

Political Conditions Lebanon

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Body

Introduction

Lebanon's **political** history since independence can be defined largely in terms of its presidents, each of whom shaped Lebanon by a personal brand of politics: Sheikh Bishara al-Khoury (1943-1952), Camille Chamoun (1952-1958), Fuad Shihab (1958-1964), Charles Helou (1964-1970), Suleiman Franjeh (1970-1976), Elias Sarkis (1976-1982), and Amin Gemayel (1982-1988). From the end of Amin Gemayel's term in September 1988 until the election of Rene Moawad in November 1989, Lebanon had no president. This was due to a constitutional crisis over the existence of both an interim government and a de facto government. After Moawad's assassination in 1989, only two weeks after he was elected, he was replaced with Elias Harawi (1989-1998). Emile Lahoud was elected president in November 1998. Controversy swirled around the successor to Lahoud in 2007 (see below for details). In 2008, Michel Suleiman became Lebanon's most recent president. A presidential contest was to be held in 2014 but the deadline passed without a consensus candidate being found (see below for details). In 2016, a deal was finally brokered, setting the way for Michel Aoun to become the president.

Note: In Lebanon, the president is elected by the National Assembly for a six-year term and may not serve consecutive terms. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious **representation**. There is also supposed to be some transfer of powers from the president to the prime minister and cabinet.

The Early Post-independence Period

The terms of the first two presidents ended in **political** turmoil. In 1958, during the last months of President Chamoun's term and the height of Egyptian President Nasser's pan-Arabism ideology, an insurrection broke out over opposition to Lebanon's close ties to the West. In July of that year, in response to an appeal by the Lebanese government and justified by the Eisenhower doctrine of resistance to "international communism," United States (U.S.) **forces** were sent to Lebanon. They were withdrawn in October, after the inauguration of President Shihab and a general improvement in the internal and international aspects of the situation.

Political Conditions Lebanon

By the 1970s, yet another crisis emerged, as a consequence of post-World War II restructuring efforts. Specifically, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 war had displaced the non-Jewish Palestinian people, and led to the influx of a stream of Palestinian refugees into Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. By 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had been formed, and it engaged in the training of members in military activities, and mobilizing "fedayeen" (commando-style martyrs) by 1968. The mass killings of Palestinian civilians and guerrillas in the Jordanian government's "Black September" operation in 1970 saw the final expulsion of Palestinian guerrillas from Jordan. The PLO moved its headquarters to Beirut, and began operating bases out of Lebanon, launching attacks out of South Lebanon on Israel.

Civil Conflict

President Franjeh's term saw the outbreak of full-scale civil conflict in 1975. Prior to 1975, difficulties had arisen over the large number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the presence of Palestinian guerrillas, mirroring the internal Lebanese sectarian identity struggles. Frequent clashes involving Israeli **forces** and the "fedayeen" endangered civilians in South Lebanon and unsettled the country. Many Christians were especially vocal about controlling the activities of the "fedayeen." Following minor skirmishes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, serious clashes erupted between the "fedayeen" and Lebanese government forces in May 1973.

Exacerbated by the Palestinian problem, the already existing Muslim-Christian **political**, social and economic differences grew more intense. The Muslims were dissatisfied with what they considered an inequitable distribution of **political** power and social benefits. The Palestinian problem pitted leftist, pan-Arab, mostly Muslims against right wing, Western-oriented, mostly Christians.

In April 1975, after shots were fired at a church, a busload of Palestinians was ambushed by gunmen in Ain al-Ramaneh in the Christian sector of Beirut—an incident widely regarded as the spark that touched off the civil war. Palestinian militia **forces** joined the predominantly leftist-Muslim side as the fighting persisted, eventually spreading to most parts of the country. Almost 40,000 people were killed in this first phase of what was going to be a 15-year long civil war.

Elias Sarkis was elected president in 1976. In October, Arab summit s in Riyadh and Cairo set forth a plan to end the war. The resulting Arab Deterrent **Force** (ADF), composed largely of Syrian troops, moved in at the Lebanese government's invitation to separate the combatants, and most fighting ended soon thereafter.

As an uneasy quiet settled on Beirut and parts of Lebanon, security conditions in southern Lebanon began deteriorating. A series of clashes occurred in the south in late 1977 and early 1978 between the PLO and Lebanese leftists on the one hand, and the pro-Israeli, southern Lebanese militia, eventually known as the South Lebanese Army (SLA), on the other.

After a raid on a bus in northern Israel left large numbers of Israeli and Palestinian guerrilla casualties, and whose purpose undoubtedly was to cause civilian Israeli casualties, Israel invaded Lebanon in March 1978, occupying most of the area south of the Litani River. The United Nations (U.N.) Security Council passed Resolution 425 calling for withdrawal of Israeli **forces** from Lebanon and creating a United Nations Interim **Force** in Lebanon (UNIFIL), charged with maintaining peace. When the Israelis withdrew, they turned over positions inside Lebanon along the border to their Lebanese ally, the SLA, and formed a "security zone" under the effective control of Israel and the SLA.

In mid-1978, clashes between the Arab Deterrence **Force** and the Christian militias erupted. Arab foreign ministers created the Arab Follow-Up Committee, composed of Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to end fighting between the Syrians and Christians. After the Saudi ambassador was wounded in an attack in December 1978, the committee did not meet again formally until June 1981, when it was convened to address security and national reconciliation. The committee was unsuccessful in making progress toward a **political** settlement and was inactive from November 1981.

The 1980s

Israeli-Palestinian fighting in July 1981 was ended by a cease-fire arranged by the United States. The cease-fire was respected during the next 10 months, but a string of incidents, including PLO rocket attacks on northern Israel, led to the June 6, 1982, Israeli ground attack into Lebanon to remove PLO **forces**. Israeli **forces** moved quickly through South Lebanon, encircling west Beirut by mid-June and beginning a three-month siege of Palestinian and Syrian **forces** in the city.

Throughout this period, which saw heavy Israeli air, naval and artillery bombardments of west Beirut, American special envoy Philip C. Habib worked to arrange a settlement. In August 1982, he was successful in bringing about an agreement for the evacuation of Syrian troops and PLO fighters from Beirut. The agreement also provided for the deployment of a three-nation Multinational **Force** (MNF) during the period of the evacuation, and by late August, U.S. Marines, as well as French and Italian units, had arrived in Beirut. When the Palestinian fighters had left Lebanon for Tunis and the Israeli evacuation ended, the MNF departed. The U.S. Marines left on Sept. 10, 1982, but would soon return.

In spite of the invasion, the Lebanese **political** process continued to function, and Bashir Gemayel was elected president in August. However, on Sept. 14, 1982, he was assassinated by unidentified gunmen. The next day, on Sept. 15, Israeli troops entered west Beirut. During the next three days, Lebanese militiamen massacred hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in west Beirut, an area under the control of Israeli **forces**. The massacres caused international outcry, and Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon was **forced** to resign.

Bashir Gemayel's brother, Amin, was elected president by a unanimous vote of the parliament. He took office Sept. 23, 1982. The MNF **forces** returned to Beirut at the end of September as a symbol of support for the government. President Gemayel and his government placed primary emphasis on the withdrawal of Israeli, Syrian and Palestinian **forces** from Lebanon, and in late 1982, Lebanese-Israeli negotiations commenced with U.S. participation.

In February 1983, a small British contingent joined the American, French and Italian MNF troops in Beirut. On May 17, an accord was signed by the representatives of Lebanon, Israel and the United States, which provided for Israeli withdrawal. Syria declined to discuss the withdrawal of its troops, effectively stalemating further progress.

Opposition to the negotiations, as well as to U.S. support for the Gemayel regime, led to a series of terrorist attacks in 1983 and 1984 on U.S. interests. The bombing of the U.S. Embassy in west Beirut on April 18, 1983 left 63 people dead; the bombing of the U.S. and French MNF headquarters in Beirut on Oct. 23, 1983 left 298 people dead; and the bombing of the U.S. Embassy annex in east Beirut on Sept. 20, 1984 left eight people dead.

The general security situation in Beirut had remained calm through late 1982 and the first half of 1983. A move by Christian militiamen into the Druze-controlled Chouf area southeast of Beirut following the Israeli invasion, however, led to a series of Druze-Christian clashes of escalating intensity beginning in October 1982.

When Israeli **forces** unilaterally withdrew from the Chouf at the beginning of September 1983, a full-scale battle erupted between the Druze, backed by Syria, and the Christian Lebanese **forces** supported by the Lebanese army. American and Saudi efforts led to a cease-fire on Sept. 26. This left the Druze in control of most of the Chouf. Casualties were estimated to be in the thousands.

The virtual collapse of the Lebanese army in February 1984, following the defection of many of its Muslim and Druze units to opposition militias, was a major blow to the government. As it became clear that the departure of the U.S. Marines was imminent, the Gemayel government came under increasing pressure from Syria and its Muslim Lebanese allies to abandon the May 17 accord. The Lebanese government announced on March 5, 1984, that it was canceling its unimplemented agreement with Israel. The U.S. Marines left the Lebanon for the second time later that month.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Further national reconciliation talks at Lausanne in Switzerland, under Syrian auspices, failed. A new "government of national unity" under Prime Minister Rashid Karami was declared in April 1984, but made no significant progress toward solving Lebanon's internal political crises or its growing economic difficulties.

The situation intensified with the deterioration of internal security. The opening rounds of the savage "camps war" in May 1985, a war that flared up twice in 1986, pitted the Palestinians living in refugee camps in Beirut, Tyre, and Sidon against the Shiite Amal militia, which was concerned with resurgent Palestinian military strength in Lebanon. Eager for a solution in late 1985, Syria began to negotiate a "tripartite accord" on political reform among the leaders of various Lebanese factions, including the Lebanese forces.

Gemayel nonetheless opposed the accord, and his hard-line anti-Syrian rival, Samir Geagea overthrew the leader of the Lebanese forces in January 1986. Syria responded by inducing the Muslim government ministers to cease dealing with Gemayel in any capacity, effectively paralyzing the government. In 1987, the Lebanese economy worsened, and the currency began a precipitous slide. On June 1, Prime Minister Rashid Karami was assassinated, further compounding the political paralysis. Salim al-Huss was appointed acting prime minister.

As the end of President Gemayel's term of office neared, the different Lebanese factions could not agree on a successor. Consequently, when his term expired on Sept. 23, 1988, Gemayel appointed Army Commander Gen. Michel Aoun as interim prime minister. Gemayel's acting prime minister, Salim al-Huss, also continued to act as the de facto prime minister.

As a result, Lebanon was placed in a constitutional crisis with two governments claiming legitimacy—an essentially Muslim government in west Beirut, and an essentially Christian government in east Beirut. The working levels of many ministries, however, remained intact and were not immediately affected by the split at the ministerial level.

In February 1989, Gen. Aoun attempted to close illegal ports run by the Lebanese forces. This led to several days of intense fighting in east Beirut, and an uneasy truce between Aoun's army units and the Lebanese forces. In March, an attempt by Aoun to close illegal militia ports in predominantly Muslim parts of the country led to a six-month period of shelling of east Beirut by Muslim and Syrian forces, and the shelling of west Beirut and the Chouf by the Christian units of the army and the Lebanese forces. This barrage caused nearly 1,000 deaths, several thousand injuries, and further destruction to Lebanon's economic infrastructure.

In January 1989, the Arab League appointed a six-member committee on Lebanon, led by the Kuwaiti foreign minister. At the Casablanca Arab Summit in May, the Arab League empowered a higher committee on Lebanon, composed of Saudi King Fahd, Algerian President Bendjedid, and Moroccan King Hassan, to work toward a solution in Lebanon. The committee issued a report in July 1989, stating that its efforts had reached a "dead end" and blamed Syrian intransigence for the blockage.

After further discussions, the committee arranged for a cease-fire in September, followed by a meeting of Lebanese parliamentarians in Taif, Saudi Arabia. After a month of intense discussions, the parliamentarians informally agreed on a charter of national reconciliation, also known as the Taif Agreement.

The parliamentarians returned to Lebanon in November, where they approved the Taif Agreement and elected Rene Moawad, a Maronite deputy from Zghorta in North Lebanon, president on Nov. 5. Gen. Aoun, claiming powers as interim prime minister, issued a decree in early November dissolving the parliament, and did not accept either the ratification of the Taif Agreement or the election of President Moawad.

President Moawad was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1989, by a bomb that exploded as his motorcade was returning from Lebanese Independence Day ceremonies. The parliament met on Nov. 24 in the Bekaa Valley and elected Elias Harawi, a Maronite Christian deputy from Zahleh in the Bekaa Valley, to replace him. President Harawi named a prime minister, Salim al-Huss, and a cabinet on Nov. 25. Despite widespread international recognition of Harawi and his government, Gen. Aoun refused to recognize Harawi's legitimacy, even when he was officially replaced by the new president as army commander in early December.

The 1990s

In late January 1990, Gen. Aoun's forces attacked positions of the Lebanese forces in east Beirut in an apparent attempt to remove the Lebanese forces as a political force in the Christian enclave. In the heavy fighting that ensued in and around east Beirut, over 900 people died and over 3,000 were wounded.

In August 1990, the National Assembly approved, and President Harawi signed into law, constitutional amendments embodying the political reform aspects of the Taif Agreement. These amendments gave some presidential powers to the Council of Ministers, expanded the National Assembly from 99 to 108 seats, and divided those seats equally between Christians and Muslims.

In October 1990, a joint Lebanese-Syrian military operation forced Gen. Aoun to capitulate and take refuge in the French Embassy. On Dec. 24, 1990, Omar Karami was appointed prime minister. Gen. Aoun remained in the French Embassy until Aug. 27, 1991 when a "special pardon" was issued, allowing him to leave Lebanon safely and take up residence in France in exile. The Syrian air bombardment on east Beirut on Oct. 13, effectively ended the Lebanese civil war. The war had left some 150,000 dead, 300,000 wounded and 500,000 people displaced.

Considerable advancement in efforts to reassert state control over Lebanese territory took place in 1991 and 1992. Militias, with the significant exception of Hezbollah, were dissolved in May 1991, and the armed forces moved against armed Palestinian elements in Sidon in July 1991. In May 1992 the remaining Western hostages taken during the mid-1980s by Islamic extremists were released.

In October 1991, under the sponsorship of the United States and the Soviet Union, the Middle East peace talks were convened in Madrid, Spain. This was the first time that Israel and its Arab neighbors had direct bilateral negotiations on the Middle East conflict. Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and representatives of the Palestinians concluded round 11 of the negotiations in September 1993.

A social and political crisis, fueled by economic instability and the collapse of the Lebanese pound, led to Prime Minister Omar Karami's resignation May 6, 1992. He was replaced by former Prime Minister Rashid al-Sulh, who was widely viewed as a caretaker to oversee Lebanon's first parliamentary elections in 20 years.

The elections were not prepared and carried out in a manner to ensure the broadest national consensus. Elements of the 1992 electoral law, which paved the way for elections, represented a departure from stipulations of the Taif Agreement, expanding the number of parliamentary seats from 108 to 128, and employing a temporary districting arrangement designed to favor certain sects and political interests.

The turnout of eligible voters in some Christian areas was extremely low, with many voters not participating in the elections because they objected to voting in the presence of non-Lebanese forces. There also were widespread reports of irregularities. The electoral rolls were themselves in many instances unreliable because of the destruction of records and the use of forged identification papers. As a consequence, the results did not reflect the full spectrum of Lebanese politics and did not help the process of national reconciliation.

Following the election of the National Assembly, according to the Taif Agreement, the Syrian and Lebanese governments had agreed that by September 1992 Syrian troops would be withdrawn from the Bekaa region. That date passed and it became clear that no such compliance would take place until a comprehensive peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon had been completed.

In early November 1992, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri formed a new cabinet, retaining the finance portfolio for himself. The formation of the Hariri government, with the inclusion of a number of technocrats, was widely seen as a sign that the government would seriously grapple with reconstructing the Lebanese state and reviving the economy.

In June 1995, a constitutional amendment was passed that allowed President Harawi another term in office, which would otherwise have expired in October of that year. In 1996, the Hariri government was renewed in the next set of

Political Conditions Lebanon

parliamentary elections. The elections did not produce a parliament much different from the previous one. Syrian meddling was obvious, election fraud and irregularities were many. Many Christians continued the call for boycotting the elections as long as there were foreign **forces** on Lebanese soil.

Since the beginning of the Middle East peace talks at Madrid, Spain in 1991, Lebanon has participated in the process. An escalation in fighting between Hezbollah and Israel-supported, took place from late 1992 into early 1993. Such conflicts continued well into 1994. Lebanon and other Arab nations withdrew from the peace talks once again in 1994 following the murder of a group of Muslim worshippers in Hebron, by an Israeli extremist. Another escalation in fighting between Hezbollah and Israeli **forces** took place, as a consequence of the incident. Hezbollah ceased its attacks later that year when United States (U.S.) President Clinton visited the region, but resumed activity after his departure.

Intensive Israeli air attacks on Lebanon occurred in 1993, 1994 and 1996, in response to Hezbollah operating from positions within Lebanon. Israeli authorities warned Lebanese authorities that civilians would be endangered by the attacks on Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon, and some 400,000 Lebanese were displaced as a result. Operation "Grapes of Wrath" in April 1996, saw air attacks directed at a village north of Beirut (where Hezbollah had never operated from) as well as the infamous attack on a U.N. post in the village of Qana which sheltered civilians. The Israeli attack killed 106 Lebanese civilians, and it became crucial to find an immediate diplomatic solution.

On April 27, 1996, a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah took effect, and as a result of the devastating consequence of Operation Grapes of Wrath, the two parties agreed to avoid civilian targets. An international committee monitored it in July, and the larger Middle Eastern peace process continued. In the wake of the cease-fire, in 1998, Emile Lahoud replaced Harawi as the president. The former general, who had successfully rebuilt the army, was approved by the Syrians and entrusted with the presidency. Personal differences between Lahoud and Hariri led to the naming of Salim al-Hoss as prime minister-his fourth term.

President Lahoud emphasized the battle against corruption and economic reform in inaugural speech. However, due to Syria's and its supporters' role in Lebanese politics, Lahoud has been unable or unwilling to clean up the system. This is particularly illustrated by the fact that Lahoud chose to include Michel al-Murr as minister of interior in his government. Murr has been known as Syria's strong man in the Lebanese regime, and is a feared and corrupt man.

From 2000-2004

Israeli attacks on South Lebanon continued almost on a daily basis in 1998, 1999 and 2000. On two occasions, in June 1999 and in February 2000, Israeli planes bombed Lebanese infrastructure causing substantial damages to roads and power stations. Several people were killed in both instances. Also, the Israeli army and the South Lebanese Army (SLA) suffered heavy losses in the beginning of 2000.

The election of Ehud Barak and his promise to withdraw Israeli soldiers from South Lebanon within a year led to the anticipation of the departure of Israeli soldiers in July 2000. However, intensified Hezbollah attacks and the killing of several Israeli soldiers -- in addition to the low morale and the desertion of SLA soldiers -- led to a hasty end of the Israeli occupation on May 25, 2000. The SLA once numbered 2,500 fighters. Some 2,200 of them surrendered to Lebanese authorities or were captured after Israel withdrew, while the rest, mostly ranking SLA officers and their families fled to Israel. A Lebanese military court has sentenced more than 1,000 people to jail terms of up to 15 years since the trials of alleged collaborators began on June 5, 2000. The military court's verdicts cannot be appealed.

Civilians flooded the roads and villages of the liberated zone that had been occupied for 22 years in the days following the withdrawal. Peace and order was not restored immediately, and it was not until June 18 that the U.N. Security Council confirmed the Israeli withdrawal. More than a month went by before U.N. peacekeepers could deploy in the area on July 28.

Political Conditions Lebanon

During the summer of 2000, the Lebanese army was still in the process of returning to and restoring law and order in the area. South Lebanon remained relatively quiet and stable since the Israeli withdrawal, but low-level tensions existed on almost a daily basis. The new border stations became points of attractions, where Lebanese came to throw stones and bottles on Israeli soldiers, and tourists to experience the absurd closeness of the conflict now being within an arm's reach of Israeli soldiers.

The death of Hafez al-Assad in Syria and the coming to power of his son, the self-proclaimed reformer and modernizer, Bashar al-Assad, had, in addition to the opposition's sweeping victory, given rise to the hopes of changes in Syrian-Lebanese relations. The election campaign saw, for the first time, calls for the re-evaluation of Syrian-Lebanese relations. The return to Lebanon of former President Amin Gemayel, after 12 years of self-imposed exile in France, signalled Christians' hopes for a fairer political process in the future.

Despite the liberation of South Lebanon, the Hoss government had been unable to improve the economic situations and failed to implement promised economic reforms. In the parliamentary elections on Aug. 27 and Sept. 3, 2000, government opposition candidates, and in particular former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his supporters, won a landslide victory. The elections were less tainted by obvious fraud, but the pre-elections restrictions, such as Syrian approval of most candidates, the centrality of money and the need for "wasta" (connections) in the campaign, does still disqualify the elections from a free and fair label.

The new parliament convened on Oct. 17, 2000, and within a few days Rafik Hariri was appointed prime minister. The new government faces enormous economic challenges as Lebanon spends half of its national budget serving the sky rocketing debt-ironically acquired during Hariri's first period as prime minister. The new 30-member cabinet includes some of Hariri's former ministers, amongst others the controversial former Finance Minister Fouad Siniora who is under investigation for embezzlement of public funds. Armenian and Maronite groups who complain of lack of representation criticized the new cabinet. The fact that all members of the new cabinet were approved by Syria and that no politician in vocal opposition to Syria's influence were amongst the ministers appointed, underlined the continued influence of Syria on domestic Lebanese politics.

With the death of the older Assad, a psychological barrier seems to have been brought down. The politically marginal, but symbolically important, success of some opposition candidates in the elections has spawned an increasingly vocal and intense opposition to the Syrian presence and domination of Lebanese politics. An unprecedented anti-Syrian statement was issued on September 20 by the Council of Maronite Bishops, which called for the redeployment of the Syrian army. Maverick Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, has on several occasions strongly criticized the Syrian presence. Jumblatt's fierce anti-Syrian comments have earned him new allies among Christian opposition politicians and the Maronite clergy, but also a persona non grata status in Damascus. Not surprisingly, Syrian troops' patrols around Jumblatt's strongholds in the Chouf area have intensified.

In an attempt to demonstrate Lebanon's commitment to freedom of statement, and simultaneously testing former Gen. Aoun's willingness to observe the "red lines" of public discourse, Murr TV (MTV) was allowed to broadcast a live interview with Aoun on Feb. 12, 2001. However, those who believed that Aoun would tone down his criticism of Syria, in order to "earn" his right to return to Lebanon were wrong. Aoun continued his fierce criticism of Syria, and even said that Lebanese President Emile Lahoud had been appointed by Syria. However, threats that charges would be filed against both Aoun and MTV were dropped when MTV officially denounced the views presented by Aoun, and after Prime Minister Hariri returned from France in mid-February, arguing that such charges would damage Lebanon's relation with France and the West. Despite the government's displeasure with criticism of Syria, former President Amin Gemayel, only recently returned to Lebanon from exile, launched a fierce tirade against Syrian occupation of Lebanon in a lecture in late February 2001.

In early August 2002, Murr TV was in the headlines again -- accused of slandering the country's president and its security services, as well as damaging the country's ties with Syria, which is the major political force in Lebanon. The charges followed similar accusations against Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International, the most popular Christian-owned channel, earlier in the week.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Many Christians oppose Syria's continued influence in Lebanon, where it maintained 20,000 troops. Against this backdrop, the Lebanese and Syrian regimes' fear of the growing overt opposition to Syria's role in Lebanon increased. On March 14, 2001, several thousand students demonstrated on the 12th anniversary for the launching of Aoun's "War of Liberation" against Syria. Lebanese security **forces** virtually sealed off the capital in a bid to contain demonstrations, and more than 35 demonstrators were detained. However, a demonstration against the Aoun demonstration a week later dispersed some security personnel around the capital.

Lebanon's human rights violations record was still bleak with scores of people continuing to be arrested on **political** grounds, including students arrested after demonstrations. Dozens of people accused of "collaborating" with Israel received trials, which fell short of international fair trial standards. There were also reports of torture and ill treatment. Lebanon's press enjoys relatively more freedom than other Middle Eastern countries, but influential individuals and politicians often own media organizations although statements of overt, anti-Syrian opinions are seldom tolerated, and the media practices self-censorship. In December 2000, around 50 Lebanese citizens were released from Syrian prisons, and handed over to Lebanese authorities. Syria claimed that it held no Lebanese prisoners, but this was disputed by several international human rights organizations.

In January 2002, former Lebanese Christian militia leader, Elie Hobeika, a key figure in the massacres of Palestinian refugees in 1982, died in a blast shortly after disclosing that he held videotapes and documents challenging the Israeli version of the story of the massacres. Hobeika, 46, was linked to the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps, where Israeli-allied Lebanese Christian militiamen allegedly killed about 2,000 Palestinian refugees. However, just before his death, Hobeika -- who has repeatedly denied any link -- told Belgian senators investigating the massacres he had information which he believed would contradict the Israeli version of events.

The Hariri government was struggling to renew faith in the Lebanese economy and restructure its government organization. However, some steps toward administrative reform were taken. The government's TV station "Tele Liban" was closed down on March 1, 2001 -- but later re-opened. Other government services, including the electricity company, are expected to be privatized as a part of the government's efforts to revamp the debt-ridden Lebanese economy and its surplus-staffed administration. Lebanon's national debt stood at \$25 billion in March 2001, and was expected to rise to more than \$30 billion within the year. In February 2001, Lebanon obtained \$485 million in loans and grants from international finance groups such as the World Bank, the European Commission and the Mediterranean Development Agency.

Nevertheless, with increasing internal dissatisfaction regarding economic and **political** conditions, a Middle East peace process in deadlock, and meager prospects for help from an improved regional situation to boost economic and **political** confidence in the region, Lebanon faced some dire times ahead in 2002.

In the first part of 2003, international relations dominated the **political** landscape. Following the war in Iraq, the United States insisted that Hezbollah fighters on the Lebanese border with Israel be replaced with the government's military **forces** instead. For the most part, the Lebanese position regarding Hezbollah is similar to that of the Syrians; the vast majority of Lebanese believe that Hezbollah enacts legitimate resistance against Israeli occupation. In the case of Lebanon, however, Hezbollah has been legitimized by the government in Beirut. The An-Nahar newspaper reported that Lebanese President Emile Lahoud told United States Secretary of State Colin Powell that Hezbollah is recognized "as a legal **political** party." Although there was no verification of this quote by the government of Lebanon, it was certainly true that Lebanese Hezbollah is a **political** party that holds seats in the parliament. President Emile Lahoud was largely unresponsive to the requisition by the United States.

Also in the first part of 2003, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami traveled to Lebanon for the first official visit by an Iranian head of state since the Islamic revolution in 1979. At the airport, Khatami was met by the Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, several Cabinet members, as well as the deputy head of Hezbollah, Sheik Naim Kasseem. Khatami's presence was also greeted with throngs of enthusiastic Shi'a supporters in the streets of Beirut. In addition to signing a loan agreement valued at about \$50 million, Khatami discussed the role of Hezbollah with the Lebanese leadership. Although Hezbollah has operated in Lebanon, its activities have

Political Conditions Lebanon

often been funded by Iran. Lebanon, Iran, and also Syria, have been pressured by the United States to withdraw their support of Hezbollah.

In August 2003, violence returned to the Lebanese landscape when a car bomb exploded in the streets of the capital city of Beirut, killing a member of Hezbollah. Both the controversial group as well as the Lebanese government placed the blame on Israel for the explosion.

Several months later in December 2003, Lebanese security forces detained two suspects on the grounds that the men were plotting to attack the embassy of the United States in Beirut. Roughly around the same period in late 2003, close to thirty people were sentenced to imprisonment for association with various attacks in Lebanon on commercial enterprises or interests from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, also in late 2003, the government put forth a strict budget aimed at economic reform and dealing with the country's terribly high debt. The debates and disagreements about the economy in recent times have not helped the country to deal with the debt challenge, and certainly has not helped the privatization program and necessary cost-cutting measures. As such, the need for the budget to pass appeared to be of vital interest. The provisions of the budget, however, allow for very little social program expenditures and also seeks to raise taxes. The result has been an extended debate within parliament and even street protests over wage freezing in certain sectors.

In early 2004, one of the most significant political decisions made involved the resolution to reinstitute capital punishment. In this regard, in January 2004, three convicted murderers were executed.

By August 2004, the main political issue involved the declaration by President Lahoud that he wished to continue to serve in office after his six-year term ended. In this regard, the president's office issued a statement noting that Lahoud had not yet completed his political and administrative reform strategy. Accordingly, the statement said that Lahoud was "ready for the mission" of continuing his work, if parliament wished to provide him with a mandate. Such a mandate would entail constitutional changes since at present, Lebanon's constitution prevents consecutive terms for presidents.

Although neighboring Syria was reportedly enthused about the idea of such a constitutional change, other countries such as the United States, were not nearly as pleased about the possibility. Moreover, at home in Lebanon, people were generally skeptical about the idea of a constitutional change aimed at extending one person's grip on power.

Nevertheless, a vote in the Lebanese parliament resulted in a provision for the Syrian-favored Lahoud to stay on for three more years. This step was seen as a virtual agreement to allow Syria to maintain its power in the Lebanese political scene.

In September 2004, four members of Lebanon's parliament planned to resign to protest the passage of this amendment. Then, in October 2004, Prime Minister Hariri resigned from office. The resignation was the culmination of a long standing dispute with President Lahoud over political and economic reforms, although spurred in large part by the decision to extend Lahoud's tenure. Hariri, at the time, had been in political office for almost 15 years and had enjoyed the stature of being a leading political figure in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990. In the period after his resignation, he became increasingly known as an opposition voice. In particular, Hariri joined the opposition's calls for a withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon -- a move not favored by Syrian-aligned factions.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 2004, the United Nations Security Council narrowly passed a United States-proposed resolution demanding the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. The resolution also called for full respect for Lebanese sovereignty. Presumably, the measure was directed at Syrian forces, which, as discussed throughout, first entered Lebanon as peacekeepers in the 1970s. The impetus for the United States-proposed resolution was believed to have been associated with its shift in policy toward Syria. Whereas Syria was viewed favorably in the 1990s for its support of the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait, it was now viewed negatively due to its opposition to the invasion of Iraq, as well as its supposed ties to Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Earlier in 2004, the United States went so far as to place sanctions on Syria demanding cessation of

support for these groups, which often claim responsibility for attacks on Israeli citizens. By extension, this stance may have impacted Lebanon.

The Assassination and the Aftermath

On Feb. 14, 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed in what appeared to have been a **political** assassination. A car bomb exploded came just after Hariri had left a **political** session in parliament and his convoy was around the area of the St. George's Hotel.. The attack left around 10 people dead and several injured.

Included in those reported to have been killed were members of his convoy; a former minister, also in his convoy, was reported to have been seriously injured.

As noted above, Hariri resigned from his **political** office as prime minister in 2004 over differences with President Emile Lahoud.

For his part, Lahoud is regarded as a favorite of the Syrian government, which has been highly influential of Lebanese politics. In recent times, however, relations between the two countries became more tense. Nevertheless, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad condemned Hariri's assassination. As well, Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa characterized it as an act of terrorism, which was sure to have **political** ramifications.

In the period after Hariri's death, relations between Lebanon and Syria plummeted. The late prime minister's funeral was itself transformed into a spontaneous rally of Lebanese nationalism mixed with protest against Syrian's military presence in Lebanon. Such protests continued in Lebanon after the time of the funeral. Indeed, Lebanese opposition groups scheduled a rally in Beirut on Feb. 28, 2005, to protest the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and to call for a formal investigation into the assassination. Meanwhile, another pro-government rally was scheduled to protest the **arrival** of United States diplomat David Satterfield, who traveled to Beirut to call for the withdrawal of Syrian troops. In order to prevent **political** clashes, a ban against such demonstrations was put into place by the government. Nevertheless, protests and rallies became regular fare during this period. Indeed, emotions ran so high that President Emile Lahoud offered to step down from office.

For Syria, pressure was exerted by external factions. Notably, very soon after Harare's death, the United States entered the fray by calling for Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon. Of particular significance was the decision by the United States to demand the implementation of United Nations Security Resolution 1559, which calls for the withdrawal of "all remaining foreign **forces**" from Lebanon. By Feb. 21, 2005, the Arab League announced that plans were in the works to go forward with the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. The announcement followed a meeting between the leadership of the Arab League and Syrian President Bashar Assad.

In the backdrop of these developments was the parliamentary debate on Hariri's assassination, during which the opposition was expected to call for a vote of non-confidence in the government. Before the vote could be called, on Feb. 28, 2005, pro-Syrian Prime Minister Omar Karami and his government resigned. Ten days after his resignation, Karami was asked by the president to form a **new** government and resume his post as prime minister. Karami had the backing of the majority of parliamentarians and continued on as head of government in somewhat of a "caretaker" capacity.

By April 2005, however, Karami again submitted his resignation, which was accepted by President Lahoud. On April 14, 2005, Karami said that the reason for his resignation was the inability to form a cabinet. After consultations with other politicians, many with competing interests, demands and agendas, Karami said that the process had reached a dead end. President Lahoud said he would begin **new** consultations with the parliament for the purpose of naming a **new** prime minister. Complicating matters was the fact that parliamentary elections were

Political Conditions Lebanon

scheduled for May 2005. Nevertheless, Nagib Mikati was eventually named as the prime minister-designate. He soon formed a government and was able to command some popular support despite his perceived ties to Syria.

In another development, it was announced in late April 2005 that Saad Hariri, son of the late Rafik Hariri, would take on the task of continuing his father's work. A statement was issued noting that the young Hariri would assume the "historical responsibility and leadership" required to pursue the goals of independence and national unity. While Saad Hariri had already assumed the role of administering his late father's business interests, it was not known precisely how his **political** commitments might be met. For example, it was not made clear whether Saad Hariri would be a candidate in parliamentary elections to be held in May 2005.

Meanwhile, in March 2005, after weeks of intensifying pressure, Syrian President Basha al-Assad announced the redeployment of Syrian troops in Lebanon. The pull-back was scheduled to begin first with redeployment to the eastern Bekaa Valley, and then to the Syrian border, as part of a phased withdrawal. Talks making official the details of the withdrawal were to commence between the Syrian and Lebanese leadership. President Bashar al-Assad said that following the redeployment, Lebanon and Syria "will have fulfilled our obligations under the Taif accord and under [United Nations Security Council] Resolution 1559." Even though United States authorities said that the redeployment did not go far enough, Lebanese and Syrian groups eschewed intervention by the Americans. These events followed a mass protest in Beirut in regard to the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Then, in early April 2005, United Nations envoy Terje Roed-Larsen announced that Syria would withdraw all its troops from Lebanon by the end of that very month. The announcement came after a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara. The date was viewed as something of a surprise because it indicated a rapid pace for the full withdrawal of Syrian troops, military assets and intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, the scheduled withdrawal was intended to meet the requirement of the 1989 Taif agreement, which set the course for the end of the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war. It was also intended to fulfill the requirements set forth in United Nations Security Resolution 1559.

Editor's Note: The 1989 Taif accord, which ended the Lebanese civil war, specified a phased withdrawal, while the 2004 United Nations resolution called for the withdrawal of foreign **forces** from Lebanon and the disarming of militant groups.

As these developments were unfolding in the spring of 2005, Lebanon was in a state of **political** turmoil. A spate of bombings, mostly in Christian areas where anti-Syrian sentiment had been high, only exacerbated the grim situation. Indeed, the violence sparked anxieties about the return of sectarian violence in a country which suffered frequent car bombings during its civil war from 1975 to 1990. While Lebanon's **political** opposition lashed out at Syria for the attacks, leaders in Damascus denied any involvement and pointed to their plan to withdraw their troops from Lebanon. Meanwhile, Lebanon's pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud called on **political** parties to participate in "crisis talks."

Elections of 2005

By early May 2005, attention was turned to the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled to begin later that month in the capital city of Beirut.

In late May 2005, an opposition bloc claimed victory over all the seats in the capital city of Beirut amidst Lebanon's parliamentary elections. The anti-Syrian opposition in Beirut has been led by Saad Hariri, the son of former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, who was assassinated months earlier. But even before voting had commenced, nine out of the 12 Beirut seats had gone unchallenged to the "Martyr Rafik Hariri list."

The Beirut vote preceded voting in other parts of the country, which was scheduled to take place over the course of weeks during June 2005.

In the south of the country, the two main Shi'a groups, Hezbollah and Amal, formed an alliance under the Resistance, Liberation and Development list. As expected, they were the victors in the southern part of the country

when voting took place a week later in early June 2005. Early results suggested that Hezbollah and its ally, Amal, won all 23 seats in that area bordering Israel.

Within Maronite Christian enclaves, Michel Aoun led his own election list. During the following phase of elections in the second week of June 2005, the anti-Syrian opposition appeared to have suffered something of a defeat in the central area of Mount Lebanon. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who was able to hold on to this own seat, admitted that Aoun's pro-Syrian Christian hardliners had defeated his own more moderate compatriots. Although Aoun, who had once functioned as prime minister in the late 1980s led a campaign to expel Syrian troops from Lebanon in years gone past, in more recent times, he had aligned with pro-Syrian candidates from the Druze community.

Elections also took place in the Bekaa Valley, in the eastern part of the country. There, another strong contest ensued between pro- and anti-Syrian candidates. Then, in the fourth and final round of Lebanon's phased parliamentary elections, the main opposition anti-Syrian alliance appeared to have won victory in the northern part of the country.

This meant that after the successive phases of the parliamentary elections, the opposition alliance leader, led by Saad Hariri – the son of the assassinated former prime minister, would hold a majority in parliament. The vote also symbolized the desire among the Lebanese people for change. Still, the Shi'a factions of Hezbollah and Amal, who won prior in the south of the county, would also hold a significant number of seats in the parliament. As such, they would likely to continue to be an influential contributor to the **political** process.

As the election transpired, voting took place to choose 128 members of parliament, with seats allocated to equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. Within the two religious groupings, seats were also allocated to various sects, such as Druze, Greek Orthodox, Shi'a and Sunnis. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious **representation**.

In the wake of elections, an ally of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was designated to be the **new** head of government. Fouad Siniora (sometimes spelled Fuad Siniora), a former Finance Minister, was nominated by the son of Rafik Hariri, who led the anti-Syrian **political** bloc to victory. Siniora was also backed by an overwhelming majority of legislators.

Hariri's bloc held 36 seats in the 128-seat parliament. Still, with its allies, such as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Christian leader Michael Aoun, the Hariri bloc actually controlled 72 parliamentary votes. Yet despite this level of **political** influence, even as Lebanese legislators voted in favor of Siniora, they also re-elected the strongly pro-Syrian Nabih Berri as the Speaker of the House for a fourth term. The election of Berri demonstrated that even in the aftermath of the Syrian military withdrawal, Syrian influence continued to prevail on the Lebanese **political** landscape.

Note: The popular uprising that occurred after Hariri's death, which largely contributed to an election victory for modern, anti-Syrian, pro-Western factions in parliament, ultimately placing the Siniora government in power and spurring the exit of Syrian **forces** from Lebanon, has come to be known as the "Cedar Revolution" of Lebanon.

Violence, Unrest and Investigations

In late September 2005, a television **new** anchor for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), May Chidiac, was terribly wounded by a bomb explosion in her car, just north of the capital city of Beirut. Reports stated that the bomb had been planted under the driver's seat of her Range Rover vehicle and it exploded when she turned on the car's ignition. She was raced to the hospital and was in critical condition after her arm and leg were amputated. LBC, a Christian television station, was regarded as one of the main anti-Syrian media outlets in Lebanon. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri earlier in 2005, a number of anti-Syrian figures have been targeted.

Political Conditions Lebanon

In October 2005, Syria's Interior Minister Ghazi Kanaan committed suicide. His death came a month after he was questioned by a United Nations investigator about the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri. Hours before apparently taking his own life, Kanaan, who had functioned as Syria's top security chief in Lebanon for several years, said in an interview that he had served Lebanon with honesty. This statement, in conjunction with the timing of his death following questioning by the United Nations, led to suspicions about how Kanaan would be **represented** in the United Nations report, which was to be published at the end of the month. Some suggested that Syria's intelligence community was likely to be implicated, but how Kanaan's suicide was linked with this outcome remained unknown.

The United Nations report on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri alleged the involvement of Syria's ruling Assad family, as well as key Lebanese associates. In concluding section of paragraph 123, the report stated in strong terms that the decision to assassinate Rafik Hariri could not have been reached without approval from the very top of the Syrian security apparatus. The report also noted that Hariri's murder could not have been organized without "the collusion of their counterparts in the Lebanese security services." The report suggested that the motive for Hariri's murder was rooted in the belief that he was an enemy of Syria and its Lebanese allies. The document did not, however, foreclose a more complex constellation of rationales, including corruption and fraud.

One individual named in the report was Sheikh Ahmed Abdel-Al who seemingly telephoned Lebanese President Emile Lahoud only moments after the bomb exploded killing Hariri and several others. Lahoud, significantly, had been at odds with Hariri and had enjoyed a strong alliance with Syria. The timing of the call, thus, was deemed to be highly suspicious.

Its revelation appeared to fuel further calls for Lahoud's resignation from office. The report also named one of Lahoud's closest security advisors -- General Mustapha Hamdan, the commander of Lebanon's presidential guard - as a witness. The report alleged that four months prior to the assassination, he claimed that Hariri was "pro-Israeli" and said, "We are going to send him on a trip; bye bye Hariri."

As well, paragraph 96 of the report discussed testimony of a witness who claimed to have worked for Syrian intelligence. In that testimony, a series of apparent (but unconfirmed) meetings in Damascus between Lebanese and Syrian security officials were described, including plans for Hariri's assassination. The brother-in-law of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Asef Shawkat, who led Syria's military intelligence, as well as Maher al-Assad, the president's own brother, were reportedly mentioned in the report as well, although their actual names were redacted. More broadly, the report criticized Syrian authorities of failing to cooperate with the investigation.

An investigator for the United Nations, Detlev Mehlis, warned that the report evoked further investigatory work, and cautioned that those named should enjoy the presumption of innocence. Nevertheless, he did not back away from the overall charges of conspiracy to commit murder, which appeared to involve key Syrian and Lebanese officials. The report has been sent to the United Nations Security Council for discussion. Before the commencement of those discussions, the United States had already demanded action against Syria. Throughout, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that there was no evidence to suggest that Syria was involved in Hariri's death.

A bomb exploded in Lebanon in December 2005 killing Gibran Tunei, a prominent anti-Syrian parliamentarian and managing editor of a well-known newspaper. Tunei's death came only days after his return from Paris, where he had been residing due to fears of attempts on his life.

The murder of Tunei, who had been a vocal critic of Syria's occupation of Lebanon, was the latest in a series of more than a dozen **political** assassinations over the course of 2005. The attacks led Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to state that he would call for an United Nations Security Council investigation into the killings, which have been allegedly linked with Syria. For its part, Syria said the specific killing of Tunei may have been timed in order to damage its standing just ahead of meetings scheduled with the United Nations. Whether or not Syrian involvement could be ascertained, it was certainly true that with each **political** assassination of an anti-Syrian voice in Lebanon,

Political Conditions Lebanon

the fires of **political** conflict have been sparked. Indeed, well-known Lebanese politician and leader of the country's Druze community, Walid Jumblatt, accused Syria of being behind Tunei's assassination.

In late 2005, a Syrian-born suspect was arrested in connection with the killing of Tunei. The suspect, Abdul Qadir, allegedly made telephone calls immediately before and after the bombing that killed Tunei, and apparently rented a plot of land located near the place where the attack took place.

Lahoud's Future

In the the first part of 2006, Lebanon's **political** sphere was dominated by the debate over the **political** career of Lebanon's pro-Syrian president. Politicians in Lebanon were ensconced in a **new** round of discussions about the country's **political** future, including the question of whether or not President Emile Lahoud should be dismissed from office. Several rounds of discussions have been ongoing ever since an anti-Syrian majority took power in the last elections, however, there has been little consensus on the fate of Lahoud.

Although many of the **political** players in Lebanon shared the view that Lahoud should not remain in the country's top post, there was little agreement about who should replace him. Other issues on the table for debate included the procedure for the disarmament of Hezbollah's militia, as set forth in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559.

Special Extended Coverage Report: Israeli-Hezbollah Conflict in Lebanon

Prelude

On May 28, 2006, the United Nations (U.N.) announced that it brokered a truce following incidences involving mutual missile attacks along the Israel-Lebanon border. In one of the most significant attacks since December 2005, Katyusha rockets from Lebanon were fired across the border toward northern Israeli bases around Mount Miron. While no specific militant group claimed responsibility, in the past, such attacks have been carried out by the likes of Hezbollah as well as Lebanon-based Palestinian militants. In retaliation, Israeli jets fired on guerilla bases in Lebanon. Clashes between guerillas and Israeli troops then ensued along the boundary between Israel and Lebanon and residents in the area were instructed to take cover. The area has been a particularly volatile zone despite the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000, following an occupation that lasted close to two decades. Still, there has remained a contested territory in the border region called the Shebaa Farms, which remains the site of periodic confrontations.

Background and Primer

In mid-July 2006, the leader of Lebanon-based Hezbollah announced that his militant Islamic group had captured two Israeli soldiers. The Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, asserted that the soldiers would only be returned through a combination of dialogue and prisoner exchange. He added that the operation had been planned in advance of the capture of another Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants in Gaza. Underscoring his militant stance, the head of Hezbollah also said that if Israel wanted to escalate the crisis, his group would be ready to deal with a possible confrontation.

The Israeli government held urgent cabinet meetings regarding the situation and approved a strong military offensive in Lebanon -- in response to Hezbollah's actions and also for the purpose of finding the two captured soldiers. Israel warned that it would hold Lebanon responsible for the fates of the two captured soldiers, pointing to the fact that Hezbollah had been allowed to attack Israel from within Lebanese borders with impunity and irrespective of the parameters of international law. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert characterized the actions of Lebanon-based Hezbollah as an "act of war." The Israeli leader's promise of "painful" and "far-reaching" consequences was issued just as its **forces** launched a military assault on southern Lebanon.

Political Conditions Lebanon

The military assault left several Israeli troops and civilians dead, even as roads as well as Hezbollah interests were attacked within Lebanon. Indeed, as the conflict raged on, parts of the Lebanese capital of Beirut were decimated - particularly southern suburban areas known to be Hezbollah strongholds. The country's main infrastructure, including major highways, were bombed in order to prevent Hezbollah from receiving arms and support - allegedly from Iran via Syria. The human dimension was not to be ignored as hundreds of civilians were killed in Lebanon as a result of Israel's military actions. On the other side of the border in Israel, the death toll and injury list, albeit in notably lower numbers, continued to rise as a consequence of a relentless barrage of rocket attacks by Hezbollah. Indeed, rocket attacks became systematically more pronounced over time -- traveling further distances and more deeply into Israeli territory and with greater frequency.

The two main players in the drama unfolding in the Middle East had their own perspectives as well. With no sign that the conflict was easing, the government of Lebanon called for a ceasefire with Israel and also requested assistance from the United Nations. Lebanon was desperate for an end to the violence as its terrain bore the brunt of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. As a result, the Lebanese people, a first outraged at Hezbollah for placing them in an untenable position, had now turned their anger toward Israel. Meanwhile, Israel maintained the view that its two soldiers had to be returned and Hezbollah rocket attacks against Israel had to be stopped. To these ends, Israel was willing to take radical actions to achieve a long-term solution.

On the international scene, leaders laid primary blame for the situation at the feet of Hezbollah. They echoed Israel's demand for the release of the two abducted soldiers and a cessation of rocket attacks on Israel, which had left scores of people dead and hundreds injured. Nevertheless, they also demanded that Israel cease its military operation, which had destroyed several Hezbollah interests at a terrible cost. They pointed to the devastation of the city of Beirut, as well as hundreds of civilian Lebanese lives and thousands of injuries, which were taken as collateral damage. The deaths of the United Nations peacekeepers as well as the deaths at Qana were particularly bleak examples of the high cost of Israel's operation. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert asserted that his country was cognizant of the humanitarian aspect of the situation regarding Lebanon's civilians. In fact, his Lebanese counterpart, Fuad Siniora, said on United States television that it was something the two of them had discussed. That said, Olmert maintained the position that Israel was compelled to defend itself against terrorism.

Diplomatic efforts were underway to try to bring an end to the violence. Attempts to draft a United Nations Security Council Resolution on the matter were marred somewhat by different policy imperatives of various countries. Lebanon's failure to enforce a previous United Nations Security Council Resolution (1559), which was intended to disarm militias from attacking Israel from within its borders, was a key concern. Indeed, it led to discussions about the creation of a new international force, which would be tasked with ensuring that security was maintained in the border region. Israel's heavy-handed military operation was also a source of great concern with many critics wondering whether it would not result in increased animosity in the Middle East, rather than regional peace and stability. Iran and Syria became increasingly implicated in the conflict as backers of Hezbollah, while the United States' support for Israel and its refusal to call for an immediate ceasefire became the source of global debate.

On August 11, 2006, United Nations Security Resolution 1701 called for an end to the hostilities and provided for the establishment of more robust United Nations enforcement in the border region. By August 14, 2006, the ceasefire was officially in effect. A few days later, Lebanese troops crossed the Litani River to take up positions on the southern border with Israel. Their presence, however, was viewed as more of a symbolic development than a strategic one since it remained unknown how they would control the region that had become a Hezbollah stronghold over a period of decades. The fragile ceasefire was holding despite occasional flare-ups of violence. Still, the United Nations was warning that the ceasefire was at risk of collapsing in the aftermath of a raid by Israelis in the Bekaa Valley due to apparent attempts by Hezbollah to rearm itself. In the last days of August 2006, there were also rising accusations about the violations of humanitarian law during the conflict.

Meanwhile, displaced Lebanese people were returning home. As well, the United Nations said that it was hoping to establish 3,500 troops in southern Lebanon within two weeks and up to 15,000 in a month. There was also a call for European countries to contribute troops since Israel objected to the presence of peacekeepers from countries that do not recognize its right of existence. In addition to the orchestration and deployment of the United Nations

Political Conditions Lebanon

peacekeeping mission on the Lebanese-Israeli border, there were also efforts underway to raise funds to be used to reconstruct Lebanon's destroyed infrastructure.

In the backdrop of these developments both Israel and Hezbollah made competing claims of victory. However, by the close of August 2006, Hezbollah's leader expressed regret that his orders to capture two Israeli soldiers had sparked a war that had left more than 1,000 people dead and which had decimated southern Lebanon.

Editor's Notes:

Hezbollah (Hizbollah) --

Hezbollah (also known as Hizbollah) is a militant movement founded with the assistance of Iran's late revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Although it is accused of being a terrorist organization by the West, it is regarded as a legitimate resistance movement by many Arabs and Muslims. The group endeavors to restructure Lebanon as an Islamic state and has called for the destruction of the state of Israel. Functionally, it has had control of the border region between Israel and Lebanon since the withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2000. Like the militant group, Hamas, in the Palestinian territories, Hezbollah also has a political wing, which has won representation in government. Indeed, there is a Hezbollah representative serving as a government minister in Lebanon.

The following countries made pledges toward the peacekeeping mission along the Lebanese-Israeli border --

France: Leadership and 2,000 troops

Italy: 2,500-3,000 troops; also offered to take on leadership of the mission

Bangladesh: Two battalions (up to 2,000 troops)

Malaysia: One battalion

Spain: One battalion

Indonesia: One battalion, an engineering company

Nepal: One battalion

Denmark: At least two ships

Poland: 500 troops

Finland: 250 troops

Belgium: 302 troops to be increased to 392

Germany: Maritime and border patrols but no combat troops

Norway: 100 soldiers

Introduction to Day-to-Day Coverage: Positions in the Conflict

The initial assault left several Israeli troops and civilians dead, even as roads as well as Hezbollah interests were attacked within Lebanon. Israel was now dealing with crises on two fronts. First, it was carrying out an operation in the Gaza Strip to rescue Corporal Galid Shalit, who had been captured by Palestinian militants. As a result, there was an ongoing conflict between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants taking place in Gaza. A second operation into Lebanon was now being launched to rescue Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev -- the two soldiers captured by Lebanon-based Hezbollah. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming task of fighting on two fronts, Prime Minister Olmert ruled out any negotiations with Hezbollah, just as it had foreclosed the discussions with Hamas. Additionally, his government filed a complaint with the United Nations, calling on the Security Council to enforce an existing resolution [1559] that required the Lebanese government to disarm militias.

For its part, Lebanon said it had no knowledge of Hezbollah's activities and would not take responsibility for the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers. To this end, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora said, "The government

Political Conditions Lebanon

was not aware of and does not take responsibility for, nor endorses what happened on the international border." Experts on the ground in Lebanon also pointed to the fact that despite the existence of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, the country simply was not in the position -- politically or militarily -- to disarm Hezbollah on its own.

July 13, 2006

On July 13, 2006, the situation intensified after Israeli forces bombed the Beirut international airport and later a main Lebanese army base in the Bekaa Valley. As well, Israeli warships blocked Lebanese ports. An assault on targets across southern Lebanon at that time left approximately 50 people -- most of whom were civilians -- dead. There were also reports of several Israeli casualties as a result of attacks by Hezbollah in the northern part of Israel.

With a war-like scenario unfolding, both Israelis and Lebanese on their respective sides of the border were fleeing to safety. Tourists in the region also joined the exodus, with many trying to cross the northern border into Syria. Special emergency flights were being planned to pick up stranded tourists trying to escape the escalating violence.

Lebanon's Social Affairs Minister, Naila Mouawad, called for the two Israeli soldiers to be returned home. She also reiterated Lebanon's previously-noted position that her government was neither aware of Hezbollah's plan, nor supported it. That said, Mouawad criticized Israel's response for being too heavy-handed, particularly with regard to the lives of Lebanese civilians. She warned that Lebanon was experiencing a catastrophe and explained that her government could not disarm Hezbollah by force.

In the late hours of July 13, 2006, at least two rockets hit Haifa. Hezbollah quickly denied firing them. Nevertheless, the timing of the attacks -- only hours after the group had threatened to carry out this very act -- did little to assuage suspicions that Hezbollah was responsible.

That said, it should be noted that although Hezbollah fired several rockets into Israel over the course of the previous days, none had traveled more than 12 miles (approximately 20 kilometers). As such, there was some skepticism that Haifa could be hit at all. Regardless, the distance traversed by the rockets suggested that since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah had been busy accumulating more sophisticated weaponry. Left unsaid at the time was the matter of who would have furnished more technologically-advanced rockets to Hezbollah. For its part, Israel reacted to the rocket attacks on Haifa by characterizing it as a major escalation.

Global Reaction

With no sign that the conflict was easing, the government of Lebanon called for a cease-fire with Israel and also requested assistance from the United Nations. To this end, the United Nations Security Council was set to meet on July 14, 2006 to discuss the crisis unfolding in the Middle East. The European Union said that it would deploy its head of foreign policy, Javier Solana, to the region to try to assist in bringing an end to the violence. The Arab League was also reported to have scheduled an emergency session.

Meanwhile, there was a growing state of anxiety across the globe, with many countries calling for restraint from all parties involved. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan condemned both the abduction of the Israeli soldiers as well as the resulting offensive by Israeli forces into Lebanon. Russian, France and the European Union expressed the view that Israel's response to the capture of two soldiers was disproportionate. But Israeli spokesman, Mark Regev, said that Israel was simply responding to an "unprovoked act of aggression." United States President George W. Bush characterized Hezbollah as terrorists and supported Israel's right to defend itself. However, he also warned that whatever action Israel took, it should be mindful of the stability of the Lebanese government. Margaret Beckett, the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, took a similar position saying that while Israel had to ensure its own security, it should do so in a way that avoided civilian deaths. The Vatican later added its condemnation of the situation - calling for the release of the soldiers by Hezbollah and decrying Israel's strikes against the sovereignty of Lebanon.

Conditions on the Ground

Political Conditions Lebanon

Amidst these varied calls for restraint, the crisis intensified further. Along the Israeli-Lebanese border, heavy fighting took a toll. Reports suggested that Israel had endured its worst losses in the area in several years. Hezbollah fired rockets in the direction of northern Israel and threatened to attack Israel's port city of Haifa if any attacks on Beirut took place.

As noted above, Israel did, indeed, bomb the airport in Beirut earlier in the day and further strikes on the city followed.

July 14, 2006

By the early hours of July 14, 2006, reports emerged that Israeli **forces** were carrying out a **new** round of attacks on Hezbollah targets inside Lebanon. Among the targets were various Hezbollah interests in the southern part of Beirut --buildings believed to house Hezbollah weapons caches and offices of Hezbollah's leader (Sheik Hassan Nasrallah).

Other strategic targets, such as a power plant and the main highway between Beirut and Damascus (Syria), were also hit by Israeli strikes. Several spokespersons said that in addition to trying to free their two captured soldiers (as noted above), Israeli **forces** were also endeavoring to stop Hezbollah's flow of weaponry between Lebanon and Syria, which have been used to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. Earlier, Israel had warned Lebanon that the suburbs of the country's capital city should be evacuated -- presumably a foreshadowing of what was to follow.

Later on July 14, 2006, Israeli **forces** struck bridges, Hezbollah's media and security headquarters, and the Beirut offices of Hassan Nasrallah. The Hezbollah leader was not hurt in the attack. In an address broadcast after the striking of his offices, Nasrallah declared "open war" on Israel. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continued to systematically launch rocket attacks into northern Israel. The violence left several people dead on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border.

On that day, the United Nations Security Council met to discuss the crisis, which was taking on the characteristics of warfare. Lebanon's ambassador to the United Nations, Nouhad Mahmoud, called for an end to Israel's operation in Lebanon saying, "The Security Council meets today in the shadow of a widespread, barbaric aggression waged by Israel to this very moment against my nation, Lebanon." But Israeli Ambassador Dan Gillerman responded by saying that his country had no choice but to respond to Hezbollah's actions. He also noted that the Lebanese people were the ones suffering because of their government's ineffectiveness in disarming Hezbollah, as set forth in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559. United States Ambassador John Bolton called for disarmament saying, "All militias in Lebanon, including Hezbollah, must disarm and disband immediately, and the Lebanese government must extend and exercise its sole and exclusive control over all Lebanese territory."

July 15, 2006

By July 15, 2006, the level of violence was escalating. In one attack by Hezbollah, an Israeli warship off the Lebanese coast was hit by an Iranian-made missile. Three Israeli sailors were reported missing while Israeli media said that the body of a fourth sailor had been found. The leader of Hezbollah had earlier alluded to such an attack in his aforementioned address threatening "open war" on Israel. Then, Israeli air strikes on southern Lebanon resulted in the deaths of several Lebanese civilians who were attempting to flee the region.

Israeli strikes on targets across Lebanon, stretching as far north toward the border with Syria, were ongoing. Beirut continued to bear the brunt of the Israeli offensive with the city's port, gas stations, key roads and Hezbollah interests being struck. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continued its systematic pounding of northern Israel with rocket attacks. The town of Tiberius was among those hit in Israel. There were reports of casualties on the ground.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora repeatedly emphasized his country's call for a cease-fire, calling on the United Nations to administer such a move. In response, the United Nations said it would send a peace delegation to the region to assess the situation. For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he would concur with a

Political Conditions Lebanon

cease-fire so long as certain conditions were met. He said that Hezbollah had to release the two abducted soldier and cease rocket attacks at northern Israel, while Lebanon had to comply with the existing United Nations Security Council resolution [1559]. Israel also accused Syria and Iran of conspiring with Hezbollah and the Palestinian group, Hamas, against the Jewish state. In this regard, Israel particularly drew attention to the Iranian-made missiles, which allegedly hit its warship, as noted above. Iran, however, denied supplying Hezbollah with the missiles. Earlier, in a telephone conversation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reportedly warned of a strong response to any Israeli military offensive against Syria.

July 16, 2006

On July 16, 2006, an attack by Hezbollah on Haifa killed several Israelis. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned that the attack on Haifa -- the country's third largest city -- would yield grave consequences. Indeed, the resulting retaliation came in the form of intensified Israeli air raids across Lebanon, including the northern part of that country. About seven Lebanese soldiers at a military post at Abdeh were killed in the strikes. The city of Tripoli was also among the areas struck by Israeli **forces**. Israeli air strikes ongoing in southern Lebanon also left a number of people dead. An attack on Tyre and a border village left several more people dead, including some holding Canadian citizenship. Strikes against strategic interests, such as fuel tanks at the Beirut airport, also continued. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's rockets were traveling more deeply into northern Israel, as exemplified by attacks on the town Afula, located close to Nazareth. In this way, the death toll was also mounting on the Israeli side of the Lebanese-Israeli border. Nazrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, promised that the battle against Israel had only just begun.

July 17, 2006

A day later on July 17, 2006, Israeli strikes resulted in the deaths of about 10 Lebanese as they crossed a bridge; several others died in strikes elsewhere in Lebanon as the death toll in that country rose. There were some reports that Israeli **forces** crossed the border into southern Lebanon, however, this activity was not regarded as a large-scale operation. In Israel, the continuous series of rocket attacks by Hezbollah resulted in Israeli casualties. Also, Hezbollah said that it had brought down an Israeli F-16 fighter jet over Beirut, however, that claim was dismissed by Israeli authorities who said all their jets were accounted for.

Within the Israeli parliament, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made it clear that strikes on Lebanon would continue unless the two abducted soldiers were released, Hezbollah was disarmed and Lebanon showed that it was taking control over its own southern border with Israel. Olmert said, "When missiles are launched at our residents and our towns, our answer will be war waged at full strength, with all determination, courage and sacrifice."

He also noted that Israel was not looking for war or direct conflict, but it would deal with that reality if necessary. The Israeli government continued to assert that militant groups, such as Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, were functioning in tandem with accused state sponsors of terrorism, Iran and Syria. Those two countries were referred to as "an axis of terror."

Also on July 17, 2006, French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin traveled to Beirut as a measure of French solidarity with the people of Lebanon and to try to advance a ceasefire agreement. As the French head of government was arriving in Lebanon, the foreign policy head of the European Union, Javier Solana, was returning from his trip to that country and warned that a ceasefire might not be quickly reached. Likewise, United Nations Special Envoy Vijay Nambiar said that although he had made some initial progress during ceasefire talks in Beirut, much was yet to be done. Nambiar also noted that it was imperative that Lebanon be more involved in the ceasefire process. Clearly, Hezbollah's unilateral actions against Israel served to essentially marginalize the Lebanese government. The government was also faced with the reality that conflicting ideas about where to place blame served only to create dissonance within the military -- a condition that could spark factionalism or another civil war.

July 18, 2006

Political Conditions Lebanon

The following day, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora again blamed Hezbollah for sparking the conflict and repeated his call for the release of the Israeli soldiers. At the same time, he condemned Israel for its harsh military response. Indeed, he reportedly said in an interview with British media that Israel had opened "the gates of hell and madness" on Lebanon.

Lebanon's pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud took a somewhat different view as he promised to stand by Hezbollah's leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. The different stances of Siniora and Lahoud laid bare the brewing **political** discord within Lebanon.

July 18, 2006 was also the day a delegation from the United Nations, led by Vijay Nambiar, was set to meet with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to discuss the terms of a possible ceasefire. At that meeting, Livni asserted that there could be no ceasefire until its conditions (delineated above) were met. Israel also hinted that its offensive in Lebanon could last for another week in order to ensure that it had destroyed as much of Hezbollah's arsenal of weaponry as possible. A day later on Arabic television, Hassan Nasrallah made it clear that the Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah would only be released if there was a prisoner exchange with Israel. The respective positions of Israel and Hezbollah made the notion of a resolution appear rather elusive.

The casualty list on July 18, 2006 included the deaths of 11 Lebanese soldiers as a result of Israeli strikes. One Israeli was killed in Nahariya as a consequence of Hezbollah rocket attacks. Across northern Israel, a barrage of Hezbollah rockets hit cities and towns such as Haifa, Safed, Acre, Kiryat Shemona, and the Gush Halav region.

July 18, 2006 also marked the day in which the United States Senate passed a non-binding resolution of support for Israel.

July 19, 2006

The next day saw little change from the previous ones. Indeed, July 19, 2006 appeared to have been a day of even greater bloodshed and violence in Lebanon and Israel respectively. Israeli air strikes targeted eastern and southern Lebanon and left over 50 people dead. In one case, around a dozen people died in one village. Meanwhile, Israel lost some of its soldiers in heavy clashes with militants from Hezbollah on the ground, just inside the border of Lebanon. The Israeli **forces** were attempting to locate and destroy weapons and facilities used for terrorist attacks. A spokesperson for the Israeli government, Miri Eisin, told both British and American media that her country would not allow a terrorist organization to deploy along its border. In the city of Nazareth in northern Israel, three people died as a result of rocket attacks by Hezbollah.

July 20, 2006

On July 20, 2006, United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, called for an immediate ceasefire, blaming Hezbollah for sparking the conflict and Israel for using excessive retaliatory **force**. The United Nations chief also indicated that because of the destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, a humanitarian crisis was evolving. Indeed, several sources noted that there were now hundreds of thousands of displaced people across the country. Annan noted that the crisis could only be dealt with via urgent funding and the European Union - which had also called for an end to the violence - pledged to contribute financially to the cause. Recognizing that a ceasefire would be difficult to achieve but that the humanitarian crisis had to be addressed nonetheless, the French government put forth a proposal for the establishment of safe corridors in Lebanon by which aid could be transported. In response, the Israeli government agreed to the proposal of a humanitarian corridor between Lebanon and Cyprus.

It was also announced that the Secretary General would hold a private meeting with the European Union's Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana, as well as United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. For her part, Rice later characterized the notion of an immediate ceasefire as "a false promise."

The casualty list on July 20, 2006 included the deaths of two Arab Israeli children in Nazareth as a result of Hezbollah rockets. The Hezbollah leader expressed regret for their deaths. As well, four Israeli soldiers died in

Political Conditions Lebanon

clashes with Hezbollah fighters on the border. Israeli forces also lost two of its Apache helicopters when they collided near the Lebanese border. One officer died and three others were injured in that incident.

July 20, 2006 also marked the day in which the United States House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution expressing solidarity with Israel.

July 21, 2006

On July 21, 2006, the situation took a turn for the worse when thousands of Israeli reservists were called up for duty in anticipation of a possible land incursion. Although it appeared that Israeli troops were already in Lebanon fighting against Hezbollah, they had been operating on a small-scale level. The call for reservists augured the possibility of a larger-scale operation. Another ominous warning came in the form of a directive from the Israeli government that civilians exit southern Lebanon as quickly as possible, presumably in order to escape imminent peril.

Israel's Defense Minister, Amir Peretz, said that although Israel had no intention of conquering Lebanon, his country was prepared to do whatever was necessary. The president of Lebanon, Emile Lahoud, warned that the Lebanese army would battle Israel if it invaded Lebanon. Syria, through its Information Ministry, warned that it would enter the conflict if Israel carried out a ground invasion of Lebanon that threatened its own security.

The fighting between Israel and Hezbollah continued across the border. Israeli strikes further degraded thoroughfares and infrastructure in Lebanon while Hezbollah rockets rained on northern Israel, hitting the city of Haifa once again.

There were at least 15 casualties. A Hezbollah rocket attack hit Masarik and left three people injured. Other incidences were reported, including the striking of a United Nations observation post, however, no injuries occurred in that case. Israel also announced that it had bombed a Hezbollah bunker and destroyed much of that group's stock of missiles. It was a claim that Hezbollah disputed.

July 22, 2006

On July 22, 2006, fighting between Israeli forces and Hezbollah resulted in serious injury to an unarmed United Nations observer. The incident happened in the town of Maroun al-Ras, which according to some reports, had been the site of a major clash between the two sides. Some reports concluded that the fight at Maroun al-Ras resulted with Israel taking control of the town.

The Evacuation Process and Humanitarian Relief

Meanwhile, with the conflict ongoing, roads across Lebanon were filled with people attempting to flee the aerial bombardment but unsure of where exactly to go. Foreign nationals were being evacuated as governments of Western countries sent ships and aircrafts to rescue people stranded on the conflict-ridden terrain of Lebanon. Some governments began considering the need for special operations to rescue foreign nationals trapped in cut-off parts of Lebanon. In particular, the French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said that France would launch a special mission to rescue some of its citizens trapped in southern Lebanon.

The evacuation process was winding down by the close of July 2006, although a Canadian ferry was set to evacuate foreign nationals trapped in the southern part of Lebanon from the city of Tyre. At the same time, humanitarian efforts were underway with lorries of food and medical supplies arriving at key points in the conflict, such as Beirut and Tyre.

As the last week of July 2006 began, the evacuation of foreign nationals began to be the source of great consternation among local Lebanese who accused the international community of caring only about people carrying certain passports, while failing to act on behalf of local civilians who were bearing the brunt of the violence.

July 23, 2006

Political Conditions Lebanon

By July 23, 2006, the head of the emergency relief agency for the United Nations, Jan Egeland, characterized the damage caused by Israeli strikes on Beirut as "horrific." He decried the devastation caused by Israel's retaliatory action against Hezbollah, calling it excessive, while at the same time condemning Hezbollah for cloaking itself among the civilian population, thus worsening their casualties. He called on both sides to cease their attacks and noted that humanitarian aid would begin arriving shortly in Lebanon. In that latter regard, he appealed for safe access. As noted above, Israel had earlier said that it would lift its blockade on the port of Beirut and respect a humanitarian corridor. He also said that the United Nations would be launching an appeal for humanitarian aid amounting to \$150 million dollars (USD).

Egeland arrived in Beirut on the heels of an Israeli strike against the Hezbollah-dominated portion of Lebanon's capital city. In Beirut, there were four injuries when one strike hit a mosque. While Hezbollah said the facility was used only for prayer, Israel contended that it was one of several legitimate targets used not only for conventional purposes, but also by Hezbollah for its activities.

On that same day [July 23, 2006], Israel's aerial bombing of southern and eastern Lebanon continued in the early hours of Sunday. In the east, Israeli strikes caused engineers, who had been attempting to repair impassable roads, to retreat for safety reasons. The southern town of Sidon, where several people had fled seeking safety, was hit by Israeli strikes. As well, the city of Tyre was the site of action from both sides. It was one of several places from which some Hezbollah militants were firing missiles and, as such, Israel made it a target of retaliatory strikes. There were eight deaths reported across Lebanon. They included a young boy, a photographer, three people fleeing in a minibus, as well as three Hezbollah fighters. On the other side of the border, two Israelis died in Haifa and over twenty people were injured as a result of repeated Hezbollah rocket attacks.

In other developments, Kim Howells, a Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, was scheduled to meet with the Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister, Tzipi Livni. Howells issued a rebuke of Israel for essentially attacking the Lebanese nation in its effort to fight Hezbollah. However, he also expressed understanding of Israel's imperative to defend itself and condemned Hezbollah for exacerbating the conflict by hiding weapons in civilian-dominated areas.

For its part, the United States appeared reticent about getting actively involved since the start of the crisis. Nevertheless, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was expected to depart for the Middle East on July 23, 2006. As well, foreign ministers from France and Germany were expected to travel to Israel for peace talks. Iran, which had been notably silent for some time, entered the mix with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suggesting that Israel's current conundrum had been self-inflicted.

Diplomacy and Ceasefire Demands

On July 24, 2006, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in the Middle East for talks regarding the crisis. Before arriving in the Middle East, Rice mentioned to reporters that the United States still had an embassy in Syria. Her statement was interpreted by some as a reminder that the United States and Syria still shared diplomatic relations that could be leveraged, if necessary. Her first stop was Lebanon where she met with Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. In that meeting, she expressed concern for the Lebanese people, while also making clear that Hezbollah's attacks on Israel from within Lebanese territory could not be permitted to continue. She then left for talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

There was no call issued for an immediate ceasefire. In the backdrop of these developments, the White House announced that it had authorized humanitarian aid to be sent to Lebanon.

Secretary Rice, and later President Bush, both conveyed the view that the only possible solution to the conflict was a sustainable ceasefire and enduring peace. The United States' stance has been that a ceasefire might result in only Israeli compliance, thus subjecting Israel to future attacks. Clearly, this view has not been shared by many world leaders and foreign policy chiefs who have called for an immediate ceasefire, arguing that continued hostilities were untenable, regardless of optimal long-term objectives. Many Middle Eastern experts have further said that no long-term objectives can be achieved, at all, without addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Intensive talks between Western and Middle Eastern ministers were scheduled to take place on July 26, 2006 in Rome. Prior to the meeting, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said it was crucially important to achieve concrete results aimed at resolving the conflict.

July 24, 2006

On the ground in the conflict zone in the last week of July 2006, Israeli forces moved northward from Maroun al-Ras, the southern Lebanese town it had earlier taken control of, and were engaging Hezbollah fighters around the town of Bint Jbeil. In that fighting, ten Israeli soldiers were injured while two Hezbollah fighters were captured. The level of operations suggested that Israel was still carrying out only small-scale incursions across the border in Lebanon. In one case, an Israeli helicopter crashed in northern Israel. While Hezbollah said it had shot down the aircraft, Israeli authorities said it crashed as a result of technical difficulties.

There was a lull in the Israeli strikes on Beirut on July 24, 2006, presumably due to the presence of Rice in the city on that day.

Clashes and blasts elsewhere in Lebanon ensued nonetheless. In one case, there were allegations that clearly-marked Red Cross vehicles had been hit by Israeli strikes. Israeli efforts in Bint Jbeil appeared to have been successful because it was later reported that they had taken control of the town and were advancing toward Yaroun. As well, Israel subsequently said during its incursions in southern Lebanon, that it had managed to kill Abu Jaafar, a key Hezbollah commander. Both Israel and Hezbollah confirmed that several of their troops had been killed in the fighting.

July 25, 2006

On July 25, 2006, the conflict was ongoing with blasts heard on both sides of the border -- from Beirut to Haifa. Clearly, Israeli strikes on Lebanon's capital had resumed with explosions heard in Hezbollah-controlled areas of the city. Hezbollah's efforts against Israel continued with a constant volley of rockets raining down on northern Israeli. In one case, a young Arab-Israeli girl was killed in the village of Maghar. At the same time, Haifa continued to endure Hezbollah's ceaseless rocket offensive. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, appeared on Lebanese television on this day warning that his forces were ready to attack more deeply into Israeli terrain.

The Deaths of the United Nations Peacekeepers

Meanwhile, several days earlier on July 25, 2006, there were reports that a United Nations observation post in southern Lebanon had been hit by Israeli military aircraft. There were unconfirmed reports that four peacekeepers might have killed. This was later confirmed when it was reported that four unarmed peacekeepers from Austria, Canada, China and Finland died when the United Nations post was struck.

United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan expressed shock at the "apparently deliberate targeting of the post," especially since he claimed that Israel had assured him of the safety of United Nations personnel. Israel responded by conveying its regret over the matter. Some Israeli spokespersons criticized Annan for "irresponsibly" accusing their country of deliberate action before an investigation could be carried out.

A day later, an initial report into the deaths of the United Nations peacekeepers was released. The report indicated that despite repeated contacts by the United Nations -- 10 in total -- with Israeli troops regarding the closeness of Israeli strikes in the area, and regardless of promises from the Israelis that the shelling would stop, the United Nations post was hit by a precision-guided missile following a period of about six hours of constant shelling.

One diplomat familiar with the report argued that if Israel had actually acted on the basis of the contacts, "rather than deliberately ignoring them," the peacekeepers would still be alive. As well, the Irish Foreign Ministry said that one of its soldiers working for the United Nations warned Israel that its military activities were placing the lives of the peacekeepers at risk.

Political Conditions Lebanon

United Nations humanitarian aid chief, Jan Egeland, said on United States television that (1) the post had been a known and clearly-marked structure for decades; (2) the Israeli prime minister had given personal assurances of safety to head of the United Nations; (3) repeated contacts by the United Nations had been made regarding the dangerously close range of the shelling; (4) although Hezbollah operated generally in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah was not in close proximity of that particular post; and (5) the post had, in the end, been hit by a missile known for its precision.

For its part, Israel expressed deep regret regarding the deaths of the four United Nations peacekeepers and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert personally telephoned United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to express his condolences over what had happened.

Both Israel and the United Nations agreed to pursue a joint investigation into what transpired. At the same time, the United Nations said that it would meet to deliberate what course of action it should take. After lengthy talks on July 27, 2006 in which no real consensus could be reached on the wording of a position statement, the United Nations Security Council released a declaration expressing deep shock and distress over the Israeli air strikes that killed four peacekeepers. China criticized the statement for being needlessly weak.

A few days after the deaths of the four United Nations peacekeepers, another two peacekeepers were injured as a result of the ongoing violence. There was rising concern that many countries might be reluctant to contribute to future peacekeeping efforts, as a result of these incidences.

July 26, 2006

On July 26, 2006 -- crisis talks in Rome ensued and ended with no agreement on the call for an immediate ceasefire, despite an impassioned plea from Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. United States Secretary of State Rice was apparently one of few voices arguing against the ceasefire, which gave rise to difficult discussions among the parties present. The Rome summit ended with the release of a declaration expressing "determination to work immediately to reach with utmost urgency a ceasefire to put an end to the current hostilities." The declaration also included a description of a ceasefire as "lasting, permanent and sustainable." The Rome summit did manage to advance calls for the creation of an international force that would enforce peace and stability along the Israel-Lebanon border.

On the ground in the conflict zone, Israeli troops experienced one of their bloodiest and most challenging days. Eight soldiers died and around 22 were injured in clashes with Hezbollah; it was the most significant loss of troops to Israel since the start of the conflict. The clashes ensued at Bint Jbeil -- the very town that Israel said it had taken control of a day earlier. In a separate incident of fighting, a ninth Israeli, this time an officer, was killed. In the city center of Tyre in Lebanon, a huge explosion destroyed a multi-storey complex, supposedly regarded as the offices of another Hezbollah commander. On the other side of the border, Hezbollah continued its rocket assault on Israel, leaving about 31 people injured. It was estimated that Hezbollah was firing rockets at a rate of over 100 per day into Israel.

The Imperative for Stability

The escalation of hostilities between Israeli forces and Lebanon-based Hezbollah, in conjunction with Israel's ongoing conflict in Gaza, spurred fears that the entire Middle Eastern region was at risk of being acutely destabilized.

Keeping these anxieties in mind, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair called for an international force to be deployed to Lebanon. The force would be tasked with stopping Hezbollah's attacks on Israel, and in so doing, it would remove Israel's rationale for bombarding Lebanon. Although a United Nations mission, UNIFIL, has been monitoring the Israeli-Lebanese border since 1978, it numbers less than 2,000 in strength and has few means to enforce peace. As such, a new stabilization force would have to be enshrined with far more power and capabilities.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Amir Peretz, the Defense Minister of Israel, expressed support for the idea of an international peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon on July 23, 2006. He particularly conveyed his backing for such a force to be led by NATO. A day later, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert confirmed his country's support for this plan, so long as the forces deployed were both robust and enshrined with sufficient power as to be able to carry out their mandate. The European Union's chief of foreign policy, Javier Solana, further affirmed the plan when he stated that several European countries would contribute to such a force, which might function under the aegis of the United Nations Security Council.

Israel announced that it would maintain control over southern Lebanon until the proposed international force was activated. In this regards, Amir Peretz, Israel's Defense Minister, explained on July 25, 2006 that his country had no alternative saying, "We have no other option. We have to build a new security strip that will be a cover for our forces." It was not clear if Israel intended to hold control over a security zone even after the deployment of the proposed international force.

Following the Rome summit on July 26, 2006, there had been a call for the creation of an international force, working under a United Nations mandate, and with the mission of fully implementing existing United Nations Security Council resolutions. The statement also called for the disarmament of militias and the deployment of Lebanese troops on the border.

July 27, 2006

On July 27, 2006, Hezbollah rockets continued to rain on northern Israel. Targets hit the town of Kiryat Shmona and ignited fires. Rockets also fell on fields close to Safed, Carmiel, Maalot and Shlomi. As well, the terrorist group al-Qaida, which has traditionally not worked in sync with Hezbollah, issued a statement suggesting that it would not sit on the sidelines as the conflict in southern Lebanon raged on. That same day, Israeli authorities said that while they did not intend to expand their military offensive in Lebanon, they would call up additional troops from their reserve divisions to fortify their operations against Hezbollah. Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz said that Israel's military operation would go on until a secure border strip could be established, preventing Hezbollah's return to current positions.

His statement came a day after failed peace talks in Rome in which no agreement could be reached on a ceasefire.

July 28, 2006

On July 28, 2006, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair and United States President George W. Bush held talks in Washington D.C. The crisis in the Middle East factored highly during those discussions, which were followed by a call by the two leaders for "lasting peace" in the region. Bush also said that he and his British counterpart both supported the establishment of an international force, which would work with the Lebanese military to maintain stability along the Israeli-Lebanese border zone. Despite increasing international pressure for the cessation of hostilities, however, there was no call for an immediate ceasefire from the respective British and American leaders. Meanwhile, the United Nations made its own call for a 72-hour truce aimed at facilitating the transportation of aid and supplies.

On the ground in the conflict zone, Hezbollah reportedly fired a long-range rocket, the Khaibar-1, in the direction of Israel; it landed just south of Haifa. It was an apparent attempt to make good on an earlier threat to fire longer range rockets more deeply into Israeli territory. Another Hezbollah rocket -- this one of unknown origin and packed with explosives -- hit an area around the town of Afula.

Several Israelis were injured as a result of these and other rocket attacks on that day. At the same time, the Israeli military was carrying out strikes against targets in Lebanon, leaving at least a dozen people dead. Israel also reported that it had killed a number of Hezbollah fighters in the town of Bint Jbei, which had been the site of serious clashes in recent days. Civilians were again the unfortunate casualties of the hostilities when mortar rounds struck a convoy of civilian vehicles as they tried to flee southern Lebanon. There was no conclusive knowledge about who might be responsible for those injuries. Two members of the German media were also injured during the chaos

Political Conditions Lebanon

of the day. Elsewhere in Lebanon, Israeli strikes left a Jordanian man dead and three people wounded in Kfar Joz. Strikes were also being carried out on the Bekaa Valley in the east and southern villages around Tyre.

July 29, 2006

A day later on July 29, 2006, Israeli air strikes in the north of Lebanon resulted in the closure of the border crossing between Lebanon and Syria. It was reported that missiles hit the area between the two countries' respective immigration stations.

Israeli raids on southern Lebanon left several people dead. There were reports that a mother and her five children were among those killed. Israeli troops were still engaging Hezbollah fighters in Bint Jbeil, however, on July 29, 2006, Israeli troops withdrew from the Hezbollah stronghold. On the other side of the conflict, Israel continued to be hit by volleys of rockets from Hezbollah. Safed was among the towns affected on July 29, 2006. Israeli anxiety also increased on this day as Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, promised that towns in the center of Israel could well be targeted.

On the diplomatic front, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in the region for further talks -- this time with a focus on the creation of an international force that would ensure security and stability in the conflict zone. Rice warned that, at this point, negotiations were expected to be very difficult. Meanwhile, Rice and other foreign policy leaders were also trying to craft a United Nations resolution, which would set forth key conditions associated with the long-term resolution of the crisis.

Also on July 29, 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed similar views to those previously-articulated by his American counterpart, saying that there could not be a ceasefire until certain conditions [presumably those that would ensure a long-term solution] were in place. Jack Straw, the leader of the British House of Commons and the former Foreign Minister, endeavored to carve out quite a different stance. Following on the heels of Minister of State Kim Howells, who had issued strong sentiments on the matter, Jack Straw criticized Israeli's military operation in Lebanon as "disproportionate." International Development Secretary Hilary Benn also raised concerns about the conflict.

Civilian Deaths at Qana

July 30, 2006 was likely to be remembered as one of the darkest days in the conflict taking place between Israeli forces and Lebanon-based Hezbollah. An Israeli air raid at Qana left more than 50 civilians dead -- the vast majority of whom were women, children and senior citizens. They had been seeking shelter from the violence in the basement of a three-story house. Survivors, as well as relatives of those killed, were reported to have been anguished about the bloodshed and confused about why they had been targeted.

Israeli authorities responded by saying that they had warned civilians to leave the area. They also furnished aerial footage, apparently filmed two days earlier, which showed missiles being fired from the area around Qana, as well as what seemed to be a missile launcher surreptitiously hidden in a house there.

Despite this explanation, Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Siniora characterized the Israeli strikes in Qana as "heinous crimes against civilians." For Siniora, along with many Lebanese, it was possible that this incident at Qana evoked memories of a similar strike that took place a decade ago. In 1996, Israel launched its "Grapes of Wrath" operation, which was similarly aimed at destroying Hezbollah's base in Lebanon. A United Nations post was hit by Israeli strikes and approximately 100 people, who had come to the post seeking refuge from the violence, died as a result. Now, ten years later, a similar scenario had transpired.

For its part, Hezbollah promised retaliatory attacks. Hezbollah soon acted upon that ominous promise and fired successive waves of rockets into Israel later in the day, some of which hit the Israeli border town of Kiryat Shemona. Israelis said that they were experiencing the worst barrage of rocket attacks ever.

Regardless, the deaths at Qana evoked recriminations and condemnations from the international community. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan called for a vociferous rebuke by the international community and

Political Conditions Lebanon

reiterated his demand for an immediate ceasefire. After several hours of discussions during an emergency session, the United Nations Security Council issued a statement in which it unanimously expressed "extreme shock and distress" over what had happened at Qana and deplored the loss of life there. The Security Council, however, did not call for an immediate ceasefire, despite Kofi Annan's earlier's appeal for one.

Nevertheless, the deaths at Qana appeared to have shifted the position of United Kingdom's leader, Tony Blair, significantly. Only a day after he said that certain conditions had to be met before a ceasefire could ensue, Blair on July 30, 2006 said that some sort of resolution had to be forged "as soon as possible," in order to resolve the "catastrophe" that befallen Lebanon. Blair said, "What has happened at Qana shows that this is a situation that simply cannot continue." It was apparent that the events at Qana had spurred a notable change in perspective on his part. Indeed, Blair issued a joint statement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, asserting that the tragedy of Qana emphasized the "urgency of the need for a ceasefire as soon as possible."

Overall, perhaps the most important outcome of the Qana deaths appeared to have been a renewed sense of urgency from among the international community to end the crisis, if only to stop further tragedies of this sort from occurring.

July 31, 2006

By July 31, 2006, Israel had agreed to an immediate suspension of air strikes over southern Lebanon for a 48-hour period, in order to facilitate an investigation into what had transpired. Dan Gillerman, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, said in an interview with British media that the suspension would allow the inquiry to take place, while also providing remaining civilians with time to evacuate the area.

The agreement to cease air strikes temporarily was reached following urgent talks between Israeli officials and the United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. For its part, however, the United States had not shifted its position and did not join the increasing chorus of calls for an immediate ceasefire.

That was not to say that the views of all American politicians were unified on the matter. Despite expressed support by the two houses of Congress for Israel on July 18, 2006 and July 20, 2006 respectively, United States Senator Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, broke ranks with his party and the Bush administration to call for an immediate ceasefire. On July 31, 2006, Hagel declared, "The sickening slaughter on both sides must end and it must end now. President Bush must call for an immediate ceasefire. This madness must stop."

August 1, 2006

By August 1, 2006, the Blair government was experiencing some internal dissonance as a result of differing approaches to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah. Whereas the British Foreign Office indicated its support for an immediate ceasefire, the stance from Downing Street was one that stopped short of that particular call. The Foreign Office was not the only source of dissonance regarding Blair's stance. As noted above, comments from the Minister of State, the former Foreign Minister and leader of the House of Commons, as well as the International Development Minister, indicated that several members of the Blair's Labour Party was departing company with the prime minister. Now, days later, a number of cabinet ministers were reported to have dispatched notes to the British prime minister during a cabinet meeting suggesting that their silence was not to be interpreted as actual consent for Blair's position.

While the internal struggle was going on within government of the United Kingdom, British Foreign Minister Beckett joined her counterparts within the European Union in the Belgian capital of Brussels to draft a proposal calling for an "immediate cessation of hostilities," which would be followed by a sustainable ceasefire. That two-step process would eventually facilitate both a political accord and the deployment of a multinational force to enforce stability in the conflict zone. The elements of the proposal were somewhat adapted to accommodate the varying perspectives of European governments on the conditions of a ceasefire.

In other diplomatic efforts, French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy was in Beirut and met with his Iranian counterpart, Manouchehr Mottaki. Taking a different approach than that of the United States, the French diplomat

Political Conditions Lebanon

complimented the Iranian nation and its heritage, presumably paving the way for harmonious discussions aimed at resolving the conflict. The Foreign Minister's objectives were somewhat frustrated by the call from a senior Iranian cleric for Muslims to lend support to Hezbollah's fight against Israel.

On the ground in the conflict zone, Israeli tanks moved into southern Lebanon. Following a security cabinet meeting, Israel had indicated that it was going to expand its ground offensive.

Heavy fighting was reported in the southern part of Lebanon in several locations between Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters.

Israeli warplanes struck at targets on the ground, even as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert claimed that his country was succeeding in its efforts to nullify Hezbollah. But at the same time, Hezbollah was responding with fierce resistance. Casualties were reported on both sides as a result of the clashes. In the Lebanese town of Lweizeh, an Israeli strike was said to have left a mother and her two children dead. In Ait al-Shaab, where the strongest exchange of fire was reported, an anti-tank missile killed three Israeli soldiers and injured 25 others. Israel said that it had killed dozens of Hezbollah fighters there.

Hezbollah fighters were also reported to have been killed at Kfar Kila, Adiasse and Taibe, while Bint Jbeil continued to be the site of clashes.

On the other side of the border, Hezbollah fired mortal shells into northern Israel, however, there were no rocket attacks. The last day rockets were fired at Israel was July 31, 2006.

Despite his claim that Israeli **forces** were winning the military battle against Hezbollah (noted just above), Ehud Olmert acknowledged that Israel would not be able to completely destroy Hezbollah's arsenal of weapons. That said, he asserted that Israel's objective was to lessen the threat posed by Hezbollah. Israel's Infrastructure Minister said that his country's troops would likely require another two weeks to finish this task. In this regard, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said on Israeli Army Radio that this timeline would be needed "to complete the job, and by that I mean that the area in which we want [an] international **force** to deploy is cleansed of Hezbollah."

Reports suggested that Israel's operations in Lebanon also involved **forcing** Hezbollah fighters to retreat as far as the Litani River, located 18 miles (or 30 kilometers) north of the border.

Also on Aug. 1, 2006, irrespective of previous announcements about a temporary halt on air strikes (made in late July 2006) and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor (made in the third week of July 2006), two Belgian aircraft carrying humanitarian aid were prevented from landing in Beirut when Israel warned that it could not guarantee safe passage. Nevertheless, a day later, humanitarian efforts were underway with the World Food Programme saying that they had been given safe passage into Lebanon.

August 2, 2006

After a lull, Hezbollah resumed its attacks on Israel on Aug. 2, 2006 with intensity. Indeed, Hezbollah launched more than 220 rockets into Israel from Lebanon. It was the heaviest barrage of rockets in a single day since the start of the conflict. Intensity aside, this spate of attacks was also distinguished for the distance traveled. Indeed, there were reports that the rockets were hitting the targets deeply into Israeli territory. One person was reported to have been killed in Nahariya while several others were injured. One rocket hit Beit Shean on the edge of the West Bank, while another hit the West Bank itself.

For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel was successfully destroying Hezbollah's infrastructure. He also foreclosed any hope of an immediate ceasefire by asserting that no such action would be taken until an international **force** was deployed in southern Lebanon.

Political Conditions Lebanon

His comments suggested confidence in the operations being carried out by the Israeli military. Indeed, earlier in the day, Israeli troops assaulted a Hezbollah stronghold, Baalbek, located in the north eastern part of Lebanon. There, Israeli troops raided a hospital that was said to be used by Hezbollah fighters and seized five people. Israeli authorities claimed that the five individuals were Hezbollah fighters, but Hezbollah disputed the claim and said they were civilians. Regardless, the fact that Israeli commandos had managed to infiltrate Lebanese territory, even reaching a part of the country located close to the border with Syria, served to bolster Israeli claims of mission success.

In southern Lebanon, clashes between Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters were ongoing.

On the diplomatic front the United Kingdom's ambassador to the United Nations expressed the view that an initial Security Council resolution aimed at ending the violence was close at hand.

Amidst these developments, Iran's supreme leader echoed the earlier words of a senior cleric and called on the Muslim world to stand with Hezbollah against Israel.

August 3, 2006

Israel continued to carry out its offensive operation into southern Lebanon, destroying several interests in the region along the way, but taking a toll in the form of the lives of four Israeli soldiers. Nevertheless, Israeli authorities appeared to be planning intensified attacks, as evidenced by the dropping of leaflets in Beirut warning residents of a new military operation against Hezbollah. As well, Defense Minister Amir Peretz was reported to have informed top military commanders that they should prepare to advance northward of the border with Lebanon toward the River Litani.

On the other side of the conflict, Hezbollah's rocket attacks on August 3, 2006 resulted in the deaths of at least eight civilians in northern Israel. As well, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, warned that further attacks by Israel would result in the bombing of Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, diplomats at the United Nations were attempting to craft a resolution that would bring an end to the fighting. Such a result was to be welcomed by humanitarian agencies, which warned that their relief operations were being hampered by the destruction of infrastructure as well as fuel shortages.

August 4, 2006

On August 4, 2006, an Israeli strike left 26 people dead and at least 20 people injured. Most of the victims were Syrian Kurdish farm workers in the village of Qaa, located in the Bekaa Valley along Lebanon's north-eastern border with Syria. Israeli strikes also hit bridges in Christian areas in northern Beirut, as well as bridges along Lebanon's coastal highway. Five people were reported to have been killed when the coastal bridges were decimated. As well, an Israeli air raid on Taibeh in the southern part of Lebanon resulted in the deaths of seven people and injuries to 10 others. Meanwhile, Israeli fighters continued to engage Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon, in an attempt to push Hezbollah's forces northward from the border toward the Litani River.

On the other side of the conflict, Hezbollah fired 190 rockets into Israel, leaving three civilians dead. The attacks evoked fears about Hezbollah's capacities since some rockets landed as many as 50 miles (80 kilometers) from the border. Indeed, the town of Hadera, just 30 miles (45 kilometers) north of Tel Aviv, was among the areas hit.

In addition to concerns about the increased range of the rockets being fired by Hezbollah, there was anxiety about the amplified volume of rockets. In recent days, the number of rocket attacks by Hezbollah had increased substantially to close to 200 per day -- double the number of attacks that had become the norm in the first few weeks of the conflict. In anticipation of a possible missile attack against Tel Aviv, Israeli authorities urged the city's residents to ensure that they were able to access bomb shelters.

Political Conditions Lebanon

On the diplomatic front, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested that a United Nations resolution regarding the conflict could be pass within days. At issue was the phraseology of a possible ceasefire resolution. However, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert signaled that with or without a resolution, Israel's offensive would continue until an international force was actually deployed in southern Lebanon.

August 5, 2006

Clashes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon continued on Aug. 5, 2006. Several casualties were reported as a result of a raid by Israeli troops on an apartment in Tyre, which was said to house Hezbollah fighters. The Israeli military claimed that Hezbollah militants made up the casualty list; the Israeli military also acknowledged that eight of its own soldiers had been wounded in the raid. Israel additionally warned people in Sidon to avoid areas where rockets might be launched, presumably auguring strikes against such targets.

On the other side of the border, Israel continued to be pounded by a barrage of rocket attacks from Hezbollah. Again, the number of rocket attacks far exceeded the previous volume and numbered in excess of 170 on August 5, 2006, leaving three women dead. Haifa was among the places hit by the rocket attacks on this day, and five people were reported to have been injured as a result.

On the diplomatic front, differences regarding the wording of a possible ceasefire agreement were being worked out as the United States and France came to agreement on the matter. The draft of the proposed United Nations Security Council Resolution apparently called for a "full cessation of hostilities," demanded that Hezbollah immediately cease all attacks, and declared that Israel immediately halt its offensive military operations.

The wording was deliberately crafted to allow Israel some room to defend itself in the face of attack. It was hoped that the resolution, which still had to be passed in the 15-member Security Council of the United Nations, would bring a quick end to the violence. United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair and United States President George W. Bush lauded the diplomatic progress being made.

In other developments, humanitarian aid agencies warned that the destruction to infrastructure in Lebanon, and particularly to bridges, was making it very difficult to transport supplies to people in need of help. Meanwhile, the situation in the Middle East was spurring people from across the world to take to the streets to protest the violence and to call for a ceasefire. Such demonstrations were taking place from Baghdad to London.

August 6, 2006

August 6, 2006 was the bloodiest day experienced on the Israeli side of the conflict. At least 15 people were killed in northern Israel as a result of relentless rocket attacks by Hezbollah. The port city of Haifa was especially hard hit on this day, with three deaths, dozens of injuries and the collapse of a building. Israelis were also dying on Lebanese soil as evidenced by the deaths of 12 soldiers during an attack on the town of Kfar Giladi. It was the highest number of Israeli deaths in a single incident since the start of the conflict.

In Lebanon, Israeli strikes killed approximately 14 people. In the coastal town of Naquora, three people were killed in strikes while five civilians died as a result of an air raid in the village of Ansar. The Israeli military reported that its forces had launched strikes on a site in Qana where it said rocket launchers were being housed. The military also said that it had destroyed rocket launchers to the north of Tyre. Fresh strikes were carried out on the southern suburbs of Beirut, the area of Tyre, as well as the eastern Bekaa Valley. Clashes between Israeli soldiers and Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon were also ongoing.

In the diplomatic sphere, Lebanon formally issued a request of the United Nations Security Council. In that request, Lebanon asked that a provision be added calling on Israel to withdraw from Lebanese terrain. Syria also weighed into the diplomatic process by characterizing the current draft of the proposed resolution as a "recipe for the continuation of the war." For its part, the Israeli government was generally happy with the draft resolution.

Political Conditions Lebanon

A spokesperson for the Israeli government noted that Israeli forces were prepared to withdraw from Lebanon once the resolution was passed, and so long as Israel had satisfactorily incapacitated Hezbollah's strongholds.

August 7, 2006

Israeli air raids on Lebanon on August 7, 2006, resulted in the deaths of almost 50 people. Among those killed were up to 30 people in southern Beirut who died in air strikes. Lebanon's Prime Minister Fuad Siniora corrected a claim that an earlier Israeli air strike had left 40 civilians dead. Instead, five people were reported to have been killed in the earlier strike. Clashes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon were ongoing with three Israeli soldiers and five Hezbollah militants killed at Bint Jbeil. On the other side of the conflict, Hezbollah fired more than 100 rockets into northern Israel, resulting in civilian casualties.

The issue of civilian casualties was the topic of a report issued by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, in which the targeting of civilians was strongly criticized. Annan said that military operations by both sides, in which civilians suffered the consequences of indiscriminate attacks, constituted a violation of international law. The bombing at Qana was specifically noted in this regard.

On the diplomatic front, United States President George W. Bush conveyed strong support for the United Nations draft resolution, stating that he wanted to see the document passed in the Security Council as soon as possible. That said, the draft resolution remained in doubt, as Arab ministers echoed Lebanese demands for changes to the proposed resolution.

August 8, 2006

On August 8, 2006, Israeli fighter jets struck at Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. In the village of Ghaziyeh, at least six people were killed and two dozen injured. Another strike left 13 villagers dead as they attended a funeral for those previously killed in air raids. One person died when Israeli strikes hit Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp at Ein el-Hilweh. Clashes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon were ongoing, with at least three Israeli soldiers dying in addition. There was no word about casualties among Hezbollah factions. On the other side of the border, Hezbollah continued its barrage of rocket attacks against southern Israel.

With rocket attacks increasing, Israel said that it would temporarily relocate remaining residents from the city of Kiryat Shmona to a safer area. Compared to the rest of northern Israel, Kiryat Shmona had suffered the most attacks by Hezbollah.

Meanwhile, Israel was stepping up its operations to move toward the Litani River. Israel had earlier dropped leaflets in Tyre, the largest Lebanese city south of the Litani River, warning of military strikes to come. But with many roadways in the area bombed and destroyed, those still in the villages around Tyre were expected to have difficulties trying to get out. Israel also warned that as its forces advanced toward the river, any moving vehicles spotted in the area south of the Litani would be destroyed. Given the clear risk outlined by Israel, the United Nations decided to stop its aid convoy from traveling in that zone.

In the realm of diplomacy, the United Nations Security Council debated the draft resolution aimed at ending the violence and bloodshed. At the same time, a delegation from the Arab League traveled to the headquarters of the international body to officially express backing for Lebanon's demands. Lebanon had argued that the draft resolution should be altered so that it expressly called for Israel's immediate withdrawal from Lebanese terrain. As well, there were differences over the phrasing in some parts of the draft, which called on Israel to end its "offensive" military operations, while mandating that Hezbollah end "all" its attacks. It was not clear how these demands for changes to the document would be received by the Security Council, especially since many key members appeared supportive of the current version of the draft. Moreover, France and the United States, who made great headway in agreeing to the current terms of the draft, were not apt to make any changes. On the other side of the equation, however, Russia said that it could not vote for a resolution that did not have the backing of Lebanon. A vote on the resolution was not expected until later in the week.

August 9, 2006

On August 9, 2006, heavy fighting in Lebanese villages close to the Lebanese-Israeli border resulted in the deaths of 15 Israeli soldiers and 40 Hezbollah fighters. Israeli soldiers later commenced an operation against Hezbollah in Khiam. Meanwhile, Israeli strikes continued to bombard targets in Lebanon. As a result of air strikes in the Bekaa Valley, a building believed to have housed a Hezbollah fighter collapsed, killing six people. Beirut continued to be hit by Israeli strikes, resulting in deaths of several people. On the other side of the border, Israel was still dealing with Hezbollah's rocket attacks.

On the same day, the Israeli cabinet approved sending troops further north toward the Litani River. However, the cabinet also agreed to delay the advancement of the troops in the hopes that a diplomatic resolution could be found. The plan to deploy Israeli troops northward was not new; it had been discussed for several days in advance of the official approval by cabinet.

In the realm of diplomacy, France and the United States worked on redrafting the original text of the proposed United Nations resolution. The redrafting exercise occurred after the two countries disagreed on the proper course of action. Given Lebanon's opposition to the original text on the basis that it did not expressly call for Israel's withdrawal from its own terrain, France said that it would work toward adjustments in the text. By contrast, however, the United States was reluctant to make any changes. The situation set the stage for a possible impasse, and by extension, the continuation of hostilities. Consequently, French President Jacques Chirac argued that it would be "immoral" to relinquish diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire.

August 10, 2006

On August 10, 2006, Israel dropped another wave of warning leaflets over south Beirut auguring further air strikes to come, and urging residents to flee. Clashes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters were reported in Marjayoun. At the same time, Hezbollah rocket attacks were pounding targets in Israel, leaving two people dead in the Arab village of Deir al-Assad. Meanwhile, Jan Egeland, the head of the United Nations' humanitarian agency, decried both Israel and Hezbollah for creating a humanitarian crisis in Lebanon by preventing the transportation of much-needed aid and relief supplies. On the diplomatic front, further efforts were being extended to forge a diplomatic resolution that would bring an end to the violence and bloodshed, while setting the terms for sustainable peace in the region.

August 11, 2006

As diplomatic efforts were going on in New York on August 11, 2006, to try to resolve the conflict in the Middle East, violence was unabated. Israeli troops were moving toward the Litani River, with the objective of pushing back Hezbollah fighters and thusly establishing a de facto security zone. In Beirut, Israeli strikes were ongoing. Elsewhere in Lebanon, an attack by an Israeli drone left about four people dead in the town of Marjayoun, located in the south of the country. Hundreds of Lebanese soldiers and police stranded at barracks in that very town of Marjayoun were being evacuated by United Nations troops. To the north, Israeli air strikes at a bridge near the Lebanon-Syria border left approximately 12 civilians dead. One Israeli soldier died in fighting in western Lebanon, while close to 20 were reported to have been injured in southern Lebanon. On the other side of the border, several casualties were reported in northern Israel as a result of a barrage of missile attacks by Hezbollah.

On the diplomatic agenda, media reports on August 11, 2006 suggested that the United Nations Security Council was set to debate and vote on a new draft resolution calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. The text of the draft, which had been changed to reflect concerns articulated by Lebanon about a withdrawal of Israeli troops, called for a "full cessation of hostilities," and made provisions for Israeli troops to pull back from Lebanese terrain as local and United Nations forces were deployed along the border. The draft also authorized an expansion of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Lebanon, known by the acronym UNIFIL, along with increased enforcement powers. Left out of the text was a reference to Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, which would facilitate the use of force if certain conditions were not met.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Illustrating Israel's dual-pronged approach toward a mix of military tactics along with a diplomatic strategy, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was reported to have said that he accepted the new ceasefire plan. This revelation came after Olmert had already directed Israeli troops to expand its offensive operations in Lebanon, presumably because of the bleak prospect of an acceptable resolution being passed by the United Nations Security Council earlier in the day. Now, with a shift in the proverbial winds, Olmert was expected to call on his cabinet to sanction the resolution within the next few days. It was expected that Israel's military operations would continue until that time.

Meanwhile, an affirmative vote within the United Nations Security Council was expected shortly. While not perfectly in line with the desires of either Israel or Lebanon, the new draft appeared to be acceptable to both parties as well. In a passionate speech at the convening of the Security Council session, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan decried the international body's failure to act in a more timely manner, saying that it had "badly shaken" the international community's confidence in the United Nations. Still, later on August 11, 2006, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1701.

A policy adviser in the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora cautiously welcomed the passage of the new resolution. United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, declared that agreement would "open a path to lasting peace between Lebanon and Israel." Her French counterpart, Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, characterized called the passage of the resolution as "a historic turning point." United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair lauded the resolution and called for an immediate end to hostilities. He also said that he intended to travel to the Middle East to personally revitalize the stalled peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. But on the other side of the equation, Qatar, which at the time held a seat on the Security Council as a non-permanent member, criticized the resolution for containing provisions that favored Israel.

August 12, 2006

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan announced on August 12, 2006 that that the ceasefire called for in Security Council Resolution 1701 would go into effect at 05:00GMT on August 14, 2006.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said that his group intended to abide by the United Nations ceasefire, however, he warned that fighting would prevail while Israeli troops were still inside Lebanon. Such a position promised that there would be no immediate end to the hostilities. This was because Israel had said that it would take some time to draw down its troops while UNIFIL forces were deployed -- a process that could well take close to a month. For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert issued praise for Resolution 1701, characterizing it as both positive and acceptable. He also said that he would seek approval from his cabinet on August 13, 2006 to abide by the ceasefire agreement.

Meanwhile, Israel's ground assault in Lebanon continued, with particular effort expended by forces moving north to the Litani River. In southern and northern Lebanon, air strikes by Israeli fighter jets carried on with some deaths reported in the southern city of Tyre.

August 13, 2006

On August 13, 2006, the Israeli cabinet endorsed United Nations Security Resolution 1701, but warned that its troops would not exit Lebanon until UNIFIL forces were deployed. That position, in conjunction with the stance articulated earlier by Hezbollah that it would abide by the ceasefire only when Israeli troops were out of Lebanon, suggested that fighting was destined to continue until the deployment of the newly-madated United Nations forces (UNIFIL). Indeed, United Nations Deputy Secretary General Mark Malloch Brown said that it could take up to a month to install UNIFIL in southern Lebanon. For its part, Lebanon's cabinet postponed an important meeting to discuss the disarmament of Hezbollah -- a key directive set forth in Security Resolution 1701.

Meanwhile, the conflict raged on in Israel and Lebanon. Israeli strikes on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, including the cities of Tyre and Beirut, left close to 20 people dead. Aid personnel and rescue workers said that Israeli air strikes had resulted in the collapse of several buildings in southern Beirut. There were also reports of strikes in eastern Lebanon. In fighting between Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters, five Israeli soldiers were reported to

Political Conditions Lebanon

have been killed. Among those who died was Uri Grossman, the son of renowned Israeli writer and peace activist, David Grossman. The younger Grossman died as a result of an anti-tank missile only days after the older Grossman joined a call by Israeli intelligentsia for an end to the violence. On the other side of the conflict, Hezbollah fired a relentless barrage of rockets into Israel, this time numbering around 250 in total.

August 14, 2006

On the first day of the ceasefire, relative calm reigned both in northern Israel and across Lebanon, with only sporadic fighting reported in disparate areas. The easing of hostilities ensued despite earlier assertions by Hezbollah that it would continue its fighting until Israel left Lebanon, and regardless of the fact that Israel said it would remain in Lebanon until UNIFIL forces were installed.

Israel also issued a statement noting that it intended to pursue Hezbollah leaders.

Displaced Lebanese attempted to traverse bombed-out roads to return to their homes despite the fact that travel restrictions were still in place. On the other side of the border, few people in northern Israel left their bomb shelters, evidently not quite willing to trust yet that the ceasefire would hold.

Later in the day, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed satisfaction in his country's elimination of Hezbollah's dominance in southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a televised address in which he claimed "historic victory."

In the backdrop of these competing claims of victory, President George W. Bush of the United States and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blamed one another for spurring the conflict.

August 15, 2006

The second day of the tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah was marked by occasional spurts of fighting. In one case, five Hezbollah gunmen were reported to have been shot by Israeli soldiers. In another case, Hezbollah militants fired several mortars in the direction of Israel, however, none landed across the border. Amidst these intermittent bursts of violence, efforts were underway to try to find bodies of the dead.

Meanwhile, the United Nations said that it was hoping to establish 3,500 troops in southern Lebanon within two weeks and up to 15,000 within a month. Most of the soldiers were expected to come from France. In the backdrop of this announcement, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad hailed Hezbollah's victory and said that it augured a new Middle East. At the same time, he assailed the United States' perspective of the region.

August 16, 2006

The third day of the fragile ceasefire ensued much like the previous day -- with the truce holding in spite of sporadic violence.

Israel warned that southern Lebanon was vulnerable to the resumption of violence until United Nations troops were deployed and the Lebanese military was operating in the border region.

Negotiations were ongoing to formulate a United Nations peacekeeping force as called for in United Nations Security Resolution 1701 to enforce the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. France was contributing the lion's share of troops, also the force would also include the Lebanese army. France said that it might be prepared to command the peacekeeping mission but only if certain conditions were in effect. Other than France, other countries said that they might be joining the effort, but no formal pledge of troops was made.

Meanwhile, the United Nations said that approximately 250,000 Lebanese people had returned to their homes with half a million Lebanese en route.

August 17, 2006

August 17, 2006 was marked by the crossing of the Litani River by Lebanese military, which then took up positions in the area of the strategically-located waterway as Israeli troops withdrew. The Israeli military also said that it had transferred control of up to half of its positions in southern Lebanon to the current (not-yet fortified) United Nations peacekeeping mission there. In order to stave off the chance of bloodshed should a wave of attacks resume, Israel dropped **new** leaflets urging people not to travel in and around southern Lebanon. Despite this warning, displaced Lebanese people worked their way home.

August 18, 2006

In the Lebanese capital of Beirut on August 18, 2006, Hezbollah representatives handed out disbursements of \$12,000 to residents whose homes and businesses had been decimated in the conflict between its group and Israel. By this day, up to 400,000 Lebanese had returned home to southern Lebanon. In the town of Qana where a number of people were killed in an Israeli air strike that garnered international condemnation, relatives of the dead hosted a mass funeral.

Meanwhile, the United Nations called on European countries to come forward and contribute troops to the peacekeeping **force** in Lebanon, which had been provided for in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. Thus far, only France had expressed the possibility of contributing troops, however, Italy added its bid to the list of countries willing to participate in the peacekeeping mission. Italy also said that it was prepared to take the leadership role in the operation.

The call from the United Nations came on the heels of a complaint by Israel that it would be "inconceivable" that peacekeepers be accepted from countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, which deny the right of Israel to exist.

August 19, 2006

On August 19, 2006, Israel carried out an air raid in the Bekaa Valley deep within Lebanese territory. One Israeli and three Hezbollah fighters were reported to have been killed. The Lebanese government described the air raid as a blatant violation of the existing ceasefire, however, the Israeli government said it was responding to an attempt by Hezbollah to rearm itself. It thus claimed that Hezbollah and not Israel was in violation of the ceasefire agreement. The scenario unfolded only hours after United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan characterized the situation in the conflict zone as "fragile."

Meanwhile, the first of the **new** deployments of United Nations peacekeepers arrived on the ground; these included 50 engineers from France.

August 20, 2006

A day after Israel said that it had carried out an air raid in the Bekaa Valley to prevent Hezbollah from rearming itself, Lebanon's Defense Minister Elias Murr warned that anyone firing rockets into Israel from the south would be regarded as a traitor. His warning came along with an expression of confidence regarding Hezbollah's commitment to the existing ceasefire set forth in United Nations Security Resolution 1701. In the backdrop of these developments, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan rejected Israel's explanation for the air raid, noting that it was indeed a violation of the ceasefire agreement.

Meanwhile, France called on the European Union to convene a meeting to discuss involvement in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon. At issue were Israel's concerns about the composition of the **force**, as well as overall concerns about deployment. Emphasizing what had already been noted, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that peacekeepers from countries that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel were not acceptable.

August 21, 2006

Political Conditions Lebanon

Attention turned on August 21, 2006 to reconstruction of the conflict-ravaged region when United States President George W. Bush said that there would be an aid package earmarked for Lebanon's reconstruction worth approximately \$230 million in United States currency (USD). Bush also called for the deployment of a United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping **force** in Lebanon as quickly as possible.

On that particular issue, Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi was reported to have told U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan that Italy was willing to lead the peacekeeping mission. As regards Israel's opposition to the participation of certain countries as peacekeepers -- notably from countries that did not recognize the state of Israel -- U.N. Deputy General Mark Malloch Brown noted that Israel did not have the power to foreclose participation by any specific country, regardless of whether or not there were diplomatic ties.

At home in Israel, hundreds of Israeli army reservists signed an open letter calling for a massive investigation into the handling of the war against Hezbollah. At issue was the lack of decisive leadership by the military and politicians, exemplified by ever-shifting objectives of the war.

Across the border in southern Lebanon, the discovery of British-made night-vision equipment in Hezbollah bunkers was believed to be British, led to the launching of an investigation by the British authorities. At issue in this case was the question of how that equipment came to be in Hezbollah's possession.

Meanwhile, sporadic hostilities ensued, exemplified by the killing of two Hezbollah fighters by Israel. The Israeli military explained that the Hezbollah fighters were among a group of men who approached their troops in a "threatening manner" in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah did not concur with this version of events. For its part, Hezbollah's deputy leader Sheikh Naeem Kasseem rejected requirements for the militant group's disarmament saying on al-Jazeera Arabic television that the resistance would continue. Nevertheless, Terje Roed-Larsen, a senior U.N. envoy, expressed optimism regarding the prevailing ceasefire.

August 22, 2006

On the heels of the news that Italy was willing to both contribute troops and act lead the peacekeeping mission in the conflict zone, Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema tempered the announcement by noting that his country's involvement was contingent upon a commitment to respect for the prevailing ceasefire. The Italian Foreign Minister also called on the European Union to convene an urgent meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the contribution of European **forces** to Middle East peacekeeping efforts.

On the issue of the peacekeeping mission, senior United Nations envoy Terje Roed-Larsen warned that Lebanon would likely experience a security vacuum while organization was being established. In other developments, the human rights group, Amnesty International, accuse Israel of committing war crimes by deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure in Lebanon. It was a claim vociferously denied by Israel. Amnesty International also demanded a United Nations investigation into war tactics of both Israel and Hezbollah aimed at determining of any humanitarian laws had been breached.

August 23, 2006

A meeting between European Union ambassadors and military official convened in Belgium at which the issue of Europe's contribution to a United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping **force** on the Israeli-Lebanese border was discussed.

Meanwhile, a day after a senior U.N. envoy warned of a security vacuum in Lebanon as the proposed peacekeeping mission was being established, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni called for quick action on the matter. She particularly noted that time was running short for the application of the U.N. ceasefire resolution along the Lebanese-Israeli border.

In a related development, Israel also suggested that U.N. peacekeeping troops also patrol the Lebanese-Syrian border in order to prevent the movement of arms by Hezbollah. But Syrian President Bashar al-Assad soundly

Political Conditions Lebanon

rejected Israel's suggestion, stating that such a measure would be viewed as a "hostile act." Syria later said that it would close its border with Lebanon if such a move was implemented.

In a separate development, one Israeli soldier was killed and three others were injured when their military tank hit a landmine in southern Lebanon.

August 24, 2006

Finland, which held the presidency of the European Union in late August 2006, said that United Nations (U.N.) troops should be deployed to the conflict zone within a week. The announcement by Finland came at a time of increasing urgency regarding the establishment of peacekeeping forces along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Also on the subject of the peacekeeping mission, France pledged an additional 1,600 troops to the effort and registered its willingness to continue to lead the force.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese were returning home. In southern Lebanon, returning residents faced the problems of a lack of proper sanitation and no potable water. To this end, the U.N. launched a 60-day plan to deal with the humanitarian situation in Lebanon.

August 27, 2006

On August 27, 2005, Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, expressed his regret regarding the war between his group and Israel on Lebanese terrain. In an interview on Lebanese television, Nasrallah acknowledged that he had ordered the capture of the two Israeli soldiers -- the incident that resulted in Israel's military response and effectively sparked the war. He said that had he known the extent of the repercussions of his actions -- a conflict lasting approximately one month and resulting in the deaths of more than 1,000 people -- he would have acted differently. In the interview, Nasrallah also said that he did not expect fighting to resume, effectively suggesting that his group was likely to hold to the ongoing truce.

August 30, 2006

The issue of Israel's blockade of Lebanon came to the fore at the close of August 2006. Despite the presence of an ongoing truce, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rejected calls for an end to his country's seven-week blockade of Lebanon. Following discussions with United Nations (U.N.) Secretary General Kofi Annan, Olmert said the blockade would be lifted when all the ceasefire requirements were implemented. Olmert particularly specified one of the central conditions for an end to Israel's blockade of Israel as being the release of two Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah. He said that unless the two Israeli soldiers were freed, the U.N. Security Council Resolution could not "be considered as fully implemented."

Annan echoed Olmert's call for this condition to be met and appealed for the "unambiguous and unconditional release" of the soldiers.

It was unclear if such a measure would actually materialize. Indeed, Lebanese Energy Minister Mohammed Fneish who was also a member of the political wing of Hezbollah said that the unconditional release of the Israeli soldiers was "not possible." He said that the Israeli soldiers would only be freed within the constraints of a prisoner exchange with Israel.

The close of August 2006 was also marked by the denunciation of Israel's use of cluster bombs during its conflict with Hezbollah on Lebanese terrain. The U.N. said that the cluster bombs had caused death and injuries, and the U.N. Mine Action Coordination Center said that up to 100,000 unexploded cluster "bomblets" had been found at hundreds of sites in Lebanon. The U.N.'s humanitarian head, Jan Egeland, characterized the use of cluster bombs in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah as "immoral." He argued that the majority of the cluster bomb strikes had taken place in the last days of the conflict, when a resolution appeared likely. He thusly said that the strikes made at that sensitive time were "shocking."

Political Conditions Lebanon

For its part, Israel said that its use of such munitions was compliant with international law. That said, there were some media reports that the bombs had been purchased from the United States on the basis of conditional use, the requirements of which may not have been met. The United States said that it was investigating whether or not Israel had used the cluster bombs on non-military targets, which was prohibited under the terms of the sale agreement. Even so, a conditional use agreement between Israel and the United States would not constitute an actual violation of international law.

In other developments, the European Commission pledged 42 million euros toward the reconstruction of Lebanon. At home in Lebanon, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said that his government would allot \$33,000 in compensation to tens of thousands of families whose homes were destroyed in the conflict.

August 31, 2006

A donor conference in Sweden on August 31, 2006 focused on raising funds to be used toward Lebanon's post-war reconstruction. The Swedish Foreign Minister Jan Eliasson said that \$940 million in new funds had been pledged -- bringing the total reconstruction funds to \$1.2 billion. The event was an apparent success given the fact that the conference's organizers had aimed to collect \$500 million.

September 4, 2006

By the start of September 2006, United Nations (U.N.) Secretary General Kofi Annan said that Israel and Hezbollah had accepted his offer to mediate the dispute over two captured Israeli soldiers. Despite this announcement by the U.N. head, Israel publicly reiterated its stance that the soldiers had to be released unconditionally and noted that this was a condition of the U.N. Security Council resolution, which brought an end to the war between Israel and Hezbollah. Within this context, Israel said that Annan would assist in the release of its soldiers, rather than mediate an agreement. Many analysts surmised that despite its public pronouncements, Israel may have privately acknowledged that a deal would have to be brokered in order to garner the release of the two soldiers.

September 6, 2006

On September 6, 2006, Israel said that it intended to lift its air, land and sea blockade of Lebanon. The announcement came days after Israel firmly stated that it would not lift its blockade until all conditions of the prevailing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 were met. Israel said that it was holding its position in order to prevent Hezbollah for accessing weaponry. Israel said that it did not intend to lift the embargo until international forces were fully deployed in the conflict zone and could ensure that the transport of weaponry did not take place. News that French, Greek and Italian troops would patrol the conflict zone, followed later by German forces, appeared to have assuaged Israel in some measure.

As well, the shift in stance may have been attributed partially to mounting international pressure, in conjunction with efforts to release the two Israeli soldiers, whose capture sparked the war between Israel and Lebanon. For its part, Israel has publicly said that it will not negotiate with terrorists -- a reference to Hezbollah. That said, some sources suggest that efforts are underway to try to secure the release of the soldiers -- a process that may well involve engagement by Israel at some point, as well as the possibility of deal-making.

Later in September, 2006

Later in September 2006, with the truce in full force, the human rights group, Amnesty International, accused Hezbollah of war crimes. It had previously made a similar charge against Israel. Amnesty said that Hezbollah's conduct of aggression from civilian terrain was classified as a war crime. Also in September 2006, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, led a victory rally in southern Beirut to proclaim the success of his

Political Conditions Lebanon

group's efforts, and also to assert that Hezbollah was still in possession of a number of rockets. Nasrallah was also championing the idea of a new government in Lebanon with greater Hezbollah representation, presumably with greater ties to Syria and Iran. the natural corollary of such a government would entail the resignation of Fuad Siniora's moderate government. On the other side of the border, Israelis were carrying out periodic demonstrations against the Israel government, and particularly Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Many Israelis called for the Israeli prime minister's resignation and protested his leadership during the war with Hezbollah. In this way, the aftermath of the war yielded clear political ramifications, not the least of which was the precariousness of the positions of the leaders of both Israel and Lebanon.

October 2006

By the start of October 2006, the United Nations said that Israel had fulfilled a core conditions of the ceasefire agreement by withdrawing the vast majority of its troops from Lebanon. Only in a border village of Ghajar were there some Israeli troops left. Monitoring and enforcing the ceasefire were both Lebanese troops and international peacekeepers. On the other side of the equation, however, Hezbollah was yet to comply with the requirement that it disarm. Instead, the group refused to comply, saying that it intended to keep its fighters equipped to resume operations.

On October 22, 2006, Israel acknowledged its use of phosphorus during its war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in mid-2006. The admission that it had dropped phosphorus munitions on military targets contravened against earlier statements that phosphorus weapons were used only to mark targets. Because of the severe chemical burns caused by phosphorus weapons, its use has been regarded as strongly controversial. In fact, the Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies have said that phosphorus munitions should be regarded as chemical weapons. At the same time, the Geneva Conventions expressly prohibits the use of white phosphorus against civilian populations and in air attacks against military forces in civilian areas. For its part, Israel said that its use of these weapons did not contravene against international law. Meanwhile, Hezbollah was also facing criticism for its warfare tactics. The group Human Rights Watch accused both Hezbollah and Israel of using cluster bombs during its war in mid-2006. For its part, Hezbollah denied that it had used cluster munitions.

Post-War Developments

On October 15, 2006, three grenades were fired in the center of the capital city of Beirut. There was some structural damage and several people were injured as a result. The area of the attacks was the site of a number of nightclubs -- a location in close proximity to the headquarters for the United Nations. It was the third such incident in the Lebanese capital within ten days, leading government officials to say that they believed the three attacks were connected. In particular, Interior Minister Ahmed Fatfat expressed the view that the attacks were aimed destabilizing the country, which was not recovering from the war between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah months earlier. To this end, he said, "It is clear that there is an attempt to ignite security strife in the country."

A month later, Lebanon was embroiled in a domestic struggle for power between the Western-backed and democratically-elected Siniora government and pro-Syrian Hezbollah. The situation took a turn for the worse when, in the first week of November 2006, six cabinet ministers aligned with Hezbollah resigned from government, following the collapse of multi-party unity talks.

At issue was the demand by Hezbollah for substantially more power and influence in the political sphere in the aftermath of the war with Israel, which raised the profile of Hezbollah, and cast relations with Syria in more favorable light. Buoyed by that change in the political landscape, Hezbollah was demanding more of a say in the country's political decision-making.

Political Conditions Lebanon

On the other side of the equation, however, Siniora was vowing not to bend to "the tyranny of the minority" -- a possible reference to the small number of Hezbollah-affiliated members in government prior to their resignations. Siniora's position was echoed by Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, who foreclosed the possibility of Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian faction having a decisive say in government. Indeed, Jumblatt noted that Hezbollah and its allies already had control of the presidency (a reference to Emile Lahoud), important ties to Iran and Syria, as well as possession of weaponry -- all of which, he alleged, had a negative effect on Lebanese democracy and sovereignty.

The situation was further complicated by the decision by the cabinet -- now without the pro-Syrian and Hezbollah-affiliated members -- to approve the statutes drafted by the United Nations to establish a special tribunal charged with prosecuting those responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese leader, Rafik Hariri.

Siniora, Jumblatt and other anti-Syrian leaders had criticized their pro-Syrian colleagues for trying to block the creation of the tribunal. Indeed, pro-Syrian factions have been implicated by the United Nations (as intimated earlier) in Hariri's assassination. Not one to accept the situation as it stood, Syrian-backed President Lahoud issued a letter to the office of the United Nations Secretary General charging that the approval of the statutes by Siniora's government was not legitimate since he had not given his approval, and because some of the cabinet members had resigned. For its part, the Siniora government said that its decision was fully constitutional.

On November 21, 2006, Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel was assassinated in the Christian suburb of Jdaideh in Lebanon's capital city of Beirut. Gemayel's car was rammed by three gunmen, who then sprayed the vehicle with gunfire and shot the cabinet minister at close range. Gemayel was taken to the hospital in critical condition where he died.

At only 34 years of age, Gemayel was one of the youngest politicians in Lebanon, and certainly one of the youngest to ever suffer political assassination. A Maronite Christian, he was known for his anti-Syrian stance, as well as his well-known Gemayel family, who formed something of a modern political dynasty in the Lebanese political spectrum.

His grandfather, Pierre Gemayel, for whom he was named, had been the founder of the Phalange Party; his father, Amin Gemayel, once served as the country's president.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora reacted to the tragic news by saying, "Assassinations will not terrorise us. We will not let the criminal killers control our fate."

In a poignant moment during his press conference, Siniora addressed the late Gemayel, asking him to give regards to Hariri -- the former Lebanese leader who was also assassinated over a year earlier -- promising that both their deaths would not be in vain.

The international community was quick to condemn Gemayel's assassination. United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair said the killing was "completely without any justification" and said, "We condemn this murder utterly." United States President George W. Bush called for an investigation in Gemayel's death, and said that his country would stand in support of the Siniora government.

Despite appeals for calm from the victim's father, former President Amin Gemayel, crowds of people -- both infuriated and wracked by grief -- gathered in the streets, particularly outside the hospital where the cabinet minister died. Other protests were reported to be taking place in various Christian districts of Beirut, the Christian town of Zahle in the eastern part of the country, as well as Gemayel's hometown of Bikfaya to the east of Beirut.

In an effort to stave off violence, the Lebanese army was being deployed in and around Beirut.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Gemayel's death was the latest in a list of assassinations since 2005 that began with the murder of former Prime Minister Hariri, but went on to include journalist Samir Kassir, ex-communist leader George Hawi, and parliamentarian / newspaper editor Gebran Tueni. During the same period, journalist May Chidiac survived an assassination attempt.

All of the victims were known for being vocal critics of Syria's influence in Lebanon. In the immediate aftermath of Gemayel's murder, Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister and the current leader of the anti-Syrian majority in parliament, accused Syria of being involved. That said, Syria was quick to condemn Gemayel's death, even characterizing it as "a dispicable crime," and expressing sympathy. As such, there was also some speculation about Hezbollah being responsible for the murder, Syria's possible involvement notwithstanding. Behind this hypothesis was the view that Hezbollah was becoming more aggressive in demanding political power from the Siniora government, which was itself at risk of collapse.

With Gemayel's death now in the forefront of the consciousness of many Lebanese, it was difficult to determine how Hezbollah's influence would be affected. Likewise, it was too soon to tell if the Siniora government could withstand collapse, or if Gemayel's assassination could rally support by anti-Syrian factions -- and in a direction away from Hezbollah's sphere of influence.

In late 2006, the Lebanese capital of Beirut was overwhelmed by mass protests by pro-Hezbollah and pro-Syrian factions, demanding the end of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government. Protestors were calling for a new government that would include more allies of Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian opposition, and would be capable of wielding more influence. But with Siniora and his government still refusing to resign, a political crisis seemed inevitable.

The situation was not helped by the fact that emotions were still running high in the aftermath of the aforementioned assassination of Pierre Gemayel only a week earlier.

Complicating matters was the fact that the demonstrations were taking on a sectarian cast, as evidenced by the clashes erupting between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Moreover, sectarian affiliations appeared to be linked with particular political allegiances. Whereas Shi'as were largely allied with Hezbollah, on the other side of the equation, Sunnis, Christians and Druze tended to align with Siniora's government. Analysts were, therefore, warning that civil strife could potentially be rekindled in Lebanon. That type of destabilization would inevitably have regional implications.

In response, regional blocs, such as the Arab League, as well as envoys from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Tunisia, were extending their assistance. They offered to facilitate negotiations between the Siniora government and the pro-Syrian opposition, along with its Hezbollah allies.

The second week of December 2006 saw further protests with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets of Beirut and demanding that the Siniora government give more power to the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Syrian opposition. In an effort to prevent the eruption of violence, Lebanese military troops were deployed to the streets of the capital city, and were seen barricading the key roads around the two squares where the demonstrations were taking place. Also visible on the streets of Beirut were Hezbollah security agents.

By January 2007, a general strike in Lebanon exacerbated the chaos. Clashes between pro-Hezbollah supporters and government supporters resulted in over 100 injuries and some deaths, while thousands of protestors brought the capital city of Beirut to a virtual standstill. Protestors were also participating in the strike in the Shi'a south and east of Lebanon. The northern part of the country, which was inhabited by both Christians and Muslims, saw a complex mix of institutional support and opposition to the government. At issue remained the demand for greater

Political Conditions Lebanon

power and influence by pro-Hezbollah and pro-Syrian factions in government, and an orientation away from influence by the West.

Prime Minister Fouad Siniora responded to the brewing crisis in Lebanon by stating in a televised address that he intended to stand squarely against the "intimidation" by the opposition and its supporters. To this end, he said, "Today's general strike turned into actions and harassment that overstepped all limits and rekindled memories of times of strife, war and hegemony." But the opposition warned that it would not let up its efforts.

The situation turned particularly grim when clashes erupted at Beirut's Arab University between Sunni pro-government factions and Shi'a opponents. Several people were killed and over 150 others were injured as the two sides turned violent and hurled rocks, clubs and other items at one another, eventually spreading the violence beyond the university campus and across the capital. The fighting came to a close after the military fired into the air and an overnight curfew was imposed.

The developments overshadowed a donor's conference aimed at helping Lebanon rebuild and restore its infrastructure following the damaging war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006.

Lebanon was wracked by bombs on February 13, 2007 -- the eve of the second anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

The bombs exploded on two buses in a Christian area and left at least three people dead and more than 20 injured.

Conflict and the Palestinian Refugee Camp

On May 20, 2007, intense fighting between Lebanese soldiers and radical Islamic fighters from a Palestinian refugee camp left at least 50 people dead close to the city of Tripoli in the northern part of Lebanon.

Among those killed on that day were more than 20 Lebanese troops and at least 20 gunmen from the Fatah Islam group. Two civilians also died as a result of the fighting, while scores more people, including several soldiers, were injured.

The group, Fatah Islam, which split from Fatah al-Intifada in late 2006, has been based at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. It was believed to have ties to the terrorist enclave, al-Qaida, although the group denies this claim.

There were also suspicions of a connection to Syrian intelligence.

The group has been largely shunned by other Palestinian organizations.

The fighting was said to have been sparked by the raid of a building aimed at arresting of bank robbery suspects in Tripoli. The suspects, also allegedly radical Islamic militants, resisted arrest and then attacked the army posts of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp where 30,000 displaced Palestinians were said to be living. Lebanese **forces** then retaliated by storming the camp.

In separate attacks, an explosion was reported in the capital city of Beirut. It was unknown whether it was related to a blast in the Christian district of Ashrafieh, which left one woman dead and at least 10 people wounded.

Political Conditions Lebanon

A day later, on May 21, 2007, Lebanese troops and Palestinian Islamic militants continued to battle for another day around the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp close to Tripoli.

Lebanon's Information Minister Ghazi Aridi promised that the military would continue its efforts against the Palestinian extremist group. Arizo also noted that leading figures of Fatah Islam were among the fighters who had been killed the day before, and he alleged they were responsible for past attacks as well as the planning of future attacks. To this end, Lebanese security officials said that one militant was wanted in Germany in connection with an unsuccessful train bombing plot in mid-2006.

While the conflict appeared to be lessening as Lebanese troops took control of the perimeter of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, the exchange of gunfire continued through the next day. Caught in the cross-fire were civilians inside the camp. As a result, the death toll was expanding with reports of the deaths of several civilians, including Lebanese citizens and Palestinian refugees. The list of those suffering from injuries was also increasing and there were attempts to move the wounded to hospitals for treatment. Meanwhile, there were burgeoning humanitarian concerns about deteriorating conditions on the ground.

That situation was not helped on May 22, 2007 when a convoy carrying aid entered the Nahr al-Bared camp came under heavy fire and shelling, thus **forcing** its retreat. The convoy of six truck was transporting food, water, medical supplies, an electrical generator, and other necessities. In the midst of this development, heavy fighting appeared to have resumed between the two sides, effectively nullifying reports of a supposed ceasefire.

At the national level, the Lebanese government authorized the military to intensify its efforts in dealing with the extremist fighters. Internationally, the United States said the extremist **forces** had to be "reined in." European Union foreign policy head Javier Solana was set to convene meetings with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in Beirut to discuss the situation.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Trade Minister Sami Haddad said in an interview with the British media that he believed Syria was responsible for orchestrating the violence for the purpose of destabilizing the Lebanese government. But Bashar Jaafari, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations dismissed this notion, asserting that there was no link between his government and Fatah Islam. He also made note of the fact that some members of the group had been imprisoned in Syrian jails for their support for al-Qaida.

After a week of ongoing clashes between the Lebanese army and radical Islamic fighters at a Palestinian refugee camp, the situation remained unresolved. While an official from the United Nations said that about 25,000 civilians had managed to flee the Nahr al-Bared refugee compound, about 6,000 people remained trapped there -- effectively caught in the crossfire of violence.

On May 26, 2007, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said in an interview with British media that if the radical Islamic fighters of Fatah Islam surrendered, they would be treated fairly. He warned, however, that if the radical Palestinian Islamists continued to fight, the army would deal with them. In the meanwhile, an uneasy cease-fire was ongoing as the Lebanese authorities allowed Palestinian factions a few days to try to forge a peaceful end to the crisis.

Despite this uneasy cease-fire and negotiation plan, on May 27, 2007, Lebanese troops came under attack from the Islamist militants inside the Palestinian refugee camp. In the background of this development was the clear rejection of a resolution on the part of Fatah Islam leader, Shaker al-Abssi, who in a videotaped message promised to "fight Jews, Americans and their allies."

Political Conditions Lebanon

Weeks after fighting ensued between Lebanese troops and Islamic militants at the Nahr-al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli, a **new** site of similar violence broke out at the Ain al-Hilweh camp close to Sidon. In this case, the fighting involved Lebanese soldiers and militants from the group, Jund al-Sham. Reports suggested that the situation at Ain al-Hilweh was provoked after militants fired a rocket-propelled grenade at an army checkpoint. Lebanese soldiers responded to the attack with gunfire. The mayor of Sidon, Abdul Rahman Bizri, later said the incident was limited in scope and was ultimately contained.

But on June 4, 2007, a commander for Fatah Islam warned it would enter the fray and escalate the newly-sparked conflict at Ain al-Hilweh. The warning from Commander Abu Hureira came after two Lebanese soldiers were reported to have been killed in the fighting there with the other extremist group, Jund al-Sham.

On June 5, 2007, the head of the Palestinian Fatah **political** party in Lebanon (distinct from the extremist group Fatah Islam), announced that seven militants had surrendered and laid down their arms. Khaled Aref explained to the media, "They surrendered on Monday and Tuesday to Fatah men in the Nahr al-Bared camp." He continued, "We can confirm that men from Fatah al-Islam turned themselves in and handed over their weapons."

While that announcement was welcomed, two days later on June 7, 2007, the violence was ongoing at Nahr al-Bared. Lebanese troops, fortified by air power, carried out heavy shelling of the refugee camp. Clashes on the ground were also going on, with one Lebanese soldier reported to have been killed as a result.

Meanwhile, violence was not limited to the two camps. In Beirut, four bombs exploded in the weeks since the start of the fighting. In one case, a bomb exploded on a bus; several people were reported to have been injured as a result. It was unknown as to who was responsible, however, Lebanese authorities alleged that the bombings were likely connected to the conflict at the two camps. Complicating matters even further was the discovery of three vehicles packed with explosives close to Lebanon's border with Syria. Lebanese officials said that the vehicles were intended to be used as car bombs; they also noted that two Syrians and one Iraqi had been arrested.

At the start of July 2007, attention returned to the ongoing conflict at the aforementioned Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. Palestinian refugees were trying to get past a security checkpoint, in an attempt to return to their homes, and were fired on by the Lebanese army. As a result, at least three people were said to have been killed, and over 40 people were reportedly injured. While it was unclear whether the protestors provoked the soldiers or not, the Lebanese army said the troops were responding with warning shots to the fact that throngs of people were burning tires and attacking soldiers with sharp objects. Human Right Watch called for an independent inquiry into the situation.

By the middle of July 2007, the conflict between Lebanese troops and Fatah Islam militants was continuing at the Palestinian refugee camp, with the army taking on more of an offensive stance. In fact, reports suggested that Lebanese **forces** took up positions just outside the camp and were shelling at the compound.

The offensive move came after many of the remaining residents fled the camp and two soldiers were shot by snipers at the edge of the compound.

Lebanese officials denied that the relentless shelling was a final assault aimed at flushing out or killing the militants.

Note: Since the start of the conflict, more than 85 soldiers, 60 militants and 40 civilians were killed.

Other Developments in 2007

Meanwhile, on June 13, 2007, an explosion in Beirut's waterfront left eight people dead, including anti-Syrian parliamentarian Walid Eido, and at least 10 people injured. The attack was the latest in a spate of blasts plaguing

Political Conditions Lebanon

Lebanon in the spring of 2007, and Eido was the most recent victim in a series of assassinations in the last few years involving high profile anti-Syrian individuals. Eido was a member of Future Movement, and a **political** ally of Saad Hariri, the son of Lebanon's former head of government.

The timing of the attack was regarded as significant since it came two weeks after a decision by the United Nations Security Council to establish a tribunal to prosecute suspects in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Throughout, there has been suspicion about Syrian involvement in the Hariri's assassination as well as the subsequent attacks on **political** opponents in Lebanon. For its part, Syria has dismissed such accusations.

In the third week of June 2007, even as the Lebanese army continued to battle with militants from Fatah Islam at the Nahr-al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, the country continued to be plagued by violence. Less than two weeks after the assassination of another leading anti-Syrian figure in the country, parliamentarian Walid Eido (discussed just above), six United Nations (U.N.) peacekeepers were killed when their vehicle was hit by an explosive device.

The peacekeepers were functioning under the aegis of Spanish **forces**. The attack took place between the towns of Khiyam and Marjeyoun, close to the border with Israel, in a zone that has been part of the U.N. operation in Lebanon since 1978. (Note: In 2006, the U.N. operation in Lebanon was intensified following the Hezbollah-Israel conflict.)

There was no claim of responsibility although the Spanish Defense Minister, Jose Antonio Alonso, stated that it was a "premeditated attack," noting also that his government was "working on the theory of a terrorist attack." Indeed, extremists groups in Lebanon have made threats against U.N. peacekeepers in the past. Most notably, some of the militants of Fatah Islam who were arrested and interrogated since the start of the aforementioned conflict at Nahr-al-Bared, admitted to a plot to attack the U.N.

On Aug. 5, 2007, tens of thousands of Lebanese voters went to the polls to cast ballots in key by-elections. Turnout was reported to have been high and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said that voting took place in an orderly manner. There was no deadly violence reported on election day, presumably as a result of tight security at polling stations.

At stake were the two vacant seats previously held by two assassinated parliamentarians, both of whom belonged to the anti-Syrian and Western-backed ruling coalition. The elections would, thus, result in replacements for the seats held by Sunni Muslim parliamentarian, Walid Eido, who had been assassinated in a car bomb in Beirut in June 2007 as noted above, and Christian cabinet minister, Pierre Gemayel, who was gunned down in November 2006, as aforementioned. Both deaths were a result of the spate of murders and violent attacks that have plagued Lebanon since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri who had been a harsh and vociferous critic of Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs.

Now, two years later, Lebanon was deeply divided on sectarian grounds between Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians (its Jewish population having long since dwindled). Lebanon was also politically fragmented between pro-Syrian and pro-Hezbollah factions on one end of the equation, and anti-Syrian, nationalist, and pro-Western enclaves, on the other end. In many ways, the fractures that characterized Lebanon's civil war were resurfacing, most especially in the form of renewed violence, power struggles, strategic machinations, and **political** tensions.

The by-elections were thus imbued with grave symbolic significance, irrespective of the fact that they did not have the approval of either President Emile Lahoud or recognition of the parliamentary speaker, Nabih Berri. Both

Political Conditions Lebanon

Lahoud and Berri were aligned with Hezbollah-led opposition in parliament, which had been calling for the resignation of Fouad Siniora's government since late 2006.

In the period leading up to the 2007 by-elections, Eido's seat in western Beirut was expected to be won by the pro-government candidate, Mohammed Amin Itani. With the votes counted, it appeared that projections for a victory by Itani were on target with the pro-government Sunni politician winning by a substantial margin.

Gemayel's seat in the Maronite Christian stronghold of Metn was another matter, largely because of the divided nature of the population base. Amin Gemayel, the father of the murdered cabinet minister, was contesting the election and hoping to replace his son. A former president and Phalange Party leader, Gemayel, was regarded as a strong contender. However, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), was hoping that its candidate, Camile Khoury, would win the seat. Supporters of the two parties were reported to have been embroiled in clashes with one another, which ended only after the army intervened. While the situation was calm in Metn as voters cast their ballots, there were allegations of voting irregularities. Then, prior to the announcement of the election result, Gemayel called for a re-run of the vote in a particular district. Nevertheless, once the votes were counted, it appeared that Khoury had won a slim victory.

The race was regarded as a precursor to the upcoming presidential election for a successor to pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud. This was because Gemayel was viewed as a possible (albeit unconfirmed) candidate for the country's leadership position against former military chief and FPM leader, Micheal Aoun. While Phalange has been an establishment of sorts within the Maronite Christian community, FPM had never been regarded as a bitter rival until the last year.

In 2006, Aoun of FPM, who had once been a strong critic of Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs, became increasingly allied with the extremist group, Hezbollah, which has itself been tied to Syria. There was some speculation that Aoun crafted his alliance with Hezbollah strategically, for the purpose of advancing his presidential ambitions. Regardless of the motivation, his efforts were successful because Hezbollah indicated that Aoun was its preferred candidate in the impending presidential contest.

Clearly with Aoun aligned with Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian **forces** in Lebanon, and with Gemayel and his allies being strong advocates of the pro-Western and anti-Syrian orientation of the ruling coalition, there was a clear choice before the voters in the by-election, and also in the presidential election later in 2007, regarding the path to be charted by the Lebanese people. To this end, Gemayel said, "Lebanon is at a crossroad. The people have to make a choice whether they want an independent and democratic Lebanon, or whether they want to vote for the opposition and a country ruled by Syria."

On Sept. 19, 2007, another anti-Syrian parliamentarian was assassinated in an apparent car bombing that took place in the Lebanese capital. Antoine Ghanim, a member of the Maronite Christian party known as Phalange, was killed when his car exploded in the mainly Christian district of Sin al-Fil in Beirut. Ghanim was an attorney who was first elected to parliament in 2000 and re-elected in 2005. Several other people were killed as well in the attack, which also caused serious injuries to even more victims, as well as damage to nearby cars and buildings.

The Lebanese government expressed its sorrow over Ghanim's death while governments across the world, as well as regional and international groups, conveyed both sympathy and outrage over the turn of events. As the country mourned Ghanim, government offices, banking institutions, schools and universities were closed. A funeral was expected to be held within days.

Ghanim's killing came months after the murder of Walid Eido, less than a year after the death of Pierre Gemayel, the son of the one of the leaders of the Phalange Party [Amin Gemayel], and more than two years after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Since the killing of Hariri, which gave rise to the Cedar Revolution (referenced above), several **political** assassinations have ensued in Lebanon. All the victims have been high-profile figures with anti-Syrian stances.

There have been allegations that Syria has been behind the political killings, presumably as a result of its declining power and influence upon -- and within -- Lebanon in recent years. While an investigation by the United Nations suggested that Syria, indeed, played a role in Hariri's assassination, the government of Syria in Damascus has steadfastly denied any role in the wave of killings. Nevertheless, pro-Western interests both inside Lebanon and internationally have noted that the latest assassination fit the pattern of past assassinations in Lebanon.

Ghanim's death had political implications on two levels. In broad scope, it was the latest manifestation of political violence rocking Lebanon, destabilizing the Siniora government, and ripping away the democratic foundations that were beginning to take shape in the last decade after a long period of civil war. In the immediate future, Ghanim's death had the practical effect of reducing the governing bloc's majority in parliament to only two seats, thus strengthening the position of pro-Syrian elements, such as Hezbollah, in parliament.

The Lebanese parliament, or National Assembly, was made up of a slight majority of modern, anti-Syrian, and pro-Western factions, as noted above. However, the pro-Syrian factions, such as Hezbollah, have also held a great deal of political power. Much of that power had been consolidated after the war between Israel and Hezbollah on Lebanese terrain in 2006. Since that time, Hezbollah had been demanding a greater say in the governing realm.

In fact, the year 2007 had seen Lebanon become increasingly mired in an ongoing political crisis between the two sides in parliament.

The parliamentary breakdown and climate of relations were of significant relevance, given the fact that Lebanese parliamentarians were set to vote on the country's new president. The winner of this vote within parliament would succeed outgoing pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud.

All candidates for the post of head of state were Maronite Christian*, in accordance with existing political provisions.

(*Note: In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the parliamentary speaker is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious representation.)

In the wake of the assassination of Ghanim, there were prevailing questions as to whether or not the vote on the presidency would go forward as planned. But only days after Ghanim's death, Lebanon's government said the election would indeed take place. Prime Minister Fuad Siniora made a point of noting that those responsible for the assassination of Ghanim should not be allowed to succeed in their objectives to undermine the democratic process and to silence the people. To these ends, the Lebanese head of government said, "The hand of terror will not win and will not succeed in subduing us and silencing us." He also called for a United Nations inquiry into the assassination.

On Sept. 25, 2007, the situation changed when the Lebanese parliament adjourned its session intended elect the country's new president and, instead, set a new date of Oct. 23, 2007, to do so. The decision was made due to the absence of pro-Syrian opposition members at the session. As such, there were insufficient parliamentarians present to form the two-thirds quorum, effectively making a vote impossible. While Lebanon's leadership contest remained unresolved, there was some hope that the delayed vote would provide additional time to, perhaps, consult across party lines and reach agreement on a consensus candidate.

Apart from the aforementioned candidate, Michael Aoun, who was supported by Hezbollah, others contesting the election included the following:

pro-government candidate and industrialist Nassib Lahoud, pro-government parliamentarian and former cabinet minister Boutous Harb, former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, and former Army Commander Michel Suleiman. Obeid was rapidly being viewed as a consensus candidate, while Salameh's positive domestic and international reputation was regarded as a strong asset. Suleiman's prospects appeared weak since a constitutional amendment would have to be passed to allow him to become president.

Months later, there was no sign of a successor to President Lahoud. In fact, the highly anticipated presidential election was postponed until Nov. 21, 2007. Parliamentary speaker, Nabih Berri, said that more time was needed to settle on a compromise candidate who would be acceptable to the Western-backed government of Lebanon as well as the Syrian-supported opposition. That date was again postponed until Nov. 23, 2007, due to the failure to agree on a compromise candidate even with the assistance of international mediators.

If no successor to Lahoud was selected by Nov. 24, 2007, when the outgoing president was scheduled to step down from office, interim leadership would be named. Indeed, that deadline approached and passed with no selection of a successor. The vote, in fact, was unable to take place since the pro-Syrian opposition would not allow a quorum to be formed. Instead, a new vote was scheduled for Nov. 30, 2007.

In the interim, as Lahoud left the presidential palace, he instructed the army to take presidential control. To that end, Lahoud issued a statement noting that the army would take on responsibility for ensuring that stability and order was maintained. For his part, however, army chief General Michel Suleiman refrained from comment, preferring to present the military as a neutral entity. But Lahoud's declaration was not accepted as fact. Pro-Western Prime Minister Siniora forthrightly rejected the position that the army was in charge saying that he and his cabinet held temporary power in keeping with constitutional provisions.

In the background of these developments, there have been grave anxieties about a power vacuum, constitutional crisis and civil unrest if the political impasse is not ultimately resolved.

Increasingly unstable Lebanon sunk deeper into a vortex of chaos in mid-December 2007 when one of the country's top generals, General Francois al-Hajj, was assassinated in a car bombing. The attack, which also killed two other individuals including Hajj's bodyguard, took place in the Christian enclave of Baabda, located near to the presidential palace in the capital city of Beirut. The location of the attack had, until this time, been regarded as a highly secure area.

General Hajj, who had been the Lebanese army's chief of operations, was rumored to be in line for the position of army chief, if the current army chief, General Michel Suleiman, was chosen to become the country's new president. Since Emile Lahoud's rule as president ended in late November 2007, the country had been in a state of political crisis with no resolution between the pro-Western ruling government and pro-Syrian/pro-Hezbollah opposition factions in parliament. Both sides were unable to agree on a successor to Lahoud for several months, and as such, the power vacuum has loomed large.

Only by December 2007 did the two sides agree on Suleiman being a consensus candidate, however, their dissonance prevailed as there was no agreement on how to amend the constitution to allow a senior civil servant to be elected to the presidency. As well, no concurrence could be reached on the government, which the opposition refused to recognize.

Hajj's untimely death was another one in a long line of political assassinations in Lebanon since 2005 when former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was murdered. The assassinations of Hariri and a number of anti-Syrian public figures have long since been blamed on Syria. As such, it was not surprising that some pro-Western voices placed the

Political Conditions Lebanon

blame for Hajj's assassination on Syria once again. To that end, Lebanese telecommunications minister Marwan Hamadeh accused the "Syrian-Iranian axis" of targeting the Lebanese military because it was the only entity that could "balance the power of Hezbollah and other militias in the country." However that charge was somewhat tempered by the fact that both Syrian-backed Hezbollah and Hezbollah-backed Christian politician Michel Aoun both condemned Hajj's murder. Indeed Aoun said that he backed the idea of Hajj succeeding Suleiman as army chief.

Attention then turned to other motivations. Because of Hajj's involvement as chief of operations in the fight against Islamic militants at the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp earlier in the year, there was some belief that his assassination was a revenge killing. However, the location of the attack, as noted above, would have required militants to have had access to high level logistical intelligence, thus casting some doubt about that particular theory.

Regardless of who was responsible for Hajj's assassination, such action was unprecedented. To date, the Lebanese military has been viewed as a unifying **force** in this fragmented country, and senior military officials have not been targeted in assassination attacks. Hajj's death, thusly, could be regarded as an omen of further **political** conflict on the horizon for Lebanon.

Developments in Early 2008

The ongoing **political** crisis that had gripped Lebanon for months over the choice of president was extended once again by the start of 2008. The presidential election, which had already been postponed approximately a dozen times due to **political** dissonance on the matter, was delayed again until Feb. 11, 2008. Attempts to mediate a solution by the Arab League had yielded little success. Amr Moussa of the Arab League met with the Lebanese parliament to advocate a plan that would result in the election of Suleiman as president, the formation of a national unity government and the passage of a **new** electoral law.

On Jan. 25, 2008, a powerful bomb blast in the Lebanese capital of Beirut rocked the city and resulted in the deaths of several people. Included in the death toll was Wissam Eid -- a senior intelligence officer. Close to forty others were injured in the bomb blast.

Wissam Eid had been carrying out an investigation of the attacks against notable anti-Syrian **political** and media figures that had plagued Lebanon since 2004 and left the country in a state of instability.

It was thus believed that Wissam Eid was the clear target of the attack, coming on the heels of the late 2007 high profile assassination of a top general. To that end, the Internal Security **Forces** chief, Ashraf Rifi said, "This is a message to the Internal Security **Forces**, following the message sent to the army in December when General Francois el-Hajj was killed in a car bomb."

Meanwhile, Saad Hariri -- the country's majority leader in parliament and son of the assassinated former head of government -- implicated Syria in the attack and demanded that the neighboring country cease its interference into Lebanese affairs.

For its part, as it has before, Damascus, denied any involvement.

Recent Developments: Doha Agreement and Presidential Election

In the first part of 2008, attention turned to the prospect of the impending presidential election. The indirect presidential election in Lebanon had been delayed over and over several times, with **new** dates put forth on a successive basis.

The main presidential candidates, listed in brief above, are discussed more fully following --

One of the strongest candidates has been Michel Suleiman, the chief of the Lebanese armed **forces**. Suleiman is a highly decorated official and he is positively seen by both sides of the Lebanese debate as the best option for the next president. He has been functioning in a leadership role since President Emile Lahoud left office and the presidency has remained vacant.

Nassib Lahoud is a member of the Democratic Renewal Movement, which is anti-Syrian. This movement gained momentum in opposition to the pro-Syrian former president (Emile Lahoud). He believes that Lebanon must put an end to Syrian intrusion in their affairs.

Michael Aoun is a highly controversial candidate for the presidency. Having served as a Prime Minister to one of the governing bodies in Lebanon imposed by former President Amine Gemayel, Aoun's government was defeated by Syrian **forces** in 1990 and he was exiled. After his return in 2005 and the exit of the Syrian **forces**, Aoun became a member of the Free Patriotic Movement that gained support in the 2005 elections and he, himself, was elected to the National Assembly in that same year. Aoun has been criticized for his support of the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah, though he criticized them openly during his exile. He is endorsed by Hezbollah.

Michael Edde was chosen as a candidate by the head of the Lebanese Maronite Church (a sect that produces the majority of Presidents chosen by the Parliament) as a candidate that most parties involved could agree upon. He has worked as a minister in Lebanon for upwards of 30 years.

Riad Salameh is a very successful banker in Lebanon and is supported by the French. He has maintained a stable monetary policy, though his candidacy would require a constitutional amendment to allow him to take the position of president.

Boutros Harb is an anti-Syrian candidate for the presidency. He has been an active protestor of the Hezbollah's involvement in the Lebanese government since the assassination of their Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2004. He insists upon national unity and wishes to work on mutual respect for sovereignty and independence with Syria.

Jean Obeid is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and is seen as a consensus candidate, as he served as an advisor to two former Lebanese presidents on the Syrian affairs.

The election was intended to bring an end to the impasse that had plagued the country since the departure of former President Lahoud. However, no election would take place unless the Western-backed government and Hezbollah-allied opposition could come to agreement on the backing of a consensus candidate.

Several successive postponements marked the lack of consensus on the matter of the presidency. However, even with emerging agreement over Michel Suleiman as the consensus candidate, there remained no agreement regarding a plan to pass a **new** electoral law, that would allow the army chief to take on the position of head of state.

To that end, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa was attempting to broker a three-point plan aimed at resolving the **political** dissonance between the opposition and the Western-backed government. That plan called for the election of Suleiman as president, the formation of a unity government with no group having the right to veto, as well as the passage of a **new** election law. The main sticking point for the opposition bloc was the issue of veto power, which it demanded.

Political Conditions Lebanon

At the core of the political dissonance in Lebanon was the very one keeping the country from securing a leader: the relationship with Syria and the Hezbollah. Indeed, the conflict between the pro-Western government of Lebanon and the parliament (composed of opposed pro-Western and pro-Hezbollah factions) has kept the process from moving forward since November 2007 when President Emile Lahoud left office.

By May 2008, even as Lebanon was once again delaying its presidential election due to lack of consensus among rival factions of parliament, a violent conflict between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government was brewing.

The violence, which resulted in scores of deaths in the streets of Beirut and beyond, had been sparked when the leader of Hezbollah, characterized the government's decision to close its telecommunications network as a "declaration of war." The network had been deemed a threat to security. Hassan Nasrallah also railed at the government for firing the chief of security at the Beirut airport, also on the basis of security concerns. The Hezbollah leader thusly promised to "cut off the hand" trying to dismantle its operations.

On the other side of the equation, Saad Hariri, the leader of the pro-Western parliamentary majority, called for an end to the bloodshed saying, "My appeal to you is to stop the language of arms." This call was not realized. Hezbollah had taken control over the airport and key transport arteries and attacked interests associated with the government in Beirut.

In fact, the area was plagued by several successive days of bloodshed between Hezbollah and pro-government forces, reminiscent of the period in which the country had been plunged into a civil war. The Western-backed government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora said that an "armed and bloody coup" was taking place in his country.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese military warned that the country's security would be at risk if the crisis went on, and it also suggested that its neutral status could be compromised if it was forced to intervene to stop the violence.

While there was a temporary lull in the violence on May 10 and 11, 2008, and even though Hezbollah withdrew some of its fighters from the capital, fighting resumed again outside Beirut in the hills to the east of the capital.

The area was a stronghold of the Druze community and was emerging as the site of violent battles between pro-Hezbollah forces and government supporters. The Druze community was fearful that without the deployment of military troops in the area, Hezbollah would take control by force, as per Beirut. In order to prevent such an end in the northern part of the country, military troops were deployed to Tripoli to tamp down clashes between pro-Hezbollah forces and government supporters. In the background of these developments, thousands of Lebanese people were trying to flee regions of the country affected by the conflict.

Later in May 2008, the Arab League mediated talks in which a deal was forged to bring an end to the fighting. Central to the agreement were provisions for electoral reform and the formation of a national unity cabinet. Earlier, the government had reversed its actions against Hezbollah regarding the telecommunications network and the security chief. As well, Hezbollah agreed to end its street blockades, re-open the airport and end its siege of Beirut. On May 18, 2008, rival political leaders from Lebanon were convening talks in Qatar, aimed at putting the peace deal into action. However, the meeting was somewhat stymied by differing views on Hezbollah's possession of vast stores of weapons.

By May 21, 2008, Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani of Qatar announced in Doha (Qatar) that rival Lebanese factions had agreed on a plan to resolve the political crisis. Central to the Doha Agreement was the provision for the formation of a unity government according to the "16-11-3 formula." To this end, the Western-backed ruling majority would hold 16 cabinet seats and would have the right to select the prime minister, while the Syrian/Hezbollah-backed opposition would hold 11 cabinet seats and have veto power. The president would have the right to nominate options for three cabinet seats. Another core component of the Doha Agreement was the election of a new president within 24 hours, which would itself bring an end to the ongoing political

Political Conditions Lebanon

standoff in Lebanon. Other provisions were included, such as electoral reform, the prohibition of the use of weaponry in internal conflict, and the removal of protests camps in central Beirut. The weapons ban and closure of the protest camps were intended to prevent Lebanon from spiraling into a state of violent civil unrest.

The first tangible sign that the Doha Agreement was clearly activated came when Army Commander Michel Suleiman was elected by parliament and became Lebanon's **new** president. The indirect vote gave Suleiman 118 votes out of 127. In his first official address to Lebanon's parliament, President Michel Suleiman urged national reconciliation saying, "Let us unite... and work towards a solid reconciliation... we have paid dearly for our national unity, let us preserve it hand-in-hand."

This rallying call did not ignore the recent dark events, as he also noted that the country was "starting to wake up from self-destruction." The **new** head of state additionally called for

"quiet dialogue" on the most contentious issues facing Lebanon, such as Hezbollah's role as an armed resistance movement. Suleiman also addressed the thorny matter of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri by saying the country should cooperate with the United Nations in bringing those responsible to justice.

The biggest test facing Lebanon now was the formation of the **new** unity government. Until that government could be formed, outgoing Prime Minister Fuad Siniora would lead the caretaker government.

In late May 2008, Siniora was nominated to reprise his role as prime minister under the provisions of the Doha Agreement. The only other name being considered for the post was that of the son of former Prime Minister Hariri, who had been assassinated years prior. Newly-elected President Suleiman was expected to be presented with the news that Siniora had been selected for the role of head of government, and the process of government formation would then commence.

In July 2008, in the wake of the concurrence reached in the Doha Agreement, Lebanese **political** leaders agreed to form a national unity government, in accordance with the "16-11-3 formula" noted above. With the government to be formed, it was expected that Fuad Siniora (at the time, functioning as the caretaker head of government) would continue on as prime minister and head of government, albeit with a very divided cabinet. Addressing this fact, Siniora said, "Our differences will not be resolved overnight, but we have decided to resolve them through institutions and dialogue rather than in the streets."

On July 11, 2008, Lebanon finally formed a 30-member national unity government after several weeks of difficult negotiations. Indeed, the fractious period was marked by contentious debate among **political** power brokers and violent clashes in the streets of Beirut among supporters of the two rival sides. The **new** cabinet was composed of 16 ministers of the Western-backed ruling majority, 11 allied with the Shiite Hezbollah-led opposition, and the rest three named by President Michel Suleiman.

With the **new** government set to take office, Prime Minister Siniora was faced with a plethora of challenges. Chief among these challenges was the task of unifying the rival factions in the cabinet. Prime Minister Siniora remarked on some of the objectives of this **new** cabinet saying, "This government has two main tasks: regaining confidence in the Lebanese **political** system... and securing the holding of transparent parliamentary elections.

In early August 2008, the Lebanese parliamentary speaker, Nabih Berri, called parliament to discuss a possible confidence vote for the newly-established unity government. The vote would make clear whether the uneasy coalition of unlikely partners -- pro-Western factions and pro-Hezbollah factions-- would be able to maintain functioning viability in parliament. That vote passed off successfully reifying the **new** unity government's authority and influence in parliament.

Other Recent Developments

Meanwhile, in late July 2008 saw sectarian violence break out in Lebanon as rival factions of Alawi and Sunni Muslims clashed in the northern city of Tripoli. Sniper fire and rocket-propelled grenades were reported to have been used by the two sides. Officials said that at least five people died as a result of this bout of violence, however, a number of deaths and injuries had already taken place earlier in the month as a result of the factional fighting. The clashes occurred in the wake of the formation of a unity government and appeared to have been sparked by differences over militia weaponry and disarmament.

On Aug. 13, 2008, a bomb explosion in the Lebanese port city of Tripoli killed between 10 and 20 people and wounded more than 30 others. According to the Lebanese military, the bomb exploded in proximity of a bus carrying several off-duty soldiers and some of those troops were among the dead.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, however, the city had been the site of sectarian fighting between the dominant Sunni community, which supports the pro-Western **forces** of government, and the Alawite community, with its Shi'a roots and connection to pro-Syrian Hezbollah. This particular attack occurred one day after the **new** government of national unity won a key confidence vote and just as newly-elected President Michel Suleiman was set to visit Syria. As such, there was speculation that the attack was intended to upset reconciliatory movement both at home and abroad between typically-conflicted pro-Western and pro-Syrian factions.

For his part, President Suleiman described the explosion as "a terrorist act" and promised that the country's military would not stand for such action. In a statement, he said, "The army and security **forces** will not be terrorized by attacks and crimes that target it and civil society, and the history of the army attests to that."

Update:

October 2008 saw Syrian President Bashar al-Assad initiate plans to forge diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time in decades. Indeed, the two Arab countries have been at odds with one another since gaining independence from France in the 1940s. The plans, which have been backed by France, includes the establishment of a Syrian embassy in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. The move would be a symbolic acknowledgment of Lebanese sovereignty after decades of what many have viewed as Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs.

On the other side of the equation, Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh said that he would travel to the Syrian capital of Damascus to commence establishing ties with his Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moualem. That would constitute the first step in the diplomatic process, ultimately aimed at the exchange of ambassadors by the close of 2009.

In March 2009, there was a stall on the proceedings of the special tribunal, established by the United Nations at The Hague, to try those individuals believed to be responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. At issue were the upcoming general elections. The court decided to halt its call to transfer four generals held in connection with Hariri's assassination until after the elections in June 2009.

Meanwhile in January 2009, the Lebanese Interior Ministry issued a decree calling for the parliamentary elections to take place in June 2009. The parliamentary elections were to take place according to the 1960 election law, as urged by the opposition, and signed by Lebanese rival leaders in Doha in 2008 as a way of ending the prevailing **political** power struggle between pro-Western and pro-Hezbollah factions in government.

Political Conditions Lebanon

On the issue of the elections scheduled for June 2009, President Michel Suleiman vowed in March 2009 to hold the general elections on time, saying in the An-Nahar daily publication that elections are "democratic means of competition."

He went on to note, "The elections represent one step in the political life, and not the end of the road."

At stake was representation in the 128-seat parliament, which according to Lebanon's power-sharing system, divides seat allocation along sectarian and communal lines. In effect, that means that there were 64 seats for Muslims and 64 seats for Christians. The two main factions contesting the elections were as follows--

-The pro-Western "14 March Coalition," made up of Future movement, Progressive Socialist Party, Christian Lebanese Forces and Christian Phalangist party.

-The Hezbollah-led bloc, composed of Hezbollah, Amal movement of Speaker Nabih Birri, and Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun.

Lebanese voters finally went to the polls on June 7, 2009 to cast their ballots and, in so doing, select members of parliament. Turnout was said to be high at close to 55 percent -- the highest level of voter participation since the 1975-91 civil war. Former United States President Jimmy Carter led a team of international monitors who concluded that the voting took place in a free and fair manner.

At issue in the election was the ongoing power struggle between the Lebanon's governing pro-Western coalition and the Hezbollah-led bloc on the other side of the equation. The two sides have been deadlocked in a political battle for supremacy for several years. But with the votes counted, it was clear that the ruling pro-Western coalition would retain its majority in the 128-member parliament. The actual official results indicated that the pro-Western coalition won 71 seats and the Hezbollah bloc secured 57 seats. With these results confirmed, the pro-Western coalition actually increased its parliamentary representation and consolidated its political power.

Saad Hariri-- the leader of the pro-Western coalition and the son of assassinated anti-Syrian politician Rafiq Hariri - claimed victory. In a speech before jubilant supporters, Hariri said, "Congratulations to you, congratulations to freedom, congratulations to democracy." He continued, "There is no winner and loser in these elections, the only winner is democracy and Lebanon." On the other side of the equation, the Hezbollah-led bloc was reported to have conceded defeat.

Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said: "I would like to congratulate all those who won, those in the majority and those in the opposition."

Western countries, such as the United States, were likely relieved to hear the election results, which decisively averted the prospect of victory and increased political influence for the Hezbollah bloc.

In fact, United States President Barack Obama reportedly, "It is our sincere hope that the next government will continue along the path towards building a sovereign, independent and stable Lebanon."

Fresh on the heels of election victory, Lebanese majority leader Saad Hariri said in an interview with Italian media that he was ready to lead a new government. On Italy's Italian TV Rai Uno, Hariri said, "I did not have the experience and was not ready after my father's assassination to take office, but now after four years I do not fear taking this position."

Of course, Saad Hariri was referring to his father, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was assassinated in a car bomb in Beirut on Feb.14, 2005. Saad Hariri became the leader of the coalition that won

election in what came to be known as the "Cedar Revolution" just after his father's assassination. However, the younger Hariri did not lead the government, instead leaving that task to Prime Minister Fouad Seniora. Going forward, though, Hariri was indicating that he had effectively earned the right to head the new incoming government.

Striking an assertive tone, Hariri said, "We are keen on doing what the Lebanese want and not what the United States, Europe or Israel want." He also said that the new government would be fully representative and that his hands were outstretched to political opponents "for the interest of Lebanon." This statement was viewed as a veiled hint toward the Shi'ite militant group, Hezbollah, especially as he made clear that his government would solve its problems via dialogue and not with violence.

On June 27, 2009, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman announced that Hariri would be the country's new prime minister. In this way, the younger Hariri would take on the role once held by his late father. Prime Minister-designate Hariri was tasked with forming a new government, which he said would include members of the opposition. It was not known if the opposition membership in government would extend to Hezbollah.

That said, there was a sense that Lebanon was entering a period of stability after several years of insecurity and volatility that came with Rafiq Hariri's assassination and continued well after the so-called Cedar Revolution, and reached its nadir during the war between Hezbollah and Israel.

Relations with Israel came to the fore in September 2009 when two rockets were fired into northern Israel from Lebanon; the explosions were reported in the Israeli city of Nahariya only six miles from the border with Lebanon. The Israeli military responded by firing eight shells into a fruit plantation near the city of Tyre. There were no reports of deaths or injuries as a result, although Israeli police said they did manage to find the remnants of a Katyusha rocket.

United Nations peacekeepers in Lebanon urged both sides to exercise restraint in response to the situation. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) said that it was deploying extra troops and released the following statement: "Unifil is in contact with both sides, urging them to exercise maximum restraint, uphold the cessations of hostilities and avoid taking steps which would lead to further escalation."

Unifil was established in 1978 following Israel's incursion into Lebanon and was expanded after Israel's 2006 war with the militant Islamic group, Hezbollah. That situation was spurred by a Hezbollah offensive from Lebanese terrain into Israel, in which two Israeli soldiers were seized at the onset. Israel retaliated and Lebanese citizens -- more than 1,000 in total -- were killed in the crossfire of violence. As well, about 160 Israelis, most of whom were soldiers, also died in the war as a result of rocket fire and fighting. The border region maintained a sense of uneasy calm since the end of the 2006, although there have been occasional flare ups of rocket fire and clashes between the two sides.

On July 30, 2010, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Saudi King Abdullah were in Beirut for landmark talks with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman. The meeting was significant largely because of the complicated relationship between Lebanon and Syria through the years, which translated into a complex political terrain in Lebanon defined by pro-Syrian/Hezbollah-backed factions at odds with anti-Syrian/pro-reform factions, who have had tenuous control of the government. Those tensions reached a nadir years ago as discussed in the "Editor's Note" below and have functioned as the main dynamics of the Lebanese political sphere. Now tensions were on the rise once again.

At issue was the possible indictment of members of Hezbollah by a United Nations tribunal investigating the assassination of vocal anti-Syrian former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. As noted below in the "Editor's Note," Hariri's murder marked a turning point in Lebanon's modern history, functioning as a harbinger for the Cedar Revolution that forced the Syrian military from Lebanon after a 30-year long presence there. Despite its tragic roots, the Cedar

Political Conditions Lebanon

Revolution was a **political** victory for pro-Western and reformist **forces** in Lebanon, and concomitantly enflamed the passions of pro-Syrian elements in the country, many of whom were allied with Hezbollah and sought to assert their authority in Lebanon. Now, in mid-2010, the possible indictment of members of Hezbollah in Hariri's assassination, in many ways, re-opened the wounds of that period.

Still, years after Syrian **forces** were compelled to exit Lebanon, Syrian President al-Assad was in Lebanon for his first visit since that fateful period. While some Lebanese would likely interpret the visit as a sign of progress between the two neighboring countries, others could well view it as a rallying cry for renewed hostility between pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian factions. But the presence of Saudi King Abdullah on the scene underlined the imperative for regional powers to work in lockstep for Middle Eastern stability. To this end, both the leaders of Syria and Saudi Arabia appealed for calm during unprecedented talks in Lebanon and urged that country's rival factions to refrain from violence despite the politics of the moment. Moreover, with al-Assad and King Abdullah saying that resolution should be reached through "legal institutions," there was a message of unity and a tacit endorsement of the United Nations tribunal process.

On Aug. 3, 2010, Lebanese and Israeli soldiers have exchanged fire along their shared border. There were competing claims as to what spurred the incident. Lebanese officials claimed that it started firing only after warning Israeli soldiers not to uproot a tree impeding their view on the Lebanese side of the border; they said that Israeli troops responded with artillery fire. Lebanese authorities also accused Israeli troops of crossing the border into Lebanon and said that three of their soldiers and a journalist had been killed in the fracas. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri criticized Israel for its "aggression." For its part, Israel said that it also had casualties with two of its soldiers being shot in the border zone; Israel also denied ever encroaching on Lebanese territory. Indeed, Israel said that its armed **forces** were on the Israeli side of the internationally-sanctioned "blue line" separating the two countries, carrying out routine operations, when they were warned to withdraw from the area. The Israeli Defense **Forces** said that individuals in Lebanese army uniforms then opened fire on them.

It was the most serious diplomatic imbroglio between Israel and Lebanon since the 2006 conflict between Israel and the Lebanon-based militant extremist organization, Hezbollah. Perhaps not surprisingly, United Nations peacekeeping **forces** stationed in southern Lebanon called on both sides to exercise "maximum restraint" at a time of heightened tensions.

Special Entry

Western **political** bloc refuses to join **new** Lebanese government and calls for **new** "Cedar Revolution"

Background --

On Jan. 12, 2011, the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri collapsed when members of the Hezbollah faction and its allies resigned from the cabinet. In fact, ten of the prime minister's 30 cabinet ministers withdrew from unity government while Saad Hariri was in the United States for talks with President Barack Obama.

At issue for the members of the Hezbollah faction was a United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which has been investigating the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri -- the father of the current Prime Minister Hariri. Indications suggested that the United Nations-backed tribunal was going to indict members of Hezbollah for Rafik Hariri's assassination, even handing over supporting documents to a pre-trial judge. For its part, Hezbollah wanted the government to convene an emergency session aimed at opposing the tribunal. Hezbollah has further characterized the tribunal as a joint Israeli-United States project intended to discredit the extremist Shi'ite anti-Israel entity.

Gebran Bassil, the country's energy minister for the opposition March 8 alliance, read a statement on behalf of opposition ministers. He said on Hezbollah's al-Manar news service: "Following our last bid to resolve matters through our call for an immediate cabinet session, and after our call was turned down by the other bloc, and in order

to pave the way for the formation of a **new** government that would be able to assume its duties in the upcoming stage, we announce our resignation from the government."

Clearly, the resignations and collapse of the government meant that talks led by Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia intended to avert a **political** crisis had not ended successfully. Lebanon's cause of stability was not helped by the fact that Saudi Arabia decided to abandon its mediation efforts.

New government --

Nevertheless, attention would refocus on Lebanese President Michel Suleiman with an eye on forming a **new** cabinet. To that end, President Suleiman was expected to launch consultations with the various **political** factions. For his part, Prime Minister Hariri -- now the head of a caretaker government -- was making the international rounds as he conducted talks in France and Turkey, aimed at shoring up support for a **new** government with him at the helm. Hezbollah was hinting that it would not sanction a government headed by Hariri; however, Hariri was insisting that he intended to hold onto his job.

But on Jan. 24, 2011, it was Najib Mikati, an American-educated businessman, who was nominated by Hezbollah for the post of prime minister during talks with President Michel Suleiman. Mikati had served briefly as prime minister between April and July 2005 -- a period of heightened tensions following Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. Now, in 2011, Mikati won the backing of a bare majority in the Chamber of Deputies -- 65 of 128, thanks to support from Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, and six members of his Progressive Socialist Party, who swung the vote in the direction of Mikati and away from Hariri.

Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah suggested that if that group's candidate (Mikati) was appointed prime minister, efforts would be made to form another national unity government inclusive of Hariri's Western-backed Future Movement. Caretaker Prime Minister Hariri was quick to dismiss such a move, making clear he would not serve in a government chosen by the Iran-backed Hezbollah, and issuing a statement that read as follows: "The Future Movement... rejects taking part in any government headed by an 8 March candidate." [Note that March 8 refers to the coalition that includes Hezbollah, the Shi'a Amal movement, and the bloc of the Maronite Christian leader, Michel Aoun.] Supporters of Hariri and his Future Movement took to the streets in angry protests across the country. President Suleiman was hoping to act as peacemaker, saying in an interview with the media, "We are all one hand for the sake of Lebanon."

In the backdrop of these developments was the ongoing power struggle between Hezbollah and the Western-backed pro Hariri factions. For its part, Hezbollah's supporters were taking to the streets to carry out demonstrations, presumably aimed at showing the group's **political** influence in Lebanon. Opponents said that Hezbollah was trying to intimidate the Lebanese populace. At the same time, Hariri's Future Movement parliamentary block and their Western-backed March 14 Alliance were accusing Hezbollah and its allies of trying to turn Lebanon into "an Iranian base." The dissonance was contributing to fears of a resumption civil war in Lebanon. Such anxieties reached **new** heights on Jan. 25, 2011, when Mikati was officially appointed to become the **new** prime minister, spurring further protests across Lebanon by Sunnis alarmed at the consolidation of Hezbollah's **political** power. For his part, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri praised fellow Lebanese who "denounced the attempts of hegemony over our national citizens," but also expressly rejected violent forms of expression.

At the international level, the Obama administration of the United States said it had "great concerns about a government within which Hezbollah plays a leading role." Indeed, the United States has designated Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that on Jan. 17, 2011, international prosecutors for the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon issued a sealed indictment for the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. It was expected, as noted above, that members of Hezbollah would be named in the indictment. Yet to be seen was the matter of whether or not a pre-trial judge would issue warrants. In Lebanon, assuming that Mikati would indeed become prime minister, it was not known if he could cooperate with Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

Update --

Political Conditions Lebanon

On Feb. 27, 2011, Lebanon's Western-backed March 14 Alliance made clear that it would not be joining the new government of Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati. The Western-backed political bloc said that Mikati was unwilling to give clear commitments relating to the aforementioned United Nations-backed tribunal investigating the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The March 14 Alliance also accused Shi'ite militant extremist group Hezbollah of working with allies to carry out a coup aimed at bringing down the government of Saad Hariri. Accordingly, former Prime Minister Faoud Siniora, speaking on behalf of the bloc, issued the following statement: "The March 14 forces refuse to legitimize this coup and will not stand silent in the face of violations being committed." Siniora continued, "The March 14 camp will confront this coup through all means available in the framework of its commitment to the practice of democracy."

By mid-March 2011, tens of thousands of Lebanese were taking to the streets in Beirut to demand the disarming of Hezbollah, which was now the dominant force in government. The rallies ensued on the sixth anniversary of the "Cedar Revolution," which swept Syrian forces from Lebanese soil after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. On this occasion, former Prime Minister Siniora formally posed the questions asked by many of Lebanese at the rallies: "Do you accept the formation of a government that imposes its weapons on its people? Do you accept a government who would topple and stop the funding of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon?" In answer to that question, Siniora's Maronite Christian ally, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, said: "I am announcing today with you this is the second Cedar Revolution that will not stop until the end of the (Hezbollah) ministate."

See below under "Update" for details related to the development of a new Hezbollah-dominated government in June 2011, and the geopolitical challenges emerging as a result.

2011 Update

On May 27, 2011, a bomb hit a United Nations convoy in Lebanon, injuring at least six Italian peacemakers. The bomb exploded close to the coastal city of Sidon. According to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil*), the bomb appeared to have been aimed at a logistics convoy. Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati condemned the attack but there was no immediate indication of who might be responsible.

*Note: Unifil operates in Lebanon with about 13,000 troops deployed to southern Lebanon. Its mission has been to keep the peace along the conflict-ridden border with Israel. First formed in 1978 when Israeli troops entered southern Lebanon, Unifil's mission was expanded in 2006 following the war between Israel and the Lebanese militant extremist Islamic group, Hezbollah.

On June 13, 2011, Lebanon announced that it had finally formed a new government. The announcement was made following meetings between Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, House Speaker Nabih Berri, and Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati, and occurred almost five months after the collapse of outgoing Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government.

Indeed, on Jan. 12, 2011, conflict between the Western-backed March 14 Alliance and the Iran and Syria-backed Hezbollah bloc led to the unraveling of that unity government. At issue for the members of the Hezbollah faction was a United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which has been investigating the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri -- the father of the younger Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Indications suggested that the United Nations-backed tribunal was going to indict members of Hezbollah for Rafik Hariri's assassination, even handing over supporting documents to a pre-trial judge. For its part, Hezbollah wanted the government to convene an emergency session aimed at opposing the tribunal. No concurrence on the matter led to the exit of the opposition ministers from cabinet and the fall of the Hariri government.

The political scene became more tense when Najib Mikati, the Hezbollah nominee, was chosen for the post of prime minister following talks with President Michel Suleiman. The Western-backed March 14 Alliance of outgoing

Political Conditions Lebanon

Prime Minister Hariri made it clear that it would not sanction such a move and would not participate in any new Hezbollah-backed government of Mikati. Now, in June 2011, as the new cabinet line-up was unveiled, even as Mikati promised a government that would be for "all the nation," it was apparent that the government was not representative of the wide array of political parties of Lebanon. Instead, it was heavily dominated by members of Hezbollah and its closest ally, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. It should be noted that Aoun, a Christian, was once an enemy of Shi'a Hezbollah, but has since reconciled with the Islamic militant extremist group for strategic political reasons. He has, therefore, been viewed as a traitor by many Christian Lebanese.

Not surprisingly, the nature of the new Lebanese government signaled alarm bells across the West in response to this move. Indeed, Hezbollah has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Canada, and several other Western powers. Moreover, the ascendancy of Hezbollah as the dominant power in Lebanon was illustrative of the resurgence of Syrian and Iranian power on the Lebanese scene.

It should be noted that the aforementioned United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon was scheduled to announce its findings by July 2011. A list of indictments was expected to include members of Hezbollah, therefore compelling the government of Lebanon to arrest those individuals. To that end, at the close of June 2011, the United Nations-backed tribunal investigating the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri reportedly moved to issue arrest warrants for four members of Hezbollah.

The son of Hariri, Saad Hariri, said that he welcomed these moves, characterizing them as "historic" developments in Lebanese recent history. As reported by Agence France Presse, the younger Hariri said: After many years of patience, of struggle... today, we witness a historic moment in Lebanese politics, justice and security."

At a news conference, newly-selected Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said, "All suspects are innocent until proven guilty." Prime Minister Mikati said his government intended to deal "responsibly and realistically" with the United Nations indictments, but that it would bear in mind "that these are accusations and not verdicts."

Despite Prime Minister Mikati's public claims that Lebanon's international responsibilities include its support for the tribunal, his view was not echoed by the rest of the Hezbollah-dominated government. Indeed, it was Hezbollah's objections to the very United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon that led to the collapse of the previous government, ushering in the current Hezbollah-dominated government, headed by Mikati. As expected, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, quickly rejected the indictments, insisting that no power would be allowed to arrest four indicted individuals, whom he characterized as the "honorable brothers." He has also insisted that there was "no direct evidence" against the four suspects despite the existence of incriminating telephone records.

Clearly, with this assertion from Nasrallah, there was little optimism that the new Lebanese government would actually act on the basis of the indictments and arrest the four Hezbollah individuals at stake. Regardless, Lebanon now had 30 days to serve the arrest warrants; should the Lebanese authorities fail to act, then the Special Tribunal for Lebanon would be empowered to publicize the indictments and summon the suspects to appear before the court. In fact, if the Lebanese authorities failed to act upon the dictates of international law, the United Nations Security Council would have to make a decision on its next course of action. The entire situation placed Lebanon at risk of international isolation.

Note that by July 10, 2011, Interpol was circulating arrest warrants for the named in the aforementioned indictments over the assassination of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The suspects' names, photographs, and other biographical information were made public at that time.

According to a spokesperson for the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Marten Youssed, "The tribunal has requested Interpol to notify all states of the arrest warrants."

More than a month later, on Aug. 17, 2011, the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon publicized the charges against four named suspects, who were expected to be tried in absentia.

In the indictment, Mustafa Badreddine, a high-level figure in the Lebanese Hezbollah, was identified as the central director of the operation. Another Hezbollah figure, Salim Ayyash, was accused of orchestrating the actual assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri. The other two suspects were charged with complicity due to their attempts to craft a false claim of responsibility. The tribunal's chief prosecutor, Daniel Bellemare, said that the publication of the indictment would serve to "finally inform the public and the victims about the facts." He continued, "The full story will, however, only unfold in the courtroom, where an open, public, fair and transparent trial will render a final verdict."

Meanwhile, on Aug. 11, 2011, a bomb exploded at a parking lot in a northern suburb of the Lebanese capital city of Beirut. Two people were killed as a result of the explosion while at least one passerby was injured. According to police, the two people who died had been handling explosives at the time of the blast. Accordingly, there was speculation that the two individuals may have been either assembling the bomb or trying to dismantle it. Regardless, Lebanese authorities indicated that they were treating the incident as an act of terrorism. The situation recalled the period between 2004 and 2008 when there were a spate of car bombings in Lebanon -- most of which targeted anti-Syrian figures.

In the realm of foreign relations, Hezbollah claimed that it uncovered a Central Intelligence Agency spy ring in Lebanon. A Hezbollah member of parliament, Hassan Fadlallah, confirmed in an interview with Agence France Presse that "Lebanese intelligence vanquished U.S. and Israeli intelligence in what is now known as the intelligence war." A report by the Associated Press reflected the same claims with acknowledgment from officials in the United States. Of course, the dynamics of the respective governments notwithstanding, the lives of the individuals accused of spying were now broadly regarded to be at risk.

The notion of foreign agents infiltrating Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon resurfaced in February 2012 when a military tribunal in Lebanon sentenced three people to death for spying on Hezbollah on behalf of Israel. The men reportedly passed on information about Hezbollah officials to Israeli contacts over the course of a decade. The cases have come to light since 2009 when Lebanese authorities began a crackdown against Israeli spies, leading to the arrests, convictions, and death sentencing of several suspects.

2012 Update:

In 2012, Lebanon was being rocked by spill-over sectarian violence from Syria. In May 2012, sectarian clashes in northern Lebanon left a number of people dead and several more injured, with blame being placed on brewing conflict between Alawite supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Sunnis, who back the Syrian opposition. Syrian President Assad was himself an Alawite -- a variant of the Shi'a sect of Islam. Of particular concern was the outbreak of violence in the Lebanese city of Tripoli and the deaths of at least five people there.

At issue was the eruption of violence when a Sunni cleric, Shadi al-Moulawi, was arrested on terrorism charges. Supporters of al-Moulawi said he was detained because of his assistance to Syrian refugees. Of course, Lebanon's current government -- dominated by members of Hezbollah -- has held a more favorable orientation to Syria, and could presumably be less lenient with anti-Syrian activists. Despite calls by *political* and religious leaders to end the violence, fighting has continued in Lebanon, which has increasingly become a bastion of refuge for Syrian refugees fleeing the violence in Syria.

By the third week of the month (May 2012), the spillover violence continued when Sheikh Ahmed Abdul Wahid, an opponent of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was shot to death at a Lebanese army checkpoint. The incident occurred in a part of Lebanon where the sympathies of the people were clearly with the Syrian rebels. The incident,

Political Conditions Lebanon

therefore, brought into high relief the aforementioned tensions between Lebanon's current government (dominated by members of Hezbollah and pro-Assad in orientation) -- and -- Sunni Muslims in Lebanon who have some loyalty to the anti-Syrian former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, and thus feel connected to the Syrian opposition.

Sheikh Wahid's death triggered violent street battles, which reached new heights at the funeral of the Sunni Muslim cleric. Demonstrations ensued in the northern province of Akkar, while protests in Beirut spurred gun battles as well as the firing of rocket-propelled grenades. In Beirut, the street battle were between members of the Future Movement (aligned with supporters of former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri), and pro-Syrian activists. At least two people died as a result. The violence in Lebanon served as a reminder of the episodes of sectarian strife that has periodically plagued the country over the years, and raised the specter of another sectarian conflict erupting in Lebanon.

By the start of June 2012, around ten people were killed and more than 20 were injured in Tripoli when clashes broke out in the northern port city. As before, they were seemingly sparked by the crisis unfolding in neighboring Syria. In this case, pro-Syrian Alawites and anti-Assad Sunni cadres became embroiled in violent clashes on June 2, 2012 in the Sunni Bab al-Tebbaneh district and in the pro-Syrian and Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighborhood of Tripoli. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati visited Tripoli, held talks with ministers and officials, and promised that security forces would work to stop the violence. However, the passions of the two sides were clearly inflamed and were sparking sectarian tensions in a manner unseen in recent times. With no end in sight to the Syrian crisis, it was unlikely that the spill-over sectarian violence in Lebanon would spontaneously end. The main question was whether or not it could trigger a return to Lebanon's previous political landscape of sectarian conflict.

In mid-August 2012, four Arab countries -- Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait -- urged their citizens to exit Lebanon due to spillover sectarian violence from Syria.

The call was made following a series of kidnappings of Sunni Muslims by a powerful Shi'a clan in Lebanon. The al-Meqdad clan claimed that the 20 individuals (most of whom were Syrian nationals but also included at least one Turkish and one Saudi national) had ties to the Syrian rebels. They further claimed that the kidnappings had been carried out in retaliation for the abduction of an al-Meqdad clan member by Syrian rebels in Damascus. The Syrian rebels had their own counterclaim; they said that the man they seized in Damascus was fighting for the Syrian government on behalf of Lebanon's Shia Hezbollah movement. The situation was further complicated when seven Lebanese hostages held by Syrian rebels were wounded as Syrian warplanes struck the town of Azaz to the north of the Syrian city of Aleppo.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese city of Tripoli had already seen no shortage of violence between supporters and opponents of Syrian President Assad.

As a result of these developments, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait were clearly responding to the fact that the Syrian de facto civil war was not only slipping over into Lebanese terrain, but was also being imprinted with a sectarian dimension. Indeed, it was pitting Shi'a and Sunni against one another, with implications for the entire region.

Of course, Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- both countries with predominantly Sunni Muslim citizens -- have offered support to the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime.

Also in August 2012, the pro-Hezbollah cabinet of Lebanon approved a new electoral law based on proportional representation and referred it to the parliament for ratification. If passed in the legislative chamber, the new legislation would divide Lebanon into 13 electoral districts for the 2013 legislative elections, effectively reducing the number of constituencies in half from its current 26 districts. With the vote in parliament pending, former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who was now serving as the pro-Western opposition leader, made clear that he and his party would reject the legislation. Hariri explained that the draft electoral law would disadvantage half the

Political Conditions Lebanon

Lebanese population, saying: "This draft law is directed against more than half of the Lebanese... This project is unacceptable and will not pass." Hariri also accused the government of adopting the electoral law because it would give the militant party of Hezbollah an advantage at the polls.

On Oct. 19, 2012, Lebanon was rocked by shocking violence when a massive car bombing occurred in the mainly Christian district of Ashrafiya within the capital city of Beirut. Three people were killed as a result and as many as 80 others were wounded. Among the dead was the internal intelligence chief, Wissam al-Hassan.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility although it was apparent that Hassan may have been the target of an assassination plot. Hassan's close ties to the anti-Syrian opposition led to suspicion that the violence in Lebanon was intrinsically connected to the de facto civil war raging in Syria between the Assad regime in that country, and the anti-government opposition movement. Of course, Hassan was also a close associate of opposition leader Saad Hariri, who was also a vocal critic of the Assad regime in Syria. It should be noted that Saad Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was assassinated in 2005. Pro-western in orientation, Hariri's assassination was linked towards his anti-Syrian orientation. The Hassan-Hariri connection to Syria was a strong one since Hassan led the investigation into the 2005 assassination, which ultimately implicated Syria. More recently, Hassan was behind the arrest of a Lebanese politician who was allegedly plotting a terror campaign in Lebanon, with Syria as the supposed sponsor of such action. Thus, suspicion in the Hassan assassination was quickly pointing in the direction of Syria once again.

At home in Lebanon, protesters took to the streets to register their outrage. The emerging unrest led Prime Minister Najib Mikatis to offer his resignation to

President Michel Suleiman. The president, however, urged him to remain in his role in the interests of national unity and stability, and in order to prevent a power vacuum.

With the government of Mikati supported by the political wing of Hezbollah, and with Hassan linked with the 14 March opposition alliance of Saad Hariri, the notion of national unity seemed illusive. Indeed, the two political blocs have long been on a collision course. The assassination of Hassan likely re-opened old wounds, as they stoked the memories of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, ultimately deepening the political cleavages between pro-Syrian and Hezbollah factions on one side, and the pro-Western opposition on the other. Not surprisingly, the opposition reacted unfavorably to the idea of Mikati staying on at the helm of a national unity government, even as efforts soon shifted towards the goal of forming a new coalition government.

The Western-backed 14 March opposition alliance made it known that it was holding Mikati "personally responsible for Hassan's blood and the blood of innocent people." It also demanded the resignation of Mikati's government. Further, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora of 14 March opposition alliance warned, "The Lebanese people won't accept, after today, the continuation of the government of assassination." Stung by these accusations, Mikati responded by rescinding his offer of resignation and instead insisting that he would remain as head of government.

In an additional twist, the opposition alliance's leader, Saad Hariri, unequivocally accused Syrian President Bashar Assad of being behind Hassan's assassination.

2013 Update

In February 2013, Bulgarian officials were placing the blame on Lebanon-based Hezbollah for a bus bombing that killed five Israelis and a local bus driver, in the Black Sea resort town of Burgas in mid-2012.

The attack on July 18, 2012, which also resulted in the death of the suspected suicide bomber, occurred at the Burgas airport in Bulgaria. The bombing appeared to target a bus carrying Israeli tourists and ensued on the 18th

anniversary of a deadly attack on a Jewish community center in Argentina, raising the likelihood that the Bulgaria bombing was another instance of anti-Jewish terrorism by extremist elements.

At the time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wasted little time in blaming Iran for the act of terrorism. A day later, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak expanded on Netanyahu's claim that Iran was behind the act of terrorism, explaining that the Lebanese Hezbollah was the direct perpetrator of the attack, but had been acting under the aegis of Iran. Netanyahu himself explained the connection using the following phrase: "Hezbollah, the long arm of Iran." Analysts were suggesting that the terror attack in Bulgaria was likely another manifestation of the covert war between Israel and Iran. To that end, there were intimations that the Bulgaria bombing might have been a retaliatory attack for the series of targeted strikes against Iranian nuclear scientists. For its part, Iran dismissed the accusation and expressed condemnation for "all terrorist acts."

No statement, though, came from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In mid- 2012, United States officials were suggesting that the suicide bomber on the bus in Bulgaria was a member of Hezbollah. According to the **New** York Times, their sources did not wish to be identified as the investigation was under way, however, the suicide bomber was in Bulgaria on a mission to attack Israeli interests. The **New** York Times' unnamed sources also observed that Hezbollah was being guided and sponsored by Iran in this effort. Bulgarian Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov was on the record confirming that the suicide bomber had been "in country" for several days prior to the terror attack.

More than six months later in February 2013, and with an investigation having taken place, Bulgarian officials were now officially saying that there were "obvious links" to Lebanon and Hezbollah. Bulgarian Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that two suspects involved in the Burgas bombing plot were directly linked to Hezbollah. He said, "We have established that the two were members of the militant wing of Hezbollah. There is data showing the financing and connection between Hezbollah and the two suspects."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wasted little time re-entering the fray. He accused Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Iran of "waging a global terror campaign across borders and continents" and called on Europe to "reach the required conclusions regarding the true nature of Hezbollah." That latter call appeared to reference the fact that many European countries have not gone so far as Israel and the United States in classifying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

In the third week of February 2013, Bahraini authorities were saying that they had foiled an Iranian-backed terror plot that targeted military and civil installations as well as certain public figures. The public security chief, Major General Tariq Al Hassan, accused an Iranian national, Abu Nasser, of dispatching funds to a terror cell named "Army of Imam," presumably to carry out the operation. As well, five suspects linked with the terror cell were arrested in Bahrain and Oman. Bahrain's Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa

confirmed that a "terrorist cell" linked to Iran and Lebanon had been uncovered. For its part, Iranian politicians dismissed the claimed of an Iran-linked terrorist cell. Indeed, Hoseyn Naqavi Hoseyni, the spokesman of Iran Majlis Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, described the allegation as part of Bahrain's campaign of "Iranophobia." Meanwhile, a Lebanese member of parliament and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel Aoun, actively entered the Shi'ite-Sunni fracas in Bahrain when he accused the international community and the Arab League for failing to support Bahrain's Shi'ite protest movement. It should be noted that Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has been Hezbollah's main Christian ally in Lebanon.

In March 2013, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Najib Miqati signed a decree calling for parliamentary elections to be held in June 2013.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Later in the month on March 23, 2013, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati. Although Mikati claimed his resignation was for "personal reasons," the general consensus was that he resigned amidst **political** disagreements with the Hezbollah bloc in government. At issue, according to the Beirut Daily Star, was the fact that Hezbollah members of the cabinet objected to a proposal to establish an electoral supervisory body ahead of parliamentary elections to be held in Lebanon. Also contributing to the dissonance between Hezbollah and Mikati was the Hezbollah **political** bloc's rejection of Mikati's plan to extend the term of the internal security chief. The growing chasm between Hezbollah and Mikati -- one time **political** allies -- appeared to be the latest manifestation of the **political** crisis gripping Lebanon. For his part, Mikati said that the internal divisions in Lebanon were only serving to create deep wounds and urged the various **political** parties to "come together to bring Lebanon out of the unknown."

In the first week of April 2013,

Tammam Salam -- a moderate independent and the son of former Prime Minister Saeb Salam -- was named as the **new** head of government. He was something of a consensus selection, as he won the support of both the pro-Western March 14 bloc and the Hezbollah-controlled March 8 alliance.

Note that in 2009, following a parliamentary victory for the pro-Western coalition, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman announced that Saad Hariri would be the country's **new** prime minister. In this way, the younger Hariri would take on the role once held by his late father. Prime Minister-designate Hariri was tasked with forming a **new** government, which he said would include members of the opposition. The prime minister is appointed by the president in consultation with the National Assembly. Hariri's government collapsed in January 2011 when the Hezbollah faction withdrew from the unity government, making way for Hezbollah-sanctioned Najib Mikati to take on the role as the **new** prime minister. In March 2013, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Najib Mikati signed a decree calling for parliamentary elections to be held in June 2013. Shortly thereafter, Mikati issued his resignation due to conflicts with Hezbollah and as noted above, in April 2013, Tammam Salam was named as the **new** head of government. See below for primer on 2013 elections and an announcement on the postponement of those polls.

Violence from Syria reaches Lebanon due to Hezbollah's involvement in Syrian conflict

In mid-August 2013, Lebanon was struck by Hezbollah-related violence. An explosion in a southern suburb of Beirut killed about two dozen people and injured 200 others. The blast also exacted massive damage to buildings and vehicles in the vicinity.

A week later as August 2013 was coming to a close, the northern city of Tripoli was the venue of further attacks. The bloodshed was being attributed to Hezbollah's ongoing involvement in the civil war in Syria, which has exacerbated sectarian tensions between Shi'ites (such as pro-Assad Hezbollah) and Sunni Muslims (of the type that form the base of the Syrian rebel opposition). Indeed, that connection was made clear when a Syrian rebel group took responsibility for a bombing in Beirut a month earlier (discussed below) and threatened to continue its assault against Hezbollah.

Going back to the start of July 2013, a car bomb exploded in the Lebanese capital city of Beirut, resulting in injuries to scores of people. The bombing occurred in the Beir el-Abed area of Beirut, which was known to be a stronghold of the Shi'a Islamic extremist militant entity, Hezbollah. Although there was no claim of responsibility for the attack, Hezbollah's role in the Syrian civil war next door raised questions about spillover violence into Lebanon from Syria. To be clear, Lebanon-based Hezbollah has increasingly taken a high profile role on the side of the Assad regime as it has fought a relentless battle to hold onto power in Syria against a rebel movement supported by other Arab countries and the West. For their part, rebels have railed against Hezbollah for siding with the Assad regime and involving itself in the Syrian conflict. They have accordingly threatened to target Hezbollah in Lebanon for its intervention into the Syrian civil war.

It was not known if this bombing was the work of Syrian rebels in retaliation for Hezbollah's activity in Syria. That being said, by mid-July 2013, the United Nations

Security Council was demanding that Lebanon-based Hezbollah end its involvement in the conflict in neighboring Syria. A statement from the United Nations

Security Council read as follows: "The Security Council calls upon all Lebanese parties to recommit to Lebanon's policy of disassociation, to stand united behind President Michel Suleiman in this regard and to step back from any involvement in the Syrian crisis."

On July 16, 2013, a roadside bomb in Lebanon, close to the Syrian border, appeared to target a convoy carrying members of Hezbollah. The explosion killed one Hezbollah official and wounded two others. Because Syrian opposition rebels have warned they would strike against Hezbollah, in retaliation for the militant Shi'a Islamic entity's involvement in the Syrian civil war, all suspicion rested on the rebels for this attack. It was vividly clear that the Syrian civil war, and specifically, Hezbollah's involvement in that conflict, was having an effect on the other side of the border in Lebanon.

Spillover violence from Syria reached new heights on July 17, 2013, when a well-known commentator on Syrian state television was assassinated in the southern Lebanese town of Sarafand. Mohammad Darra Jamo worked for the Syrian state media, but also appeared frequently on other Arab networks; he was known to be a strong supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to reports, gunmen were hiding in Darra Jamo's house prior to the attack; the gunmen opened fire and killed him. The Syrian state news agency, SANA, said that an "armed terrorist group" carried out the attack while Lebanese security officials said the assassination was carried out by supporters of the Syrian rebel movement.

Meanwhile, the 15-member United Nations body conveyed its anxieties about the rising death toll in Syria -- now estimated to be approaching 100,000 since the start of the conflict in 2011 -- as well as the increasing number of internally displaced persons -- now estimated to be as many as four million with two million fleeing to neighboring countries. Lebanon, especially, was bearing the brunt of the exodus of from Syria, as refugees sought to escape the cross-fire of bloodshed and violence. To this end, the United Nations Security Council noted in its statement: "The Security Council underlines the need for assistance on an unprecedented scale, both to meet the needs of the refugees and of host communities, and to assist the Lebanese authorities who face extraordinary financial and structural challenges as a result of the refugee influx."

Nawaf Salam - Lebanon's ambassador to the United Nations - addressed the matter of Syrian refugees in his country saying, "Lebanon will not close its borders. Lebanon will not turn back any refugees. Lebanon will continue to provide assistance to all Syrian refugees. But let's be clear, Lebanon cannot cope with the burden of the refugee crisis. Lebanon needs international support."

In mid-August 2013, as noted above, Lebanon was struck by further Hezbollah-related violence. An explosion in a southern suburb of Beirut left about two dozen people dead, up to 200 others wounded, and exacted massive damage to buildings and vehicles in the vicinity. The high number of injuries was due to the fact that the explosion - caused by a car bomb -- occurred in a densely populated part of Beirut. Of course, the area was also a stronghold of Hezbollah. Accordingly, the violence was being attributed to Hezbollah's ongoing involvement in the civil war in Syria, which has exacerbated sectarian tensions between Shi'ites (such as pro-Assad Hezbollah) and Sunni Muslims (of the type that form the base of the Syrian rebel opposition). That claim gained traction when a Syrian rebel group took responsibility for a bombing in Beirut a month earlier (discussed above). In a video posting, the Battalions of Ayesha indicated their involvement in the Beirut bombing in July 2013 and promised to continue to target Hezbollah strongholds, which it described as "colonies of Iran."

Politicians from Hezbollah's government wing characterized the car bombing as a "terrorist attack," but they were seemingly cognizant of the deleterious consequences of the militant wing's activities in Syria as they also urged their supporters to exercise "restraint." But Hezbollah's militant wing was in no mood for the rhetoric of restraint. A day after the bombing, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah referred to the Sunni Muslim militants from Syria behind the attack promising to personally fight in Syria against them. Speaking on his own television channel, Nasrallah said, "I will go myself to Syria if it is necessary in the battle against the takfiris (Sunni radicals)." He also indicated that Hezbollah had no intention of retreating from its effort to support the Assad regime in Syria. Dispelling the notion that spill-over violence would make Hezbollah rethink its activities, Nasrallah declared that his movement would re-intensify its involvement in Syria by doubling its **forces** fighting in that country.

Meanwhile, no conflict involving Lebanon-based Hezbollah could occur without some reference to Israel. Some politicians in Lebanon were casting blame on Israel for the mid-August 2013 attack in Beirut. At a joint news conference with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Israeli President Shimon Peres dismissed that notion with a succinct declaration as follows: "Why should they look to Israel? They have a Hezbollah that collects bombs, that goes and kills people in Syria without the permission of the Lebanese government."

Violence continued to punctuate the Lebanese **political** landscape a week later. On Aug. 23, 2013, the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli was rocked by explosions, which left more than 40 people dead and another 400 injured. The blast occurred at the al-Taqwa mosque during Friday prayers; a second explosion ensued minutes later at the al-Salam mosque. Noteworthy was the fact that the well-known Sunni cleric opposed to Shi'a Hezbollah, Sheikh Salem Rafii, was in attendance at the al-Taqwa mosque; the general consensus was that he was the target of the attack although he escaped unharmed. The city of Tripoli has long been a flashpoint of sorts, **representing** the sectarian division between the majority Sunni population of the city which also contains a small Alawite community aligned with the Assad regime in neighboring Syria.

It should be noted that the 15-member United Nations body conveyed its anxieties about the rising death toll in Syria -- now estimated to be approaching 100,000 since the start of the conflict in 2011 -- as well as the increasing number of internally displaced persons -- now estimated to be as many as four million with two million fleeing to neighboring countries. Lebanon, especially, was bearing the brunt of the exodus of from Syria, as refugees sought to escape the cross-fire of bloodshed and violence. To this end, the United Nations Security Council noted in its statement: "The Security Council underlines the need for assistance on an unprecedented scale, both to meet the needs of the refugees and of host communities, and to assist the Lebanese authorities who face extraordinary financial and structural challenges as a result of the refugee influx."

Nawaf Salam - Lebanon's ambassador to the United Nations - addressed the matter of Syrian refugees in his country saying, "Lebanon will not close its borders. Lebanon will not turn back any refugees. Lebanon will continue to provide assistance to all Syrian refugees. But let's be clear, Lebanon cannot cope with the burden of the refugee crisis. Lebanon needs international support."

Note on Elections:

Parliamentary elections were set to take place in Lebanon in June 2013 (although, as noted here, the elections were subsequently postponed and 2013 ended without those polls taking place). At stake would be the composition of the "Majlis al-Nuwab"/ "Assemblée Nationale" (National Assembly) -- a unicameral body where 128 seats are allocated on the basis of regional and sectarian affiliation. Christian and Muslim sects are equally **represented**. Within the two religious groupings, seats are also allocated to various sects, such as Druze, Greek Orthodox, Shi'a and Sunnis.

Special Reports: Violence Rocks Lebanon (late 2013-2014):

Suicide bombing of Iranian embassy in Beirut --

On Nov. 19, 2013, a double suicide bombing outside the Iranian embassy in the Lebanese capital of Beirut left more than 20 people dead and more than 140 others injured. The first bombing was carried out by a suicide attacker on a motorcycle, while the second was executed by a suicide bomber in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Among the dead was the Iranian cultural attache, Sheikh Ibrahim Ansari, who had just assumed his diplomatic post a month prior.

Because Iran has been a well-known supporter of the Lebanese Shi'a Islamic extremist group, Hezbollah, which deployed fighters to Syria to help the government of Bashar al-Assad hang onto power against rebel forces, there were suggestions that this attack was a manifestation of spillover violence from the Syrian civil war.

Certainly, the violence and bloodshed augured negatively for Lebanon as it pushed the country further into a state of turmoil. Noteworthy was the fact that it was the first since Lebanon's 1975-90 Civil War that an embassy had been targeted. Moreover, the brazen act of violence illustrated the ease with which Lebanon was being pulled into Syria's destructive orbit.

There was also a sectarian element to the attack as the Sunni Jihadist group, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, claimed responsibility for the violence at the Iranian embassy in Beirut. Via the Twitter account of the group's religious guide, Sheikh Sirajeddine Zuraiqat, Abdullah Azzam Brigades issued its formal claim of responsibility, declaring: "The Abdullah Azzam brigades - the Hussein bin Ali cells - may they please God - are behind the attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut." The group, which is linked with the notorious terror enclave, al-Qaida, also said that the bombings were a "double martyrdom operation carried out by two heroes from the heroic Sunnis of Lebanon." The group threatened more attacks in Lebanon until Iran withdrew its forces from Syria, bolstering the view that a sectarian conflict that transcended borders was emerging in the Middle East.

In Lebanon, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati condemned the violence, calling it "a cowardly terrorist act." Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri -- a member of the Hezbollah faction in the Lebanese parliament -- warned that the terrorists behind the attack on the Iranian embassy were the people who attempted to assassinate him a year prior. He was quoted in Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper as saying, "Those who targeted the embassy [Tuesday] are the same team that threatened to assassinate me."

There was also a global outcry against the bombings, especially given the fact that a diplomatic post was the target. United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague said: "The U.K. is strongly committed to supporting stability in Lebanon and seeing those responsible for this attack brought to justice." United States Secretary of State John Kerry said, "The United States knows too well the cost of terrorism directed at our own diplomats around the world, and our hearts go out to the Iranian people after this violent and unjustifiable attack."

At the start of January 2014, DNA tests confirmed that a man arrested in Lebanon was likely wanted in connection with the bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut months earlier in November 2013. The man was identified as Majid al-Majid, the head of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which claimed responsibility for bombing. According to the Daily Star in Beirut, Majid had been captured by the Lebanese army and was on Saudi Arabia's list of 85 most wanted individuals for his links to the Islamist Jihadist terror enclave, al-Qaida.

Sectarian spill-over violence from Syria hits Lebanon --

Political Conditions Lebanon

Note that at the start of December 2013, Lebanon was struck by spillover violence from the war in Syria as clashes broke out in the northern city of Tripoli, leaving six people dead, and as many as 50 people wounded, including more than 10 soldiers. The city of Tripoli is home to a small Alawite community -- the same ethnic group as Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. But the city is also surrounded by a larger Sunni community, which was aligned with the rebel movement opposing the Assad regime in Syria. In response to the violence in Tripoli, and with an eye on halting the sectarian bloodshed, the Lebanese authorities instituted military rule in that city.

These sectarian fault lines were occurring not only in Syria where the conflict was unfolding, but also in Lebanon. The sectarian tensions in Lebanon were sparked when some residents of an Alawite district in Tripoli began flying Syrian flags to show support for President Assad; residents of the Bab al-Tabbana district responded by flying the flag of the Syrian rebels. The acrimony led to violent clashes, with the deadly results noted here.

Senior Hezbollah commander killed in Beirut --

On Dec. 4, 2013, reports emerged that a senior Hezbollah leader was killed in the Lebanese capital city of Beirut. Hassan Lakkis was a senior commander of the Lebanese Shi'a extremist terror group, Hezbollah, known to be a stalwart of the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and an expert in the manufacture of sophisticated weapons and explosives.

Hezbollah reacted to the news of Lakkis' death by releasing a statement in which they noted that the senior commander was attacked by assailants and shot in the head as he was returning from work late at night. Hezbollah also placed the blame for Lakkis' death on Israel, noting that the Jewish state had carried out several assassination attempts against the Hezbollah commander before. Israel denied any involvement in the death of Lakkis, saying via Yigal Palmor, its spokesperson for the Israeli foreign ministry, "These automatic accusations are an innate reflex with Hezbollah, They don't need evidence, they don't need facts. They just blame anything on Israel."

Indeed, there were parallel accusations emerging about rival Sunni Jihadists being behind the death of Laqqis. There was even a claim of responsibility for the assassination of Lakkis from a previously unknown group, the Brigades of the Free Sunnis in Baalbek. Coming on the heels of the attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut a week before at the hands of the Sunni Jihadist group, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, it was a more plausible explanation of the assassination, rather than the standpoint anti-Israel explanation for Hezbollah's problems. The so-called "blame game" aside, it was certainly clear that Lebanon was once again at risk of sectarian conflict.

Explosion in Lebanon kills Sunni politicians with anti-Assad and anti-Hezbollah ties --

On Dec. 27, 2013, Mohamad Chatah -- an opposition politician and former Lebanese cabinet minister -- was killed during a car bombing in central Beirut. The attack took place between the Starco Centre and Phoenicia Hotel close to the Lebanese parliament building. The blast killed several other individuals and left as many as 50 people injured. For his part, Chatah was a Sunni Muslim who worked as an adviser to former pro-Western Prime Minister Saad Hariri; he was known as a moderate but also a critic of both Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Lebanon-based Shi'a extremist entity, Hezbollah.

Given this background, there were suggestions that Chatah was the latest casualty in the ongoing Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict that was spreading across the Middle East, but particularly influencing the Syrian civil war and contributing to spill-over violence in Lebanon. Of note was the fact that Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon have become an integral part of the pro-Assad forces fighting in Syria to the consternation of Sunni Muslims in Lebanon. Tensions from both sides have manifested in an increase in the number of sectarian attacks and assassinations on Lebanese soil.

Political Conditions Lebanon

In this case, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri intimated that Hezbollah may have been involved in the apparent assassination of Chatah, accusing "those who are hiding from international justice and who have spread the regional fire to the [Lebanese] nation" of being responsible. This statement appeared to be a tacit reference to the fact that the United Nations implicated Hezbollah in the 2005 assassination of Saad Hariri's father -- former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Indeed, Rafiq Hariri -- like Mohamad Chatah -- shared an antipathy for the Syrian regime and was wary of the power of Hezbollah with its funding from Iran and its ties to Assad in Syria. In many senses, the assassination of Chatah recalled the painful historic memory of the assassination of Hariri.

That event -- the killing of Hariri in 2005 -- raised the ire of the Lebanese people, spurring the so-called Cedar Revolution, and ridding Lebanon of the presence Syrian **forces** from Lebanese soil. The subsequent findings that Hezbollah was likely behind the older Hariri's death have been rejected by that extremist Shi'a entity but nonetheless highlighted the influence of Hezbollah on the **political** landscape in Lebanon. Although Hezbollah denied the charges, five members of the organization were due to face trial at The Hague in connection with Rafiq Hariri's assassination.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah characterized the 2013 assassination of Chatah as a "heinous crime" and attempted to distance itself from the violence, declaring, "No-one benefits from [the bombing] but Lebanon's enemies." As well, Syria was quick to deny any involvement in Chatah's killing. However, the fact of the matter was that the assassination occurred as Chatah was en route to a meeting of the anti-Syrian/pro-Western March 14 bloc -- led by Saad Hariri -- when his convoy was struck by the blast. There were suggestions that the killing of Chatah was not so much a targeted assassination as it was a message to Hariri's anti-Syrian/pro-Western March 14 bloc.

Regardless, former Prime Minister Fuad Siniora of the March 14 bloc was not backing down from a **political** confrontation with Hezbollah. At the funeral for Chatah, Siniora demanded that Lebanon be freed from Hezbollah's militancy. He said, "We have decided to liberate the country of the occupation of illegitimate weapons to preserve its independence, its sovereignty and its civil peace." Siniora indicated that a popular but peaceful movement opposed to the violence and conflict-ridden ethos of Hezbollah was in the offing as he said: "We have decided to engage with the Lebanese people in peaceful, civil and democratic resistance... We call for liberty and justice, we will not surrender, we will not back down, we will not be afraid." The notion that his statements were aimed in opposition to Hezbollah became clear when funeral goers cried out, "Hezbollah is the enemy of God," and "Hezbollah are terrorists."

Instability update --

Violence against struck the Lebanese capital of Beirut on Jan. 2, 2014 when a car bomb killed at four people and injured nine others. The area of the car bombing was a busy shopping area not far from Hezbollah's offices. Because human remains were found close to the car, which was seemingly laden with explosives, experts surmised the bombing was a suicide attack. The car bomb marked the second attack in the Lebanese capital in less than a week.

As discussed above, a car bombing in central Beirut in late December 2013 left Mohamad Chatah -- an opposition politician and former Lebanese cabinet minister -- dead along with several others. As discussed above, blame was placed (at least at the popular level) on Hezbollah.

In this case, because the target was in the densely populated area of Haret Hreik district of Beirut -- a Hezbollah stronghold of the city -- suspicion rested on an anti-Hezbollah faction. With Hezbollah -- a Shi'a extremist entity -- controversially involved in fighting on behalf of the Alawite Assad regime in Syria, there were suggestions that this January 2014 bombing might be the work of anti-Assad Sunni Islamic militants.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Both incidences highlighted the increased Sunni-Shi'a tensions plaguing the entire region of the Middle East, with particular attention to Syria, which was in the throes of its ongoing civil war, and with spill-over violence in neighboring countries like Lebanon.

Hariri assassination trial convenes amidst flare of sectarian tensions in Lebanon --

In mid-January 2014, the trial of four members of the Shi'a extremist entity, Hezbollah, commenced at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague over the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Hariri was a pro-Western politician who opposed Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs, and by extension, was an antagonist of Hezbollah, which has long been aligned with the Alawite-ruled regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Hariri's assassination in 2005, followed by the assassinations of several other key pro-Western figures in Lebanon, fueled speculation that Syria and its local proxies, such as Hezbollah, were behind the bloodshed.

The allegations against the four members of Hezbollah has long been a source of contention in Lebanon. Hezbollah has denied that any of its members were involved in the dark chapter in Lebanese modern history, but the pro-Western opposition has clamored for justice after so many long years of what they perceive was impunity for Hezbollah.

The inclusion of Hezbollah in government in 2011 signaled alarm bells across the West as Hezbollah has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Canada, and several other Western powers. Moreover, the ascendancy of Hezbollah as the dominant power in Lebanon was illustrative of the resurgence of Syrian and Iranian power on the Lebanese scene.

But in that same year -- 2011 -- the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon announced its indictments of four members of Hezbollah in relation to the

assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Among the suspects were Mustafa Badreddine, a high-level figure in the Lebanese Hezbollah, who was identified as the central director of the operation to assassinate Hariri. Another Hezbollah figure, Salim Ayyash, was accused of orchestrating the actual assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri. The other two suspects -- Hussein Oneissi and Assad Sabra -- were charged with complicity due to their attempts to craft a false claim of responsibility. The charges thus ranged from conspiracy to commit a terrorist act to murder and attempted murder.

The son of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Saad Hariri, said at the time that he welcomed the indictments, characterizing them as "historic" developments in Lebanese recent history. As reported by Agence France Presse, the younger Hariri said: After many years of patience, of struggle... today, we witness a historic moment in Lebanese politics, justice and security

Meanwhile, the special tribunal's chief prosecutor, Daniel Bellemare, has said that the case against the four members of Hezbollah would serve to "finally inform the public and the victims about the facts." At the time when the indictment came down, Bellemare said, "The full story will, however, only unfold in the courtroom, where an open, public, fair and transparent trial will render a final verdict."

Now, in 2014, the trial was finally set to begin with high hopes for a verdict being reached by 2015. All four suspects would be tried in absentia since not one of them has actually been arrested and at least two were believed to be in Iran. In his opening statement, Prosecutor Norman Farrell said the sheer quantity of explosives made it clear that the attackers intended to deliver "a terrifying message and to cause panic among the population of Beirut and Lebanon." He added, "It is not that the perpetrators simply did not care if they killed their fellow citizens. Rather they intended to do so."

It was clear that the trial would likely re-open the wounds of the past. In combination with the civil war raging in neighboring Syria, which has increasingly included the involvement of Hezbollah, the trial could exacerbate the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict plaguing the Middle East, with Syria and Lebanon at the center of that conflict. To that latter end, Lebanon was being plagued with spill-over violence from the Syrian civil war thanks to the active involvement of Lebanon-based Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis, and as that Shi'ite entity expressly supported the Assad regime in Syria. The result has been a plague of sectarian violence in the streets of Lebanon.

Going back to late 2013, a car bombing in central Beirut in late December 2013 left Mohamad Chatah -- an opposition politician and former Lebanese cabinet minister -- dead along with several others. Blame was placed (at least at the popular level) on Hezbollah. Then, at the start of the new year (January 2014), a car bomb killed at four people and injured nine others. The area of the car bombing was a busy shopping area not far from Hezbollah's offices. Because the target was in the densely populated area of Haret Hreik district of Beirut -- a Hezbollah stronghold of the city -- suspicion rested on an anti-Hezbollah faction. With Hezbollah -- a Shi'a extremist entity -- controversially involved in fighting on behalf of the Alawite Assad regime in Syria, there were suggestions that this particular bombing might be the work of anti-Assad Sunni Islamic militants.

Then, just before the Hariri assassination trial was scheduled to begin, a suicide bomb occurred in the town of Hermel - a Hezbollah stronghold close to the Bekaa Valley and near to the border with Syria. That blast killed at least five people, including the suicide bomber, and wounded 20 others. By the third week of January 2014, a suicide bombing

in a residential district of southern Beirut, known as a Hezbollah stronghold, left four people dead and more than 20 others wounded. A Twitter account supposedly controlled by the Lebanese branch of the Syrian rebel group, al-Nusra Front, claimed responsibility for this attack. Around the same time, further signs of spillover violence from the Syrian civil war flared when fighting resumed in the northern city of Tripoli between rival factions who support different sides of the Syrian conflict. Then, as January 2014 came to a close, a car bomb exploded in Hermel close to Lebanon's northern border with Syria, killing at least three people. The area has been known as a Hezbollah stronghold and thus reinforced the tensions going on within Lebanon and across the border with Syria.

Twin bombings by al-Qaida aligned extremists --

On Feb. 19, 2014, twin bombings struck the Lebanese capital city of Beirut. The attacks ensued in a Hezbollah-controlled southern suburb of Beirut close to an Iranian cultural center. Two suicide bombers in a car and on a motorcycle respectively detonated the explosives strapped to their bodies, killing the suicide bombers along with at least two other individuals. Several other people were injured while massive damage was inflicted on shops and businesses in the vicinity.

The militants Sunni Islamist group, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which was aligned with the terror enclave al-Qaida, immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks. Abdullah Azzam Brigades also took the opportunity to claim responsibility for the November 2013 attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut that killed more than 20 people. Because Iran has been a well-known supporter and funder of Hezbollah, there were suggestions that the embassy attack was carried out by Sunni extremists opposed to the Shi'a militant group's engagement in the Syrian war. Now, it was clear that that speculation was based on merit, especially with these February 2014 twin bombings taking place in Hezbollah stronghold close to an Iranian interest. It should be noted that civilians were the primary victims in both cases.

Abdullah Azzam Brigades warned of more attacks to come unless Hezbollah withdrew from Syria; it also demanded that its own fighters be released from jail in Lebanon. Via its website, the militants Sunni Islamist group

Political Conditions Lebanon

said, "We will continue -- through the grace of God and his strength -- to target Iran and its party in Lebanon (Hezbollah) in all of their security, **political**, and military centers to achieve our two demands: One, the exit of all fighters from the Party of Iran in Syria. Two, the release of all our prisoners from oppressive Lebanese prisons."

The civil war raging in neighboring Syria has increasingly included the involvement of Hezbollah, exacerbating the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict plaguing the Middle East, with Syria and -- increasingly -- neighboring Lebanon at the center of that conflict. To that latter end, thanks to the active involvement of Lebanon-based Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis, there has been a countervailing plague of sectarian violence in the streets of Lebanon. Sunnis aligned with the opposition in Syria have railed against Hezbollah's alignment with the Assad regime in Syria.

In the Syrian civil war, the rebel groups have not been united. Some groups have been aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime from office for **political** reasons, while other Sunni extremist groups have also sought to oust the Assad regime but for more ideological (read: sectarian) reasons as they oppose the Shi'a elite that has long ruled Syria. In Lebanon, those dynamics were playing out in similar form. Some Sunni enclaves were simply sympathetic to the rebel movement in Syria and opposed to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, some Sunni factions were being motivated by religious extremist ideology to use tactics of terrorism.

Suicide car bombing in Lebanon close to Syrian border kills three soldiers

A suicide car bombing in late March 2014 at an army checkpoint in Lebanon close to the border with Syria left three soldiers dead and another four wounded. The attack

took place in the town of Arsal, which was home to a complex population base including thousands of Syrian refugees and Syrian (Sunni) rebels. The attack in Arsal was thus linked with the civil war rocking Syria. Indeed, it likely constituted another episode of cross-over violence.

The principal contributor to cross-over violence in Lebanon was the fact that Hezbollah -- a Shi'a extremist entity based in Lebanon -- was controversially involved in fighting on behalf of the Alawite Assad regime in Syria. While many Shi'a Lebanese were supportive of Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian civil war, there were other swaths of the Lebanese populace who were Sunnis and held allegiances instead to the rebel movement in Syria (the fact that some elements of the Syrian rebel movement were extremist Islamists notwithstanding).

Tensions were already at an elevated level following the capture of the strategic Syrian border town of Yabroud by the Syrian army earlier in the month. Then as March 2014 was coming to a close, the Syrian army were making more gains as they captured the Syrian border towns of Flita and Ras Maara. Collectively, these victories for the Assad regime in Syria likely created consternation among Sunni antagonists across the border in Lebanon where many Sunni residents were more sympathetic to the Syrian rebels than the Alawite Assad regime. Now, the attack in Arsal -- for which the Sunni extremist group Ahrar al-Sunna claimed responsibility -- suggested these tensions were escalating, and that Sunni militants were becoming increasingly active not only in Syria but also in Lebanon.

The timing of the Arsal attack was key, coming as it did on the heels of a blustery speech by Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in which he declared that he was protecting Lebanon by fighting Sunni militants in Syria. Of course, around the same time, the Lebanese army raided the house of a Sunni bomb maker in Arsal and killed him. Together, the two incidences were illustrative of the competing loyalties and ethno-sectarian hostilities at play in Lebanon.

Collectively, the violence in Lebanon highlighted the increased Sunni-Shi'a tensions plaguing the entire region of the Middle East, with particular attention to Syria, which was in the throes of its ongoing civil war, and with spill-over violence in neighboring countries like Lebanon.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Attacks in Lebanon suggest continued spill-over sectarian violence from Syria --

In June 2014, a suicide bombing in eastern Lebanon left a police officer dead and more than 30 other people injured. That attack was believed to have been an attempted assassination of the security head, Major General Abbas Ibrahim, who was traveling in the area at the time. Soon thereafter, Lebanese security forces carried out a raid on a hotel in the capital of Beirut and arrested more than a dozen individuals who were linked with the attacks in Lebanon.

In the last week of June 2014, there was a suicide car bombing close to an army checkpoint in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. An officer in Lebanon's General Security forces was killed and more than a dozen other people were injured. This particular attack took place as people were watching a football match. Because the attack took place in a southern suburb largely inhabited by Shi'a Muslims and pro-Hezbollah elements, suspicion rested on Sunni activist lashing out at the Shi'a militant group, Hezbollah, for its involvement in the Syrian civil war. However, an additional element was the fact that Sunni terrorists from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) were advancing in Iraq, thus possibly emboldening other Sunni extremists in the region in what was quickly becoming a regional sectarian conflict.

Two days after the army checkpoint attack, another suicide bombing took place in Beirut -- this time at the Duroy hotel located in close proximity to the Saudi Arabian embassy. The suicide bomber died in the incident. Several other persons -- mostly security personnel who approached the assailant as he prepared to detonate the explosives - were wounded. In this case, with the assailant believed to be a Saudi national and quite likely a Sunni Muslim, the sectarian and geopolitical dimension was clearly evident.

Spillover violence from the Syrian civil war --

Spillover violence from Syria was in late October and early November 2014 arising in Lebanon where Islamic militants were engaged in battles with Lebanese military forces in the northern city of Tripoli. Fierce battles went on for days and left Lebanese soldiers, civilians, and Islamic extremist fighters dead. However, Lebanese authorities were ultimately able to gain the upper hand and re-assert control over the city. Of concern was the fact that the Islamist militants appeared to be a mix of Lebanese and Syrian fighters aligned with ISIL and the al-Nusra Front. This development pointed to a closer alliance between the two extremist entities than previously thought.

Additional Note:

Collectively, the recent violence in Lebanon has highlighted the increased Sunni-Shi'a tensions plaguing the entire region of the Middle East, with particular attention to Syria, which was in the throes of its ongoing civil war, and with spillover violence in neighboring countries like Lebanon.

The civil war raging in neighboring Syria has increasingly included the involvement of Hezbollah, exacerbating the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict plaguing the Middle East, with Syria and -- increasingly -- neighboring Lebanon at the center of that conflict. To that latter end, thanks to the active involvement of Lebanon-based Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis, there has been a countervailing plague of sectarian violence in the streets of Lebanon. Sunnis aligned with the opposition in Syria have railed against Hezbollah's alignment with the Assad regime in Syria.

In the Syrian civil war, the rebel groups have not been united. Some groups have been aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime from office for political reasons, while other Sunni extremist groups have also sought to oust the Assad regime but for more ideological (read: sectarian) reasons as they oppose the Shi'a elite that has long ruled Syria. In Lebanon, those dynamics were playing out in similar form. Some Sunni enclaves were simply

Political Conditions Lebanon

sympathetic to the rebel movement in Syria and opposed to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, some Sunni factions were being motivated by religious extremist ideology to use tactics of terrorism.

New Government for Lebanon

In mid-February 2014, following more than 10 months of **political** wrangling, Lebanon finally formed a **new** government.

The **new** cabinet would be split equally between members of the pro-Western March 14 bloc and the Hezbollah-led faction.

The government would be led by the incumbent Prime Minister Tammam Salam -- a moderate independent and the son of former Prime Minister Saeb Salam -- who had been named as the consensus head of government. Salam would continue in that role -- this time at the helm of an uneasy coalition between two rival alliances, as noted below.

It should be noted that the office of the presidency has been occupied by President Michel Suleiman since 2008. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious **representation**.

Going back to 2011, the pro- Western government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government collapsed when the Hezbollah faction withdrew from the unity government, making way for Hezbollah-sanctioned Najib Mikati to take on the role as prime minister. But in 2013, the prime minister resigned amidst disagreements with Hezbollah. At issue, according to the Beirut Daily Star, was the fact that Hezbollah members of the cabinet objected to a proposal to establish an electoral supervisory body ahead of parliamentary elections. Also contributing to the dissonance between Hezbollah and Mikati was the Hezbollah **political** bloc's rejection of Mikati's plan to extend the term of the internal security chief. The growing chasm between Hezbollah and Mikati -- one time **political** allies -- appeared to be the latest manifestation of the **political** crisis gripping Lebanon. As noted above, Mikati was succeeded by Salam as the **new** head of government, although since being named to that post, the actual composition of his government has been a matter of consternation. There were high hopes that the formation of this **new** government -- as uneasy and unlikely a coalition as it might be -- could at least chart the path towards elections.

Indeed, the **new** government was intended to end the **political** stalemate plaguing Lebanon, and it would be tasked with crafting a **new** electoral law and preparing the country for elections. Those elections had been scheduled to be held in mid-2013 but were delayed due to internal **political** hostility between the Hezbollah-led faction and the pro-Western bloc; those tensions were exacerbated by spill-over violence from the civil war in Syria. A spate of violent attacks in Lebanon laid bare the sectarian hostilities between the stalwarts of Shi'a Hezbollah, who were now actively supporting the Assad regime in Syria -- and -- the local (Lebanese) supporters of the Sunni resistance and rebel movement in Syria. The cross-border interactions of Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Syria have had a long and enduring imprint on the Lebanese **political** scene.

Primer on 2014 Presidential Election in Lebanon

A presidential election was expected to be held in the spring of 2014 -- ahead of May 2014 when the tenure of long-serving President Michel Suleiman was scheduled to come to an end.

In Lebanon, the president is elected by the National Assembly for a six-year term and may not serve consecutive terms. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious representation. There is also supposed to be some transfer of powers from the president to the prime minister and cabinet.

The last election was held in 2008. As a result of the Doha Agreement (discussed directly above), Army Commander Michel Suleiman was elected by parliament and became Lebanon's new president. The indirect vote gave Suleiman 118 votes out of 127. The vote brought an end to an ongoing political impasse between rival pro-Western and pro-Syrian/Hezbollah factions, which resulted in the presidency staying vacant for months after former President Emile Lahoud's term ended. In the background of these developments, there had been grave anxieties about a power vacuum, constitutional crisis and civil unrest if the political impasse was not ultimately resolved.

Now in 2014, it was to be seen who might succeed outgoing President Suleiman. One candidate interested in entering the political waters was Lebanese Christian politician, Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces Party who announced his bid for the presidency. It should be noted that Geagea was known for his views opposed to Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria, and was thus supported by the pro-Western March 12 political bloc. It was to be seen if Geagea could secure the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament to win the presidency.

The recent political climate in Lebanon has been beset by bitter hostility between the rival pro-Western and pro-Syrian/Hezbollah factions, and cross-over violence from the Syrian civil war. That war has sparked ethno-sectarian violence and bloodshed on Lebanese soil as Shi'a Hezbollah has involved itself in that war to the consternation of Lebanon's Sunni population, even forcing the delay of the country's parliamentary elections that had originally been intended to be held in 2013 but were postponed to 2014. It was to be seen if in this climate of acrimony any candidate for the presidency could capture a super-majority of support in the polarized legislative body.

Note that Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri called for the presidential vote in parliament to be held on April 23, 2014. Ongoing political dissonance and acrimony in Lebanon ensured that the vote would not end successfully. Members of parliament in Lebanon failed to elect a president since the main candidate, Geagea did not secure the required two-thirds majority. In fact, he fell significantly short of that goal, with the pro-Hezbollah members of parliament issuing blank votes.

This result could open the race up to other potential candidates. The former army chief, Michel Aoun, who is supported by Hezbollah, could now decide to throw his hat in the ring. Of course, it was quite likely that the March 12 bloc would take on the spoiler role on that ballot and oppose him, essentially producing another failed vote. It was also possible that both sides might support a consensus candidate, such as the current army chief, General Jean Kahwaji, or even Central Bank governor Riad Salameh; however, neither man has expressed any interest in becoming president.

A second round of voting to decide the presidency took place on April 30, 2014. That effort was ultimately abandoned when several members of parliament -- mostly aligned with Michael Aoun (mentioned above) -- opted to boycott the vote. No consensus candidate was agreed upon by both of the two main political factions, suggesting that the process aimed at selecting and electing a successor to outgoing President Suleiman could continue for some time. Of course a period of protracted postponement in deciding the presidency would present a

political challenge. Indeed, Lebanon was in dire need of leadership at a time when divisions and sectarian conflict characterized the landscape.

By the start of May 2014, former President Amine Gemayel of the party, Kataeb, had convened talks with Walid Jumblatt, the head of the Progressive Socialist Party.

According to the Daily Star, Gemayel was trying to rally Christian support for his bid for the presidency bid as the pro-Western March 12 bloc candidate. It was to be seen if he could become the official replacement to Geagea. It was also to be seen if he could gain support (or at least a lack of resistance) from the Hezbollah bloc.

A third round of voting on May 15, 2014, also ended in failure, and was followed by similarly futile fourth and fifth rounds of voting later in May 2014 as no consensus could be found to satisfy the two rival pro-Hezbollah and pro-Western factions. A sixth round was set for June 9, 2014, amidst calls by the United Nation Security Council that Lebanon settle its **political** affairs and select a **new** president in the interests of national and regional security. The statement by that international body read as follows: "The Council urges the Parliament to uphold Lebanon's longstanding democratic tradition and to work to ensure that presidential elections take place as soon as possible and without external interference."

But even with that external pressure, the sixth round of voting on June 9, 2014, ended in failure as Lebanon's deadlocked politicians again could not agree on a successor to outgoing President Suleiman. The failed vote occurred because the pro-Hezbollah faction in parliament boycotted the session, thus depriving parliament of a quorum. Another voting session was set for June 18, 2014; however, until the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Western coalitions could find agreement on a consensus candidate, there was no expectation of success on that day.

As expected, the seventh round of voting on June 18, 2014, in the same way as the previous round -- without a president elected to power. Once again the Hezbollah faction boycotted the session. Leading the boycott throughout has been Michel Aoun, who has been backed by Hezbollah. Clearly, he would continue to sabotage the presidential vote until he was ready to prepare himself as the presidential consensus candidate.

On June 17, 2014, ahead of the seventh round of voting, Aoun said, "I will announce my nomination when the **political** situation in parliament becomes clear and when (the current candidates) are dismissed." Disparaging Geagea, he said, "It is totally rejected to choose the weakest Christian as president and I will not tolerate this." Making his intentions clear, Aoun continued, "I'm the strongest and I'm the one who **represents** (the Christians). My popularity is on the rise." However, it was unlikely that the pro-Western bloc in parliament would be prepared to accept Aoun as president. As such, the impasse was expected to continue for some time although news was emerging about an alternative presidential candidate in the form of Parliamentarian Henry Helou.

Note that another attempt to elect a president took place on July 2, 2014, and ended in failure as insufficient parliamentarians were present in the assembly, presumably due to another boycott. Another attempt would be made later in July 2014.

In mid July 2014, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri demanded that members of parliament end the **political** impasse and avoid the continuing power vacuum and elect a president.

He said, "We want parliamentary elections held on schedule, and we do not want an extension for the parliament. But the entrance to the parliamentary elections is electing a president of the republic -- today before tomorrow." Hariri, who was living in exile in France and Saudi Arabia due to fears of assassination, also demanded that Hezbollah withdraw from its military engagement in the civil war in neighboring Syria. He said, "Unfortunately

Political Conditions Lebanon

Hezbollah believes that it will save the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The truth is no one can save Assad's regime." While Hariri's demand was likely to be ignored by Hezbollah, the fact of the matter was that Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has only served to accentuate sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Those very tensions have done little to alleviate the highly-polarized **political** environment that has set the Sunni pro-Western coalition of Hariri against the Shi'ite/Allawite bloc dominated by Hezbollah.

Note: As of late 2014, a **new** president was not yet elected. As such, the outcome of this election was yet to be determined.

Parliamentary elections in Lebanon postponed due to Syrian civil war

Parliamentary elections were originally set to take place in Lebanon in June 2013. As noted here, the elections were postponed and rescheduled to be held in 2014, and then again delayed until 2017, due to sectarian strife associated with the ongoing Syrian civil war across the border. Meanwhile, **political** acrimony and in-fighting meant that successive rounds of voting in the presidential contest had ended in failure. So even without a successor to President Michael Suleiman decided to take the executive office of the presidency, there would now be a lengthy delay until a fresh mandate could be democratically decided as regards the legislative branch of government.

At the parliamentary level, elections would decide the composition of the "Majlis al-Nuwab"/ "Assemblée Nationale" (National Assembly) -- a unicameral body where 128 seats are allocated on the basis of regional and sectarian affiliation. Christian and Muslim sects are equally **represented**. Within the two religious groupings, seats are also allocated to various sects, such as Druze, Greek Orthodox, Shi'a and Sunnis.

The previous elections took place on June 7, 2009. The two main factions contesting those elections were the pro-Western "14 March Coalition" (made up of Future movement, Progressive Socialist Party, Christian Lebanese **Forces** and Christian Phalangist party) and the Hezbollah-led bloc (composed of Hezbollah, Amal movement of Speaker Nabih Birri, and Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun).

On election day in 2009, turnout was close to 55 percent -- the highest level of voter participation since the 1975-91 civil war. Former United States President Jimmy Carter led a team of international monitors who concluded that the voting took place in a free and fair manner. The contest was a reflection of the ongoing power struggle between the Lebanon's governing pro-Western coalition and the Hezbollah-led bloc on the other side of the equation. The two sides have been deadlocked in a **political** battle for supremacy for several years.

After the voter were counted, it was clear that the ruling pro-Western coalition would retain its majority in the 128-member parliament. The actual official results indicated that the pro-Western coalition won 71 seats and the Hezbollah bloc secured 57 seats. With these results confirmed, the pro-Western coalition actually increased its parliamentary **representation** and consolidated its **political** power.

But the pro- Western government of Prime Minister Hariri enjoyed its ascendancy only until January 2011 when it collapsed after the Hezbollah faction withdrew from the unity administration, making way for Hezbollah-sanctioned Najib Mikati to take on the role as the **new** prime minister.

As noted below, Mikati resigned in 2013 due to disagreements with Hezbollah (his one time ally) over an electoral law. He was replaced ultimately by Tammam Salam -- a moderate independent and the son of former Prime

Political Conditions Lebanon

Minister Saeb Salam. The new prime minister was something of a consensus selection, as he won the support of both the pro-Western March 14 bloc and the Hezbollah-controlled March 8 alliance.

Meanwhile, in March 2013 -- ahead of Mikati's resignation and his replacement with Salam -- Prime Minister Najib Mikati and President Michel Suleiman signed a decree calling for parliamentary elections to be held in June 2013. But at the end of May 2013, just one month ahead of the vote, Lebanon's parliament voted to again postpone the parliamentary elections due to security concerns over the ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria, and a failure to find consensus on the aforementioned electoral law. Members of parliament thus extended their mandate until November 2014.

In October 2014, with the November 2014 election timeline looming just ahead, a decision was made to postpone the elections even further -- until 2017. This decision was made in response to the political instability and sectarian conflict, which were only aggravated by the ongoing Syrian civil war crisis. The new 2017 schedule for elections would mean that the current parliament would serve eight years before being subject to election once again.

In the first week of November 2014, Lebanon's parliament made the decision to postpone the next elections officially by voting to extend its own mandate until 2017. The move had been criticized by observers, with even the head of Lebanon's Maronite Christian community, Patriarch Beshara al-Rai, as well as the European Union noting that it was likely an unconstitutional move.

It should be noted that while there would be no new parliament until 2017, Lebanon was already without a new president. The process for electing a new president had been going on for months without resolution due to continuing political acrimony between the two main political factions. Thus, there was a growing call for the schedule for the parliamentary elections to be linked with a provisions requiring a president to first be elected.

Why is this election -- and the news of its postponement -- important?

The decision by the Lebanese parliament to delay the elections was a significant move. Indeed, it was the first time since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 that members of parliament have chosen to effectively postpone elections and recalled that dark chapter in Lebanon's history. Of particular concern was the growing involvement of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon in the Syrian conflict, battling to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The cross-border interactions of Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Syria have had a long and enduring imprint on the Lebanese political scene.

In 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri -- a noted politician with an anti-Syrian orientation -- was assassinated. Hezbollah and Syria have long been suspected of perhaps playing a role in that act. Hariri's assassination gave rise to short-term transformation when Lebanon's Cedar Revolution swept pro-Western and anti-Syrian factions to power at the polls later that year, along with the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon after a three-decade long presence in that country. While the Cedar Revolution was viewed as the dawning of a new day in Lebanon, the aftermath was not so pleasant. Political stability devolved, as exemplified by a spate of political assassinations, which were blamed on pro-Syrian elements. As well, Lebanon was the main venue of violent conflict during the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. In recent times, the country has been caught in a political deadlock and intransigence, largely due to prevailing acrimony between pro-Syrian/pro-Hezbollah factions and pro-reform/Western-backed members in the Lebanese parliament. The ascendancy of Hezbollah as the dominant power in Lebanon since 2011 and well into 2014, as well as Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war across the border, in many ways suggested that the progress of the Cedar Revolution had been reversed.

Exchange of fire between Israeli forces and Hezbollah leaves two Israeli soldiers and a peacekeeper dead

In the worst eruption of violence between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah since the 2006 war, Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters exchanged fire at the end of January 2015, leaving two Israeli soldiers and a Spanish peacekeeper dead. The two Israeli soldiers died when Hezbollah fired five missiles at a convoy of Israeli military vehicles along the border with Lebanon. The Spanish peacekeeper, who was serving as part of a United Nations monitoring mission in southern Lebanon died when Israel responded to the assault by Hezbollah with artillery fire and air strikes. Hezbollah wasted little time claiming responsibility for the eruption of violence, saying that its attack on Israel was carried out in retaliation for an Israeli air strike in southern Syria that killed an Iranian general and several members of Hezbollah weeks earlier. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised retribution, saying "Those behind the attack today will pay the full price." Across the border in Lebanon, supporters of Hezbollah in southern Beirut shot gunfire into the air in celebration of the killing of the Israeli soldiers. But other residents of the city were preparing to evacuate Beirut in the event that Israel made good on its promise of retribution, and with the memory of the devastation associated with the 2006 war still fresh in their memories. That being said, with an election in Israel looming ahead, there was deep skepticism that Netanyahu would pursue a military effort against Hezbollah anytime soon.

Foreign relations note related to Syrian civil war:

In mid-May 2015, the pro-Assad Syrian military, backed by the Lebanon-based militant based entity, Hezbollah, appeared to be preparing for a major offensive in the border area between the two countries. For some time, Hezbollah -- an ally of the Alawite Assad regime -- has been backing President Assad in Syria, and bolstering the fight against Sunni rebel groups (many of them of the extremist Islamist type, such as al-Nusra Front) with whom the regime has been ensconced in a civil war since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011. Now, however, with the Sunni Islamist rebel groups gaining strength in the region, and with the Qalamoun mountains becoming a stronghold for Sunni militants and terrorists, joint Syrian military and Lebanese-based Hezbollah forces were advancing on the area. Their aims were to regain control in strategic areas, such as Assal al-Ward and Qarna Heights, and to cut off a major supply route for weapons and militants. It should be noted that some anti-Hezbollah political factions in Lebanon have decried the operation, warning that it will stimulate violence within Lebanese borders.

Islamic State claims responsibility of attack in Beirut; Lebanon increasingly becoming a flashpoint in Syrian crisis

On Nov. 12, 2015, two suicide bombings rocked the Lebanese capital city of Beirut killing at least 40 people and injuring up to 200 more victims. The body of a third suicide bomber who had not yet detonated the explosives strapped to his body was also reported at the site of the carnage.

It was the worst episode of terrorist violence in Lebanon since the time of that country's civil war.

The attacks occurred in a southern suburb of Beirut known to be a stronghold of Lebanon's Shi'a Islamic militant group, Hezbollah. According to reports from the ground, the attacks were carried out in succession by suicide bombers at the Mansur shopping plaza and at a storefront in Burj al-Barajneh.

Because the bombings occurred in an area known to be controlled by Hezbollah, and because that Shi'a Islamic militant group has been heavily involved in supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, all expectations were that these attacks were carried out by Sunni Islamists opposed to Assad.

In recent times, there have been several terror attacks in Lebanon, most of which have been linked with Hezbollah's active military engagement in Syria on behalf of Syrian President Assad.

Political Conditions Lebanon

While there was no shortage of extremist Islamist groups opposed to Assad operating in Syria, and they have certainly spread over the border into Lebanon,

suspensions in this case quickly rested on actors aligned with the notorious terror group, Islamic State. The Islamist terror group itself soon confirmed these suspicions by disseminating a claim of responsibility.

Note:

Collectively, the recent violence in Lebanon has highlighted the increased Sunni-Shi'a tensions plaguing the entire region of the Middle East, with particular attention to Syria, which was in the throes of its ongoing civil war, and with spillover violence in neighboring countries like Lebanon.

The civil war raging in neighboring Syria has increasingly included the involvement of Hezbollah, exacerbating the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict plaguing the Middle East, with Syria and -- increasingly -- neighboring Lebanon at the center of that conflict. To that latter end, thanks to the active involvement of Lebanon-based Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis, there has been a countervailing plague of sectarian violence in the streets of Lebanon. Sunnis aligned with the opposition in Syria have railed against Hezbollah's alignment with the Assad regime in Syria.

In the Syrian civil war, the rebel groups have not been united. Some groups have been aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime from office for **political** reasons, while other Sunni extremist groups have also sought to oust the Assad regime but for more ideological (read: sectarian) reasons as they oppose the Shi'a elite that has long ruled Syria. In Lebanon, those dynamics were playing out in similar form. Some Sunni enclaves were simply sympathetic to the rebel movement in Syria and opposed to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, some Sunni factions were being motivated by religious extremist ideology to use tactics of terrorism. Of particular note was the November 2015 bombings in a southern suburb of Beirut for which the notorious terror enclave, Islamic State, claimed responsibility.

Renewed effort rises to find consensus on a president and end Lebanon's **political** stalemate

For two years, Lebanon has been without a president. Typically, the president in Lebanon is elected by the National Assembly for a six-year term and may not serve consecutive terms. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious **representation**. There is also supposed to be some transfer of powers from the president to the prime minister and cabinet.

An election was to be held in 2014 when the term of outgoing President Michel Suleiman ended. However, to date, despite successive attempts to elect his Christian successor, there has been no consensus in filing the post with a consensus candidate. As a result, Lebanon has been mired by a continuing power vacuum.

By January 2016, there were **new political** alliances being formed with an eye on finally inaugurating a **new** head of state; however, those **political** alliances remained complicated and potentially contradictory. It was to be seen if an end to the **political** stalemate would in the immediate offing.

In an additional **political** development, parliamentary elections in Lebanon had been postponed. In October 2014, with the parliamentary elections looming just ahead, a decision was made to postpone the elections even further -- until 2017. This decision was made in response to the **political** instability and sectarian conflict plaguing Lebanon,

both of which were only exasperated by the ongoing Syrian civil war crisis. The new 2017 schedule for elections would mean that the current parliament would serve eight years before being subject to election once again.

In the first week of November 2014, Lebanon's parliament made the decision to postpone the next elections officially by voting to extend its own mandate until 2017. The move had been criticized by observers, with even the head of Lebanon's Maronite Christian community, Patriarch Beshara al-Rai, as well as the European Union noting that it was likely an unconstitutional move.

The decision by the Lebanese parliament to delay the elections was a significant move. Indeed, it was the first time since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 that members of parliament have chosen to effectively postpone elections and recalled that dark chapter in Lebanon's history. Of particular concern was the growing involvement of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon in the Syrian conflict, battling to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The cross-border interactions of Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Syria have had a long and enduring imprint on the Lebanese political scene.

Of course, as discussed here,

while there would be no new parliament until 2017, Lebanon was already without a new president. The process for electing a new president had been going on for some time without resolution due to continuing political acrimony between the two main political factions. Thus, there was a growing call for the schedule for the parliamentary elections to be linked with a provisions requiring a president to first be elected.

By December 2015, former Lebanese prime minister and opposition leader Saad al-Hariri expressed support for a power-sharing solution that could potentially end the political stalemate that had left Lebanon without a president for close to two years. Hariri backed the candidacy of Suleiman Franjeh, a Maronite Christian who was a stalwart of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, for the role of president. Of note was the fact that the Hariri political family has long been opposed to Syrian influence in Lebanon, which made the notion of consensus seem remote. Nevertheless, productive discussions between Hariri and Franjeh appeared to herald a breakthrough of sorts, in which both politicians agreed to "proceed on the joint path for the election of the president."

This breakthrough was made official in mid-December 2015 when Franjeh said that he would contest the presidency of Lebanon. Objections from other political players on the scene, such as Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea, both of whom had their own personal presidential ambitions, promised to complicate the situation.

That complication was manifest when in the third week of January 2016 Geagea said that he was backing Aoun for the presidency.

Since Geagea was actually aligned with the March 14 alliance of Hariri, his shift to the Aoun camp was a significant development and suggested something of a political re-alignment. According to Geagea, his backing of Aon was due to his desire to rescue the country from its political paralysis and return Lebanon to what he called "a normal life."

In mid-February 2016, Hariri made it clear that he retained his support for Franjeh for the presidency. Hariri's continued commitment to Franjeh was made clear in his statement that read as follows: "We have a commitment and our commitment to Suleiman (Franjeh) is clear." This stance emphasized the reality that the political landscape in Lebanon in February 2016 continued to be marked by stalemate.

Hezbollah commander killed in Damascus

In mid-May 2016, the top military commander of the Lebanon-based and Iranian-backed Shi'ite extremists group, Hezbollah, was killed in an explosion close to the Syrian capital of Damascus. The elimination of Mustafa Badreddine appeared to be a targeted strike and there was little doubt about the fact that it was a blow to the leadership of Hezbollah. There was no official acknowledgment of who might be responsible for the strike; however, all expectations were that Israel was likely behind it, although, as expected, Israel offered no comment. It should be noted that the United States government had long believed

Badreddine to be responsible for Hezbollah's military operations in Syria where a civil war has been ongoing since 2011. Badreddine was actually sentenced to death in 1983 in Kuwait for his role in a bombing. After escaping prison in Kuwait in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, he has gone on to be a terror orchestrator. Of particular importance is the fact that he was one of five Hezbollah members indicted by the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon with regard to the 2005 assassination of prominent pro-Western politician, Rafik al-Hariri.

Lebanon set to finally elect a president thanks to PM deal

In October 2016, Lebanon was preparing to end its impasse on electing a new president. For two years, Lebanon has been in a state of stalemate for over the presidency with no agreement on a Maronite Christian candidate to fill the position, as set forth in the 1943 National Pact. While Micheal Suleiman's mandate expired in 2014, a two year power struggle between the pro-Western and Hezbollah-dominated blocs prevented any consensus from being reached. Finally, an agreement appeared to have been reached to elect Michel Aoun -- a Hezbollah ally — as the president, with Saad al-Hariri — of the pro-Western coalition — heading a new government as prime minister.

By November 2016, Hariri had been asked to form a government, after he won a parliamentary vote of confidence, which included support from Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, who had initially opposed the deal.

Note: In Lebanon, the president is elected by the National Assembly for a six-year term and may not serve consecutive terms. In accordance with the 1943 National Pact, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is to be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly is to be a Shi'a Muslim. This means that Lebanon's president is the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world amidst a system of pluralistic religious representation. There is also supposed to be some transfer of powers from the president to the prime minister and cabinet.

Mystery surrounds Lebanese prime minister's apparent resignation and exit

The political scene in Lebanon was rocked in the first week of November 2017 when Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri was reported to have resigned from office. The move also resulted in the collapse of the ruling coalition government, which included both Hariri's pro-Western bloc, as well as Hezbollah. The fall of the coalition government effectively triggered a political crisis.

Days later, Saudi-owned al-Arabiya television reported that Hariri had been received by Saudi King Salman in Riyadh. For his part, Hariri said in a televised speech that he had resigned out of fear that he would be assassinated. Hariri also accused Iran and its Lebanon-based ally, Hezbollah, of being behind a plot to stir chaos in the Arab world. In the background was an accusation from the Hezbollah leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, that Saudi Arabia had forced Hariri to step down.

Hariri's accusation was regarded as fuel for a brewing sectarian chasm between Sunni and Shi'ite countries in the Middle East. That schism was already in place with an ongoing rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran,

Political Conditions Lebanon

which was being played out in Yemen, but which was also being manifest in other countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain.

With the governing scene in a state of turmoil in Lebanon, President Michel Aoun held an emergency meeting which was attended by security officials and cabinet ministers from the collapsed government. He urged national unity, stability, and calm, also indicating that he would take no measures until Hariri returned from Saudi Arabia.

The next development was more ominous as the newspaper al-Akhbar, a Hezbollah-linked publication in Lebanon, reported that Hariri was being held in Saudi Arabia under house arrest. That claim was at odds with a report from the prime minister's office, which indicated that Hariri was in the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir said the newspaper report was "nonsense" and Hariri was free to leave at any time. Saudi media also broadcast footage of Hariri's meeting with King Salman and reported that the Lebanese politician had departed Saudi Arabia for the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, more than a week later, Hariri addressed the matter himself, saying via Twitter: "To say that I am held up in Saudi Arabia and not allowed to leave the country is a lie."

By mid-November 2017, Hariri was in the French capital of Paris meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron.

From Paris, Hariri announced that he would be returning to Lebanon in time for the country's Independence Day celebrations and would, at that time, explain his status. Hariri said, "As you know I have resigned, and we will discuss that in Lebanon."

Primer on 2018 parliamentary elections in Lebanon

Parliamentary elections were set to take place in Lebanon on May 6, 2018 -- several years after they were due to be held. The last elections were held in 2009 and were to be followed by polls in 2013. However, the elections were postponed due to disagreements over electoral law, and rescheduled to be held in 2014. A further postponement due to regional unrest set the election date for 2017 -- but December 2017 passed with no elections being held. Finally, in May 2018 after nine years, the Lebanese people would get the chance to make their governing choice known.

At stake would be the composition of the "Majlis al-Nuwab" / "Assemblée Nationale" (National Assembly) -- a unicameral body where 128 seats are allocated on the basis of regional and sectarian affiliation.

Since the civil war that lasted from 1975-1990, power in Lebanon is split according to sectarian lines. The president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is always a Sunni Muslim, and the parliament speaker is always a Shi'ite. In parliament, Christian and Muslim sects have been equally **represented**. Within the two religious groupings, seats are also allocated to various sects, such as Druze, Greek Orthodox, Shi'a and Sunnis.

In 2009, the two main **political** blocs were the March 8 block made up of Hezbollah and its allies and the pro-Western March 14 bloc made up of Saad al-Hariri and his allies. As of 2018, Hariri was the head of government thanks to a government formation deal in 2016 that made him prime minister in exchange for Hezbollah ally, Michel Aoun, becoming president.

In 2018, voting would take place under a **new** and complicated structure in which voters would choose both a favored party list and a preferred candidate from it, in accordance with a proportional system.

On election day, voters in Lebanon had gone to the polls and made their voice heard at the ballot box. There were no results immediately available. However, Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, a Sunni Muslim, was expected to form another unity government that would include Iran-backed Shi'ite movement Hezbollah.

Weeks later, President Michel Aoun announced that Saad al-Hariri had been designated to become prime minister and form a government.

Political Conditions Lebanon

Hariri has been Lebanon's most well known Sunni politician since 2005 when his father, Rafik Hariri was assassinated. That event set the path for the country's Cedar Revolution, which ended Syria's overt influence in Lebanon's **political** scene. The assassination of the older Hariri has remained a keystone event in Lebanon, especially since a United Nations-backed court charged members of Hezbollah for his assassination. At the helm of the pro-Western bloc in parliament, Hariri has continued to fight against the influence of Hezbollah's **political** wing in Lebanon, which is backed by Syria and Iran. The Syrian civil war has exacerbated those tensions. His ties with Saudi Arabia have raised eyebrows, especially when he was reported to have resigned and trapped in Saudi Arabia. But French intervention appeared to have helped Hariri return to Lebanon and retract the questionable resignation.

Editor's Note:

Since the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri -- a noted politician with an anti-Syrian orientation -- Lebanon has slowly retrenched into a state of dissonance. The period saw short-term transformation when the Cedar Revolution swept pro-Western and anti-Syrian factions to power at the polls later that year, along with the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon for a three-decade long presence in that country. While the Cedar Revolution was viewed as the dawning of a **new** day in Lebanon, the aftermath was not so pleasant. **Political** stability devolved, as exemplified by a spate of **political** assassinations, which were blamed on pro-Syrian elements. As well, Lebanon was the main venue of violent conflict during the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. In recent times, the country has been caught in a **political** deadlock and intransigence over presidential succession, largely due to prevailing acrimony between pro-Syrian/pro-Hezbollah factions and pro-reform/Western-backed members in the Lebanese parliament. The establishment of the May 2008 Doha Agreement was intended to end the **political** impasse and move the country forward. The opening of corresponding embassies in Beirut and Damascus in 2009 was viewed as a step not only towards positive bilateral engagement, but also towards greater stability in Lebanon. However, the collapse of the unity government at the start of 2011, the May 2011 attack on United Nations peacekeepers, and the June 2011 appointment of a Hezbollah-dominated government, together augured further instability in Lebanon. The assassination of the Lebanese internal intelligence chief, Wissam al-Hassan in 2012 re-opened old wounds, as they stoked the memories of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, ultimately deepening the **political** cleavages between pro-Syrian and Hezbollah factions on one side, and the pro-Western opposition on the other. The ascendancy of Hezbollah as the dominant power in Lebanon since 2011 and well into 2013, as well as Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war across the border, in many ways suggested that the progress of the Cedar Revolution had been reversed. The postponement of the 2013 elections as a result of the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict across the border only underlined the turbulence that characterizes the Lebanese **political** landscape in recent times. It was to be seen if the formation of a joint pro-Hezbollah and pro-Western government, headed by a consensus prime minister, would stabilize Lebanon and set it on the path to elections in 2014 (now delayed from 2013). However ongoing cross-over violence from the Syrian war meant that the election would be further delayed until 2017. Meanwhile, Lebanon's failure to elect consensus president after a 2014 deadline passed was a sign that the **political** arena was dominated by dissonance.

In 2015, Lebanon continued to be plagued by cross-over violence from the Syrian civil war.

An agreement was made in 2016 for the establishment of a **new** president followed by long-awaited parliamentary elections in 2018; it was hoped that this **political** consensus would stabilize the country, at least domestically.

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