

Lebanon poised at the brink

Tine Gade



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Abstract

Gravely affected by the Syrian crisis, Lebanon has remained relatively stable against all odds – despite the influx of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees and an internal political crisis involving supporters of 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. However, stability remains extremely precarious. Primary tipping points include (1) an IS strategy to spread the conflict to Lebanon, with consequent disintegration of the army along sectarian lines, (2) democratic decline and people’s dissatisfaction, (3) Hizbullah’s domestic ambitions and Israeli fears over the group’s growing military powers and (4) the potential that frustration between refugees and host communities may erupt into recurrent violence. The slow economic and sanitary decline in the country (5), however, is considered the biggest challenge.

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The case of Lebanon is arguably a counter-example to research on violent spill-overs in civil wars, which often emphasize the potential for conflict contagion (Black 2013, Young et al. 2014, Stefanova 1997). In the literature, large influxes of refugees, the fragility of the host state and high conflict intensity are found to correlate positively with cross-border spread of conflict. Yet, against all odds, Lebanon has remained remarkably stable – despite the massive pressure from the horrific war in next-door Syria, including the influx of some 1.5 million refugees. The Lebanese Republic 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 lack of border demarcation between Syria and Lebanon in mountainous areas. Many of the same religious and political cleavages are found in both countries, and conflicting Lebanese political-religious camps have hardliners pitted against each other on the ground in Syria. Lebanon, the ancient Land of Cedars, has come to function as a buffer to Europe, containing security threats as well as the humanitarian crisis.

Lebanon faces two parallel crises. Firstly, there is the situation of the 1.5 million Syrian refugees who live under extremely harsh social and legal conditions, and whose presence has strained the Lebanese economy.² This adds to the approximately 450,000 Palestinian refugees already in Lebanon, descendants of the 1948 refugees. Over half of them live in the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps spread around the country (UNRWA 2016a). At least three out of ten inhabitants in Lebanon is now a refugee, making it the country with the highest refugee/citizen ratio in the world. While this first and foremost amounts to an extremely grave humanitarian crisis affecting the refugees and vulnerable host communities, it is also a potential factor of political and military destabilization. A primary obstacle in crisis response has been that the country's opposing factions have dealt with the crisis as a function of their own views on the Syrian crisis, and not from a humanitarian perspective.

From an early stage, Lebanon's conflicting political-sectarian camps agreed on the principle of neutrality to the Syrian crisis (Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the UN 2012). However, since 2012, Hizbullah, the largest military force in Lebanon, has broken with this by its military involvement in Syria on the side of President al-Assad. The Syrian armed opposition, and the Jihadi groups al-Nusra Front and IS (also known as ISIL, ISIS or Daesh), have sympathisers among Sunni youth in the country, including some 1000 to 2000 believed to be fighting in Syria, primarily alongside the al-Nusra Front.³ Lebanon has been split

² UNHCR stopped registering refugees in May 2015; its official estimate is approximately 1 million. In addition, some 42,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria receive aid from UNRWA (UNRWA 2016b).

³ Interview, Radwan Sayyid, Beirut, August 2016. Other sources provide the figure of approx. 900 Lebanese Sunni fighters with IS and al-Nusra Front. The Economist

between the March 14 and March 8 alliances (named after two rival demonstrations against and for the al-Assad regime, respectively) ever since the assassination of former Prime Minister and billionaire Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. The March 8 Movement is dominated by Hizbullah and its allies, the Shia-based Amal movement and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by General Michel Aoun. The March 14 alliance includes Sunni politicians in the Future Movement (led by Saad Hariri, son of Rafiq) and the Christian Phalangist (Kataib) and Lebanese Forces parties.

The Syrian war has exacerbated the polarization of the population, with Shias generally supportive of al-Assad's regime and most Sunnis supporting the opposition, at least initially. Lebanon's Christians are divided between the 8 and 14 March alliances. The struggle between Hizbullah and Syrian Jihadi groups also takes place inside Lebanon's borders, primarily in Aarsal in the Beqaa Valley, 12 km from the Syrian border. With the exception of repeated security breaches, Lebanon has so far been able to defend itself against conflict contagion to central areas. However, stability remains extremely precarious.

Figure 1. Lebanon's demographic balance is precarious⁴



Source: <https://obiatlebanon2011.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/1164380558.gif> (accessed August 2016).

2014; Dodwell, Milton and Ressler 2016. According to the Lebanese Justice Ministry, the number is only 200. Interview, Ashraf Rifi, Justice Minister, Beirut, February 2015.

⁴ Since no official census has been held in Lebanon since 1932, all statistics are estimates, based on electoral registrations. Many Christians have emigrated, so the de facto number of Muslims is probably higher than these figures show.

Although the refugee issue has been treated abundantly, and rightly so, from a legal perspective (Aranki and Kalis 2014, Janmyr 2016, forthcoming), or focusing on refugees' coping strategies (Yassin et al. 2015, Yassin 2016), less attention has been accorded to the question of Lebanon's resilience vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis (see, however, Dionigi 2016, ICG 2015). Serious studies have offered in-depth analyses of various aspects of the Lebanese situation, such as the labour market (Longuenesse 2014/2015), Hizbullah (Cimino 2016), the Lebanese security sector (Moussa 2016, Seurat 2016), Jihadi groups (Rougier 2015, Gade 2014, Meier 2014), or the microcosmos in the Palestinian refugee camps (Sogge 2015, Abou Zaki 2014/2015). Some studies have also studied the transformation of Syrian citizenship in exile (Dot-Pouillard and Pesquet 2014/2015, Ruiz de Elvira 2017 forthcoming) and Syrian anti-regime networks in Lebanon (ICG 2013). However, more general assessments of the Lebanese state's resilience after 2011 have been few. A World Bank (2013) report assessing the economic costs of the Syrian crisis for Lebanon is perhaps the most serious study to date, but is based primarily on estimates.

The present study begins by examining the political, international and economic factors that led to resilience, before analysing potential military, political and economic tipping-points. It is based on interviews in Lebanon in 2015 and 2016 with political decision-makers from various sects, rights groups, UN staff, economists, religious leaders, university professors and journalists, cross-checked with the secondary literature and newspaper articles.

Explaining resilience #1: the high opportunity cost of war

Thus far, Lebanon has been helped by systemic, conjunctural and international factors to overcome the many challenges of the Syrian war, but stability remains extremely vulnerable. A prior experience of civil war does not suffice as 'vaccination' against new violence, as the DRC and South Sudanese experiences have shown (Bøås 2015). War often emerges as an unintended consequence of micro-actions. Private interests may press actors to maintain a hardliner position, increasing the chance of war (Deutsch 1968: 118–120). Actors on both sides of the Lebanese conflict are aware of this: deeming the situation to be extremely dangerous, they have been very cautious.⁵ The country's consociational democracy, with the power-sharing deal between religious groups, hinders the production of clear winners and losers and thus provides some protection against dictatorship (Picard 2002, Englebert 2007). Since power relations in Lebanon are diffuse in the extreme, frustrations are often directed against specific leaders, not the system as such (Mouawad 2015).

⁵ Interview, Samir Frangie, Lebanese politician close to the 14 March alliance, Beirut, February 2015.

The security situation in Lebanon deteriorated between 2011 and 2014. Then, in February 2014, with the end of former President Michel Sleiman's mandate drawing near, major political figures agreed on the formation of a government, led by Tammam Salam. A security plan was also implemented, and the army and security forces were deployed in volatile areas and given the political backing to intervene and make arrests. The plan, applied in the northern city of Tripoli to end a regional and sectarian proxy conflict, proved surprisingly successful.⁶ This was possible because the Future Movement, the largest Sunni movement, endorsed the plan, and gave full and explicit support to the Lebanese army in its struggle against Sunni Jihadism. Moreover, the army is seeking to neutralize Syrian Jihadi groups in the Aarsal mountains, assisted by strong Hezbollah contingents, and has thus been able to seal the border better.

So far, the opportunity cost of state breakdown has been very high for all primary political figures in Lebanon. Although some would lose more than others, none of them stand to gain from another civil war. Hezbollah, the country's largest military actor, is already hard-pressed in Syria, having lost around 3,000 men and needing to provide for more than 4,000 wounded.⁷ It has a total force of around 6,000–10,000 men in Syria,⁸ implicated to varying degrees, depending on the intensity of the battle. Thus, Hezbollah does not want to open another front in Lebanon. Having alienated large groups of the population because of its involvement in Syria, it now seeks to present itself as a guarantor of the Lebanese state, in order to rally non-Shia support and safeguard its alliance with the FPM. Also Lebanon's Sunni leaders want the 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 its military adventures after an embarrassing defeat against Hezbollah in West Beirut in May 2008 (ICG 2008) and has stayed clear of any attempts at organizing Syrian (primarily Sunni) refugees against Hezbollah, because of the devastating potential consequences.

The Sunni scene is more split than the Shia one, and Sunni Islamists rival the Future Movement for influence over the Sunni urban poor. However, faced with IS' extreme radicalism, many Sunni Islamist shaykhs are drawn towards a more moderate discourse, fearing IS support among the young.⁹ Also for Islamists, the opportunity costs of war have been too high, and few have been willing to risk their legal exist-

⁶ Interview, popular figure in Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, March 2016.

⁷ Interview, Radwan Sayyid, professor and political advisor, Future Movement, Beirut, August 2016.

⁸ Ziad Majed, 'Assad's Jihadist allies', paper presented at the University of Oslo on 24 September 2015. Interview, Lebanese journalist close to Hezbollah, Beirut, August 2016.

⁹ I am grateful to Sahar Atrache, senior analyst at ICG, for this information.

ence. Several well-connected figures mediate between Lebanese Jihadis and the law enforcement agencies (Zaatari 2016). There is massive frustration among many urban poor Sunnis, but little willingness to translate this into street fights. Even Jihadis who have returned from Syria have had little desire to open a battle inside Lebanon (Gade 2017, forthcoming). Mosque imams close to the al-Nusra Front in Tripoli condemned a suicide bombing that killed nine in an Alawi-majority area in the city in 2015,¹⁰ and almost no Islamist groups gave their support when a firebrand cleric, Ahmad al-Assir, fought against the Lebanese army in 2013 (Gade and Moussa 2017, forthcoming).¹¹

Explaining resilience #2: International and regional interests

Likewise, no regional or international actors want to see the Country of Cedars destabilized. International assistance has been essential to maintaining the survival of state institutions since 2011. The International Support Group for Lebanon, formed in September 2013, includes the UN and its relevant specialized agencies, as well as the EU, the Arab League and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The EU provides assistance to the Lebanese judicial system; and France, the UK and the USA support the Lebanese army (LAF) in its struggle against Jihadism and in demarcating the border with Syria, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) and Resolution 1559 (2004).

At the regional level, neither the Assad regime, nor Iran or Russia can dedicate capacities for opening another front; nor can Saudi Arabia, which is drained by the war in Yemen. Other Arab countries, such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq, have taken over Lebanon's previous (1975–1990) position as main arenas of regional proxy rivalry. The December 2015 prisoner swap of 16 kidnapped Lebanese soldiers and policemen held by the al-Nusra Front and 13 Islamist prisoners in Lebanese jails came about after Qatari mediation (Samaha 2015). This deal – in all likelihood accepted by the Western powers – helped to avoid escalation of the security situation.

The economic aid of the international community, slightly over USD 1 billion each year since the refugee crisis began in 2013 (Government of Lebanon and the United Nations 2015), has also been crucial in enabling Lebanon to deal with the crisis (UN News Centre 2016).¹² Since 2011, the European Commission has allocated €820 million (USD 927 million) to Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities in Lebanon (European Commission 2016). The London conference held on 4

¹⁰ I am grateful to Prof. Sari Hanafi, AUB, for this information.

¹¹ al-Assir fled, but was arrested in August 2015 at Beirut airport, trying to board a flight to Nigeria.

¹² Interviews, Tripoli, 2016.

February this year – co-hosted by the Germany, Kuwait and Norway, and coordinated with Lebanese institutions, the UN and the World Bank – resulted in pledges of more than USD 1 billion, including 550 million by the co-hosts. Further, promises were made to help strengthen the Lebanese economy, including agriculture, water and energy – sectors affected by the refugee crisis.¹³

Vulnerable host communities have increasingly been taken into account, as European countries believe that maintaining Lebanon's position as a buffer is in their own national interest. European donors, including Norway, also see the crisis as an opportunity to improve Lebanon's infrastructure and public services. In the course of the past year, the Lebanese government has achieved greater control of the crisis response, though technical support from the UN gives the latter possibilities for influence. The Beirut government would like to control more funding, to counter-balance its lack of resources and staff (see also Zetter and Ruaudel 2014: 10).¹⁴

Although international assistance to Lebanon has not covered all the needs, it has helped fuel national growth of around 1.6%, meaning that every dollar of international aid has in fact been worth 1.6 dollars, thanks to the associated economic growth (UNHCR/UNDP 2015). Aid agencies have a policy of using Lebanese products when they provide food and other aid packages. This helps account for some of the resilience of the Lebanese economy, in a situation where the costs otherwise outweigh the gains by far.¹⁵

¹³ In 2015, around 60% of the USD 1.87 billion USD needs noted in the Lebanon Crisis Relief Plan (LCRP) were funded. By May 2016, however, only 30% of the requested USD 2.48 billion had been provided.

¹⁴ Interview, Hala Helou, Ministry of Social Affairs, Beirut, August 2016.

¹⁵ The total economic costs for Lebanon of the Syrian crisis, which also account for the above-mentioned fall in GDP growth, increased unemployment and poverty, have been estimated at USD 2.6 between 2012 and 2014. The Daily Star 2016a.

Figure 2. Informal tented settlement



Source: <https://lebanon.savethechildren.net/what-we-do/humanitarian-response>

Explaining resilience # 3: Migration and Banking as pillars of survival

La Banque du Liban (BDL), untouched by the 2007 global financial crisis, is considered a cornerstone of Lebanese stability. The price of the Lebanese pound (lira) has been pegged to the US dollar since 1993 to secure financial sector confidence after the end of the civil war (1975–1990). The BDL’s policy has been to maintain very large currency reserves, in the form of net foreign assets (NFAs), as a shield against external shocks.¹⁶ It has improved access to finance, through effective regulations, central bank independence and competent staff, and subsidizes loans to various sectors to spark economic activity.

Foreign debt is very high, standing at some USD 75 billion, equivalent to approximately 149% of Lebanon's GDP (World Bank 2016). High ever since the government took up loans in the 1990s to finance reconstruction (Corm 2003), the debt has grown since the Syrian crisis because of rising government expenditures and the plunge in tax royalties. On the other hand, most of the debt is local, as most treasury bonds are held by Lebanese commercial banks. The banking sector is extremely liquid, primarily because Lebanese expatriates place their deposits in Lebanese banks at high interest rates. Between 2002 and 2015, the inflow of remittances from Lebanese working abroad constituted 13–24% of GDP, and it made up 15% in 2015 (World Bank 2016). Migration helps to alleviate unemployment and spark tourism, although it has also led to a brain drain to the Gulf countries (Kasparian 2008, Hourani 2007). Thanks to the diaspora, BDL’s currency reserves have continued to grow steadily during the Syrian crisis, although this growth is around half of what it was previously. The low oil price has

¹⁶ 64% of Lebanese bank deposits are in US dollars. Source: Banque du Liban, 2016.

given rise to concerns about reduced remittances, but these have remained very high.¹⁷ It is also believed that Syrian government officials, Syrian opposition groups and Jihadi financiers have deposited funds in Lebanese banks, benefiting from the secrecy laws.¹⁸ This is another reason why Syrian combatants have scant interest in seeing Lebanon collapse.

However, the secrecy policy of the Lebanon banking system has come under pressure, due to the sanctions implemented by the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), aimed at countering money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism acts. Such sanctions target Syrian businessmen close to the Assad regime, individuals suspected of ties to Jihadi groups and various individuals and companies suspected of links to Hizbullah. (See Haddad 2016; Nader 2016)

Explaining resilience # 4: Informal network resilience

Civic initiatives also help to explain why Lebanon has managed thus far (Mackreath 2014: 20). Members of the Syrian middle class have established small-scale NGOs that promote Syrian citizenship in exile, although legal obstacles force many to register in the name of Lebanese partners (Ruiz de Elvira 2017, forthcoming, Smallwood 2014: 22). Integration of refugees into the informal economy has also alleviated some of the economic burden.

The Syrian and Lebanese economies, always complementary, became increasingly so under the socialist policies of the Baath regime (1963–) and the Syrian military presence in Lebanon (1976–2005). The many historical, social and economic bonds between the two countries have helped Syrian refugees to find shelter and livelihoods through informal channels. Some had already been to Lebanon as workers before they had to flee Syria, though wealthier, urban Syrians have more networks than peasants. Many refugees also have relatives in Lebanon and rely on these, for instance to take up loans.¹⁹ Because of the history of Syrian tutelage, stereotypes about Syrians exist among the Lebanese, associating civilians with the corruption and repression of the Syrian military.

Only the agricultural, construction and cleaning sectors, occupied by Syrian migrant workers before 2011 (Chalcraft 2009), are formally open to Syrian labour. These jobs are often not desired by the Lebanese.²⁰ Refugees work in most sectors of the informal economy, for around half of normal Lebanese wages. Syrians with some capital open

¹⁷ Around 300 000 Lebanese graduates have been working in the Gulf.

¹⁸ Informal discussion, Joseph Bahout, Oslo, August 2016.

¹⁹ Interview, Nasser Yassin, Beirut, August 2016.

²⁰ Interview, Nasser Yassin, Beirut August 2016.

small businesses. The Lebanese authorities have ignored calls from the international community and rights organizations to issue work permits to Syrians, claiming that it would destroy the Lebanese labour market and throw the country into further instability.²¹ Conditions in the informal sector are exploitative, and some of the human costs may become evident only in the longer term. This brings us to the matter of the extreme precariousness of Lebanon's stability, and the potential tipping-points.

Tipping point #1: Jihadism and Sunni defections from the army

The main triggers of war in the short or medium term include an IS strategy to take the battle to Lebanon, or if Hizbullah lost something it considered essential and which could lead it to retaliate against its domestic enemies, or Israel. Tensions between refugees and host communities could also fuel intermittent violence in the short and longer term.

Jihadi groups have until now seen Lebanon as a back base, not a combat arena. Back in 2000, the Syrian-born Jihadi strategic thinker Abu Musab al-Suri (Mustafa Setmariam Nasar) advised against opening a front in Lebanon, where Sunni Muslims constitute only around a third of the population (see Figure 1, p. 5).²² Since the 1990s, however, Jihadis have used Lebanon to train foreign fighters (Rougier 2015). Since 2011, Syrian Jihadi groups have infiltrated Sunni areas in northern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley to access health services (allegedly funded by Gulf money).²³ After Hizbullah regained control of the Syrian–Lebanese border following the battle of Qussayr (spring 2013) and Qalamoun (late 2013), the area of Aarsal is the only place where Hizbullah has not sealed the border, and assistance to Syrian Jihadi groups still occurs.

In August 2014, clashes between the Lebanese army and Syrian-based Jihadi fighters led to the death of 20 soldiers and the acknowledged capture of 28 servicemen. In addition, Jihadi groups seeking to retaliate for Hizbullah's actions in Syria have claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in the Shia-majority southern suburbs of Beirut. In November 2015, 43 civilians died in a double suicide attack. In June, the Christian village of al-Qaa, north of Aarsal, was attacked by eight suicide bombers, killing five civilians. Lebanese security agencies believe that the attackers had planned to attack Shia areas in Baalbeck or

²¹ Interview, Sejaan Azzi, labour minister, Beirut, August 2016. Under donor pressure, the government has now abolished the practice of demanding a pledge not to work from Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR (Janmyr 2016, forthcoming).

²² al-Hakim, Umar Abd (Abu Musab al-Suri), *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* (in Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, December 2004), p. 784. See also Lia 2009.

²³ Opinion voiced by observers from several political sides. Interviews, Lebanon, August 2016.

Beirut, but blew themselves up after being exposed (Gade and Sogge 2016).

Facing growing pressure in Syria and Iraq, IS militants might decide to shift the battle to Lebanon. In that case, Syrian Jihadi groups could activate sleeper cells in northern Lebanon and in the Palestinian refugee camps (Rougier 2007, Sogge 2015, Gade 2014). In these areas, Jihadi groups, particularly the al-Nusra Front, have sympathisers among destitute Sunni youths who resent Hizbullah's influence over the country's security services. So far, Sunni Islamists and impoverished youth have not shown willingness to risk a war inside Lebanon. The return of Lebanese Jihadis from Syria has been limited, due to pressure from the security services and the death of some operatives in Syria. A change of IS strategy could, however, change the equation for Lebanese Sunni Islamists who have deep grievances against the state and who identify more with the transnational Islamic Umma than with the multi-communal Lebanese polity (Rougier 2007, Gade 2015b).

With implementation of the security plan, the scenario of disintegration of the army along sectarian lines appears more distant than before. Despite Sunni Islamist accusations against the army, the military is generally seen as a legitimate institution that unites the population (Moussa 2016, Knudsen and Gade 2017, forthcoming). Army unity is precarious, however, because it consists of almost 40% Sunnis at rank-and-file level. Many of these come from Akkar, having joined the army in order to gain a livelihood (Yassin and Solh 2017, forthcoming). Many are extremely critical towards the position of the army commander, who is accused of collusion with Hizbullah. New IS suicide bombings could be a tipping point, especially if they led to street fights between Shias and Sunnis – a dreaded scenario for Hizbullah.

The strong support of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri to the army has been crucial for maintaining army unity, partly because he exerts influence over Sunni officers. Yet, under a scenario of declining Hariri influence over the Sunni street in poor areas, Salafis might rally the population against the military and unleash a process of Sunni defections. Since 2008 and particularly since 2011, the Future Movement has granted many concessions to Hizbullah, to the point that it now struggles to maintain domestic popularity.

Figure 3. Female salafi protestors in Tripoli



Source: <http://www.ibraaz.org/embed/pictures/138/640x500/> (accessed September 2016).

Tipping point #2: Democratic decline and popular frustration

The Lebanese consociational system has since 2013 witnessed a considerable democratic decline. The deadlock in representative institutions has given additional power to the country's five primary sectarian leaders (Hariri, Nasrallah, Aoun, Berry and Jumblatt), who negotiate informal arrangements amongst themselves instead of solving the deadlock and returning to constitutional politics. Security has been used as an argument for delaying elections and as an excuse for poor governance (ICG 2015: 16). Citizen dissatisfaction was visible during the civil society campaign labelled 'You Stink' in 2015 (Geha 2017, forthcoming). Moreover, the municipal elections in May 2016 led to sizeable losses for the established political class in many regions, especially in the Sunni north.

There has long been a project to de-confessionalize the Lebanese Parliament and maintain minority guarantees through a Senate instead. That would mean abolishing sectarian quotas, except for the overall 50–50 representation of Muslims and Christians, and electing representatives according to a proportional system, with the entire country as one single electoral district. The crisis and the presidential void have rendered such reform difficult, and fears of Hizbullah's ascension in the Lebanese system are an additional obstacle.

Moreover, the system has become more decentralized since the beginning of the political deadlock in 2014. Basically, the municipal level is the only one functioning today: services continue to be delivered, sometimes in cooperation with international organizations. This in turn entails more power and *de facto* autonomy, gradually altering the situ-

ation of financial centralization that had persisted since the end of the civil war (Dewailly 2001). If this trend should continue, with state institutions remaining blocked, in the long run that could imply a move towards *de facto* federalism, reminiscent of developments in other countries in the region.

Tipping point #3: Hizbullah ambitions and the risks of regional war

Hizbullah's search for additional guarantees within the Lebanese state contributes to further weakening the quality of the country's representative institutions. The Shia group has influence in the Lebanese security sector (Moussa 2016) and enough clout over the institutional functioning of the country to block presidential elections for more than two years now. The aim has been to protect the Hizbullah involvement in Syria. Hizbullah's power is also guaranteed by the inaugural statement of the Lebanese governments, since 1992, declaring that the 'people, the army and the resistance' constitute an inseparable trinity.²⁴

It is too early to speak about its role in Lebanon after the Syrian war, as there are no indications that the war will end soon. While Israel may be relieved that the Shia group finds itself under strain in Syria, it also worries about the massive expansion of Hizbullah's manpower and weapon arsenal. Although Hizbullah has lost key military operatives in Syria, new ones have emerged. The number of Hizbullah fighters has mushroomed – from some 5,000 to 20,000 (Cimino 2016). Hizbullah claims that its resistance arsenal against Israel has not been touched,²⁵ although it is also in the interests of Hizbullah to maintain this perception. The Syrian war has served as a vast training ground for Hizbullah forces.

The Israeli deaths sustained in the 2006 war (12 IDF soldiers and 43 civilians) have so far deterred wishes to engage Hizbullah. However, the level of conflict between Hizbullah 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 Damascus suburb (Hadid and Barnard 2015). The Syrian Golan area is currently where tensions have materialized (see also Barnard 2016),²⁶ partly because Israel has supported the Syrian opposition by providing hospital care for anti-Assad fighters (Cohen 2015). In the longer term, Israel also worries that the Syrian war may serve to boost the power of Hizbullah's military wing, as opposed to its political and social wings. The next decade may see the rise of a new generation of battle-hardened fighters, perhaps

²⁴ Replaced in 2014 by a formula stressing the Lebanese people's right to resistance.

²⁵ Interview, Lebanese journalist close to Hizbullah, Beirut, August 2016.

²⁶ I am grateful to Nicolas Dot-Pouillard for this analysis.

more aggressive towards Israel.²⁷ There is a tipping point where Israel could opt for a new attempt to crush the Shia group. Although many Lebanese would be happy to see Hizbullah gone, this scenario, implying a major war in a very tense regional climate, would be catastrophic for Lebanon.

Another concern is the loosening of Hizbullah control over Shia areas, which could entail a growing potential of dangerous escalations between Sunnis and Shias – for instance, following a Jihadi attack on a Shia area. Hizbullah deaths in Syria, in a war against fellow Arabs, do not have the same value as the ‘martyrs’ who died defending Lebanon against Israel.²⁸ When Hizbullah combatants hear Muslim opposition fighters praying on the other side of the trenches, they may have mixed feelings about the Syrian war. Nevertheless, Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has maintained the overall support of the Shia street, adopting a confessional discourse and framing the Syrian war as an ‘existential battle’ against Sunni Jihadism (‘Takfirism’). This argument gained weight after the suicide bombings targeting Shia areas. Thus far, Hizbullah has made strong efforts to hinder retaliations against Sunnis in the aftermath of such suicide attacks, as that could prove extremely dangerous for Hizbullah.

Recently, however, small-scale violence has increased in the southern suburbs of Beirut – and, unlike in the past, Hizbullah has been unable to prevent its partisans from shooting in the air during Nasrallah’s speeches. This also implies that thugs might more readily clash with Lebanese Sunnis or Syrian refugees, against Nasrallah’s commands.

²⁷ However, this is not certain: Hizbullah has good structures for re-integrating combatants, and the command structure within the organization is unchanged.

²⁸ Hizbullah has a very strong tradition of celebrating martyrs, with dedicated institutions to care for their families (Saade 2016).

Figure 4. Funeral of Samir Kuntar, killed in Syria in December 2015



Source: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.693327> (accessed October 2016).

Tipping point#4: Recurrent violence between refugees and host communities

Socio-political tensions between Syrian and Lebanese communities have at times erupted in sporadic violence, directed primarily against the refugees. Although the phenomenon of ‘refugee warriors’ – combatants hiding among the refugee population – is limited,²⁹ the refugees have been blamed, often unjustly, for the heightened domestic instability in Lebanon. Arbitrary attacks against Syrians in many parts of the country have been documented on the social media (Horn and Janmyr 2016). There have been no instances of Lebanese groups setting fire to refugee camps, or anything on that scale, but Syrian truck drivers have been attacked by Lebanese mobs in the Shia-majority southern suburbs. A village near Beirut recently put up a banner forbidding entry to Syrians at all times, and warning that it would occur at Syrians’ own risk.³⁰

The fact that most of the Syrian refugees are Sunni Muslim and are poor has created anxieties in the shrinking Christian population, politically dispossessed ever since the end of the Lebanese civil war (Picard 1994). Even in Sunni-majority regions, relations between refugees and host population have gone from warm (Mackreath 2014: 20) to very tense, primarily because many Sunnis also see Syrians as competition on the labour market.³¹ Since 2014, local police have raided refugee

²⁹ Interview, Nasser Yassin, Beirut, August 2016.

³⁰ Observation, Lebanon, August 2016. The banner read: ‘Forbidden for Syrians. Under the penalty of your own responsibility’.

³¹ Interview, Shia cleric opposed to Hizbullah, Beirut, August 2016.

camps, claiming that Jihadi militants were hiding among the refugees, and municipalities have imposed curfews (Rollins 2016). Moreover, Lebanese intelligence services have cooperated with their Syrian counterparts against Syrians believed to be close to the opposition.³² A tipping point would be the creation of villagers' (mainly Christian and Shia) self-defence groups, hitherto prevented by the authorities.

There is potential for larger-scale violence in the medium and longer term, especially if social entrepreneurs should mobilize refugee frustrations into political grievances. So far, the only Lebanese political actors that have made attempts to gain political influence over larger masses of refugees are the Islamists.³³ The latter have capitalized on providing humanitarian aid, often with funding from the Gulf. They have profited from the void left by their non-Islamist counterparts (ICG 2013: 24), and some have established schools. Most active today are the moderate and highly professional Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated NGOs, in addition to Syrian NGOs close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. However, Salafi shaykhs also have influence, and the societal roles that such shaykhs have acquired by providing aid sometimes translate into arbitrary power over the poorest among the refugees.

The nightmare scenario of widespread arming of the refugees, as a result of mobilization by social entrepreneurs, is still very distant. Political scientists have shown that the most destitute of the poor, those who worry a lot about their very survival, are not the most prone to revolt (Davis 1962). Syrians themselves feel that they have no interests to serve by intervening in internal Lebanese conflicts (ICG 2013). However, in the longer term, the grievances of frustrated, outcast young Syrian males of military age could be fuelled by Islamist entrepreneurs (Davis, Taylor and Murphy 2014: 36). Syrian children deprived of schooling may also be more vulnerable to recruitment to armed groups (European Commission 2016a, Barnard 2015).

³² Interview, Khaled Daher, Tripoli, February 2015.

³³ Syrian anti-Assad groups do interact with March 14 movement figures such as Saad Hariri in order to obtain permit for holding demonstrations, register NGOs or put pressure on authorities to release activists from prison.

Figure 5. 'Syrians not welcome'
(See note 20)



Source: Facebook (downloaded on 18 August 2016).

Tipping point # 5: Slow, but constant, economic decline

Even in the face of numerous potential security risk scenarios, the economic risks for Lebanon still constitute the most difficult challenge. The infrastructure and sanitary system are visibly deteriorating, and the labour market has reached saturation. State institutions are slowly falling apart, increasingly incapable of providing services to the population.

With the rubbish-collection crisis last summer, state inability hit a peak. After its landfill in Beirut closed in July 2015, the government was unable to organize waste collection in the capital for nine months, until March 2016 (Geha 2017, forthcoming). Rubbish piled up in the streets, with grave sanitary consequences. The electricity sector has been in crisis ever since the 1990s; with the refugee crisis, shortages have multiplied. Moreover, population increases have drained the country's already limited natural resources, especially as regards water. After years of over-exploitation, neglect and waste-dumping, the pollution of lakes and waters has become a concern at the same time as

demand is increasing because of the refugees. The incidence of infectious diseases, such as measles, has grown (Horn and Janmyr 2016).

The Syrian war has brought three separate economic impacts on Lebanon: First, the geographical isolation of Lebanon has led to reduced exports, as access to primary export markets in the Gulf has been cut off (Zetter and Ruaudel 2014: 7).³⁴ This factor alone accounts for a decline of around 7–8% of Lebanon's GDP.³⁵ The absence of Gulf visitors to Lebanon, partly since 2011 and completely since 2014,³⁶ is the main cause for the crisis in the tourism sector (where revenues have fallen by 35%); in addition comes the decline in the high-end real estate market in Beirut.³⁷ On the other hand, Lebanon's overpopulation and subsidized housing loans help to alleviate the risk of a crash. Secondly, the presence of some 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon has led to increased total consumption and production. Thirdly, the injection of foreign aid, around one billion US dollars a year since 2013, has served to boost consumption, increase domestic prices and further tilt the balance of trade in favour of imports.

The relative stability in GDP, at 1.2% (from 8.5% in 2009) (*Lebanon Weekly Monitor* 2016), while the number of residents in Lebanon has increased by around one fourth, and the number of active residents may have increased around 15–20%, means that income per active resident has been reduced by as much as 20%.³⁸ A small stratum of the Lebanese population has profited from the crisis – including those who sell products and services to the UN, landlords renting out farmland or basements to refugees, construction contractors and large-scale agricultural producers, who have gained access to cheaper labour. However, for large categories of Lebanese unskilled workers, income has been dramatically reduced, perhaps as much as 30%. Moreover, the competition from smuggled agricultural products from Syria, sold all over Lebanon, has reduced Lebanese farm incomes (*The Daily Star* 2016b).

According to the World Bank (2016), the number of Lebanese under the poverty line (set at USD 3.1) is now at least 1,200,000 (or more

³⁴ Main destinations for Lebanon's exports before the crisis were Saudi Arabia (10.7% of total value), UAE (9.7%), Syria 8.7%) and Iraq (7.6%) (Blanc 2016).

³⁵ Interview, Charbel Nahas, economist, Beirut, August 2016.

³⁶ Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries issued in 2011 a travel warning against Lebanon.

³⁷ Supply in high-end real estate always exceeded demand because Former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri focused on this sector during the reconstruction of Beirut, rather than on modest housing. Moreover, prices increased during the 2008–2010 oil boom.

³⁸ According to calculations made by Charbel Nahas. Interview, Beirut, August 2016.

than 30%).³⁹ This is more than the estimation in the 2013 report, which predicted approximately 170,000 new poor citizens, over and above the 1 million living below the poverty line in 2011. Moreover, households have become more indebted, with a growing number of payment defaults.⁴⁰ Official unemployment figures have risen by 220,000–320,000, exceeding at least 20% (World Bank 2016), with the real numbers probably much higher.

A major challenge is that if the Syrians were to stay on, the labour force would be transformed in the long run. Syrians in Lebanon have less formal education than the overall Syrian population (for the pre-war level, see Dionigi 2016: 32); 33% of them are illiterate or never attended school.⁴¹ Currently, less than half of Syrian refugee children attend school and only 30% attend Lebanese state schools. Five years into the Syrian crisis, middle productivity per active resident has decreased by more than 10%, and economic activity increasingly centres on labour-intensive sectors, due to the access to cheap labour, reducing incentives for investments. Foreign direct investment (FDIs) has already been halved, and is now worth just over USD 2 billion (Horn and Janmyr 2016).

Migration to Europe

Given the extremely difficult situation for Syrians in Lebanon, it is not surprising that many wish to leave for Europe, although others prefer to stay close to their own country and family. However, the number of refugees resettled abroad is low, around 7,100 in 2015, and with a total of approx. 20,500 between 2011 and 2015 (UNHCR 2016a). Yet, in comparison to Turkey, which has received at least twice as many refugees as Lebanon, the proportion of resettled refugees is lower than in Lebanon: 2,730,000 officially registered Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2016b) but only around 35,000 resettled since 2011 (UNHCR 2016c).

Syrian activists claim there have been instances where the Lebanese authorities have delayed or refused to issue exit visas for refugees selected for resettlement (Janmyr 2016). However, European Ministries of Justice insist that the cooperation with Lebanon proceeds smoothly, and that the only categories of former Syrian residents who cannot readily obtain exit visas are Palestinian refugees from Syria and Syrian Christians.⁴² The former are not resettled because of Lebanon's opposition of principle to the resettlement of Palestinians. Moreover, the Lebanese authorities may be reluctant to respond to resettlement requests

³⁹ The World Bank operates with an upper (normal poverty) line of 3.1 US dollars a day and a lower (extreme poverty) line of 1.9. See also UNDP (2008).

⁴⁰ Interview, Sejaan Azzi, labour minister, Beirut, August 2016.

⁴¹ UNHCR statistics compiled by Nasser Yassin. Interview, Beirut, August 2016.

⁴² Informal discussion with a state official, European capital, August 2016.

by countries willing to take only Syrian Christians, not wanting the country's fragile demographic balance to tilt further in favour of Muslims.⁴³

Lebanon does, however, issue transit visas for Syrians wishing to go elsewhere. Commercial boats have opened a direct line between the port of Tripoli and Adana, Turkey. Migration has become organized through a network of couriers and traffickers. Also Lebanese urban poor have attempted to get into Europe by the same route – to the extent that counterfeit Syrian passports are circulating on the black market.⁴⁴ In January 2016, Turkey began requiring visas for Syrians arriving from third countries. This means that Syrians in Lebanon can no longer travel through Turkey, but must opt for other migration routes, especially to Egypt through Sudan, and from there, possibly to Europe.

Migration has historically been easier for Christians than for Muslims, partly because of their educational background and knowledge of foreign languages (Hourani 2007). Many middle-class professionals from Sunni families work in the Gulf countries, while Shia families have created strong support networks in many African countries. Unskilled workers, however, have fewer chances of securing good positions abroad, especially if they do not already have strong networks (as Shia families have in Africa, and Sunnis in Sydney, Australia, though to a lesser extent) (Humphrey 1998). This makes many Sunni urban poor less keen to migrate to Gulf countries (Kasparian 2008: 7), at a time when falling oil prices are also reducing opportunities and salaries, enforcing Lebanese unemployment at home.

Conclusions and outlook

With no president since 2014, the situation in Lebanon has been turning to the worse. Although actual breaches of security plans are limited, the state is gradually shrinking. At present, the opportunity costs of war are too high for Lebanon's political actors. That said, however, if the situation should escalate, the configuration of interests could change.

The most immediate risk scenarios are IS strategy in Lebanon and Hizbullah's ambitions. The hitherto contained political grievances of destitute Sunni youths in northern Lebanon may become a potential tipping point. Hizbullah is too occupied in Syria to wish to ignite the Lebanese scene, or provoke Israel, but it has a set of minimum demands for guarantees inside Lebanon ('red lines') which it wants to be respected. If the group's essential interests in Lebanon were threatened, it could respond by sparking an internal or external conflict. A

⁴³ Informal discussion with a state official, European capital, August 2016.

⁴⁴ Informal discussions, Tripoli and Beirut, March and August 2016.

war with Israel cannot be excluded, since the Hebrew state worries about Hizbullah's military build-up.

There is also the possibility that tensions between Syrian refugees and host communities could fuel intermittent violence, in the form of arbitrary attacks on refugees or, in the long run, militant Islamist mobilization of refugee frustrations. All the same, the greatest risk to Lebanon today is the economic and infrastructural decline, coupled with ever-increasing poverty and unemployment.

Future research should focus on the economic and financial impact of the crisis on Lebanon, and establish new, reliable statistics. There is also a need for research on transformations of Syrian identities in exile, and the work of the charity sector among refugees in Lebanon.

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Annexes:

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

Primary Lebanese political figures:

- The Future Movement, led by Saad Hariri (Sunni), son of slain former Prime Minister Rafiq. Confessional, but not Islamist, movement.
- Hezbollah, led by Hassan Nasrallah (Shia). Controls a large parliamentary bloc and the country's largest military arsenal. Islamist movement.
- Free Patriotic Movement, led by General Michel Aoun (Christian). Ally of Hezbollah 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

Lebanese history:

1920: Creation of Greater Lebanon

1946: Independence (*de jure*: 1943)

1967–1982: Palestinian *fedayyen* activism, Christian opposition

1975–1990: Civil war

1978–2000: Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon

1976–2005: Syrian military presence in Lebanon

2005–: Political crisis between the March 8 and March 14 alliances

2011–: Political crisis exacerbated by the Syrian conflict, refugees

Lebanon's economy: Some key fs

- 15%: Remittances from abroad, in % of GDP (2015)
- 1.2%: GDP growth (2016 estimate)
- 149%: National debt in % of GDP
- 30%: Poverty among Lebanese



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