

When the Syrian Crisis Sheds Light on the Lebanese Crises

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Since 2005, the Independence Uprising (*intifâda al-istiqlâl*) and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the latter has been in a state of permanent crisis. To such a degree that the phrase “cold civil war” used before the Civil War (1975-1990)¹ is now used regularly by observers. Despite the assertion on the international stage of a so-called doctrine of “dissociation” vis-à-vis the Syrian regime,² expected to prevent Lebanon from becoming the stage for another “war of the others,”³ Lebanese society is increasingly shaken by the wars taking place in Syria. It is disrupted first of all at its borders, of course (400 km of shared borders), where skirmishes and abductions are multiplying, but also by the thousands of Syrian refugees (estimated at 469,970 by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on 15 May 2013, that is, 10% of the Lebanese population), with the specific problems this increasingly entails for the government:⁴ housing, health and social services, employment / unemployment, not to mention the political and security issues that are being stoked (discourse on deliberate inequalities between reli-

gious communities and intensification of mobilisations for or against the Syrian regime, with their share of victims). Yet Lebanese society is also becoming more fragmented from within.⁵ In this regard, it can be said that Lebanese and Syrian societies share certain battlefields rather than that their wars spread to one another (today we evoke too superficially an “importation” of the Syrian conflict to Lebanon, just as a “Lebanisation” of Syria was recently forecast). Syria’s bloody conflict, with no resolution on the horizon in the short term, reveals and exacerbates – much more than it generates per se – the profound difficulties encountered by the Lebanese regime in regulating its internal conflicts other than by dispensing with laws or having recourse to force and violence. In other words, it has pushed to the limits the logic of a consociational democracy, which failed to prevent the civil war lasting from 1975 to 1990 and which, updated by the Taif Agreement (1990), is not folding but continues adapting to date, while indefinitely putting off the essential public policies expected by the country, in a highly fragile economic situation (despite relatively good scores in terms of per capita GDP), extremely poor insofar as social protection and behind in terms of infrastructure, public services and utilities (the case of drastic electricity rationing is the most eloquent example⁶). Lebanon is thus beset by tensions that put the regime to issue. Recourse to various forms of political violence on the one hand, and governance

¹ CHARARA W., 1976, *La paix civile froide*, Beirut, Centre d'études arabes [in Arabic].

² KARAM K., 2012, “The Fragile Balance in Lebanon: Domestic Tension and Foreign Pressure,” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook: Med.2011*, Barcelona, IEMed. www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Karam_en.pdf

³ This phrase in reference to the mechanisms of the Lebanese Civil War, by the renowned politician, diplomat and newspaper publisher Ghassan Tuani, who passed away in 2012, has long prospered. Cf. TUANI Gh., *Une guerre pour les autres*, Paris, Lattès, 1985.

⁴ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, “Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, No. 141, 13 May 2013.

⁵ PICARD E., “De crise en crise, l'horizon problématique du couple Liban-Syrie,” *Carnets de l'Iremam*, 2013. <http://iremam.hypotheses.org/2056>

⁶ VERDEIL E., “Électricité et territoire : un regard sur la crise libanaise,” *Revue Tiers Monde*, No. 198, pp. 83-99, 2009.

by dispensing with laws as justified by emergencies and the management of everyday affairs on the other render the serious impasses and uncertainties the Lebanese have to deal with on a daily basis more patent, as demonstrated by the upsurge of debate on social and economic issues.

The Ubiquity and Historicity of Political Violence

The wave of yet-unsolved political assassinations and assassination attempts perpetrated in 2005-2006⁷ has been followed over the past few years by other forms of recourse to weapons of varying scope. End of the “pax syriana”: the war in the summer of 2006⁸ between the Israeli army and Hezbollah did indeed, for a time and on the scale of the Arab world, lend the Shiite political party the prestige of its resistance against the Zionist occupant, but it also reactivated in Lebanon the inextricable issue of Hezbollah’s military power, the only party not to be disarmed upon conclusion of the civil war. The street combat in Beirut in May 2008 between paramilitary forces of March 8 Alliance (dominated by Shiite Hezbollah) and those of March 14 Alliance (dominated by the Future Movement of the Sunni Hariri clan)⁹ rendered the political divide between the country’s Shiite and Sunni Muslims more evident. The violent confrontations over the summer of 2007 between the Lebanese army and the Salafist forces of *Fatah al-Islam* at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in the outskirts of Tripoli¹⁰ mustered the country’s support for its army while exposing the growing power of Jihadi groups in Lebanon.¹¹ Since 2011, deadly clashes fostered by the Syrian conflict have been intensifying. But their roots are often older. In Tripoli, Lebanon’s second-largest city, the Sunni inhabitants of the Bab al-Tebbaneh neighbourhood and the Alawi of the Jabal Mohsen neighbourhood, who have been clashing since the 1980s,

are now fighting in the name of the Free Syrian Army and the Assad regime, respectively. These bloody clashes, part of a long-term rivalry, are taking on unprecedented scope and reveal a process of radicalisation and militarisation observed in other regions of the country: whereas the partisans of the Salafist Sheikhs Ahmad al-Assir (Sidon) and Salem al-Rafii (North) are calling for a jihad to aid Syrian opposition, the leaders of Hezbollah are displaying the party’s support for the Syrian army more and more openly. While the main Sunni party, the Future Movement, led by Saad Hariri, is overwhelmed by Salafist groups (against the backdrop of regional rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia), Hezbollah is increasingly emerging as the Shiite ally of Iran and an armed support for the Syrian regime, thereby undermining the doctrine of “dissociation.”

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The car bombing assassination of General Wissam al-Hassan in Beirut in October 2012 can also be interpreted as an additional episode of the power relations and settling of political accounts that intensified after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005. A Tripolitan close to the Hariri Sunni clan (and former head of security and protocol for R. Hariri) but also chief of intelligence services of the Domestic Security Forces, General al-Hassan was leading an active inquiry into the assassination of the former Prime Minister, in collaboration with the Special Tribunal

⁷ A dozen attacks from 2005 to 2007 targeted political leaders and journalists.

⁸ MERMIER F., PICARD E. (dir.): *Liban : une guerre de 33 jours*, Paris, La découverte, 2007.

⁹ SAFA O., “Lebanon’s Stubborn Resistance to Change,” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook: Med.2011*, Barcelona, IEMed, 2011. www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2011/Safa_en.pdf

¹⁰ From 20 May to 2 September 2007, the Lebanese army carried out a major offensive, deadly even for its own soldiers, against members of Fatah al-Islam entrenched at the second most populated Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

¹¹ B. ROUGIER, *Le jihad au quotidien*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2004; F. ITANI, *Les jihadistes au Liban: de Quwat fajir à Fath al-islam*, Beirut, Dar al-saqi [in Arabic], 2007.

for Lebanon (STL), entrusted by UN Resolution 1757 with trying the criminal acts associated with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 other people. Since even before it was instituted in June 2007 and began operating in March 2009, the STL has not ceased to divide the Lebanese partisan arena, regarding both its national legitimacy and international legality and its investigations (case of the false witnesses, media leaks, etc.), as well as Lebanon's contribution to its work: its first indictment, made public in the summer of 2011, convicted four individuals who were "Hezbollah sympathisers" and close to the Syrian regime. Its mandate, which officially expired in February 2012, was tacitly renewed, not without causing revived debate in Lebanon on the absence of discussion of this move. Involved in the dismantling of a Mossad network in Lebanon in 2011-2012, Wissam al-Hassan had above all contributed to the fantastic arrest in August 2012 of Michel Samaha, former minister and MP for North Metn, considered one of the strongmen of the Syrian regime in Lebanon, for having fostered assassination plots for Damascus, with the complicity of General A. Mamlouk, chief of Syrian intelligence services (for which Lebanon issued a warrant of arrest in February 2013).

Enduring Political Crises

The same diagnosis can be made of parliamentary and governmental politics. The Syrian crisis accentuates the problems that the Lebanese regime, which is bending but not breaking, cannot or can no longer solve. Certainly, the movement that began in 2011 during the wave of Arab uprisings for the "overthrow of the confessional regime and its symbols" (*isqat al-nizam al-ta'ifi wa rumuzihi*) itself ran out of steam and became divided without managing to mobilise people beyond a certain circle, as if to attest to the strength of the country's extant political system while others in the region are collapsing. In any case, there has been a breakthrough in 2013 with the registration of the first civil marriage in Leb-

anon. The fact remains, however, that since 2005, the Lebanese Parliament has not voted on any government budgets. The National Dialogue process reactivated in Doha (May 2008), entrusted to the President of the Republic and primarily designed to discuss Hezbollah and its weapons, was suspended due to diverging positions regarding the STL and Hezbollah military power, as well as the inability to define a common defence policy – a factor that cannot but be exacerbated in the current context. The government led by Tripolitan businessman, Najib Mikati, appointed Prime Minister in June 2011, ended up resigning in April 2013. And the parliamentary elections to be held in June 2013 according to the institutional timetable are, three weeks before the appointed date, still suspended for lack of a preliminary agreement on the electoral law.¹² With them, the organisation of new presidential elections by the Parliament is also put off indefinitely, with Michel Sleiman's term coming to an end.

Since Rafiq Hariri's assassination in February 2005, five administrations have governed, interrupted by long power vacuums during which complex balances of representation in each cabinet have been bitterly negotiated, balances that rapidly break when it comes to defending the contradictory interests of religious communities. It took six months and the confrontations of May 2008, which represented a major warning, for the new President, Michel Sleiman, former commander in chief of the armed forces and constitutionally ineligible, to be elected in May 2008.

In other words, since the departure of Syria as arbiter in 2005, the Lebanese political system is stumbling to find a way of institutionally regulating its internal conflicts, in terms of both designating leaders and making political decisions. Thus, even though Najib Mikati's administration was a "majority" government dominated by the March 8 Alliance, its form of operating did not really differ from preceding "national unity" administrations, since during his term, he reintroduced the right to veto for religious community leaders.¹³ In fact, it was due to a "veto" from the Future Movement and Sunni leaders that Najib Mikati eventually chose to resign.¹⁴ This was accentuated with the debates on the

¹² KARAM K., "Missing Questions in the Debate over Electoral Reform," *Legal Agenda*, No. 6, Oct. 2012, translated from the Arabic at: www.lb.boell.org/downloads/Electoral_Reforms_by_Robin_Moger.pdf

¹³ KARAM K. "The Fragile Balance in Lebanon...", IEMed, 2012, op. cit.

¹⁴ In this case, the veto consisted of Hezbollah and its allies not wanting General Ashraf Rifi, with affinities to the Hariri clan, to be reinstated as Director-General of Homeland Security Forces (he had reached retirement age).

new electoral law that stagnated throughout 2012, reflecting a radicalisation of community positions: this was the case with the initiative by Greek orthodox leaders, who proposed instituting a single electoral district in Lebanon, in which each individual would vote for representatives of their religious community (certain Christian groups deplore the fact that it is a Muslim constituency that votes in Christian MPs).¹⁵

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In this context, public policy endeavours are tentative, often limited to dealing with everyday affairs. The different reform projects (decentralisation, justice, electoral system, transmission of nationality, retirement, etc.) announced since the Taif Agreement remain suspended, despite innovative work by the various Councils of Ministers and Parliament, not to mention active think tanks, including on the international level. This is punctually yet significantly illustrated by the absence of a concerted policy regarding the unprecedented influx of Syrian refugees into the country. In order not to repeat the experience of the Palestinian refugee camps, the Lebanese government is avoiding grouping the refugees together. This policy – which in the short term renders more difficult humanitarian work aimed at the neediest of these refugees, co-ordinated in other countries by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR) – has not to date been supplemented by other emergency arrangements of any magnitude. The consequences of Lebanese public policy's ten-

tative responsiveness – or the structural and political impediments to response – can be considered on a number of levels: that of the country's growing economic and social difficulties (in particular, the issue of the constant rise in real estate prices, the difficulty of exporting and importing via the former routes to Arab countries and the decline in tourism); that of the various proselytising activities carried out among Syrian refugees, who are primarily Sunni; and finally, that of the multiplication of mobilisations in Lebanon for or against the Syrian regime.

In this context, however, the most innovative elements in 2012 emerged in the sphere of labour. The social and economic issues shared by all Lebanese regardless of their confession or political sympathies are far from decisively mobilising the country, but things are beginning to move. First of all, though the reform that Minister of Labour Charbel Nahas wished to implement failed (he resigned in February 2012), it momentarily moved public debate away from the eternal issues of weapons and the protection of religious community interests towards reflection on the notion of “social wage,” bringing out the major shortcomings and inequalities generated by the Lebanese economy. Moreover, the country has been the arena of exceptional labour protests in the past few years regarding salaries in the education sector (with an unprecedented coordination of teaching staff from both public and private education) and among employees of the public electricity company, *Électricité du Liban*, and finally and most surprisingly, there has also been a significant movement among workers of private distribution channels (the Spinneys supermarket chain) after strikes in the banking sector. Although these movements are contained and not easily relayed by labour organisations, they reveal problems other than partisan balance, indicating first of all the generalisation of a sense of social insecurity (in parallel to the political and civil insecurity felt by Lebanese citizens), as well as a timid reorganisation of the sphere of labour.

¹⁵ CATUSSE M., KARAM K., LAMLOUM O., *Métamorphose des figures du leadership au Liban. Champs et contrechamps des élections législatives de 2009*, Beirut, Presses de l'Ifpo, 2011.