

Web Commentary

Middle East Program

May 2008

Hizbollah Attempts a Coup d'État

By Paul Salem

After 25 years of focusing on resistance against Israel, and after repeated assurances by party leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah that Hizbollah would never use its arms domestically, the organization launched a series of armed assaults in Beirut and plunged parts of the country into militia and sectarian confrontations reminiscent of the 1975–1990 Civil War. By Monday May 12, over 50 people had been killed and 200 wounded, and Hizbollah had effectively conquered West Beirut, subdued the Druze part of the Mount Lebanon region, and was pursuing operations in the Beqaa Valley to reopen the highway to Damascus after pro-government protestors had closed it. In Beirut and parts of Mount Lebanon, Hizbollah, after winning, was handing over overt security to the Lebanese Army while maintaining a behind-the-scenes presence.

Assisting Hizbollah were fighters from the Shi'i Amal movement led by parliament speaker Nabih Berri, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party that is close to Syria, and, in the Mount Lebanon region, two Druze groups hostile to Druze pro-government leader Walid Junblat, and backed by Syria and Iran. The fighting in these areas appears to be winding down, and some opposition leaders have promised to suspend military operations while vowing to maintain the campaign of civil disobedience, which includes the closure of the international airport and many roads in Beirut, as well as the sit-in in downtown Beirut.

In a speech on May 8, Nasrallah denounced the government's decision on May 6 to dismiss the head of airport security, an officer close to Hizbollah, and to investigate the party's private telecommunications network. These decisions were tantamount to a declaration of war, he charged, but his party would "cut off the hand" that dared to touch the resistance—Hizbollah portrays itself not as a partisan political organization but as the embodiment of the resistance to Israel. The government's decision and Hizbollah's reaction would put Lebanon in a completely "new phase," he declared, without specifying exactly what that phase would be. His primary concrete demand was that the government rescind the two decisions.

In its response to Nasrallah's speech, the government offered to "suspend" the two decisions and put them in the hands of the Lebanese army command. The army command responded with a compromise: it would keep the head of airport security in his post, and

it would “investigate” the issue of Hizbollah’s private fixed-line communications network “without hurting” the resistance. The army command also requested of the government to officially rescind the decisions.

The army has come under intense criticism for doing nothing to stop the onslaught by Hizbollah and its allied militias against civilian areas of the nation’s capital and other locations and for simply picking up the pieces of what Hizbollah leaves in its wake. The army defended its inaction by admitting that if it engaged in internal political battles it would be in danger of splitting along sectarian lines, and that it needed to remain neutral among the competing political factions.

The current spokesman of the opposition, Speaker of Parliament and Amal leader Nabih Berri, has argued that the way out of the crisis is to cancel the two offending decisions and resume the National Dialogue meetings that had taken place under his tutelage in the first half of 2006 but have since been suspended. The dialogue should focus on two issues, he contends: the formation of a National Unity government, and the drafting of a new parliamentary election law. The government has so far not officially cancelled the two decisions, and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has argued that Berri is a party to the conflict and cannot be the mediator of a national dialogue. There are unconfirmed reports that Saad Hariri, the head of the parliamentary majority and the Future movement and the primary Sunni leader in the country, and Junblat have agreed to attend national dialogue meetings led by Berri.

As of this writing, Hizbollah’s military campaign has mainly targeted the strongholds of two of the March 14 leaders, Saad Hariri and Walid Junblat. It is not clear whether the campaign will also extend to the Christian areas of Beirut or Mount Lebanon in order to weaken Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces and a primary Maronite leader in the March 14 coalition. Even if the opposition halts its military campaign, it is also not certain that the security situation can be brought back in hand or whether the devil of sectarian civil war has already been let out of the bottle and cannot be put back again.

Hizbollah’s immediate goals are clear: to break the authority of the March 14 government, forcing it to rescind the two controversial decisions, and to bring about the establishment of a new national unity government in which the opposition has a significant say. Such a government would not be able to take decisions Hizbollah opposes, including decisions relating to UNSC 1701 that it interprets as gradually leading to its disarmament. It could also try to obstruct the work of the international tribunal on the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Furthermore, a government of national unity could not maintain the exclusive alliances the current government has with Saudi Arabia and the United States, because it would also represent groups allied with Syria and Iran.

The opposition is not enthusiastic about electing a new president immediately as the government demands—the position has been vacant since November—because some of its members do not favor the election of the announced “consensus candidate,” Army Chief General Michel Suleiman, to the post. Instead, Hizbollah and other members of the

opposition favor proceeding to early parliamentary elections (which need to be held at least before the current parliament's term expires in June 2009) in the hopes of winning a majority, and leave the presidential issue for later.

But Hizbollah and Amal, as leading representatives of the Shi'i community, may also have broader goals. There is widespread speculation that they might demand a re-opening of the 1989 Taif Agreement, which regulates the distribution of power among sectarian groups, and insist on a larger share of power for the Shi'a. Neither Nasrallah nor Berri have demanded this officially, but Siniora in his speech of May 9 accepted that the Lebanese political system "can be developed." Some Shi'i leaders have complained that the Sunni prime minister and Maronite Christian president dominate the executive branch; critics counter that it is the Shi'i speaker of parliament who dominates the state through his proven ability to open or close parliament at will, and thus to control not only legislation but also the rise and fall of presidents and governments.

The timing of the government's two decisions, which Hizbollah used as an excuse to launch its military operations, left many observers puzzled. The government apparently realized that the decisions were momentous and might cause a strong reaction: the session dragged on for eleven hours of heated discussion. The most plausible explanation is that the government felt under pressure from its Western and Arab allies to take some action against Hizbollah; after all, the state is bound by several UNSC resolutions that call for gradual action toward disarmament of non-governmental militias. Perhaps U.S. policy to raise the pressure against Iran and its allies, and President Bush's impending visit to the Middle East impelled the government to do something. Some in the government also have felt for some time that Hizbollah's military options are limited despite its obvious military superiority: Iran, they argued, would not risk stumbling into a Sunni-Shi'i civil war in Lebanon. This had already been demonstrated in December 2006, when the opposition had launched its first campaign of road closings and civil disobedience aimed at toppling the government but had stopped in its tracks when Sunni-Shi'i clashes erupted in Beirut in January 2007.

There has been much speculation as to what has shifted in the Iranian position such that it encouraged, or at least, allowed Hizbollah to unleash its military advantage at this time. It could be a response to the latest round of sanctions against Iran that the United States has sponsored in the Security Council, U.S. accusations of Iranian interference in Iraq, and/or the campaign against Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army. It could also reflect an Iranian concern that if Syria goes down the road of peace with Israel over the Golan Heights, as it has tried to do by enlisting Turkish mediation, Hizbollah could be weakened; thus Hizbollah needed to unseat the current pro-Western government and regain access to the airport and sea ports of the Lebanese state in order to avoid being strangled if Syria made peace with Israel.

As of this writing, the situation in Lebanon remains extremely tense. An Arab League ministerial delegation is to arrive to help negotiate an end to the crisis. The next days will indicate whether the opposition will escalate and widen its military assaults, or whether

Lebanon is entering a lull in which discussions and political bargaining will come to the fore.

Paul Salem is the Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center. Prior to joining Carnegie in 2006, Salem was the general director of the Fares Foundation and from 1989 to 1999 he founded and directed the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Lebanon's leading public policy think tank. He also has held various positions at the American University in Beirut. He is a regular commentator on television, radio, and in print on political issues relating to the Arab world.

© 2008 CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, Carnegie is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.