

THE STRUGGLE FOR LEBANON: WHAT IS IT REALLY ABOUT?

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The war in the summer of 2006 between Israel and Hizbullah and the ongoing standoff between Hizbullah and the Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Seniora are part of a struggle for power that reaches far beyond the borders of Lebanon. In fact, this is a struggle for regional hegemony between Iran, on the one hand, and a number of Arab states and Israel, on the other. In recent decades, the most important shift in the Middle Eastern power structure has been the steady decline of the relative power and influence of major Arab states such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, coupled with the concomitant increase in the regional clout of the region's non-Arab countries—Iran, Israel and Turkey.

Turkey is seemingly being gradually edged out of Europe. Its religious-conservative government and large segments of the public are becoming evermore attentive to Turkey's Middle Eastern hinterland. This trend has been greatly accelerated by the possible break-up of Iraq in the wake of the US invasion, and the resultant political vacuum in the Arab East. Kurdish independence in Northern Iraq would impinge very directly on Turkish security and territorial integrity, because of the large Kurdish minority in Eastern Turkey. The Turks, needless to say, watch Iraq very closely.

Even more importantly, the war in Iraq has

catalyzed Iran's rise as a regional great power. The crushing of Ba`thi Iraq, the gate-keeper in the Arab East against Iranian expansionist influence, and the empowerment of the country's heretofore downtrodden Shi`ite majority have transformed Iraq into the first Arab state dominated by Shi`ites. Consequently, Iraq has become a regional platform for Iranian penetration into the Arab world, the likes of which has never existed in the modern era. Simultaneously, though unconnected with Iraq, the Shi`ites in Lebanon have in recent decades become the single largest demographic group, overtaking the Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. The expressed concern of Jordan's King Abdullah in late 2004 over the emerging "Shi`ite crescent" of influence stretching from Tehran via Baghdad and on to Beirut was a tangible manifestation of how these developments are viewed in Arab capitals.

Hence, the recent war between Israel and Hizbullah was clearly not just another round in the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, it was not an Arab-Israeli war at all, but rather a clash between Israel and Iran through its proxy, Hizbullah, in Lebanon. Syria certainly aided Hizbullah, but its role was secondary to Iran's, while the other Sunni Arab states remained on the sidelines as passive bystanders. Some of these states — particularly those who had fought against Israel in the more distant past — actually wished for Israel to win the war more decisively



than it really did. They sincerely hoped that Israel would deal a more destructive blow to the Iranian--Hizbullah--Shi'ite alliance that provided encouragement and moral support to those Islamic revolutionary forces that threatened the cohesion of a number of Arab states, not to mention the stability of their regimes.

Lebanon has thus become the battlefield for the struggle over the new Middle East, which pits the Sunni Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, seeking to preserve the stability of the state order and to keep Iran at bay, against Tehran, the Arab Shi'ites and other non-state actors seeking to destabilize the region by force. In contrast to the old rules of the game whereby Israel was deemed to be a foreign force that was automatically excluded from any regional alliance, Israel now, for the first time in its history, actually belongs to one of the region's competing camps, the Arab anti-Shi'ite bloc.

Lebanon finds itself yet again at a historical juncture. Since its foundation as Greater Lebanon in 1920, the country has wrestled with its identity. In the early years of statehood, Lebanon vacillated between two main options. On the one hand, the dominance of its Christian communities and the country's intimate bond with France pulled it in the direction of a strong relationship with the West. But after the defeat of France in June 1940, the county's two leading communities, the Maronite Christians and the Sunni Muslims, clearly understood that in order to preserve the country's stability and domestic cohesion, Lebanon would have to seek the protection not of France but of the Arab hinterland. With the constant proportional decline in size of the Maronite community, and the erosion of French power and influence, this question was finally settled, as Lebanon became a full-fledged Arab state and a founding member of the Arab League at the end of the Second World War.

Today, however, Lebanon's identity and place in the regional order are being debated yet again, but with a significantly different thrust. Is Lebanon still an integral part of the Sunni Muslim Arab World, as per the desire of its non-Shi'ite communities (Sunnis, Maronites and other Christians, and the Druze), or will its Shi'ite community drag the country into the heart of the Iranian-Shi'ite arc of influence? Needless to say, Shi'ite political supremacy in Lebanon would serve the interests of their Iranian and Syrian allies. The Sunni Muslim Arabs and Israel, therefore, have common cause to preserve Lebanon as part and parcel of the Sunni Arab heartland, and to contain Hizbullah and the Shi'ites. More specifically, the Sunni Arab states and Israel seek to contain Hizbullah's "state within a state" and to degrade the organization's capacity to whittle away at the sovereignty of Lebanon on Iran's behalf.

For the meantime, at least, the government of Fouad Seniora and his Sunni, Maronite and Druze allies is holding fast, showing unexpected grit and determination. They know perfectly well what is at stake. If they learned anything from last summer's war, it was the prohibitive cost of allowing Lebanon to be converted into an Iranian (and Syrian) outpost poised on Israel's northern border. In these circumstances, Israel should think twice about negotiating with Syria. If such negotiations would empower Syria in any manner or form in relation to the Seniora government, Israel would be doing itself a great disservice, eroding its most important achievement of the recent war in Lebanon: the containment of Iran's Lebanese client and the strengthening of the will-power of Seniora and his allies. Any negotiations with Syria would have to be preceded by having already insured that such erosion could not occur.