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Wimmen, Heiko

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Balancing on the Brink

Lebanon, Tangled up in the Syrian war, Struggles to Maintain Its Stability

Heiko Wimmen

So far, the Syrian war and the involvement of Lebanese actors in it has not spread to Lebanon, despite the fears of many. In spite of irreconcilable differences on the Syrian issue, Lebanon's political camps have reached a fragile consensus that makes it possible for political institutions to function at least rudimentarily and for the security situation to be provisionally stabilized. However, this consensus remains precarious and threatened by the ambitions of Lebanese actors and by regional tensions. Moreover, Hezbollah's active involvement in the Syria conflict steadily increases the likelihood of a renewed military confrontation with Israel. Germany and its European partners must do their part to pre-empt such a confrontation, to support the dialogue between the Lebanese parties through mediation, and to stop regional tensions from spilling over.

The four-year-old war in Syria has put Lebanon to the toughest test since its own civil war ended in 1990. This small country of not quite four million inhabitants has taken in at least 1.2 million Syrians, who are a serious burden on its chronically underfunded welfare system. The critical security situation and the loss of many transit routes through Syria have substantially affected trade and tourism, two of the most important sectors of the economy.

The biggest danger, however, is that the country's most powerful political forces have taken up diametrically opposed positions on the conflict in neighboring Syria. The predominantly Sunni Future movement, led by the Saudi-Lebanese Hariri family, has sided with the rebels. During the conflict's first phase, it helped to

recruit and equip them, supported by state and private sponsors from the Arab Gulf states. The Shiite Hezbollah, on the other hand, has been fighting on the side of the Syrian regime since the autumn of 2012, at first secretly, and then, as of May 2013, openly. In the process, it has been collaborating with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Shiite Iraqi militias. Since that date of May 2013 at the latest, the commitment to avoid turning the country into a transit area or source for weapons or fighters and to remain neutral on regional conflicts – which all political forces in Lebanon had formally made in June 2012 – has not been worth the paper it was written on.

Lebanon thus faces a triple challenge. First, the opposing stances on the Syrian conflict quickly blocked political institu-

Heiko Wimmen is a researcher and coordinator of the project "Elite change and new social mobilization in the Arab world" realized by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). The project is funded by the German Foreign Office in the framework of the transformation partnerships with the Arab World and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. It cooperates with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Ph.D. grant programs of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung.

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tions. Second, the Syrian civil war, and the rivalry between the two regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran that lies behind it, is increasingly seen as part of a denominational conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. Because of this, there is a risk that the rifts between Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites will deepen and lead, in the worst-case scenario, to a violent confrontation. Third, Hezbollah's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict is causing a noticeable shift in the organization's strategic capacities and orientation. This increases the risk of a renewed armed confrontation with Israel.

The Erosion of Institutions

For over a decade, Lebanon has been the setting for persistent disputes over the new balance of power in the region. After the withdrawal of the Syrian occupying troops in the spring of 2005, and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the US, the EU and pro-Western Arab states encouraged the Future movement and its allies to detach Lebanon entirely from the Syrian-Iranian sphere of influence. Hezbollah, on the other hand, sought to keep the country on the side of the "resistance" against the alleged hegemonic aspirations of the US and Israel, a resistance that was deemed to include Palestine's Hamas as well as Syria and Iran. These fundamental differences inevitably caused a blockage of the political institutions, since the Lebanese political system is organized so as to ensure consensus and balance between the religious and denominational groups, and only allows for majority decisions to a very limited extent. Fighting between the two camps first broke out in May 2008, ending in a clear victory for Hezbollah and its allies, and in a fragile compromise. Against the background of this eruption of violence, President Michel Suleiman, elected after the fighting, and Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who had been in office since February 2011 and was likewise considered an independent, both advocated strict neutrality on the conflict in Syria.

However, in the spring of 2013, when Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war became increasingly obvious, the Mikati government had no choice but to resign, leaving the political system once again paralysed. For almost a year, all attempts at forming a new government failed. The irreconcilable differences between the two camps also scuppered the passage of a new electoral law, as the precise design of this law had the potential of shifting the majority ratio by a few decisive seats. Parliamentary elections, due in June 2013, were postponed indefinitely, and Parliament, elected in 2009, used a constitutionally dubious procedure to extend its period of office by 17 months. However, boycotts by various factions meant that it remained inquorate to begin with.

In the spring of 2014, with the Suleiman presidency due to come to an end on 31 May, an almost total institutional vacuum loomed. With no prospect of a successor being elected, the president's responsibilities would under the constitution have devolved onto a caretaker government with narrowly restricted powers. Such a government is unable to initiate legislation without a functioning parliament. It was only at this point, in February 2014, that all political forces came together to form a so-called National Unity Government. However, even this has been hamstrung by recurrent quarrels over voting rules and responsibilities. Moreover, after a second postponement of parliamentary elections in November 2014, its legitimacy looks increasingly questionable. Political decisions that are both necessary and, for the Lebanese people, of existential importance are falling by the wayside, including decisions on funding the long overdue and already agreed-on public sector pay reforms or on curbing the scandalous conditions in the food industry. Institutional erosion has long since reached the Lebanese armed forces as well. An endless tug-of-war over new appointments to the highest command posts has entailed legally suspect extensions to the mandates of current officeholders here too.

The reason for the many blockages lies in the fact that Lebanese political actors adapt their conduct to the strategic interests of their rival foreign patrons, first and foremost Iran and Saudi Arabia, and often pursue their individual and personal goals in the slipstream of this confrontation. In addition, there is insecurity over the outcome of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, and over the medium-term repercussions on the regional power balance of a successful implementation – or not – of the framework agreement reached in Lausanne in early April. All this makes it impossible for Lebanon’s political actors reliably to gauge the long-term consequences of compromises on the distribution of power and posts. The top echelons of state institutions therefore look set to remain blocked for the time being. Apart from initiatives by individual ministers, government activity will remain at an absolute minimum.

Stabilizing the Security Situation

In contrast, the spillover of the Syrian war into Lebanon, feared by many, has so far failed to materialize. This is primarily due to the fact that, despite Lebanon’s political polarization, neither of the camps can expect to benefit from an armed confrontation. On the one side, Hezbollah has committed a large part of its military capacity in Syria. It is therefore not interested in confrontations on the home front, especially since the status quo suits it. Hezbollah’s combat units have a disciplined command structure, and the organization has its own security service to monitor Shiite population centres, not least because of several devastating bomb attacks in 2013 and 2014. On the side of Hezbollah, this all but precludes unchecked escalation, for example in the form of spontaneous clashes with supporters of the Future movement in mixed-denomination or neighboring city districts.

The other side looks noticeably more complex. The Future movement might

complain at every available opportunity about Hezbollah maintaining a military apparatus that is outside of state control, but since its humiliating defeat in the armed confrontations of May 2008, the Hariri party has realized that it can neither match Hezbollah militarily nor expect support from its Western or Arab allies in this regard. It is therefore endeavouring to de-escalate the situation. However, one result of this politically responsible shift in strategy is that the movement has lost much of its authority at the radical end of the Sunni spectrum. Since 2008, groups that are ideologically orientated towards Al-Qaeda have shown noticeable growth. This tendency has been reinforced by the fact that the Syrian civil war is increasingly seen as a combat between a “Shiite” regime sponsored by Iran and the majority Sunni population. Furthermore, the creation of covert networks that support the rebels has encouraged the militarization of the radical Sunni fringe in Lebanon. In 2012 and 2013 there were repeated exchanges of fire between such groups and the security forces. Some spokespersons of the Future movement defended the creation of these networks as a purely self-protective reaction to Hezbollah’s display of power, and criticized the collaboration of the Lebanese army with that organization. They thus gave the impression, at least temporarily, of secretly condoning the existence of jihadist currents or even cooperating with them.

However, as increasingly extreme groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the al-Nusra Front advanced onto Lebanese territory from the autumn of 2014 onwards, the Future movement distanced itself ever more firmly from this milieu and showed a few particularly radical followers the door. Since December 2014, the party has been involved in a formal dialogue with Hezbollah, which has helped to reduce Sunni-Shiite tensions and made it easier to control especially conflict-laden localities. For instance, the fighting between Sunnis and Alawites in the northern port town of Tripoli, which had previously flared up again

and again, has been contained. That truce held even after a bomb attack in January 2015 caused nine deaths. Further success came with the destruction of a central command post for terrorist activities that jihadist inmates had established in Roumieh's main prison under the very eyes of the apparently powerless security authorities. In addition, the close collaboration of Hezbollah and the Lebanese army against jihadist groups that advance into the Beqaa Valley from Syria was prevented from compromising the armed forces' legitimacy among Lebanese Sunnis.

In fact, the army has weathered several rounds of military confrontations with (Lebanese and foreign) jihadis without any negative effects on its cohesion. Moreover, each time it prevailed over the extremists or beat back their attacks. In addition, Lebanese Sunnis have shown very little solidarity with the fighters trickling in from Syria. Confessional geography has been helpful in this respect. An estimated 3,000 jihadi combatants did manage to establish themselves in the impassable mountains along the Syrian-Lebanese border in the Beqaa Valley and in the surroundings of the Sunni-dominated small town of Aarsal. However, this area is bordered to the west and south by territories settled by Christian and Shiites, where both the Army and Hezbollah enjoy broad support. Numerous reports point out that the al-Nusra Front and IS – which elsewhere tend to fight each other, but which partly collaborate in this region – are gathering forces in the Syrian-Lebanese border area for a spring offensive. This may be aimed just as much against the strategically important road linking Damascus and the central Syrian town of Homs. In contrast, further advances into Lebanon would bring hardly any strategic benefits, nor would they be very promising against the united forces of the Lebanese military and Hezbollah.

At first sight, northern Lebanon would seem to offer a better starting-point for jihadis because the population of the Akkar district is largely homogenous in being

Sunni and socially marginalized, and because the mainly Sunni port city of Tripoli is already a centre for jihadi networks. However, the Assad regime largely controls the Syrian side of the border and thus prevents jihadist groups from penetrating into this part of Lebanon. In addition, the army is an important employer especially in the impoverished north, and thus enjoys the respect of large parts of the population there. Ever since the jihadis murdered several captured Lebanese soldiers in late 2014, they have no longer been able to count on local sympathies. The possibility of further attacks by underground networks (as occurred in 2013 and 2014) on Shiite or Hezbollah-controlled areas or on state institutions, above all in the security sector, cannot be totally excluded. However, the actual threat of such groups for the general security situation seems, on the whole, manageable – on the condition that the Lebanese armed forces be allowed to deploy their capacities fully and without interference by politicians whose grassroots sympathize with jihadi groups.

Against the expectations of many observers, the huge number of Syrian refugees who have sought shelter in Lebanon has not substantially exacerbated the internal conflicts nor destabilized the security situation either. It is true that in some hotspots, especially in the border area of the eastern Beqaa Valley, gatherings of refugees are believed to serve as a refuge and cover for jihadi militants, and that some of these refugees are believed to collaborate with Lebanese groups. However, the overwhelming majority of refugees keep their distance from militants. Of course, many of them are desperate given the dramatic funding gap in international humanitarian aid. Aid currently stands at only 10 percent of the about two billion US dollars a year estimated as necessary by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. Concerns that young men will increasingly be recruited by extremist groups using financial incentives must therefore be taken seriously. In spite of the remarkable readiness to help shown by

the Lebanese, there are signs that even their capacity and acceptance have limits. Analyses point to a constantly growing sense of threat, which could be socially explosive in the medium term.

Hezbollah's Regional Transformation

In January 2015, the first direct exchange of blows took place between Israel and Hezbollah that had its origin in the organization's armed engagement in Syria. An Israeli rocket attack on a Hezbollah convoy in the Syrian-controlled area of the Golan Heights on 18 January killed six of its fighters – including a son of the Hezbollah strategist Imad Mughniyah, who had been assassinated in Damascus in 2008 – and an Iranian officer. Ten days later, in an attack that it explicitly declared to be an act of reprisal, Hezbollah killed two Israeli soldiers and wounded seven others in the Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian border area.

At first sight, the trajectory of these incidents confirms that neither side is currently interested in renewing their armed confrontation. Hezbollah's choice of the Shebaa Farms, an area occupied by Israel and claimed by Lebanon, as the site of its reprisal kept the attack within the geographical frame of its previous "resistance operations", for which reliable mechanisms of communication and de-escalation have been established since the 2006 war. According to Israeli sources, following the attack Hezbollah used diplomatic channels to communicate that it did not intend to escalate the violence further. In return, Israel limited itself to diplomatic protests and artillery fire on a largely uninhabited area, which did, however, claim the life of a Spanish UNIFIL soldier.

And yet the Hezbollah operation marks a qualitative change in its strategy and outlook. Until the spring of 2013, it had always explicitly presented itself as a national Lebanese organization and depicted its military activities as the liberation or defense of Lebanese territory. In a speech on 30 Janu-

ary 2015, General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed that "the resistance no longer cares about rules of engagement". He underlined Hezbollah's aspirations to become active in all strategically relevant military locations regardless of existing state borders. With this, he formally confirmed Hezbollah's transformation into an organization with a transnational military role. It is now a part of a group of state actors (the Syrian and Iraqi governments), quasi-state actors (the autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq), and non-state actors (alongside Palestine's Hamas, Yemen's Houthi rebels, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in north-eastern Syria, and Shiite Iraqi militias), whose interests at least partly coincide with Iran's, or for whom Iran is an important source of external support. They therefore collaborate with Tehran, if to varying degrees.

This development has considerable potential for escalation. The expansion of Hezbollah's area of operations to include Syria already generates a great number of potential conflict scenarios, for which there are, in contrast to southern Lebanon, no established mediation mechanisms. The mere presence of Hezbollah units in an additional sector near its northern border is causing Israel great concern. Israeli military observers furthermore assume that since the 2006 war, Hezbollah has substantially replenished its military equipment and noticeably expanded its strategic capacities. Presumably, this tendency has been reinforced by its military engagement in Syria. The close operational collaboration between Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the Syria conflict also modifies the organization's previous status as a guerrilla force that received support from outside Lebanon but was active exclusively within it. From an Israeli perspective, Hezbollah now acts within a regionally integrated structure dominated by Iran. It thus constitutes an Iranian military presence in the immediate vicinity of Israel's borders, but without any possibility of holding Tehran accountable for Hezbollah's actions.

This change in Hezbollah's role, activities and area of operations constitutes a qualitatively new threat for Israel.

Conclusions

In spite of their extremely different stances on the Syrian crisis, Lebanon's political actors were able to avoid a collapse of the political institutions in the spring of 2014. In the autumn of 2014, faced with the threat of jihadi groups advancing from Syria, all political actors finally and unconditionally stood behind the Lebanese security and armed forces, and accepted their close collaboration with Hezbollah. The immediate military threat was thus averted. In addition, tensions between parts of the Sunni population and the army were reduced, and a split along denominational lines was prevented at an early stage. Despite its serious internal rifts, the Lebanese political sphere is thus clearly capable of producing compromises in acutely difficult circumstances. The fact that this generally occurs only at the very edge of the abyss remains a cause for serious concern, as the risk of fatal misjudgements (such as occurred in 2008) persists. The postponement of parliamentary elections by a further 31 months in November 2014, and the failure of all attempts to elect a new president, show how limited this ability to reach a compromise is. For this reason, effective governance remains impossible; and ever new crises call the brittle minimal consensus into question time and again.

The external dynamic

External influences continue to be a powerful factor of uncertainty. Some observers ascribe the partial stabilization of the Lebanese political system to a tacit consent to neutralize Lebanon, reached by Iran on the one side and Saudi Arabia and the US on the other. However, this arrangement, if it exists, could change quickly once one or several of the external actors involved re-appraise their strategic interests. In this

context, the broader dynamic in the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran remains a substantial unknown. The question arises, for instance, whether a successful conclusion to the nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran really will reduce tensions in the region. Many observers fear that, on the contrary, an internationally rehabilitated Iran – which will also have noticeably more resources at its disposal after sanctions have been lifted – will pursue its strategic interests even more emphatically. They also suspect that Western states might be ever more inclined to accept Iran as an unloved but effective de facto ally against Islamist extremists such as IS. Inversely, Saudi Arabia and its allies might try to pre-empt such a development by committing themselves more strongly to the various trouble spots. Many signs point to the second scenario, especially the air strikes begun on 25 March, which saw ten Arab states fly attacks on targets in Yemen, under Saudi leadership. The fragile understanding between the political blocs in Beirut would undoubtedly be taxed by such a development. However, for the time being they mostly realize that they must hold on to their pragmatic minimal consensus. Thus Saad Hariri, the leader of the Future movement, condemned the latest verbal attacks on the Saudi leadership by Hezbollah's General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah, but emphasized at the same time that dialogue would continue.

A conflict with Israel is still the greatest danger

In the medium term, the greatest danger for Lebanon derives from Hezbollah's new regional role. Like Saudi Arabia, Israel – and notably its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, re-elected in March 2015 – views the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 with a great deal of scepticism, and fears an expansion of Iranian influence in the region. From an Israeli perspective, the steady increase in Hezbollah's military capacity, especially its missile arsenal, must

surely constitute Israel's strategic Achilles heel should the confrontation with Tehran intensify. Eliminating this capacity while that is still possible at reasonable cost – or at least perceptibly reducing it – might therefore seem an obvious choice. Politicians on the Israeli right as well as experts from pro-Israel research institutes in the US are already calling a third Lebanon War probable, or even inevitable, in the medium term. Not least, this would allow Israel (with the tacit approval of several Arab states) to demonstrate to Iran the limits of its regional expansion without risking a military confrontation with the country itself.

Recommendations

Compromises are unlikely to be reached on the most important political conflicts in Lebanon for the foreseeable future – such as the presidency, a new electoral law or parliamentary elections. For this reason, European and German mediation attempts should concentrate on decisions and processes that are essential for preserving the delicate cooperation between Lebanese political actors. This is especially true for the pending nominations for top military posts. Already existing direct relationships between Lebanese political actors and German institutions – for instance through the political foundations or actors involved in Track II diplomacy – need to be used so as to offer additional channels and forums for dialogue on neutral ground.

Additional equipment and training for the Lebanese army would also provide a valuable contribution to stabilizing the security situation and strengthening one of the few institutions which still retains confidence across the denominations. In the process, it would be vital to avoid giving the impression that such support is aimed at influencing the army's position vis-à-vis the political blocs. Finally, it is surely also in Germany's interest to provide financial means that help to improve the disastrous humanitarian conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This could counter radicaliza-

tion and reduce the appeal of illegal migration to the EU.

At the diplomatic level, attempts should be made to shield the situation in Lebanon from the repercussions of a potential escalation in other locations in the region, such as Iraq, Yemen and Syria. This would require exerting an influence to that effect on partners in the region, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Any positive momentum in Germany's relationship with Tehran, such as might result from successful negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme and Germany's role in them, should also be used for this purpose.

There are still no reliable forums or mechanisms for conflict management in the region. Regional actors instead prefer strategies aimed at projecting or limiting the influence or hegemony over other states (such as Lebanon), which almost inevitably exacerbates internal conflicts there. The more international involvement limits itself to containing "terrorism", and the more regional actors carry out internal and inter-state conflicts militarily, the more likely are further escalation, additional boosts for extremist forces, and fresh waves of refugees.

Finally, concentrating on fighting terror and on ever new hotspots should not mean losing sight of chronic trouble spots – such as Israel, Palestine or the four-year-old civil war in Syria – which certainly have the potential of triggering new military confrontations. Thus, a new round of confrontations between Israel and Hamas could at the same time easily provide the grounds for Israeli military actions against Hezbollah, for instance because of alleged connections between the two organizations. Equally, any renewed Israeli attacks on Hezbollah units in Syria could set off precisely the sort of escalation that was avoided in January. To help prevent this latter scenario among others, Germany and Europe need to remain involved in the UNIFIL mission on the Lebanese-Israeli border, and promote a continued UNDOF mission at the Israeli-Syrian ceasefire line in the Golan Heights.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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