absence of tangible support for Damascus in the face of Israel's assault on Syrian forces in Lebanon in the summer of 1982, and in the criticism of Syria's support for the pounding of Palestinian refugee camps in the mid-1980s by Shi'ite militias. However, occasional Saudi efforts notwithstanding, no other Arab states were capable during these years of pressuring Syria to ease its domination of Lebanon. Indeed, Syria's efforts to roll back Israeli influence in Lebanon after the 1982 war were largely successful, thanks primarily to the actions of a new Syrian client, Hizballah, which arose from the long-deprived Lebanese Shi'ite community and received important support from Syria's new strategic ally in the region, the Shi'ite Islamic Republic of Iran.

By 1989, the mutual blood-letting in Lebanon and Syria's own uncomfortable isolation from a large majority of Arab states resulted in a new, Saudi-brokered power sharing arrangement for Lebanon, embodied in the Ta'if Accord. Power would be shared more equitably between Christians and Muslims, while Syria was committed to redeploying its troops to the eastern Beka'a valley, hinting at an eventual withdrawal. But Hizballah, with Syria's approval, was never a party to this agreement, insisting on maintaining its independence as leader of the "national resistance" against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon, and Syria had too much to gain in Lebanon, politically and economically, to genuinely countenance a withdrawal.

In October 1990, Syria expelled the main Maronite challenger to the Ta'if Accord and Syrian hegemony, Gen. Michel Aoun, with tacit US approval, a quid pro quo for Syrian support for the anti-Saddam coalition. (Ironically, Aoun is now a staunch ally of Hizballah.) Lebanon then enjoyed a 15-year period of relative peace and prosperity, as Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri spearheaded the reconstruction of central Beirut. However, the internal balance of power between the country's quarreling factions remained fragile, while Hizballah, led by the charismatic Hassan Nasrallah and with ever-increasing Iranian support, expanded its military and political reach. Syria, for its part, experienced a changing of the guard in June 2000. The new president, Bashar al-Asad, quickly managed to antagonize the Saudis and Egyptians by his open embrace of Nasrallah and sharp criticism of the Arab states' inaction on behalf of the Palestinians, as the second intifada raged. Matters came to a head in February 2005, with the assassination of Hariri, a long-time intimate of the Saudi leadership. Blame was quickly laid at Syria's feet, and international pressure resulted in a swift evacuation of Syrian troops from Lebanon, ending a 30-year presence. Shortly thereafter, parliamentary elections produced a new government, headed by the Sunni Muslim Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, backed by the anti-Syrian, anti-Hizballah "March 14th coalition" of Lebanese factions. US President Bush proclaimed his delight with Lebanon's "young democracy", and promised support for the government. However, the internal political balance remained fragile,

Hizballah drew sharp condemnation from Riyadh, Cairo, Amman and the Siniora government for its provocation of Israel in summer 2006, which resulted in extensive damage and loss of life in Lebanon. For these leading Sunni Arab states, Hizballah's actions were viewed as part of the larger pattern of an expansion of both Shi'ite and Iranian state power, at the expense of the Arab Sunni states. Bashar al-Asad's regime, already blamed for the Hariri assassination, drew Arab wrath not only for sparking Israel's massive bombing of Beirut, but for enabling Hizballah's growth and Iran's penetration into the Arab heartland, including the Palestinian sphere. Saudi Arabia's relations with Syria reached an unprecedented low this past year, as Riyadh openly sought to cultivate an opposition to Bashar. But in the end of the day, as in the past, collective Arab leverage on the Lebanese front proved to be minimal. Arab League Secretary-General Musa repeatedly attempted to mediate an end to the internal Lebanese crisis during the past half-year in a way which would preserve the legitimacy of the Siniora government and limit the power of the Hizballah-led opposition. But the latter steadfastly refused to yield, exposing the impotence of Lebanese state institutions and the weakness of the Saudi-

Egyptian axis . The political logjam was broken only when Hizballah responded militarily to the government's challenge of its autonomy, which left more than 80 people dead and once again opened up a Pandora's box of sectarianism, including unprecedented Sunni-Shi'ite bloodletting. Despite Lebanese proclamations of "no victor, no vanquished," the latest agreement closely conforms to the opposition's long-standing demands. In particular, it confers upon the opposition veto power in the Cabinet, which, among other things, will enable it to block Lebanon's cooperation with the international investigation poised to blame Syria for Hariri's murder. Siniora's days in power are now clearly numbered.

Given the current balance of forces in Lebanon, the decision by the March 14th coalition to accede to the opposition's demands can be seen as a prudent one, allowing its members to cut their losses. How long the new Lebanese agreement will hold up, and how the Syrian regime will conduct itself regarding Lebanese affairs and Iran's growing influence in the region remains to be seen.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation