

Summer Wars in Lebanon?

By Anthony Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

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Lebanon is already involved in four potential struggles:

- A Syrian effort to restore influence, if not control.
- The rebuilding and restructuring of Hezbollah military power as both a means to gaining power in Lebanon and as an Iranian and Syrian supported threat to Israel.
- Confessional struggles for power reflected in a major division between a Christian-Sunni prime Minister and a slim majority of Parliament and a Presidency with Syrian and Hezbollah ties, and
- A struggle against the emergence of Sunni Islamist extremist movements with ties to Al Qa'ida that has led to clashes between the Lebanese Army and extremists in Palestinian Camps, but which involves Lebanese supporters of Al Qa'ida as well.

None of these struggles need turn into a “war,” but all of them can. They also interact, not only with internal developments in Lebanon, but developments in Israeli-Syrian relations, regional tensions with Iran, Palestinian struggles, and conflicts involving Sunni Islamist extremist movements like Al Qa'ida. The question of who will use whom interacts with the question of how far things can escalate, and no one can predict the outcome.

As for Syrian efforts to restore control, Syria is more likely to pursue a path of influence than try to restore a military presence. Only a major civil war seems likely to trigger armed Syrian intervention, and then only if hostile Parliamentary factions seem likely to win. Syria can accomplish more by backing Lebanese factions like Hezbollah and President Emile Lahoud, derailing full-scale investigation into the assassination of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri in 2005, and using Lebanese instability as a way of pressuring Israel.

Three members of the Lebanese Parliament have already been killed in ways that may have been intended to reduce the Prime Minister's coalition and strengthen Lahoud and Syria. (Pierre Gemayel, Gebran Tueni, Walid Eido.) The coalition supporting Prime Minister, Fuad Siniora, now has a majority of only 5 seats in the 126-man parliament. Lahoud has opposed by-elections, and the government as a whole has been politically paralyzed since November 2007, when six pro-Syrian ministers quit the cabinet. Nabih Berri, the pro-Syrian speaker of parliament and a Shi'ite, has since refused to convene parliament to ratify legislation, including efforts to create an international court to try suspects in Hariri's murder.

Israeli and UN sources disagree as to how much the Hezbollah has rebuilt its military presence in the south and rearmed, and the details are unclear. Maj. Gen. Claudio Graziano, who commands the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), said on June 15th that Hezbollah was not reaching its previous level of strength and had little presence south of the Litani River. Other UN sources have claimed that there has been little evidence of serious new Syrian and Iranian arms transfers. Hezbollah leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, has not talked about new fighting with Israel and has concentrated more on the domestic struggle for power.

US experts do feel, however, that the Hezbollah has been able to rebuild its military strength nationally and get significant deliveries of advanced antitank weapons and other weapons it can use to fight the IDF – as distinguished

from long-range rockets. Some IDF sources feel the Hezbollah may have improved its MANPAD quality and quantity, has developed new defense in depth tactics, and can raid across the border in spite of UNIFIL's presence. Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, has claimed the Hezbollah has rebuilt its strength to last year's level.

The only way to be certain of the truth is the hard way: watching actual fighting. It does seem likely, however, that Hezbollah has enough strength and freedom of action in the south to launch provocative small raids for its own purposes or in support of Hamas or Syria. There is little evidence it faces any challenge from the Lebanese Army, and it does seem to have a substantial presence and cadre structure outside the area occupied by UNIFIL. If it did attack Israel, Israel would be faced with having to try to drive north, use airpower or commando raids against Hezbollah targets that would be difficult to locate, or relying on uncertain international action. Israeli threats or attacks on Syria might or might not lead to meaningful Syrian pressure on Hezbollah. Hezbollah can also train Hamas and PIJ fighters and help them attack from outside the occupied territories.

The confessional struggles for power reflected in the major division between a Christian-Sunni Prime Ministers and slim majority of Parliament and a Presidency with Syrian and Hezbollah ties may represent the highest possibility of serious violence, although they are more likely to play out in demonstrations, low level violence, bombings, and assassinations.

The facade of a "Beirut spring" following Hariri's assassination no longer veils a return to growing confessional polarization and quiet rearming. US efforts to help rebuild the Lebanese Army may or may not help. Similar efforts in 1982-1983 simply armed an army that divided and became part of the problem rather than the solution.

Sunni Islamist extremist movements like Fatah al-Islam, with ties to Al Qaeda, continue to clash with the Lebanese Army and extremists in Palestinian refugee camps like the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. It has been clear since 2001, however, that there are Lebanese supporters of Al Qaeda as well. Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq and other areas are all recruiting grounds. The strength of such movements seems limited, and more likely to create more clashes, bombings, and low-level security problems than serious fighting. In a minor incident on June 17, two rockets were fired using timers, from an area in South Lebanon between the villages of Adaisseh and Kfar Kila, a few miles from Israel's border. Israeli analysts said they suspected a "splinter Palestinian group" was responsible for the attack, and doubted that Hezbollah was involved.

However, the rise of Hamas is almost certain to trigger associated power struggles in refugee camps throughout the Arab world. Such movements also raise the prospect of another proxy force that Syria can use in addition to Hezbollah – or that can use Syria for its own ends. Sect, ethnicity, and ideology do not prevent supposedly hostile factions from supporting each other against what are perceived to be great enemies. In practice, the Middle Eastern motto that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend," is being rewritten to be, "my enemy is my friend against my other enemy until he again becomes my enemy."

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