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**THE IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS ON LEBANON:
GEOPOLITICAL ASPECT
(THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT)****

Abstract: *The paper analyses the geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon. This impact is observed in two forms: one within the Syria-Lebanon relations (a sub-regional) and the other one within the wider Middle East (a regional). The first refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability in Syria has on the Lebanese part. More specifically, the impact that have some factors of the Syrian crisis –increasing confessionalism and Islamic radicalism- on the internal political and religious power relations of Lebanon. The second form of impact refers to the indirect yet critical repercussions that the regional instability of the Middle East has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon sub-region, Lebanon is the primary point on which the regional systemic pressure is applied. As a result of this regional impact, the internal political and religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.*

Keywords: *Lebanon, Syrian crisis, Hizballah, geopolitics, regional power, confessionalism*

Introduction

The Syria-Lebanon sub-region plays an important geopolitical role within the wider Middle East region. Syria constitutes a state that lies at the center of the intertwined interests of the power relations that define the Middle Eastern region. Lebanon, the other part of the sub-region, has been a state where the major regional

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powers have been projecting power through their proxy Lebanese actors for decades.

At the sub-regional level, the relations between Syria and Lebanon have been rather complicated. For three decades, from 1975 to 2005, Lebanon was transformed into an imperative geopolitical asset for Syria. This was due to the geopolitical objectives that Damascus had set regarding the Syria-Israel sub-region as well as within the wider Middle East. Among them is the sustainment of any advantage vis-à-vis Israel and the checking of any geostrategic aspirations of other competitive Arab states in Lebanon, primarily Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

After the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri and the Syrian military withdrawal in 2005, Lebanon entered a new phase of power antagonism between the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance (brought together the Shia movements Hizballah and Amal and the predominantly Christian Maronite supporters of Michel Aoun (who had opposed Syrian influence in Lebanon during the 1990s) and the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance (the 14 March coalition, named after the rally staged on that day in 2005, gathered around the al-Mustaqbal (the Future) party, which included the Sunni forces but also those of the Christian Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblat, who left the coalition in 2011). Subsequently, a series of key events have played a prominent role in formulating the current political power balance. The Lebanon War in 2006 enhanced Hizballah's internal and regional status. The 2008-armed confrontation between Hizballah and the Sunni militia ended in an absolute victory for Hizballah. It was a statement of intent by the Shia organization, which asserted its military superiority in Lebanon. In 2010, Hizballah withdrew its ministers from the unity government, and in January 2011, it supported, along with other March 8 allies, the formation of a new government under the premiership of Sunni politician Najib Mikati.

At the beginning of 2011, Syria experienced the first popular protests that swept, since 2010, the Arab world. The violent reaction of the Assad regime against the first peaceful protests in the south of the country (in the city of Deraa) set the motion for the spiral descent of Syria towards a long crisis. From Deraa, the protests moved swiftly to other parts of the country, notably Hama, Deir az-Zor, and Homs. Within weeks, and primarily in reaction to the initial violent suppression of the Syrian security forces, the protests and demonstrations were transformed into a full-armed insurgency against the Assad regime. The Syrian crisis escalated and was soon characterized by sectarian violence between the Sunni opposition and the Alawite¹ regular and irregular forces (shabiha) that

¹ This is an offshoot of Shia Islam.

supported the Assad regime. Within 2012, the Syrian crisis was spread to the main cities of the country, Aleppo and Damascus (Hinnebusch, 95-113). As the hardliners of the regime led the escalation of violence, many reports were providing evidence that segments of the opposition were increasingly composed of Islamic radical groups (with some of them connected with Al-Qaeda elements) (Rosen, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2012).

By the end of the first half of 2012, the Syrian crisis had also been first regionalized and then internationalized, with the formation of a loose anti-Assad 'coalition' consisting of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France, and the US, and an equally loose pro-Assad supporting bloc composed by Iran, Russia, China, and partly Iraq (Seal, 2011). It was only a matter of time before Lebanon, so closely intertwined with Syria, and began to feel the multiple impacts of the escalation of the Syrian crisis.

The geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon (the beginning of the crisis)

The length and cruelty of the Syrian crisis has multiple impacts on Lebanon. The Syria-Lebanon sub-region constitutes a particularly integrated one, where any major political and military action, development, or change in one part of the sub-region has a direct effect on the other one.

At the regional level, that of the wider Middle East, Syria possesses a most central role. It lies at the heart of the Middle Eastern region. It has a long common border with Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan. It constitutes a "bridge" through which its ally Iran projects its influence in the Levant. It has an ongoing dispute with Israel regarding the Golan Heights and for sure, it almost engulfs geographically the much smaller state of Lebanon. In a way, Syria, by providing strategic depth to Iran and Hizballah, (Hokayem, 7-14) is the 'heart' of the Middle East.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, it is possible to identify and analyze two different forms of the geopolitical impact the Syrian crisis has on Lebanon: a sub-regional one (Syria-Lebanon) and a regional one (the wider Middle East): 1. The sub-regional impact refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability of the Syrian part has on the Lebanese part of the subsystem; specifically, the impact that particular factors of the Syrian crisis, which belong to the cultural pillar of power², such as sectarianism and radicalism, have on the internal political-religious power relations of Lebanon. 2. The regional impact refers to the indirect repercussions that the instability at the center of the Middle East (in Syria) has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the

² By the methodology of the Contemporary Regional Geopolitical Analysis.

regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon sub-region, Lebanon is the primary point on which the regional pressure is applied.

As a result of this regional impact, the internal political-religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.

Sub-regional impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon

The first manifestation of the sub-regional impact is the reactivation of the confessional confrontation in Lebanon, between the Sunnis and the Shiites. On the Israel first level, it is a direct, almost automatic, influence of the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese political-religious space. The main geographical locations where this confessional confrontation has been mostly reactivated are the city of Tripoli in north Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, two areas that are in proximity to Syria and consist of a mixed religious mosaic.

Tripoli, the second largest Lebanese city, is in close geographical proximity not only to Syria but especially to major spots of armed confrontation between the Syrian regime forces and the Free Syrian Army forces, particularly Homs and Hama. The Sunni-dominated Tripoli and its surrounding area have been logistics support centers for the Syrian opposition. Tripoli is also the residence of the small community of Alawites in Lebanon and the part of the city where the Sunni and the Alawite neighborhoods are adjoined has been in a state of low-intensity conflict since May 2012. The Alawite party in Tripoli, the Arab Democratic Party, is also believed to have been receiving funds and arms from the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad (Muir, 2012).

The arrest of anti-Assad Sunni activist Shadi al-Moulawi by the pro-Hizballah General Security Directorate (GSD) in May, and a few weeks later, the killing of a prominent anti-Assad Sunni cleric, Sheikh Ahmad Abdul Wahed, in the northern region of Akkar by the Lebanese Armed Forces led to the start of the confessional clashes in Tripoli. This low-intensity conflict has been mostly contained between the Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tannaneh and the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen, which are separated by a single main street –the appropriately named Syria Street- that has been turned into an actual frontline. This is where the Syrian civil war is re-enacted on a micro-scale between the anti-Assad Sunnis of Tripoli and the pro-Assad Alawites of Tripoli (Cave, 2012). Tens of people have been killed on both sides in a confrontation that has at times involved heavier weaponry as well. The Lebanese army has been deployed in Tripoli and has often been engaged against militiamen of both sides.

The Bekaa Valley has also seen early sparks of confessional violence, though not to the extent that Tripoli has. The Bekaa, traditionally the main transit

route for legal and illegal activity to Syria, has become a transit point and logistical base for the Free Syrian Army. This has created friction between the adjoining Sunni and Shiite towns and villages, which has resulted in sporadic violence and several abductions. Also, there are reports from journalists that refer to training camps within the Sunni-controlled areas of the Bekaa that have been organized to train Sunni fighters destined for the Syrian war (Blanford, 2012). Abductions and violent incidents have also spread to the region of Wadi Khaled, north of Bekaa, in the Akkar district of north Lebanon (Cave, 2012).

Amid August 2012, sectarian violence spread also to the capital Beirut, when members of the powerful Shiite Meqdad clan of the Bekaa Valley abducted more than 40 Syrian nationals (as well as a Turkish citizen) and held them in Dahiye, the Hizballah-controlled southern suburb of Beirut. The mass abduction was retaliation for the abduction of Shiites in Syria by the opposition forces of the Free Syrian Army (Sulome, 2012). The second sub-regional impact is the radicalization of certain Sunni segments within Lebanon. One of the reasons for this is the increasing religious radicalization of parts of the Syrian opposition. Reports from the field indicate that as the Syrian crisis becomes longer and even more violent, the number of Salafi and Sunni-Wahhabi jihadi groups that are drawn into combat operations increases. In consequence, the increase of radical Islamic elements in Syria has also increased the radical Sunni-Islamic elements in Lebanon. This is particularly evident in Tripoli, which has a long history of Islamic radicalism as well as close historical connections with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Khasan, 85-90, 2011). In fact, the Islamic organization Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (Islamic Unity Movement) had transformed Tripoli into an Islamic Emirate from 1983 to 1985. The more recent major incident of Sunni Islamic radicalism in Tripoli was the takeover of part of the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared, by the organization Fatah al-Islam in 2007 and its confrontation with the Lebanese army. But this was an isolated event, instigated by an obscure jihadi organization with opaque roots and funding. Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, Tripoli has been experiencing a renewed wave of Sunni Islamic radicalism, which is closely associated with the increased radicalism across the border in Syria (Wood, 2012).

Another reason for the radicalization of Sunni elements in Lebanon is the political void that has been created during the last two years at the high echelons of Sunni political power in the country. In the most high-profile case, Saad Hariri has been living in Geneva due to a series of assassination threats against him. This void is enhanced by the fragmentation of the Sunni leadership, particularly expressed in the political and economic competition between the Hariri family and the Mikati one (Vloeberghs, 241-248).

This void has allowed more activist and radical elements to emerge at the forefront. They utilized the rising sectarianism of the Syrian crisis to achieve a higher mobilization of followers and supporters in Lebanon. The most characteristic cases are those of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir in Sidon and Imam Selim al-Rafei in Tripoli (Abdo G., 2012).

The regional geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis

The most evident manifestation of the regional impact of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon is the overall pressure that it applies to a confessional political system and its existing power structure. Lebanon's political power balance has been, during the last four decades, a micro-level representation of the balance of power in the wider Middle East region, and particularly of the regional power play between the Iran/Syria alliance against the different security and regional aspirations of Saudi Arabia, Israel, lately of Qatar and until a few years ago of Iraq. In other words, after 1975 and the start of the Lebanese second civil war, Lebanon's confessional "mosaic" composition has transformed the country into a proxy war battleground for the projection of political and military power by Damascus, Teheran, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Tel Aviv (since 2011 the ground presence of Iran in Syria is a serious security threat of Israel). This nexus of regional interests has acquired further importance, after the eruption of the Syrian crisis, within the power dynamics of the wider Middle East. Old actors have receded (Iraq) and new actors (Qatar) have entered the frame along with the "traditional" regional actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia) who compete for influence in the Levant and the sub-region of Syria-Lebanon (Ablaka, 2015).

Hizballah, the powerful Shiite organization (that controls the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Bekaa Valley, and the south of Lebanon), is the clearest example of this pressure that the system applies to the proxy actors on the Lebanese ground. By heavily relying on Iranian funding and weapons, as well as on Syrian logistical and weapons support, Hizballah has been feeling more than any other Lebanese political/military actor the pressure exerted by the ongoing Syrian crisis. Since its founding (in 1982 in Bekaa), Hizballah has been the main proxy actor for Iranian and Syrian power projections in Lebanon and a checking force of Saudi Arabia's aspirations. Under that prism, the current Syrian crisis that threatens the viability of the Syrian Assad regime also constitutes a threat to the sustainment of the Syria-Iran-Hizballah anti-Israeli, strategic, sub-regional axis. This regional threat has led the leader of Hizballah, Hassan Nasrallah, to express on numerous occasions his vocal support for the Assad regime. Furthermore, reports from both Syria and Lebanon have claimed that Hizballah has sent highly

trained units to fight alongside the Syrian regime, especially in urban warfare environments where Hizballah fighters have extensive experience (Loveday, 2012).

It is also evident that within Lebanon, Hizballah has attempted to maintain a relatively low profile in order not to aggravate further the sub-regional confessional and Sunni Islamist factors that have been reactivated by the ongoing Syrian crisis. This may also be explained by the fact that Hizballah controls the Mikati government, which in turn translates as a positive if only temporary, political advantage for the pressurized Syrian and Iranian regimes.

The centrality of Hizballah within the Lebanese power balance is of such political and military importance that any major shift in its course of action that its leadership may decide to take, whether to support more actively and openly the Assad regime or be forced to disengage from it, has serious repercussions within the Lebanese power space but also for the Shiite organization itself.

The way that Hizballah reacted to this pressure within the Lebanese political-religious context is part of the second systemic impact on Lebanon, namely the gradual regionalization of the Syrian crisis by proxy means in the Lebanese space. The assassination of the head of the Information Branch of the Lebanese *Internal Security Forces*, Wissam Hassan, on the 19th of October 2012, by a remotely detonated bomb in the Christian neighborhood of Achrafiye in central Beirut, is the first trace of this regional war by proxies on the Lebanese ground. Hassan was head of the investigation for the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri and he was also responsible for the arrest, in August 2012, of former minister and pro-Syrian Christian Lebanese politician Michel Samaha. He was arrested and accused of preparing a series of bomb attacks in Lebanon directed by the Syrian regime (Black, 2012). Whether all these cases relate to Hassan's assassination is still open.

The Internal Security Forces are the only Lebanese security institution that is not controlled by Hizballah, and since 2005, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon has been receiving substantial funding from the US. Furthermore, Wissam Hassan was in close contact with US, French, and Saudi officials and was considered a key person in monitoring and checking the activities of Hizballah and other Syrian and Iranian agents in Lebanon (Ignatius, 2012).

Conclusion

Lebanon is the first country to be affected by any major shift at the sub-regional (Syria-Lebanon) level. The sub-regional impact of the Syrian crisis has already started to destabilize the internal politico-religious balance of Lebanon since the beginning of 2011. The growing sectarian character of the Syrian conflict, along with the increasing Islamic radicalization of parts of the Syrian opposition,

has reactivated the already existing confessional and Islamic politics in Lebanon, which were, until the eruption of the Syrian crisis, in a state of fragile containment (such as the Fatah al-Islam activities in North Lebanon and the Shiite-Sunni armed confrontation in 2008 in West Beirut). This destabilization is further enhanced by the influx in Lebanon of more than 1.5 million registered Syrian refugees (Harutyunyan, 5, 2022), a fact which can also transform the critical demographic balance of Lebanon, always a factor of great importance within the Lebanese confessional political antagonisms.

Yet, this sub-regional impact does not possess the adequate dynamic to destabilize decisively the Lebanese politico-religious balance of power. In effect, it creates the conditions for full-scale consequences of the Syrian conflict within the Lebanese territory. It is only the increasing interaction of the sub-regional impact with the regional impact that appears to be able to create such a dynamic that could set in motion the conditions for a possible power reshuffling within Lebanon. The initial existence of such a dynamic would then be sufficient to fully energize the opposing forces within Lebanon.

This is due to the fact that the activities of the regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis have also begun to increase. Specifically, the activities of the regional actor of Iran have the following target: the support of the Assad regime. The possible covert operations by Hizballah within the Syrian territory, along with its increasing re-armament within the Lebanese territory, are without doubt in accordance with the preparations that the Iranian leadership is crafting for a possible post-Assad Syria.

Other regional actors - Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are also appeared to have recently increased their activities in Lebanon with the double target of undermining the Assad regime and counter-checking Hizballah, the main proxy actor of Iranian influence in the Levant. The assassination of Wissam Hassan³ was part of this new regionalized dimension of the Syrian crisis that has started to be conducted within the Lebanese territory.

Conclusively, Lebanon appears to be on a threshold. However, the increasing regionalization of the Syrian conflict has resulted in increasing pressure on Lebanon of the regional/systemic impact originating from the main actors of the Middle East. As a consequence, the first critical traces of this impact have started to appear in the Lebanese geopolitical space.

³ A key ally of Saudi Arabia and the US and an equally key opponent of Hizballah, Syria, and Iran.

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