

Viewpoints
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Lebanon's Existential Threats

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Once again Lebanon is facing crises that are driving it toward communal strife. The Syrian crisis and Hizbullah's involvement in it on the side of the Bashar al-Assad regime is dividing the country, stoking sectarian feelings, and forcing a political vacuum in the government. The flood of hundreds of thousands of refugees is adding to the explosive mix. Few Lebanese are trying to find a way out. Their success will depend on how the Syrian crisis turns out.

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On a recent trip to Lebanon, it was disheartening to see the country on the brink. A Lebanese businessman likened Lebanon to a field of dry grass that someone had doused with gasoline. “All it needs is a match before it explodes,” he told me. Watching the violence move from the north to Beqaa to Sidon raises fears that the country might plunge again into a civil war that would make the 1975 war seem like a walk in the park.

But the recent violence in Sidon is particularly ominous. The spark for civil war was ignited in Sidon in the 1970s. The tension between the Salafist leader Ahmad Assir and Hizbullah and its supporters in the city has been brewing for a while. But the latest round came in the aftermath of his ultimatum for Hizbullah to close its offices in Sidon. The unprecedented level of violence and the high number of casualties among the Lebanese army is not good news for the whole country.

For those Lebanese who still remember the civil war, it is a nightmare, but the gathering storm in the country has all the ingredients necessary for an explosive mix. It is common today in Beirut for a conversation to start with questions on whether one still has his or her foreign passport. The Lebanese have a strong sense of an impending crisis. They know when to start packing – at least those who can leave – and these days, many are doing just that and waiting for a good reason to go.

The country is living three “existential” threats to its national security. Each one of these threats alone is enough to send the Lebanese scurrying for cover within their neighborhoods and sects or in the safety of a foreign passport.

The first of the crises was brought upon the country by the intervention of Hizbullah in Syria and fighting alongside the regime forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Although the party’s intervention in Syria has been going on for nearly two years, the leading role it played in recapturing al-Qusayr in the Homs province close to the Lebanese border became a watershed for Hizbullah and for the Syrian opposition defending against it.

The Lebanese have always complained of “others’ wars in our country.” This time, it was a Lebanese party that crossed into a neighboring country to fight a war against its people in support of its embattled regime. This new role for Hizbullah has stoked sectarian feelings in Lebanon, incited violence by Syrians against Lebanese towns and villages in the north-east corridor of the country, and deepened Lebanese political divisions.

When Hizbullah’s Secretary General, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, told people to go and fight in Syria, the Lebanese people saw this as a new, emboldened party intent on taking the country into a more dangerous direction than any the country has known before. It was seen as a move that will deepen the sectarian divide between the Sunnis and the Shi’a, not only in Lebanon but in the whole region. This was compounded by Hizbullah’s claim at the outset that they were entering Syria to defend the Shi’i holy places, especially the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. A sign of Hizbullah’s unease about its new gamble was its changing discourse regarding the goal of their intervention. They told the Hizbullah rank-and-file that this was a war to protect the resistance;

“it is the same as the 2006 war but on Syrian land,” said a Hizbullah supporter. Then it became a preemptive war. The mantra became, “If we do not go and fight them in Syria they will come and fight us here in our homes.” Interestingly, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah put himself and his party on the side of the West when he announced that they are fighting the Takfiris (Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy) and the extremists in Syria. Many in Beirut expressed fear that the West might fall for this.

Hizbullah’s rhetorical and physical assault on the Syrian opposition invited threats from the Free Syrian Army to bring the battle inside Lebanon. The cross-border attacks from Syria on Hizbullah’s areas in northern Beqaa moved the battle lines for the party that prided itself on fighting Israel in the south to the most northern Lebanese border with Syria. This was not lost on the Lebanese who raised questions about not only the legitimacy of Hizbullah’s resistance but also the party leadership’s judgment in dragging the country into a Syrian quagmire.

Many see Hizbullah’s adventure in Syria as their Vietnam, a war that will sap their energy and drown them in sectarian conflict in Syria and Lebanon alike. But it is only like Vietnam if they lose in Syria. Winning the battle for Syria will “make them unbearable inside Lebanon,” a Lebanese politician lamented.

The tension between the Sunnis and the Shi’a in Lebanon is razor thin, and the Syrian refugees could be drawn into this. These refugees are now in 1,200 Lebanese towns and villages including in the south, Hizbullah’s heartland. As of May 2013, there were over 66,000 Syrian refugees registered in southern villages, according to the UN refugee agency. They are watched very closely by Hizbullah’s security. A minister in the Lebanese caretaker government told me the refugees have started arming and getting organized. They are afraid of revenge killings against them from Hizbullah and its supporters when the funerals of Hizbullah members killed in Syria mount.

Hizbullah’s Lebanese opponents are afraid of a victory for Hizbullah and the regime in Syria because of the implications on Lebanese political life. A victorious Hizbullah will redraw the Lebanese political map to its liking and that of its allies in Syria and Iran. Hizbullah’s supporters in the media are already prophesying a “new role for Hizbullah in the whole East,” to change the political, economic, and even social map of the region. This could be hubris, but while it is succeeding in intimidating some, it is drawing strong opposition from Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and the March 14 Coalition. They are both challenging Hizbullah and calling for it to pull its fighters from Syria and for Lebanon to maintain its dissociation policy. However, these calls are falling on deaf ears, and sectarian fires are roving the country.

The second threat to Lebanese national security is the Syrian refugee crisis. It is described as an existential threat – a time bomb – by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Lebanese officials. The problem is casting its shadow over all aspects of Lebanon’s political, economic, security, social, and even cultural life. The Lebanese will tell you the current refugee presence is overwhelming the country. It has exceeded the capacity of the state to handle the influx of refugees, for the infrastructure is not equipped to deal with a load of this magnitude. Their number is swelling by the day and with each new battle in Syria. The latest is al-Qusayr, which made the number quoted by UN officials at the beginning of June a moving target. The registered Syrian refugees are now approaching 600,000 according to UN officials who predict that Lebanon will have one million registered refugees by the end of the year. But Lebanese

officials already put the number of refugees at 1.2 million, prompting one official who is handling the refugee file in the government to quip, “Our Syrian refugee brothers are achieving what Bashar al-Assad could not achieve during the presence of his army in Lebanon. They could annex areas to Damascus.”

Instability is becoming the number-one problem in Lebanon, in addition to shelter. UN officials pointed to the number of young men among the refugees, around 25 percent of the total number, and said that the biggest challenge is to find something to occupy them. In failing to do so, an official said, “We will have at minimum criminality, and at maximum militarizing them.” The UN is talking about starting vocational schools for these refugees, but Lebanese officials are worried that this will make them more competitive than the Lebanese. Competition over economic opportunities between the Lebanese and the Syrian refugees is another source of tension in the country.

The health sector in Lebanon is also overloaded, and education is in an even worse situation. There are 440,000 school-aged children among the one million refugees in Lebanon, according to a government official. If these children do not enter school, there will be a whole generation without education.

In the face of this crisis, Lebanon seems without a strategy to handle it. Officials told me the political class is living in denial. They are focusing on the elections or bickering over government formation while the country could explode in everyone’s face, as one official said.

The third threat to Lebanon’s security is the deteriorating economic situation fueled by instability and the power vacuum in the country. Lebanon has not had a government for over two months now, and there is no sign that this could change soon.

Lebanon could soon face a shortage of bread. The Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs, Wael Abou Faour, who is the leading figure on the refugee issue, said that they stopped subsidizing wheat because of the high cost. “We have 1.2 million refugees who are eating with us. We cannot afford it,” the minister warned.

Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria worsened an already precarious economic situation. The scarce Gulf investments dried up and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) threatened it will punish Hizbullah economically over its intervention in Syria, a move that made thousands of Lebanese who work in the Gulf worry about losing their livelihood. Tourism dropped 30 percent according to government officials; these days you almost never see a tourist in Beirut’s streets, which are usually a haven for tourists – especially from the Arab world – during the summer months.

These factors – and the raging war in Syria with no peaceful solution in sight – make Lebanon a tinder box. There are attempts by parties in Lebanon to avoid the abyss. Within the March 14 Coalition, work is underway on a new initiative to pull Lebanon out of its current standoff. An idea that was floating around is to establish a new coalition that transcends March 14 and March 8 and brings together a new alliance of parties and people who are against Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria, but also are against extremism, whether Sunni or Shi’i. This coalition will look for what brings the Lebanese together: their shared principles for the country to build on and cast aside their differences for a later date. If this coalition sees the light of day and succeeds in forming a government, then maybe Lebanon will ride the Syrian storm safely.

If the “rainbow coalition” is to materialize, Lebanese politicians believe there is a need for hard work among the different factions to come together, driven by their fear for Lebanon. But they see international support, especially American support, as indispensable to help Lebanon avoid the bitter cup. They are looking to the United States to shore up Lebanon both internally by empowering its moderate leadership and in the international community by strengthening Lebanon’s sovereignty through the United Nations. But America’s friends in Lebanon are confused, feel left alone, and are not sure of America’s resolve or its will to engage them seriously.

The criticism leveled at the United States among Lebanese leaders ranged from criticism of indecisiveness to “sends conflicting messages,” to “promises never fulfilled” to conspiracy. A political leader in Lebanon told me, “People are burning Russian flags in Lebanon and Syria, but they respect the Russians because they stand by their friends.”

But when asked what the United States can do to help Lebanon, his answer was telling about how Syria trumps everything: “They should help the Syrian opposition.”



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