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Lebanon's Slow-Motion Self-Destruction

State Institutions Disintegrate under Pressure of the Conflict in Syria

Heiko Wimmen

The conflict in Syria has already led to flare-ups of violence in Lebanon, but the worst may still be to come. As the Shiite Hizbullah fights alongside Syrian government troops, and Lebanese Sunni Islamists join the ranks of the rebels, sectarian tension is surging in Lebanon itself. At this point in time, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) provide the last buffer against all-out sectarian war. Yet their capacity to keep a fragile peace is now threatened by an accelerated erosion of Lebanon's political institutions. Germany and the EU should provide equipment, training and financial support for the LAF, and impress upon pro-Western Lebanese parties the need for a minimum consensus that retains the legitimacy of the armed forces to act on behalf of the Lebanese state.

As the Lebanese are drawn ever further into the conflict in Syria, violence is flaring up in Lebanon itself. Already since the summer of 2011, fighting has erupted on a regular basis in the northern port city of Tripoli between the local pro-Assad Alawi community and Sunni neighborhoods rooting for the rebels. Since early 2013, a string of skirmishes involving the LAF and local actors supporting either Hizbullah or the Syrian rebellion have created high tension in the northeast of the Bekaa Valley, just across the border from the embattled Syrian towns of Qusair and Homs. Lebanese Sunni preachers with Salafi backgrounds call for Jihad in Syria and attack Hizbullah for its support of the Syrian regime. In late June 2013, the LAF battled one such firebrand Salafi agitator in the mixed southern city of Sidon, leaving some 20 soldiers dead.

Residential areas in Beirut that are identified with Hizbullah have become targets for missile and bomb attacks of unknown provenance, with the apparent objective of spreading fear among the support base rather than attacking the party itself. Supporters of Hizbullah accuse Sunni politicians of fanning the flames of sectarianism; the latter routinely distance themselves from the radicals but insist that Hizbullah's military structures are the true root of the security problem. Mutual distrust runs high between Sunni and Shiite Lebanese, fueling a pervasive fear of all-out sectarian conflict.

Struggling for neutrality

The effects of the conflict in Syria on the Lebanese political system appear less dramatic as of now but are liable to be just

as dangerous in the mid- to long run. Officially, all political forces in Lebanon are committed to a policy of neutrality, or “disassociation” from the Syrian conflict, in order to avoid a serious confrontation between the two opposed camps that have dominated Lebanese politics since 2005.

The March 14 block – and in particular its core support in the Sunni community – fall in line with their co-sectarians in Syria, who form the backbone of the rebellion, as well as with the policies of Saudi Arabia, which is the regional patron of both. The Shiite parties Hizbullah and Amal, as the mainstays of the March 8 block (both dates relate to rival demonstrations in 2005 for and against the Syrian presence in Lebanon), follow the line of their regional patron, Iran, and the perceived necessity to maintain Syria in the camp of “resistance” against Israel and the United States. Lebanese Christians, in turn, either come down on the side of liberalism and democracy, ostensibly represented by March 14 and the Syrian rebellion, or fear the rising influence of radical Sunni Islamists among these actors, and therefore lean towards justifying the position of the Syrian regime. Finally, the Lebanese Druze oscillate between both blocks, torn between liberal leanings on the one hand and fear for the Druze community in Syria in the event of an Islamist takeover on the other.

Underneath the surface of official neutrality, accusations that both camps were secretly involved in Syria continued to surface in the local media. In December 2012, an MP for March 14 was named as a major organizer of weapon transfers to the rebellion. Recruitment of volunteers and the transfer of fighters and provisions continue apace in (Sunni) areas supportive of March 14, allegedly with support of politicians from this camp. On the other side, news about funerals for Hizbullah fighters for months fueled suspicions that the party was participating in the fighting. Finally, in May 2013 the party officially announced that it had joined the crucial battle of Qusair and would stand with the Syrian

regime as part of the “resistance” against the United States and Israel.

Thus, the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati was increasingly undercut on an existential policy issue, even by factions ostensibly supporting his government. This added further weight to long-standing accusations that he was but a fig leaf for Hizbullah’s domination of the political system, handing the (Shiite) party effective control over the post of the prime minister, a traditional Sunni domain. In March 2013, Mikati chose to resign.

Erosion of institutional legitimacy

Despite initial support from a broad bipartisan majority in parliament, the designated new prime minister, Tammam Salam, a respected, non-aligned political figure from Beirut, has so far not succeeded to form a new government. Political gridlock now threatens to bring Lebanon’s institutions to a grinding halt.

By the end of May, last-ditch efforts to end months of bitter wrangling over a new electoral law for the parliamentary elections due in June finally collapsed. Since designing electoral laws in Lebanon inevitably implies acts of gerrymandering that affect the balance of power, compromise is notoriously difficult. Faced with the imminent threat of a power vacuum, as the deadline for elections was about to elapse, the Lebanese Parliament postponed the vote and extended its own term by 17 months.

Although supported by a large majority of MPs, the decision itself was highly controversial and now threatens to draw one institution after the other into a quickly expanding vortex of eroding legitimacy. Challenges to the decision’s constitutionality could not be heard by the constitutional council, as several judges bowed to political pressure and boycotted the sessions, thus preventing a quorum. The question whether the extension was actually legal was hence not answered but suppressed, and three attempts to convene the extended parliament have since failed

for lack of a quorum. Sectarian sensitivities – namely, that a *working* parliament alongside a *suspended* government will empower the *Shiite* position of the speaker of parliament at the expense of the *Sunni* position of the prime minister – may prevent it from functioning. In the medium term, a divided parliament with contested legitimacy will most likely be unable to elect a new Lebanese president when the term of Michel Suleiman expires in May 2014.

With polarization riding high, compromise on the electoral track remains elusive, meaning that any new government may rule for an indefinite period of time. The stakes involved in government formation are therefore high, and the chances of success accordingly remote. As long as there is no new government, the cabinet of former Prime Minister Miqati will stay on in a caretaker function with limited competences. Deadlock between the two camps and divergent interests within them has also prevented the appointment of a new army chief and a new chief of staff of the LAF, making it necessary to extend the tenures of the current officeholders through administrative maneuvers of doubtful legitimacy as well.

In their substance, these struggles go far beyond the factional bickering and the self-serving attitude of which Lebanese politicians often stand accused. Rather, they relate to the long shadow cast over the Lebanese political system by the continuous calamity in Syria. Since most Lebanese political actors draw much of their bargaining power from external support, they remain in a state of trepidation as long as the outcome in Syria and the repercussions on the regional power system remain uncertain. Compromises, however minimal, are therefore difficult to achieve. They will also be difficult to sell, as all sides frame the dispute in existential terms – the future, or even the survival, of the respective sectarian community – and mobilize by catering to fear perceptions, for which the war in Syria provides ample fuel. The Syrian crisis also saps the attention and the capac-

ities of those external actors who have forced the Lebanese to compromise in the recent past. Thus, very soon, the country might be left without any legitimate and working political institutions at all.

From deadlock to violence?

Already between 2006 and 2008, Lebanon experienced a similar process of progressive institutional erosion – with Hizbullah and its allies besieging the government in Beirut – which led to violence and was only ended through an Arab League-sponsored settlement on Hizbullah's terms. Today, no such scenario is likely, as the acting government is dominated by March 8, which also wields sufficient political resources to prevent any new government from being formed or acting against its will. Militarily speaking, no political force in Lebanon can possibly challenge Hizbullah's militia. As it conducts its "resistance activities" (training fighters, channeling weapons into Lebanon, sending fighters into Syria) with a degree of discretion and in areas where it wields unchallenged control, run-ins with the formal authorities, who anyway prefer to look the other way, are unlikely. The Lebanese authorities have also made little effort to track down four leading cadres of Hizbullah indicted for the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, evading yet another point of conflict.

The situation is different concerning Sunni extremists. After caving in against Hizbullah in 2008, the capacity of March 14 and the Hariri family to integrate disenfranchised Sunni youth has receded significantly. Instead, radical preachers capitalize on resentment stirred up by Hizbullah's domineering role in the Lebanese arena, in addition to events in Iraq and Syria. As of now, these groups lack the cohesion and the means to seriously challenge the LAF, let alone Hizbullah. Yet, as the conflict in Syria intensifies, this equation is liable to change. In mid-2013, areas dominated by Sunnis, in particular near the Syrian border, are becoming awash with weapons,

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and with men experienced in their use. As the conflict in Syria continues to escalate and the rebels receive more and better arms, their capacity to impose exclusive control over these areas will increase. So will their motivation to exact revenge on Hizbullah and wrest strategic areas on the Lebanese side of the border from the control of the party. Additional waves of refugees may force the Lebanese authorities to finally set up camps, which could then become rearguard bases for the fighters.

The LAF may soon find itself caught in a crossfire and will stand accused of becoming a partisan force if it takes on Sunni militants while at the same time leaving Hizbullah's armed structures alone. Thanks to the post-civil war strategy of replacing mono-sectarian army units with mixed ones, the force is unlikely to fracture along sectarian lines, and so far its *esprit de corps* appears resilient. However, with woefully insufficient funding, rising casualties among the elite units, a leadership with questionable legitimacy and with nearly all political institutions paralyzed, it is only a matter of time until the LAF lose both the capacity and the legitimacy to act on behalf of the Lebanese state. Already, operations to contain (rather than suppress) armed groups in areas identified with certain sectarian groups (Tripoli, eastern parts of the Bekaa, the south side of Beirut) require clearance with political actors. Once the LAF are no longer able to control the flashpoints between the two sides, violent confrontations between Sunni militants and Hizbullah are all but certain.

Preventing a downward spiral

As long as the conflict in Syria continues, there is little hope to resolve the paralysis of the Lebanese political system. Therefore, political and diplomatic efforts by German and European actors should focus on helping the Lebanese to prevent a downward spiral into major violence.

Maintaining and improving the capacities of the LAF is key. Existing British and

French support, in particular training of elite units, should be expanded and upgraded. Donations of hardware and budgetary support for the notoriously underfunded force should be considered. Equally important, the legitimacy of the LAF must be retained. European political actors with direct access to Lebanese counterparts – politicians, parties and party foundations in France and Germany – should encourage their partners to suspend political differences and focus on finding a consensual solution to the appointment of senior security officials, rather than resorting to stopgap measures.

They should also urge these partners to distance themselves more clearly from radical Sunni groups and to work toward curbing their influence among their constituents. While it is understandable that the March 14 block focuses its critique on Hizbullah's military apparatus, explaining the Jihadist threat solely as a defensive reaction is liable to be understood as an implicit endorsement in this milieu. On the diplomatic level, the close relationship to Saudi Arabia entertained by several European states should be used to impress upon the Kingdom that an escalation in Lebanon will neither serve its own interests nor that of the Sunni community there.

Hizbullah is behaving as a non-democratic actor on many accounts, and exposing Lebanon to grave danger through its involvement in Syria. Yet the party is also interested in maintaining the status quo, leaving the fight against Sunni radicals to the LAF, and avoiding any confrontation with Israel for the time being. Progress in the P5+1 negotiations with Hizbullah's regional sponsor, Iran, will lower the party's threat perception and make it easier to avoid escalation in Lebanon. Despite the recent listing of Hizbullah's military wing as a terrorist organization, the EU should maintain contact with its political structures, not least for the sake of the safety of the European troops active in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.