

Beirut, May 30, 2008

Lebanon Pulls back from the Abyss

By [Heiko Wimmen](#)

The political crisis that has dragged on for nearly 18 months escalated dramatically during the second week of May and has finally led to armed confrontation, as has been predicted by many observers.¹ After five days of fierce fighting in Beirut and other parts of the country, the immediate danger of a downward slide into total and uncontrollable civil strife appears contained. With the help of the Arab League, a process of dialogue was inaugurated and, on May 20, a temporary compromise was struck. The immediate crisis seems now resolved; however the situation remains volatile and renewed conflict possible, in particular as long as regional tensions continue to run high.

¹ Cf. Heiko Wimmen, "Cedar Revolution Reloaded", *hbf-meo*, 05/02/07; <http://www.boell-meo.org/en/web/410.htm>.

Escalation and War

The immediate trigger to the clashes was a decision passed by the government of Prime Minister Fuad Seniora (whose legitimacy has been contested by the opposition since the walkout of all Shiite ministers in November 2006) on May 6 to reassign the head of Airport Security at Beirut International Airport and to investigate and dismantle a separate telecommunications network run and controlled by the Shiite part-cum-resistance movement Hizbullah. Pushed forward in particular by Druze leader Walid Jumblat, the decisions came on the eve of a general strike called by the Lebanese Trade Union Federation to protest deteriorating living conditions. Almost instantly, the Shiite parties Hizbullah and Amal appropriated the strike, turned it into a protest platform against the two cabinet decisions and organized a so-called civil disobedience movement, which led to the closure of all access roads to Beirut International Airport and many other traffic arteries with burning tires and sand barriers, effectively stopping air traffic and paralyzing movement in the Western sectors of the capital on May 7.²



Blocked Highway in Downtown Beirut. Photo: Layla Al-Zubaidi.

² Although Lebanon's Christians are also divided into government and opposition supporters, the mainly Christian Eastern parts of Beirut remained largely unaffected, and the opposed Christian factions did not participate in the fighting.

In areas such as Ras An-Nabaa and Corniche Al-Mazraa, where pro-government Sunnis and pro-opposition Shiites live side by side, protests quickly escalated to violent clashes that were barely contained by the security forces. First shots were fired, and during the afternoon paramilitary units, apparently trained and equipped for urban warfare, started to operate on the side of opposition and to uproot armed government supporters from contested quarters. In a press conference broadcast live (for the first time since the 2006 war) on May 8, Hizbullah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah called the government decision "a declaration of war" and renewed allegations of collaboration with Israel and the US. After months and months of patience and working for compromise, Nasrallah said, he would now move strongly against internal enemies, and "cut off any hand who tries to touch the resistance." In a response speech, the leader of the Future Movement Saad El-Hariri claimed the decisions had been misunderstood, offered partial concessions (to leave the implementation of the decisions to the discretion of the army, i.e. postpone it indefinitely) that were immediately rejected by the opposition and warned against Sunni-Shiite fratricide.

Fighting resumed almost immediately after Hariri's speech, and continued unabated throughout the night. Fighting units of Hizbullah and Amal, advancing according to an apparently well-prepared and coordinated plan, attacked and overran positions defended by armed supporters of the government;³ the Lebanese Army and Security Forces did not intervene. In the early morning of May 9, most of West Beirut was under the control of

³ The government side denies that those constituted a militia and speaks of "citizens who defended their houses," for a report on the built-up on the government side see Borzou Daragahi and Raed Rafei, "Lebanon's Sunni bloc built militia, officials say", *Los Angeles Times*, 12/05/08; <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-security12-2008may12.0.6458359.story>.

Hizbullah, Amal and other armed opposition groups; the residences of prominent government politicians such as Saad El-Hariri and Walid Jumblat surrounded. Media outlets controlled by the Future Movement were first attacked and then forced to cease operation, their offices partly trashed or set on fire. Already in the evening, the opposition militias started to reduce their presence in central areas, handing over positions to the army.

On the weekend, new fighting erupted between government and opposition supporters, along the strategically important Beirut-Damascus highway, in the North and in the mountains to the South-East of the capital. Except for the Hariri-stronghold Tripoli, all such confrontations ended with clear defeats of government supporters, who were obliged to hand over their arms and positions to the army. 80 died and 250 were wounded in the clashes (Reuters, 14/05/08).



Car destroyed during the recent clashes in the West Beirut area of Caracas. Photo: Layla Al-Zubaidi.

Still a Political Conflict

The good news in this grim scenario is that the feared horror scenario of an uncontrollable Shiite-Sunni conflict and indiscriminate mass killings along the lines of what happened in Iraq did not occur. The Shiite groups Hizbullah and Amal uprooted the political and military presence of the Sunni Future Movement from areas that are mostly mixed or where Shiites and Sunnis live in close vicinity.

In some cases, known Future-activists were forced out of their quarters, and eye witnesses reported thuggish behavior and sectarian intimidation in the immediate aftermath of the fighting, in particular on the part of the Amal militia. Many uninvolved Sunni residents felt threatened and intimidated by the ongoing presence of those groups in their areas, and sought refuge with friends and family in other quarters. Yet, no systematic sectarian violence or expulsion occurred, and the climate of intimidation and fear quickly subsided, to be replaced by indignation about the suffered defeat in Sunni quarters, while Shiite areas (in particular poorer quarters abetted by more affluent Sunni areas, such as Basta and Zokak El-Blat or Hayy Al-Lijje) were characterized by an atmosphere of celebration.

At the heart of the most recent Lebanese crisis is still a conflict over *political* differences that appear nearly impossible to bridge, in particular in the field of foreign policies. External actors with agendas of their own and little compassion for the lot of a small country fuel this conflict, while local actors attempt to pursue their own interests on the back of such foreign intervention, and mobilize sectarian sentiment for that purpose.

- On one side, the opposition, backed by Syria and Iran and mainly represented by the Shiite parties Hizbullah and Amal, views struggle and confrontation with and against Israel as a national and a religious imperative that cannot be subject to majority decisions or compromises.
- The Western-backed government headed by Prime Minister Fuad Seniora and with the Sunni Future Movement as its political backbone strives to prevent further involvement in regional conflicts and, in the long run, wants to get rid of or at least hem in extra-state structures – in particular Hizbullah’s independent military capabilities.

In particular since the war of 2006 between Israel and Hizbullah, these two camps confront each other with deep mutual distrust: while the government accuses Hizbullah of being subservient to Syrian and Iranian interests, and prepared to sacrifice Lebanon in that pursuit, Hizbullah maintains that the government collaborated with the enemy during the war and intends to turn Lebanon into a Satellite of the US, and an auxiliary of a purported “Israeli-American hegemony” over the region. Both sides are mobilizing their supporters by tapping into deep layers of old conflicts and ethno-sectarian fears: the government camp exploits Sunni wariness at the demographic rise of Lebanon’s Shiite community and Arab-nationalist animosities against Iran; Hizbullah draws upon the historical experience of religious and social marginalization at the hand of Sunni elites that is a centerpiece of Shiite spirituality, and on the perception of being a besieged minority surrounded by militantly anti-Shiite regimes such as Saudi-Arabia. Fear of Sunni extremism and the historical competition with the Sunnis over power in the state also is an important reason for a significant part of the Christian population (represented by the “Free Patriotic Movement” of Michel Aoun) to side with Hizbullah.⁴

Casus Belli or Pretext?

While the flare-up over the disputed cabinet decisions fits well within the logic of this conflict, it also shows the enormous dangers of engaging in tactical maneuvers and short-term (mis)calculations amidst a highly charged situation liable to escalate at any moment. So what was at stake?

- According to the government’s representation, the head of Airport Security did

not move swiftly and decisively enough against “surveillance equipment“, allegedly installed by Hizbullah in the immediate vicinity of the airport. Such equipment, it was claimed, could potentially be used to monitor the movements of government politicians and prepare for yet another assassination, like so many that have targeted anti-Syrian activists and pro-government politicians (including acting ministers) over the past three years. While the concern is surely understandable, the effect of the measure – firing the head of the security apparatus - appears as doubtful as its urgency: for one, the perimeter of the airport is lined with residential areas that are strongholds of Hizbullah, where many residents would welcome the party to install just about anything. Second, no evidence has ever surfaced; including what has become public of the work of the UN-commission investigating the political assassinations that would implicate Hizbullah. Finally, given the existing security concerns and the necessary protection measures, it is almost impossible even for second-tier politicians to move unnoticed, in particular within a state institution such as the airport, where the Lebanese system of sectarian allotment of state employment makes sure that supporters of all political groups are present on all levels – unless, of course, the reassignment was part of a larger campaign to systematically replace opposition supporters with government loyalists in key state institutions. Hizbullah clearly suspected as much, and described the reassignment as part of a scheme designed to “transform the Airport into an operation base for the CIA and the Israeli Mossad” – surely an outlandish accusation (for one, everybody involved could be prosecuted for high treason), but well in line with their representation of the government as a „tool of Israel and the US.”

⁴ For a discussion of Aoun’s movement see Heiko Wimmen, “Rallying around the Renegade”, *Middle East Report Online*, 27/08/2007; <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero082707.html>.

- According to the government, Hizbullah's private communication network presents a challenge to the sovereignty of the Lebanese state, and is also being used for illegitimate commercial purposes, in particular offering international calls in violation of the state's telecom monopoly. Even if both charges were correct (Hizbullah categorically denies any commercial use of the network), it is hard to see how they would warrant priority treatment in a situation where much of the political system has been in paralysis for some 18 months, in particular as illegitimate telecom services are available unchecked in many parts of Lebanon. Furthermore, it appears mysterious how the decision was meant to be implemented: surely, Hizbullah knows where the wires are, and would have not stood by as they were being dug up. The latter became abundantly clear in Nasrallah's press conference on May 8: Accordingly, the party considers its communication network, which is secured against any form of surveillance and interception, as an essential asset to protect its leaderships and within any new conflict with Israel. Given the crucial importance of secure communications in conducting military operations,⁵ this argument appears to make immediate sense, even if some of the implied purposes – in particular, missile attacks on Israeli civilians – cannot be condoned.

On balance, the arguments advanced by the government to support the crucial importance and urgency of the two decisions do not appear convincing. Therefore, it appears likely that secondary considerations were behind the move:

⁵ See Nicholas Blandford, "A Cell Phone Civil War in Lebanon", *Time Magazine/CNN*, 07/05/08; <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1738255,00.html?xid=site-cnn-partner>

(1) Tactical Maneuvering for Short-Term Political Gain

Since in particular the second decision was unlikely to be implemented any time soon, tactical gains may have been the objective: by resisting its implementation, Hizbullah would have exposed itself once more as "a state within a state" and as an illegitimate player. Furthermore, the government camp could have intended to "trade" a suspension of the decision against concessions in the ongoing debate and haggling over the formation of a new government, a new election law, etc.

(2) Renewing Internal and External Credibility
Stepping up the pressure on Hizbullah would have boosted the credibility of the Seniora government in the eyes of foreign supporters (a meeting with George Bush during his scheduled trip to the region was expected, a meeting of the Security Council to discuss the implementation of resolution 1559 – which calls for the disarmament of all armed militias and the extension of state sovereignty over all of Lebanon – was scheduled for May 8). A show of force would have also boosted the morale of political supporters, which may have been on the wane after 18 months of grinding political stalemate.

(3) Pressuring a Cornered Adversary into Cooperation

After three years of foreign political, financial and military support (the latter in particular through the restructuring and equipping of the Internal Security Forces), the government may have felt capable to deter Hizbullah from a direct confrontation, and exert concessions to settle the crisis on its own terms. Since the opposition had largely balked at the prospect of an all-out conflict during prior crisis conflagrations (mass mobilization was called off after riots, threats of a "countergovernment" or large-scale "civil disobedience" never materialized), there may have been the expectation that fear of sectarian conflict

would always make the party yield when squeezed.

“March 14 elements likely felt they could afford to embarrass Hizbullah and address head-on the question of its military apparatus without provoking a major flare-up because of the Shiite movement’s fear of the consequences of a sectarian clash.”⁶

(4) Internationalizing the Conflict

Many interpretations in particular from observers close to the opposition suspect much larger schemes engineered and designed by the majority and its regional and international allies to provoke Hizbullah into staging a coup and thus providing the pretext for an internationalization of the conflict, possibly involving the deployment of an international force that would disarm Hizbullah.⁷ Observers who are closer to the government’s views suspect an attempt by Iran to open up an additional front line in its confrontation with the US, or to derail the ongoing Turkish-mediated Israeli-Syrian negotiations over relaunching the peace process between the two countries.⁸ However, neither of the international and regional parties allegedly involved in engineering the crisis seem to have made any move to escalate it and capitalize on it for any of the suspected purposes, and many seem to have been taken largely by surprise, or even appeared to have serious trouble making sense of what was happening on the ground. In particular the prospect of international actors or even the US committing troops to take on

Hizbullah is so remote that it appears unconvincing how anybody could have seriously believed that such an intervention would ever materialize.

All possible calculations however share one fatal flaw: a serious underestimation of Hizbullah’s readiness and capability to confront the Lebanese state, the acting government and the international community. While the two offending decisions would have probably been of little immediate effect, in Hizbullah’s eyes – at least if Nasrallah’s statements are to be taken at face value – they were only a prelude to further demands that would hit the core of its military structures, and therefore had to be nipped in the bud. Yet, the systematic and well-coordinated military performance of Hizbullah and its allies creates the impression that such an operation had been prepared for a considerable period of time. The swift rejection of Hariri’s compromise proposal in the evening of May 8 also indicates the intention to not miss the chance to deliver a decisive blow once this long-prepared operation had swung into action, and to break the political deadlock by changing the power balance on the ground, before the built-up of armed groups of government supporters would make such an operation too costly.



The Lebanese Army deploying in Hamra Street, one of the main commercial streets in West Beirut. Photo: Layla Al-Zubaidi.

⁶ International Crisis Group: *Lebanon: Hizbullah’s Weapons Turn Inward*, 15/05/2008; http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east_north_africa/b23_lebanon_Hizbullahs_weapons_turn_inward.pdf

⁷ See for example Ghassan Saoud in *Al-Akhbar*, 20/05/08 who bases his account on anonymous diplomatic sources and claims that only the unexpectedly swift collapse of the pro-government forces thwarted the success of this plan; <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/74335>; Arabic.

⁸ See Paul Salem, “Hizbullah Attempts a Coup d’État”, *Carnegie Web Commentary*, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/salem_coup_fi nal.pdf).

New Balance on the Ground

By handing over their positions to the Lebanese Army and refraining from attacking the governmental palace – as some of their allies suggested –, Hizbullah and Amal quickly averted accusations of staging a putsch, thus denying outside actors a pretext for direct intervention. Instead, they immediately pushed to reopen the deadlocked political process, trying to capitalize on the changed balance of power on the ground. Little room for doubt was left concerning the latter: the “neutrality” of the army and the security forces – justified by the fear of internal divisions or even an outright split along confessional lines – practically gave a free hand to the clearly superior opposition forces, which operated unchallenged while the troops stood by. Moreover, the army, by taking control of quarters where government supporters had surrendered, willy-nilly kept the opposition forces with their backs and hands free to knock out their opponents elsewhere, getting dangerously close to the role of an auxiliary. After this experience, it is hard to imagine how the besieged government could have felt reassured to withstand pressure for political concessions, and trust the security forces to defend it should the other side again step up the military pressure to that end. No surprise then that, after initial posturing (“no dialogue while the other side puts a gun at our head,” according to Saad Hariri) and apparently rather muscular mediation by a commission of Arab foreign ministers headed by the prime minister of Qatar, the government quickly rescinded the offending decisions and, on May 15, agreed to a “national dialogue” with an agenda that largely accommodated the opposition’s demands – “the political translation of the ‘victory’ that was achieved on the ground,” according to the commentator of the pro-government daily *An-Nahar* Rajeh Khoury.⁹

⁹ Rajeh Khoury: “What is Fixed and what is Changeable in the ‘Accord’!” *An-Nahar* 16/05/08, Arabic.

Hazem Al-Amin of the Saudi-owned pro-government daily *Al-Hayat* puts it even more bluntly:

“While the Syrian-Iranian camp was well prepared and equipped, the West responded slowly and with negligence...during the first hours of the confrontation, those who were besieged in Beirut felt they were alone. It appears likely that if an agreement is reached, it will reflect these realities.”¹⁰

From New York, the commentator of the *New York Times* Thomas Friedman made up a similarly unflattering balance sheet for the performance of the US and its Arab allies, and fits the events in Lebanon into a wider scenario of changing fortunes in the strategic struggle between the US and Iran:

“Team America is losing on just about every front. How come? The short answer is that Iran is smart and ruthless, America is dumb and weak, and the Sunni Arab world is feckless and divided.”¹¹

As expected, the deal finally struck in the Qatari capital Doha in a night session on May 20 included further gains for the opposition, who obtained veto power in the new government of national unity,¹² another key demand that the majority had categorically rejected over past months, while haggling over the demarcation of voting districts in the upcoming parliamentary election absorbed much of the remaining attention of the negotiators.¹³ The weapons and independent

¹⁰ Hazem Al-Amin, “A Window in Doha – Between Iranian Preparedness and Western and American ‘Negligence’”, *Al-Hayat*, 18/05/08; <http://www.daralhayat.com/opinion/currents/05-2008/Item-20080517-f7d6fd5d-c0a8-10ed-01e2-5c731a05b268/story.html>, Arabic.

¹¹ Thomas Friedman: “The New Cold War”, *New York Times*, 14/05/05; http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/opinion/14friedman.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin

¹² According to the Lebanese constitution, the resignation of one third of the cabinet ministers leads automatically to the resignation of the government. Thus, a walkout of all 11 ministers allotted to the opposition by the Doha Accord (out of a total of 30) would immediately bring down the government.

¹³ Like in all majority systems, design of electoral districts is key and gerrymandering with the aim of

military structures of Hizbullah and hence the actual core problem of the conflict will be subject to a further “dialogue” presided over by the incoming president, Michel Suleiman, head of the same army that stood by and watched as Hizbullah and Amal took out their opponents with the declared aim of “protecting the arms of the resistance.” The most likely “results” of such a dialogue are easily predictable, and aptly described by the pro-Hizbullah commentator and Manar TV anchor Imad Marmal:

“The phrasing of the agreement [the original agreement of May 15, which preceded the Doha negotiations], which refers to ‘refraining from the use of weapons for political ends,’ and ‘launching a dialogue over the relation of the state with the various organizations in the country’ leaves abundant room for a multitude of political interpretations, true to the well-known Lebanese tradition in issues such as these.”¹⁴

Outlook: Temporary Respite?

True to the form of former agreements struck after armed confrontations (1958, 1989), much of the viability of the achieved deal will depend on maintaining the fiction of “no winner, no vanquished,” and of both sides

guaranteeing specific results even before Election Day common practice. In the 2005 elections, Hizbullah and Amal struck an electoral alliance with the current government, based on a common platform that, inter alia, lend political legitimacy to their military structures and which fell apart in the wake of the 2006 war. Thus, many of the current pro-government MPs won their mandate with the help of voters who now support the opposition, meaning that the elections scheduled for the spring of 2009 may tip the parliamentary balance in favor of the opposition. A particularly difficult stumbling block is Beirut, where the Hariri list won all seats in 2005 with the help of an electoral demarcation originally intended (by the late head of Syrian secret service in Lebanon Ghazi Kanaan) to contain the notoriously anti-Syrian Christian vote by combining Christian quarters with much more populous Muslim areas. While it is clear that such a success cannot be repeated in 2009, much of Hariri’s future political fortunes and those of the governing coalition depend on his ability to make a strong showing in Beirut.

¹⁴ Imad Marmal, “A government of Three Thirds and Franjeh’s Election Law?” *As-Safir*, 17/05/08, Arabic.

engaging actively in positive cooperation to create a reconciliatory atmosphere that allows the memories of violence and defeat to recede into the background (where they will linger, ready to be summoned on the next occasion). Failing this, the humiliation suffered in particular by the Sunni community will provide fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment into Islamist organizations, especially of the violently anti-Shiite Al-Qaeda type.

“The Sunni community could turn to more radical Islamist movements. The three days that led to West Beirut’s fall inescapably will leave deep scars and have long-term effects among Sunnis, with two likely consequences: on the one hand, the sectarian radicalization of a rank and file shocked by its own weakness and its perception of a powerful Shiite threat; on the other hand, diminished control exercised over the Sunni base by the Future Movement, seen by many as responsible for the debacle.”¹⁵



The tents of the opposition encampment are removed from downtown Beirut. Photo: Haytham Al-Musawi / Al-Akhbar.

Yet, even with both sides acting with good will and in good faith – and the atmosphere and the language of the discussions over the re-appointment of Prime Minister Fuad Seniora and the exact composition of the new “government of national unity” do not bode well on that account –, the situation remains volatile. Squabbles will emerge over how to staff vacant key positions in the state structure such as the constitutional council, defunct since 2006, and over the exact composition of

¹⁵ ICG, *Lebanon: Hizbullah’s Weapons Turn Inward*, 15/05/2008.

electoral lists as the 2009 elections approach. The Hariri Tribunal, the original spark that triggered the walk-out of the opposition in late 2006, may once again become a contentious issue. Key reform issues such the privatization of key state assets and the implementation of the Paris-III reform package will not pass without heated debate. The networks behind the string of political assassinations that have destabilized the country since 2004 remain unknown, making new attempts of this sort appear a real possibility. Tension on the streets remains high and charged with sectarian resentment and has again led to armed clashes, this time quickly contained. Last but not least, foreign diplomats resumed their practice of intense “consultations” with their respective Lebanese allies immediately upon the latter’s return from Qatar, and it seems safe to assume that the quick souring of the upbeat post-Doha atmosphere owes a lot to these interventions.

Most importantly, the issue of Hizbullah’s weapons remains the central conundrum that no Lebanese government can afford to neglect. As Hizbullah’s mini-coup d’état of May 7-11 has shown beyond any further discussion, nothing can be done about it over the objections of the party,¹⁶ and no force in Lebanon – including the army and the security forces, however much equipment and training Western countries may pour into it – is prepared or capable to change this fact. Barring direct foreign intervention, for the time being the Lebanese and the international community will have no choice but to live with the fact that a large military potential remains in the hands of Hizbullah, and to make efforts to reduce or contain the likelihood of this potential being used or again becoming a source of armed conflict. The

¹⁶ “Hizbullah Ready to Discuss Defense Strategy, Not to Give up Resistance”, *Naharnet*, 29/05/08; http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/gets_tory?openform&E4929CDD6C5D2413C225745800501494.

same applies for the regional and international stakeholders in the larger conflict: Teheran must make efforts to convince Hizbullah not to stage any provocative actions against Israel and in particular to suspend retaliation for the assassination of its top cadre Imad Mughnieh in Damascus on February 14, 2008, which the party blames on Israel; Washington should impress a similar conduct of de-escalation upon its ally Israel.

Such efforts will also help stabilizing the fragile compromise that has now been struck in Doha. A cooling of regional tensions and a lessened likelihood of a renewed Hizbullah-Israeli confrontation will help ease Hizbullah’s suspicions against other political players, who in turn will feel less urgency to address the issue of the weapons. Equally important, a détente between Iran and the US or at least an understanding between the two sides to no longer pursue their strategic confrontation on the back of the Lebanese will discourage local actors to overly rely on foreign support and adopt maximalist positions in pursuit of their own narrow interests, and make compromise and bargaining once again the preferable mode of interaction.

“In the longer term, stability will require that third parties cease using Lebanon as the arena for their fierce regional and international competition and, just as importantly, that Lebanese political leaders cease enabling such costly interference.”¹⁷

Yet, and even with the best of efforts, there remains the danger of renewed crisis. Lebanon may have pulled back from the abyss of all-out civil war, but remains situated in the neighborhood of equally if not more dangerous conflicts that tend to radiate out and involve and engulf countries and societies where state power and cohesion are weak. Barring a spectacular breakthrough in the ongoing, indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel – and judging from public opinion polls in Israel

¹⁷ ICG, *Lebanon: Hizbullah’s Weapons Turn Inward*, 15/05/2008.

concerning the crucial questions of the Golan Heights, there seems to be little reason to expect anything of this sort¹⁸ -, both Hizbullah and Syria will remain committed to confronting Israel, and will continue to receive support from Iran, for both strategic and ideological considerations. The increasingly intricate interconnections between the various Middle Eastern flashpoints of conflict – Iraq, Gaza, West Bank, the Lebanese-Israeli border, or even as far afield as Afghanistan and Somalia – provide for a multitude of tripwires and triggers, often hard to detect or imagine, that may ignite the enormous destructive potentials stockpiled around the Gulf as well as in the triangle between Syria, Lebanon and Israel. Only after an Arab-Israeli peace agreement that is both comprehensive and perceived as fair and viable by a clear majority of the populations of the region and hence sustainable – as opposed to agreements signed by authoritarian leaders over the objections of their citizens – can the Lebanese, and with them their neighbors, hope to finally dispel the specters of war and destruction.

¹⁸ Lily Galili: “Poll: More Israelis object to Golan accord than to Jerusalem deal”, *Haaretz*, 22/05/08; <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/985866.html>.