

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Syrian/Israeli Peace Talks and Political Deal in Lebanon: Teleconference with Carnegie Experts

Participants:

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Wednesday, May 21, 2008

- Question: Why should one not view the agreement in Doha as a great set-back for the Siniora government because of its agreeing to give Hizbollah the veto that it has long resisted?
- Paul Salem: Well, let me address that. First of all, it is a set-back and a defeat for the Siniora government. The government certainly did not want to give this veto and has resisted for the last 18 months. The events in Beirut two weeks ago—the attacks led by Hizbollah certainly changed the situation—pushed the government’s back against the wall and sort of gave a choice between accepting the compromise that the opposition has been calling for the last 18 months or facing further unrest either armed or unarmed. I think the government in the end felt it had no choice. The other way of looking at it is that although the government initially had decision-making power, and the opposition did not have veto power—in effect the government was unable to implement decisions that it had taken when they related to Hizbollah. So, in effect, Hizbollah had veto power on the ground that’s now translated as veto power in the government. Yes, it is a set back. Yes, it is a defeat in that sense. But what we have is not a complete win or loss, but a new accommodation, certainly with more influence for Hizbollah. So, it’s a nuanced outcome, but still it is a set-back for the government.

Question: Bush administration officials argue that there is some possibility that Hizbollah—by the violence earlier this month—that it has won sort of a tactical victory but it may have suffered a strategic set-back by undermining its popular support or acquiescence in the broader Lebanese population. Do you think that is true? Do you think that they may have eroded their political support by the violence?

Marina Ottaway: First of all, let me go back a moment to your first question, because I don't think it's quite correct to say this is a defeat for the Siniora government. What this is is a recognition of a situation that has been existing for a long time. And in fact, by recognizing the situation—that is, the real power of Hizbollah to block what the government was doing—it's an agreement that might allow, in fact, the government to govern a little more than it has been able to do so far. Now, concerning the issue of Hizbollah and whether it has, in fact, suffered a strategic loss, in many ways we will only know with the result of the next parliamentary election.

Paul Salem: Let me add to that point two things. One is that, yes, Hizbollah has lost some faith and some support among some undecided or middle of the road people in Lebanon. It has lost some faith and some support in the wider Arab and Arab-Sunni world. However, I don't think that at the end of the day it has much weight as regard to the fate of Hizbollah. Hizbollah—the two things that it did, it got this (inaudible) veto in the government. It also extended its intelligence and military influence into the capital of the country. Hence, it has more access to the airport, and access to the Lebanese sea port, and access and control of the highways leading South and East—which previously were not in its hands. These are important for the technical, on-the-ground gains that it has made. In the elections of next year, generally the Shiite voters who are in the district where Hizbollah runs will vote for Hizbollah. In the other

districts, Hizbollah candidates are not necessarily running—some of their allies in the Christian community will be running—and might be slightly affected by what has happened. But I don't think we can exaggerate. I think what Hizbollah really is in search of, and perhaps the reason it's acted so aggressively in Lebanon, relates to the other announcement that took place today which relates to Syrian-Israeli potential for peace. Hizbollah cannot survive as it is now, as an armed militia, if Syria and Israel have peace, and that is the main concern in its immediate future. And I think a move to consolidate its position in the capital and in the government is an insurance policy against that eventuality to be able to survive that.

Question: It seems to me like that both the news events that happened today, both the announcement in Israel on the Syrian peace talks and the agreement on Lebanon, show U.S. influence in the Middle East in retreat. In both of these instances, you have developments that go against U.S. goals, and in case the of the Israel-Syrian announcement, Condi Rice and others have said over time that they didn't really want this to happen. Is that your sense?

Marina Ottaway: Yes I think this is true. I think what has happened is that the United States has taken a very hard-lined position on all these situations without being able to deliver in the end. It wanted the Siniora government to take a hard-lined position and hold out against Hizbollah, but in the end it could not provide enough support to make this possible. So that what we are seeing there, and in a lot of other situations—we see these talks between Arab countries and Iran, for example, we see the countries in the region trying to find a different policy to move all these situations forward. And this is going on across the board, it's going on in trying to bring about reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, we see the Egyptians very involved now, the Yemenis tried to mediate in the past, the Saudis tried to mediate. We

see it in talks between the countries of the gulf (inaudible) and Iran. So it's not just these two instances, it's a much broader issue.

Paul Salem: Let me add a nuance to that, because I think we could distinguish between defeat certainly for Bush administration policy and its approach--these are two developments that flew in the face of what Bush just said. However, the two impact differently. What happened in Lebanon certainly gives Hizbollah more influence, which is overall negative for the U.S. However, what Syria is doing via turkey with Israel, although its not what Bush policy was, in effect, if this moves forward, it is bringing Syria further away from Iran, and closer to a U.S. ally, which is Turkey, and negotiating peace with another U.S. ally, which is Israel. The development on the Syria Israeli front, while flying in the face of Bush policy, might actually end up bring Syria further away from Iran and closer to U.S. allies in the region and be a U.S. gain in the long term.

Marina Ottaway: I agree with Paul, but another way to put it is that it's a defeat of the policy, but it is not a defeat of U.S. interests. And in fact, they are both developments that in the long-term, further U.S. interests in seeing an agreement reached on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Question: Could you follow up on Hizbollah's long-term prospects in the face of a potential Syrian-Israel peace deal? Could you spell that out a bit more? What would really happen to Hizbollah in this instance?

Paul Salem: The background is that Hizbollah was built and supported by Syria and Iran over the last 25 years and the pipeline and bridge has always been Syria. Their survival and growth depended, and still very much depends, on Syria. And Syria supported Hizbollah for all those years to keep pressure on Israel, and recently, they have moved that pressure up, and supported events in Lebanon, in order to push Israel more vigorously

toward the negotiating table to get Golan back. If Syria ends up signing a peace agreement with Israel, of course one of the U.S. conditions to encourage or allow that to go forward, Syria would have to cut its ties with Hizbollah, with Hamas, transform its relations with Iran, and really undertake a very fundamental shift. Hizbollah has two issues. Strategically, it has always received its arms, guns, and cash, through Syria, from Iran through Syria. As I mentioned a moment ago, it might be trying to consolidate its position in Beirut so as to continue to receive such aid from Iran if Syria jumped ship. But that would be much more difficult, and much more difficult to sustain. The second point is critical, that if Syria signs a peace deal with Israel, it will insist and lean on Lebanon, and it has many ways to lean on Lebanon, to open negotiations with Israel, and sign a peace treaty with Israel as well. Syria will not allow Lebanon to remain a radical state if it is moving ahead with peace, it does not want a radical state on its flank. In that situation, Hizbollah would be in a parliament, and in a government which is facing external pressure for negotiations with Israel, and it would face the option to either enter those negotiations, and secure a place for itself at the table in a post-peace Lebanon, or face the alternative of trying to survive against Syrian opposition and against, probably at that time, many Lebanese factions would also break away again and again to put pressure on Hizbollah. It would be a very difficult situation for Hizbollah to sustain.

Marina Ottaway: Let me add something. It would certainly weaken Hizbollah in its role vis-à-vis Israel, there is no doubt about that. You know, everything that Paul just pointed out. It would not necessarily make, weaken, at least in the shorter run, Hizbollah as a sheer political party in the domestic politics of Lebanon. Because Hizbollah still has the support of much of the Shi'a community, so that at least in the shorter run I don't think we should expect a peace agreement between Syria and Israel. It would not

bring about immediate change in the domestic balance of power in the relationship among the different factions in Lebanon.

Question: How is Iran looking at this? I mean, the sort of conventional wisdom in Washington is that Iran is feeling very emboldened and sees things sort of turning its way in the region. Does it not have more influence with Syria to say—now is not the time to reach a deal with Israel, we are winning and you're messing us up here?

Marina Ottaway: No, I don't think it does. I mean, I don't think the agreements, I don't think Syria and Iran always had identical interests. And Syria has clearly put its own narrow interests ahead of everything else. Syria has wanted to get the Golan back for a long time. The Assad regime needs desperately to have a success to shore up its position. It has suffered defeat and humiliation when it was forced to withdraw troops from Lebanon in 2005 so it needs something positive to show and this would be a big positive. Syria has benefitted at times from the alliance with Iran but it's not going to let that get in the way of its own interests. And Iran, in the end, cannot tell Syria not to negotiate.

Question: If no one else is going to follow up can I follow up on that? If there is a success here, you've obviously stated early on in the phone call that the debate here is all about do you talk to your enemies, etc.? And this clearly, with Israel talking to Syria, undercuts that argument. If there is success there, do you think that would make the argument that we won't talk to Iran even more difficult to sustain, because something good came from these negotiations?

Marina Ottaway: Well, probably it would. I do not know to what extent the Bush Administration would be willing to change its position openly in the final months of the Administration. I mean, this is not an Administration that has changed its tack very easily in the past. But

certainly it would undermine the idea that you should not, you cannot have successful talks until essentially, you know, one of the two parties has already given up, essentially, and accepted the conditions of the other side. So yes, it would show, if nothing else, the futility of the U.S. position. It would not necessarily cause the Administration to change its stand.

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