

November 2013

About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Lebanon, Dual Legitimacy, and the Syrian Crisis

Challenges for the EU and the United States in a Lebanon on the Verge of Escalated Internal Confrontations

by Peter Seeberg

Lebanization Revisited

The Lebanese President Michel Sleiman's six-year-term expires in May 2014. As the political crisis in Lebanon continues, the level of consensus among the rival politicians in Lebanon concerning the upcoming election is at a very low point. The National Dialogue Committee, which comprises Lebanon's main political leaders and includes March 8 and March 14 parliamentarians,¹ have not held regular meetings since September 2012. The political unrest resulting from deep national divisions over the ongoing war in neighboring Syria became 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."²

There is hardly any doubt that both sides in Lebanon — Hezbollah as well as the Future Movement alliance — are sending fighters and weapons into Syria, raising fears in Lebanon that the conflicts will produce a spillover and that there will be fighting on a larger scale in Lebanon. There have been clashes between supporters and opponents of Assad in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, which have resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of wounded. 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 taken place. The caretaker government has drafted a security plan, but if a further escala-

2 "After Assad Criticism, Lebanon Defends Disassociation," *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, October 22, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Oct-22/235382-after-assad-criticism-lebanon-defends-disassociation.ashx>.

1 The March 8 Alliance, characterized by its pro-Syrian stance, was the ruling coalition in Lebanon until July 2013. The March 14 Alliance, in contrast, represents anti-Syrian parties such as the Future Movement Alliance.

tion of the conflict in Lebanon becomes a reality, security forces will hardly be able to control things.

A much-discussed issue has been the case of former Information Minister Michel Samaha, charged in coordination with Syrian officials with smuggling explosives into Lebanon to make car bombs. Samaha was arrested by the Lebanese authorities in August 2012, and during the interrogation allegedly admitted involvement in the conspiracy. Shortly after this, the leader of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (*al-Maloumat*), Wissam al-Hassan, was killed by a car bomb. The assassination was seen as a warning to people in Lebanon who might attempt to support the fight against the regime in Damascus, but a connection was never officially established. Hassan was 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. Furthermore, according to rumors, Hassan had supported opposition forces in the Syrian civil war by facilitating a flow of money and arms through Lebanon. He was given a state funeral, posthumously awarded the National Order of the Cedar by the president, and laid to rest alongside Hariri.

The National Dialogue attempted to touch upon the sensitive issue of disarming Hezbollah, and in September 2012, Sleiman suggested a national defense strategy under which it would be possible for Hezbollah to maintain their armed forces, but in a changed setup. They would have been 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 the possibility of such an arrangement without handing over the weapons to the army or of a more informal coordination between the Hezbollah "resistance" and the Lebanese army. 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."³ He also warned March 14 supporters about pursuing an unrealistic scenario in which Hezbollah would hand over their arms to the Lebanese army.

3 Hussein Dakroub, "Hezbollah Ready to Attend National Dialogue," *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, July 20, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jul-20/224389-hezbollah-ready-to-attend-national-dialogue.ashx>.

The Syrian Crisis and Lebanon

A Weberian approach can be useful to understanding the increasing social and political tension in Lebanon in light of the Syrian crisis. A simplified dichotomy — in which on one side we have representatives of a legitimate, weak Lebanese government, and on the other proxies of Syria and Iran — might work in some lightweight Western media, but the Lebanese reality is more complex. A *dual-power* situation in Lebanese politics is, in the current state of affairs, supplemented by a *dual-legitimacy* phenomenon. Hezbollah, with its efficient political work in parliament and the municipalities, its notoriously well-functioning and wide-ranging 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 to dominate Lebanese politics and society to some degree.

The recent conflict is worsened by the fact that almost 800,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon.⁴ The potential for conflict related to this fact is significant, not least because of the above-mentioned national divisions. There is no consensus in Lebanese society on how to deal with the refugees. Some are worried about a drain on limited Lebanese resources. But more importantly, others fear that an influx of highly problematic groups will be hidden among the refugees. Lebanon is a sensitive country when it comes to refugees as a result of the more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees in the country who for decades have contributed to its dramatic history.

International Aspects

The *dual-legitimacy* phenomenon in Lebanon has been an obstacle for the EU for years in the sense that the EU has had difficulties dealing with a strong non-state actor like Hezbollah. Its sharing of power with other actors in Lebanon, its social work, its maintenance of its status as "the resistance" and, at the same time, its pursuit of political agendas on behalf of Syria and Iran have all been problematic. In July 2013, the EU added the Hezbollah Military Wing to its list of entities, groups, and persons involved in terrorist acts. In the EU's press release it was emphasized that "this decision does not affect the continuation of dialogue with all political parties in Lebanon and does not

4 UNHCR, *Syrian Refugee Response: Lebanon Inter-Agency Update*, October 2013, November 1, 2013, <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=3272>.

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affect the delivery of assistance to Lebanon.”⁵ By explicitly limiting the listing to the armed wing, the EU wanted to maintain working relations with Lebanon’s government and all political parties. Obviously, however, the decision may complicate the EU’s ability to approach Lebanese politicians who have relations with Hezbollah.

In a comment on the EU’s decision, U.S. 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.”⁶ Given the recent highly problematic situation in Syria and its effects on Lebanon, this approach based on a simple *dual-power* understanding of the Lebanese reality might not be appropriate for two reasons. Firstly, if the objective is to avoid a spread of the Syrian tragedy by maintaining dialogue with all parties, a pragmatic approach in which contact is maintained with both March 8 and March 14 parliamentarians seems necessary. Secondly, a post-Assad scenario in Syria will tend to create a highly critical and unstable situation in Lebanon. Given such a situation, it seems reasonable to be ready and able to discuss solutions with all parties interested in avoiding chaos. March 8 and March 14 parliamentarians will be necessary discussion partners in this scenario.

⁵ Council of the EU, *Council Amends EU Terrorist List*, July 25, 2013, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/138396.pdf.

⁶ Saad Abedine, Nick Paton Walsh, and Joe Sterling, “Hezbollah Slams EU’s Blacklisting of Its Military Arm,” *CNN*, July 23, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/23/world/europe/hezbollah-eu>.

About the Author

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