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LEBANON: A State in a Constant Flux

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Lebanon's size has always been inversely proportional to the magnitude of its turbulence. More of a mirror of the region's intricacies than a catalyst, the country offers a unique regional case; although in ever-simmering tension, it manages to escape the contours of a country-wide flare-up. This is more often than not attributed to the country's bitter memories of the civil war (1975-1990). For others, it is the product of an ill-thought out, yet relatively balanced consociational mechanism of power-sharing.

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Today, Lebanon's experience of a brutal civil war has permeated every aspect of the country's political discourse: when talking of power-sharing, electoral laws, the armed forces or even identity cards the country's politicians often allude to the need to avoid the renewal of such a war. The signing of the Ta'if Agreement in 1989, which ended the war and laid the foundations for the continuation of the country's existence, was a milestone; it attempted to codify the behavior of what looked like an unfathomable nation. Naturally, the Agreement could not be without its shortcomings. A lot of its political and economic stipulations proved to be little more than wishful thinking or a product of momentary over-eagerness.

Ta'if Agreement (almost) a dead letter but security could be worse

The Ta'if Agreement, signed in 1989 in Saudi Arabia to end Lebanon's 15 year-long fighting, called for all armed groups to surrender their weapons. In practice, the same standards were not applied to all: Hezbollah was allowed to retain its weaponry, both because of its role as a resistance force and its holding of Western hostages. But at the time, Hezbollah was part of a movement representing the country's oppressed. The consequences of giving it military leeway were impossible to gauge. Yet, with generous Syrian and Iranian backing and a political strategy that managed to present its domestic and regional struggles as two sides of the same coin Hezbollah managed to transform itself into a political and military juggernaut. Joseph Kéchichian, a Lebanon analyst for the Gulf News, maintains that Rafiq Hariri (Prime Minister for an intermittent decade between 1992 and 2004) was unwilling to believe that "a foreign power (first Syria, then Iran) would manipulate the party to its advantage".¹ Allowing it to keep its arms, ostensibly because of the Israeli occupation, proved equally wrong.

For Kéchichian, the Ta'if Agreement was never implemented because "the Syrians were too busy ruling and looting Lebanon".² It should be remembered that according to the agreement, "Syria should not be allowed to constitute a source of threat to Lebanon's security under any circumstances", yet Syrian troops only departed in 2005, after the assassination of Hariri. And while in the 2005 and 2009 general elections the March 14 and March 8 alliances fared almost similarly, Hezbollah was well on its way to becoming the strongest single force in the country. This started a process seen as a "gradual marginalisation of the Sunnis".³

Still, this phenomenon wasn't accompanied by a respective transfer of the country's wealth. Lebanon's oligarchs, coming from all sects, clung onto their wealth while trying to gain as much profit from the country's reconstruction as possible. Some analysts see intra-sectarian tension in terms of an almost simplistic quid pro quo: post-2005, Hezbollah and the oligarchs made a trade-off: the former would increase its power within the military and intelligence institutions while the latter would continue to manage the state's resources.⁴

Recriminations stemming from each side's different interpretation of Ta'if did not necessarily preclude an often symbiotic relationship on the ground: the Lebanese-Syrian border is today more secure than other border areas because of Hezbollah activities. The only area with some terrorist presence is the Aarsal – Qarah line, where the situation in the early years of the war, before Hezbollah's involvement, was much worse.⁵ At the same time, the Lebanese Armed Forces have been cracking down on terrorist sleeper cells with great efficiency. In Tripoli, a region with particularly great Sunni grievances, the government launched a local security plan in early 2014 which has to this day proved a success.

What is more striking about Lebanon's power equilibrium is that the latter is always the product of implicit understandings. Up to this day, the country's actors have yet to adopt a National Defence Strategy, despite former President Michel Suleiman's best efforts.⁶ This leaves Lebanese security issues open to multiple interpretations, misunderstandings and distortions. Thus, the Phalange party has recently accused Hezbollah of contradicting Ta'if by holding on to its arms, while Future Movement

Minister of Labour Mohammad Kabbara has warned against the 2006 Aoun-Hezbollah understanding (which made great progress in Shiite-Christian conciliation) being moved to the Presidential Palace⁷ (The understanding was at the time considered a grand victory for Hezbollah, as it received further support for its persistence to not give up its arms and situate this issue within a “global approach”).⁸ In the same vein, Hezbollah has yet to clarify whether it is primarily a domestic force, a regional one, or both and equally.

Refugees and demographic balance

Lebanon has received between 1.5 and 2 million Syrian refugees, mostly Sunnis. The country's residency policy makes it very hard for Syrians to obtain legal status, with 70% of them lacking legal residency. In addition, Lebanon hasn't signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention,⁹ probably the single most important regulatory framework for the treatment of refugees. Thus, Syrian refugees are susceptible to all kinds of arbitrariness. Yet, mass immigration has given rise to another hot-button issue: Christians see Sunni refugees as a potential demographic threat, as well as a security one. It thus came as no surprise when, early into his presidency, President Michel Aoun called for the repatriation of Syrian refugees or/and the creation of safe zones inside Syria. To make matters worse, on 16 January hundreds of Syrian refugees were forcibly returned to Syria without prior assessment of their refugee status and the dangers posed by an eventual return to their home country.

Lebanon as a model for post-war Syria?

For all the talk of Lebanon's consociational model's shortcomings, the country has done relatively well in eschewing large-scale tension. While comparisons between the two often seem tempting, one has to keep in mind that: a) in Lebanon no community enjoys an overwhelming majority. This is a product of Lebanon's National Pact, forged in 1943 and allowing the country to gain its independence. Syria's Alawites, who owe their political fortunes solely to the country's French colonial masters, have for long faced a restive Sunni majority which abhors the former's privileges. While not excluded from power, Syria's Sunnis have found no vehicles to address their political grievances. For example, the Syrian constitution stipulates that no political party can be founded on the basis of sect or religion. Thus, Syrian politics have been experiencing a degree of institutional suffocation unseen in Lebanon, where political frustration has at least been able to find outlets, b) Syria's post-war geographical and institutional shape is impossible to predict; the archipelago of Sunni extremist organizations, not to mention ISIS, is unlikely to consent to a prolongation of Bashar al-Assad's regime, or even negotiations (and that's why Syrian opposition in international fora has mainly been represented by out-of-touch, foreign-based politicians). The Kurds, who during the war have gained some cultural and military concessions, are yet to be allowed to be represented by the PYD, their most popular organization. In addition, some thought, even if with a grain of salt, should also be given to the potential of forced demographic change. For Kéchichian, the (predominantly Alawite) regime is “trying to recalibrate internal demographics”¹⁰ by moving Iranians to entire neighborhoods in Damascus. As the (pro-Saudi) Al-Sharq Al Awsat recently reported, sources close to Iranian activities in Syria have previously asserted that whole Iraqi Shiite families are being moved to Syria.¹¹ For others, these fears are exaggerated: Syria's complicated sectarian for a demography-changing plan.

Walking the tightrope

Perplexing as they can be, Lebanon's politics currently present their actors with some clear-cut choices: first, a lot will depend on Hezbollah and its allies' power management. Hezbollah has based its politics on a two-pronged approach: it has played the sectarian card (by promoting Shiite-only trade unions from which anyone else is excluded¹² and by endorsing Lebanon's sectarian political system and understandings in its 2009 Manifesto¹³). At the same time, it has promoted an Arab nationalist agenda, in the context of which it has forged alliances with Christian and secular parties (at home and abroad). Needless to say, the perception of which of the two strands is more powerful will determine the regional actors' behaviour towards the party.

In addition, the future of the relationship between its main sponsor with its Saudi Arabian arch-enemy is yet to be fathomed: some analysts allude to an upcoming Iranian-Saudi rapprochement,¹⁴ which will enable the two countries to work on current political conflicts. In Lebanon, and given President Aoun's first post-election visit to Saudi Arabia, this could equal an effort to suppress its incipient Salafist movements, especially given the latter's scattered nature.

Finally, demography will inevitably play a major role. With very little progress made in Syria, Lebanon is facing a highly uncertain future: the fate of its Syrian, Palestinian and Syrian Palestinian refugees could well lie within the country, at least in the short and medium term. The Lebanese government has thus far failed to form or enunciate a long-term plan regarding the future of refugees. The perpetuation of this ambiguity will likely lead anew to economic, demographic and political tensions. Finally, Syria's shadow, despite frequently voiced grandiloquent announcements and ambitious plans, will keep looming large over the country. For Kéchichian, the (unlikely?) continuation of the war in Syria for another decade or two could mean its formal partitioning into several statelets. This will have a tremendous impact on Lebanon, which quite possibly undergo a formal separation too; historically, Syria and Lebanon's fortunes have always been intertwined. This intensified during Syria's armed conflict, to the extent that the two have become even more inseparable. Thus, a division of Syria could be the straw that breaks the camel's back in Lebanon too. The same point was recently made by Ali Fayyad, a Lebanese MP with the Resistance Bloc and political scientist.¹⁵

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