

Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward

I. OVERVIEW

Hizbollah's takeover of much of West Beirut began as a cost-of-living strike on 7 May 2008. Yet the course of events, their speed and ultimately violent turn exposed the true stakes. For almost four years, Lebanon has been in a crisis alternatively revolving around the government's composition, its program, the international tribunal investigating Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination, the choice of a new president and the electoral law. All attempts at peaceful resolution having failed, it has reverted, more dangerously than ever, to its origins: an existential struggle over Hizbollah's arms. The government's 14 May decision to reverse the measures – removal of the airport security chief and questioning Hizbollah's parallel telephone system, a key part of its military apparatus, precipitated the crisis – is welcome as is the Arab League-mediated solution. The onus is now on all Lebanese parties to agree a package deal that breaks the political logjam and restricts how Hizbollah can use its military strength without disarming it for now.

No party can truly win in this increasingly volatile lose-lose confrontation. Hizbollah clearly prevailed in the military showdown, demonstrating its ability to overrun any opponent. Politically, however, the balance sheet is far different. Outside its own constituency, it is seen more than ever as a Shiite militia brutally defending its parochial interests rather than those of a self-proclaimed national resistance. The blatantly confessional aspect of the struggle has deepened the sectarian divide, something the Shiite movement long sought to avoid. Hizbollah's principal Christian ally, General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, appears deeply embarrassed. Although Lebanon's intense polarisation might enable him to retain most of his followers in the short term, over time his alliance with Hizbollah will become ever more difficult to justify. The government has remained in place and will be able to continue rallying domestic and international support.

But the principal Sunni party, Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement, has equal reason to worry. The March 14 coalition was forced to back down and revoke its controversial measures. The Sunni community is be-

wildered, stunned by its inability to resist Hizbollah's three-day takeover and angry at a leadership accused of letting it down. Pressure on the heads of the Future Movement to bolster its military capacity will grow; simultaneously, some militants will be drawn to more radical, possibly jihadi movements. Its other allies, notably Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader, appear demoralised and defeated. The army, too, has been damaged, unable to restrain the opposition and harshly criticised by the ruling March 14 coalition as well as many ordinary Sunnis. The risks of an escalating sectarian conflict are real and dangerous.

By withdrawing its decisions, the government has helped calm the situation. But a threshold has been crossed, and it will be very hard to turn back the clock. To minimise the risks of a more dangerous conflagration, renewed efforts pursuant to the Arab League agreement are needed to settle on a new president and national unity government that accepts for now Hizbollah's armed status while strictly constraining the ways in which its weapons can be used. In the longer term, stability will require that third parties cease using Lebanon as the arena for their fierce regional and international competition and, just as importantly, that Lebanese political leaders cease enabling such costly interference.

II. A TURNING POINT

A. THE ONSET OF THE CRISIS

It soon became apparent that the motivations behind the general strike called for 7 May by the Workers General Union, a trade union with close ties to the opposition,¹ went far beyond its immediate and quite unremarkable demands (such as increasing the minimum wage, raising salaries more generally and subsidising oil and gas prices).² Although these aspira-

¹ The Workers General Union is dominated by former members of pan-Arab parties; it has close ties to Hizbollah.

² At the conclusion of a ten-hour cabinet meeting, the government ordered a raise in the monthly minimum wage to

tions were widely shared, the strike garnered support mostly among sympathisers of Hizbollah and Amal, another Shiite party. Unions, commercial chambers and other associations close to the ruling 14 March coalition reportedly urged their followers to turn up for work; if so, their call unquestionably was heeded.³ Even many members of General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement ignored the strike despite the fact that its slogans echoed its own.⁴

From the outset, the dispute revolved around something entirely different: the government's 6 May 2008 decisions to reassign the pro-Hizbollah Beirut airport's security chief and investigate Hizbollah's independent telephone network. In response to this unprecedented challenge to its military apparatus, Hizbollah sought to intimidate the government and March 14 coalition and force their surrender through a show of strength, taking to the streets notwithstanding the violent outcome of previous such attempts.⁵ Originally, the opposition planned a massive demonstration which was to run through the heart of Beirut's volatile, confessionally-mixed neighbourhoods before ending up at Hamra,⁶ the stronghold of the Future Movement – the principal Sunni party and March 14 heavyweight. Like the strike, the demonstration

500,000 Lebanese pounds (slightly over \$330); trade unions were demanding 960,000.

³ According to March 14 sources, most professional associations in Saïda, Tripoli and Iklîm al Kharoub – all predominantly Sunni areas – refused to follow the strike. The banking sector, dominated by Christians close to March 14, did likewise.

⁴ For instance, Aounist merchants in the Ashrafieh neighbourhood ignored the strike, and several of the movement's leaders did not conceal their irritation at the opposition's stance. That said, in meetings with several Aounist supporters, none was prepared to part ways with the general as a result of his Shiite partner's behaviour. Crisis Group interviews, Aounist loyalists, Achrafieh, 9-10 May 2008.

⁵ Between December 2006 and January 2007, Hizbollah resorted to street politics in order to pressure the government, with demonstrations, sit-ins and a general strike. However, its tactics proved risky and ultimately self-defeating, as "the street battles quickly morphed into confessional ones, forcing Hizbollah into a sectarian straitjacket" and threatened to degenerate into a sectarian civil war. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007, p. 1. As a result, the Shiite movement opted for political paralysis over "confessional chaos" (*fitna*) that would detract it from its primary objective, the struggle against Israel.

⁶ The demonstration was supposed to begin at the Barbir Bridge, follow Corniche al-Mazraa street and end up at Hamra. In other words, the planned route crossed several mixed Sunni-Shiite neighbourhoods where confessional clashes typically have occurred in the past.

was a flop; because of its unmistakably provocative course, it ultimately was called off.

Together with Amal and several smaller pro-Syrian parties, Hizbollah hardened its stance. It organised a so-called civil disobedience movement, which led to the closure of Beirut's airport and major roadways. On 7 May, the capital witnessed increasing provocations and violence. Then, in the wake of a press conference by Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary general, the protest movement turned into a deliberate and well-planned operation to take over West Beirut. The fighting pitted Hizbollah's and Amal's Shiite militias against Sunnis. With far superior equipment, training and discipline, the former overwhelmed their rivals, taking control in less than twelve hours of West Beirut, the section of the capital that includes government headquarters, known as the *Sérail*, and the residences of many leading March 14 members (such as Saad al-Hariri and Walid Jumblatt) and that is home to the Future Movement's middle- and upper-class constituency.

Although the army protected several key sites (most notably the *Sérail*, as well as Hariri's and Jumblatt's domiciles), the Future Movement was forced to shut down its main media offices, which were looted or set ablaze.⁷ While the Shiite movements' objectives appeared primarily political, the behaviour of their rank and file struck a clear-cut sectarian chord: armed militants hurled abuse at key Sunni religious symbols.⁸

Unable to offer much resistance on the ground and confronting what many Sunni sheikhs already described as their community's *naksa* (defeat),⁹ March 14 leaders issued strong verbal reactions. Taking the lead, the *mufti* – the most prominent Sunni religious authority – characterised Hizbollah as an occupying force, a clear reference to Israel's earlier occupation.¹⁰ Ahmad Fatfat, a Sunni minister and close ally of Saad al-Hariri, the Future Movement leader, accused Hizbollah of turning from a resistance movement to a militia, drawing a parallel with the evolution of Palestinian movements in Lebanon in the early 1970s – one of the main triggers of that era's civil war.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Future Movement journalists, 9 May 2008; Crisis Group also visited the destroyed offices of the Future Movement's television station.

⁸ According to several witnesses, there were differences between the more provocative Amal militants and more disciplined Hizbollah fighters who, in some cases, went so far as to protect Sunni religious sites. Crisis Group interviews, West Beirut residents, foreign journalists and Jamaa Islamiyya officials, Beirut, 10-11 May 2008.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Sunni sheikhs, Tripoli, 11 May 2008.

¹⁰ Press conference, Future TV, 7 May 2008.

Samir Geagea, the foremost March 14 Christian leader, compared Hizbollah to Iraq's Mahdi Army. And Fayçal Mawlawi, the secretary general of Jamaa Islamiyya (an Islamist movement with close ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood), called for the militias' withdrawal from West Beirut, in order to "save the honour of the resistance", and for the dispatch of Arab armed forces.¹¹ Throughout, Sunni and other political leaders denounced Hizbollah's "military coup",¹² a theme echoed by important segments of the international community and much of the world media.¹³

B. THE STAKES

In his press conference, Nasrallah made clear what had largely remained unspoken: at its core, the crisis pertained to the status of Hizbollah's weapons. For the first time since the onset of the long crisis, the government had taken aim at Hizbollah's military apparatus through two decisions:

- On 6 May, it reassigned the head of security at Beirut's airport, Wafiq Shuqayr, a general officer accused by March 14 forces of having failed in his duties and believed to be sharing information with Hizbollah.¹⁴ In particular, Shuqayr was faulted for allowing Hizbollah to operate a system of listening devices and cameras it had set up to monitor runway 17, from where officials fly out and where they land.¹⁵ This directly affected the movement's control over a strategic location that is vital to the flow of people and probably to various types of trafficking. Hizbollah's reaction to Shuqayr's removal suggests he played a central role in this regard.
- The council of ministers challenged the "legality and constitutionality"¹⁶ of Hizbollah's independent telephone system, described by the movement as an indispensable component of its military apparatus which ensures the secrecy of internal communications and the efficiency of its command

and control. It is believed to have been a cornerstone of Hizbollah's military performance during the July 2006 war with Israel.¹⁷ For the government and March 14 forces, the problem was not only the network itself but also its recent expansion and the fear that it would be used – either by Hizbollah or Syria – for domestic surveillance.¹⁸

While these decisions could have been taken a long time ago, they were not, reflecting an unwritten *modus vivendi* between March 14 forces and Hizbollah. The issue of the Shiite movement's weapons has been raised and debated regularly since 2005,¹⁹ but until now the majority had refrained from any tangible measure to undermine Hizbollah's operational capability. Instead, attempts to weaken or corner the movement were limited to verbal condemnations and political manoeuvres.²⁰ Conversely, Hizbollah consistently had pledged to reserve its weapons for the fight against Israel and not to use them domestically. When-

¹⁷ According to Nasser Qandil, a former pro-Syrian member of parliament, Hizbollah owed its 2006 success to the inability of Israeli intelligence to penetrate its communications system. In turn, this was due to the existence of a "resistance society" wholly loyal to Hizbollah and, therefore, hard to penetrate and to the movement's underground telephone network. The latter allegedly enabled Hizbollah to coordinate its actions during the war and protect its leaders. To incorporate it into the state network, he argued, would be to expose it to Israeli surveillance and thus tantamount to betrayal. Because it touched upon the resistance ("a sacred object"), any attempt to challenge the telephone network was a red line. Al-Manar television, 8 May 2008. Likewise, Hassan Nasrallah argued: "In the July war, our most important point of strength was the command and control, thanks to the fact that communication between the leadership and the various commanders and field fighters was secured. The enemy has admitted to this....When we have a look at the Winograd report [official Israeli report on the 2006 conflict] today, we find that the most important recommendation in the report was the need to eliminate Hizbollah's command and control system in which telecommunications play a decisive role". Hassan Nasrallah press conference, al-Manar, 8 May 2008.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Future Movement leaders, Beirut, 9-10 May 2008. The government planned to refer the affair to the judicial system and ask it to rule on the legality of the telecommunication system. Crisis Group interview, Aref al-Abad, media adviser to Prime Minister Siniora, Beirut, 13 April 2008.

¹⁹ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°20, *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, 21 December 2006; and Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

²⁰ For example, Fouad Siniora is said to have pushed for a more restrictive mandate for the UN force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), in part to avoid provoking Hizbollah. Crisis Group interview, adviser to Prime Minister Siniora, Beirut, July 2007.

¹¹ See Al Jazeera, 11 May 2008.

¹² A senior adviser to Saad al-Hariri was among the many who employed this term. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 9 May 2008.

¹³ In its coverage of the events, Al Arabiya systematically used the expression "Hizbollah's coup d'état".

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Future Movement member of parliament, Beirut, 13 May 2008.

¹⁵ March 14 leaders suspect that the system was used by the Shiite movement and Syria to spy on them. Crisis Group interview, adviser to Saad al-Hariri, Beirut, 10 May 2008.

¹⁶ Nicholas Blanford, "A Cell Phone Civil War in Lebanon", *Time*, 7 May 2008.

ever its anti-government activities risked provoking intra-Lebanese confrontations, it had taken a step back, determined not to appear as a purely sectarian militia as opposed to a broader resistance movement.²¹

The violence that engulfed Beirut this month ended this precarious status quo and shed any remaining illusion about the ultimate stakes of the struggle. Whatever implicit rules once prevailed and helped maintain a fragile calm even amid intense political disputes no longer are in force. March 14 elements likely felt they could afford to embarrass Hizbollah and address head-on the question of its military apparatus without provoking a major flare-up because of the Shiite movement's fear of the consequences of a sectarian clash.²² Hizbollah's reaction, in other words, was expected to be relatively mild, but it was nothing of the sort. On 9 May, in his first press conference since the onset of the 2006 war, Nasrallah proclaimed the legitimacy of "defending our weapons with our weapons",²³ thereby violating his earlier promise never to turn them inward. Hizbollah's subsequent course was methodical, deliberate, massive, brutal and fully planned.

Although many in the majority evoked a possible coup, that does not seem to have been Hizbollah's goal. Its attacks appear to have been undertaken for other objectives: to send the March 14 forces an unequivocal message not to touch its weapons and prove its military superiority and capacity to overthrow the government if need be. A well-informed opposition member said that:

Hizbollah's fighters entered into Beirut because a red line had been crossed. Indeed, this was the first time a concrete measure was taken against the resistance, and this happened after several warnings were sent to the government, before and even during the fateful council of ministers meeting.²⁴

Operating at lightning speed, the Shiite movement quickly conquered most key sites; it subsequently handed over some neighbourhoods to the military, which studiously remained neutral throughout the fight-

ing – largely out of fear that its multi-confessional army could splinter if forced to take sides.²⁵ The Siniora government has not been toppled, a sure sign that Hizbollah understands the perils of such an enterprise as well as the enormous challenge of ruling either against or without Sunnis – and with virtually no international support or recognition.

A senior opposition official said, "the problem is not to take power, but what to do with it. In a multi-confessional system such as Lebanon's, if we were to seize power by force, we would have every other community against us".²⁶ According to a well-informed opposition member, Hizbollah's actions were aimed exclusively at protecting the resistance and would end as soon as the government met its core demands: withdrawal of the two ministerial decisions and a return to the negotiating table.²⁷ In short, Hizbollah did not conduct a military coup so much as it imposed militia rule in several areas previously dominated by the Future Movement.²⁸ Most

²⁵ The army evidently feared that if it intervened to stop the Shiite militias, it risked fragmenting along confessional lines. As early as 8 May, when West Beirut awoke to a Hizbollah-imposed order, an army communiqué described the events as a threat to its own unity. Quoted on Al Jazeera, 8 May 2008. As a result, it limited itself to protecting state institutions. The army's behaviour and, in particular, its decision to take control of areas handed over by Hizbollah – thus in a way giving the militia more freedom to push forward – raised serious questions in March 14 ranks about its neutrality. Crisis Group interview, Future Movement official, 9 May 2008. Many Sunni residents of West Beirut, particularly Future Movement members, were greatly disappointed by the army, whose reputation suffered as a result. Crisis Group interviews, West Beirut, 10-13 May 2008.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, well-informed opposition member, Beirut, September 2007.

²⁷ Some commentators evoked other possible Hizbollah goals, such as halting Future Movement efforts to set up a powerful militia of its own. See *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 2008. A Hizbollah leader denied this, stating, "there is only one reason for our armed intervention in Beirut, which is to halt the government's decisions. Sunni rearming is a Sunni problem that Hizbollah cannot solve militarily. It is worrisome, but unlike the government's two measures, it does not represent a direct threat to us". Crisis Group interview, well-informed opposition member, 13 May 2008. An analyst with close ties to Hizbollah argued that its main fear is not the possible rearmament of Sunnis within the Future Movement, but rather Salafi radicalisation and the emergence of jihadi groups, especially in the Bekaa Valley. Crisis Group interview, 13 May 2008.

²⁸ As of 10 May, the various groups involved in the fighting (Hizbollah as well as militias belonging to Amal and the National Social Syrian Party) were still in charge of a number of neighbourhoods and were continuing to conduct searches and arrests of local Future Current militants. Crisis

²¹ Thus, when the opposition's January 2007 general strike threatened to degenerate into violence, Hizbollah quickly called it off. See Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit., p. 3.

²² A few days before the conflict, one of Siniora's senior advisers predicted that the status quo would persist at least until the 2009 parliamentary elections, arguing that most actors could live with long-term political paralysis. Crisis Group interview, 2 May 2008.

²³ Hassan Nasrallah press conference, al-Manar, 8 May 2008.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, opposition leader, Beirut, 12 May 2008.

of all, it addressed an unambiguous warning to the government: if it violated the implicit bargain and rules of the game, Hizbollah would not feel barred by any constraint of its own. It demonstrated that, if pushed, it would go all the way.

III. THE CONFLICT'S NEW PHASE

A. A MIXED BALANCE SHEET

From a strictly military view, Hizbollah, along with its allies, notably Amal and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, incontestably prevailed. They proved their ability to swiftly defeat March 14's own militias, keep the nation's armed forces at bay and, if necessary, overthrow the government. Both the Future Movement and its leader, Saad al-Hariri, were humiliated by the ease with which these fighters took over Sunni and mixed neighbourhoods of Beirut, overpowering any supposed defences.²⁹ Politically, too, Hizbollah has reason for partial satisfaction: under pressure, the government ultimately revoked the decisions that triggered the showdown, thereby raising the question why it had taken them in the first place.³⁰

Yet, its success is at best relative and ambiguous; indeed, both Hizbollah and its allies have avoided referring to a "victory". The Shiite movement's losses appear almost as considerable as its gains. To begin, its reputation has been substantially tarnished. Insofar as one side was virtually entirely Shiite and the other almost wholly Sunni,³¹ the fighting became intrinsically sectarian, something Hizbollah heretofore had strenuously sought to avoid.³² The Shiite movement's

Group visits, West Beirut and interviews, residents and Sunni Islamist militants, Beirut, 10-14 May 2008.

²⁹ Many of Hariri's followers harshly criticised him afterward, claiming that he had falsely promised to protect Beirut. Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli Sunni religious officials and Beirut residents, 10-13 May 2008. Several eyewitnesses said that in many instances Hizbollah militants assisted and coordinated large numbers of Amal fighters. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 9 May 2008.

³⁰ On 14 May, after a prolonged cabinet meeting, the government revoked the two decisions, claiming it wished to preserve civil peace and facilitate the Arab League mediation. Reuters, 14 May 2008.

³¹ Interestingly, it seems that Aounist forces did not help Hizbollah, and Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces did not assist their Sunni allies.

³² Even during this crisis, Hizbollah showed that it worried to some extent about the level of Sunni-Shiite tensions. At the rhetorical level, its leadership systematically attacked what it called "Walid Jumblatt's government", taking aim at

targets – neighbourhoods that make Beirut a quintessentially Sunni city in the eyes of Future Movement sympathisers; Saad al-Hariri's palace; and the offices of the prime minister, a position which Lebanon's confessional system sets aside for Sunnis – further exacerbated this sectarian divide.

To make matters worse, many Shiite militants acted in highly offensive and deliberately provocative ways;³³ witnesses report that they attacked civilians, destroyed cars and shops, proffered anti-Sunni insults and hung portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and former Lebanese President Emile Lahoud in areas or buildings they had conquered.³⁴ Even though less disciplined Amal loyalists are believed to have committed many of these offences and even if Hizbollah might have sought in some places to prevent them, this thuggish behaviour deeply damaged its reputation.³⁵ Never before had it appeared so clearly as a Shiite militia rather than a resistance movement capable at times of transcending Lebanon's divides.

As a result, the Hizbollah-led opposition coalition has been badly hurt. Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, the Shiite movement's most important numerical and political ally, has always justified the controversial partnership on the grounds that Hizbollah was more than a Shiite militia and could become a truly national party. The crisis, set off by issues that have no resonance among Hizbollah's Christian allies, exposed the weakness of the argument and brought to

the Druze leader whose ministers, along with those from the Lebanese Forces, had strongly lobbied for the government's decisions. Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and Future Movement official, Beirut, 14-15 May 2008. On the ground, there is some evidence that Hizbollah occasionally sought to protect Sunni mosques. This was the case, for example, in Burj al-Barajné. Crisis Group interview, Sunni Islamist leader, 11 May 2008. Still, the movement recognises that it has lost further support among Sunnis. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese with close ties to Hizbollah, Beirut, 14 May 2008.

³³ According to several eyewitnesses, fighters insulted emblematic figures of the Sunni faith and cursed both Saad al-Hariri and the Sunni *mufiti*. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, 9 May 2008.

³⁴ At the hospital centre of the Hariri Foundation in Ra's al-Nabaa, Shiite fighters hung Bashar's poster on the top of the door and Lahoud's underneath, prompting an Islamist militant to say, "it is as if Syria were avenging itself against the Future Current". Crisis Group interview, West Beirut, 11 May 2008.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, journalists who witnessed the progression of the Amal-Hizbollah fighters, Beirut, 11 May 2008. A high-level source within the opposition claimed that Amal engaged in such behaviour far more than Hizbollah. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 12 May 2008.

light contradictions inherent in the alliance itself. At this point, it is hard to assess how much support among Christians Aoun has lost as a consequence,³⁶ but the Free Patriotic Movement's unease is palpable. In the words of an Aounist leader, "each time Hizbollah radicalises its position, it hurts us".³⁷

More damaging still, the fighting solidified and entrenched confessional dynamics, as well as communal hatreds, that almost certainly will lead to recurring incidents, including acts of revenge. During the street battles, some Shiite militants stopped people at newly erected checkpoints and demanded to know their religious identity. Sunni religious leaders sought to mobilise their constituency by resorting to an unprecedented form of sectarian rhetoric.³⁸ Sunnis, taken aback by the loss of Beirut and their own shortcomings, are likely to adopt more radical positions and seek to bolster their own military capacity.³⁹

³⁶ Since the July 2006 war, March 14 forces regularly claim that General Aoun is losing popularity among Christians, but there is little hard evidence. Aounist leaders acknowledge that their movement suffers each time Hizbollah radicalises its posture (eg, when it seized Israeli soldiers prior to the 2006 war; when Nasrallah delivered a fiery speech in the wake of the February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hizbollah's military leader; or, more recently, when the movement seized control of West Beirut). That said, they also argue that the Aounist base does not see an attractive alternative, given the state of Christian politics. The most logical one, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, is unappealing to many due to its leader's history as a key actor in the civil war. Moreover, they say that many Christians, principally interested in casting a vote against the Hariri family, will side with Aoun. An Aounist sympathiser remarked that, despite the events in West Beirut, Christians need to partner with a strong Shiite movement to ensure that Lebanon does not fall under the control of a pro-Saudi Sunni force. Crisis Group interview, Achrafieh merchant, 9 May 2008. Indeed, many Christians still suspect the Future Movement of harbouring the goal of Islamicising the country. Crisis Group interviews, Achrafieh merchants, 10 May 2008. Nevertheless, some Aounist leaders concede that the general's unabashed support for Hizbollah has prompted serious disagreements within the group. Crisis Group interviews, Aounist sympathisers, militants and leaders, Beirut, February-May 2008.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Free Patriotic Movement official, Beirut, April 2008. A Lebanese with close ties to Hizbollah said that it acknowledged Christian discontent, but hoped it would be reversed. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 May 2008.

³⁸ Some denounced the "Persian occupation of Beirut"; others bluntly referred to Hizbollah as "the enemy". Crisis Group interviews, clerics and Salafist figures, North Lebanon, 11-12 May 2008.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Sunni sheikhs and residents of West Beirut, Tripoli, 10-11 May 2008.

Many Sunni fighters and ordinary citizens, shocked at their lack of equipment and weaponry, feel abandoned or even betrayed by Saad al-Hariri.⁴⁰ According to a resident of Beirut's Tariq al-Jedida neighbourhood, there were only 1,500 fighters, armed solely with pistols; in reaction, residents of this neighbourhood, a Future Movement stronghold, are said to have torn down a pro-Hariri poster out of rage. The party's rank and file, furious at the army's performance, can be expected to press for their community's accelerated militarisation; its embarrassed leadership may have little choice but to oblige.

Alternatively, the Sunni community could turn to more radical Islamist movements. The three days that led to West Beirut's fall inescapably will leave deep scars and have long-term effects among Sunnis, with two likely consequences: on the one hand, the sectarian radicalisation of a rank and file shocked by its own weakness and its perception of a powerful Shiite threat; on the other hand, diminished control exercised over the Sunni base by the Future Movement, seen by many as responsible for the debacle.

For now, the combination of growing militancy among Sunnis and weakening influence by those who purport to represent them has led to an increase in both individual violence and spontaneous acts of collective revenge. Over time, it could strengthen the radical jihadi current which is staking its ground as the most determined Shiite adversary and one intent on ensuring the community's self-defence.⁴¹ Among March 14's Christian and Druze elements, most notably Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party – which suffered a humiliating blow in its own stronghold – the push to rearm also is likely to intensify.

Finally, although Hizbollah won the military battle, the government has not been entirely weakened. It not only remained in place, but also now has at its disposal powerful arguments against the opposition in general and Hizbollah in particular. It is in a position to discredit the Shiite movement's demands by depicting it as a dangerous sectarian militia that violated its oft-repeated commitment never to turn its weapons inward,⁴² while rallying both March 14's

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, journalist who witnessed the fighting, Beirut, 9 May 2008.

⁴¹ This fear was expressed by several Islamist and Salafist leaders in Tripoli and Beirut, as well as by members of the opposition. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Tripoli, 11-14 May 2008.

⁴² Many Islamist militants emphasised that Hizbollah had betrayed this commitment. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Tripoli, 11-12 May 2008.

social base and an international community that was equally dismayed and angered by what it considers was an attempted coup.

Hizbollah sees a slightly more nuanced picture. According to a source close to the movement, it believes that of March 14's three sources of power (government control, foreign support and the country's sectarian divide), only the third remains truly effective. In its view, the government no longer governs and the majority's Western as well as Arab allies proved unable to affect events on the ground. The growing confessional polarisation, however, represents a more direct and worrisome threat.⁴³

B. STABILISING THE SITUATION?

Even as Beirut was ablaze, there were some signs of compromise. An agreement apparently was reached on 15 May, the day after an Arab League delegation headed by the Qatari prime minister, Sheikh Hamas bin Jassem, and Secretary General Amr Moussa met in Beirut with parties of the majority and opposition. First, the government revoked its controversial decisions, paving the way for a possible return to normalcy in the capital and elsewhere. Then, the Arab delegation announced a multi-point accord which, inter alia, provided for:

- ❑ a return to the situation that prevailed prior to 5 May 2008, including the opening of the airport, ports and other major roads and the withdrawal of armed elements;
- ❑ resumption of a national dialogue aimed at electing a new president (Michel Suleiman, the current commander in chief of the army), forming a national unity government and reforming the electoral law;
- ❑ initiation of a national dialogue on means to strengthen state institutions;
- ❑ a commitment to refrain from violence; and
- ❑ de-escalation of the war of words and in particular a halt to sectarian-based attacks and accusations of betrayal.

This is a welcome development which lays the basis for a broader compromise. Still, the situation remains perilously fluid. Even if fighting appears to have receded, communal animosity has intensified, the craving for revenge is powerful, and there is good reason to fear a second round. Hizbollah saw a rare attack on

its military status; March 14 forces witnessed the internal use of Hizbollah's weapons. These events will leave deep scars. Likewise, even if the immediate cause of Hizbollah's offensive has been nullified, none of the underlying issues are any closer to resolution. The Arab mediation promises a return to dialogue; the hardest part lies ahead.

Finally, the violent events exposed yet again the explosive interaction between local, regional and international dynamics: internal politics are being dragged into wider contests (eg, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between the U.S. and Syria), while foreign actors are being pulled into Lebanon's domestic struggles.

IV. CONCLUSION

At this writing, the Arab League agreement has yet to be put into effect. Shiite militias continued to control much of West Beirut and man checkpoints in its Sunni or mixed neighbourhoods; access to West Beirut was hindered by earth mounds and rocks; schools and universities remained closed; and local Future Movement leaders were still being seized and questioned before being turned over to the army or to local go-betweens, such as West Beirut leaders of Jamaa Islamiyya.⁴⁴ Though these could and should now rapidly be reversed, Sunni misgiving toward the army and anger toward Shiites are deepening; several figures have called on their co-religionists to sever all ties to Shiites or to boycott their stores. Moreover, the conflict was not confined to Beirut. Intense fighting occurred in the Druze areas of Mount Lebanon between Walid Jumblatt loyalists on the one hand and Hizbollah militants or allied forces on the other. In Tripoli, pitched battles opposed residents of Bab al-Tebbané – a Future Movement-dominated Sunni neighbourhood – and residents of Baal Mohsen, an adjacent hill populated mainly by Alawite followers of Aly Eid, who is close to the opposition.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, Islamist leaders and Sunni sheikhs, pointing to the Future Movement's helplessness, are seeking to fill the void left by more traditional Sunni politicians.⁴⁶ A Tripoli sheikh said that:

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, West Beirut residents and Islamist militant, West Beirut, 10-11 May 2008.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local political and religious local leaders, Tripoli, 11-13 May 2008.

⁴⁶ The "Independent Islamic Gathering" (*liqa islami mustaqbil*), a group of Islamist and Salafist personalities from the north of the country, announced it was launching a Sunni armed resistance movement. For now, this appears to be

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, source with close Hizbollah ties, Beirut, 14 May 2008.

Beirut's fall and what is happening in the Druze mountains should serve as a lesson: if the Future Movement was unable to defend Beirut, the Islamists will protect other regions, especially in the north. Hizbollah is pushing the country toward its break-up.⁴⁷

There have been over 80 deaths and 250 wounded,⁴⁸ of which the vast majority occurred outside the capital and after Hizbollah's West Beirut offensive ended.

As suggested by the Arab League agreement, there is some reason for hope. Neither Hizbollah nor the Future Movement, the two principal protagonists, is served by the current situation. Despite Hizbollah's proven military might, time is not entirely on its side. There is little doubt it can continue to hold the country's political system hostage, but this hardly is its first choice. The longer this crisis lasts, the more vulnerable its position will become; while it will retain overwhelming Shiite support, it risks further losses among all other constituencies. Politically weakened, it might increasingly feel the need to rely on military threats to achieve its domestic objectives, thereby further spoiling its reputation as a resistance movement.⁴⁹ By the same token, a prolonged confrontation could strengthen the Future Movement's more radical Islamist rivals, who already are assailing its apparent impotence and challenging its hold on the Sunni community.

The government's annulment of its two decisions should end the conflict's current phase and help separate it from the broader political crisis. Now, in line with its commitment, Hizbollah must immediately withdraw its armed men from newly conquered areas and hand over security management throughout West Beirut to the army; reopen the airport and port; restrain its own as well as its allies' militants; and allow all media to function freely.

Should these steps be taken, Lebanon might look as if it were reverting to the status quo ante. In fact, the situation would be far worse: a threshold has been crossed, what has happened will be neither ignored

mainly a media stunt, which aims at pressuring Sunni political leaders. Still, it reflects the state of mind of broad segments of the Sunni community. Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Bilal Baroudi, one of the initiative's founders, 12 May 2008.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi sheikhs, Tripoli, 12 May 2008.

⁴⁸ Reuters, 14 May 2008.

⁴⁹ After the Beirut events, a Jamaa Islamiyya member said, "the resistance is over. We will no longer allow anything to happen in its name". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 11 May 2008.

nor forgotten and the country will long live under its shadow. Hizbollah is more convinced than ever that the March 14 forces and their international allies are determined to disarm it and has demonstrated as clearly as could be that it will defend its armed status at virtually any cost, civil war included. As Crisis Group warned in October 2007, Hizbollah's priority is to maintain its weapons: "should it feel the need, it likely would perpetuate Lebanon's political paralysis, even at the cost of further alienating non-Shiites [and] mobilise its constituents, even at the risk of reducing itself ever more to a sectarian movement".⁵⁰ For their part, the fears of March 14 forces that the Shiite movement might one day turn its overwhelming military might inward have been realised. Militants on all sides have been radicalised, a development that might lead to bloody confrontations that none of the parties' leaderships will be able to control.

To minimise these dangers, the second requirement is for Lebanese parties and outside mediators to reach agreement on elements of a broader package deal that addresses what, to a large extent, is at the heart of the matter: the status of Hizbollah's weapons. No durable solution can be found without attending to this issue and no peaceful solution can be found by confronting it head-on. The answer, in other words, is a settlement that postpones the ultimate disposition of Hizbollah's weapons while strictly defining and regulating the ways in which they can be employed. As Crisis Group earlier suggested, this should entail, *inter alia*, the following simultaneous steps:⁵¹

- ❑ a consensual presidential choice (ie, by a two-thirds parliamentary vote), most likely Michel Suleiman;
- ❑ a national unity government;
- ❑ adoption of a ministerial declaration that accepts the principle of resistance as a transitional phase leading to implementation of a proper national defence strategy, while restricting Hizbollah's military capabilities to defensive purposes against an eventual foreign attack and clearly barring their domestic use;
- ❑ an agreement among all Lebanese parties to freeze any military build-up and de-escalate the war of words, especially in the media; and

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵¹ For more detail, see *ibid.*, p. i.

- a consensual electoral law for the 2009 parliamentary elections based on the smaller district (*caza*).⁵²

The recent escalation in violence was made possible, in part, by the long-standing ambiguity surrounding Hizbollah's weapons. Lebanon must find a middle ground between irresponsibly allowing Hizbollah their unfettered use and recklessly seeking its forcible disarmament. Until a broader regional settlement is found – one that deals not only with the Arab-Israeli conflict but also relations between the U.S., Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia in particular – one cannot hope for much more. Still, as Lebanon edges toward civil war, that would be no modest achievement.

Beirut/Brussels, 15 May 2008

⁵² Christian parties in particular have called for holding elections at the *caza* level to enable them to directly elect their representatives rather than have to forge alliances with Muslim parties in larger districts.

APPENDIX A MAP OF LEBANON



Base 802856AI (C00059) 5-02

Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin