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Lebanon: The Arab Spring's Wildcard?

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Following Lebanon's 2005 "Cedar Revolution," which culminated in Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, many commentators referred to the small Middle Eastern country to Syria's west as a model of successful democratization. The hope was that Lebanon's experience would be emulated by other countries in the region.

However, while the winds of change brought forth by the "Arab spring" have finally reached the rest of the Arab world, Lebanon seems to be struggling to keep both internal stability and the legacy of the 2005 revolution alive. This is particularly true today, as domestic political tensions are rising over the recent indictments issued by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) against alleged members of Hizbollah. The indictments only add fuel to the sectarian fire within Lebanon, while threatening to further distance the country from the international community and the West.

This uncertain political process began already in early June, with the announcement of the formation of a new executive Cabinet dominated by Hizbollah and its main political allies, the so-called March 8 camp. This development suggested that Lebanon's political path was diverging not only from its own Cedar Revolution, but also from the Arab spring.

On the one hand, the creation of a new Cabinet under PM Najib Mikati was a welcome change for Lebanon, filling the internal power vacuum created by the collapse of Saad Hariri's government in January 2011. However, the composition of the Cabinet, comprising 18 ministries from the so-called March 8 camp and 12 "independent" candidates – and no members of the so-called March 14 coalition – from the outset made it highly problematic.

First, the main concern behind the new Cabinet is that it brings the country back to the pre-Cedar Revolution era, strengthening the influence of Syria on Lebanese domestic politics. Bashar al-Asad's regime was heavily involved in the process that led to the formation of the Hizbollah-dominated executive, and Syria has been highly supportive of the new direction taken by Lebanese politics.

Given Syria's ongoing internal turmoil and the mounting international pressure against the Asad regime, the rise of a friendly pro-Syrian coalition in Lebanon provides Asad with a breath of fresh air. Internationally, Syria can now count on Lebanon's vote in the UN Security Council, where the country is a non-permanent member. What is more, Syria will likely choose to rely heavily on its increasingly strong influence within Lebanon to attempt to restore both its domestic and regional standing. The alliance is in this sense a blow to the Arab spring.

Second, while bringing Lebanon closer to Syria, the new government also threatens to undo some of the post-Cedar Revolution foreign policy trends, including its closer partnership with the United States. With Hizbollah as a dominant force within the new Cabinet and key Christian leader Michel Aoun publicly threatening to “splint the arm of US intelligence in Lebanon,” there are clear reasons to be concerned about the stability of US-Lebanese relations.

The main issue that will likely define the future of this partnership, along with Lebanon's relationship with the international community at large, is the way the new government deals with the recently issued STL indictments. On June 30, 2011, after months of speculations, the UN Special Tribunal finally made public the names of the first four individuals to be indicted in connection with their role in the political assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri. The four suspects are all alleged members of Hizbollah, and they include the brother-in-law of Imad Mughniyeh, Mustafa Badreddin.

Although Mikati had publicly vowed to stand by the country's international commitments, it is extremely unlikely that the new government will be in a position to cooperate fully with the Tribunal. In fact, Hizbollah, now a main political force within the government, has been adamant in denying any links to the murder, while accusing the Tribunal of being an American-Israeli puppet and stating that the organization will not consent to the arrest or trial of any of its members. This position is strongly at odds with Lebanon's international commitments, which in the short term require the country to serve the arrest warrants within 30 days and to arrest and detain the suspects so that they can stand trial.

Although Lebanese Interior Minister Marwan Charbel has stated that the procedures to carry out the arrests have begun, it is highly unlikely that the suspects will indeed be found and detained smoothly. Confirming this widespread uncertainty over the issue, PM Mikati – mindful of Hizbollah and its political allies' refusal to cooperate with the STL and their desire to end any collaboration with the UN body – stated vaguely that Lebanon will “act responsibly” with respect to the indictments, while stressing the need to “preserve stability.”

The predicament the PM faces is extremely sensitive: while full compliance with the Tribunal in defiance of Hizbollah's will is out of the question, as this would lead to the

collapse of the government; complete defiance risks alienating and angering the March 14's constituency, raising the potential for political paralysis and internal strife. Moreover, such a crisis would also impact on Lebanon's relations with the UN and the Tribunal's backers, including the US and EU.

This development is especially problematic because the new government already exacerbates Lebanon's existing sectarian divisions, while de facto marginalizing the political forces that had led the Cedar Revolution. The new Cabinet, formed without the participation of the pro-Western March 14 forces led by former PM Saad Hariri, leaves a large segment of the Lebanese population, and especially the Sunni community, unrepresented. As a result, there is already a rise in internal tensions among the different sectarian groups, thus increasing the potential for violence. This possibility is further confirmed by the recent reports regarding a foiled plot to assassinate Saad Hariri, an act that would have likely catapulted Lebanon back into chaos. In this context, Lebanon's potential refusal to continue its cooperation with the STL could have far-reaching domestic consequences.

From an Israeli perspective, it is too early to assess the ramifications of the current political change within Lebanon. The magnitude and impact of this process will be decided in the months to come, and will depend equally on the internal political process and what role the March 14 forces can play domestically, as well as how the Syrian crisis develops. Similarly, the unfolding of the STL trial will be a crucial factor in determining the future of Lebanon and its main political actors. Specifically, a strong and convincing case against Hizbollah has the potential to substantially weaken the credibility and popularity of the organization, a development that would be certainly welcomed by Israel. At the same time, if Hizbollah manages to dodge the bullet and force the country to end its cooperation with the STL, it will end up strengthened and it will de facto have destroyed its political opposition. In both cases, there is potential for renewed internal strife and instability, which should be seen as a potential security threat for Israel.

In the short term, the rise of a pro-Syria, Hizbollah-dominated government is also a worrisome trend, although it is unlikely that the new position of political power will lead Hizbollah to modify its long term strategy or seek a military escalation with Israel, as such decisions would likely depend on a set of different (and mostly extra-institutional) factors.