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C O N T E N T S

- Charalampos Tsitsopoulos **3** Lebanon's Christians: Between Existential and Institutional Precariousness
- Charitini Petrodaskalaki **7** Can Lebanon Solve its Refugee Crisis?
- Maria Kourpa **12** The Confessional State in Lebanon: An example for Syria?
- Costas Faropoulos **17** Hezbollah Rising: Syria, Lebanon and the regional implications of its ascendance
- Maria Tare **22** Bring our Prime Minister Back?
- Alexandra Nikopoulou **27** Saudi Arabia and Iran's Regional Struggle for Power: Another Source of Instability for Lebanon
- Angelos Tsioris **30** Jumblatt: Time of Reckoning?



Lebanon's CHRISTIANS

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos

Between
existential
and institutional
precariousness

Nowadays, Lebanon's Christians are leading a precarious existence. In many respects, their situation is more delicate than it has ever been since the end of the country's civil war. The country might be the only one where a seemingly sacrosanct consociational agreement guarantees steady access to power for all sects. Yet behind closed doors, an ever-intensifying power struggle seems to be at play. Christians also face important demographic and security challenges. Thus, the Lebanese Christian plight is a multi-faceted one and can be viewed through a triple prism: demographics, institutional access and security.

Fluid demographics and the war in Syria

IT IS NO SECRET that demographics have always been a major concern for Lebanon's Christians. Although around the end of the civil war (1975-1990) Christians amounted to approximately 50% of the total population, the figure today is more likely in the region of 40%.¹ And the time when Christians owned around 70% of Lebanon's land is long gone; today, Christians own no more than 50%.² Christian emigration from Lebanon is another index of the denomination's predicaments: thought to be in the thousands every month, a significant part of Christian working-age Lebanese work outside the country (overall Lebanese remittances amount to a staggering 40% of the country's annual GDP).³

The situation is aggravated by the large numbers of Lebanon's predominantly Sunni refugees: Palestinians and Syrians. The first are estimated to number around 450,000, and the second have surpassed 1,5 million people. And while Palestinians in Lebanon have to some extent become part of the landscape, the same cannot be said about Syrians. They are seen as dangerous to the country's delicate demographic balance. This is often reminded by Christian officialdom, sometimes covertly and sometimes overtly: in July 2017, Lebanon's Maronite Patriarch Bishara al-Rai called for politicians to urgently work on returning Syrian refugees back home, as the latter were "snatching the Lebanese people's daily bread from their mouths".⁴ Furthermore, Lebanese President Michel Aoun has recently called for the refugees' return to Syria's calmer areas, as the latter constitute - inter alia - a demographic danger.⁵ Undoubtedly, increasing demographic turmoil will not be easy to do away with. The war in Syria might be coming to an end, but nobody knows exactly under what scheme Syrians are expected to return home. Given the insurgency's predominantly Sunni character, the question of the Sunnis' return has emerged as probably the most complicated of all: Syria will take a long time to reconstruct and with the country's basic infrastructures virtually destroyed, it is unknown how many of the Syrian refugees will be keen on returning. And there is a second reason which, although cynical enough, cannot be discarded: Syria's post-war regime, possibly similar to the current one and heavily influenced by Iran's newly acquired status, is projected by some to become an outlet for the latter's regional designs.⁶ Their policies vis-à-vis a massive wave of Syrian refugees will be hard to gauge.

An institutional power struggle

On paper, the Ta'if Accords are considered to have done a good job ensuring Christian political survival. Not only is the country's President a Christian, but Christians are allocated half the number of Parliamentary seats. They are also entitled to half of all political positions in the government. But, according to Lebanese analyst Joseph Kéchichian, in reality, preference is given to Muslims and especially Shiites for two main reasons: firstly, because there are not enough Christian candidates for each position and secondly, because intense Shia lobbying is changing Lebanon's institutional make-up.⁷ Interestingly enough, current President Michel Aoun was already galvanizing Christians back in 2015 by asserting that the government was taking away their rights.⁸ In the same vein, the 2006 understanding and later marriage of convenience between Hezbollah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) should not be overplayed; the former has repeatedly called for constitutional amendments aimed at creating a three-way (as opposed



to today's two-way) balance of power between Christians, Sunnis and Shiites, which would reduce Christian political representation and clout even more.

Further stifling the Christian community's political efficiency is a gaping elite-populace dissonance: while it is true that Aoun is considered Lebanon's first "strong president" since the end of the civil war, in that he received the support of most Christian parties, his election was the result of Byzantine machinations rather than entrenched popular support, as few Christians outside the FPM support Aoun. For the same analyst, the real leadership in the country lies with Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces.⁹ In addition, the Geagea-Aoun rapprochement which resulted in the former's endorsement of the latter for the presidency should be viewed mainly in the context of a response to the national and regional strategic threats faced by the Christians, rather than as a hopeful first step towards addressing wider Christian populace concerns.

One would do well to not forget that the Christians' alienation from the Christian political elite should be seen in the context of general discontent with the political establishment. This is precisely why a Christian majority voted for the cross-sectarian 'Beirut Madinati' movement in the May 2016 municipal elections.

A worsening security environment

There can be no doubt that the region's security landscape is currently undergoing tectonic changes. In light of this, minorities are in an increasingly vulnerable position; Syria's Christians have only ensured their survival by means of their cooperation with the al-Assad regime. Their Lebanese brethren could not have failed to view events next door with apprehension; not least because Syrian and Lebanese politics are heavily intertwined. Thus, the Lebanese Christians' security concerns hinge on a number of factors: a) the successful completion of the anti-ISIL coalition's campaign in Syria. While Christian loyalties inside Lebanon are far from monolithic, in the Syrian civil war the Christian population has overwhelmingly rooted for regime victory.¹⁰ This also explains the side-by-side fighting of Christian militias with Hezbollah in the Beqaa Valley; b) the further spillover of Sunni extremism into Lebanon. The latter's Salafi groups have indeed been emboldened by their counterparts' campaign in Syria and it remains to be seen what the potential demise of the Syrian extremist groups will mean for Lebanon; c) the eventual solution of the Syrian refugee issue. As mentioned, the future of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon is hard to gauge. There is a significant possibility that a great chunk of Syrian refugees in Lebanon might not return home any time soon. Thus, and independent of the Syrian war's resolution, radicalization of Syrians in Lebanon might come about due to the latter's



destitute living conditions. After Shiites, Christians could very well become targets for Sunni extremism, although this has not been the case so far.

To sum up, the future of Lebanon's Christians will be predicated upon a set of regional and national circumstances. And while in the former the small denomination naturally has minimal influence, recent developments do not augur well for the latter: infighting between Aounists and forces loyal to Samir Geagea regarding an electricity bill and judicial nominations have come to prove that Christian politics in Lebanon are much more than convergence around the same President.¹¹

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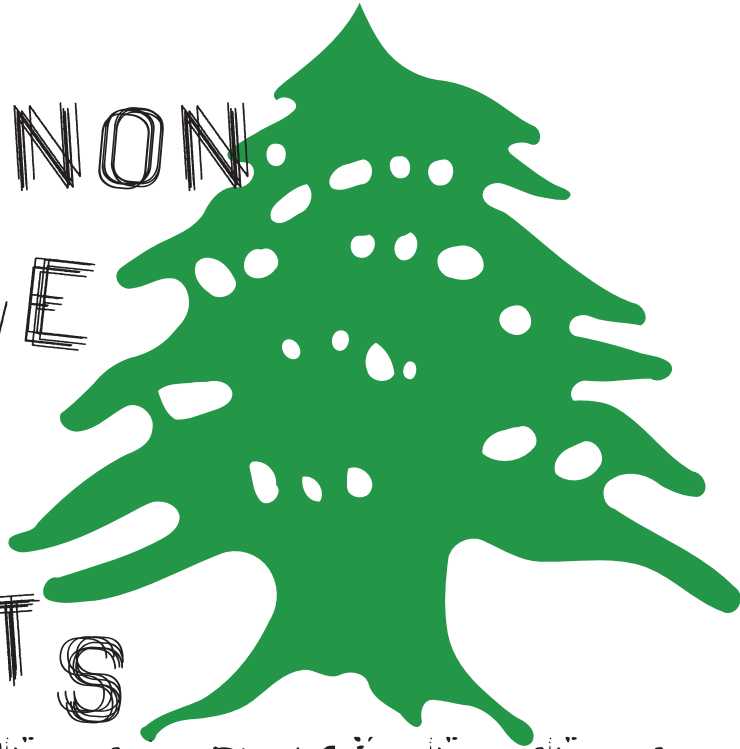
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CRISIS?

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Lebanon is struggling to cope with the huge influx of Syrian refugees in its territory. The initial “open borders” policy has given way to mounting discrimination and worsening living conditions for Syrians in Lebanon. As politicians and media are using widely anti-refugee rhetoric, calling for the return of refugees in Syria, sectarian overtones are echoing from the Lebanese civil war. Social tensions are escalating, creating an unsafe environment for both Syrians and Lebanese. Yet, as repatriation is not a safe solution for the refugee crisis, the question remains: how long will Lebanon cope with its refugee population?

SINCE THE OUTBURST OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR, millions of people have crossed the borders into neighboring Lebanon. Currently, more than 1 million Syrian refugees are registered with the UNHCR, but at least another 500,000 are believed to be scattered throughout the country.¹ This number is particularly high, considering that Lebanon has a total population of 6 million. The influx of Syrians, adding to the roughly 450,000 Palestinian refugees already there, makes Lebanon the country with the highest concentration of refugees in the world, amounting to around 30 per cent of its population. This major influx of people has resulted in serious economic and social strains to the host country, which in turn, impacts the lives of Syrian refugees.

The Lebanese government has failed to come up with a concrete strategy to deal with this refugee influx. Until late 2014, it maintained the pre-existing border entry regulations with neighboring Syria, which allowed a relatively free movement flow between the two countries, and granted residency for six months to new entrees with the possibility of renewal.² Moreover, the government allowed the UNHCR to handle the registration procedures for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which offered de facto refugee status, access to services and aid to all Syrians. The UNHCR continued to offer registration documents to Syrians until 2015, when the Lebanese government decided to review the whole refugee registration system, as it called into question the qualifications of many Syrians holding a refugee status. Currently, between 70 to 80 % of Syrians in Lebanon lack legal status, mainly because they lack documentation or financial resources to renew their residency, rather than having entered the country illegally.³

It is noteworthy that Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, thus it offers limited legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers. What is more, the state has refused to build refugee camps, or to offer any alternative shelter policy. By contrast, the state urged for their housing in rented accommodations or with local families, leading to the self-settlement of Syrian refugees, scattered across Lebanon. This attitude can be justified under the prism of the so-called “Palestinian experience”, which shaped the Lebanese response to the Syrian refugee crisis: when the government built similar camps for the Palestinian refugees, they became permanent settlements, ultimately fostering a marginalized and radicalized community. However, at least 87% of Syrian refugees live in peripheral, historically poor areas, such as the Bekaa Valley, which hosts the highest number of Syrians in Lebanon; in some towns near the borders, like Aarsal, there are now more Syrians than Lebanese.⁴ Their lack of legal status is also increasing their risk of abuse and exploitation, as they face restriction of movement, work, and fear of arrest. It is estimated that 70 % of Syrian households are living below the Lebanese poverty line.⁵

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, most Lebanese people opened their homes to their Syrian neighbors. There was a deep connection between the two people, through linguistic and cultural terms, as well as tribal ties, dating back to the Ottoman times. Furthermore, as Lebanese politics since 2005 were defined by the association with the Syrian state, showing support for the refugees and asylum seekers was a way for the members of the “March 14” alliance to show their objection to the Syrian regime. Media outlets close to the Syrian opposition also favored the idea of welcoming refugees, while those close to the Assad regime were against it. The situation became more complicated politically when hundreds of Syrians in Lebanon marched in favor of the regime on June 2014, occasioned by the Syrian presidential elections.⁶ As the human flow continued, public opinion began to shift, the



anti-refugee rhetoric gained ground, and the Lebanese government began to deal with the refugee issue more actively, by closing its borders and reviewing the registration process of refugees.

As time passed, politicians from all spectra became more and more intolerant with the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, calling for the repatriation of refugees to Syria. In July 2017, President Aoun also called for safe, not voluntary, returns in provinces that are now considered de-escalation zones; these claims are also being reproduced by other public figures, including the Maronite Patriarch Beshara al-Rai.⁷ What is more, some politicians are justifying their anti-refugee policies using nationalist language. Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, in order to justify his refusal to naturalize Syrian refugees, said “we are racist in our Lebanese identity”.⁸ This kind of discrimination is echoed in all levels of society, and campaigns against Syrians in Lebanon are widespread, portrayed in many cases as a burden, or even as killers and rapists. As social tensions are rising, Syrian businesses are shutting down, fake news stories are circulating, and videos threatening Syrians are emerging.

There are multiple reasons for the rising social tensions concerning refugees. Evidently, the sudden increase of population is putting a strain on the country’s already limited resources, and has affected all sectors, from economy, to education, to waste management, and more. In addition, the poorer Syrian refugees are involuntarily competing with the Lebanese labor for temporary income, as they present a cheaper alternative to employers. This contributes to the overall decline in wages and the rise in tensions between Syrians and Lebanese. What is more, the presence of this many, mainly Sunni, Syrians is affecting the delicate sectarian balance of the country. Sectarian divisions have already been deepened due to the conflict in Syria, in a country that is still healing from its own civil war; the continuing sojourn of such a large number of Sunnis is particularly worrisome for the Christian and Shia communities, who feel more directly threatened by the prospect of a permanent settlement of Syrian refugees. Last but not least, the memory of the role that Palestinian refugees played during the Lebanese civil war, along sectarian lines, is still vivid, and the Lebanese are likely to fear any such repetition from the settlement of Syrian refugees.

In this context, it is understandable that an online petition, calling for the return of refugees in Syrian “safe zones” managed to gather more than 20,000 signatures.⁹ Nonetheless, repatriation is not the solution to the refugee crisis. In the period between June and August 2017, following these calls for repatriation, more than 10,000 refugees had crossed the border to re-enter Syria, largely under agreements negotiated by Hezbollah. According to aid groups, these operations offered no guarantees about the returnees’ safety and welfare.¹⁰ Furthermore, the United Nations declared that it is too early to organize safe returns to Syria, raising concerns over the “legal standards and humanitarian principles” of



these returns. Even if these returns have been deemed voluntary, senior UN officials believe that these people have little choice in their departure; Syrians are facing indirect pressures to return to Syria, as the living conditions in Lebanon, and particularly in towns such as Aarsal, where most of the returnees were previously sheltered, have become so difficult that human rights groups have been driven to speculate they are the reason Syrians have decided to re-enter the war zones.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to expect that such a large number of people will return to Syria voluntarily.

In a nutshell, there seems to be no solution to the refugee crisis in sight; the accelerating pressure and the worsening living conditions for Syrian refugees are unlikely to make them go back to Syria voluntarily, but rather they create a less safe environment for both Syrians and Lebanese. There is however the possibility for the Syrians to try to flee towards Europe in the hope of a better future. Meanwhile, as sectarian and social tensions in Lebanon are heating up, fueled by fierce anti-refugee language, a discriminatory environment is being forged, making the possibility of violence erupting all the more likely. The question is to what lengths the Lebanese government will go to solve its refugee problem.

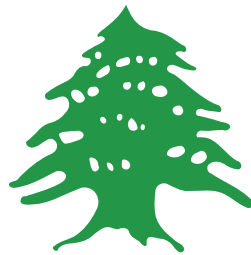
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THE CONFSSIONAL STATE IN LEBANON

An example for **Syria**?

Maria Kourpa

The discussions over the future of Syria after the civil war have brought up the Lebanese confessional model as a possible solution to sectarian violence in the country. Lebanon went through a long civil war in the past and it still struggles to form a strong central government that could overcome sectarian divisions. Undeniably, despite the malfunctions, the country sets an example of stable democracy and economy in the Middle East and was amongst the countries that did not have to deal with popular uprisings in 2011. Could that model be successfully applied in Syria? Has it been successful in Lebanon?

A democracy with flaws

LEBANON'S CONFESSIONALISM – a type of consociational democracy – has been presented as a pivotal model of political participation and decision-making for deeply divided states in the Middle East since 1943. It was designed to provide a fair system of power-sharing among different sects and social groups in order to secure stability and democratic function. Each religious group enjoys proportional representation in the parliament and the government as well as in civil service positions, based on its percentage of the Lebanese population. Theoretically, this system secures equal representation between the different sects.

In practice, the consociational principles were poorly implemented during the 20th century and the country faced serious political instability that eventually led to a bloody civil war for almost two decades. The failures of the reconciliation among the elites, a weak state and the regional conflicts facilitated the existence of power blocks that act as state within a state and further deepened sectarianism and polarization. Moreover, and as a result of the animosity between the Lebanese elites, from 2013 until the end of 2016 the country struggled to form a government.

First of all, due to fear and mistrust among the religious sects, the Lebanese confessional state has been resistant to absorbing the domestic demographic and spatial changes into its system. Therefore, as modernization and economic growth were changing the balance between the sects, legislature was not capable of accommodating the new social forces equally to the system. The years before the civil war, it was the Christian-Muslim division that overwhelmed Lebanese politics. The country has not conducted a population census since 1932, when a slight Christian majority was recorded.¹ The 1943 agreement was based on that census, which provide the Christian population with more political power. But with time, Muslims were gradually becoming the majority of the population without obtaining respective political power. The confessional system was not able to accommodate the dynamics of the society, the economy and the population. It was this rigidity of the state that eventually led to the civil war and the escalating sectarian violence.²

The Ta'if agreement, which ended the civil war, corrected the proportions among Christians and Muslims but, nowadays, the system faces another challenge: the balance between the Shia and the Sunni Muslims. Although each holds around 27% of the population, Sunni Muslims have more political power.³ On the other hand, Shia Muslims are the population with the biggest demographic growth in Lebanon, while being the poorest and the less politically advantaged. As a result of their political marginalization, Shia Muslims shifted their loyalty and support to armed Shia groups, such as Amal and Hezbollah; a trend that dates back to the civil war but was intensified after the Ta'if agreement.

The biggest disadvantage of the consociational system of Lebanon is its vulnerability towards regional developments and alliances. For a confessional system to survive, a well-balanced and stable regional environment must be in place.⁴ But in Lebanon, each sectarian group, based on sub-national identity, is very dependent on regional and international supporters, who are more than willing to meddle into Lebanese politics for influence. While Christians traditionally enjoyed the support of the West, the on-going conflict between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia for the regional dominance has deepened the division among the Muslim population of Lebanon, who are in need of external allies.



Confessionalism in Syria?

Even though Lebanon set an example of how a fragmented population could be governed, its confessional system faces criticism and alterations are being discussed that would make the system more efficient. Even so, if the Lebanese post-war model is to be applied on Syrians, then the Lebanese experience should be noted and similar mistakes avoided.

However, Syrian politics holds peculiarities that would make the implementation of this system even more difficult. Although Syria was presenting itself as a secular state, it consists of different religious sects, such as Christians, Muslims and the Druze. During the second half of the 20th century, Syria was governed by the Alawite minority, despite projecting itself as a secular state.⁵ Over the last decades, the state has been operating on the logic of forced secularism combined with the strong power grip of the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime that has suppressed any opposition from the Sunni majority. This all ended in 2011, when the civil war commenced and quickly took a sectarian turn.

Syrian politics faces different challenges than the Lebanese one. At this point, the country faces not only religious divisions, solidified now more than ever, due to the civil war but also ethnic divisions such as the Kurdish or Turkman minorities. The civil war was essentially based on anti-governmental action and pro-governmental support, which soon assumed a sectarian character, the regional involvement also being a factor. In terms of population dynamics, while in Lebanon no sect prevails over the other, in Syria, the majority Sunni Muslims could easily claim the state for themselves, although they are currently politically divided.⁶ Most importantly, Lebanon agreed on power-sharing and was founded on the rules of democracy, whereas Syria has been a one-party authoritative state for decades. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that the anti-governmental forces in Syria will sit on the table and share power with the Ba'ath regime after all these years of war atrocities, especially now that Assad and his allies are strong enough to guide the peace process. The Assad regime and the powerful Ba'ath party, on the other hand, would never allow a dilution of their power and would make the introduction of a consociational system impossible.

It is crucial that the peace-building process of the two countries be examined from a regional and international aspect. As in

Lebanon 30 years ago, Syria will only achieve a functioning consociational system, if the involved regional powers agree upon compromising power-sharing in the country and do not commit to a zero-sum game.⁷ Nevertheless, the international community should supervise the negotiations as well as the first years of the new government and intervene to facilitate its democratic function, as the Arab League did in Lebanon in 1990.

However, it seems that the regional and international powers that are involved in the conflict will not come to an



agreement or facilitate peace talks easily. At this point, Iran has been allegedly trying to control Syrian demographics through its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah by repopulating Syria with Shia Muslims.⁸ Even so, Iran only focuses on the continuation of the trusted Assad regime as it was before 2011, or in a federalist state, but certainly not on a power-sharing democracy among the sects.⁹ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is refusing to agree on a new political system in Syria that includes Bashar al-Assad and demands governmental participation for the Sunni groups whom the country is backing economically.

Last but not least, and as implied above, Syrian politics only took on a sectarian dimension during the civil war. Yet, religious sects like the Sunnis are also divided within themselves for reasons other than religion. Fears have risen that the application of a consociational system in this society will only de jure institutionalise sectarianism and further promote clientelism.¹⁰ Similarly to the Lebanese case, if sectarianism prevailed in Syria it would only make the country's internal players more vulnerable to external influence and weaken the Syrian state. This is not to say that a consociational system would be entirely unsuitable for Syria. In fact, it may be argued that consociational system could be a temporary solution – and not a permanent phase as it is in Lebanon - that would work as a medium towards a functional democracy and a united identity that would overpower religion.

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HEZBOLLAH RISING

Syria, Lebanon and the regional implications of its ascendance

Costas Faropoulos

In its Syrian endeavors, Hezbollah has managed to upgrade its operational and political influence in the region. Being transformed into a military force, it has now the potential to increase its reach as far as Yemen and Iraq. As a loyal ally of Iran, it has enjoyed the benefits of victory in Syria, but it will also very likely face the repercussions of its actions there, which may end up challenging and undermining its new-found influence.



DURING ITS 5-YEAR PARTICIPATION IN THE SYRIAN WAR, Hezbollah has gone through a major metamorphosis; that the latter has shifted the balance of power in the region. With the support and assistance of Iran, Hezbollah has gradually turned from a Lebanese resistance movement opposing Israel to a full-fledged regional military force with offensive capabilities. Its arsenal exceeds 100,000 missiles according to some estimates, while during the past decade it has even developed a fully functional, sophisticated drone program, thus upgrading its operational capabilities significantly.¹ This evolution has made Hezbollah more of a regular army. The military experience accumulated in its involvement in Syria and the rise of a new generation of battle-hardened commanders has made it easier for the group to deploy its forces in other countries. In Iraq, Hezbollah has been providing Shia militias with its military expertise, sending commanders on the field, while, in Yemen, it has provided the Houthi forces with training advisers and logistical support.² Hezbollah's ability to deploy its forces and exert its influence throughout the region has rendered it a valuable asset for Iran.

Given the organization's economic and military ties to Iran, its decision to enter the Syrian war back in 2012 was not surprising. Although its initial justification for this was the protection of Shia holy sites in Syria, Hezbollah soon became fully involved in military operations across the country, conducting operations as Iran's proxy. However, the ties between Hezbollah and Iran are more than just pragmatic; they are founded on a deep ideological bond that stems from Shia confessional principles.³ On a more practical level, and while Hezbollah has its own sources of income, its economic sustainment is largely dependent on Iran's financing. While there are no concrete data on this, estimates place the annual economic aid of Iran to Hezbollah from 100 to 400 million dollars. To use the words of Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, himself: "As long as Iran has money, we have money".⁴

It is no coincidence therefore that Hezbollah's strategy in Syria has been for the past five years perfectly aligned with that of Iran. Its main goals have been to save Assad's regime from collapsing, to defeat the Sunni jihadists and to obtain and maintain control of a land strip that connects Iran with Beirut, through Iraq and Syria. Given the overall success of the Iranian strategy (with the decisive assistance of Russia), Hezbollah had the opportunity to also pursue its own regional goals, i.e. to protect the Shia shrines in Syria, to maintain the flow of arms shipments from Iran and to prevent jihadist attacks against Lebanon.

The prevention of a spill-over of the Syrian war in the country has been the most crucial argument put forth in many occasions by Nasrallah, in his attempt to justify the involvement in Syria. If Hezbollah had not entered Syria to fight the jihadists there, they would have brought the fighting in Lebanon, the argument went. This line of thought is not entirely unfounded. There has been a permanent presence of jihadist groups in northern Lebanon in recent years, which operates as a recruiting and training base for groups in Syria. However, the aforementioned argument has been used by Hezbollah mainly to bolster its patriotic image in the country. Despite its obvious realignment of purpose and means, Hezbollah is still portraying itself as "the resistance", i.e. as a movement dedicated to the protection of all Lebanese against foreign forces that threaten Lebanon, be they Israel or Sunni extremists. Using nationalistic rhetoric and symbols to project an image of unity, Hezbollah has tried persistently to maintain stability and calm in the country.⁵ Besides, keeping and even strengthening the political status quo in Lebanon is essential for Hezbollah, as it needs the security it provides in order to pursue its regional goals.



Notwithstanding Hezbollah's desire to keep things quiet in Lebanon, the truth is that there are currently no political or other forces in Lebanon capable to oppose it. Its armed forces are larger than the actual Lebanese Armed Forces, and President Michel Aoun has acknowledged that "the Shia militia is essential for Lebanon's defense".⁶ Moreover, the Shia community in Lebanon, with some minor exceptions,⁷ fully supports Hezbollah, and has been enjoying a feeling of empowerment by its repeated victories on the battlefield recently. Of course, attempts at disrupting the political process have existed, but they have ultimately failed. The latest such attempt has been the sudden announcement of resignation by Saad Hariri from the premiership of the country in early November. While the goal of this move was mainly for Saudi Arabia to undermine Hezbollah's (and consequently, Iran's) hold over the Lebanese political scene, it failed to do so and it backfired tremendously. Instead of aggravating sectarian tensions in the country, it managed to further consolidate feelings of unity among the Lebanese public. At the same time, Hezbollah came out of this affair unscathed, as it projected once again an image of itself as the protector and guarantor of Lebanese sovereignty.⁸

With the war in Syria entering a new phase, Hezbollah may be forced to reevaluate its position on the ground. Right now, it is enjoying the spoils of war by taking advantage of Assad's dependence on his allies - Iran, Hezbollah and Shia militias - to control the entirety of the country. It is controlling areas to the south of the country, near the Syrian-Lebanese border, and by adhering to its regional goals, Hezbollah will attempt to maintain a permanent military presence in Syria, if possible.⁹ From there, it can function as Iran's right hand, in controlling the arms routes and by being a permanent thorn in Israel's side. Whether Hezbollah will be successful in this attempt will depend on several factors. Assad's attitude towards the permanent presence of Hezbollah to the south will be crucial, as will also be Russia's take on this matter. Furthermore, Israel most surely will object to Hezbollah's presence near its borders.

In light of this, it is no surprise that the discussion over the possibility of an Israel-Hezbollah war has flared up in recent weeks, as all the reasons that could trigger one are there. Israel has repeatedly warned that it will not tolerate an Iranian military presence or its proxies in Syria, let alone near its borders, and it has acted on that on multiple occasions, by bombing arms convoys and military bases, as deep in Syrian territory as the suburbs of Damascus. Hezbollah, on the other hand, remaining faithful to its anti-Israeli rhetoric, has repeatedly threatened Israel with a war that would devastate the country. However, even with the rhetoric heating up, it is unlikely that a war between the two sides will break out at this point. The situation in Syria is quite uncertain as of now, with no political solution yet in sight, and no side would risk open confrontation. Israel could face potentially heavy military and civilian losses that would be hard to deal with politically, while Hezbollah, even



if it was forced to retreat from its expeditionary activities, would be difficult to face defeat in such a decisive manner as to render it non-operational.¹⁰

Hezbollah is currently enjoying a prominent spot in the balance of power in Syria, but that could very well change, given the challenges it will have to face in the aftermath of the war. Once a political solution has been reached in Syria, pressure will be applied for its withdrawal from Syria. At the same time, tensions in Lebanon have been building, as the opposition views Hezbollah's military endeavors and megalomania as reckless and dangerous to Lebanon's own security. In addition, the overextension of Hezbollah's activities in several countries could potentially lead to the weakening of the organization, both militarily and financially. It may have grown in recent years, but it is still not convincingly self-sufficient, as to maintain both its operations across the borders and the quasi-welfare system it has built in southern Lebanon for the Shia population. Nevertheless, Hezbollah has consolidated its place in the region as a military force to be reckoned with, and it will most definitely not abandon this hard-earned status easily.

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BRING OUR PRIME MINISTER BACK?

Maria Tare

After an unconventional international tour –including a prolonged stay in Saudi Arabia and brief visits to France, Egypt and Cyprus– the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri returned to Beirut on November 21, just before the country’s 47th Independence Day. Speaking from the Presidential Palace in Beirut, he agreed to pull back from his sudden resignation, which he announced on November 4 while in Saudi Arabia, thus only bringing the country back to a standstill.



N LEBANON'S POLITICAL SYSTEM – the product of a delicate sectarian power-sharing agreement dating back to the 1940's – the Presidential seat is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the Prime Ministership for a Sunni and last but not least, the position of the speaker of the parliament for a Shiite Muslim.

In the 2016 national unity government, Saad al-Hariri came to personify a compromise between the country's sectarian adversaries. Saad al-Hariri, the son of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri who was assassinated in 2005, was appointed head of the coalition government for a second time, thus putting an end to the two-year-long political crisis during which the country's Presidential seat was empty. Eventually, Michel Aoun –a Maronite Christian, former Army general and an ally of Hezbollah- filled the presidential seat. And as in past elections, the Shiite Hezbollah, won cabinet seats.

After 2011 and in a divided Middle East, Lebanon would strive to remain equidistant from all parties involved. The country's political reality was epitomized by what was called "the policy of distancing".² Arguably, Michel Aoun's adherence to this approach has been carried along with less conviction than that of the country's previous President, Michel Suleiman. Consequently, when Saad al-Hariri endorsed Aoun's election, domestic intra-power relations took a radical shift to his disadvantage. His endorsement was largely perceived as a political victory, not only for Hezbollah and its international-backer, Iran, but also, in some ways, for the Syrian regime.³ In Lebanon, as well as in other Middle Eastern countries, the sectarian-based political establishment can effectively lay the ground for foreign influence to seep through; for Lebanese politics, however, became even more heavily polarized after 2005. By that time, the majority of the political parties –while aiming to bolster their power domestically- had grown increasingly dependent on their international backer(s) for funding.

Since Rafik Hariri's premiership, Saudi Arabia went on to become the patron and protector of the "March 14" coalition -and most particularly of Hariri's Future Movement- as it was seeking to challenge Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. Until now, and under Saad's - who holds a dual Lebanese and Saudi nationality and whose family's business interests rest in the kingdom - governance this arrangement seems to have been working.⁴

However, the 2016 power-sharing government and Hariri's pragmatic positions on the precarious coexistence have been increasingly alarming Riyadh, who fears that their Lebanese ally is aligning too close with a group they consider not only a terrorist organisation, but most notably a threat to their national security. Apparently, their pique came to a head on November 4 when Mr. Hariri was summoned to Riyadh, from where he announced his resignation.

According to Maha Yahya, the Beirut-based Director of Carnegie Middle East Centre, the apparent Saudi pressure on the Lebanese Prime Minister to resign, the latter's refutation of such allegations notwithstanding, resulted in a rare but fragile unity between Lebanon's unconventional political components.⁵ The country's politicians, including Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, perceived the attempted quasi-coup as a palpable threat to the country's political stability and to its very security.⁶ Lebanon's Grand Mufti, the highest cleric for Sunni Muslims, said Saad al-Hariri's resignation came amid difficult circumstances, while calling for national unity.⁷

However, once the national unity agreement sinks in, the issues that precipitated the crisis will be there. The majority of these



issues resides inside the Future Movement and Hariri's inner circle. Hariri's concerns over the elections next May are twofold: first, the kind of electoral alliances that he will be forming;⁸ and second, the voices within his movement that re-emerged even prior to his attempted resignation. Known as "al-Sabhan's men", these voices are pushing towards a more aggressive approach in matters affiliated with Hezbollah's actions, both domestically and regionally.⁹

Allegedly, the man most keen to benefit from these developments is Ashraf Rifi.¹⁰ In last year's municipal elections of Tripoli - a Sunni stronghold- Rifi supported a list of candidates that outran Hariri's-backed list, thus challenging his prominence in northern Lebanon.

There are several reasons explaining Rifi's growing prominence in northern Lebanon. For one thing, with an impressive 88% of the Sunni population holding negative views on Hezbollah,¹¹ Rifi's harsh critique of the party brought a large number of Sunnis under his influence. But most importantly, the roots can be traced back to the socioeconomic inequalities that exist in northern Lebanon. According to a research held by the International Poverty Centre - that dates back to 2008 - poverty struck 25% of the population in areas mostly inhabited by Christians, whereas in Sunni-majority cities such as Tripoli, 57% of the population was considered poor.¹² In a time when Hezbollah is consolidating its political and military gains, a growing number of Lebanese Sunnis is starting to feel politically marginalized.

This development may open the door to a more radical, even anti-statist, political shift. Surprising as it may seem that some within the Lebanese Sunni community are attracted to anti-statist political alternatives and given that their popular former leader Rafik Hariri was a key player in rebuilding and strengthening the country's institutions destroyed by the 1975-1990 civil war, the fact of the matter is that his death in 2005 changed the equation dramatically.¹³

As shown in Tripoli's municipal elections, some are even growing further apart from the Future Movement and criticize it for not doing enough for the Sunni community. Raphael Lefevre rightfully points out that much of this criticism stems from what is known in Lebanon as "consociational democracy", i.e. a regime "based on an association of communities the patron of each sect, the zaim,

is generally elected in exchange to his ability to provide services for his community".¹⁴ And while the Future Movement has long supported these kind of arrangements, in recent times, it has failed to deliver them.

Nevertheless, the Sunni population is not a monolithic entity. Socioeconomic discrepancies within the Sunni community itself have been also increasing. Particularly worrying though, is the fact that these inequalities are "leading to a high level of urban segregation",¹⁵ with the majority of Sunni population having to subsist on the margins of society.



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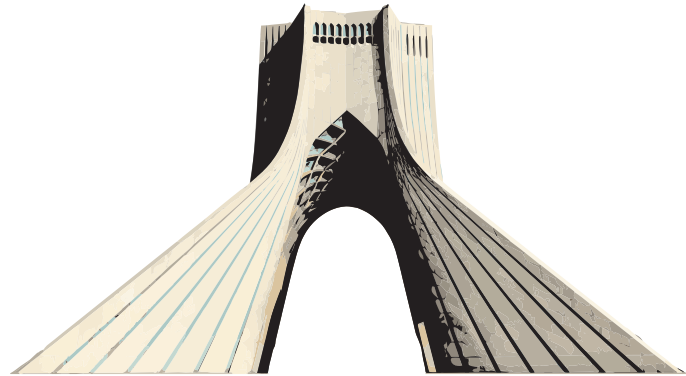
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SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN'S

regional struggle for

POWER



Another source of instability for Lebanon

Alexandra Nikopoulou

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two of the most important players in the MENA region, and have both claimed a leadership position in the Arab world. Their conflict has never resulted in open war, but the game of power between the two has repeatedly led to the “externalization” of the conflict. Such is the case of Lebanon which has lately become the new theater of conflict between the two. This analysis examines the factors that triggered the Saudi-Iranian conflict and the extent to which they can affect Lebanon. Are we heading towards another proxy war or is there space for a political solution?



SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN HAVE REPEATEDLY INTERFERED in the politics of neighboring countries with the goal of increasing their influence and regional share to power by supporting their ideological allies in those countries. This is visible in the wars in Iraq and Syria, and most recently in the case of Lebanon.¹ The latter, a politically divided and unstable country, has become a bone of contention between the two regional powers that have taken advantage of the political deadlock in Lebanon to increase their influence in the country.² Although the two countries represent the two largest sects of Islam, their rivalry is translated into terms of power and not into a sectarian conflict. However, both countries use sectarian rhetoric to support their interests; Saudi Arabia, which is the host country of the two holy Muslim cities, claims that is rightfully the leader of all Muslims, while Iran sees itself as the only Muslim leader, as the current regime of the country is a byproduct of the popular revolution of 1979.³ This new regional Cold War has deeply affected the political status quo in Lebanon, which after years of political breakdown and lack of governance was getting closer to a period of normalization.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have not always been rivals. In fact, both countries were allies of the Western block during the Cold War period and were both standing against Russia and its rising influence in the region.⁴ Relations between the two countries drastically changed after the religious revolution in Iran that overthrew the Shah and brought the Shia Ayatollah Khomeini to power. Saudi Arabia considered itself the leader of all Muslims and saw in Iran a major rival. The two countries represent the two largest branches of Islam—the Sunni and the Shia—and the idea of exporting the revolution that Khomeini was promoting was strongly delegitimizing all Sunni leaders of the Arab world. Khomeini was representing a Muslim minority and at the same time wanted to become the leader of the Muslim world by encouraging Shia uprisings in other Arab countries which, as he considered, were led by illegitimate, foreign-backed rulers.⁵ However, both countries have also had opposing financial, strategic, and political interests in the region, which made their conflict all the more likely.⁶

After a period of relative peace, the rivalry was revived in 2003 and was boosted by the divide-and-rule policy that the US was following during that period.⁷ The Iraqi case is the first example of a Saudi-Iranian proxy war. After Saddam's overthrow, the Sunni vacuum was indeed a great opportunity for Iran and its Shia allies in the country to claim their share to power.⁸ However, tension in the Middle East was about to rise even more. After the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Iran has been gaining even more power in the region, threatening the leading role of Saudi Arabia. In fact, as the Syrian conflict has evolved until today, Assad, who is indeed supported by Iran, has managed to cling to power and has made himself indispensable for any possible solution.

At the same time in Lebanon, there is an unprecedented turn of events. The 2014 elections led to a political deadlock and left the country without a government for two years. In 2016, when the two coalitions—the Iranian-backed “March 8” Alliance led by Hezbollah and supported by Syria, and the Saudi-backed “March 14” Alliance of the Sunni party of late Rafiq Hariri and other Christian or secular parties—reached an agreement, Saudi Arabia saw its allies not only cooperating with Shias, but also co-existing in a coalition with Hezbollah, which is considered by Saudis and the West a terrorist organization.⁹

These developments called for action that was then expressed with the forced resignation of Saad Hariri as Prime Minister of



Lebanon, while he was visiting Saudi Arabia. Saad, who is son to Lebanon's popular leader Rafiq Hariri, was seemingly supported by Saudi Arabia and was possibly forced to resign, as a result of his cooperation with the "March 8" alliance.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia used Hariri's resignation to project its power to Iran, as the latter was increasing its share in the politics of Lebanon through Hezbollah. As Hezbollah –an organization supported by Iran– is the largest political power and a popular movement in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia seems to be losing its control over its political allies in the country. That is why Saudis preferred to replace Saad with his brother Bahaa, who was closer to their interests and promoted Saad's resignation.¹¹ The "March 14" coalition, however, needed to meet their own agenda and thus proceeded with the cooperation with the Christian and Shia political elements that was much needed to create some form of political stability in the country. When the two opposing coalitions decided to surpass their differences, and align towards a solution, Lebanon was for the first time closer to normalization. But this solution would be harmful to Saudi interests, which is why Saudi Arabia intervened in the politics of the country. Through this incident, it is pertinent that Hariri is not able to stand on his own and Saudi Arabia is still pulling the strings in Lebanon. Even though he withdrew his resignation, he still is at the mercy of Saudi interests and the future of the agreement between the "March 8" and the "March 14" coalitions is highly uncertain.

It should be remembered that Lebanon is a part of the regional politics of Saudi Arabia and Iran and is caught in the struggle for power and leadership between the two. As with other unstable, politically divided, and failed states, Lebanon offers another opportunity for each country to impose its power and ideas. Although Lebanon is politically and religiously divided, this is not the main reason for the country's instability and conflict. As a country that has been controlled by foreign powers for years, Lebanon's shallow political infrastructures and weak political culture have again made it a welcoming field for foreign intervention. Since no political power is able to govern on its own, and as the country is home to several political and religious groups, foreign players seek to exploit them to promote their own agendas.

As tensions are rising in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran will increase their competition, thus bearing a severe impact on the political life of their neighboring countries. Even though Hariri has currently put his resignation on hold and the conflict seems to de-

escalate, there is a long road to normalization. In the face of Iran's increasing influence, Saudi Arabia is facing a security dilemma, leading it to interfere more deeply in the politics, not only of Lebanon, but also of other countries, in order to counterbalance the new status quo. This will affect the fragile balance that was achieved in Lebanon, which is now realizing that, notwithstanding the internal attempts for peace and cooperation, external factors still have a say in the politics of the country.



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Jumblatt

TIME OF RECKONING?

Angelos Tsioris

The Druze are a small ethno-religious minority inhabiting the Chouf Mountains. They have managed to become a considerable force within Lebanese politics due to the leadership of Jumblatt family. This article argues that Jumblatt has managed to preserve the group as a force in Lebanese politics due to the pragmatic examination of threats, which has led him to the continuous switching of sides. Meanwhile, Wi'am Wahhab, Jumblatt's political adversary, has been increasing his influence both within and outside Lebanon, which may as well increase the political leverage of the group as a whole. Therefore, the increasing influence of the Druze both at the domestic and regional level is quite promising.



The Druze are a small ethno-religious group found in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan. As a group, they came to existence in the 11th century as an offshoot of Shia Islam. Their faith has adopted various aspects from Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and Hinduism, while Jethro (Moses's father in law) is celebrated as the principle prophet and saint.¹

Before the establishment of the state, the Druze played a critical role in the wider Mount Lebanon region, as since the 12th century the ruler of the Mount Lebanon region was the Maan dynasty, which was Druze. However, due to internal divisions and the 19th century sectarian war against the Maronite Christians, they lost much of their influence.² In modern history, the rivalries of certain traditional, notable families –such as the Arslan and the Jumblatt– has been translated into the formation of opposing groups that each tries to represent the Druze community in the Lebanese political scene, while the religious leaders tend to set themselves apart.³

Since the establishment of the Lebanese state in the 1920s, the Lebanese Druze have form around 5% of the population, while they have maintained their traditions, which are still preserved in small villages that lie in the Chouf Mountains south and east of Beirut.⁴ For several centuries, the most influential Druze family in the Lebanese political sphere has been the Jumblatt family. In 1949, Kamal Jumblatt founded the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), which supported socialist policies and a secular future for Lebanon, based on pan-Arabism. In 1977, during the early stages of the Lebanese civil war, Kamal Jumblatt was assassinated, supposedly by Syrians, as he supported the Palestinians.

After Kamal's assassination, his son, Walid, took over the leadership of the Druze. Once in charge, Walid took a pro-Syrian side in the civil war. The pro-Syrian stance was maintained up until 2005, when Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated. From 2005 onwards, Walid allied with the anti-Syrian democratic forces in the country and supported the departure of Syrian forces from the country due to the expected decreasing influence of Syria, both in the country and the region. This was because Syrian politicians were blamed for Hariri's assassination. In 2008, though, once the rise of the Hezbollah became apparent, Walid initiated relations with them, as well as with one of their patrons: Syria. However, after the outburst of the Syrian civil war, relations with President Assad broke, as he became a vocal supporter of the anti-regime forces.

Meanwhile, increasing opposition to Jumblatt's leadership was being expressed by a "Damascus' Man": Wi'am Wahhab.⁵ Wahhab started his career as a pro-Syrian journalist, while in 2005, Syrian officials ensured Wahhab's place in the government of Omar Karami, as Minister of the Environment.⁶ Meanwhile, in 2006, Wahhab formed his own party, the largely irrelevant at the time Arab Unity party, which aligned with the pro-Syrian forces, the "March 8" alliance. This political position contrasted Jumblatt's anti-Syrian position as member of the "March 14" alliance. With the pretext that since the signing of the Taif Agreement Jumblatt has been not representing the Druze effectively, Wahhab tries to unite the Druze in supporting pro-Syrian policies.

Lebanese Politics and the Druze

Despite their small number, the Druze have demonstrated their ability to survive under difficult political conditions. It is striking how



easy they switch sides, as shown by both the civil war and afterwards between the pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian alliances. This political expediency points towards the fact that Jumblatt has adopted a pragmatic understanding of the political threats that may even put the very existence of the Druze people at risk. The outcome of this pragmatic approach is their key role in Lebanese politics. This is because they can switch sides in the political landscape based on their interests and not on sectarian divisions, i.e. they have been detached from the sectarian divisions between Christians and Muslims.

Also, a key aspect of Druze influence in Lebanese politics, as several observers have noted, is their role as kingmakers. This was demonstrated in 2011, when Jumblatt hindered the formation of a government by Saad Hariri by realigning his party with the “March 8” alliance led by the Hezbollah. The role of kingmakers is ensured by the weak balances in the political system as well as by the key positions that Druze hold within governments, such as that of Chief of General Staff under the National Pact of 1943. These realities allow Jumblatt’s party to influence political decision-making in favor of the party’s interest. For example, it was Jumblatt behind the 2008 government’s decision to target Hezbollah’s telecommunications and airport networks as a way to limit its increasing influence in the country. Therefore, Jumblatt’s understanding of where the wind blows has had a great influence on the political outcome of Lebanese politics and on the protection of the Druze community. In March 2017, Walid’s advanced age forced him to proclaim his son, Taymour, as the PSP party leader in the next elections, something that demonstrates the maintenance of the dynastic politics of the Druze, as well as the principles that come with it.⁷

In addition, the military-based defense by Wahhab’s party further ensures the strategic and political survival of both his supporters and of the Druze in general. The recently established Saraya al-Tawheed as the military arm of the Arab Unity Party led by Wahhab and based in the Druze region claims to support the protection of Lebanon from foreign terrorists. This move suggests the leading role that Wahhab wants to assume, as the protector of all the Druze in Lebanon and abroad, always under the Syrian-Hezbollah umbrella. This is shown by the public statements urging Jumblatt to unite under the common Druze flag.⁸ Thus, the existence of such a group not only increases the political and strategic role of the party, but it also acts as an arm of defense against possible terrorist

attacks for all the Druzes, regardless of their political affiliations.

Sub-regional influence

The internal division of the Lebanese Druze between Walid Jumblatt and Wi’am Wahhab has been translated in the support for opposing camps in the Syrian Civil War. In accordance with their respective political alliances, Jumblatt urged the Syrian Druze to rise against Assad, while Wahhab supports the Assad regime, as shown by his alignment with an



affiliate militia defending the Syrian Druze, called Ammar bin Yasir Battalion.⁹ Despite the division among the Druze, the existence of a militia controlled by the Lebanese Druze points to the potential of exerting sub-regional influence in the region.

The Druze could also become a sub-regional force in the form of a state entity. This is supported by the fact that Israel discreetly promotes the creation of a Kurdish-like buffer state, composed by the Syrian Druze in south-east Syria and those in the Golan Heights.¹⁰ This is manifested by the three “Druze conventions” organized by western governments, such as the United States and Israel, in order to convince the leaders of the group to initiate a fight against ISIS and to fight for independence from the Syrian government.¹¹ A Druze state extending from the Golan Heights to south-western Syria would imply the regional upgrading of the group as a whole and the creation of a strong ally for the Lebanese Druze; yet, the refusal of the Druze of the Golan Heights hinders this possibility for now.¹²

NOTES

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