

Lebanon's Interwoven Crises

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This month's apocalyptic explosion in Beirut was a symbol for the disintegration of a Lebanese state plagued by political and economic crisis - and increasingly subject to the intrigue of its old imperial power, France.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." This quotation from the novel *The Leopard* summarises, roughly speaking, French President Emmanuel Macron's approach to Lebanon. In the book, the character of Tancredi explains to the Prince of Salina the need for the aristocracy to adapt and embrace the zeitgeist - in this case, the bourgeois revolution.

Since October 17th, Lebanon has experienced an unprecedented wave of protest against organised corruption and social inequalities. Meanwhile, the political class - the same one which has led the country since the end of the civil war and is responsible for the Lebanese shipwreck - echoed these sentiments.

During his visit to Beirut on August 6th, Macron, as pragmatic as Tancredi, gathered the community leaders around a table, as many as they are. The scene was absurd: seated and docile, listening to the young president, were Samir Geagea of the Christian Lebanese Forces, Walid Joumblatt of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party and Nabih Berry of the Shia Amal Movement, each of whose deeds of glory will no longer have to be proven.

France's voluntary return to the regional scene followed a specific agenda, stretching far beyond humanitarian aid - and taking place in the context of an acute local and regional crisis.

Local Power and Regional War

This is hardly the first time that a foreign power has put its big clogs in the Lebanese quagmire to calm (or control) the game. In 1958, American marines landed on the beach of Khaldé at the call of President Chamoun, frightened by the rise of Nasserism. In 1976, the Syrian army intervened with the blessing of the United States to stem the advances of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) fighters and the MNL (Lebanese National Movement). The Christian nationalist forces, allies of Israel, were losing ground at the time. Whether it is seen as a 'buffer state' or a 'sounding board' for regional conflicts, one thing is certain: Lebanese actors are not fighting their battles alone.

Even if the two coalitions which had shaped Lebanese politics - the anti-Syrian March 14th and pro-Syrian March 8th - no longer exist as such today, the cleavage over the geostrategic positioning of Lebanon remains topical. What we have seen since the political crisis of May 2008, and then throughout the war in Syria, is a gradual weakening of the March 14th camp, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia. The legislative elections of May 2018 were won by forces sympathetic to Hezbollah - and confirmed a new balance of power.

That result meant, for the first time since 2005, the components of the March 8th coalition have a majority in Parliament. Saad Hariri's participation in the 'National Compromise,' his inability to counterbalance the alliance between Michel Aoun and Hezbollah, and his increasingly diminished

legitimacy on the 'Sunni street' have exasperated his Saudi ally. This was reflected in the bankruptcy of the real estate company Saudi Oger, and the kidnapping of Hariri by Mohammad bin Salman - which ended in the farcical spectacle of Hariri resigning his post as Prime Minister from Riyadh.

At the time, without any reservation, Saudi Foreign Minister Thamer al-Sabhané stated on al-Arabiya: "We will deal with the Lebanese government as a government on the verge of declaring war because of the Hezbollah militias." The most militant wing of the Trump administration sees Lebanon similarly as a mere synonym of Hezbollah, and converges in its analysis with Israel and its war against regional forces that resist it.

This was evident from the moment of the United States' exit from the Iranian nuclear agreement in May 2018. Then, it implemented a series of economic sanctions against Lebanon which had direct consequence: a massive flight of Gulf capital (in alignment with the US position) and the weakening of the banking sector (some banks even had to close).

US sanctions have undermined the economy of the country long known as the Switzerland of the Middle East. But it was already a shaky economy, dependent on financial transfers from its diaspora, deprived of an agricultural and industrial base, without any link with neighbouring countries, producing almost nothing, and doomed to dependency by the processes of uneven development [analysed by Samir Amin](#). It was an economy, moreover, plagued by endemic corruption nested in the confessional system.

Diab and the Deep State

Within this framework, and following the immense popular protests of last autumn, a government composed of technocrats and independents was created in January. From the outset, the components of the March 14th coalition refused to participate, accusing the government of being under the control of Hezbollah. For months, it became the target of powerful media propaganda aimed at delegitimising it.

The truth, however, was that the Diab government lacked the support of any of the traditional political groups. On the contrary, it faced off against Lebanon's deep state - an alliance between oligarchy and warlords. Without a political base, it found itself orphaned from the start, and prevented from taking action.

It tried to defend reforms that it ultimately could not carry off. Whether it was bills to establish a regime of capital controls, the forensic audit of the Banque du Liban (BDL), or the financial rescue plan presented to the IMF, a shield of barriers arose which paralysed the executive. Political scientist Camille Najm explained it thus:

Every time it has tried to tackle the interests of the oligarchs, the Diab government has been attacked by these same oligarchs and their cronies in the state apparatuses. The saddest thing is that it could not even draw its strength from the hirak [protest movement], while the reforms were in line with the demands for more social justice. The hirak went with the flow as it blindly rejected the Diab government.

Certainly, we are not talking here of a leftist government which would have benefited from the frank support of the European Left. And from a Marxist perspective, "technocracy" and "independence" are apolitical notions which generally refer to categories of power perfectly nested in neoliberal logics.

However, in this case, it will be necessary to make the effort to go beyond commonplaces, and to reflect on reality as it is. The ministerial team around Diab tried to initiate institutional reforms, to shake up inertia, to restructure the banking sector, to recover dividends distributed by the large banks to shareholders since 2016, to investigate corruption – in other words to stop the haemorrhage.

It's not the revolution, but it's not nothing neither. And in the midst of what can be identified as the old regime, Camille Najm considers that "the government should have had the necessary exceptional legislative powers to override the systematic opposition of Parliament, and of the entire confessional political-financial caste." Even more so as a thorn was already lodged in the heart of the Diab government: Nabih Berry's Amal movement. Holder of the ministerial portfolio of finance for decades, Amal played "the role of the Trojan horse in this government," according to Najm, defending the interests of cronies whether they are of the March 14th or March 8th factions.

In his resignation speech, only eight months after the formation of his government, Hassan Diab bluntly accused the "deep state" of sabotaging the attempts of his ministerial team made to move forward reforms. "We must change them because they are the real disaster of the country," he said.

If the resignation of this government was seen as a result of pressure from the streets, it was only partially so. It derived above all from sabotage by the old régime, which has worked tirelessly towards this conclusion.

Enter Macron

During his press conference in Beirut, President Macron called for the urgent overhaul of the Lebanese political system. Evoking the historical links between France and Lebanon in the lyrical register in which he excels, he nonetheless knew that the confessional political system which he decried was the work of French imperialism.

It was consecrated at the same time as the proclamation of the State of Great Lebanon (Grand Liban) by General Gouraud, then High Commissioner of the French Republic in the Levant. Although it takes on a somewhat tribal character, denominationalism remains a product of modernity which will only accentuate the difficult emergence of the Lebanese nation-state.

The confessional community is the first and essential place of political power in Lebanon, not the nation. Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amel summed up this original contradiction when he said, "we say that the confessional state is the bourgeois state and that, at the same time, it is what prevents it from existing as a bourgeois state."

For decades, Lebanon, as envisioned by France and its allies on the Christian right, suffered from a crisis of legitimacy. The Taëf agreements signed in 1989 put an end to the wars of 1975-1990, and rebalanced power between the Christian, Sunni and Shia communities. This opened the era of Harirism in the economy; a period of euphoria characterised by a massive influx of dollars from the Gulf countries that were invested in the banking and real estate sectors.

The economic, financial and political crises that are now sweeping over Lebanon mark the end of the Taëf era and the deadlock of Harirism. "A few days before the centenary of the land of the Cedars, the call for a 'new pact' by the French president has a certain irony of history – a bitter irony," remarked former As-Safir journalist Mohammad Ballout.

The apocalyptic explosion that shook Beirut on August 4th is arguably the most glaring manifestation of the degree of decomposition of the Lebanese state. The fact that 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate

could have been stored so carelessly for six years in the city's port, when several alerts had been issued by customs officials, is enough to understand the extent of the state's dysfunction. Simple accident or sabotage, the disaster was an inevitability.

From a French and European perspective, the collapse of Lebanon represents a political, strategic and security threat. First, because Lebanon is one of the few places in the Middle East where France still exerts a strong political and cultural influence. Its collapse is synonymous with the loss of the main lever of French policy in the Arab East.

It is therefore a scenario to be avoided, especially as French influence in the region is already diminishing. Control of the eastern Mediterranean remains a key strategic issue, especially as Turkey is increasingly asserting itself in the area.

But then also haunting Europe, as always, is the question of refugees. If the situation in Lebanon does not improve soon, there are fears that hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, as well as ruined Lebanese, will be head for Europe. This would embarrass Fortress Europe, which has an interest in Lebanese stability. Chaos is not an option, and they must act quickly.

However, these considerations alone do not explain the great pomp with which the French President arrived in his country's former colony. An opportunity to regain a role in international politics had presented itself. France could reposition itself in the local and regional political game, in particular by proving its ability to develop a line of its own.

This is useful, because the French President hopes to insert himself as the essential intermediary between the United States and Hezbollah at a particularly exacerbated moment of the regional conflict. This is why we saw a representative of Hezbollah at the discussion table, and this was followed by a face-to-face meeting.

This greatly annoyed advocates of a total boycott of the Shia party. But the next day, in a telephone exchange, Macron argued to the US President that the sanctions against Hezbollah are "counterproductive," and that one needs to reinvest in Lebanon. For now, Trump appeared to be listening to him, attending the International Support Conference in Beirut.

This is the option favoured by the French elite: cosmetic reform of the Lebanese state under its patronage, a project it can undertake with the very same leaders and oligarchs who demolished the country. In return, Macron will negotiate the easing of US sanctions on Lebanon, and work to strengthen pro-Western components so as to recreate a balance against Hezbollah.

Humanitarian aid would come first, then economic aid afterwards. Each would offer their own levers to redraw the Lebanese political map. "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change," indeed.

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