

Lebanon 2005

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2005 was a year of great change in Lebanon with events triggered by the assassination of former Prime Minister (PM) Rafic Hariri and popular protests leading to the withdrawal of Syrian troops after what became known as the 'Cedar Revolution'. The country is left with several unresolved problems, but also with great hopes for a fresh start.

The regional and international context is that developments in Lebanon in 2005 are part of the fallout from the US invasion of Iraq and the transformations in the strategic environment that accompanied it. Thus Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, which was established with international blessing largely as a recompense for Syria having joined the first Gulf War coalition against Iraq in 1990, is being dismantled as a consequence of the second invasion of Iraq in 2003. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1559, sponsored by France and the US, is seen as a resumption of protection by the two main powers who burnt their fingers in Lebanon in the early 80s and withdrew from Beirut together with the rest of the existing Multi-National Force. What they left behind then are all the problems that they are trying to resolve now. In 1990 the international community was happy to have Syria restore stability in Lebanon and put a lid on all the problems and, now that the lid is off, it is many of these that have resurfaced and which it is trying to address.

Crisis in Lebanese-Syrian Relations

The greatest challenge is how to re-establish Lebanese-Syrian relations and on what basis. The main reason for this tension is that the revolt in Lebanon was against a joint Syrian-Lebanese system dominated by the security establishments in both countries. This revolt in Lebanon poses a threat to the same establishment in Syria itself. At the same time Syria holds the key to many of the problems that were left behind after its withdrawal from Lebanon.

Syrian troops entered Lebanon in June 1976 and left it in April 2005. The two countries had established 'special relations' after the end of the civil war and signed several agreements. Most importantly, in the last fifteen years, Syria has had almost total control of Lebanese security institutions, and together they built a security services-dominated state. This order of things brought stability in Lebanon to the extent that 2004 had been a good year by all measures. But stability came at a great cost: a compromise on certain freedoms and a measure of repression, as well as a heavy economic cost brought about by corruption that left the country heavily in debt. The system broke down when the Syrian regime felt that it was under increasing pressure from the US, and the Lebanese saw this as an opportunity to decrease Syrian influence in the country. The straw that broke the camel's back was Syria's insistence on amending the Lebanese constitution and extending the mandate of President Emile Lahoud in the summer of 2004, which triggered the crisis about international interven-

tion that the Syrian regime saw as being encouraged by former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

The assassination of Rafic Hariri, in February, brought people out into the streets, and the various demonstrations both pro – and anti – Syrian in March of 2005 involved close to half the population of Lebanon. The two societies are too close to each other, and developments in one are bound to influence the other. In Lebanon the shock produced an absence of fear, and if this caused the same effect in Syria, the regime of the Baath party rule would also be under threat. The example of Iraq means that it is feared that a regime collapse in Syria, whether triggered by internal or external forces, would result in Iraqi-style chaos, with civil war and religious extremists coming to power.

International support came in the form of several UN Security Council resolutions. UNSC resolution 1595 on April 7th established a United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) on the murder of former PM Rafic Hariri headed by the German prosecutor Detlev Melhis. The commission presented its reports on the 19th of October and on the 10th of December. These were followed by UNSC resolutions 1636 on 31 October and 1644 on 15 December. Resolutions were passed unanimously and were strongly in support of Lebanon, but were watered down because of indecision and disagreement between the main powers on how far the international community can go in dealing with Syria. The dilemma is influenced by the example of chaos in Iraq. Amongst the regional powers, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, there is

also great reluctance to provoke further instability by weakening the Syrian regime to the point of no return, and they are eager to mediate in order to end the crisis. Thus one of the main concerns in Lebanon is about the sustainability of international support, given all the other problems in the region, and this is again linked to the Iraq situation and talk of an exit strategy for the coalition forces from that country.

There are various mechanisms to mend the relations between the two countries in the long run. But until the matter of the stalemate in the investigation is resolved, it is unlikely that any measures would be effective. Serge Brammertz has been appointed to head the investigation after Mehlis's departure. In the meantime Lebanon is likely to suffer both politically and economically until this situation is resolved.

There have been several border closures and restrictions on Lebanese merchandise transiting through Syria to such destinations as Iraq and other Arab Gulf countries, resulting in loss of trade. Lebanon also benefits from Syrian labour and informal trade activity over the borders. The security situation in Lebanon has deteriorated with further assassinations and explosions. Most importantly, bad relations with Syria are likely to exacerbate internal divisions within Lebanon, paralysing the political process and causing further difficulties in implementing policies. Syria still holds the key to the major unresolved issues, both internally and in UNSC resolution 1559.

Security Concerns

Disengagement from Syria meant the dismantling of the complex web of the Lebanese-Syrian security apparatus that pretty much dominated most aspects of political and economic life in Lebanon. This left the country exposed and the security situation deteriorated. A series of explosions and assassinations at regular intervals targeted at areas and people seen as opposed to Syria in Lebanon. In addition to former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the Minister of the Economy Basil Fuleihan, two prominent journalists Samir

Kassir and Gibran Tuani and the former leader of the communist party George Hawi were assassinated with car bombs; there were two other unsuccessful attempts, one of a TV presenter May Chidiac, and the other on Minister of Defence Elias el Murr. Altogether 15 explosions in Beirut and its suburbs aimed at spreading terror and creating instability. This was accompanied by rumours of a hit list including many of the political leaders and media personalities at the forefront of opposition to Syria, some of whom had taken refuge abroad.

Instability over the border with Israel, with exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah, continued at regular intervals throughout the year. This is linked to the discussions over the disarmament of Hezbollah and the issue of the Israeli occupation of a border area called the Shebaa farms. The Israelis claim that they took this land from Syria in 1967 and thus consider it as Syrian territory. Syria has issued ambiguous statements that do not resolve the ownership of the area and the Lebanese government is calling for a demarcation of the Lebanese-Syrian border largely in order to resolve this issue.

Another security concern is the armed presence in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The camps are semi-autonomous areas with Lebanese state authority absent. A struggle between the mainstream Fatah organisation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and several radical organisations, ten of which have been organised under Syrian tutelage as a front opposed to the PLO's Oslo accord with Israel. It is mainly these organisations that are supposed to be disarmed according to UNSC resolution 1559. There has been many threats and declarations issued by such organisations. The Lebanese government of PM Fouad Siniora has opened a dialogue with them and with representatives of the PLO, and the situation so far seems to be under control.

Adjusting the Political Process

The political upheaval in the country was the equivalent of a peaceful in-

ternal coup, with the dismantling of one order and replacing it with another, but the process is not without problems and is not complete. The country has seen massive popular demonstrations, three governments, one general election, the return of exiled politicians General Michel Aoun, and the release of former prisoners like Christian militia leader Samir Geagea. There is also a crisis with the presidency of pro-Syrian General Emile Lahoud, whose mandate extension last year provoked the present crisis. Hezbollah and Amal, the two main Shiite parties, remain loyal to Syria, and the process of avoiding a direct clash with them by other parties threatens to create paralysis in the government and institutions. The disarmament of Hezbollah remains one of the thorniest items to be implemented in UNSC resolution 1559.

After the assassination of former PM Hariri on February 14th, the government of PM Omar Karami resigned due to public pressure on February 28, this was replaced by the government of PM Najib Miqati, which was an interim government whose main task was to run the elections. This was then followed by the government of PM Fouad Siniora, a close aid of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Parliament is now composed roughly of three blocks: one is the coalition around Saad Hariri, composed of Christian, Druze and Sunni MPs; this has control of over 70 seats out of 128. The rest is divided between the two Shia parties, Amal and Hezbollah, and the bloc of General Aoun. The government contains for the first time official Hezbollah representation but excludes the bloc of General Aoun. The decision making process is thus weak, because it has to compromise between different factions represented in the government. A serious crisis has been averted over the decision to call for the formation of an international tribunal. This resulted in the Shiite ministers walking out of the cabinet meeting, which sparked a debate on whether to take decisions by consensus (which may spell paralysis), or by majority rule (which may spell crisis). In short, the choice is between confrontation and paralysis, and the Lebanese chose paralysis.

On the positive side, there is a huge impetus for reform driven by civil society and popular demand and followed by the politicians with them. On the negative side, the country is still divided over the issue of relations with Syria, and until this is resolved the paralysis it creates is likely to hamper any advance on in the reform agenda. There are preparations for a conference of support to the Lebanese economy, ca-

lled 'Beirut I', following the Paris II meeting of November 2002 convened by president Chirac. The success of this conference rests on the government's ability to present and implement policies of economic and social reform that will convince donors that supporting the Lebanese economy will put its debt servicing on a sustainable path. Lebanon entered into negotiations with the EU over an Action Plan within the

European Neighbourhood policy. The Association Agreement under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership will also enter into force in early 2006. Lebanon regards such agreements and strengthening of relations as a form of additional protection, a concept heavily ingrained in the foreign policy doctrine that governs the external relations of the country, and will determine whether it sinks or floats.