

Lebanon and the Brink of Disaster

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The arrival of terrorists of all stripes on Lebanon's eastern border at the beginning of August has spelled assured calamity for the fragile, multi-sectarian nation. Initially, the assault was thought to be one by the al-Qaeda-allied Nusra Front challenging Syrian and Hezbollah troops west of Damascus. But as the battle progressed and the smoke settled, it turned out to have been an orchestrated joint push into a Sunni town that had hosted tens of thousands of Syrian refugees since early 2011. The terrorists proceeded to take the town and its police contingent hostage until the Lebanese army was able to dislodge them at a very high cost. At a minimum, this development calls for a concerted effort by Lebanese political leaders to put the country's house in order to prevent it from getting mired in the terrorist morass currently engulfing Syria and Iraq.



Lebanese army soldiers outside Arsal

The need for institutional continuity

The terrorist assault on the eastern town of Arsal comes at a time of dire political crises in Lebanon, foremost among which is the stalemate in electing a new president after the expiration of former President Michel Suleiman's term last May. Suleiman himself

became president in May of 2008 after an eight-month vacuum in the top office of the land that ended following a grand bargain sponsored by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, and Iran. In the current situation, it has again become evident that the stalemate is the result of a combination of domestic factors and regional influences.

Domestically, Lebanon's Parliament has on at least nine occasions since last April failed to convene the necessary two-thirds quorum, 85 deputies, for a constitutionally-sanctioned session for electing a new president. The failure to convene a session has squarely rested with deputies belonging to the Change and Reform Bloc of Michel Aoun, himself an aspirant to the presidency, Hezbollah, and other minor parties closely associated with the Party of God and the Syrian regime. Aoun, 81, sees the presidency as a birth right and has dug in his heels, holding the country hostage unless he is elected president. Hezbollah and its allies, on the other hand, have used their purported support for the former general as an excuse to continue to delay the return to constitutional normalcy, pending developments in Syria and Iraq, now that the Islamic State is threatening both countries.



Former President Michel Suleiman

Regionally, the Lebanese presidency has become another symbol of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. While former President Suleiman

succeeded in keeping official Lebanon outside the pro- and anti-Syrian polarization governing relations between the country's communities, Lebanon's geography keeps it in play in the region's *de facto* leaders' strategic designs. But what has become eminently clear is that as Saudi Arabia tries to ensure Lebanon's historical alignment with the Arab status quo, it has pushed for a quick end to the presidential crisis and for choosing a consensus candidate capable of maintaining constitutional continuity. Last week, it pledged US\$1 billion to fund Lebanon's army and security services. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been reluctant to pressure Hezbollah and its allies to allow the election to take place, in essence exposing itself as a player in a dangerous game of chess that might end any hope for restoring the fragile Lebanese unity that is necessary to fight the scourge of millennial terrorism.

Second, the election of the president must precede the election of a new parliament, itself due to be accomplished by November 20 of this year after the current term of the Chamber of Deputies was extended for 17 months in May 2013. But the Ministry of Interior is required by law to call upon the electoral registration committees to begin their work by August 20 so as to allow enough time for November's polls.

With the election of the president mired in disagreements and outside interference, it will be necessary to yet again extend the term of the current parliament. Absent that, both the office of the Chief Executive and the legislative branch of government will be vacant, creating an insurmountable obstacle to the return of constitutional life. Needless to say, such a development would deprive the country of the necessary political

mechanisms and popular unity to stand up to the threat posed by the Islamic State and other jihadists.

Hezbollah's Syrian overreach and the refugee crisis

Third, Hezbollah's continued involvement on the side of the Syrian regime increases the dangers of the dreaded Shia-Sunni rupture that can easily find resonance across national boundaries extending as far east as Iraq and Bahrain, at the very time that the rump Islamic State challenges the heart of the Levant and threatens to occupy Baghdad. Rumor has it that the Lebanese Party of God is even contributing fighters to the Iraqi government's Shiite sectarian effort to stand up to the Sunni Islamic State and militias in Iraq. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, Sunni armed groups are spoiling to challenge both state authority in many parts of the country and Hezbollah's military superiority.



Hezbollah parade

Fourth, Lebanon is reeling economically and socially from the influx of close to 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which account for about 30% of the population. The country is in desperate need for international assistance. A study conducted earlier this year by the United Nations and the World Bank found that the influx has cost the country around

US\$7.5 billion. Lebanon's infrastructure, never in good shape, is close to the breaking point. Refugee concentrations in towns and large cities threaten a social backlash against traumatized Syrian families that may for years be unable to return to Syria. What mainly worries policy-makers is the very distinct possibility that thousands of poor and unemployed Syrian males can easily be tempted to join extremist groups feeding on desperation and poverty; essentially swelling the ranks of the very forces that took Lebanon by surprise in early August.

The recent years of Lebanon's political existence have seen a deterioration of compromise and common-sense politics. Short-term expediency has long replaced the famous bargains of independent Lebanon such as the National Pact of 1943 and the 1989 Taif Accords. It appears that the country is finally beginning to experience the repercussions of the Syrian crisis and is in the throes of regional crises perpetuated by unrealized grand strategic designs of outside actors. Absent the sacrifices necessary to overcome divisiveness and discord, the country teeters on the edge of an abyss only its politicians are responsible to avoid.

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Images accessed August 10, 2014

Lebanese soldiers' image

https://now.mmedia.me/Pages/ImageStream/param/MediaID_5f7a69db-3329-4a55-ad46-44ddb127b80f/w_616/h_394/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84.jpg

President Suleiman image

https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/images/article_images/people/michel-suleiman.jpg

Hezbollah image

http://www.middle-east-online.com/meopictures/big/58323_hezbollah.jpg