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The July war and its effects on Lebanon's power-sharing: the challenge of pacifying a divided society

By Tamirace Fakhoury-Mühlbacher¹

¹ **Tamirace Fakhoury-Mühlbacher** is a Researcher at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg, Germany. She has published two reports on ethnic conflicts and international relations in cooperation with the International Centre of Human Sciences affiliated to the UNESCO in Lebanon.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Lebanon's fragile politics of accommodation in the wake of the Hezbollah-Israeli war in July 2006. After drawing attention to the dangerous emergence of a bipolar and unstable power-sharing model between Lebanese dissenting factions, it shows how a flimsy elite consensus, divergent perceptions of external threat, the republic's entanglement in the regional and international orbits as well as the increase of foreign pressures since the 2005 Beirut Spring could impede the pacification of a divided society.

In the end, the author explains how a non-aligned foreign policy could help Lebanon pacify its internal cleavages and extricate itself from the dilemma of polarized power-sharing.

On a broader scale, this article helps shed light on the dilemma of power-sharing systems on stormy seas when external conflicts overlap with internal conflict lines.

Lebanon's power-sharing riddle

The Lebanese model had once been considered as one the most successful cases of consociational democracy.² Indeed, the formula of power-sharing based on the 1943 national pact³ has somewhat allowed a deeply divided society composed of many religious communities to regulate its conflicts, and counteract to a certain extent the centrifugal drives that threaten to destabilise it. Yet, the apparently resilient formula which has fallen under many strains since 1943 ended up disclosing deep inherent imperfections as well as a dangerous addiction to external allegiances and a peculiar vulnerability to foreign pressures.

After a 15-year war which only came to a halt in 1990 as regional and internal factors converged to facilitate a regulation of the conflict, power-sharing democracy was formally resuscitated. The new updated formula of power-sharing, the Ta'if agreement, signed in 1989, fixed some institutional and political flaws.⁴ Nonetheless, the consociational pact was heavily influenced by Syria. Its subsequent implementation depended closely on an obtrusive Lebanese-Syrian model of governance which impaired to a large extent the power-sharing ingredients of the Lebanese formula.

In spring 2005, Lebanon's post-war Republic finally broke the shackles of Syrian guardianship after a transcommunal 'Democratic Uprising' in the wake of premier

² See for example Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Consociational democracy is the technical term for power-sharing democracy, and is defined as a model of governance in a plural society which tries to reconcile the quintessence of democracy with political stability. This model entails a sharing and a division of power among communities.

³ Since 1943, Lebanese political life has been organized according to a formula of consensus which has allowed communities to divide and organise political power. Considered as the cornerstone of the consociational pact, the 1943 unwritten agreement drew the premises of a grand coalition government between a Maronite president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shiite speaker of parliament. The different religious groups were to be proportionally represented in the cabinet, and a ratio of six Christians to five Muslims was adopted in the parliament. Proportionality was also observed in the appointment of civil servants. Scholars are divided as to whether Lebanon's power-sharing formula was responsible for the outbreak of the 15-year war in 1975.

⁴ After the ratification of the Ta'if agreement, parity between Muslims and Christians has reigned in the parliament. Whereas the president's excessive powers were reduced, the prime minister and the parliament speaker acquired new prerogatives.

minister Rafiq Hariri's slaying. This historical watershed, followed by the Syrian troops' pullout in April under heavy international pressure, has been saluted as a power-sharing and democratic revival. In an unprecedented manner, various political groupings joined together in an attempt to patch up communal cleavages and conflicting visions over a multi-faceted Lebanese nation. In May 2005, the first free parliamentary elections since 1972 took place leading to the formation of a fairly representative coalition government led by Premier Fuad Siniora.

Unprecedented occurrences included the electoral victory of the 'March 14 Alliance' or the anti-Syrian multi-confessional coalition which orchestrated the 2005 Intifada Uprising,⁵ and the subsequent cooption of the Shiite Party Hezbollah in the coalition government.

Yet, this political awakening which announced the emergence of a balanced consociationalism, free of Syrian tutelage, turned out to be transitory. With the return of internal political bickering and the increase of external loads on the frail Lebanese system, transcommunal affiliations fostered by the Beirut Spring have quickly wilted and lost their glamour. One of the hottest and latest episodes of power-sharing derailment goes back to the 2006 roaring Summer of Rage in the small Arab Republic.

A Pandora's box of divisions

On July 12, Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers along the Lebanese-Israeli border led to the outbreak of a large-scale war in Southern Lebanon which resulted into the destruction of the Lebanese infrastructure and the death of 160 Israeli and 1500 Lebanese civilians.

⁵ Organised on a transcommunal basis, the alliance groups the Future Current led by Sunni leader Saad Hariri, the Progressive Socialist Party led by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt as well as various anti-Syrian Christian factions namely the Lebanese Forces and the Kornet Chehwane Grouping.

Israel's asymmetric retaliation to Hezbollah's seizure of the two soldiers, commonly described as the method of collective punishment, had the visible objectives of enforcing a rash application of United Nations Resolution 1559,⁶ and bringing about a Lebanese consensus around the dismantling of Hezbollah's armed wing by causing nationwide destruction.

These deadly confrontations which ended with a UN-brokered cessation of hostilities preceded by the adoption of Resolution 1701⁷ will have innumerable implications for Lebanon's national dialogue and politics of accommodation.

Even though Lebanese political groupings chose not to display openly their divergences during the 34-day war in fear of internal strife, no sooner did the fighting abate than Lebanon's consociational formula of endurance turned into a formula of division. In fact, the after-effects of the July war on Lebanon's power-sharing seem particularly daunting.

First, the large-scale escalation interrupted brutally the initial process of internal dialogue which, despite its tediousness, has been utterly superseded by regional violence.⁸ Although the groupings agreed to resume dialogue once hostilities on Lebanese ground had come to a halt, it is anticipated that consensual practices will not yield positive results any time soon. Indeed, the bipolar balance of power between the pro-Syrian '8 March' and the anti-Syrian '14 March' camps⁹ threatens to continue if not to deepen.

⁶ Adopted in September 2004, after the Syrian-brokered mandate extension of Lebanon's president Emile Lahoud, UN Resolution 1559 calls mainly for the pullout of Syrian troops, and Hezbollah's disarmament. While Syrian forces withdrew in April 2005, the Party of God has refused to disarm.

⁷ Resolution 1701 approved on August 11, 2006, after a long embarrassing international silence, called for an immediate cease-fire, Hezbollah's disarmament, the Israeli forces' withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, the deployment of the Lebanese army to the South, and the increase of capacity of the United Nations Interim Force deployed since 1978.

⁸ This national dialogue conference, in which 14 communal leaders participated, was launched in March 2006. Its objectives were to tackle consensually hotbed issues namely Hezbollah's disarmament, president Lahoud's controversial mandate extension and Lebanese-Syrian deteriorating relations since the Syrian troops' pullout.

⁹ During Lebanon's 2005 'Democratic Uprising' that happened in the wake of premier Hariri's slaying on February 14, political groupings were divided between the pro-Syrian '8 March' and the

The end of the Summer of Rage has been overshadowed by rising political confrontations between the winning ‘14 March Alliance’ and Hezbollah joined by the Free Patriotic Current.¹⁰ Pending questions revolve around possible changes in the national balance of power.

Strengthened after the July war in the internal and regional realms, Hezbollah, which was able to withstand the Israeli deadly offensive and, during a victory rally in September, claimed to have achieved a historical and divine triumph. During this event which gathered tens of thousands, the party called overtly for the resignation of the Siniora-led cabinet, and for the formation of a more solid ‘national unity government’ able to confront external threats.¹¹ Hezbollah’s call for restructuring political alignments in post-Syrian Lebanon indicates that the party will sooner or later claim political gains for its regional triumph, and challenge the rigid institutionalism of the Lebanese national formula.

Two days after Hezbollah’s gathering, the Lebanese Forces¹² staged a counter-rally in the Christian area of Harissa in which they called for Hezbollah’s demilitarisation, and opposed the party’s calls for a government change. This clash, reminiscent of the 8 and 14 March demonstrations in 2005, shows that Hezbollah’s arsenal is about to become a major political cleavage.

Whereas Hezbollah affirmed that it had not expected such a reprisal after the two soldiers’ kidnapping, the March 14 Alliance has expressed reservations about the Party of God’s unilateral foreign policy and its right to decide on issues of war and

anti-Syrian ‘14 March’ factions. These dates allude to the two biggest demonstrations staged respectively by the pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian coalitions.

¹⁰ After his return from a forced exile in Paris in May 2005, General Michel Aoun, the Maronite leader of the Free Patriotic Current, struck an alliance beginning in 2006 with Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah.

¹¹ See Nada Bakri, “Hundreds of Thousands Show up for ‘Victory Rally’ ”, *The Daily Star*, September 23, 2006, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=75664&category_id=2

¹² The Lebanese Forces is a Rightist Christian party whose leader Samir Gegaa was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment in 1992. His release in 2005 after Syria’s pullout has been considered as a victory for the post-war politically emasculated Maronite community.

peace in Lebanon. In fact, the inability of the Lebanese government to raise a finger during the military conflict has led to the prevalent assumption that an authoritative centre of gravity in Lebanon is non-existent,¹³ and that sharing fragmentation rather than power best describes Lebanon's actual politics. In retrospect, the July war showed that the ongoing process of national discussion between Hezbollah and the majoritarian alliance on the party's military wing could be described more as a case of incommunicability than a case of genuine dialogue.¹⁴

More specifically, while the Party of God considers its arsenal as the only guarantee against attack on the frail Lebanese Republic, the anti-Syrian coalition regards the party's military wing as a source of dissension and internal weakness. A statement released by the 'March 14 Alliance' claimed that the Shiite party's artillery transformed Lebanon into "a battleground used by Iran to improve its bargaining position with the international community and by the Syrian regime to exercise its hegemony over Lebanon".¹⁵

Doubtful of the party's regional and political agenda, the winning anti-Syrian coalition has questioned Hezbollah's intransigence on the subject of its arms, as well as its attempt to hijack the national dialogue process. Anti-Syrian actors have notably cast doubt on the building of a post-Syrian Lebanese polity, a state within a state, on the nature of the party's relations with Syria, and its belief in a victory against Israel. More significantly, while Hezbollah considers itself to be a regional and internal winner after the July war, opposing factions have themselves claimed victory because the Summer of Rage has been followed by the deployment of UN peacekeepers and the Lebanese army in the South.¹⁶

¹³ During the Summer of Rage, it had become *en vogue* to allude to the absence of the Lebanese state by describing Hezbollah as a state within a larger Iranian state. Interviews with Lebanese residents during August 2006.

¹⁴ Right after the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers, the Lebanese government declared that it had known nothing of this action. Although the Siniora government intended through this statement to assure Israel that the Lebanese state was not waging itself a war against its neighbour, this declaration has shown the prevalent state of disharmony between Hezbollah and the government.

¹⁵ See "Lebanon after the War: Hezbollah's New Offensive", *The Economist*, September 16, 2006, 49-50, 49.

¹⁶ See "Geagea Scoffs at Hezbollah's Claims of 'Victory'", *The Daily Star*, September 25, 2006,

These political clashes disclose a deeper national fissure over what post-Syrian Lebanon will look like, and confirmed that the national consensus bred by the 2005 free parliamentary elections remains flimsy. On a national level, bipolar confrontations between Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Current and pro-Syrian factions against the Future Current led by Saad Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, and anti-Syrian Maronite factions foretell that the non-consensual model will not fade away imminently.

The dangers of regional and international entanglement

More importantly, as Lebanon's power-sharing politics is intricately shaped by the republic's foreign entanglement, the resumption of violence in July 2006 confirms that Lebanon is still the playground of a sweeping external twister. The Hezbollah-Israeli 34-day war has been commonly described as a micro-phenomenon reflecting a much broader battle played on Lebanese ground by international and regional players. Thus, the western world was fighting a Middle Eastern radical crescent in this war, while the Shiite party backed by Iran and Syria was trying to rein in 'imperialist' powers trying to achieve a docile Middle East.

More gravely, the war has thrust back into the limelight the regional fragility and porousness of the Lebanese state, and has shown that Lebanon's equilibrium hinges more than ever on regional parameters. By drawing Lebanon directly in the eye of the Middle Eastern storm once again, the Summer of Rage has dispelled hopes associated with the 2005 aggrandised Beirut Spring of emancipation, and has proven that Lebanon's old heavy-handed guardians and enemies are still there.

This paper does not aim to examine the causes and regional repercussions of the July war, suffice it to say that this ill-timed confrontation has had a negative bearing on Lebanon's divided versions of foreign policy. Whereas Hezbollah seems intent on

building a “strong and just state”¹⁷ through confrontational foreign politics, the majoritarian anti-Syrian alliance has been trying in vain to extricate Lebanon from the regional shifting sands. Most probably after this war, Lebanon’s consociational future will be obscured by inter-Lebanese conflicts over the republic’s external policy, and its degree of alignment in the regional strife on the one side and entanglement in the US-led international orbit on the other.

Amid deep political uncertainty, Hezbollah’s predicament has stolen the spotlight after a period of muffled ambiguity since Syria’s pullout. Immediate challenges hinge on how and whether the Party of God will comply with UN Resolutions 1559 and 1701, and how the Lebanese government will extend its control over the south without confronting the Party of God. In fact, the ailing Siniora government faces the task of rebuilding a war-torn economy, re-launching dialogue and mending worsening differences over Hezbollah’s disarmament, and on the causes and consequences of the July war.

The government has decreed the deployment of 15.000 Lebanese soldiers to the south. But Hezbollah’s announcement that it will not give up its weapons until a strong state has been established, and that the war has not much harmed its military arsenal¹⁸ raises many questions about the coalescence of Lebanon’s political elite. The increasing uncertainty over ways of sharing power between Hezbollah and its allies and the majoritarian anti-Syrian alliance dominated by Hariri’s Future Current suggests not only a deep Shiite-Sunni cleavage in the country, but the rise of an embattled and vacillating consociation. With the deployment of the international peacekeeping force one the one hand and Hezbollah’s opposition to disarmament on the other, how much leeway will Lebanon’s coalition government have to resolve the external and internal burdens on the system? In addition to these considerations, the episode of the Summer of Rage draws one’s attention to the destabilising forces of

¹⁷ Taken from leader Nasrallah’s speech during Hezbollah’s victory rally in September 2006. See Bakri, “Hundreds of Thousands”.

¹⁸ Ibid.

foreign pressures on the frail Arab Republic, and to the failings of power-sharing systems in agitated surroundings.

The destabilising impact of Lebanon's regional environment notwithstanding, strong international pressure since President Lahoud's controversial mandate extension¹⁹ has massively impinged on the internal dynamics of Lebanon's consensus, and will probably continue doing so. First, constant international interference has prevented dissenting Lebanese factions from solving their differences quietly and with forbearing. Second, they have contributed to the Party of God's radicalisation and national estrangement.²⁰

In the summer of 2006, the escalation of violence against the backdrop of international divergences²¹ showed the limitations of the international strategy for a peaceful Lebanese transition since late premier Rafiq Hariri's slaying. More particularly, UN Resolution 1559's initial purpose of bringing about political transformations in Lebanon through diplomacy²² has partly fallen through. Persistent external pressure on Lebanon's erratically aligned factions – namely on Hezbollah – failed to reduce the controversy over the party's armed wing.

Although it is too soon after the adoption of Resolution 1701 to analyse the reverberations of the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, the chances are that oppressive international supervision would heighten internal divisions. If Hezbollah is hemmed in by the multinational force,²³ the party's alienation might increase and its regional alignments might become even stronger.

¹⁹ Throughout 2005 and 2006, western and particularly US pressure on Lebanon to disarm militant factions has increased considerably.

²⁰ Reinoud Leenders, "How UN Pressure on Hezbollah Impedes Lebanese Reform", *Middle East Report Online*, May 23, 2006, <http://middleeastdesk.org/article.php?id=290>.

²¹ While some states called for the immediate cessation of hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel, others preferred to tackle the roots of the problem i.e. enforce Hezbollah's disarmament before imposing a truce.

²² Political officer in the European Union, interview to the author, Beirut, October 2004.

²³ One of the international forces' tasks is to control whether ammunitions reach Hezbollah.

On a more theoretical level, the July war, the impasse reached by the Lebanese national dialogue, and the elites' inability to agree on a common view after the Summer of Rage, all hint at the inherent limitations of consociational models when foreign encumbrances and challenges become overriding. The question is how much can be expected from a subjugated model of consensus? How resilient are such systems on stormy seas?

An external or internal solution to Lebanon's oppressive internal and external entanglement?

At first glance, it seems plausible to plead for an eventual "alternative exit strategy" for Lebanon's regional and domestic quagmire. This strategy would consist of tackling "the wider political problems" by re-launching the stalling Middle East peace process and involving the main players in the negotiations.²⁴ In fact, the heavy burdens on the Lebanese polity show that a final solution to the dilemma of Lebanon's entanglement as well as to Hezbollah's military wing²⁵ hinges more on the progress of the Middle East peace process than on the magic formula of Lebanese consensus.

Yet, this external approach of solving Lebanon's problems by pacifying the region is not sufficient to stabilise the republic's shaky power-sharing. Lebanon's inability to trace a stable independent path in foreign politics has not only been contingent on the increase of external loads on the Lebanese state but on the elites' inability to form a national consensus that would prevent internal fault lines from overlapping with external conflicts. This weakness has mainly stemmed from contradictory perceptions of foreign threat or foreign help.

²⁴ See "Post-war Lebanese Politics: The Perils of Breaking the Deadlock", *Strategic Comments*, September 2006, <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-12---2006/volume-12--issue-7/post-war-lebanese-politics>.

²⁵ Hezbollah's military wing is considered to be a pawn used by the Syrian regime in its passive 'liberation war' of the Golan Heights. Furthermore, alluding to the Palestinian strife, the Party of God has on many instances declared that its armed wing remained a strategic option for other parties in the Middle East.

Still, even if elites prioritise coalescence, much depends on the regional balance of power and the willingness of regional and international actors to maintain or disrupt this balance.²⁶ This vicious circle makes Lebanon's equilibrium contingent on a complex process of variables. Hence, in the course of Lebanon's history, foreign intervention has not only consolidated the confessional foundation of the system, but has also deepened sources of contention to the extent that "the unsettling consequences of this precarious inside-outside dialectics were becoming more unmanageable".²⁷

Under these circumstances, it is unrealistic to envisage the return of a sane and non-aligned consociationalism. The latter would demand supernatural qualities of Lebanese elites, to ensure that external cleavages do not exacerbate internal divisions. Should we conclude, therefore, that Lebanon is bound to remain a permeable state and that a policy of non-alignment remains contingent on the regional landscape and on the international world order?

Tying Lebanon's fate to the vicissitudes of the Middle East dilemma would seriously hamper the emergence of a sovereign Lebanese polity that chose to cooperate constructively in regional matters. It would also prevent the reconciliation of a divided society in turmoil.

Although a policy of neutrality remains impossible during Lebanon's transition, the Lebanese state could adopt a two-phased plan in order to construct a cautious foreign policy. The first phase would entail dealing constructively with latent regional conflicts that have a direct impact on Lebanon's status – by containing the dilemma of Hezbollah through internal dialogue, striving for the construction of balanced

²⁶ Walid E. Moubarak, *The Position of a Weak State in an Unstable Region: The Case of Lebanon* (UAE: The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003), pp. 2-3.

²⁷ Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.274.

relations with Syria and, pending a Middle East settlement, engaging in a peaceful dialogue with the militant Palestinian groups residing in Lebanon.

The second phase would entail the long-term prioritisation of national integration over involvement in regional tensions. This does not mean that the Lebanese state has to insulate itself totally from its Arab neighbours, but that the polity should avoid lingering conflicts that might upset internal cleavages. An interim solution could be adopting a national stance of ‘positive neutrality’²⁸ which reconciles Lebanon’s Arab face and obligations to its Arab neighbours with its weak status.

In the long run, Lebanon’s explosive fragmentation could, however, only be counterbalanced by “a definitive emancipation” from its porous character. This could only be brought about through the principle of non-alignment.²⁹ Yet, this sustaining condition of consociational democracy³⁰ does not depend solely on the acceptance of Lebanese internal communities but also on its neighbouring countries and the international community. If adopted consciously and consensually, the policy of non-alignment will have numerous positive effects on the power-sharing formula. Most importantly, this policy would have a salutary effect on internal equilibrium. Conflicting communal cleavages hovering between regional and western loyalties could come to rest through a policy of neutrality.

In the final analysis, the eventual pacification of communal conflicts and their gradual depoliticisation might help Lebanon’s confessional apparatus evolve gradually into a secular system built on an overarching loyalty to the nation rather than to disparate affiliations.

²⁸ Professor Maurus Reinkowski, Chairperson of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Freiburg, interview to the author, Freiburg, July 2006.

²⁹ Georges Corm, “Le Liban doit s’émanciper,” *Le Monde*, November 23, 2005,
http://www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer_element/0,40-0@3232,50-713337,0.html.

³⁰ For an account on the importance of non-alignment in power-sharing democracies, see Gerhard Lehmbruch, “Consociational Democracy in the International System”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 3 (1975), pp. 377–391.

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