The Lebanese Political Arena, 2006-2016: A Turbulent Decade

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Lebanon is no stranger to conflict. Due to a unique mixture of weak political institutions, internal sectarian political divisions, and deep and often aggressive foreign intervention, the small Mediterranean country has time and time again oscillated between war and peace, stability and chaos.

The past decade (or more precisely, decade plus) has been especially complex. It began with the shocking and highly disruptive political assassination in February 2005 of twice-Prime Minister, industrial magnate, and all-around post-war political superstar Rafiq al-Hariri. In a sense, the country is still coping with the legacy of that single, devastating event, even though much has happened since, including a war with Israel in the summer of 2006 that brought direct devastation on Lebanon, and more recently, the destabilizing effect of the 6-year old civil conflict in Syria. Yet the roots of Lebanon's current political crisis can be traced back to that formative event.

The most obvious lasting repercussion is the country's political polarization. The period following the Hariri assassination ushered in the Independence Intifada (or Cedar Revolution), the broad civil and political cycle of protest that put an end to the Syrian military presence in Lebanon. With the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, the post-civil war years of Syrian "tutelage" finally ended, seemingly leaving the political forces behind the revolution free to pursue a new, post-Syrian domestic and foreign policy agenda. In reality, the same political coalition that had supported the Independence Intifada did attempt to stir Lebanon in this new direction;

but only to find that the Syrian legacy in the country went far deeper than its military presence. Similarly, the new "revolutionary" forces soon discovered that any effort to alter the country's political outlook significantly would encounter deep and entrenched resistance. In the end, rather than a radical reshuffling of the political game, Lebanon settled for an uneasy balance between pro- and anti-Damascus sentiments.[1]

In this context, the Cedar Revolution and its aftermath saw the rise of two largely antagonistic political blocs, the March 14 revolutionary forces and the March 8 resistance camp. For the past decade the former has been a favorite of the West, backed by Saudi Arabia and led by al-Hariri's son Saad, head of the Tayyar al-Mustaqbal (Future Movement), a political party that largely represents Lebanon's Sunni community. The resistance camp, on the other hand, is led by Hezbollah and supported by Iran and Syria, and (for the most part) speaks for the country's Shiites. With the Lebanese Maronite Christian community more or less evenly divided across the two political camps, March 14 and March 8 quickly became more than just an expression of sectarian politics: they reflected rooted and divergent political, sectarian, and geostrategic interests. Indeed, in the midst of the deep change Lebanon has experienced in the past decade, what has been constant is this profoundly ingrained domestic polarization. Over the past few years, the Syrian civil war has only worsened this dynamic by further entrenching the deep animosity, mutual distrust, and sheer parochialism of both political camps. Since the Independence Intifada, the inability of March 14 and March 8 to work together has led to a series of political crises and domestic strife, and ultimately, to deep political paralysis.

The country's inability to pick a successor to President Michel Suleiman after his official term expired in May 2014 spoke volumes.[2] Suleiman himself was only elected as a consensus candidate through the Qatar-brokered May 2008 Doha Agreement and following intense Saudi-Syrian behind the scenes mediation. That agreement ended a crippling eighteen months of political paralysis and prevented the sectarian-political gap between the March 8 and March 14 camps from escalating into a long term armed confrontation. This is turn demonstrates how the March 8-March 14 divide antedates the Syrian civil war.[3]

At the same time, there is no doubt that the Syrian conflict only exacerbated this trend, increasing the enmity between the camps as well as between their regional backers, and thus further lowering the chances of grand bargaining

and political compromise. As a result, for over two years, the Lebanese parliament attempted more than thirty times to elect a successor to Suleiman, but to no avail.[4] What is more, the political paralysis went well beyond the presidential succession; it prevented the country from attending to business in literally every realm, from garbage collection to gas exploration. The impasse also delayed important political and economic reforms, including the revision of the country's electoral system, putting the democratic system on virtual hold.[5]

The fact that this deep political rivalry has by and large not spiraled into an open armed confrontation between the different sectarian and political factions is perhaps the only silver lining in this story. The lack of intense armed strife is, however, more a testament to the country's collective determination to prevent another civil war than a reflection of internal reconciliation within Lebanese society, which remains highly divided.

Beyond the political polarization shaping the Lebanese political and social arena, much has indeed happened not only between March 14 and March 8, but also within each camp. For the March 14 forces, the post-2005 revolutionary momentum has largely dissipated. This can be seen in two separate but related trends: the rise in disagreements among political allies within the March 14 camp, and the political decline of Saad Hariri as a coalition leader and political representative of Lebanon's Sunni community. Overall, the March 14 political alliance weakened in the years following the Independence Intifada, with its performance marred by a combination of internal quarrels and at times shaky leadership. More recently, strife between political partners resurfaced in connection to the troubled presidential elections. March 14 had jointly backed the nomination of Dr. Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, to succeed Suleiman, against the March 8 candidacy of Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun.[6] Yet by early 2016, the March 14 vote split de facto following Saad Hariri's somewhat surprising nomination of Damascus-friendly Sleiman Frangieh as a "consensus candidate" to end the presidential rift. Ironically, Hariri's move did not lead to filling the presidential vacuum, but it did manage to facilitate the dialogue between mortal enemies Geagea and Aoun.[7] The two rival Christian leaders agreed that they hated the idea of being politically sidelined by Hariri even more than they disliked each other, and struck an agreement, with Geagea withdrawing his candidacy and backing Aoun's presidential aspirations.

The disagreement has not just punctured the March 14 coalition further, but has also revealed the declining influence of Saad Hariri over his own political allies, a trend reflected by the rise of criticism within his own community. In the past decade, and especially since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Saad Hariri's leadership has been questioned within both March 14 and the Lebanese Sunni community, which inter alia has criticized his inability to stand up to Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad.[8] The fact that the political leader has spent a good part of the past decade in self-imposed exile outside of Lebanon has not enhanced his domestic popularity and legitimacy. More recently, it seems that even the historic foreign backer of the Hariri family, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is losing its patience with its traditional protégé.

Increasingly frustrated by its regional losses to Iran, notably in Syria and Yemen, Saudi Arabia has tried to exert its influence in Lebanon, forcing the Lebanese government to pick between Tehran and Riyadh. In early 2016, this led the Kingdom to officially halt both a $3 billion military aid package to the Lebanese Armed Forces as well as a separate $1 billion earmarked for the Lebanese security sector at large, a measure taken in tandem with the advice to Saudi citizens to refrain from traveling to Lebanon (a policy also implemented by Bahrain and the UAE). In addition, Saudi Arabia invested in putting pressure on Iran's strongest ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah, leading to both a Gulf Cooperation Council and an Arab League designation of the group as a terrorist organization. Ironically, the greatest casualty of this policy is likely not to be Hezbollah, but rather Saudi Arabia's Lebanese allies. The recent Saudi moves cast Hariri and his party as especially weak and isolated, unable to help the Kingdom meet its objective of weakening Hezbollah domestically.[9]

When the growing disagreements within the March 14 camp, the leadership crisis, and the weakening regional backing are all taken into account, it is hard to avoid the sense that the post-2005 revolutionary momentum has largely dissolved and, along with it, much of the political leverage of the March 14 camp.

In tandem, the March 8 camp soldiers on, and overall, the Hezbollah-led coalition seems to be less shaky than its March 14 counterpart. This is particularly the case following the Russian intervention in Syria and the temporary consolidation of the Bashar al-Assad regime. At the same time, much has changed within the resistance camp in the past decade. Most

notably, Hezbollah has undergone a rapid and deep set of strategic changes in the post-2006 years. At the political level, the group has had to balance its identity as the national resistance with its growing role and involvement in the Syrian civil war, where the Lebanese party gradually became a crucial force multiplier for the Assad regime as well as a key element of its combat strategy.

Within Lebanon, this active involvement sparked vitriolic attacks against the Lebanese Shiite organization by the March 14 parties, led by Tayyar al-Mustaqbal, and worsened the March 8 standing at the national and regional level.[10] To respond to the criticism that Hezbollah can no longer claim to be a national Lebanese resistance movement, and should instead be considered a sectarian militia and an Iranian proxy, the Lebanese party has been investing in a political campaign to defend itself and its record. For example, the group has stressed its role as a political and military movement engaged on two fronts; fighting against the Israeli enemy as well as protecting Lebanon against the rising takfiri threat.[11] Naturally, this argument has not been accepted by Hezbollah's political foes.

Furthermore, Hezbollah's Syrian campaigns made it vulnerable to attacks from Salafi jihadist organizations directly or indirectly affiliated with jihadist groups in Syria.[12] Yet it would be incorrect to assume that criticism at the national level and the series of high profile attacks against Hezbollah by Salafi jihadist groups has radically altered Hezbollah's historically solid relationship with the Lebanese Shiite community at large. Indeed, if anything, the rise of Salafi jihadist groups in Lebanon, along with the cross border activities of both the Islamic State and al-Nusra, have made the security pact between Hezbollah and the broader Shiite community even more relevant. This is not to say that the prolonged involvement in the Syrian civil war has not brought any criticism within the larger Lebanese Shiite community. There have been voices doubting Hezbollah's rationale for being in Syria, protesting the high casualty toll , questioning the relatively subdued approach by Hezbollah to its Syrian martyrs, and pointing to evidence of malpractice and corruption within the group. Yet for the time being these are not mainstream voices, and the Shiite community largely continues to back Hezbollah as well as its Syrian involvement.

Beyond polarization and political reshuffling, the Syrian civil war is shaping Lebanon's future in far deeper ways**.** Lebanon's political, economic, and social prospects have already been indirectly shaped by the Syrian war.

With over one million refugees from Syria, the consequences of the war are tangible at every level: from the impact on the already overstretched public infrastructure, to the social and economic challenges related to the short term assistance and long term integration of the refugee population. In a country where the political system is shaped by sectarian dynamics, the challenge of long term citizenship rights and integration of the refugee population is an especially thorny and complex subject – as the history of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon painfully demonstrates. In the long term, however, the outcome of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is far from predetermined: if the country capitalizes on foreign aid and invests in political and economic integration, the refugee population can be a resource for the country.

Thus**,** the last decade has been highly eventful within the Lebanese political arena, amid growing domestic polarization, internal paralysis, and heavy external involvement. Looking ahead, Lebanon's political future will continue to be tied to both the outcome of the Syrian civil war and of the broader geopolitical regional balance of power, stressing how the small country is itself a mirror and a reflection of the broader Middle East.

Notes

1 See Benedetta Berti, *The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: The Role of Foreign Powers in Lebanon between Old Dynamics and New Trends*, Memorandum No. 111 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2011).

2 "Sleiman's Departure Stirs Reactions on Social Media," *Daily Star,* May 24, 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/May-24/257699-sleimans-departure-stirs-reactions-on-social-media.ashx#axzz32izpc3je.

3 Berti, *The Ongoing Battle for Beirut*.

4 Hamza Takin, "For 36th time, Lebanon Fails to Choose New President," *Andolu Post,* March 2, 2016, http://aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/for-36th-time-lebanon-fails-to-choose-new-president/530561.

5 Oliver Holmes, "Lebanese Parliament Extends Own Term till 2017 Amid Protests," *Reuters,* November 5, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-parliament-idUSKBN0IP18T20141105.

6 Benedetta Berti, "The Challenge of Electing a New Lebanese President," *Muftah*, June 9, 2014, http://muftah.org/challenge-electing-new-lebanese-president/#.VwJis-J96Un.

7 Ramez Dagher, "Lebanon's Divisive Presidency," *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*,* February 2, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=62658.

8 Benedetta Berti, "Saudi Brinkmanship in Lebanon," *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=63111.

9 Mayssam Rizk, "Saudi Sanctions on Hariri," *al-Akhbar Lebanon*, March 8, 2016, http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/253765 (Arabic).
10 "March 14: Hizbullah Fighting in Syria Risks Eruption of Sunni-Shiite Strife," *Naharnet*, April 17, 2013, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/79815.
11 "Nasrallah Speech: I Vow Victory Again," *al-Ahed,* May 25, 2013, http://goo.gl/dY60JQ (Arabic).
12 See Nour Samaha, "Twin Suicide Bomb Attacks Rock Lebanon," *al-Jazeera*, January 11, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/01/twin-suicide-bomb-attacks-rock-lebanon-2015111113944330224.html.