Internal choice or external fate?

Recasting the debate on Lebanon's vulnerability

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Lebanon's instability is frequently explained by the country's vulnerability to its external environment. Interestingly, before the country descended into civil war, its particular brand of consociational power sharing, a political system based on the proportional representation of the major societal groups in government, was hailed as a successful experiment in democracy, one that was held up as an example for other deeply-divided societies. The view of Lebanon's conflicts, described by the Lebanese journalist, diplomat and scholar Ghassan Tuéni, as 'wars of others on Lebanese soil', sees the Lebanese as victims situated at the heart of a conflict-zone, who cannot but feel deeply the reverberations of regional shock waves.

Explaining the mechanisms of vulnerability

What accounts for the vulnerability of Lebanese politics? This is intrinsically related to two characteristics of Lebanese state formation. The state is weak relative to society. The state is also soft; its boundaries are permeable to foreign influences.

In Lebanon, the state is weak by design. The balance of power between state and society has been crafted to give communal groups the upper hand. Lebanon's consociational system is founded on the proportional representation of all major Lebanese confessions (religious groups) in state institutions. The country's Personal Status Regime (*nizam al-ahwal al-shakhsiyya*) gives religious tribunals the legislative and executive authority over the personal status of their flocks. Further, transnational dynamics have historically traversed Lebanese state-society relations. Transnational appeals – Nasserist Arab nationalism in the 1950s, the Palestinian cause in the 1970s, Shia Islamism in the 2000s – have resonated in the Lebanese political scene.

Lebanon's weakness and softness are related; the first has been described as facilitating the emergence of the second. Together, the state's weakness and the society's permeability cause the country's vulnerability.

Wars of others on Lebanon's soil?

There are two standard readings of the entanglement between Lebanon's domestic politics and external dynamics. The first and most widespread account begins with the external environment. It argues that the key to the stability of Lebanon's power sharing resides in the ability and willingness of external actors to bring coercive pressure to bear on internal factions. According to this analysis of a century and a half of Lebanon's history, external guarantors have been able to bring about stability, but only when interested foreign powers agreed not to draw the country into their regional power struggles.

The second account starts from within. It focuses on the manner in which insiders draw outside powers into their 'games'. The scholar Bassel Salloukh suggests that this begins with the premise that local actors use transnational ideologies or bandwagon with external actors to strengthen their positions in domestic struggles. This account, therefore, begins with state weakness.

One of the major consequences of weak states is the lack of a credible deterrent. Weak states have a tenuous monopoly over the use of force. They do not have the wherewithal to prevent sub-state groups from using violence. This is the history of Lebanon's army, continuously threatened with implosion along communal lines and therefore incapable or unwilling to forcefully step in to prevent groups from using violence. In the 1958 civil war, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Fouad Chehab refused to involve the

military in the conflict fearing its implosion. During the war, the Lebanese military establishment stood on the sidelines as militias fought one another. Ultimately, some army units split to fight alongside their co-religionists. In 2008, the LAF also stood by as 8 March and 14 March combatants took their disagreements violently to the streets.

Nor can a weak state credibly provide assurances to internal groups that, if they comply with the rules of the game, no other group will take advantage of them. That, in many ways, is the quandary of the Lebanese state as it seeks to address the fact that Hezbollah remains the only legally armed militia in the country, with other groups fearing that the 'Party of God' will use its weapons not simply against Israel but also against internal opponents. Weak states are particularly likely to be captured by private interests in which case the state can be seen as a threat by groups that do not share the orientations of those in power. In 1958, anti-status quo forces felt very strongly that President Camille Chamoun did not have the interests of all Lebanese equally at heart, and that his decision to join the US-sponsored Baghdad Pact coalition of states was an attempt to orient Lebanon's foreign policy in ways that would protect, privilege and give precedence to Christian interests over Muslim ones.

These situations contain the seeds of a 'credible commitment' problem. A state that fails to deter and assure cannot credibly commit to protect sub-national communities. When the latter feel threatened, they can feel they have two options: build up their own military strength, or enter into alliances with stronger (ie external) powers that can protect them. This second option provides a window into an alternative understanding of the entanglement of domestic Lebanese politics with the regional and international environment.

The debate on Lebanon's vulnerability
Lebanese factions do not simply suffer the reverberations of regional events. They have influence over their country's fate and have historically sometimes provoked and invited foreign intervention into their domestic affairs. During the 1975–90 civil war, Lebanese politicians sought out Syrian and Israeli intervention. It was Lebanon's Maronite President, Suleiman Frangieh, who invited Syria to send troops to Lebanon to change the balance of power between the protagonists of the war, at a time when pro-status quo (mostly Christian) forces were facing the prospect of defeat at the hands of anti-status quo forces (mostly Muslims). In the late 1970s, Christian politicians looked to Israel for military assistance and political support.

The trend continues to this day. When the civil war ended with the signing of the Taif Agreement, Lebanese leaders repeatedly called upon Damascus to help them settle their internal disputes. This does not deny Syria's intentional influence on, and indeed manipulation of, Lebanese politics during the 1990s until 2005 (some would argue even beyond). But Syrian officials were also drawn into the morass of Lebanon's confessional politics from within, as Lebanese politicians used Syrian interests in neighbourhood stability to gain relative advantage over one another.

Anti-Syrian Lebanese factions similarly drew the West into Lebanese politics in the 1990s, particularly the US and France. Their intention was clear. They were attempting to redress the internal balance of power, skewed because of the unchecked weight of Syria and its allies in deciding how to go about interpreting and implementing the Taif Agreement. After 9/11 opponents of Syria skillfully manipulated Western counter-terrorism concerns about the regime in Damascus to make their voices heard. While it would be a mistake to believe that the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in 2004, intended to try to reclaim Lebanon's sovereignty and expel 'foreign forces', was the direct result of these efforts, it would equally be wrong-headed to deny Lebanese factions and politicians' own role in increasing their country's dependence on the outside world.

Looking ahead
Where does this leave us? Lebanon's vulnerability to insecurity is not simply a passive matter of fate, determined outside its borders. It is also the result of active choices that the Lebanese have made as they have sought internal protection from one another. Much of the problem resides with the proverbial weakness of the Lebanese state. Although this weakness might arguably have been designed to maintain the strength and autonomy of the many Lebanese communities, it has also become a source of vulnerability. A stronger state would help to protect Lebanon from the vagaries of the outside world, as it would decrease the need of Lebanese communities to draw outsiders into domestic politics.

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