By Dominic C. MacIver

Barely addressed by Western media, over recent months Lebanon has seen an escalating political crisis that threatens regional stability. Confrontation continues between the two major political blocs. Put simply, one is the broadly pro-Saudi faction led by Saad Hariri whilst their opponent in the fragile power-sharing agreement is the broadly pro-Iranian faction led by Hassan Nasrallah. Nonetheless Lebanese politics are fluid, complex and unpredictable as regional and international powers ally with internal factions to gain advantage.

The argument between the two camps focuses on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) which is strongly opposed by Hizbullah. Their covert armed strength is growing, and is balanced only by assorted national and regional actors uniting to act as a counterweight to them and their Iranian patron. Notably included in these united powers balancing Hizbullah have been Syria and Saudi Arabia, who have not seen eye-to-eye for a long time. Their cooperation is central to the Arab Peace Initiative for Israel-Palestine and must not be jeopardized.

The STL is an impartial UN Tribunal with Lebanese and international prosecutors cooperating to bring the assassins of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri to justice. Hizbullah protest that it is compromised, calling it an Israeli plot because it refused to investigate the possibility that Mossad organized the assassination. Meanwhile the son of the assassinated Hariri, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, withdrew his former accusation of Syrian involvement. It is now expected that Hizbullah operatives will be indicted. Hizbullah have vetoed the funding that the STL receives from the Lebanese government, splitting the Cabinet and returning Lebanon to paralysis and crisis.

If this internal argument results in communal violence, with Hizbullah taking their arms to the streets (as they did in 2008) or provoking Israel into war (as they did in 2006), it would adversely affect many issues important to Western interests in the region. Although there are vastly too many variables to solidly predict outcomes, the list of endangered elements would feasibly include the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement, the Israel-Palestine peace track, and US-led attempts at Iranian containment, not to mention the precarious existence of the pro-Western governments in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Britain, which has comparatively little bad blood in the country, should pre-emptively deflate this

growing conflict by forging a role as a responsible broker for moderation, peace and cooperation between the multiple factions. This could reduce domestic instability which, if left unchecked, could give the Israeli government a long-awaited excuse to reduce Hizbullah capabilities through aerial bombardment, avenging the 2006 humiliation. The bombardment of Lebanese government forces that Israel has promised (as stated by Defence Minister Ehud Barak) would profoundly damage Lebanon's fragile progress made since the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri.

American hands are tied by the strength of the Israeli lobby in Congress, as well as their emphasis on the Israel-Palestine track, not to mention their attempts to handle the fallout from the release of hundreds of thousands of sensitive diplomatic documents. Many sects, particularly the demographically dominant Shi'i, distrust France because of their long-standing closeness to the Maronite community. In their place, the British government should lead the EU towards a creative interpretation of UNSC Res. 1701 separate from the US strategy. This is necessary given that the current joint EU-US policy is simply not working and has no realistic chance of working.

The British government could exert pressure for two reasons. Firstly their experience of incorporating a hostile paramilitary force into the government, as they did in Northern Ireland, has useful parallels with Lebanon. Although the contexts are very different, an intelligence-led and subtle counter-terrorist strategy against the multiple unlawfully armed elements in Lebanon whilst maintaining an evolving power-sharing agreement would ultimately boost Lebanese internal solidity.

Secondly, the British ambassador to Lebanon, Frances Guy, would be well-placed to advocate such a strategy, in Lebanese, Western and Middle Eastern decision-making networks. She is highly respected in the country for her nuanced understanding of Lebanese politics, which lies in stark contrast to that of the kneejerk right-wing opinion-leaders who called for her dismissal following her praise of the revered Shi'i cleric Ayatollah Fadlallah.

Meanwhile, on the northern side of the Lebanon-Israel border preparations for war with Israel are ongoing. According to Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) sources, they effectively control only around 80% of the border. The rest of it, predominantly the Masna'a crossing between Damascus and Beirut is allegedly open to Syrian arms smuggling to Hizbullah and to various Palestinian and Sunni Lebanese proxy forces. The LAF neither have the will nor the capacity to prevent the inflow of weapons. The primary function of Hizbullah's weapons will be national defence against Israel, and any forcible attempt to disarm them will be considered a pro-Israeli move by all sides of the political equation.

Given the need for militants to hide from both the UNIFIL forces on the ground and Israeli drones and satellites in the sky, few know the full extent of Hizbullah capabilities. Nonetheless, Nasrallah has alluded to both his new long range missiles and Iranian-supplied UAVs in an effort to deter an Israeli attack or, as they pithily put it, maintain the two-way 'balance of terror'. Hizbullah today are far more than a simple band of terrorist fanatics. Theirs is a complex and well-structured organization with excellent intelligence collection (aided by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Syrian Mukhabarat), massive popular support and effective decision-making. They must not be underestimated.

America's stated goal of strengthening the LAF as a counterweight to Hizbullah is illogical and imperfect. Assuming that an army that is inherently incapable of national defence (namely, the LAF) will either be able to or will even aspire to disarm another effective and popular Lebanese defence force (namely, Hizbullah) seems foolish. Western and Israeli policy-making circles should accept the honest truth that effective military aid for Lebanon is against Israel's short term military interests. It will decrease their ability to project military power across their northern border. Israel see Hizbullah as the frontal command unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Under the current scenario this is not too far off the truth.

However, the strategy of incorporating Hizbullah into the LAF will be in Israel's long-term advantage because of its potential to create a reasonable and stable truce between the two broad factions in Lebanese politics. This would be a precursor to peace on their northern front, from which everyone would benefit. As long as Lebanon remains divided and unstable, without an effective national army, the hardline enemies of Israel will continue to gain political traction independent of the government. Hizbullah's stated commitment to the Lebanese nation over the Iranian should be tested.

An STL judgement that implicates Hizbullah will create serious instability, which may manifest itself in a prolonged period of political stalemate and violence and/or war with Israel. The outcome of this chaos could feasibly be a Hizbullah-led government. Hizbullah represent the largest Lebanese sect, are better funded, dedicated and organised than most other political parties, they are highly armed and they are close to both Syria and the Palestinian militias. The current government of Hariri allegedly only won the 2009 vote because of a massive injection of Saudi cash to buy influence for their faction. The news that the Saudis have encouraged the US to bomb Iran will not have been well-received by the Lebanese Shi'i.

To negate the possibility of a Hizbullah-led government, further cooperation should be

encouraged between Hizbullah's Resistance wing and the LAF with the limited stated goal as boosting the latter's defensive capacity. Ultimately, perhaps as part of a grand peace deal that recognises Israel, it should be formalized under the sovereignty of the Lebanese nation-state. Hizbullah, though opposed in rhetoric to the existence of Israel, has stated that it cannot be their responsibility to liberate Palestine, and that this lies only with the Palestinians.

From conversations with any Lebanese outside the Kata'ib (Phalange) party, one can realise that an Israeli attack on Lebanon provoked by Hizbullah is considered the greatest threat to Lebanon's security. If the Hizbullah leadership can be persuaded that it is in both Hizbullah and Lebanese national interest that their Resistance wing be voluntarily co-opted into the LAF, the terrorist elements in their ranks will lose ground to the relative moderates, rationalizing Lebanese political discourse and dampening brinksmanship.

The alternative is the continued non-implementation of UNSC Res 1701, which both Israel and Hizbullah ignore wilfully, the former regularly sending its jets and drones over Lebanese territory, the latter still building the armed capacity of its militia. US policy is invariably decided through the optic of short-term Israeli security. Europe can free itself from that optic, and in the process aid the long-term prospects for regional peace.

In summary, Britain should lead European attempts to broker a compromise between Hariri and Nasrallah that sees cooperation between the LAF and the Resistance to provide for Lebanese national defence. In return for losing a modicum of autonomy, the role that Hizbullah play in Lebanese defence should be acknowledged by the international community, provided they commit to not using violence against internal political rivals. This could prevent the current argument over the STL from spilling over into communal violence and/or war and prejudicing Western interests in the region.