

Lebanon Deal Boosts Hezbollah - Hezbollah Highlights

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Hezbollah Highlights

Since the war with Israel in the summer of 2006, Hezbollah has increasingly flexed its muscles in Lebanon -- most recently taking to the streets of Beirut in early May, deploying across the city and shutting down the country's airport, key roads and government-backed media. On May 21, rival Lebanese political factions reached a deal gives Hezbollah what it has long demanded in government -- veto power. (See related article.) See highlights from Hezbollah's battle for a stronger voice.

July 2006: War with Israel begins after Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah orders kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, in hopes of being to exchange them for Hezbollah prisoners

August 2006: Cease-fire reached. During the 34-day air and ground battle, over 1,200 Lebanese were killed, most of them civilians. Israel lost 158, mostly soldiers. In Lebanon, more than 120,000 homes were destroyed.

September 2006: U.S. names Hussein al-Shami, Hezbollah's custodian of cash, a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist."

Nov. 11, 2006: Hezbollah and its Shiite Muslim allies withdraw representatives from Lebanon's cabinet, where they had a minority voice.

Nov. 21, 2006: Prominent Christian cabinet minister Pierre Gemayel is killed by gunmen.

December 2006: Hezbollah makes a strategic alliance with a Christian opposition party and mobilizes protesters, sometimes numbering in the hundreds of thousands, in daily demonstrations in downtown Beirut. They assemble to demand more parliament seats from the Western-backed government. Protestors also criticize the government's handling of the investigation into the February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri; the Lebanese government suspects the involvement of Hezbollah-supporter Syria. Demonstrations are largely peaceful. On the occasions they turn violent -- with clashes between rivaling Sunni supporters of the government and Shiite supporters of Hezbollah - - Mr. Nasrallah recalls the crowds from the streets.

June 2007: Anti-Syria politician Walid Eido is killed in a bomb attack in Beirut.

July 2007: Hezbollah begins rebuilding businesses and homes in Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut.

September 2007: Anti-Syria politician Antoine Ghanem is killed by a car bomb.

November 2007: President Emile Lahoud steps down as his term expired. Lebanon's political factions refused to agree on how to form a new government, leaving the country without a head of state. Hours before his term ended, Mr. Lahoud declares a state of emergency and orders the army to assume control.

December 2007: Car bomb kills a top Lebanese Army officer, Brig. Gen. François Hajj.

Jan. 15, 2008: Bomb blast rips through a busy highway in what Lebanese officials call an attack against an American Embassy convoy. Attack kills at least three Lebanese and injured scores of civilians.

Feb. 13: Imad Mughniyeh, believed to be the mastermind of most of Hezbollah's deadliest terrorist attacks over the last 25 years, was killed in an apparent bombing in Syria. Hezbollah blames Israel.

May 6: Lebanese government orders the dismantling of a Hezbollah communications system and the firing of the international airport's security chief, who is suspected of being a Hezbollah ally.

May 7: Day of general strikes turns into a violent showdown between the Shiite opposition, led by Hezbollah, and supporters of the U.S.-backed government. Hezbollah sends its men into the streets of Beirut. The clashes shut down Beirut's airport and all main roads leading into the capital.

May 8: Showdown between government and Hezbollah opposition continues, becoming a machine-gun and rocket battle

across residential neighborhoods of Beirut.

May 9: Hezbollah fighters seize large areas of Beirut. Gunmen fan out across mostly Muslim West Beirut, raid pro-government media outlets and surround the residences of some of the nation's most prominent politicians. By midafternoon, many Hezbollah and opposition fighters peacefully turn over streets and buildings in West Beirut to commanders of the Lebanese army.

May 21: After six days of talks, the Lebanese government and Hezbollah reach deal in Doha, Qatar. Deal clears the way for a compromise candidate, Army Gen. Michel Suleiman, to become president. Opposition says longstanding sit-in in downtown Beirut will end immediately.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121140372622211885.html>

Lebanon Deal Boosts Hezbollah
Islamists Gain After Battle Over Secret Fiber-Optic Network
By CAM SIMPSON
May 22, 2008; Page A1

BEIRUT, Lebanon -- In a stinging defeat for the U.S.-backed government of Lebanon, the Islamist group Hezbollah bolstered its political power in this volatile land on Israel's border.

The deal comes two weeks after Hezbollah flashed its military might by seizing Beirut neighborhoods to protest efforts to rein it in. The trigger was unusual: Hezbollah was expanding a secret communications network, and the government wanted it dismantled. The ensuing fighting this month left 67 dead, in the worst internal strife since a long civil war ended in 1990.

Wednesday's agreement could have broad regional implications. It appeared to be the latest rebuke to the U.S.'s diplomatic efforts in the region to marginalize Syria and Iran, both big supporters of Hezbollah. The bargain met Hezbollah's longstanding demand for a political setup in which it could block any major legislation it opposed.

The Bush administration welcomed the agreement as an important tool for avoiding a potential civil war between Hezbollah and the pro-Western Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. "It's not perfect as a solution, but you have to weigh it against the alternative," said Assistant Secretary of State David Welch.

But a number of current and former administration officials viewed the deal as a major setback for U.S. interests in the region. "For the U.S.'s image, the fact that its leading ally had this type of setback" is disastrous, said David Schenker, a former Pentagon official now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I'm disturbed by this outcome."

Even as the bargain was being struck -- at talks in Doha, Qatar -- word came of separate, indirect peace discussions between Syria and Israel, the arch-foe with which Hezbollah fought a five-week war in 2006. (Please see related article.)

The Doha deal broke a political stalemate in Lebanon and cleared the way to finally fill the long-vacant post of president. A compromise candidate, Army Gen. Michel Suleiman, is expected to fill it.

The catalyst for Lebanon's recent spasm was the government's discovery several months ago that Hezbollah was secretly expanding a network that could provide secure communications in times of battle. The network, the fight it sparked and Wednesday's resolution provide a dramatic illustration of Hezbollah's surging power in Lebanon.

Violent Response

Prime Minister Siniora ordered the network dismantled in early May. He also ordered the dismissal of an airport official his government labeled an ally of Hezbollah. After Hezbollah's violent response -- it seized neighborhoods, then handed them over to the neutral army -- the government was forced to rescind both orders last week.

The drama began developing late last year when engineers working for Lebanon's telecommunications minister got an odd tip: Someone was mysteriously burying spools of fiber-optic cable near a village in southern Lebanon.

Then came a call from the mayor of Choueifat, an eastern suburb of the capital. "There are strange works, unknown to the municipality...on public and private lands," he said, according to Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh, who spoke in an interview before the government backed down on May 14.

He sent engineers to investigate, and soon determined that Hezbollah had a network stretching for more than 200 miles -- in a nation only about 140 miles long. It had wireless transmitters, Mr. Hamadeh said, and redundancies so communications could continue even if part of it was damaged. The government reported the network to the United

Nations, saying it consisted of "wired and wireless links to the telephone network of our neighbor, the Syrian Arab Republic" -- which dominated Lebanon for years before agreeing to a pullout in 2005.

The government long knew Hezbollah had a network of some sort, but thought it was limited and of little threat to central authority. But after the 2006 war, the government told the U.N., Hezbollah secretly expanded it under the guise of postwar reconstruction, burying cables beneath newly paved roads.

The work, the government added, was done with the "participation in the field" of the Iranian Headquarters for the Reconstruction of Lebanon, an Iranian agency that has claimed credit for hundreds of rebuilding projects since the 2006 war. It wasn't reachable for comment.

The telecom minister said some of the equipment was imported from "the West," declining to be specific. Lebanese officials also believe Iran supplied some.

For government officials critical of Hezbollah, the system was a clear sign of Hezbollah's worrisome ambitions. "This," declared Mr. Hamadeh, pointing to a hand-drawn map of the network, "is the takeover of Lebanon."

'No. 1 Weapon'

Since the government's public challenge to the network, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has left little doubt of its importance. In a news conference May 8, he defended it as a vital weapon against Israel, whose occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000 helped give rise to Hezbollah.

Calling the system Hezbollah's "No. 1 weapon," the black-turbaned leader declared that "it is forbidden to touch [anything] linked to the networks, whether an engineer, a company or a mayor. Touching them is like touching me."

A spokesman for Hezbollah said the government's description of the network was aimed at creating a false threat to justify action against Hezbollah. The more rudimentary system that existed at the time of the 2006 war was considered vital in Hezbollah's military successes against Israel. Some independent analysts and diplomats worried that enhancement of the network meant Hezbollah is gearing up for another confrontation with Israel.

Hezbollah sees itself not only as a defender of Lebanon but as a vital link in the Iranian and Syrian alliance against the U.S. in the broader Middle East region. The U.S. has long listed the Shiite Islamic group as a terrorist organization, its critics accusing it of having carried out attacks such as the early-1980s bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon. But in the region, many view Hezbollah as an indispensable part of Lebanon's political structure.

Mr. Hamadeh, the telecom minister, outlined the events that led to the confrontation, speaking in an interview in the Grand Serail, a restored Turkish palace in the heart of Beirut -- now surrounded by coils of razor wire -- that serves as the headquarters for his government.

His engineers had discovered a Hezbollah fiber-optic cable in the heart of Beirut last year, he said. Confronted about it, Hezbollah reluctantly agreed to remove it from that area, and "things went quiet for a while." But then, when his engineers investigated the tips from Beirut suburbs and southern Lebanon, they found a greatly expanded Hezbollah system.

On a hand-drawn map, Mr. Hamadeh traced the network's route: a line south from Beirut to the port of Tyre, then to myriad sites in the southern tip of Lebanon, then north through central Bekaa Valley. Off the main trunk, he sketched what he said were several new branches, reaching toward Christian areas in the north, pro-Syrian Palestinian bases in refugee camps and to areas east of Beirut controlled by the Druze, another sect. His final line reached to a tiny border town called Tufayel, where, he said, the secure network starts to connect with Syria.

Mr. Hamadeh said the government tried three weeks ago to negotiate secretly with Hezbollah about dismantling the network, working through the army intelligence chief and the head of internal security. He said Hezbollah confirmed the existence of the expanded system but "absolutely refused to dismantle it, directing threats against officials" involved. That response prompted the Siniora government, on May 6, to issue its now-withdrawn order to dismantle the network.

The government had also ordered removal of the security chief at Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport, Brig. Gen. Wafiq Choucair. It accused him of being too close to Hezbollah, after an army patrol found a wireless security camera trained on a runway and the airport's VIP terminal that are used by government officials. The camera was hidden in a cargo container on adjacent property owned by Hezbollah's construction arm, according to government and military documents published by the Arabic daily An Nahar and corroborated by government officials.

In a memo dated May 2, Gen. Choucair said he had spoken to Hezbollah officials and been told the camera was just

intended to guard against "trespassers and thieves" on the construction firm's property.

The government saw no choice but to order a crackdown on Hezbollah, Mr. Hamadeh indicated. "We knew that if we didn't do anything it would be a catastrophe -- the end of any authority of the state," he said in the interview before the government backed down. Hezbollah's violent response took officials by surprise. "We didn't know they would go that far," he said. The government reversed its orders on May 14.

A Unity Government

There followed six days of government-Hezbollah talks in Doha, overseen by the Arab League. The agreement announced Wednesday calls on Lebanon's Parliament to convene quickly to elect Gen. Suleiman as president. Lebanese politics are guided by a complex power-sharing agreement in which key posts are parceled out among the country's sects. The presidency goes to a Christian.

The agreement also calls for a unity government that allots 16 cabinet seats to the U.S.-backed government's ruling coalition, 11 seats to the opposition -- which Hezbollah leads -- and three assigned by the new president. The setup would effectively block any government move the opposition didn't support, because major legislation needs a two-thirds vote. The deal also paves the way for a new electoral law that, if approved, will divide Lebanon into new, smaller electoral districts, in an effort to better reflect the various sects' demographics.

Material Support

The Bush administration had pushed Mr. Siniora's government for months to avoid making political concessions to Hezbollah. But in the end, said current and former administration officials, the U.S. and its allies didn't provide the government with the material support to withstand the military power Hezbollah amassed with Iranian and Syrian backing.

Longer term, the administration is voicing hope the agreement could give Beirut's pro-Western government space to reposition itself against Hezbollah. They hope support among Hezbollah's non-Shiite political allies, particularly the Christians, could evaporate ahead of Lebanese elections next year. The U.S. officials maintained that Hezbollah's use of force against Lebanese citizens in recent weeks has undercut its self-proclaimed mantle as a resistance movement battling Israel.

"The veil of resistance was ripped off this organization" in recent weeks, the State Department's Mr. Welch said. "Again, this is not the end of this crisis and Lebanon still has to go through implementing this agreement."

--Nada Raad in Beirut and Jay Solomon in Washington contributed to this article.

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 Israel, Syria Reveal Indirect Peace Negotiations
 Progress Is Unclear In Year-Old Talks Brokered by Turkey
 By CAM SIMPSON
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JERUSALEM -- Israel and Syria are conducting indirect peace talks with Turkey acting as go-between, all three governments disclosed following weeks of public speculation.

The unveiling of the dialogue, the first between the two sides since 2000, drew skepticism and condemnation from many corners of Israel. Analysts questioned the depth of the talks and said peace prospects in the near term are cloudy.

The announcement Wednesday also gives a diplomatic boost to the Syrian government at a time when the Bush administration is seeking to isolate it. Damascus has closely aligned itself with Iran, the Bush administration's major foe in the region. Washington offered tepid support in public statements Wednesday.

The dialogue started early last year, but there was no clear indication Wednesday of how far it has advanced. A senior Israeli official would say only that the talks had accelerated in the past couple of months.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is beset by a bribery investigation that threatens to unravel his premiership, issued a statement saying both sides had decided to "pursue the dialogue between them in a serious and continuous way" in order to reach a "comprehensive peace" package.

The official Syrian state news agency issued an almost identical statement from the foreign ministry in Damascus.

Although it wasn't explicitly stated by either side, a comprehensive accord under the outlines they announced Wednesday would include an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, a region north of Israel's Sea of Galilee that buffers the two sides. Israeli forces first took it from Syria during the Arab-Israeli war in 1967.

Returning the Golan Heights to Syria is an unpopular prospect among Israelis of virtually all political stripes. An April survey showed only 19% of Israeli Jews supported withdrawal from the Golan in exchange for a full peace treaty. Some 75% opposed it. Israel formally annexed the Golan in 1981, despite international condemnation.

Mr. Olmert's government also is engaged in peace talks with the Palestinians, and it was unclear how it could manage both tracks simultaneously.

An official in Mr. Olmert's office said the Syrian initiative was begun in February 2007 during Mr. Olmert's first visit to Turkey as prime minister. It emerged, the senior Israeli official said, from a meeting between Mr. Olmert and his Turkish counterpart, Tayyip Erdogan. The official wouldn't say which of the two leaders proposed the idea.

On Israel's side, the talks are being headed by Yoram Turbovich, who is the prime minister's chief of staff, and Shalom Turgeman, Mr. Olmert's leading foreign-policy adviser, the official said. The two men were in Turkey when the announcement was made. They arrived there Monday for the latest meetings.

It wasn't immediately clear who headed the Syrian side, but the Israeli official said Damascus's representation was at a similar level.

Straddling the Line

Turkey, a fairly secular Muslim nation straddling the line between East and West, is ideally positioned to broker such talks. Its leaders have envisioned their nation as an important player in regional peacemaking. Ankara also improved its relations with Damascus, with which it shares a border, just before the initiative was begun. And Turkey has been Israel's main Muslim ally since the nations agreed to a military-cooperation pact in 1996.

Reaction was swift and strong across Israel, where Mr. Olmert also has lost favor with voters. Israeli police are in the thick of the fourth pending corruption probe to entangle him during his two-year premiership. It is widely believed to be the most serious investigation to date and involves allegations that Mr. Olmert accepted large sums of cash from an American businessman.

Mr. Olmert has denied criminal wrongdoing and pledged to resign only if he is indicted. His coalition government is barely hanging on, with 64 seats in the 120-member Knesset.

Some of Mr. Olmert's adversaries and allies alike suggested Wednesday the announcement was timed to divert attention from the scandal, a charge denied by officials close to him.

Even the parliamentary chairwoman of Israel's Meretz party, a leftist faction that closely identifies its existence with Arab-Israeli peace initiatives, said she was concerned Mr. Olmert's initiative lacked moral weight because it seemed to be offered as a distraction. Within the Labor party, a center-left member of his coalition, there was both support and skepticism.

The reaction from the opposition was scathing. "He who receives cash envelopes won't touch the Golan," said Gideon Sa'ar, chairman of the Knesset faction for the right-wing Likud party.

Analysts and others with experience in negotiations between the two sides were skeptical.

'Not Auspicious'

Itamar Rabinovitch was Israel's chief negotiator to Syria in the 1990s. He was then a senior adviser on the talks when they collapsed in 2000. He said the weakness of Mr. Olmert and his government, the unpopularity of giving up the Golan and a host of other factors meant near-term progress would be difficult. "The circumstances are not very auspicious," said Mr. Rabinovitch.

Israel was torn at its seams in 2005 when then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a hawk who enjoyed broad support on security issues, unilaterally withdrew about 8,000 Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip.

Mr. Olmert is politically far weaker than Mr. Sharon was then. The Israeli population of the Golan is bigger, and it also enjoys more Israeli support, Mr. Rabinovitch said.

It also was difficult to gauge the seriousness of the negotiations, because the two sides aren't directly talking. Previous efforts have failed despite face-to-face bargaining between officials from the highest levels of the two governments. The last serious stab failed in March 2000 when the sides couldn't agree on a small swath of land along the Sea of Galilee.

The senior official in Mr. Olmert's office who spoke about the dialogue Wednesday wouldn't say whether there was a timetable for direct negotiations.

Washington's Role

Syrian officials Wednesday reaffirmed President Bashar Assad's view that progress in solving the dispute is impossible without Washington's direct role. "This U.S. administration has not only opposed the resumption of these peace talks but has diligently worked on hindering them," said Ahmed Salkini, a Syrian diplomat in Washington. "We look forward to this U.S. administration, and any future administration, resuming ... America's historic role as a broker of peace."

Other challenges also seem abundant.

Syria is a strong supporter of the two militant groups posing the greatest threat to Israel -- the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, which seized control of the Gaza Strip last year, and Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Shiite Islamist group that sparked a war in 2006 after its militants staged a deadly cross-border raid into northern Israel.

The U.S. classifies both as terrorist groups and has designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism. Israel and the U.S., normally in lock step, have disagreed on the approach to Syria, which has aligned itself closely with Iran since the Bush administration began a campaign to isolate it following the start of the Iraq war five years ago.

The State Department's point man on the Middle East, Assistant Secretary of State David Welch, said Washington supports any "expansion of the circle of peace" in the Middle East. He lauded Turkey for playing a constructive role in brokering a dialogue between Israel and Syria.

Mr. Welch refused to commit the U.S. to an active role in any Israeli-Syrian dialogue, and he reaffirmed Washington's position that Israeli-Palestinian talks were the more mature channel for the international community to pursue.

--Jay Solomon in Washington contributed to this article.

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