



Keeping the Lid on Lebanon

SUMMER TEMPERATURES HAVE been particularly warm in the eastern Mediterranean basin – and in more ways than one. For months, analysts, commentators and politicians have warned of the high likelihood of another round of Israeli-Hizballah hostilities in Lebanon, four years after the Second Lebanon War.

Two possible scenarios were recently tendered by former US ambassador Daniel Kurtzer in a Council of Foreign Relations “Contingency Planning Memorandum”: the initiation of hostilities by Hizballah, either to unify its ranks or under Iranian prodding; or (deemed more likely) an Israeli preemptive attack to degrade Hizballah’s military capabilities, which have been enhanced since 2006, and remove them from Iran’s potential arsenal in the event of an Israeli-Iranian confrontation.

So far, however, both sides have kept their powder dry, and for now appear to have found the costs of a conflagration outweighing the benefits. As of this writing, the violent exchange August 3 between Lebanese Army units and Israeli forces along the frontier does not appear to constitute a trigger for a wider conflict.

More recently, Lebanese nerves have been jangled by the prospects of renewed sectarian strife, prompting a joint Saudi-Syrian initiative designed to douse any potential sparks and maintain social and political calm. Once again, tiny Lebanon, a mere 10,000 sq km (3,860 square miles) in size, is proving to be the microcosm and cockpit of broader Middle East cross-currents and tensions.

The latest bout of concern was touched off by reports that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the Hague-based international hybrid court charged with bringing to justice those responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others in a massive car bomb on February 14, 2005, was on the verge of pointing an accusing finger at members of Hizballah. Doing so could potentially ignite a firestorm, both politically and on the ground.



Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah swiftly condemned the entire process, calling it a US-British-Israeli conspiracy to target and discredit the “resistance” movement. He emphasized Hizballah’s determination and ability to defend itself, and recommended to the late Hariri’s son and current Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri (who had first told Nasrallah of the impending accusation), that he closely calibrate his own response to the tribunal’s action. Numerous commentators in the Lebanese and Arab media have echoed Nasrallah.

Concerned that renewed inter-communal violence could quickly morph into a larger regional conflict, Saudi Arabian King Abdallah and Syrian President Bashar Asad displayed a united Arab front, journeying to Lebanon to meet with its president, Michel Suleiman, and expressing support for intra-Lebanese comity and stability in line with the 1989 Taif Accords, which brought an end to 15 years of civil war.

What a difference five years has made. Asad’s visit was his first to Beirut since Syrian troops were hastily withdrawn from Lebanon after Hariri’s assassination, ending a 30-year presence and marking the lowest point in Syrian-Lebanese relations since the abortive Israeli-Lebanese agreement of 1983.

The aftermath of the Hariri assassination spawned a pro-Western, anti-Syrian Maronite-Sunni ruling coalition in Lebanon. Syria’s alliance with Iran and their joint client Hizballah drew the wrath of most Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, following Hizballah’s ill-considered actions which triggered the 2006 war. The initial UN-sponsored Mehlis investigation of the Hariri murder

indicated that senior Syrian officials, including Asad’s brother and brother-in-law, had masterminded the Hariri assassination; and the Lebanese political system, and downtown Beirut itself, were essentially paralyzed for the next two years by the Hizballah-led opposition.

However, a political compromise between the various factions, brokered at Doha, Qatar, in 2008, indicated that Damascus was on its way to restoring its traditional preeminence over Lebanon and its warring factions, putting paid to US hopes for Lebanon’s so-called 2005 “Cedar Revolution.”

After having reached an unprecedented low point in relations with Damascus, including the tendering of open support to the disgruntled ex-vice president of Syria, Abdul Halim Khaddam, Riyadh then returned to its traditional policy of trying to cooperate with Syria in Lebanon, hoping to at least loosen the Damascus-Tehran connection and eventually repair the frayed relationship between Damascus and Cairo as well, so as to restore at least a semblance of inter-Arab cooperation.

Syria’s renewed overlordship can hardly be easy for either Saad Hariri or the formerly militant anti-Syrian Druze leader Walid Jumblatt to swallow. Both of their fathers were assassinated – the latter’s most certainly by a Syrian-directed hand in 1977, the former’s very possibly as well. But attaining justice for political crimes in Lebanon has repeatedly proven to be an unattainable proposition, even when initiated by the weight of the international community. Similarly, UN Security Council Resolutions, like 1701, which ended the 2006 war and called for the disarming of Hizballah and the prevention of arms smuggling across the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, are repeatedly neutralized or ignored in favor of political-strategic maneuverings by local and regional actors.

Concurrent with the Abdallah-Asad joint action on Lebanon, the Arab League (led in this case by the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians) acceded to American remonstrations and gave a qualified push to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to enter into direct negotiations with Israel. Taken together, then, it was a rare good week for collective Arab diplomacy.

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