



INSS Insight No. 708, June 11, 2015

Lebanon's Growing Fragility

Benedetta Berti

Michel Suleiman, Lebanon's last President, left the presidential residence at Baabda Palace over a year ago, on May 24, 2014. Since then the Lebanese parliament has attempted more than twenty times to elect a successor to Suleiman, but so far to no avail. Initially, the parliament proved unable to meet the required two-thirds majority needed to select a candidate from within the Christian community. In the subsequent voting sessions, the required quorum of two-thirds of deputies present to validate the elections was not met. But beyond Lebanon's inability to fill this key political post, the presidential vacuum is the symptom of a broader political impasse that has prevented the two main political coalitions, March 8 and March 14, both driven by parochial interests and ingrained mutual distrust, to agree on common ground, including a mutually acceptable nominee.

Deep internal polarization is not new to Lebanon. Michel Suleiman himself was elected as a consensus candidate through the Qatar-brokered May 2008 Doha Agreement, which – also through Saudi-Syrian behind the scenes mediation – ended eighteen months of political paralysis and temporarily bridged the sectarian-political gap between the March 8 and March 14 camps. More recently, following his appointment in March 2013, it took current Prime Minister Tammam Salam almost a year to devise a formula for the national unity cabinet that all main political actors would accept.

The ongoing crisis of Lebanon's political institutions has kept the country from passing important political and economic reforms, including the revision of the country's electoral system, while leading the members of the parliament to extend their mandate and postpone – for the second time since their election in June 2009 – new parliamentary elections at least until 2017. And in the background of this vicious cycle of internal polarization and state weaknesses is the Syrian civil war, which since its eruption in 2011 has further exacerbated the March 8-March 14 rift, a dynamic also fueled by Hizbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil conflict.

In the past few weeks, as Lebanon passed the one-year mark without a President, domestic tensions have taken yet again a turn for the worse.

The Battle for Arsal: A Growing Security and Political Crisis

With the evolution of the bloody civil war in Syria, Hizbollah was drawn deeply into the conflict, eventually becoming a crucial force multiplier for the Assad regime as well as a key element of its war-fighting strategy. Within Lebanon, this active involvement sparked vitriolic attacks against the Lebanese Shiite organization by the March 14 parties, led by Saad Hariri's *Tayyar al-Mustaqbal* (Future Movement). Hizbollah's Syrian campaigns also made it vulnerable to attacks from the Salafi jihadist organizations directly or indirectly affiliated with jihadist groups in Syria.

Indeed, the takfiri threat has preoccupied Hizbollah over the past year, with the group invested in boosting its own internal and community security, increasing cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces, and lobbying at the political level to address the rise of Salafi jihadist forces in Lebanon as a top national security problem. The debate over the impact of jihadist elements in Lebanon became especially salient following the August 2014 dramatic cross-border attack of the Lebanese border town of Arsal by al-Nusra and ISIS fighters, in response to the arrest by the Lebanese Armed Forces of a recently-turned pro-ISIS rebel commander. In the Arsal incident, the jihadists directly attacked the Lebanese Army and police forces, kidnapping over 30 members of the Lebanese security sector – 25 of whom remain in captivity to this day.

Following this high profile clash, the Lebanese Army, in tacit coordination with Hizbollah, stepped up its presence on the ground, with the goal of restoring control in the area. Over the course of the past year a number of open clashes have taken place between ISIS or al-Nusra affiliates and sympathizers on the one hand, and (separately) the Lebanese military and Hizbollah on the other. Despite the increased focus on tackling the takfiri challenge, however, the mountainous areas along the Syrian-Lebanese border have continued to harbor extremist militants, with the porous and barren lands surrounding Arsal becoming an operational base for roughly 3000-4000 jihadists, mostly belonging to ISIS and al-Nusra.

The issue of tackling takfiri groups became increasingly problematic and divisive in the past few weeks, following Hizbollah's extensive offensive operation – conducted in coordination with the Syrian army – to destroy the last remnants of anti-regime opposition in the strategic Qalamoun region, with a focus on the mountainous border area between Lebanon and Syria. The operations have been described within Hizbollah as both extremely successful and essential not only for the group and its supporters, but also to “protect Lebanon” from the takfiris. But as the battle on the Syrian side of the border subsided, Hizbollah focused increasingly on the barren lands surrounding Arsal, shifting the battlefield to Lebanon.

Hizbollah's strategic understanding of its operations against the takfiri threat and their relevance to Lebanon was explained in detail by Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan

Nasrallah during a series of public speeches delivered in May 2015. Nasrallah stressed that ending the presence of takfiri elements in the border region was first and foremost a Lebanese interest. He further declared this objective to be both vital for the group as well as a “right” for the “Lebanese people,” openly asserting that even if the government were to show willingness to tolerate the takfiri occupation of parts of Lebanon (a reference to Arsal and its vicinities), the “Lebanese people” would still take action to end this situation.

These declarations only added fuel to the ongoing sectarian tensions. Prominent March 14 politicians harshly criticized these statements, accusing the Lebanese Shiite group of both wanting to disregard the Lebanese government by threatening to take matters into its own hands and pressuring the army to engage in a dangerous battle against ISIS and al-Nusra supporters on the Syrian-Lebanese border. Hizbollah's assertive stance on Arsal joined the long list of disputes between March 8 and March 14, further diminishing the prospects of successful dialogue between Hizbollah and the Future Movement.

The situation became even more flammable following ISIS's surprise attack against Hizbollah posts on June 9, 2015 around the town of Ras Baalbek just north of Arsal – which extended and escalated the battle “for Arsal” and to control the Syrian-Lebanese border. Hizbollah's extensive military operations to wage the battle against ISIS and al-Nusra (with the two groups also fighting each other) in the predominantly Sunni Arsal area could further raise the domestic tensions. This is especially the case as the Arsal district hosts 40,000 officially registered Syrian refugees (having the largest concentration of the entire Bekaa governorate).

For its part, the Lebanese Army has increasingly targeted jihadist operations in the past weeks, while also declaring to be ready to confront the takfiri threat comprehensively. In any event, Hizbollah's statements have sparked a heated national debate over the army's next steps, further increasing the tensions in the March 8 and March 14 coalition while threatening the Cabinet's stability, along with that of the fragile Lebanese political institutions.

Political fragility and domestic polarization are a toxic combination, especially in a country that needs to face the pervasive impact of the Syrian civil war, including an ongoing security crisis, as well as the economic, social, and political impact of absorbing the 1.2-1.5 million Syrians who are currently in the country. More fundamentally, the one year presidential vacuum and the ongoing political paralysis seem to call into question the entire political architecture based on sectarian power-sharing established in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. As a number of analysts seek to investigate what a post-Assad Syria would look like, perhaps it is also worthwhile reflecting upon the viability of a post-Taif Lebanon.