Lebanon and the Syria conflict: between state paralysis and civil war

By Doreen Khoury

This article looks at how the Syrian conflict has worsened the 8-year old political deadlock between the March 14 coalition led by the Future Movement and the March 8 coalition led by Hezbollah. It explores the simultaneous breakdown of state institutions and the outbreak of sectarian conflict, and asks whether Lebanon is approaching civil war again.

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It is safe to say that national cohesion in Lebanon and confidence in the state have never been so weak as they are at the moment. The Lebanese people are today facing simultaneously a deteriorating security situation and a fragmentation of Lebanon into interlinked zones of sectarian conflict, and complete paralysis of all state institutions. While instability in Lebanon is largely viewed through the security prism, this only partly explains why the situation today is more dangerous than it has been in the past few years. Not only are citizens contending with multiple security incidents in many regions, but the opposing factions of the political class have steered the country into a political dead-end, unable or unwilling to agree on anything. And while politicians in the past maintained the façade or illusion of a functioning state, they are making no such effort now.

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High stakes in the Syrian conflict

No-one expected Lebanon to remain immune for long from the Syrian revolution, given the complexity and profundity of relations between the two neighbouring countries. From 1990 until the end of 2004, the Assad regime had manufactured consensus between the various Lebanese political factions, sects and former warlords, and employing divide and rule tactics to keep all parties in check. The controversy surrounding the extension of staunch Assad ally President Emile Lahoud’s term in 2004 was the first crack in this manufactured consensus. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, a number of independent MPs and Rafik Hariri (who had resigned as prime minister) opposed the extension. Future Movement MPs, under threats and coercion, ended up voting for the extension, but Jumblatt’s bloc and several other MPs defied Assad and voted against it. Hezbollah, Amal Movement, and other Assad allies, voted for the extension, thus beginning the current polarisation. The assassination of Hariri a few months later entrenched the polarisation between what became known as the March 14 camp, led by Saad Hariri (Rafik’s son) and the March 8 camp, led by Hezbollah. The Assad regime, now removed militarily from Lebanon, drew its support and power from only one political faction in Lebanon, as the March 14 camp became a fierce opponent of the regime, blaming it for the assassination of Rafik Hariri and other prominent March 14 figures such as Pierre Gemayel and Gebran Tueni.

The Syrian revolution-cum-civil war intensified the already deep polarisation between the two main political factions. With the outbreak of the popular uprising against Bashar Assad, it was inevitable that the Future Movement and Hezbollah in particular would support the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime respectively. Even though both sides in June 2012 signed the Baabda Declaration under the auspices of the President in which they pledged not to involve themselves in the Syrian conflict or drag Lebanon into regional conflict, in reality it was wishful thinking.

Both have a crucial, and perhaps existential stake (certainly in Hezbollah’s case) in the ultimate fate of the Assad regime.

The Future Movement

For the Future Movement, led by Saad Hariri, the Syrian uprising is an opportunity to get rid of Assad’s regime, weaken Hezbollah’s regional and local power and influence, and thus redress the balance of power in the Future Movement’s favour. Hariri perhaps hoped for the emergence of a new Syrian government, preferably with a majority of Sunnis, with the same regional and international allegiances as the Future Movement. Thus, many Sunni Islamist fighters crossed the border to help opposition fight against the regime, and in late 2012 it emerged the Future Movement MP Okab Sakr was acting as an arms coordinator between Syrian opposition fighters and Arab Gulf funders, presumably from Saudi Arabia. Saad Hariri wanted to reverse the trend of humiliation dealt by Hezbollah, its allies and the Assad regime, such as the collapse of his government in January 2011, triggered by the defection of his March 14 ally Walid Junblatt to the pro-Assad & Hezbollah camp, and the perceived defeat in the May 2008 Beirut clashes between Hezbollah fighters and Sunni fighters over the decision by the then March 14-led government to dismantle Hezbollah’s private communications network. The last incident had an indelible effect on Hariri’s party and the Sunni community as a whole; in sectarian terms. It perceived it as military defeat by Hezbollah in the Sunni districts of Beirut. Hezbollah emerged victorious after the Doha conference, which was organised to bring an end to the fighting in Beirut, in the sense that it retained its mass arsenal of weapons and gained a key demand in government formation, the so-called blocking third: enough cabinet seats to veto
decisions made by the majority March 14 coalition.¹

Hezbollah

For Hezbollah, it is crucial that the Assad regime triumphs against the uprising so that it can protect its arms supply route through Syrian territory and thus maintain and strengthen its power in Lebanon, and impose a new regional balance of power so that it can protect itself from regional threats – not just from Israel but from Arab countries hostile to its agenda. By admitting that Hezbollah was fighting alongside the Assad regime in the strategic town of Qusayr (considered by Hezbollah as a main weapons route), Nasrallah effectively knew that there would be backlash in Lebanon not just from Sunnis, but from most Christians as well, even his ally Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement. However, to protect its strategic position, Hezbollah is willing to lose its regional reputation as the only bulwark against Israel by fighting alongside a cruel dictator.

Nasrallah’s justifications for taking part in the Syrian conflict contained sectarian undertones. The Qusayr battle was portrayed as a calculated pre-emptive strike against ‘takfiris’ or extreme Islamists (adopting the Assad regime propaganda that the Syrian opposition are Islamist terrorists). Instead of waiting for them to enter Lebanon and target Hezbollah, Hezbollah would enter Syria and stop them from attacking Lebanese. In a televised address on June 14, 2013, Nasrallah effectively announced the trench lines between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, by saying that Future had been involved in the Syrian conflict much longer than Hezbollah (despite the fact that in terms of the weight of involvement, Hezbollah’s is much bigger) - as if Hezbollah was in Syria partly to fight the Future Movement, implicitly equating them with extremists. Stating that "Before Qusayr is the same as after Qusayr", he declared that Hezbollah will continue to fight in Syria on Assad’s side. The lack of a government (the Mikati government, of which Hezbollah was a part, resigned in March 2013) has been very conducive to Hezbollah, allowing it to be freer in its actions. It was able to admit its involvement openly in Qusayr, with no fear of being held accountable.

The Syrian conflict erupts in Lebanon

Nasrallah’s provocative admission had an almost immediate effect on the ground, as already heightened sectarian tensions caused by the Syrian conflict erupted into armed clashes in several regions, sometimes simultaneously. Nasrallah knew precisely that his words would lead to violence, and Future Movement has been willing to give Sunni Islamist fighters a measure of political cover, and, as is suspected, arms. Three potential hotbeds of violence, Tripoli, the Bekaa (both of which are highly sensitive to the Syrian conflict given their geographical proximity to the Syrian border) and Sidon which shares with the other three a delicate sectarian make-up, are witnessing mini civil wars, often fought by proxies. The security situation is also complicated by the fact that the Lebanese Army has lost at least part of its high national esteem as a pluralistic and inclusive institution, which inspires immense loyalty and patriotism in many Lebanese. In recent years, it has struggled to maintain its neutrality in the situations in which it has been forced to intervene. It is perceived by some Sunnis, as we shall see below, as coordinating with Hezbollah, often against members of the sect and is thus a front in the current, and not a neutral arbiter.²

Tripoli

In the northern city of Tripoli, there was an almost immediate resurgence of fighting between Sunni fighters in the Bab El-Tabbaneh district and pro-Assad Alawite fighters from neighbouring Jabal Mohsen, which has paralysed the city of Tripoli and terrorised its residents. The frequent outbreaks of fighting between the two neighbourhoods reflect the developments of the Syrian conflict. The Lebanese Army has tried acting as a buffer between the two sides (often accused of either of bias), but as it is trying to keep the peace on several fronts and often shackled by political polarization and indecision, it has not been able to stop the frequent outbreak of clashes (especially the sudden spread of masked armed men and snipers on the streets of Tripoli) nor is it able to conclusively enter the neighbourhoods and confiscate weapons.

The Northeast Bekaa

At the same time, the Syrian front has expanded to the northeastern Beka’a, along the Syrian-Lebanese border. The Free Syria Army has shelled Hezbollah positions in the Hermel district, causing damage to civilian homes, while the Syrian Army has bombed the Sunni border town of Arsal which is situated in the mostly pro-Hezbollah Hermel district, always under the pretext that FSA fighters are hiding in the town’s farmlands. The Syrian army has also made

² The other two main state security agencies, are overtly politicized: the Internal Security Forces, expanded and strengthened after 2005, was until recently led by Ashraf Rifi who is close to Hariri and Saudi Arabia, and the General Security director, Abbas Ibrahim, is close to Hezbollah and the Assad regime.
frequent incursions into Lebanese territory allegedly in pursuit of FSA fighters. From the beginning of the uprising against Assad, Arsal residents sheltered Syrian refugees, anti-regime activists and later, Syrian rebel fighters. This has caused conflict with the nearby Shiite towns in Hermel, and kidnappings between Arsal and the Shiite towns are frequent. The LAF has also come under attack in the region, allegedly by Arsal residents.3

The rise and fall of the Asir phenomenon
In late June, a two-day battle erupted between fighters loyal to radical Salafist cleric Ahmad Asir and the Lebanese Army, with the alleged involvement of Hezbollah fighters. Ahmad Asir had risen from a fringe religious preacher to a major Sunni voice calling for jihad against the Assad regime and employing harsh sectarian rhetoric against Hezbollah. In mid-June, Asir had begun to demand that the Hezbollah-affiliated armed group, Saraya al-Muqawama or the Resistance Brigade vacate apartments around his security compound at the Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque in the Abra suburb, which he claimed they were using to spy on him. On June 23 Assir fighters ambushed Lebanese army soldiers at a checkpoint near his mosque, sparking a battle that lasted for 2 days, claiming the lives of 18 soldiers, and wounding 35. Igniting near universal national disgust, Assir called on Sunni soldiers to defect from the army and fight on his side. Although Asir’s fighters had been defeated, the preacher managed to escape the security compound (allegedly through underground tunnels).4

Immediately after the crisis, reports emerged of Hezbollah’s role alongside the army in the fight against Asir’s loyalists with some analysts accusing Hezbollah of using the Lebanese army as cover in its elimination of Asir. On June 24 2013, Manar TV (owned by Hariri) showed video footage of fighters in the battle area wearing yellow armbands, claiming the lives of 18 soldiers, and wounding 35. Igniting near universal national disgust, Assir called on Sunni soldiers to defect from the army and fight on his side. Although Asir’s fighters had been defeated, the preacher managed to escape the security compound (allegedly through underground tunnels).4

strategically as it’s the gateway to south Lebanon and the front against Israel. Second, given Hezbollah’s claim that it is fighting a war against takfiris or Sunni extremists in Syria to protect Lebanon, it might have felt justified in fighting them at home as well. In sectarian terms, for many Sunnis, Hezbollah’s involvement in fighting Asir, however abhorrent they considered Asir, showed the general state hypocrisy towards Hezbollah’s arms. While the army confiscated Asir’s arms, Hezbollah’s weapons were not up for discussion.

Following the Asir crisis, there were almost immediate violent retaliations against Hezbollah and Hezbollah-controlled districts. On July 9, a car bomb exploded in the Bir Abed neighbourhood of the Beirut Dahiyeh district, Hezbollah’s stronghold and its security headquarters. While there were no casualties, there was significant damage to property. A previously unknown Syrian rebel group, the 313 Brigade, claimed responsibility for the explosion on Facebook, saying it was a response to Hezbollah fighting alongside the Assad regime army in the city of Homs. Whether this rebel group actually exists or not, what probably unsettled Hezbollah was that its previously impenetrable security stronghold was breached. A week later, there was a bomb attack on a Hezbollah convoy on the Bekaa-Hezbollah highway – deep in the Hezbollah heartland. Nasrallah had vowed that Hezbollah’s involvement in the Qusayr battle and its attack on extremist Islamists would protect Lebanon from strife – but it seems that the exact opposite has been achieved.

The collapse of the state?
In parallel, one state institution after the other began to break down and lose credibility. At the time of writing, most, if not all of Lebanon’s state institutions are paralysed. Lebanon has no government as Mikati resigned in March 2013 presumably over an inability to agree on the extension of the term of the chief of police, the pro-Future Movement Ashraf Rifi, who retired in April 2013. The Prime Minister designate, Tamam Salam, is finding it impossible to broker an agreement on a national unity government. Lebanese political factions were also unable to reach agreement on a new election law, and as the deadline to hold elections in June 2013 drew closer, MPs from both sides decided to extend the term of the current parliament to November 2014. An appeal to challenge the legality of parliament’s extension submitted by President Michel Sleiman to the Constitutional Council failed because the politicized Council succumbed to political interference and was unable to achieve quorum in

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3 In February 2013, the army was ambushed militarily in the region as it tried to arrest an Islamist accused of being a member of the terrorist Fatah al-Islam group.
4 His current whereabouts are unknown.
its meetings to vote on the appeal. Attempts to hold a parliamentary session to discuss over 50 pending draft laws recently failed as some political parties disputed the constitutionality of the session and the agenda set by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. The military council, which is responsible for the army’s decision-making, is close to paralysis as its members have either retired or are close to retirement. The army commander himself, General Jean Kahlwaji is due to retire in September 2013, and typically, there is no agreement on either extending his term or choosing his successor.

Lebanese are used to long government formation periods and disputes over administrative appointments, but what rang alarm bells were the extension of parliament’s term (reminding many of the 1975-1990 civil war during which parliament’s term was renewed periodically without elections) and the failure of the Constitutional Council to meet in order to decide on the President’s appeal of the extension law.

Too busy fighting to hold elections?
First, given the state of political polarisation, there was a complete absence of a national cross-party effort to work on a new election law well before the date of the elections in 2013. The one serious election proposal, the so-called Orthodox Gathering Law, proposed by March 8 and Hezbollah ally, former MP Elie Ferzli and adopted by a cross-factional alliance of Christian parties, only served to deepen polarisation as it proposed an election law in which citizens only voted for candidates from their own sect. It was supported by Hezbollah and the the Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri’s party, the Amal Movement. In retrospect, the proposal turned out to be little more than a ploy to create dissent within the March 14 ranks, as the Future Movement (and Walid Jumblatt) fiercely opposed it, deducing (rightly) that it was aimed at weakening them electorally. It was a proposal intended to deepen resentment and mistrust. Lebanese political factions able to reach agreement on a new election law as the deadline to hold elections in June 2013 drew closer, voted on May 31 2013 to extend the term of the current parliament to November 2014.

By postponing elections, the political class collectively sent a message that regional conflict subsumes local needs, and that existential sectarian crises always come first. Elections are simply not seen as a legitimate or desirable arena of competition. It also denoted a distinct lack of sovereignty, an acknowledgment that Lebanon’s fate was linked to the Syrian situation; as long as the outcome of the Syrian conflict is unclear, the political elite is unable to focus on internal matters. The so-called “security considerations” used to justify the extension were treated like an outside matter over which Lebanese politicians have no control. Even though Hezbollah chose to intervene in Syria, Future Movement chose to support the rebels, and the outbreak of Tripoli conflict can be stopped by political decision.

Nor has the extension meant a de-escalation of the crisis; on the contrary, Lebanese MPs only agreed to extend their terms; they did not agree to postpone their fighting, whether verbal or military. Moreover, the same political class that failed to hold elections, has to elect a president in March 2014, and agree on an election law before November 2014.

The Constitutional Council loses its credibility
In an attempt to salvage the constitution and the legitimacy of state institutions, President Michel Sleiman appealed against the law extending the parliament’s term before the Constitutional Council. He was joined by the Free Patriotic Movement. Despite the expectations of civil society activists and many citizens, the Constitutional Council, inevitably and depressingly, succumbed to political interference and was unable to achieve the necessary quorum (8 out of 10 members) in its meetings to vote on the appeal. The two Shiite members and one Druze member, under pressure from Nabih Berri and Walid Jumblatt, failed to attend consecutive Council meetings before the June 20 deadline to approve or reject the appeal. Thus by June 20, the extension became legal. The Constitutional Council failed the test of judicial independence and instead of being a possible solution to the crisis, became a problem in itself. Its role and very existence are in doubt, as its members are not willing to free themselves from their loyalty to sectarian leaders.

The spectre of civil war?
If the events related above, the armed clashes and the collapse of state institutions, had occurred separately – for example, the breakout of security incidents with a functioning government or vice versa, a paralysed parliament but with a stable security situation, the threat of all out war would not be high. But as this breakdown is happening on all levels, both security and institutional, and given the simultaneity of events in a short space of time, Lebanon certainly looks like its on the brink of some sort of fragmentation or a fluctuating long-term conflict, neither war or peace. Lebanon has been on the brink of civil war in the past but managed to pull back, most recently in May 2008, when a temporary agreement was brokered between the two sides by foreign mediation. This
time around however, the regional situation is different; the various patrons, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran who back the March 14 and March 8 camps respectively, are in no mood to be conciliatory, given their deep involvement in the Syrian conflict, and are encouraging polarization between their allies in Lebanon.

To avert further conflict and achieve permanent peace requires genuine political will and a realization, particularly by Hezbollah and the Future Movement, that ultimately dialogue is preferable to violence. Both sides, especially Hezbollah, have to abide by the Baabda Declaration, and abstain from taking part in the Syrian conflict, for the sake of Lebanese national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The country cannot simply be frozen in a limbo state, as they wait for a conflict which might take years to end. Nor can they wait until there is an international diplomatic breakthrough on the Syrian conflict, which is an unlikely event these days. All political parties should commit themselves to a re-launch of the National Dialogue table with serious discussion on Lebanon’s mission and identity, as well as Hezbollah’s arms.