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Lebanon Intrusion

Congress inserts itself into Lebanon's civil strife with a strongly worded resolution

By [Emily Schwartz Greco](#), [Stephen Zunes](#) | June 10, 2008

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In response to a brief spasm of violence between armed Lebanese factions early last month, the House passed a strongly worded resolution claiming that “the terrorist group Hezbollah, in response to the justifiable exercise of authority by the sovereign, democratically elected Government of Lebanon, initiated an unjustifiable insurrection.” [House Resolution 1194](#) – which was sponsored by Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Democrats' chief foreign policy spokesman in the House of Representatives – also called on the Bush administration “to immediately take all appropriate actions to support and strengthen the legitimate Government of Lebanon under Prime Minister Fouad Siniora,” wording which many interpreted as a license for future U.S. military action.

What actually happened during the second week of May was not that simple. The fighting was not between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state, but between various militias allied with some of the parties of the country's two major rival coalitions. The Lebanese army remained neutral throughout the two days of fighting and Hezbollah and its allied forces quickly and voluntarily handed over areas of Beirut they had briefly seized to the Lebanese army.

The uprising took place during a general strike to protest the Siniora cabinet's refusal to raise the minimum wage and increase fuel subsidies in the face of rising prices in food and other basic commodities. The tense atmosphere was exacerbated by the politicized firing of a popular brigadier general in charge of security at the Beirut Airport and efforts to close down Hezbollah's telecommunication network, which had played an important role in mobilizing defenses and relief operations during the massive Israeli bombing campaign against Lebanon in 2006. The Bush administration had been strongly encouraging the prime minister to enact such policies.

Demonizing Hezbollah

According to resolution co-sponsor [Rep. Gary Ackerman](#) (D-NY), however, the conflict was simply a matter of the people of Lebanon being “in the throes of having their duly elected government taken away from them by terrorist organizations and rogue regimes.”

Lebanon's “duly elected government,” a legacy of a complex system of confessional representation imposed by French colonialists as a means of divide-and-rule, consists of a slim majority made up by the May 14th Alliance, a broad coalition consisting of 17 parties dominated by center-right parties led by Sunni Muslims, a center-left party led by Druze, and far-right parties led by Christian Maronites. The opposition March 8th Alliance consists of 41 parties, led by the radical Shia Hezbollah, the more moderate Shia Amal, the centrist Maronite-led Free Patriotic Movement, as well as a various leftist and Arab nationalist parties.

Despite this complex amalgam of movements, the House resolution insists that Hezbollah had provoked “sectarian warfare” in the recent conflict, ignoring the fact that there were Muslims and Christians on both sides. One of the major combatants among the anti-Siniora forces, for example, was the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), a Lebanese movement led by Greek Orthodox Christians.

The resolution also over-simplifies the complicated dimensions of the conflict by putting the onus for the violence exclusively on Hezbollah. For example, the resolution accuses Hezbollah of sacking and burning the buildings housing the

television studios and newspaper of a pro-government party, when in fact it was SSNP partisans that did so. Similarly, the resolution also blames Hezbollah for “fomenting riots” and “blocking roads,” when in fact these were actions by trade unionists and others as part of a general strike pressing demands for greater economic justice, an agenda supported by those from across the political and sectarian divide. Such rioting and erection of barricades on major thoroughfares have occurred in dozens of other countries where governments, under pressure from the United States and international financial institutions, have attempted to impose structural adjustment programs and similar unpopular neoliberal economic policies.

Though the military actions by the militias of Hezbollah and its allies were clearly illegitimate, the hyperbolic language of the resolution went to rather absurd extremes. For example, the resolution referred to Hezbollah’s armed mobilization, in which its forces briefly controlled key neighborhoods in West Beirut, as an “illegal occupation of territory under the sovereignty of the Government of Lebanon.” By contrast, not once in Israel’s 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon between 1978 and 2000, which took place in defiance of no less than 10 UN Security Council resolutions, did Congress ever go on record condemning Israel’s actions or even referring to it as an illegal occupation that it was.

The resolution also claimed that “more than 80 Lebanese citizens have been murdered” as result of Hezbollah’s actions. However, [independent reports](#) indicate that the majority of those killed were armed combatants and that the vast majority of the killings took place outside the capital in fighting between other factions after Hezbollah ended its offensive in West Beirut. Furthermore, these same reports demonstrate that Hezbollah was far more disciplined than other militias in avoiding civilian targets.

The resolution also called on the European Union – which has already placed Hezbollah’s external security organization on its list of terrorist organizations for its involvement in assassinations overseas – to also designate Hezbollah itself as a terrorist organization. By contrast, there have been no such calls in Congress for other Lebanese parties – such as the Phalangists and the Lebanese Forces, whose militias have been responsible for at least as many civilian deaths as has Hezbollah but which are part of Siniora’s pro-Western coalition – to also be labeled as terrorist organizations.

Blaming Syria and Iran

In an apparent effort to lend support for the Bush administration’s bellicose policies toward Iran and Syria, the resolution – like a number of previous resolutions dealing with Lebanon – grossly exaggerated the influence of those two countries on Hezbollah. In reality, there is little evidence to suggest that Syrian and Iranian influence on this populist Shia party and its allies is any greater than U.S. influence on some of Lebanon’s other political factions. Indeed, many Lebanese blame the United States for much of the political crisis which has paralyzed the government during the past year and which culminated in last month’s violence as a result of the Bush administration’s pressure on Siniora and his allies to resist any compromise with the opposition on economic, political or security issues.

The parties of Siniora’s May 14 Alliance, while certainly benefiting from U.S. support and often amenable to policies pushed by the United States, ultimately make their decisions based upon their own perceived self-interests. Similarly, while Hezbollah certainly benefits from Iranian – and, to a lesser extent, Syrian – support and has often been amenable to those governments’ guidance, the Shia party is a genuinely populist, if somewhat reactionary, political movement whose leadership also makes their decisions based upon what they believe will advance their standing and their cause. Hezbollah in many ways serves as a successor to the left-leaning Arab nationalist parties of an earlier era in their resistance to Western domination and rule by traditional ruling elites.

Despite this, the resolution claims that Hezbollah’s goal in the uprising was not about the plight of the country’s poor and disproportionately Shia majority or a reaction to perceived discriminatory policies by the U.S.-back prime minister, but that it was actually an effort “to render Lebanon subservient to Iranian foreign policy.” The [resolution](#) also insists that the diverse group of opposition parties “continue to pursue an agenda favoring foreign interests over the will of the majority of Lebanese.”

The resolution went as far as calling upon the United Nations Security Council to “prohibit all air traffic between Iran and Lebanon and between Iran and Syria” on the grounds that it might be used to bring in arms to the Hezbollah militia, thereby placing a large bipartisan majority in Congress on record calling for the disruption of legitimate commercial activities between foreign countries due to the possibility that a few of the thousands of annual flights may include contraband armaments. This demand is particularly ironic given that the U.S. government transports tens of billions of dollars worth of armaments to repressive governments in the greater Middle East region every year, as well as arming private militias in Iraq and separatist guerrillas in Iran.

Sabotaging Reconciliation

The timing of the resolution, which was passed on May 22, a full two weeks after the fighting ended, appeared to some observers to have been part of a U.S. effort to undermine the sensitive talks between Lebanon's various political factions then being hosted by the Arab League in Qatar. In passing a resolution endorsing one side and condemning the other, combined with threatening the use of "all appropriate actions" in support of one of the two sides, the House was apparently hoping to harden the negotiation positions of the pro-U.S. May 14 Alliance in order to cause the talks to fail.

Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) [recognized](#) the absurdity of the resolution by pointing out "This legislation strongly condemns Iranian and Syrian support to one faction in Lebanon while pledging to involve the United States on the other side. Wouldn't it be better to be involved on neither side and instead encourage the negotiations that have already begun to resolve the conflict?"

Similarly, Rep Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), while noting the legitimate concerns regarding Hezbollah's actions, [observed](#), "We have to be very careful about how we dictate a certain policy in Lebanon for its effect on Lebanon and for its effect on the region," expressing concern "that it will be seen by some as the United States trying to instigate more civil unrest in Lebanon at the same time that we say that we're supporting the central government." Noting correctly that the 2006 U.S.-backed Israeli war on Lebanon resulted in strengthening Hezbollah at the expense of moderate pro-Western elements, the Ohio Congressman went on to observe that "We should be doing everything we can to strengthen a process of dialogue in Lebanon. I don't believe that this resolution accomplishes that. I think it accomplishes the opposite."

Kucinich went on to note how U.S. Assistant Secretary of State David Welch went to Lebanon "to basically make sure that the government took a hard-line position and that it would forestall the possibility of any dialogue." The former presidential candidate also [observed](#), in reference to his visits to Lebanon, that "One of the things that I thought was most telling was that there was a concern about working out an agreement without the interference of outside parties, without the interference of Iran or the interference of the United States." (Emphasis added.)

Fortunately, despite this apparent effort to undermine a settlement, Arab League negotiators were eventually able to get Lebanon's two major political alliances to agree to a power-sharing agreement.

Other observers, including Paul, warned of the consequences of further U.S. meddling in Lebanon's internal conflicts. "This resolution leads us closer to a wider war in the Middle East," Paul said. "It involves the United States unnecessarily in an internal conflict between competing Lebanese political factions and will increase rather than decrease the chance for an increase in violence. The Lebanese should work out political disputes on their own or with the assistance of regional organizations like the Arab League."

Paul concluded by cautioning his fellow House members to "reject this march to war and to reject H. Res. 1194." His colleagues were unwilling to heed his warnings, however, and the resolution passed with only 10 dissenting votes in the 435-member body.

Taking Sides

Though there is more than enough blame to go around on all sides for the longstanding political impasse and the more recent outbreak of violence, the Congressional resolution put the blame entirely on one side.

The resolution correctly observes how "United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680, and 1701 call for the disbanding and disarming of all militias in Lebanon" but that "Hizballah has contemptuously dismissed the requirements of the United Nations Security Council by refusing to disarm." However, there is nothing in the resolution regarding militias allied with the U.S.-backed prime minister, which are also required to disarm. Siniora's Future Movement militia, which Hezbollah fighters battled on the streets of West Beirut, has emerged since these UN resolutions passed without any apparent disapproval from Washington.

The resolution also condemned Hezbollah for attacking buildings of rival parties, but there were no criticisms for similar actions by the other side, such as when pro-government gunmen attacked and seized the SSNP and Baath Party offices in Tripoli and stormed SSNP offices in Halba, killing seven party activists.

Yet, for the Democratic-controlled Congress, as with the Bush administration, the complex cleavages of the contemporary Middle East can be simply understood as a matter of good versus evil. "We have a situation here where a democratic, freedom-loving, sovereign people are insisting on the results of their own self-determined election that they came to through democratic processes and are doing that in the face of outside interference in the form of armed opposition,

murders, assassinations that are being sponsored by Hezbollah, financed by the Iranian and Syrian regimes,” [Ackerman said](#).

And Switching Sides

As in Iraq, the United States has a history of switching sides in terms of who is seen as the bad guy and who is seen as the good guy. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s, the United States backed right-wing predominantly Maronite militias against the predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party. During the 1982-84 U.S. intervention in Lebanon, U.S. forces fought the Socialists directly, including launching heavy air and sea bombardments against Druze villages in the Shouf Mountains. Now, however, the U.S. supports the Socialists, with the recent House resolution specifically defending the group.

Similarly, the United States supported the Shia Amal militia in 1985-86 when it was fighting armed Palestinian groups as well as in 1988 when Amal was fighting Hezbollah forces. Now, the United States is strongly opposed to Amal, essentially acting as if they are one with Hezbollah.

The United States supported Syria's initial military intervention in Lebanon back in 1976 and supported the bloody Syrian-instigated coup in late 1990 that consolidated Syria's political control of the country. Subsequently, however, the United States became a leading critic of Syria's domineering role of the country's government, which continued until a popular nonviolent uprising during the spring of 2005 forced a Syrian withdrawal from the country.

In a more recent [example](#), as part of a U.S. policy to support hard-line Sunni fundamentalist groups as a counter-weight to the growth of radical Shia movements in Iraq and Lebanon, Lebanese parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri provided amnesty and released radical Salafi militants from jail. As such militants began causing problems in the northern city of Tripoli last year from a base in a Palestinian refugee camp, the U.S. then backed a bloody Lebanese army crackdown.

One of the most bizarre switches in U.S. allegiances involves former Lebanese Army General Michel Aoun, a Maronite, and his Free Patriotic Movement, the most popular Christian-led political group in the country. As an ally to Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 1990, the United States gave a green light to the Syrians to have Aoun overthrown as interim Lebanese prime minister in a violent coup. Not long afterward, however, the United States then switched sides to support Aoun and oppose the Syrians and their supporters. As recently as 2003, Aoun was feted by the [Foundation for the Defense of Democracies](#) – a neo-conservative group with close ties with the Bush administration, which includes among its leaders [Newt Gingrich](#), [James Woolsey](#), [Jack Kemp](#), and [Richard Perle](#), as well as Democratic Senators Charles Schumer and [Joseph Lieberman](#) – which declared him a champion of freedom and democracy. Aoun won similar praise by some of the very members of Congress who supported this latest resolution when he testified that year before the House International Relations Committee.

Soon after his return from exile, however, Aoun became one of the most outspoken opponents of the U.S.-backed political leaders and parties which dominate the current Lebanese government and he and his movement are now allied with Hezbollah in the March 8th Alliance. Not surprisingly, he has gained the wrath of the Bush administration and Congress.

One would think that, with a history like this, Congress would think twice before going on record in support of specific factions in Lebanon's confusing, messy, and violent political environment. Unfortunately, over 95% of House members apparently believe otherwise.

Hezbollah's provocative military action in May, which violated its pledge to use its armed militia only in defense of the country from Israel and not against its fellow Lebanese, has hurt its standing among the country's non-Shia majority, who now see them more as advancing their own parochial interests than serving the role they had previously embraced as a national resistance movement against foreign occupation forces. Washington's support for Israel's military attacks on civilian targets in Lebanon and this latest resolution backing rival armed factions, however, does little to encourage Hezbollah to disarm or promote efforts to advance nonviolent conflict resolution and national reconciliation.