

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

**Lebanon and the Middle East Peace Process:
Teleconference with Carnegie Experts**

Participants:

Nathan Brown, nonresident senior associate, Carnegie Middle East Program
Amr Hamzawy, senior associate, Carnegie Middle East Program
Marina Ottaway, director, Carnegie Middle East Program
Paul Salem, director, Carnegie Middle East Center (Beirut)

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Paul Salem: As everybody has been following, things have been moving very quickly in Beirut. We are now in the first day of the Lebanese politicians having left the country and beginning to hold meetings in Qatar under the auspices of the Prime Minister and the Emir there.

To recap and give a bit of an analysis of what happened over the past week:

The government in the beginning of last week took a rather surprising measure—because it hadn't taken such measures in the year and a half preceding this period—took two measures that directly impact Hizbollah's security situation as it sees it in the Beirut Airport and in their communication network. Hizbollah took that as sort of a declaration of war or a sense that the Government was now beginning to move towards it to implement an international resolution or to begin to move in that direction.

And Hizbollah responded very forcefully on Thursday and Friday and occupied West Beirut, and it occupied or moved into a number of areas in the Lebanese mountains that are important strategic areas for it.

The Government climbed down from its two decisions and withdrew them a couple of days ago and officially canceled them, took them off the books. So Hizbollah already had an immediate victory or success in the sense that it forced the Government to go back on two fairly major decisions and to assert its upper hand on issues that relate to its military infrastructure and its communication and intelligence, infrastructure as well as its access to the Beirut Airport.

So that in itself was a victory and something that the Government will take with it for months and maybe years to come. It sort of drew a line in a sense.

Another gain for Hizbollah was that it extended its military presence into West Beirut, which includes, obviously, the airport but also many of the major institutions in the city, reaching to the Beirut's Port and the coastline.

But it also extended its military presence up the Beirut-Damascus Highway, which is a very critical highway, and the Beirut-Sidon Highway moving south, which was another critical highway.

These two highways have been previously controlled or threatened to be controlled by Jumblatt, one of the members of the March 14 Coalition, and Hizbollah has gained and managed to wrest control and has cowed Jumblatt. And they now—in other words, another area of victory is their actual deployment, their actual, you know, ability to control territory.

A third victory would be yet to be seen whether in Qatar, where the negotiations are taking place, whether the opposition, which the Hizbollah supports, will be able to get a share of the next Government, which is a blocking third—what they refer to as the blocking third. In other words, veto power in a future government is one of their main demands. It's yet to be seen whether March 14 will accept that or not.

If that is agreed upon, then I expect there will also be agreement on the election of the Head of the Army to the Presidency, and there will probably also be agreement on an election law, parliamentary election law in order to enable the deputies to come back to Beirut, elect the President, form a new Government under terms agreed in Qatar, pass an election law and prepare for elections early next year. That would be the smooth and rosy scenario.

If disagreements cause a breakdown in the situation in Qatar and the Qatar Initiative fails, then it would be at another fork in the road here in Beirut.

Either Hizbollah would decide to re-escalate again maybe using less military means and more sort of civil disobedience and closing down things to put pressure on the Government, which might lead to problems and tensions, or Hizbollah could be content with the gains it has so far and wait a few more months to make further moves or even wait till some time next year. So, a lot of unknowns right now.

The situation certainly has changed dramatically in the last two weeks. It has not changed totally. In other words, Hizbollah has scored a victory.

But at the same time, Hizbollah is keen to maintain the Lebanese State and the Lebanese Army, to maintain some autonomy there or some presence for the State and for the Army.

Hizbollah is even keen to maintain that the government and a future government continue to be led by a March 14 figure or figures in case of a future confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah, which Hizbollah expects either this year or next year. They feel that having a government which the West, particularly the US, is friendly to is much more of a protection for them than having a government in Beirut, which the U.S. would be very hostile to.

So you have a (security) situation in which Hizbollah has the ability perhaps to bring down a government and choose presidents and prime ministers. It is actually refraining from doing that, perhaps learning a bit from the experience of Hamas in Gaza when it won in a sense too much and became too much of a target.

So in a few words, that is sort of a synopsis of where we stand today.

Question: Well that's interesting. So it seems that Hizbollah's ultimate goal then is to—is kind of defense a bit. It is concerned that it will be involved in a conflict with Israel in the long term. And that perhaps is behind its moves in the last two weeks or is that too simple?

Paul Salem: Well certainly, Hizbollah's main concern far and away is preparing for the next confrontation with Israel, which we are convinced is coming either this year or next year and will be much bigger than the confrontation in 2006. That's the defining theme of their preparations and their activities in the country.

And for that, they have been very busy building defenses in the Bekaa Valley and in parts of the South and extending communication networks with help from the Iranians and some from the Syrians. And they are doing the best

they can to prepare for that in order to survive it and give as good as they get in a future confrontation.

In that vein, what they want from the Lebanese Government primarily is to be left alone. Secondly is they want a blocking veto in the Government so as to prevent decisions that are dangerous to them.

At the same time, as I've said, they need to maintain such a government in Beirut, which is seen as separate from Hizbollah, which is seen as friendly to the West and to the other countries and to Europe because all of those are softening factors in any future confrontation with Israel, and the U.S. and Europe would have to take that into account.

There's another dynamic which might be linked to some of the timing of all of this given that this was a very big move for Hizbollah and it was a very big move for Iran and Lebanon and it did come at a cost.

Hizbollah has lost a lot of friends in Lebanon, has antagonized the Sunni community in Lebanon and parts of Saudi Arabia and other parts of the world. Iran has also been blamed for some of the violence between Sunnis and Shiites that took place. So it does come at a cost.

So one part of the reasoning of why this might be happening now this year might be, to some degree, linked to concerns in Lebanon, particularly in Hizbollah, about Syria's intentions in the near future. Syria is talking very loudly about trying to regain the Golan and its interest in signing peace with Israel.

If Syria over the next two or three years actually, you know, succeeds in doing that or if there's a situation that would enable that, Syria—that would have a profound effect on Lebanon and will have a profound effect on Hizbollah.

If Syria signs peace with Israel and any such general peace, the U.S. would not but insist that Syria either try to deliver Hizbollah or close off its borders or completely fundamentally change its relationship with Hizbollah.

So Hizbollah's moves to expand its influence into Beirut, into the mountain over the Lebanese State might be linked to worries that if Syria goes to peace with Israel, Hizbollah needs to maintain a bridge with Iran and would need to maintain it through the airport, through the ports and through a share in a Lebanese government.

So that is speculative, but it could be part of what's going on particularly because there are so many lingering questions in Lebanon about the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus, and a lot of question marks as to how and why that took place.

Question: So we were under the impression from this distance in Washington that Hizbollah had coordinated ahead of time with both Syria and Iran. Are you saying that (it may just have) coordinated with Iran?

Paul Salem: The coordination might have been with both certainly Syria and some of the Syrian groups in Lebanon participated in the attacks. Syria can be happy that—of some of the immediate gains. And currently, Syria and Iran are still on the same page.

But it is curious that Hizbollah, which has chosen to lie low for many, many years and including the last three years, has chosen to make a very major move.

And most people agree that the decisions taken by the Government last Monday certainly, you know, they would draw some Hizbollah response, but the Hizbollah move was much larger than simply a response to the two decisions. It was really a move to create a new arrangement in Lebanon and it's not yet clear exactly what the details of those arrangements are.

And the current move doesn't negatively impact Syria; it actually positively impact Syria for now. But if Syria at a later date changes its strategy and its policy and goes to—forge peace with Israel, at least Hizbollah and Iran would have more of a foothold in Lebanon, albeit slightly less dependent on Syria.

Marina Ottaway: Paul, let me push you to some of this issue of the coordination with Syria and Iran.

You said a minute ago that it's certain that such coordination took place because here what we have is allegation by the U.S. Government that there was coordination, but I don't think anybody has been presented with any evidence that this is the case.

Is there more that has transpired at that end?

Paul Salem: Well one of the parties that was fighting—not one. Actually, to be precise, two of the parties that were fighting alongside Hizbollah, one is the Syrian Social Nationalist Party or the military wing of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party...

Marina Ottaway: Yes.

Paul Salem: ...which is completely, you know, I mean, to say it's close to Syrian intelligence is an understatement.

And they were in the forefront of the battle in Beirut. They took over many of the regions in Beirut. And actually, Hizbollah put them front and center in some of the battles in order to avoid accusations of Shiite-Sunni issues because the Syrian Social Nationalist Party has members from all religious communities.

Marina Ottaway: Right.

Paul Salem: And this party was front and center and entered Beirut with its flag, with pictures of Bashar al-Assad and all of that, all the paraphernalia. That was one indication.

The other group, which is very close to Syria is the Druze group is led by Wiam Wahab. And that is a group that works very closely with Syria.

It is funded by Iran, but works very closely with Syria. They, too, were, you know, in lockstep with Hizbollah in some of the mountain areas and were completely coordinating the political statements and things of that nature.

In addition, Nabih Berri, who is the Speaker of Parliament and leader of the Amal Movement and is closer to Syria really than he is to Iran and was just in Syria months ago, his fighters were in lockstep with Hizbollah and they were all on the same page completely in this activity.

So based on that, it's clear that the Syrians were certainly not, you know, they were not outside of the loop. I don't know who made the decision or who chose to do this, but they were certainly front and center and participating.

Marina Ottaway: Okay, thank you.

Question: Policy options, since we've focused on that from here, and have—has the U.S. now seen as pretty much abandoning the Siniora Government? Basically, I would like to support it, but there's not much concrete contender.

Paul Salem: Well I don't—I mean, yes, I think it's the latter, that the people are aware that on such a short timetable, and given the real options on the ground, there is not much at all that the U.S. or even Saudi Arabia can do in the midst of the crisis.

The primary question that people are posing is whether at the political level the U.S. and Saudi Arabia will allow or will encourage or will accommodate—in the key discussion as to the formation of the next government, will they allow, will they encourage, will they, whatever, their allies, the March 14 Group, in Lebanon to accept a blocking third in the next government or not.

That really is a very fundamental point because it directly impacts implementation of UN resolutions, it directly impacts the official decision making status of the Lebanese Government towards Hizbollah and so on, and is a very key issue that the opposition is demanding.

That is a question—a policy question that is still up in the air, and we hear, and probably March 14 is trying to figure out and read the tea leaves as to is

there any—are there any red lines in that sense from the U.S. or from Saudi Arabia.

The Arab League itself is proposing a compromise in which neither side gets a blocking third, sort of a—kind of giving 1/3 each for every faction and—to resolve—to sort of square the circle.

If that works, if that's acceptable to the opposition, that would be a good face-saving mechanism. If not, the question will be posed whether the blocking third is acceptable or not.

Paul Salem: My particular view is that we've sort of gone a bit beyond that at this point. We are talking about the survival of the State, we're also talking about the survivability of March 14 to maintain itself in the State and in the country, to wage the next elections next year, to make good results, and to live, in a sense, to fight another day rather than, you know, putting everything on this gamble.

Marina Ottaway: Can I add something concerning the U.S. position?

I think it's worthwhile linking this to the speech that Bush gave yesterday in Israel when he talked, which was—it has been reported here as a jab on Obama, but actually it could have implications in terms of the U.S. position. He talked—he made very disparaging remarks about those who would, you know, the—negotiate with terrorists.

Now, he—of course, Hizbollah is a terrorist organization from the point of view of the U.S. Government so that in a sense, Bush's statement was also a jab to the so-called U.S. allies in the Gulf while they're having these important negotiations.

So if you take that statement at face value, it's quite clear that U.S. is not going to encourage those negotiations. On the other hand, that statement also comes from the Administration that has been negotiating with North Korea so that you cannot be absolutely sure that—what position it would take in the end.

But it certainly does not bode well for the position that U.S. is going to take in these negotiations.

Paul Salem: Yeah. I would hasten to add—I mean, I fully agree with that. And I think the White House spokesman—I believe it was reported here—made somewhat dismissive or disparaging remarks about the negotiations in Qatar. He didn't even give the usual, you know, we-wish-them-luck kind of thing. It was the more negative statement.

I think for March 14 right now, they will maybe have even a close ear to what the Saudis will tell them because things have gone so close to home and there are issues of survival at stake, and the U.S. is not around, you know, to provide help or succor or protection.

And I think what the Saudis, you know, indicate particularly to Hariri, whom, of course, they have great influence over, will go a long way. And that at this point is not clear.

Question: In the reading of the Bush Administration in this latest crisis is that actually, it's not that bad after all because it affected the legitimacy of Hizbollah as the resistance movement. Do you agree with that?

Paul Salem: Well it certainly has influenced the image of Hizbollah as a resistance movement in Lebanon and we talked about that a bit earlier in this discussion,

that Hizbollah has lost some in terms of prestige and its image and the way it defines itself, and that loss applies in Lebanon. There have also been some loss of image in the wider Arab world and the Islamic Sunni world.

That at the same time Hizbollah has made some real gains on the ground and is likely to make some real gains in politics in agreements that are made in the next days and weeks.

So I don't think that the U.S.—I mean, I don't think on balance Hizbollah has come out weaker or, you know, in a more difficult position.

So yes, whereas the U.S. can say that at least on the negative side Hizbollah has lost something, that's true. But Hizbollah is in a much—is in a stronger position now in Lebanon currently that it was two weeks ago.

Question: When Paul was saying that it's sort of given or Hizbollah considers—given that there will be conflict with Israel this year or next year, what is that based on, what do you—why do you think that's the case?

Paul Salem: Well they—I mean, my statement is based on the discussions I've had with people close to them and the one who are convinced that this is coming. Their analysis is quite straightforward that Israel is very unhappy with the results of the 2006 war. And that it wants to—wants a rematch and this time, obvious, Israel would like to win the rematch in a clearer way.

They are also very aware that the US, obviously, considers them an international terrorist organization, is also going to fan flames to encourage some blow against them in the near future.

They're also aware that in the tensions between Iran and the U.S. and Israel, they are in the middle as well.

So for all of those reasons, they are quite convinced that something is going to happen.

In either case, we feel that they have to prepare for it and prepare for it urgently and quickly and massively.

If in the off chance it doesn't happen, that's fine. But they're going to prepare nevertheless. And they do—there is a sense among them that this is coming.

Marina Ottaway: Paul, has anybody in your discussion with people close to Hizbollah, is there any sense that, you know, an attack by Israel is likely—is more likely to come as long as the Bush administration is still in office? I mean do they—are they looking at the politics in this country and the (influx) that the elections might help?

Paul Salem: Not so much. The more relevant things that they follow are Israeli considerations both military and political. They're quite aware that Israel wants to strike when Israel feels its ready.

And many people who follow that here are aware that Israel wants to take some time to be militarily more prepared for the next confrontation.

They're also—they follow very, very closely Israeli politics. They're aware that, you know, Olmert is on the ropes. They doubt that he and what time might be remaining for him, they doubt that he will be able to launch anything or that Barack would go along with Olmert launching anything.

So I think, no, they follow much more the Israeli dynamics. And they feel primarily that Israel wants a rematch, because of the results of the 2006, whereas the U.S. can afford from their perspective a more long-term view that yes, it wants to get rid of Hizbollah at some point. But it's not in the same urgent sense that they feel Israel is because they feel that they humiliated Israel in 2006, this encouraged Hamas, it encouraged other people and it punctured the previous image of invincibility that Israel had.

So I think it's much more Israeli centric.

Marina Ottaway: Okay.

I don't want to move the conversation away from Lebanon at all, but let me remind you all that we also have on the telephone Nathan Brown, who is prepared to talk about the situation with the Palestinian negotiations.

Anything having to do with that conflict, just for your information, because Nathan has been silent and therefore probably people have forgotten he is there.

Question: Okay. Well maybe I can ask a question that may bridge the gap and thus seen here as link, seen here in Washington as link.

The U.S. presents a Middle East divided along those supporting Iran and those supporting democracy and U.S. things.

Condoleezza Rice recently spoke of Hamas as toxic for Iran.

Is there any sense in the region at all that Iran has a grand scheme and all this ties into together at support for Hizbollah and Hamas and their movements in

Iraq, Sadr—is there even a sense that the militants on the other end have common names and it's just a nice coordinated strategy or is it just not as simple as that?

Nathan Brown: Well, if I were to answer the question literally--is there that kind of suspicion in the region--I would say that the answer is yes. You see all kinds of suspicion.

But I think there's very little evidence of a coordinated strategy. You know, Hamas makes no secret of the fact that it views Iran as an ally and that it has received assistance to some degree from Iran.

But it's usually perceived of, in Palestinian terms, very much as a marriage of convenience that Hamas and Iran have. There are things that they can offer each other in terms. Hamas gets material benefits from Iran and the Iranians get legitimacy from backing the Palestinian resistance.

There is also some sense in which people in Hamas do follow regional developments, especially, between Israel and Hizbollah. But there's no sense I think in which that could be described of as a proxy for Iran. They've got their own agenda, their own decision making structure, and their own set of priorities which are independent even if they sometimes overlap with Iran's.

Question: Do you think that then the U.S. government totally misunderstands what's going on or is that sheer—is it just politics that they—let's say the Secretary labels Hamas proxy warriors?

Nathan Brown: I think there is a little of a political shorthand going on there in terms of lumping various adversaries of the United States, who do share some and political alignment together, and I think there also is a concern in the United

States that Iran represents increasingly a security threat to United States and to American allies in the region.

But I've got to say that, you know, terming Hamas as an Iranian proxy is a hyperbole everybody's book.

Marina Ottaway: Can I add something there because you said that—you started your question by saying that there is this view in Washington that the region is divided between supporting Iran and those supporting democracy. Actually the picture is quite different, different because those “supporting democracy” are in fact the countries that are afraid of Iran but at the same time are not anxious to embrace the policy of confrontation of the United States and by and large have been trying very hard to avoid a confrontation.

Saudi Arabia itself that it's now losing its patience with Hizbollah and making rather aggressive statements as Paul has pointed out. And certainly has lost its patience vis-à-vis Syria.

Has also been in the process of mediating it, they have been talking to Iran, they have been trying to mediate an agreement between Hamas and (PATA) in the past and they have not given up on that. They have talked to—with Iran about Lebanon in the past and so on.

So that they have in fact been trying to take their distances from the United States.

(Cutter) is certainly not in the Iranian camp but yet is in the camp of negotiation is trying to move the negotiations forward.

In other words there are a lot of countries and I think I suspect and this is real just a hypothesis at this point that we see more countries trying to take a—more distance from the U.S. in terms of the policy of this confrontation or policy towards Iran and it's so-called satellite as a result of what happened in Lebanon because in a sense what the range of the last week have—whatever it is have shown is that United States real can do very little in a confrontation or is not willing to do very much in a confrontation.

So that the March 14 forces have been led pretty much on their own by the United States and that certainly does not encourage other countries to take a more confrontational position towards Iran.

So it's not the process support for Iran and—or support for democracy, it's more countries of the region trying to find a way to deal with Iran, which is not identical to that of the United States.

Nathan Brown: I would just add one thing to that. There is no doubt that there is a decline in the American ability to line up allies within the region. What I think that Bush's controversial remarks about appeasement in his speech was not simply that this mediation is going on, but then it's sometimes going on with American (acquiescence). The mediation that I would point to there is the Egyptian mediation between Israel and Hamas. It is going on with American knowledge and apparently American blessing and is sort of seems to have reached a critical point.

So in a sense, although the remark was interpreted in the United States in domestic terms, the parties that are actually negotiating indirectly but very, very clearly and all that publicly with Hamas is Israel right now.

Question: Nathan, can you expand a little bit on that, what you said about the talks between Egypt with Egypt has been brokering with Hamas seemed to have reached the critical point, what do you mean?

Nathan Brown: Well I mean in a sense of the talks that have been going on and off for quite some time, at least since the capture of Gilad Shalit, which was at this point what? It was almost...

Marina Ottaway: Two years ago?

Nathan Brown: ...No, it was almost a year ago or more than a year ago...

Marina Ottaway: More than a year ago.

Nathan Brown: Yes. That was almost a year and a half ago. A year and a half. The talks began by focusing on the issue of prisoner exchange, but what they've focused on a cease fire over the last few months instead. The terms of the ceasefire are contested. Prisoner exchange is the secondary issue now, although it's still on the agenda. And the primary issue on the agenda is ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

Marina Ottaway: Uh-huh.

Nathan Brown: And there are still plenty of outstanding issues regarding the cease fire, involving its extension to the West Bank primarily but also whether it will be linked to a broader prisoner exchange. The reason I say it's at a critical point, has to do with signals in both parties are themselves giving.

There have been explicit statements by Hamas, that "we want a decision with days. If we don't go for ceasefire all options are open"—this is really

probably the most threatening kind of martial rhetoric imaginable and the same thing in a sense is coming from the Israeli side.

The remarkable thing is that the idea of a ceasefire is not simply the initiative of the Israeli left, but it comes from different places on the Israeli political spectrum, from people all over who simply want a respite from the rocket fire.

And the signals that they are giving right now are—that they are very, very interested in the ceasefire but also seriously considering a major military operation in Gaza.

Now, with both Israelis and the Palestinians it's unclear how much of this is threatening posture and how much of it is actually based on consideration of some kind of operations. Both sides seem to expect that sometimes within the next—not necessary the next few days but at least the next week or two--it will become clear whether or not the Egyptian has been able to broker a ceasefire.

Question: Become clear in what way?

Nathan Brown: It will become clear in that...

Question: ...it will just break out into open conflict.

Nathan Brown: It could be that the one side or the other will escalate hostilities. Exactly what Hamas is planning is not clear. Whether it would just be more intensive rocket fire, would it be another attempt to reach the Egyptian border or that sort of thing is not quite clear.

An attempt to breach the Egyptian border is unlikely because it would disturb relations with Egypt as much as it would anything else, but Hamas is giving signals that they would want an escalation if the cease-fire falls through.

On the Israeli side, it is not clear again what sort of military escalation they are considering. There has been talk off and on about a full-scale invasion of Gaza that would be comparable to the 2002 operation in the West Bank, which ultimately amounted to essentially a reoccupation of the West Bank.

I don't think that's in the cards. It's something that could occur eventually, but I don't think that there is any appetite in Israel for doing that right now.

Question: The U.S. or State Department talked the other day about speeding up deliveries of previously agreed military aid shipments, I understand it's basically modest things like equipment for protecting security forces, no heavy weapons, what do you make of that, is it sort of a—just a gesture, does it show the futility of the U.S. role there?

Paul Salem: They—whether—a high ranking lieutenant general visited Lebanon a few days ago and it was quite an event. I mean in the midst of everything, he flew in by helicopter and met the head of the Army and met the Minister of Defense and made these announcements and promises, which are small, they don't change anything, but they were a very interesting set of signals.

I think partly what might be going on is—and people in DC might in the end be able to tell U.S. more about this and U.S. here, but certainly, the issue of the Lebanese Army and the future of the Lebanese Army is a key question for United States and maybe possibly elements of the U.S. military, this lieutenant general, I think, I mean, given—I mean, (you as) close I believe to betray U.S. and so on.

I also know that in visits by Lebanese delegations to Washington, they sound a lot of enthusiasm in the Pentagon towards, you know, issues relating to the Army, whereas the White House and State Department was much more interested in the politics of the matter, and there is sort of a struggle that's been going on for the (sole) Lebanese Army in a sense and for the head of the Army who's expected to be the president to see where he would end up.

And a quick review of that last year when the Army fought against the (unintelligible) (Islam), the head of the Army became very prominent in the country, he became also prominent rather internationally as an army and the leader of an army that had fought and defeated a fairly major terrorist network.

And many people expected after that that the Lebanese Army would receive a lot of support, a lot of military support from the international community and obviously, particularly from the United States.

Promises were made but it's—very, very little was delivered. This was a great disappointment I know to the Lebanese Army—to officers in the Army.

Also during that period, a prominent Army officer was assassinated possibly by, you know, the other side as it were. And in the last even of the last week, the Army team should be coordinating more with Hizbollah and not really flowing down the Hizbollah attack at if indicating that the head of the army was, you know, leaning a bit towards Hizbollah.

And it seems today that the opposition has dropped many of its sorts of suspicions of the head of the army and is happy now to elect him president possibly.

So at the political level, what I'm saying there is a lot of compensation for the attentions of the head of the army and hence the army in general, but I do throw out the possibility—but this is something that would need to be investigated sort of more in Washington than here, that the U.S. military wants to establish and build strong relations with the Lebanese military without as much attention to the, you know, the political gain that is going on at a slightly different level more in terms of the ability of the army, its ability to control terrorist networks, its ability to coordinate in some area—other areas which the military is interested in.

Question: I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you said to them. The U.S. military wants to establish and build strong relationship with the Lebanese military without what?

Paul Salem: That it's possible I said this is something to be investigated, but what I was saying is that delegations from Lebanon have tensed in the past, but the U.S. military has a keen interest in building up the Lebanese military and improving its relations with it, somewhat regardless or to some degree more, you know, with less attention to the politics of what is the head of the army right now is a bit close to Syria or less close and so on.

They are more interested in the institutional relationship and building that institutional relationship.

Question: I think what you're saying also is indirectly your—by building up the army where there are many Shiites as well you're institutionalizing a kind of oil to Hizbollah, your blunting maybe in the long term their influence.

Paul Salem: Yes, yes. I mean that's certainly politically the case. It might also reflect sort of the more the thinking of, you know, Petraeus' experience in Iraq where things are not black and white, things are not good and evil and yet to build relationships and you can build those with militaries as well as with others.

Marina Ottaway: Let me point out that it is in many ways a policy very similar to what is being pursued in Iraq where there certainly the military, but also the administration are following a policy of trying to build up at the Iraqi military the national force, and I think there is the same policy in Lebanon of trying to build up but the military is a truly Lebanese national force.

Now, as in the case of Iraq, the question in Lebanon is, can this training—can better training, better training, more support by the United States overcome the sectarian divisions that exist in both militaries and certainly exist in the Lebanese military and it was kept the Lebanese Army from really intervening in the fight and to try to stop.

Paul Salem: Yeah, I mean that remains a very good question in Lebanon as it is also in Iraq. But I think there, you know, I think the experience—about Petraeus' approach perhaps in Iraq and in Lebanon is that it's not an either or, it's not a black or white in the sense that the Lebanese military can be an institution for national stability and national sort of consensus and can do a lot even if it cannot fight a (pitch) battle with one of the communities in the country, yes, it cannot do that extreme function but still having a strong military and having one that is, you know, as it is multi-communal is certainly more attending towards stability than having a very weak one.

Question: And, Paul, you were referring to (unintelligible) kind of General (Mark) (unintelligible) visit, correct?

Paul Salem: Correct.

Marina Ottaway: Any more questions?

Question: I wanted to ask, there were some contradictory reports about kind of—just on the military level who had one (wire) and they obviously (have blunted) very well in (unintelligible) Beirut, but I was wondering about the accuracy of reports that up in the (Shoof), they had actually been really (drowned) by (unintelligible) forces.

And in fact that some of their heavy equipment was incinerated and that they lost not just fighters, but a fair number of armored jeep and things like that. And so that it wasn't actually this full, you know, throated victory for Hizbollah that some have claimed and forgive me, but if you haven't been already gone over that, what was your view just from the military side (as opposed) to political side about how well Hizbollah actually did?

Paul Salem: Yeah, on the military side they were different—I mean Hizbollah took different approaches to different regions. I have talked a bit before about this.

In West Beirut, they definitely organize a full-fledged takeover of all the neighborhoods of all of West Beirut. And they did that, it took them a day and a half. There were some fighting, somewhat of it was heavy, but they used overwhelming force and there was not much resistance—capable resistance to slow them down and that was a pretty clear victory.

Their objectives in—they did not plan to or actually undertake any invasion of the (Shoof) nor do they want to.

What they wanted and needed to do was secure the coastal side of the Southern (Shoof), which essentially means the highway from Beirut to Sidon, that they achieve very easily. It's not a very populated area, and they have allies, Druze ally in that region. Without going into sort of too many details, that was almost, you know, very easy.

The only—one of the battles—the first that they intended and they have succeeded in fairly well was in (Halle) and that was early on and that is because that is where the highway from Beirut to Damascus passes through and they fought a battle there with another Druze ally and they did win that battle.

There was other areas where they had simply mass troops and some of the massing of the troops was essentially to cow and to scare Walid Jumblatt.

However, some of the (Jumblatti) forces were far more organized and far more hardy than the future movement guys who were brought together haphazardly to try to defend West Beirut.

Jumblatt has several thousands very experienced, very hard insiders and in deed, they attacked or ambushed a number of the Hizbollah positions and yes, Hizbollah had some significant losses there in people and equipment, not enormous, but some and that actually triggered some fighting that Hizbollah retaliated in some areas.

And the point I'm making is that Hizbollah did not intend to take over the (Shoof). It intended to open two major highways and it did that. It intended to occupy West Beirut and it did that.

It intended to cow Walid Jumblatt and to, you know, “bring them around” and it did that both by, you know, surrounding him in house and surrounding his region and making it clear that if they wished to, they could go ahead and do it and he essentially admitted to see it and said, you know, okay, I will put my issues in the hands of (Halal) and (Islam) (unintelligible), I want peace, I don’t want fighting. I will accept the back down in the government, and I will accept other conditions and so on.

So yes—it was not, I mean, yes, Hizbollah took losses and so on in several areas, but it is important to note what they intended to do and how far they took it.

Question: Well just a follow-up on that.

So, you know, the wrap on those for the last many years has been that great military leader, great religious leader, never been able to translate it into political gains, bad politician, hasn’t ever really capitalized on the strength that he’s had. So are you—do you basically see that as tepid now?

Paul Salem: No, not necessarily. Actually, politically he—I mean in terms of his image and then prestige, it fairly has suffered a serious setback. He is no longer in many people’s eyes, you know, the heroic leader of the resistance, the noble religious figure who is fighting for, you know, to reclaim land and so on.

He—for many people has been reduced, you know, to a politician or militia leader of the type that Lebanon witnessed during its civil war. So at one level his image has suffered a serious setback.

Politically, we were discussing earlier in the conversation that he has made some gains, the government went back on some major decisions that it took.

Hizbollah's actions are pressuring the March 14 government to accept the larger share for the opposition, things that will be political gains.

But we also discussed earlier that Hizbollah's main ambition is not—is close to where it is now. In other words, it is set up to be a proxy, a major proxy military force in a large confrontation involving Iran and Syria, again, essentially Israel and (its back for) the United States.

In that major regional function, Hizbollah wishes to be left alone in Lebanon to set up its own military infrastructure and it doesn't have the ambition to want to take over the Lebanese Government and he take over the Lebanese State. It feels more secure and more safe in a sense hiding behind the structures of a semi-independent state. It even feels safer with the government, which is lead by a very pro-western prime minister because that gives it protection from the U.S. and Europe in case Israel attacks it again.

So yes, they can do much more than they have, but we were saying earlier they don't want to do too much, they don't want to be in the position that Hamas is in to win everything and then to become a target that is easily targeted.

Question: Yes, this is also to Paul, who mentioned that the U.S. is not prepared to do as much in the case of a conflict in Lebanon. What do you think they could have done?

Paul Salem: Well in terms of, you know, actions on the streets like this and, you know, armed group in the city moving one way or the other, the U.S. cannot do much at all nor should it. That would just fuel, you know, more fighting on the streets. I don't think they could have done anything per se.

The question that we were discussing earlier was, what would be policy position now be from the Saudi side and from the U.S. side particularly relating to the negotiations that have just began in Qatar, where all the Lebanese leaders are now assembled and they will be essentially negotiating the shape of the next Lebanese government. And the major question there, will Hizbollah and the opposition be given what they want, which is a veto power in the next Lebanese government.

Now this is something that the March 14 movement and Lebanon has refused and which the U.S. has also urged the government here not to give, not to allow Hizbollah and the opposition to have veto power in the Lebanese government.

That is the policy question, which we were discussing earlier that the U.S. would probably still urge the Lebanese government not to accept it. But as the Lebanese government feels so cornered that either it has to accept it or face another round of fighting, it might feel otherwise. But really that is still early days to figure out what's going on in that sphere.

Marina Ottaway: The U.S. is really in a very paradoxical situation because it does not want that the March 14 forces essentially to surrender to Hizbollah, to give Hizbollah more power in the government. It has been pushing the government to hold against the request of Hizbollah. This has been going on for months.

But at the same time it is really not in a position to provide concrete help to the government because I think it's not only that U.S. is (bulked) down in Iraq and so on, but I think it's, you know, military intervention in Iraq—in Lebanon would be a complete catastrophe. I mean, they should really end up by playing in the hands of Hizbollah and regaining Hizbollah some of the support it may have been losing.

Question: It seems that the U.S. and its allies have more to gain by trying to influence what goes in Qatar talks rather than at the UN. But what role did the UN have here, we haven't seen much concrete emerging from discussions there.

Paul Salem: Well the bigger game that's going on obviously involves, you know, other aspects of the UN. And this also brings in the issue of—as it relates to Lebanon and the region, the issue of the tribunal which is—and also UN hand. It is something quite serious and quite concrete that the UN is engaged in.

The UN, yes, has units or troops in the south, but they are not directly relevant to the conflict in Beirut. They do not have any impact. They do not—they cannot, you know, move one way or the other, and they're somewhat hostage to the Israeli-Hizbollah tensions in that situation.

The Security Council has to report periodically on the implementation of Resolution 1559 and 1701. And in fact, part of the impetus maybe for the Lebanese government having to—felt—feeling that it has to take note those decisions that it did last week maybe partly was because Terje Roed-Larson was going to report to the Security Council and he keeps telling the Lebanese government, “You know, look guys, I keep reporting on this issue and you're not doing anything. So help me out and do something so that I have something to report to the international community.”

So there is that dynamic there, but the Security Council itself can do even less than the United States given that it'll have to involve, you know, other players that are not eager to weigh in on this one way or the other.

And the only relevant thing I can say it goes back to what I mentioned first and foremost first in this part of the discussion that relates to the UN, which is

the issue of the tribunal. It's certainly my view that the sooner we get through with the tribunal issue the better.

Everybody in—between Lebanon and Syria is sort of hanging on that and banking on it one way or the other. March 14 is expecting it to change then. The others are expecting it to do something else.

And the U.S. and the UN has not moved very quickly on this issue. That could be somewhere if one feeds that up a bit, we can get kind of to the end of that process, pick up the pieces, after all of that is said and done.

Marina Ottaway: Okay, more questions?

Trent Perrotto: I think if I'm not mistaken, Amr has joined us.

Amr Hamzawy: Yes.

Marina Ottaway: Okay, we have Amr Hamzawy on the phone.

Is anybody interested particularly in widening the discussion about to consider what's going on in Egypt, they could, you know, (you certainly) be clear to talk about that.

Question I am very interested in hearing a little bit more—what do you know about precisely what's happening with the Egyptian negotiations with Hamas and Israel?

Amr Hamzawy: Now what I know based on different reports that were released over the last date is twofold, one the Egyptian intelligence, Omar Suleiman, the (Iraq) or the Egyptian Intelligence apparently has been successful in getting Hamas and

(Jihad), as well as (Fatah) to commit to what we call a relaxation, which was more or less meant to be a ceasefire.

And secondly, Omar Suleiman went to Israel and negotiated with Israeli Minister of Defense Barak as well as with the Prime Minister and reports on the Egyptian press indicate that the Israel accepted the Egyptian deal. So the details which I have is; A, ceasefire, B, relaxation with regard to the humanitarian conditions in Gaza.

Whatever the Egyptian broker does not reach a team, which is not relevant with regard to Fatah-Hamas political dialogue or political consultations, which is not (offering) a way out off the political dynamics.

Basically, a security arrangement with a broker and finally Egypt did relax its control over Gaza, over the borders.

Four days ago if I'm not mistaken, they opened the borders for four hours on two days, which was if I'm not mistaken Monday and Tuesday and apparently helped to get some Palestinians treated in the Egyptian hospitals as well as some supply which were badly needed.

Nathan Brown: Yes, I would just add a couple of things to that.

The accounts from Palestinian side and the Israel side are slightly less optimistic than the Egyptian accounts. But they still make clear that one of the major Egyptian accomplishments has been getting the various groups to sign on. This would not simply be an agreement between Hamas and Israel, but between all of the Palestinian groups, especially Islamic Jihad. They were much more reluctant to sign on to any ceasefire.

As far as the Israelis agreeing, the accounts coming from Israel and also from the Palestinians are a little bit less optimistic there. Hamas has said that they're expecting Israeli agreement, although the Israeli accounts are far more tenuous. Barak is supposed to be going to Egypt. And what I conclude from that is that the Israelis are very, very much interested in an agreement, but they still have some doubts.

One of the big issues is the border crossing and exactly how that would be controlled and by whom--what kind of international presence there would be and who on the Palestinian side will be there to help control it. And the accounts from the Palestinian side indicated that Hamas has relaxed its position on the Palestinian presence. They're more willing to have a presidential role, which is in essence means a (Fatah) role in the border crossing. And perhaps they are open to a European role, rather than simply have it a bilateral crossing controlled by the Hamas government by Egypt.

Marina Ottaway: Do we have any more questions? Okay, thank you all very much for your time.