

Lebanon and the Syrian crisis. Challenges for the EU and the US

Peter Seeberg

The article takes its point of departure in the recent political turmoil in Lebanon, where the crisis in neighbouring Syria is influencing the conflict between the two main political alliances in Lebanese politics, March 8 and March 14. The presidential election, which is going to take place in 2014 – and which used to be a thing decided in Damascus – has become an important theme in the fragile situation in Lebanon, not the least because it is completely impossible to foresee how the war in Syria will end. The sensitive situation is deepened by the apparent fact that both sides in Lebanon, Hezbollah as well as the Future Movement alliance, are sending men and weapons into Syria. Furthermore the internal problems in Lebanon are influenced by the almost 800.000 Syrian refugees having fled to Lebanon. The potential regional and international repercussions are significant: both the US and the EU are having trouble dealing with the complex situation in Lebanon, where both March 8 and March 14 parliamentarians supposedly will be relevant negotiation partners beyond a possible post-Assad scenario.

Lebanisation revisited

The Lebanese President Michel Sleiman's six-year-term expires in May 2014. The level of consensus among the rival politicians in Lebanon concerning the upcoming election is at a very low point, as the political crisis in Lebanon continues. The National Dialogue Committee, comprising of Lebanon's main political leaders including March 8 and March 14 Ministers, hasn't held regular meetings since September 2012. The political unrest is a result of deep national divisions over the ongoing war in neighbouring Syria, recently becoming more tense following Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's critique of Lebanon's self-disassociation policy in an interview with a Lebanese TV-station in October 2013: "Lebanon contributed directly in igniting the flames inside Syria by allowing terrorists to cross in through the Lebanese-Syrian borders so practically there was no self-disassociation".

There is hardly doubt that both sides in Lebanon, Hezbollah as well as the Future Movement coalition, are sending men and weapons into Syria. The Hezbollah fighters are in armed confrontation with Sunni jihadists in Syria and the fear in Lebanon is that spillovers will result in a situation, where the fighting will take place in Lebanon as well. There have been clashes between supporters and opponents of al-Assad in the northern city of Tripoli causing dozens of victims and hundreds of wounded.¹ So far the Lebanese Army has been able to contain the confrontations, but the fear is, that the unrest will spread to other areas in Lebanon including Beirut, where several car bombs have exploded and minor clashes have occurred. The caretaker government has drafted a security plan, but security forces will hardly be able to control things, if a further escalation of the conflict internally in Lebanon becomes a reality.

A much discussed issue has been the case of former Minister Michel Samada, charged in coordination with Syrian officials of being responsible for smuggling of explosives into Lebanon for the purpose of making car bombs. Samada was arrested by the Lebanese authorities in August 2012 and allegedly he during the interrogation admitted involvement in the conspiracy. Shortly after this the leader of the *al-Maloumat* (Lebanese Internal Security Forces), Wissam al-Hassan, was killed by a car bomb. The assassination was seen as a warning to

¹ Christèle Allès, "The Private Sector and Local Elites: The Experience of Public-Private Partnership in the Water Sector in Tripoli, Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 3 (2012).

people in Lebanon who might attempt to support the fight against the regime in Damascus, but the connection was never officially established. Earlier Hassan had been leading the investigation concerning former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's death in February 2005, so apparently there was also a more direct address label attached to the bomb.² According to rumours Hassan had supported the Syrian opposition in the Syrian war by facilitating a flow of money and arms to the Syrian opposition through Lebanon. He was given a state funeral ceremony, posthumously awarded the National Order of the Cedar by the President and laid to rest alongside Hariri.³

The National Dialogue has attempted to touch the sensitive issue of disarming the Hezbollah and in September 2012 Sleiman suggested a national defense strategy according to which it would be possible for the Hezbollah to maintain their armed forces, but in a changed setup so that they were under the command of the Lebanese army, which then (at least in principle) would be able to claim the *monopoly of legitimate violence*. The discussion related to the proposal has revolved around if it would be possible to make such an arrangement without handing over the weapons to the army (supported by 14 March) or if a more informal coordination between the Hezbollah "resistance" and the Lebanese would do (supported by 8 March). Hezbollah-leader Hassan Nasrallah mentioned in an Iftar speech in July 2013 that "We are always ready to attend National Dialogue or any dialogue to discuss a national defense strategy before the formation of a Cabinet or after its formation". He also warned 14 March supporters about pursuing an unrealistic scenario, where the Hezbollah would hand over their arms to the Lebanese army.

The Syrian crisis and Lebanon

A Weberian approach can be useful, if one wants to understand the increasing social and political tension in Lebanon in light of the Syrian crisis. A simplified dichotomy, where on one side we have representatives for a legitimate, weak Lebanese government and on the other side proxies for Syria and Iran, might work in some *lightweight* Western media, but the Lebanese reality is more

² Ed Blanche, "In Lebanon, Syria's War Creeps Closer," *The Middle East* April 2013, no. 442 (2013).

³ Najib B. Hourani, "Lebanon: Hybrid Sovereignties and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2013).

complex. A *dual-power* situation in Lebanese politics is in the actual reality supplemented by a *dual-legitimacy* phenomenon, where the Hezbollah, with its efficient political work in parliament, municipalities etc., its notoriously well-functioning and wide-scaled social work and its ideological campaigns aimed at the Lebanese public sphere through the rhetoric of Nasrallah and the impressive satellite and internet based news-hub Al Manar, is able strongly to influence Lebanese politics and society.⁴

The recent conflict is deepened by the fact that almost 800.000 Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon (according to UNHCR, Oct. 2013).⁵ The conflict-potential related to this reality is significant, not the least because of the above mentioned national divisions. There is no consensus in Lebanese society regarding how the refugees should be dealt with. Some are worried about to which degree they will constitute a drain on the limited Lebanese resources. But more importantly: others fear that an influx of highly problematic groups will hide among the fleeing Syrians. Lebanon is a sensitive country when it comes to refugees, not the least because of the more than 400.000 Palestinian refugees, who according to UNRWA are to be found in Lebanon and who for decades have contributed to the recent dramatic Lebanese history.

International Dimensions

The *dual legitimacy* phenomenon in Lebanon has for years been an obstacle for the EU in the sense that the EU has had difficulties dealing with an entity like Hezbollah: its sharing of power with other actors in Lebanon, its social work, its maintaining a status as “*the resistance*” and at the same time its pursuing political agendas on behalf of Syria and Iran. In July 2013 the EU added the Hezbollah Military Wing to the EU’s list of entities, groups and persons involved in terrorist acts. In the EU press announcement it was emphasized, that “this decision does not affect the continuation of dialogue with all political parties in Lebanon and does not affect the delivery of assistance to Lebanon.”⁶ By explicitly limiting the listing to the armed wing, the EU wanted to maintain working relations with Lebanon's government and political parties. Obviously,

⁴ Peter Seeberg, "The EU as a Realist Actor in Normative Clothes: EU Democracy Promotion in Lebanon and the European Neighbourhood Policy," *Democratization* 16, no. 1 (2009).

⁵ UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response. Regional Overview," (UNHCR, 2012).

⁶ EU-Council, "Council Amends EU Terrorist List," ed. EU-Council (Brussels: EU-Council, 2013).

however, the decision may complicate the EU's ability to approach Lebanese politicians with relations to Hezbollah.

In a comment to the EU decision US Secretary of State John Kerry stated that a "growing number of governments are recognizing Hezbollah as the dangerous and destabilizing terrorist organization that it is."⁷ This approach based on a simple *dual-power* understanding of the Lebanese realities might not, given the recent highly problematic situation in Syria and its effects on Lebanon, be appropriate. For two reasons: if the interest is to avoid a spreading of the Syrian tragedy by maintaining a dialogue with all parties, a pragmatic approach where contact is maintained to both March 8 and March 14 seems necessary. And added to that: a post-Assad situation in Syria might create a highly critical and unstable situation in Lebanon. Given such a scenario it seems reasonable to be ready and able to negotiate solutions with all parties interested in avoiding chaos. Lebanese March 8 might as well as March 14 parliamentarians be relevant partners in a situation like that.

⁷ Justyna Pawlak and Adrian Croft, "EU Adds Hezbollah's Military Wing to Terrorism List," *Business and Financial News, Breaking US & International News, Reuters* July 22(2013).

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