

Lebanon in the Cross-Hairs of a Volcano: Political Crisis set to Worsen as Threats of Regional War Increase

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Soon after the U.S. destroyer USS Cole was deployed off Lebanon's shore Feb. 28 to "preserve political stability", a group of young men gathered around in the embattled agricultural town Qana in south Lebanon, and voiced their fears.

"Everyone feels there is a war coming," said Salman Ismael, a 22-year-old university student. "Especially after the killing of (Hezbollah commander) Imad Mughniyeh and what is happening in Gaza. And now U.S. ships come to the waters of Lebanon. Israel wants to improve her army in the Middle East after its defeat in 2006, she wants the Arabs to be scared of her."

Mughniyeh is described by Hezbollah officials as a top military commander during the 2006 war with Israel, and his assassination Feb. 12 in the heart of Damascus strikes a heavy blow at Hezbollah and Syrian security concerns.

Alistair Croke, former Middle East advisor to EU representative Javier Solana, recalls that the last time a U.S. warship entered Lebanese waters was during the bloody civil war in 1983, on behalf of then president Amin Gemayel.

The ship shelled Beirut and the Chouf mountains from the shore, but the U.S. forces were forced to withdraw later that year when their Beirut embassy and marine barracks were targeted by bombs that killed hundreds. The U.S. accused Mughniyeh of having engineered those devastating attacks.

"The arrival of the USS Cole in support of (Prime Minister Fouad Sinoira's ruling coalition) has really had a traumatic effect on people," says Croke, co-founder of the Beirut-based Conflicts Forum which brokers dialogue between Islamist movements and the West. "This has really bad memories for the Lebanese."

The internal and regional crises affecting Lebanon has reached critical point. A paralysed country is split between the U.S.-backed Sinoira government, and the opposition parties led by Hezbollah and Christian General Michel Aoun, which are allied with Syria and Iran. A parliamentary vote for the current consensus presidential candidate, army head Michel Suleiman, has been delayed for a 16th time this week, leaving the post empty since pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud served out his term last November.

The Sinoira government is pushing for an immediate presidential ballot, with the details of power sharing to be worked out after, while the opposition argues for resolution of contentious issues first.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's economy has deteriorated, and the prospect of war for a paranoid population has increased after the assassination of Mughniyeh, and Hezbollah's retaliatory signal of readiness for "open war" with prime suspect Israel. "We are now on the border of war and peace, and more likely verging on conflict," Ahmad Moussalli, political studies professor at the American University in Beirut, told IPS.

"I think the (USS Cole's) message was regional and not internal," Moussalli says about the warship, since replaced by a U.S. Navy strike group of six vessels led by amphibious assault ship USS Nassau. "It is between Hezbollah and Israel. And so far it is a symbolic message to Hezbollah and its backers not to respond massively to the killing of Imad Mughniyeh."

"Certainly Hezbollah didn't want another war, but of course now that this has happened (Hezbollah leader Hasan) Nasrallah has given a pretty prominent commitment to taking some action, and he is known for doing what he says," Crooke told IPS. "The question is, is this what Israel has been playing for, and what is Israel going to do?"

"Statements by Hezbollah and from Iran following Mughniyeh's death were very clearly intended as a warning to both Israel and the U.S. that if they simply wanted to pick off Syria, or pick off Hezbollah, it won't be like that, and what they will face is a much wider conflict that will include Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah," said Crooke. "So I think that was a very clear warning, and one that Israel heard, and that caused them to pause and reflect."

Timur Goksel, the former long-time media spokesman and negotiator with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in south Lebanon told IPS that "Hezbollah and Syria need each other and are allies. And of course Iran has a lot of influence. But when it comes to making operational decisions, Hezbollah doesn't take instructions from anybody."

Goksel believes the next war between Israel and Hezbollah will be different. "It will be much more violent and destructive," he says. "Hezbollah's new thinking is not to confront the Israelis south of the Litani River (just north of Tyre in south Lebanon). It's too much of a built-up area and they know this time Israel will clear the area. 'Clear the area' means every house, every tree. Hezbollah cannot afford that sort of war.

"God forbid if there is a local group of cowboys here, not Hezbollah, that decide to fight Israel and shoot over a rocket — that's going to start a war," Goksel adds. "You pay 200 dollars and someone fires over a rocket here. Israel cannot sit back and watch if a kindergarten is hit, but it would all depend on the severity of the incident."

Having witnessed 1,500 Israeli tanks roll across the Lebanese border at very short notice back in 1982, Goksel believes the current presence of over 13,000 peacekeepers — the majority of them Italian, French and Spanish mandated by UN Resolution 1701 to patrol below the Litani River — will make a difference.

"They will take away the element of surprise from the Israelis, who cannot crash into south Lebanon while these guys are all there. Israel cannot afford to eliminate the Europeans, so they or their governments will get notice. If you see an exodus of UNIFIL countries, then you

will know a war is coming.”

Meanwhile, in the ashes of a failed Arab League initiative to resolve Lebanon’s internal political crises, and prolonged absence of a president or unity government, Lebanon’s political parties remain bitterly deadlocked over how to proceed. The opposition is demanding a revision of parliamentary proportionality, with one-third of the seats to them plus an additional vote for veto power, and revised decisions over ministry portfolios and the redrawing of voting constituencies.

“The basic division of opinion is that the West says, ‘just elect a president’, says Crooke. “And the opposition is saying, ‘this will address the symptom, rather than the cause of the problem’. Simply to elect the president does not deal with the illness, that should be treated first, which is that we need some understandings about power sharing.

“The mistake the West makes with Lebanon is to see this as interplay of forces within the region — a strategic fight between the U.S., and Iran and Syria — and this plane exists, but there is another plane which is important, which is the determination of internal parties to actually make power sharing work again in Lebanon.”

“Iran is playing a very prominent regional role, and the U.S. cannot stop it,” says Moussalli. “If the U.S. bombs a lot of places, they will still not weaken the regime. For instance, Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz (between Iran and the Gulf countries) so no oil could pass through, and this would have a major impact on the world market economy.” He adds, “Lebanon’s internal political situation is not going to be resolved unless there is a regional agreement — so the situation might go on like this for months.”

“Everyone is divided on how far America will go in Lebanon to push forward the political process, and no one knows how to read Israeli intentions of war — why did they do this (assassination), what was the purpose,” says Crooke. “No one knows how far America intends to go with Iran.”

He adds, “There is the big unsettled strategic question that dominates the region, which is the question of Iranian pre-eminence. The question is, is Israel ready to come to terms with a pre-eminent Iran? And all the signs are it isn’t. So how is that going to be resolved?”

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