

Trying to Hold Lebanon Together

Contributed by By Nicholas Blanford/Beirut
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A country constantly on the verge of civil war and invasion does not need two contending governments. But that is the dangerous scenario facing Lebanon this week. On Wednesday, members of the country's parliament are scheduled to vote on a replacement for Emile Lahoud, whose term ends midnight Friday. By unwritten agreement in this deeply sectarian nation, the president must be a Maronite Christian (the prime minister must be Sunni; the speaker of the assembly Shi'ite). Lahoud was an advocate of the policies of neighboring Syria, which until 2005 was the overlord of Lebanon.

Now Lebanon's powerful Shi'ite political party Hizballah, which possesses its own military, is using its influence to press for a new president friendly to its agenda and the interests of its Syrian and Iranian backers. Meanwhile, pro-Western, anti-Syrian politicians threaten to elect a president from their own camp if the opposition rejects a consensus candidate. Hizballah and its allies say they will not recognize an anti-Syrian president and hint they will form a rival government instead.

A who's who of leading foreign diplomats, including U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, has visited Beirut as part of an intense diplomatic effort to bridge the divide between both parties. France has spearheaded those efforts and, on Monday, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was in Beirut for another attempt to strike a deal. But his efforts appeared to be in vain. A visibly frustrated Kouchner blamed unnamed parties for derailing the negotiations. "Everybody was agreed [on the process]. Everybody said they had agreed. Now I'm amazed, France is amazed, that something is stuck, something is blocked, something is derailed, and I would like everyone to assume their responsibilities."

Last week, Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, the influential patriarch of the Maronite church, composed a list at France's behest of potential names from which the rival parliamentary blocs could select a president. The list allegedly includes candidates favored by both factions as well as some independent names. So far no potential consensus candidate has emerged as both camps continue to press for their own choices for the presidency.

The outcome of the last-minute negotiations will not only affect the future stability of Lebanon, but will also help shape the tussle for control of the Mideast between the United States, Israel and Washington's mainly Sunni Arab allies, against Iran, Syria and their local allies, particularly Hizballah. "What we have now is a confrontation between states taking place in Lebanon," said Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Endowment's Middle East Center in Beirut.

This has been a crisis nearly three years in the making. It began with the assassination in February 2005 of Rafik Hariri, a former Lebanese prime minister. His death, which many Lebanese pinned on neighboring Syria, triggered mass demonstrations in Beirut which, along with U.S. pressure, forced Damascus to end its direct domination of Lebanon. A Western-backed government was elected in June 2005.

For a moment, Lebanon was held up as a rare success in the Bush administration's floundering effort to promote democracy in the Mideast. But the pro-Syrian opposition, headed by Hizballah, began to fight back, asserting that Washington's version of Mideast democracy had more to do with protecting Israel from its Arab enemies than promoting genuine freedom.

At the heart of the emerging impasse between the anti-Syrian "March 14" block, which forms the backbone of the government, and the pro-Syrian opposition was the fate of Hizballah's formidable military wing. The March 14 block seeks Hizballah's disarmament in line with U.N. resolutions. It fears that Hizballah's weapons are really intended to serve its patron Iran, thus dragging Lebanon into the frontline of the power struggle between Washington and Tehran over the latter's nuclear ambitions. Hizballah maintains that its weapons are the only means of deterring Israeli aggression against Lebanon and that calls for its disarmament serve a pro-Israel agenda.

With time running out, many jaded Lebanese are pinning their hopes on the election of a consensus president, even if that means prolonging Lebanon's political and economic impasse. Better that, they say, than the very real possibility that the emergence of two rival governments will spark street violence and possibly civil war. They know that even if consensus over a president is reached, it will not signal the end of Lebanon's grinding political crisis. The confrontation will move onto the identity of the next prime minister, the formation of the new government, and key appointments in the security forces. And then there is that matter of implementing the U.N. resolutions to disarm Hizballah.

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