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Squabbling Politicians Push Lebanon to Sectarian Brink

Doug Bandow

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Lebanon's destructive civil war ended a quarter century ago. The capital has been rebuilt. New buildings are rising and shoppers throng luxury shops. Trendy young Lebanese fill restaurants and bars at night. Lebanon is the Middle East's only melting pot. Never has the region more needed a peaceful oasis.

However, the country is a sectarian volcano. Barely a generation ago Lebanon was torn apart in a bloody civil war which drew in America for a short time. Today cars race by buildings damaged still. Bullet pockmarks subtly mark many structures, including where I stayed.

The capital is but a short drive away from the Syrian imbroglio. A fourth of Lebanon's current population is refugees. The Shia Hezbollah movement acts as a state-within-a-state, confronting Israel to the south and anti-Assad insurgents to the east. Sunni radicalism is growing. The minority Christian community has broken apart, creating political deadlock and paralyzing the government. The country faces water shortages and power outages even in Beirut, where garbage has piled high since the July closure of the city's landfill. Warned the International Crisis Group: "today's dynamics bear an uncanny similarity to those that preceded the civil war."

But Lebanon has not yet erupted, so it receives little attention from a U.S. administration overwhelmed with crises in the Middle East. Lebanon is edging toward the critical list, however. And if the country crashes, so will the only Middle Eastern model for tolerant coexistence. Lebanon desperately needs statesmen willing to look beyond their personal and group interests.

Like so many of its neighbors, Lebanon has a storied history. The modern state emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire with France controlling (as a League of Nations "mandate") former Ottoman provinces dominated by Maronite Christians and Druze, a Shia Muslim off-shoot. Lebanon officially won its independence in 1943 and relied on an informal confessional system to keep the peace. For years Lebanon was viewed as a Middle Eastern Switzerland, with Beirut as the region's Paris.

However, in 1958 a Muslim insurrection led to the brief introduction of U.S. Marines and a new government. Far more serious was the outbreak of sectarian violence in 1975, which turned into full-scale civil war. Attacks from PLO forces located in Lebanon led to an Israeli invasion. The feeble national government invited in Syrian troops. At one point there were more than a score of armed factions, with confusing and shifting alliances crossing sectarian lines. A multinational "peacekeeping" force deployed in 1982 to bolster the national government, leading to attacks on the American embassy and Marine Corps barracks.

After the deaths of as many as 150,000 and displacement of perhaps a million civilians, the Taif Agreement ended the conflict in 1990. Syrian forces finally withdrew in 2005 after the "Cedar Revolution," triggered by the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Since then the country has suffered through conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, spasms of sectarian violence, Syria's implosion, and political deadlock.

Despite all this, Lebanon remains generally free and uniquely diverse. Elections, when they are held, are free, though the seats are divided along sectarian lines. The media is less fettered than in any other Arab nation, though sectarian ties encourage self-censorship. With 18 officially recognized sects religious liberty is prized, though proselytizing can lead to violence. Government imposes no religion's cultural rules. Moreover, as befits a historically commercial people, Lebanon enjoys a relatively free economy.

But politics systematically undermines the country's economic potential. Recovery from the civil war took time, and periodic conflict has further hampered economic development, discouraging foreign investment, spurring mass refugee flows, and increasing government indebtedness. Although aid groups such as the International Orthodox Christian Charities help, humanitarian needs are overwhelming. There are some 1.2 million Syrians officially registered as refugees, and probably many more undocumented, as well as some 450,000 Palestinians and smatterings of others in Lebanon. Government debt runs roughly 134 percent of GDP; interest payments account for 40 percent of government revenues.

Still, the bigger threat to Lebanese stability is the implosion of Syria, which long played a dominant, sometimes controlling, role in Lebanon. Hezbollah has directly intervened on the side of the Assad regime. The Shia movement's involvement risks bringing the conflict back to Lebanon, as did Hezbollah's costly 2006 war with Israel.

At the same time, the Sunni party Future Current or Movement, led by former prime minister Saad Hariri, Rafik's son, has backed the Syrian opposition. At least one of the party's top parliamentarians was involved in weapons transfers to insurgents. The two groups also fall on opposite political sides in Iraq, another sectarian battleground.

The Future Current/Movement is weak precisely when the call to radical arms seems strongest. Saad Hariri now lives abroad and is said to be in financial straits, while Lebanon's Sunni "street" chafes at its supposed leadership's ineffectiveness. Some Sunni Lebanese have joined Syrian

insurgents and may return even more radicalized. Tensions over the civil war also have flared between Sunnis and Alawites, of which Syria's President Bashar Assad is one, in the city of Tripoli. Christian criticism of the Islamic State, including flag burnings, has triggered Sunni attacks on churches.

Should such sectarian fractures widen the result could be disaster. The Sunni Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdel-Latif Derian, emphasized the importance of preventing renewed religious conflict, "to keep Lebanon in peace." He described to me how he is using his position in an attempt to discourage radicalism, unify Muslims, and reach out to Christians.

With Syria to the north and east, Lebanon also is vulnerable to a violent influx. Military leaders with whom I spoke, generally not for attribution, acknowledged the challenging security environment. Last year displaced Syrian insurgents entered the Sunni border town of Aarsal, resulting in fighting, and the area remains a problem. The military has faced other attempts at infiltration: "We work hard not to have spillover from Syria," one general told me.

There may be more popular confidence in the army than in any other government institution, and the U.S. also has backed the armed forces. Army officers emphasized their commitment to stay out of politics and instead focus on security. That stance has proved to be a challenge as controversy swirled over senior army appointments in the midst of political paralysis. Moreover, military forbearance toward Hezbollah has triggered Sunni complaints. However, observed former President Michel Suleiman, "we cannot say we will fight Hezbollah."

Directly responsible for internal security is Interior Minister Nuhad Mashnouq, who emphasized the importance of cooperation with the military. While refusing to discuss details, he said the government had successfully thwarted a number of terrorist attacks. The security atmosphere appears to have improved after a score of suicide bombings dating back to 2013, mostly against Shia forces and the army. Despite the surrounding conflict Lebanon has preserved a relatively open society. While security is heavy around government buildings and other potential targets, Beirut does not feel overly fortified. Minister Mashnouq acknowledged the unique threat posed by the Islamic State, but argued that Lebanese were united against it.

Other international currents could affect the country's security. For instance, Minister Mashnouq, a moderate Sunni leader whose party is generally at odds with Hezbollah and Syria, saw potential in the U.S. agreement with Iran, though he was cautious in his assessment. He perceived no change in Tehran's current policy, but hoped the pact ultimately would promote stability, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, son-in-law of Christian presidential aspirant Michel Aoun, told me that the agreement with Iran "was starting a positive dynamic." The pact stopped Tehran from developing nuclear weapons if it was doing so, he explained, and "unleashed productivity and economic development" by relaxing sanctions, making the pact "doubly good."

Former president Suleiman argued that the "nuclear agreement will give the region a new approach" which hopefully "will influence Hezbollah." Similarly, Journalist Nadine BaBarem

argued: "Because of the deal, I think Iran will put fewer resources into Hezbollah, especially since Syria is looking like a loss." She also emphasized the potential for a longer-term transformation of Iran, which, in her view, would redound to Lebanon's benefit. A top general predicted that the deal could help open and ultimately democratize Iran.

Others, particularly Christian political leaders outside of government, are far more skeptical. They fear Iran will take advantage of relaxed international pressure to intervene more maliciously. One spoke of feeling abandoned by the U.S. Nadim Gemayel, son of a former assassinated president, worried that the pact "gives legitimacy to Hezbollah." A leading figure in another Christian party complained that the agreement would "make Iran more powerful." The actual outcome will take time to emerge.

Lebanon can blame no one else for its political crisis, however. While the Taif Agreement formally reunited Lebanon, sectarian and factional leaders retain outsized influence, even within government ministries. The confessional system emphasizes consensus and effectively grants major factions veto power. Stasis is the natural result and today pervades the entire political system. In an interview with the Washington Post Prime Minister Tammam Salam, a Sunni independent of any political faction, pointed to "the incapacity of electing a new president for the past year and four months, the paralysis of legitimate institutions like the parliament and the paralysis also seeping through to the Council of Ministers."

The root cause is the sectarian political system, intended to enable different religious and political factions to live together. Lebanon has around 4.5 million citizens, of whom about 54 percent are thought to be Muslim, evenly divided between Shia and Sunni. Christians make up about 40 percent, more than half Maronites. The Druze constitute roughly five percent.

The Taif Agreement rebalanced sectarian influence. The president is to be a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, and National Assembly Speaker a Shiite. But the system rests on compromise, which has been sorely lacking of late.

Nominated in 2013 Prime Minister Salam was unable to form a government until the following February, and only then by appointing members of all factions. President Sulieman's term ended in May 2014, but the National Assembly deadlocked in choosing his successor, which required a two-thirds vote. Two Maronite Christians are contending for the position, former Gen. Michel Aoun, allied with Hezbollah, and Samir Geagea, backed by the Sunnis and Saudis. Parliament was elected in 2009, but divisions over election law reform caused legislators to postpone the ballot from June 2013 to November 2014, and then to June 2017. The result is a government both illegitimate and weak.

The administration has been unable even to resolve the trash crisis, leading to a youthful protest known as "You Stink." Frustrated with the system as well as current officials, the movement is demanding far-reaching changes starting with the government's resignation. But the protestors,

more liberal and secular, yet have demonstrated an ability to transcend traditional sectarian and political lines.

No solution impends. The divided, superannuated government staggers on. A highly touted "dialogue" while I visited changed nothing. Regional storm clouds darken. Trash continues to pile up. Influential Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told me: "Lebanon is crumbling under the garbage." A restaurant owner said "we don't know where to start, where to end, or where we are going."

Out of desperation, many people are looking outside Lebanon for a solution. Salam told the Post: "We are heading toward a breakdown. The Lebanese political factions are incapable of electing a president by themselves." The only hope is for outsiders to take charge was a perspective I heard frequently. For instance, Beirut Governor Ziad Chebib argued that "different domestic agendas make the political crisis impossible to resolve within Lebanon." Proposals advanced include Washington using its new influence with Tehran to encourage discussions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Oman, an independent but respected Gulf State, hosting an international conference in Muscat about Lebanon..

Chebib especially hoped for active U.S. involvement, "pressure not encouragement." He argued: "The way the U.S. sees Lebanon needs to change. We are a country with potential. We have long history and traditions, something to say to the whole world. We can serve as a model. This area, the Middle East, needs a model country where people are able to live together."

In fact, Washington should be concerned with Lebanon, which acts like a canary in a coal mine. Lebanon combines a mix of tolerance, economic openness, pluralism, human rights, democracy, cultural freedom, and liberty unusual for the Middle East. The country even has "a Christian flavor," observed Father Boulos Wehbe, a priest and academic. All of these are under threat. If they disappear in Lebanon the Arab world will lose its only example of a humane political and social order.

However, Washington will not solve Lebanon's problems. A Christian Phalangist leader got it right when he complained to me: "we are not on your [America's] agenda." Military intervention is inconceivable and the lame duck Obama administration is unlikely to find the time and resources to devote to a Middle Eastern country not in full crisis. Washington's attention is elsewhere.

Moreover, the malfunctioning Lebanese political system remains the basic problem. Jumblatt said simply: "We need to reform from the inside." Those who benefit from the country's fragile stability must reach an accommodation to ensure the system's survival. That requires elections followed by constitutional reform. BaBarem said the "entire rejuvenation of the system is needed. It is a long and tedious process, but needs to be done."

Religious identities probably are too deeply engrained to create a nonsectarian state. Rev. Habib Badr, who heads an independent Protestant congregation, said that most people "want to reform the confessional system, not bring it down." However, the process could be made more flexible. He proposed greater decentralization and rotating offices among faiths. Thus, national power would matter less and no position would be seen as the property of any one group. No change will be easy. And none can be imposed from outside.

There is more. Lebanon must better cope with the refugee influx, which requires outside assistance. The government also must find a security balance that avoids further radicalizing Sunnis. The garbage must be disposed of.

Many people rely on Lebanon's oft-demonstrated resilience. Wehbe observed: "How is the country surviving? It is a miracle." With the civil war still a sharp memory for many Lebanese, the country always seems to draw back from the brink in time. However, today the entire system appears poised on the precipice amid worsening regional chaos. The price of failure would be catastrophic.

Lebanon doubles as a desperately needed regional oasis and model. It could be so much more in the future. But only the Lebanese can ensure that their nation survives and thrives.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.