



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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THE LEBANESE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

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On April 3rd, the Lebanese “National Dialogue Forum” convened but was only able to decide that it would meet again at the end of the month. This habit of meeting and immediately dispersing has become a pattern since the beginning of February and is explained by both the structural problems and the contentious issues facing the Forum, none of which are likely to be resolved in the near future.

The National Dialogue Forum was created at the initiative of Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and leader of the Amal movement. His aim was to bring together all the leading political forces in order to discuss the issues causing tension and strife among the various sects and factions in the country. That aim explains the makeup of the forum, which is based on confessional and even clan foundations rather than on the formal representation of the various factors in state institutions. Thus, the Christians are represented by traditional spokesmen (the Jemayyil family, Samir Geagea – leader of the “Lebanese Forces”) alongside the former Army commander, Michel Aoun; the Shiites by Berri and the Secretary-General of Hizbullah, Hasan Nasrallah; the Sunnis by Sa’ad al-Hariri, son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and by the current Prime Minister (and Hariri loyalist) Fu’ad

Siniora; and the Druze exclusively by Walid Junblatt.

The Forum is faced with a number of challenges: the continuation in office of President Emile Lahoud, the presence of armed Palestinians outside the refugee camps, the nature of Lebanon’s relationship with Syria, the question of Lebanese sovereignty in the area of Shab’a Farms, and, perhaps most explosive of all, the future of Hizbullah’s military force. With respect to Lahoud, most of the Christian and Druze elements (and the Hariri family) want to terminate his presidency now, but the Shiites and Michel Aoun prefer that he remain in office. Hizbullah is particularly adamant in opposing his replacement, apparently because it fears that a new president would try to disarm Hizbullah’s militia, even if that led to an outright clash with the Lebanese Army. However, aware of the possibility that Lahoud might respond to growing pressure by tendering his resignation, Hizbullah is also searching for alternative candidates who would not threaten its special military status.

As far as relations with Syria are concerned, all Lebanese factions are united behind the idea that Lebanese-Syrian relations should be “normalized,” at least symbolically, by the opening of embassies and the exchange of official diplomatic representatives. Syria,

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however, rejects that idea, primarily because of its insistence that Lebanon is historically an integral part of Syria and that opening an embassy would signify the end of the long-standing dream of "reuniting" the two countries.

With respect to Palestinians bearing arms outside the refugee camps, all Forum participants want to stop this phenomenon, which is particularly apparent among followers of Ahmad Jibril, a protégé of Syria, whose forces hold a number of outposts in southern Lebanon and the Bek'a Valley. But the salience of this issue pales in comparison with the question of Hizbullah's independent military force.

On this question, the various factors are sharply divided for both tactical and ideological reasons. While the Druze and some Christians (the Jemayyil family and Samir Geagea) insist that the Hizbullah militia be disbanded and its members integrated into the Lebanese Army, Sa'ad al-Hariri, apparently for tactical reasons, voices his support for "the resistance" even as his prime ministerial proxy, Fuad Siniora, declares that "All Lebanon has the right to resist, not just one group," presumably implying that the time has come for the government to reassert its legal monopoly on the instruments of force. Hizbullah, of course, opposes any demand to strip it of its weapons on both ideological and tactical-political grounds, and it is backed by Michel Aoun, who committed himself to support this position when he signed the "Mar Mikhail" document. Of course, Aoun is primarily interested in gaining Hizbullah support for his (or some surrogate's) candidacy for President.

The question of Hizbullah's weapons is also linked directly to the issue of Lebanese sovereignty over the Shab'a Farms region. While all factions agree (at least publicly) that Shab'a belongs to Lebanon, the Hariri family and Junblatt are also persisting in their demand that Syria turn over to the UN official documents

proving that the Farms are not Syrian. The Syrians, however, still prefer to cloak this issue in ambiguity because they believe that will allow them to sustain tension between Lebanon and Israel without becoming directly involved themselves. They have therefore refrained from taking any official action lest that also prejudice the future of the region in advance of any possible negotiations with Israel. Moreover, all the Lebanese factions – with the exception of Hizbullah – claim that if Lebanese ownership of Shab'a Farms is documented, the area can be freed by diplomatic means. Hizbullah, by contrast, links Shab'a with the preservation of its own independent military force and insists that while the "weapon of the resistance" is necessary to "liberate" Shab'a, it must also be preserved to protect the entire state of Lebanon. For everyone else, the current situation is a constant reminder of the failure of the Lebanese state to disarm non-national forces and create a single, united military body.

The issue of Hizbullah's militia is particularly charged because it not only casts a shadow over the domestic Lebanese arena but also over Israel. Hizbullah has repeatedly stressed that it will not give up its military force. Indeed, Nasrallah has declared, "If anyone tried to take away our weapons, we will cut off his hand and his head and draw the breath from his body." Thus, the potential remains for a violent confrontation between Hizbullah and Lebanese Army. To preempt that risk, Hizbullah might try to launch attacks on Israel in order to prove, in light of probable Israel retaliation, its indispensability to the security of Lebanon as a whole. In other words, there is still a chance that domestic Lebanese tensions, this time over the military status of Hizbullah, could again lead to violence across the Israeli-Lebanese border.

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