



Cooking Up a Lebanese Deal?

RECENTLY, THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS OF SAUDI and U.S. *demarches* to Syria to officially demarcate its border with Lebanon. The concept behind them is: Syria would officially renounce its sovereignty over the disputed Shabaa Farms area in favor of Lebanon, Israel would pull back its forces from there, and Hizballah would lose its justification for maintaining its armed forces (to defend Lebanon against the Israeli "occupation").

The likelihood of Hizballah laying down its arms is virtually nil, as is Syria's complete abandonment of its strategic alliance with Iran, long a fundamental goal of Western policy makers. But the mere fact of the resumption of Syrian-Saudi and Syrian-American dialogue over Lebanese and other issues points to the renewed fluidity in regional affairs, following the Lebanese and Iranian elections. As for Lebanon, the prospects for an extended political truce between its quarreling factions appear greater than at any time in recent years.

From its inception, Lebanon has been aptly known as a "precarious republic," one with a delicate intercommunal balance and power-sharing formula with limited state capabilities. It has also been utterly incapable of insulating itself from wider regional currents and rivalries, thus complicating immeasurably the domestic bargaining required to maintain social and political peace.

The last four years have been especially eventful: the assassination of the former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, apparently with high-level Syrian involvement and the consequent withdrawal of Syrian forces after a 30-year sojourn; the Second Lebanon War in 2006 between Israel and Hizballah, which was, in an important sense, a war between Israel and an Iranian proxy; the 18-month long paralyzes of downtown Beirut and of the political system; and the selection of a new pro-Syrian president (Michel Suleiman) and conferring of governmental veto power on the Hizballah-led opposition March 8 coalition.

The recent Lebanese parliamentary elections were characterized by unprecedented flows of funds from both Saudi Arabia and Iran to their potential supporters. Against all expectations, the elections in early June reinforced the standing of the pro-Western March 14 group. Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah's response to the results was measured and he acquiesced to Hariri's son Saad being named prime minister.

Although there have recently been violent, armed confrontations between Sunni supporters of Hariri's "Future" movement and Shi'ite Amal backers, the leaders of the various Lebanese factions do not appear to have the stomach for violence, favoring instead a political *modus vivendi* in which they will be able to preserve their respective assets. Hence, the political bargaining and horse-trading has begun in earnest. At immediate issue is the makeup of the cabinet, and particularly whether or not there will be a unity government, in which the March 8 group will

have an effective veto on decisions by having at least one-third of the governmental posts, as has existed for the last year. Hariri is apparently opposed to continuing the existing formula, and various proposals are being floated, which will seat representatives of the president at the cabinet table, giving them the potential to decide fundamental questions.

Michel Aoun, the Maronite ex-general who was exiled for many years after confronting Syrian hegemony in 1990 and has reincarnated himself as an ally of Hizballah, is demanding at least seven cabinet posts for members of his Free Patriotic Movement. As both he and Nasrallah make a point of noting, the March 8 coalition parties actually received a higher number of the popular votes than the victorious March 14 bloc. Indeed, one wonders how long Lebanon's long-standing power-sharing formula, which confers a preponderance of power on the Maronite and Sunni communities at the expense of the Shi'ites, now the largest single community in the country, will continue to be deemed legitimate.

Of course, Lebanese political bargaining is also being conducted with an eye to regional developments. Nasrallah hurried to Damascus to receive an update on Syria's dialogue with Saudi Arabia regarding the border question and broader regional issues, including the developing thaw in Syrian-U.S. relations. The massive demonstrations in Iran against the fabricated results of the

elections there embarrassed Nasrallah, who had been quick to congratulate his ally Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his "victory."

A recent editorial in Beirut's Daily Star newspaper suggested that "Lebanon may need storm windows to protect itself from Iran's tempest." Indeed, the likely behavior of the newly delegitimized Iranian ruling authorities remains a wild card. Will they seek to stir up trouble in Lebanon by pushing Hizballah towards heightened confrontation after three years of quiet? Or will they take a lower profile, which is probably more in line with the desires of Damascus and the Hizballah leadership itself, which would be loath to be blamed, as in 2006, for provoking Israel into wreaking destruction upon Lebanon?

Meanwhile, in the cultural realm, the ability of Islamic radical groups to influence the public discourse was demonstrated recently by the cancellation of the scheduled appearance of Moroccan-French Jewish comedian Gad Elmaleh at Lebanon's famous summer Beiteddine Festival, following false accusations that he had served in the Israeli army. As in so many places elsewhere in the region, Lebanon's culture wars are heavily mixed up with high politics, and are likely to continue.

Still, Lebanon's political bosses do appear to prefer extended quiet at this time, in line with developing regional trends.

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