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Dynamics between Hezbollah and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon

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Although the main threat to Lebanese stability over the last months was the possibility of an Israeli attack, Lebanon is now dealing with internal tensions in connection to the indictment of Hezbollah members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). The tribunal, in charge of investigating the killing of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, initially focused on the involvement of the Syrian regime. Following the release of the initial suspects on the grounds of insufficient evidence, a stream of leaks indicated the possible indictment of members of Hezbollah.

Despite the potentially destabilising effects of the STL, the United States has been at the forefront of international support for the tribunal through financial contributions and high level declarations. Regionally, diplomatic efforts had a major role in preventing an escalation of the situation in Lebanon. Riyadh and Damascus, protagonists of an unprecedented phase of rapprochement, are playing an important role in containing the possibility of instability in Lebanon. The *entente* is perhaps explained by a convergence of interests. On the one hand Saudi Arabia is interested in curbing the influence of Iran. On the other Syria is on the lookout to regain its decisive role in Lebanese politics. Iran has also been proactive. In a recent visit to Lebanon (reciprocated by Hariri a few days ago) President Ahmadi Nejad showed Iran's interest in taking an active role. Despite negative expectations the visit served to defuse tensions.

Hezbollah is infuriated by the allegations of its involvement in what has been perceived by the Lebanese public as a heinous crime. If its involvement is ascertained Hezbollah's role as a credible resistance movement might be discredited. At the earlier stages of the investigations Hezbollah was not entirely uncooperative. Some of its members were summoned as witnesses and no major concerns were raised. Reactions varied until the more insistent rumours of indictment came about. The Hezbollah response now is to try and drag the issue of the tribunal into the more familiar framework of the conflict with Israel. Recently, Hezbollah's leader Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah presented footage intercepted from Israeli military intelligence indicating Israeli involvement in the 2005 events. Hezbollah also suspects the infiltration of Lebanese telecommunications by Israeli intelligence officers which is the source of evidence for the allegations against Hezbollah. The Hezbollah strategy does not seem completely clear as on the one hand, they asked the tribunal to consider the possibility of an Israeli role in Hariri's assassination while on the other the movement has threatened to "chop the hand" of those who aim to thwart the Resistance in Lebanon.

If the indictment against Hezbollah is issued, there are several possible ensuing scenarios. The most worrisome is the possibility of armed conflict as a result of a Hezbollah indictment. In the accusations by the STL prosecutor an important element will be the degree of involvement of Hezbollah's members. If the indictment provokes a violent reaction from Hezbollah this could easily slip into a confrontation along sectarian lines.

A second possibility is a paralysis of the executive which, already, seems to be underway. Lebanon is governed by a national unity government with fifteen of its thirty members loyal to the March 18 coalition majority. Ten members come from the ranks of the opposition, including Hezbollah. The remaining five members are from the presidential quota and may tip the delicate balance thus endangering the neutral role of the president. A ministerial vote over for example the approval of the state budget, which includes the STL's funding, may provide the occasion for the withdrawal of the opposition members from the government thus suspending its executive capacity. A third scenario could involve the withdrawal of Lebanese governmental support for the tribunal thus undermining its effectiveness.

Neither of these options can be excluded. However the likelihood of the use of force by Hezbollah must be weighed against the internal strife which would be caused and the resulting sharp contrast to Hezbollah's political identity of resistance within Lebanon. Though not completely immune from it, the Shiite movement condemns sectarian conflict, and has always been careful not to fall into a spiral of violence which may affect its popularity. Furthermore, a violent reaction to the indictment may not guarantee a cessation of the STL proceedings; quite the contrary it might be interpreted as a sign of guilt.

Governmental paralysis seems the more likely course of events. Lebanon has been in this situation before. Nonetheless, the outcomes of this scenario would be uncertain as Israel may choose to take issue with these Lebanese dynamics. Thus, the situation may precipitate into the first scenario of violence or may be solved through the neutralisation of the STL with the diplomatic support of regional powers such as Syria which would play a pivotal role. However, since the STL enjoys robust international support, its dismissal might be costly for the Lebanese government majority.

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