

# Armed groups and sovereignty

## Domestic and regional agendas for war and peace in Lebanon

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The divisions between internal and external agendas in Lebanon are not clear-cut. Ambiguity extends to the war, its causes and dynamics. Is it a civil war featuring Muslim and leftist demands for participation and social justice, respectively, versus Christian or rightist resistance to change? Or an external war fought on Lebanese soil: the projection of the Arab-Israeli conflict or of the Palestinian question? This debate is as political as it is conceptual, as the choice of analysis immediately favours one or other party to the conflict.

The internal and external dimensions of Lebanon's protracted war are intertwined and it is vital to disentangle them in relation to the political and armed forces still operating in the country.

The Taif Agreement put an end to Lebanon's militia phenomena in very specific ('Lebanese') ways. First, the terms for demobilising and transforming paramilitary forces granted them priority access to the political system, achieved in practice through an amnesty law. Second, it gave Syria tutelage over the Lebanese political system. Third, Taif provided the Lebanese army with an internal police function on condition that it 'coordinate' closely with Syria's security and military apparatus, including its infamous intelligence agency, *Mukhabarat*.

Taif also implicitly allowed Hezbollah to keep its weapons, provided that its actions were framed according to Syria's strategy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. This concession was granted in deference to Israel's occupation of the south, as well as Hezbollah's strategic ties with Syria and Iran and the West's desire to keep Syria in the process. This situation remained static until the political 'explosion' of 2005: the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and Syria's subsequent withdrawal from Lebanon.

### Hezbollah and Syria

The roots of the crisis of 2005 can be traced back to 9/11 and the resultant shift in US and Western interests and policy. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 Syria felt increasingly encircled by American physical and political presence in the region. Washington exerted strong pressure on the Syrian leadership to disarm Hezbollah and cease all ties with Hamas – in other words, to break away from Iran's orbit. UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), sponsored by France and the US, demanded the withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon, disarmament of all militia, and free and fair elections.

Damascus's decision to stick with the 'axis of resistance' eliminated any rapprochement between Syria and the West and the Arab Gulf powers. Hariri's assassination was a culmination of mounting tension and removed the ambiguity over Hezbollah's role as Lebanon's remaining armed militia and its ostensible official legitimacy. Intense debate began over its weapons and Lebanon's national defence strategy, leading to discussions on the 'Lebanonisation' of Hezbollah.

This debate occurs both outside Lebanon – in Iran, Israel, Syria and the international community – and within the new post-Hariri power structure. After 2005, Lebanese government majority lay in the hands of a coalition of pro-Western Sunnis and Christians, which faced a minority opposition of Christians and Shia dominated by Hezbollah. This new governing structure has been trying to build legitimacy based on state sovereignty and the ousting of Syrian forces. Therefore, part of the debate over Hezbollah and its weapons now takes place in a changed context, where the aim is to build an independent Lebanon with a state monopoly of force, and to which Hezbollah must

surrender its weapons and become an integral part of the national defence strategy.

Hezbollah is naturally suspicious that this new discourse is designed to convince it to disarm and give the West and Israel a comparative advantage, primarily as a means to stop the resistance movement in the Middle East – in relation to Hamas, to the Palestinian issue more generally and to Iraq. It has persisted in its refusal to hand over its weapons. The 2006 July war dramatically revised this debate: Israel wanted to disarm Hezbollah aggressively, while Hezbollah was able to display its resistance credentials. The Syrian crisis provides yet another new dimension: will Hezbollah be forced to give up its weapons if the Assad regime in Damascus falls?

The outlook for Syria is the most urgent question for the future of both Hezbollah and Lebanon. Hezbollah needs to be prepared for three possible outcomes: 1) Syria is plunged into protracted civil war; 2) the regime survives but is severely weakened and constrained; or 3) the regime falls and is replaced by one that is more hostile to Hezbollah and Iran. Hezbollah is very aware that channelling weapons through Syria from Iran will be at best severely inhibited, or more likely will become impossible. It is not obvious how Hezbollah will cope with this situation militarily in the long term, but it already has enough arms stockpiled to endure protracted guerrilla warfare with Israel, for instance.

But Hezbollah is more than its military wing. Deprived of a regional alliance, Hezbollah still has some comparative domestic advantages over its Lebanese adversaries in terms of demography and its popular and cohesive support. It can also mobilise alliances with other Lebanese sects that fear Sunni supremacy in both Lebanon and Syria. While these advantages are changeable and are likely to erode over time, they give Hezbollah breathing space to find alternative strategies and to wait for more favourable regional conditions.

### **Lebanonising Hezbollah?**

Hezbollah has maintained the Assad regime's depiction of the uprising in Syria as a foreign plot to detach Syria from the Iranian axis. Persisting in this analysis is likely at some point to undermine Hezbollah's domestic popularity. Hezbollah's credibility relies to a large extent on its support for disenfranchised people in their struggle against injustice. It welcomed revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia and cannot survive if it fails to condemn the plight of people suffering in Syria.

Hezbollah will also have to draw increasingly on resources from within Lebanon, focusing more on domestic issues of economics, justice and development and less on the

external sphere. To date Hezbollah's record on these issues has been quite weak. Hezbollah has less experience and fewer skills for domestic politics, and is less familiar with navigating domestic social and political constraints such as sectarianism and power sharing.

To what extent will Hezbollah be able to be an autonomous political actor if the Syrian regime falls, and if (or when) Iran strikes a deal with the west? Some see Hezbollah as a creation of Syria and Iran and their interests in Lebanon. This is partly true: Hezbollah was formed as a result of Syrian and Iranian political engineering in Lebanon after the Iranian revolution. But it was also constructed from a deeply rooted Lebanese Shia reality. Hezbollah has enough 'Lebanese genes' to be relatively independent from Syria, although perhaps less from Iran because of theological and ideological links. It is also very conscious of its Lebanese constituency, and aware that it has to take care of this community, and so is prepared to be a more 'pure' Lebanese political actor.

Some agreements have been reached between Hezbollah and the Aounist Christian community, as well as alliances cultivated with sections of other communities. However, as long as sectarian considerations remain prominent and sects remain focused on security and self-preservation it will be difficult for Hezbollah to reach far outside its own community.

### **Sunni and Christian political forces**

Growing polarisation between Sunni and Shia sects is becoming a danger to the sovereignty of the state. This is related to a long-standing but implicit competition between the two communities. It was triggered in the 1990s but was managed at that time by Syria. Since Syria's withdrawal in 2005 competition has become open and sometimes violent. It has also taken a further and very dramatic turn with current events in Syria. If there is a change in the Damascus regime from Alawite to Sunni, Sunnis in Lebanon will feel increasingly emboldened vis-à-vis Hezbollah. Fear of Hezbollah's power and weaponry will erode, giving radical political Sunnis the impetus to go on the offensive.

Since 2005 Saad al-Hariri's 'moderate' Sunni Future Movement has tried to mobilise the Sunni community using more radical Islamic rhetoric. However, many Lebanese Sunnis have become much more radical than the Future Movement anticipated and Hariri's party therefore not only risks being sidelined in favour of more extreme forces, but also cannot abandon radicalism for fear of being left politically 'naked'.

Taif presented the Christian community with the opportunity to act as a bridge-builder and moderator

between Muslim sects. But during the period of Syrian tutelage the Christian groups became politically apathetic and after 2005 they themselves split allegiance between the two Muslim sects: Michel Aoun and his constituency aligned with Shia interests, and Sami Geagea with Sunni. Today Christians fuel Muslim division. Their diminishing political power can, therefore, be traced partly to the civil war and the Taif Agreement, but also to their alignment with antagonistic Muslim forces. Centrifugal forces currently at play within the Christian community offer little hope that such polarisation will change in the foreseeable future.

## The Lebanese Army

After the war, and especially since 2005, the independence of the Lebanese Army has been constrained by three key factors. First, its 'Lebanese' structure means it has to take into account equilibrium between political forces and communities. What is referred to in Lebanon as 'security by consensus' – a semi-official motto – is in fact a major problem. The army is not above other political or armed forces in the country, but is dependent on consensus among them. When there is no consensus, the army is either paralysed or threatened with implosion, as happened several times during the war.

Second, even after Syrian withdrawal in 2005 the army is still tied to the Syrian military leadership as a result of various treaties and agreements, through personal links between some senior officers, and because of the role of security services. Coordination with the Syrian military security structure is very visible in the border regions with Syria, where the Lebanese army clearly cannot take actions that could antagonise Damascus – for example, the demarcation commission sponsored by the EU since 2007 has been paralysed. Third, the army is reliant on links with Western donors, such as the US and France, through funding, equipment and training.

Lebanon's army, therefore, reflects precisely its politics and, due to the reciprocal veto power of domestic political forces, can only manoeuvre within the narrow limitations allowed by consensus. In May 2008, for instance, when pro-Syrian militias and Hezbollah stormed west Beirut, the army was neither willing nor able to act, as any response would have exposed internal splits, individual units would most likely have aligned factionally, and the overall military leadership would have been stripped of authority.

The army cannot act to prevent incidents from occurring. It can repair damage in certain situations, provided the political forces permit. If political forces disagree fundamentally, the army would come under severe stress again. The army effectively acts like a peacekeeping force. Except in isolated cases, these constraints have prevented

the army from operating like other Arab militaries with a clear political appetite.

## Dialogue and identity and sovereignty

The extent of the impact of the National Dialogue regarding Lebanon's national defence strategy – in reality a forum to discuss Hezbollah's weapons – will remain elusive as long as Syria is unstable. Hezbollah is betting that the Syrian regime will ultimately prevail more or less intact and that no one in Lebanon will be able to challenge its status. The 14 March coalition is betting that the Syrian regime will collapse in a few months, leaving Hezbollah no choice but to negotiate an honourable exit: a quid pro quo of disarming and having a legitimate place in the political system. Both camps are betting on winning a zero sum game. The war in Syria could well be protracted and very bloody. A change in the current balance is probably a long way off, but one way or another would probably convince both sides to agree to sit around the negotiating table.

The issue of Lebanese identity – a very broad concept – has been challenged since 2005, and is now taking a very dramatic turn in light of the current Syrian and Arab revolutions. The Arab Spring has brought back to the table the question of minorities, self-definition, identity, Arab nationalism, and the place of Islam in society – issues which have been frozen in the Arab world for several decades. This raises extraordinary challenges for Lebanese identity – the construction of internal consensus, of cohesion, peace and coexistence and the socio-political arrangements between communities are very difficult issues to address. With all communities under stress and political parties struggling for survival it is difficult to envisage the construction of trans-sectarian links and alliances.

For the international community, maintaining communication with Hezbollah is especially important. Europe has done well to keep channels open and not list Hezbollah as a proscribed terrorist organisation, as the US has. Hezbollah is a highly pragmatic, multi-faceted organisation. It is not just a militia or an armed force, an Iranian projection or a Syrian client. It represents a significant Lebanese community that feels disenfranchised and is looking for its place in the Lebanese system. It also has a 'spoiling' capacity and can damage the process of political construction if it is not part of it. All of these factors have to be taken into account when engaging Hezbollah. Dialogue may at times seem hypocritical and will probably not lead anywhere quickly, but it is important to keep talking and at least to keep the thread alive.

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