



## Lebanon Teeters on Sectarian Brink

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October 30, 2015

Americans should be concerned with Lebanon. The country combines a mix of tolerance, economic openness, pluralism, human rights, democracy, cultural freedom, and liberty unusual for the Middle East. 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. BEIRUT—Lebanon is the Middle East's only melting pot. Never has the region more needed a peaceful Arab oasis.

However, the country is a sectarian volcano. The capital is but a short drive away from the Syrian imbroglio. A fourth of Lebanon's current population is refugees. Sectarian fractures are widening as the government faces paralysis.

But Lebanon has not yet erupted, so it receives little attention from a U.S. administration overwhelmed with crises in the Middle East. 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.

Modern Lebanon emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire with France controlling former Ottoman provinces dominated by Maronite Christians and Druze, a Shia Muslim off-shoot.

Full-scale civil war erupted in 1975. That conflict ended in 1990. Since then the country has suffered through conflict with Israel, spasms of sectarian violence, and now Syria's implosion.

Despite all this, Lebanon remains generally free and uniquely diverse. But politics systematically undermines the country's economic potential. Periodic conflict has further hampered economic development. Although aid groups such as the International Orthodox Christian Charities help, the humanitarian needs for 1.7 million or more refugees are overwhelming.

The implosion of Syria poses a bigger threat to Lebanese stability. The Shia Hezbollah movement has directly intervened on the side of the Assad regime. At the same time, the Sunni party Future Current has backed the Syrian opposition. Tensions also have risen between Sunnis and Alawites, who back the Syrian government, and Christians, who criticize the Islamic State.

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. “We work hard not to have spillover from Syria,” one general told me.

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. He acknowledged the unique threat posed by the Islamic State, but argued that Lebanese were united against it.

However, Lebanon can blame no one else for its political crisis. The confessional system emphasizes consensus and effectively grants major factions veto power. Stasis is the natural result and today pervades the entire political system.

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 the prime minister was unable to form a government until the following February, and only then by appointing members of all factions. The president’s term ended in May 2014. With two Maronite Christians contending for the position, backed by different Muslim factions, the National Assembly has deadlocked in choosing his successor.

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 government has been unable even to resolve the trash crisis, leading to a youthful protest known as “You Stink.”

No solution impends. The divided, superannuated government staggers on. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told me: “Lebanon is crumbling under the garbage.”

Out of desperation, many people are looking outside Lebanon for a solution. 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.

In fact, Washington should be concerned with Lebanon. The country combines a mix of tolerance, economic openness, pluralism, human rights, democracy, cultural freedom, and liberty unusual for the Middle East.

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. Military intervention is inconceivable and the Obama administration is unlikely to find the time and resources to devote to another Middle Eastern state.

Moreover, the Lebanese political system remains the basic problem. Those who benefit from the country's fragile stability must cooperate to ensure the system's survival.

Many people rely on Lebanon's oft-demonstrated resilience. One person called Lebanon's survival "a miracle."

However, today the entire system appears poised on the precipice amid worsening regional chaos. The price of failure would be catastrophic. Only the Lebanese can ensure that their nation survives and thrives.

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