

# Lebanon on the brink

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## Summary

Gravely affected by the Syrian crisis, Lebanon has managed to remain relatively stable against all odds – despite the influx of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees and internal political crisis involving actors who support opposing Syrian factions. Lebanon’s resilience can be explained by the high opportunity cost of state breakdown for domestic, regional and international political actors. Moreover, international economic assistance, diaspora remittances and informal networks established by refugees help to prevent outright economic breakdown. Yet, stability remains extremely precarious. Important tipping points include (1) the IS strategy of spreading the conflict to Lebanon, and the consequent disintegration of the army along sectarian lines, (2) democratic decline and popular dissatisfaction, (3) Hizbullah’s domestic ambitions and Israeli fears over the group’s growing military power and (4) the potential for frustration between refugees and host communities turning into recurrent violence. However, (5) the slow economic decline and the worsening sanitary conditions stand out as the greatest challenges.

The Lebanese case is, arguably, a counter-example to research on violent spill-overs in civil wars, which often emphasize the potential for conflict contagion. Against all odds, Lebanon has remained remarkably stable – despite massive pressure from the horrific war in next-door Syria, with some 1.5 million refugees.<sup>1</sup> Lebanon has been without a president since May 2014, and the Chamber of Deputies has unconstitutionally extended its mandate twice. Spread of the conflict may have been facilitated by the absence of border demarcation between Syria and Lebanon in mountainous areas. Many of the same religious and political cleavages are found in both countries.

The assassination of former Prime Minister and billionaire Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 and the forced withdrawal of

the Syrian military from Lebanon unleashed political and sectarian conflict in Lebanon, with an alliance composed mainly of Sunnis politicians joining forces against the Shia Hizbullah. The March 14 Alliance is led by the Sunni Future Movement (whose leader is Rafiq’s son Saad) but includes Druze and Christian policymakers as well. Hizbullah, on the other hand, has joined with Shia Amal and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) (led by General Michel Aoun) in the March 8 Alliance. The latter supports the al-Assad regime and Hizbullah’s military involvement in Syria.

In 2012, Lebanon’s opposing political-sectarian camps agreed on the principle of neutrality regarding the Syrian crisis (Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the UN 2012). Hizbullah, Lebanon’s largest military force, has violated this principle by its military involvement in Syria on the side of President al-Assad. Its professional force, some 10,000-strong – depending on circumstances – is far better organized than are the approximately 1000–2000 Lebanese Sunnis believed to be fighting in Syria, primarily alongside the al-Nusra Front, but also smaller Islamist groups and IS (also known as ISIL, ISIS or Daesh).<sup>2</sup>

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### Population: Key figures as of August 2016

- 1 million: Syrian refugees in Lebanon registered with UNHCR
- 1.5 million: approximate total number of Syrians in Lebanon
- 450,000: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon
- 42,000: Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon
- 3.9 million: Lebanese national residents

Sources: UNHCR/UNRWA/World Bank

1 UNHCR stopped registering refugees in May 2015; its official estimate is ca. 1 million. UNHCR 2016.

2 Interview, Radwan Sayyid, Beirut, August 2016. Other sources provide the figure of approx. 900 Lebanese Sunni fighters with IS and the al-Nusra Front. ‘European Jihadis: It ain’t half hot here, mum’, *The Economist*, 30 August 2014; Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016. According to the Lebanese Justice Ministry, the number is only 200. Interview, Ashraf Rifi, Justice Minister, Beirut, February 2015

Lebanon, the ancient Land of Cedars, functions as a buffer to Europe, containing security threats as well as the current humanitarian crisis. The influx of some 1.5 million refugees from Syria has created a socio-economic crisis, adding to and exacerbating the internal political crisis. Syrians in Lebanon live under extremely harsh social and legal conditions. With the 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who are descendants of those who fled in 1948 (UNRWA 2016a), and the additional 42,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (UNRWA 2016b), at least three out of ten inhabitants in Lebanon today are refugees. A primary obstacle in crisis response has been that the opposing factions have handled the crisis as a function of their own views on the Syrian crisis, and not from a humanitarian perspective.

### **The resilience of the Lebanese system**

With the exception of recurrent security breaches, Lebanon has so far been able to defend itself against conflict contagion to central areas. This is due to systemic, conjunctural and international factors, and stability remains extremely precarious. Prior experience of civil war does not ‘vaccinate’ against new violence, as the experiences of the DRC and South Sudan have shown. In Lebanon, consociational democracy, the power-sharing deal between religious groups, hinders the emergence of clear winners and losers. It is therefore resilient against military coups and revolutions but did not hinder a civil war that lasted fifteen years (1975-1990).

The opportunity cost of state breakdown remains very high for all the country’s primary political figures. Hizbullah, the largest military actor, is already under heavy pressure in Syria, and does not want to open another front in Lebanon. It seeks to present itself as a guarantor of the Lebanese state, in order to safeguard its alliance with the Christian FPM. Also Lebanon’s institutional Sunni leaders want their country to remain stable: they have everything to lose, including access to state patronage and promised international support, if the country falls apart. The Future Movement abandoned military adventures after its embarrassing defeat against Hizbullah in Beirut in May 2008. The Sunni scene is split, and Islamist and Salafi movements also mobilize some youths. However, the opportunity costs of war have been high also for Islamist leaders, and few have been willing to risk their legal existence. Frustration is high among many urban poor Sunnis, but there is little willingness to translate this into street fights.

In February 2014, after a deadlock that had lasted almost a year, Lebanon’s main political figures agreed on the formation of a new government, and implemented a security plan. The army and security forces were deployed in volatile areas, mandated to intervene and make arrests. The plan, implemented in the northern city of Tripoli, ended a cycle of conflict. This was possible because the Future Movement endorsed the plan, and gave full and explicit support to the Lebanese army in its struggle against Sunni Jihadism. Moreover, the army has been neutralizing Syrian Jihadi groups in the Aرسال

Mountains, some 12 km from the border with Syria. Assisted by strong Hizbullah contingents, the military has been able to seal the border better.

No regional or international actors want to see Lebanon destabilized. International assistance from the UN, the EU, the Arab League and the permanent members of the UN Security Council has been essential to maintain survival of state institutions since 2011. France, the UK and the USA provide assistance to the Lebanese army (LAF) in its struggle against Jihadism. Economic assistance from the international community, nearly USD 1 billion year since the crisis began (UNHCR/UNDP 2015), has also been crucial in enabling Lebanon to handle the refugee crisis.

At the regional level, neither the Assad regime, nor Iran, nor Russia can dedicate capacities to open another front – nor can Saudi Arabia, which is drained by the war in Yemen. Under new leadership, Riyadh announced early 2016 that it withdrew its pledged USD 4 billion support for the Lebanese army, and accused the latter of being under the influence of Iran and Hizbullah. Yet, destabilizing Lebanon could be costly for the Saudi monarchy.

*La Banque du Liban* (BDL), hardly affected by the 2007 international financial crisis, is considered a cornerstone of Lebanese stability. Its stabilization policy and large currency reserves, shielding against external shocks, have created market confidence and a liquid banking sector. Although Lebanon’s foreign debt is very high – around 149% of GDP (World Bank 2016a) – treasury bonds are held by Lebanese creditors, primarily commercial banks. Expatriate remittances constitute approximately 15% of GDP (World Bank 2016b). The many historical, social and economic bonds between Syria and Lebanon have helped Syrian refugees find shelter and livelihood through informal networks. Most refugees work in unskilled jobs in the informal economy. The Lebanese authorities have resisted calls from the rights organizations to grant work permits to Syrians, claiming that would undermine the Lebanese labour market and throw the country into further instability.

### **Potential military, political and economic tipping points**

Lebanese stability remains precarious, with many potential tipping points. Jihadi groups have until now considered Lebanon a back base, and not a place of combat. However, IS militants facing growing pressure in Syria and Iraq could decide to take the battle to Lebanon. In the case of such a scenario, Syrian Jihadi groups could activate sleeper cells among destitute Sunni youths in the north and in the Palestinian refugee camps where resentment against Hizbullah is high. A shift in IS strategy could change the equation of opportunity costs for Islamists who have grievances against the state and who identify more with the transnational Umma than with the multi-communal Lebanese polity.

Despite the improvements in the wake of implementation of the security plan, the scenario of army disintegration along sectarian lines cannot be dismissed. The military institution is seen as legitimate by the populace, but army unity is precarious. The institution consists of almost 40% Sunnis at the rank-and-file level, including many who have joined the army simply in order to make a living and who accuse the army commander of collusion with Hizbullah. Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's strong support to the army has been crucial to maintaining its unity – but that means that stability depends on Hariri's continued influence among Sunnis.

Lebanon's consociational system has experienced a considerable democratic decline. The deadlock in the representative institutions has given additional power to the main sectarian leaders, who negotiate informal arrangements amongst themselves instead of returning to constitutional politics. The crisis conjuncture and presidential void have made reforming the Lebanese system more difficult. The rubbish protests in 2015 and the losses sustained by the established political class at the May 2016 municipal elections are indications that the population is unsatisfied, especially in the Sunni north. Yet, so far, frustrations have been channelled against specific leaders, rather than the system as such.

Hizbullah's search for additional guarantees within the state contributes to further weakening the quality of the country's representative institutions. The group has been able to block presidential elections for more than two years. The aim of this has been to protect its involvement in Syria. It is still too early to speak about Hizbullah's role in Lebanon after the end of the Syrian war, as nothing indicates that the end will come soon.

While Israel may be relieved that the Shia group is strained in Syria, it also worries about the massive expansion and training of Hizbullah manpower and its weapons arsenal in Syria. The level of conflict between the group and Israel has remained high, as shown by last year's assassination of Hizbullah military commander Samir Kuntar in an Israeli drone strike on a suburb south of Damascus. There is a tipping point where Israel may wish to make a new attempt, after the failed one in 2006, to crush the Shia group. Another concern is the slackening of Hizbullah control over Shia areas, as that could mean a growing potential of dangerous escalations between Sunnis and Shia.

Although the phenomenon of 'refugee warriors' – combatants hiding among the refugee population – is very limited, tensions between Syrian and Lebanese communities have at times led to arbitrary attacks on refugees. Syrians have been blamed, often unjustly, for the heightened domestic instability in Lebanon. Lebanese Christians are anxious about the shift in the country's demographics, the majority of the refugees being Sunni Muslims. A tipping point would be the

creation of villager self-defence groups, hitherto prevented by the authorities. In the longer term, social entrepreneurs, primarily Salafi NGOs and shaykhs, could attempt to capitalize on frustrations.

Despite the numerous potential security-risk scenarios, economic risks represent a greater challenge. Lebanon's infrastructure and sanitary system are visibly deteriorating, and the labour market has reached saturation. While a small sector of the Lebanese population has profited from the crisis, large groups of people, mainly unskilled workers, have seen their incomes reduced dramatically (up to 30%). According to the World Bank (2016c), the number of Lebanese under the poverty line is now at least 1,200,000 (over 30%) and unemployment exceeds 20%: real numbers are much higher.

Few refugees have been resettled to third countries, partly because of incidents where Lebanese authorities have delayed issuing exit visas for refugees already selected for resettlement (Janmyr 2016). However, out-migration has become organized through a network of couriers and traffickers. Members of the Lebanese urban poor have also attempted to get to Europe through the same paths – and counterfeit Syrian passports are circulating on the black market. Since January, when Turkey began requiring visas for Syrians arriving from third countries, Syrians in Lebanon have been opting for other migration routes.

### Conclusions, outlook

For the moment, the opportunity costs of war are too high for all political actors in Lebanon. However, should the situation escalate as a result of unforeseen factors, the configuration of interests could change. Main triggers of war in the medium term could be an IS strategy of bringing the battle to Lebanon; or the violation of Hizbullah's self-determined limits, leading it to retaliate against domestic enemies. The hitherto contained political grievances of poor Sunni youth in northern Lebanon could be a potential tipping point. Nor can war with Israel be excluded, since Israel worries about

#### Key political actors

- The Future Movement, led by Saad Hariri (Sunni), son of slain former Prime Minister Rafiq. Confessional, but not Islamist, movement.
- Hizbullah, led by Hassan (Shia). Controls a sizeable parliamentary bloc and the country's largest military arsenal. Islamist movement.
- Free Patriotic Movement, led by General Michel Aoun (Christian). Ally of Hizbullah since 2006.
- Amal, led by Nahib Berry (Shia). Confessional, but not Islamist, party.
- Progressive Socialist Party, led by Walid Jumblatt (Druze).

#### Other political actors:

- Sunni Islamist groups (including Salafis and the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood)
- Palestinian groups
- Civil society groups

the Hizbullah military build-up. Moreover, tension between refugees and host communities could fuel intermittent violence in both the short and longer term. Lastly, the gradual erosion of the economy and the democratic system is slowly but surely changing the face of Lebanon.

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