



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT

UPDATE REPORT



14 May 2008 No. 3

Lebanon

Expected Council Action

It seems possible that the Council will take up the situation in Lebanon in the coming days. More than sixty people were killed in recent armed clashes between followers of the government majority led by the Future Movement (a Sunni Muslim organization) and those of the Syria-backed Hezbollah and Amal-led opposition (a Shi'a Muslim organisation), raising the spectre of the Lebanese civil war which ended in 1990.

The Arab League has been actively addressing the issue and a delegation is expected to arrive in Lebanon on Wednesday, 14 May, to try to mediate between the two sides. The UN Secretary-General and the "Friends of Lebanon" have also been active.

Some Council members are currently considering whether the Council can add its voice in a constructive way to calming the crisis. At press time, the timing and the format of any such Council reaction remained unclear. France may propose a text as it has the lead on Lebanon.

Recent Developments

On 7 May, a general strike in Beirut against economic conditions transformed into armed confrontation between Hezbollah and supporters of the government. Hezbollah demonstrators were acting against the backdrop also of a continuing political deadlock over the election of a new Lebanese president. Issues surrounding alleged government action against Hezbollah's communications assets may have been trigger points.

Heavy exchanges of fire followed in several areas of Beirut and its environs, as well as in the Bekaa valley. Hezbollah subsequently blocked Beirut international airport and as well as several roads, while Future Movement supporters established road blocks to cut Hezbollah's supply lines.

On 9 May, Hezbollah militants took over west Beirut. They pulled back on 11 May. But on 12 May fighting spread to mountains around Beirut, and violent clashes occurred in Tripoli. At press time, fighting was still ongoing in Tripoli and tensions remained high in Beirut.

The army and anti-riot police were deployed on 8 May in Beirut, but did not engage. The army remained neutral in the conflict, saying that the situation threatened its unity (as it is multi-sectarian in composition). It later said that if fighting continued, it would use force to impose law and order on all sides.

It seems that Hezbollah may be seeking to force the government to backtrack on two decisions it took on 6 May, under which the chief of Beirut airport's security, Wafiq Choucair, allegedly close to Hezbollah, was dismissed, and a telecommunication network allegedly developed by Hezbollah throughout the country was declared illegal. (The network apparently covers Palestinian camps in south Beirut and also connects to a Syrian network beyond the border.) Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, stated that those two measures were a war declaration by the government. Hezbollah said that clashes would stop if the government withdraws these contentious decisions and agrees to resume national dialogue to find a solution to the political crisis. The government said that Hezbollah would have to withdraw all armed combatants, lift all blockades and resume the national dialogue.

Despite an ongoing Arab League mediation since January, and an agreement among all Lebanese factions on a presidential candidate (army commander Michel Suleiman), the majority and the opposition have failed to reach an agreement on the composition of a government. This has been a precondition demanded by the opposition before allowing the parliament to convene and elect the president. On 12 May, the parliament session was delayed for the nineteenth time. It is now scheduled for 10 June. The government accuses the opposition of being under Syrian influence. The opposition blames the current deadlock on the Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and traces its demand for a veto-wielding power within the government back to the 1989 Taif Accords which ended the civil war.

On 8 May, UN Special Envoy Terje Roed-Larsen briefed the Council on the latest report on resolution 1559 (issued on 21 April) which reported no progress in the disarmament of militias and presidential elections due to the political deadlock. He warned that the riots might constitute a challenge of a magnitude unseen since the end of the Lebanese civil war. He added that the electoral void combined with the stalled functions of parliament and the defiant maneuvers of militias were all threats to Lebanon. He also stated that Hezbollah was the most significant Lebanese militia and had maintained a massive non-state, para-military infrastructure which constitutes a threat to regional peace and security. Finally, he urged Syria and Iran to support Hezbollah's transformation into a solely political party and he called for a return of political dialogue among all parties (S/PV.5888). He later said to the press that a real danger was the possible rearming of other militias as a result of the current clashes, which would greatly undermine the 1989 Taif Accords following which all militias except Hezbollah had been integrated into the Lebanese army.

On 8 May, in an oral statement to the press, the president of the Council and UK Ambassador John Sawers:

- stressed the need to uphold the sovereignty and stability of Lebanon;
- expressed support for the constitutional institutions;
- urged all sides to exercise calm and restraint;
- called for an immediate re-opening of all roads;

- urged all parties to elect a new president in accordance with the Arab League three-point plan; and
- recalled the need for full implementation of resolution 1559.

After the statement, US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said that interference by regional actors was a source of concern and that the Council should consider additional steps to confront the situation. This was reinforced on 12 May when he again said that he expected the Council to address the issue.

The Council, as well as the Arab League, has repeatedly called for the election of a president, the formation of a unity government and the formulation of a new electoral law (demands contained in the three-point plan).

There had been some expectations that the Arab League summit, which took place in Damascus on 29 and 30 March, might provide impetus for resolving the crisis. But the summit failed to make progress on the situation. The Arab leaders reiterated that Lebanese leaders should elect General Suleiman as president and agree on the basis for the formation of a national unity government as soon as possible. The statement also emphasized “placing Lebanese-Syrian relations on the proper track in line with interests of both States, and assigning the Arab League Secretary-General to start working on achieving this goal.”

Possible Elements of a Council Response

Two recent initiatives outside the Council seem to be stimulating the possibility of Council action:

1. **11 May Arab League statement:** after an emergency session in Cairo, the Arab foreign ministers said they would send a delegation to Beirut, headed by Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa and the Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamid bin Jassim and composed of the foreign ministers of Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, to mediate between the two sides with the aim of implementing the three-point plan. The ministers also invited Hezbollah’s leaders and the main leaders of the government coalition to talk with the delegation. In a press conference held after the meeting, Secretary-General Moussa said that the ministers condemned the use of violence to achieve political goals. It seems that Saudi Arabia and Egypt called for the emergency meeting, while Syria said that the Lebanese crisis was purely an internal matter (and it seems that Qatar may share the same view).
2. **12 May Friends of Lebanon statement:** the Friends of Lebanon is a group composed of the foreign ministers and representatives of Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, the UK, and the US, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, and the UN Secretary-General. They welcomed the Arab League intention to dispatch a delegation to Lebanon and called for the immediate election of a president without prior conditions, the establishment of a national unity government, and the holding of general elections in conformity with an electoral law agreed upon by all parties, in accordance with the three-point plan. They also called for the immediate cessation of fighting, the withdrawal of gunmen from the streets, the unblocking of roads,

and the reopening of Beirut international airport, and expressed support for the Lebanese constitutional institutions.

These statements echoed previous Arab League and Friends of Lebanon statements.

Key Issues

The main issue is whether the Council can find a way to constructively address the situation. Lending support to the Arab League and the Friends of Lebanon's initiatives and thereby creating additional momentum for the mediation between the parties seems to be an approach under consideration at this stage.

Council Dynamics

Discussions within the Council are likely to be difficult because of divisions. At press time, it was still unclear whether a draft presidential statement would be circulated. Differences between supporters of the Lebanese government (the US in particular) and those more sceptical about the government (Libya in particular) are likely to arise. The agreement on elements for the press briefing by the Council president on 8 May seems to indicate that there is a consensus in the Council on the value of calling on both sides to hold back from further violence and to engage in dialogue. The 8 May discussion—which had been an initiative by the UK as president of the Council—went rather smoothly. It seems that Libya and Russia asked for the inclusion of language requesting the lifting of roadblocks established by the Future Party followers in addition to references to Hezbollah's roadblocks.

It seems that some in the Council had wanted to emphasise not only that the Lebanese parties should implement the Arab League three-point plan and elect the president but also to so that this should be "without preconditions." By contrast, others in the Council are more sympathetic to the opposition position that agreement on the government should come first. It seems, therefore, that further pressure for the term "without preconditions" is likely to be contentious.

Many Council members seem to believe that a reaction from the Council is appropriate although some are also sceptical whether a Council statement would add value at this stage. South Africa emphasises the need for the Council be very balanced and cautious so as not to alienate regional actors because of the role they play in Lebanon.

An underlying issue is that some members continue to be concerned that the Council focuses a lot on Lebanon and not enough on the situation in Gaza. (It seems that this factor affected the discussion on the implementation of resolution 1701 which resulted in a much delayed presidential statement on 15 April.)

A key question which may arise is whether, in the absence of consensus (which is required for a presidential statement), there might be pressure to transform any text into a draft resolution and put it to a vote.

UN Documents

Selected Resolutions

- S/RES/1701 (11 August 2006) called for a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah and authorised a reinforcement of UNIFIL.
- S/RES/1559 (2 September 2004) urged withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, extension of the Lebanese government's control over all Lebanese territory and free and fair presidential elections.

Latest Presidential Statement

- S/PRST/2008/8 (15 April 2008) took note of progress and concerns expressed by the Secretary-General regarding the implementation of resolution 1701, emphasized the need for greater progress and reiterated its full support for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Latest Secretary-General's Reports

- S/2008/264 (21 April 2008) was the latest report on resolution 1559.
- S/2008/210 (28 March 2008) was the latest UNIIIC report.
- S/2008/173 (12 March 2008) was the latest report on the tribunal.
- S/2008/135 (28 February 2008) was the latest report on resolution 1701.

Selected Debate

- S/PV.5888 (8 May 2008) was the Council debate in which UN Special Envoy Terje Roed-Larsen briefed the Council on the latest report on resolution 1559.

Selected Letters

- S/2008/302 (6 May 2008) was a letter from Lebanon on Israeli violations of Lebanon territorial integrity in April.
- S/2008/295 (4 May 2008) was a letter from Syria reacting to the latest report on implementation of resolution 1559.
- S/2008/293 (2 May 2008) was a letter from Iran contesting allegations of Iranian interference in Lebanon made in the latest report on resolution 1559 and regretting that the report did not refer to the US interference in Lebanese internal affairs.
- S/2008/261 (18 April 2008) was a letter from Israel claiming that weapons continue to be transferred through the porous Syrian-Lebanese border, in violation of the arms embargo and that some of these weapons are destined for areas south of the Litani River.
- S/2008/236 (8 April 2008) and S/2008/237 (11 April 2008) was an exchange of letters between the Secretary-General and the Council on the appointment of Ambassador Johan Verbeke of Belgium as Special Coordinator for Lebanon.
- S/2008/232 (7 April 2008) was a letter from Syria rejecting claims made by Israel that Syria was violating resolution 1701 and called on the international community to put pressure on Israel to implement all resolutions, in particular resolution 1701, and to stop its occupation of Arab territory.
- S/2008/228 (7 April 2008) was a letter from Iran rejecting Israeli claims that Iran was violating resolution 1701.
- S/2008/225 (4 April 2008) was a letter from Lebanon on Israeli violations of Lebanon territorial integrity in March.
- S/2008/223 (4 April 2008) was a letter from Iran rejecting allegations of transfer of

sophisticated weaponry to Lebanon made in the latest report on resolution 1701.

- S/2008/198 (25 March 2008) was a letter from Iran mentioning Israel's "expansionist and illegal policies and practices with regard to Lebanon and the occupied Syrian Golan".
- S/2008/131 (25 February 2008) and S/2008/189 (20 March 2008) were letters from Israel expressing concerns at violations of the arms embargo in Lebanon, the rearmament of Hezbollah and the lack progress for the return of the two Israeli soldiers abducted in 2006 by Hezbollah.

Useful Additional Sources

- 12 May statement by the Friends of Lebanon
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/may/104633.htm>
- 11 May Arab League statement
- 22 April statement by the Friends of Lebanon
http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files_156/lebanon_294/france-and-lebanon_3270/political-relations_6061/informal-meeting-on-lebanon-22.04.08_11142.html