

Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies

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Executive Summary

Lebanon survives against all odds in a troubled environment thanks to a remarkable immune system, but that resilience has become an excuse for a dysfunctionality and *laissez-faire* attitude by its political class that could ultimately prove the country's undoing. Its Syrian neighbour, conjoined as if a Siamese twin, is drowning in blood, pushing waves of refugees across the border. Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shiite political party and armed movement, has been drawn into an increasingly vicious, costly and desperate regional sectarian struggle. Internally, stakeholders, fearing collapse of a flimsy political equilibrium, have failed to elect a president or empower the prime minister, preferring paralysis to anything they believe might rock the boat. Syria's conflict is bringing out all kinds of problems, old and new, which in the long term have every chance of proving destabilising. Despite the urgency, expecting bold measures is unrealistic, but politicians could and should take a small number of concrete steps that together would help reduce tensions while waiting the years it may take for the Syrian conflict to abate.

The country "functions" by containing a slowly unfolding crisis through increasingly polarising security measures and informal arrangements between political rivals. These must compensate for the absence of a president, an efficient executive, a parliament that actively upholds the constitution, an independent judiciary, an economic vision and a refugee policy. While still holding up to external threats and pressures, Lebanon is so absorbed by this strenuous challenge that it is allowing itself, slowly but surely, to decay.

A number of factors play to its advantage. It has ceased to be a primary arena where attempts to shift the regional balance of forces play out; Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya have replaced it (as well as Palestine) in that unhappy role. Massive military and organisational strength has discouraged or quelled any attempt to challenge Hizbollah. And the bitter memories of the 1975-1990 civil war continue to inoculate polity and society against a recurrence of serious domestic strife.

That said, today's dynamics bear an uncanny similarity to those that preceded the civil war. The militia culture of old, which on the face of it dissipated as armed groups were partially absorbed into the state, is resurgent. Longstanding socio-economic disparities are deepening. A large Syrian refugee influx evokes the earlier wave of Palestinian refugees, whose rejection by wide segments of society and subsequent politicisation gradually turned what started as a concern into a major security threat. Hizbollah has added a highly divisive sectarian regional role to its original *raison d'être* as a resistance movement against Israel, for which it used to enjoy wide support. The army, a cross-sectarian institution considered the backbone of what remains of the state, is increasingly polarising.

A new concern is the unprecedented disarray among Sunnis, one of the country's three dominant communities along with Shiites and Christians. Their presumptive leadership, the Future Current party, echoes the growing frustrations of its base while failing to address them effectively; aloof and disinvested, it has opened space for competing claims, some radical or even violent, to represent this disoriented, fragmented and angry community, bewildered by Hizbollah's assertiveness, the evolving U.S. attitude toward Iran and the relentless violence used against Sunnis by the regimes

in Syria and Iraq. In turn, its gradual radicalisation, by stirring existential fears of Sunni fundamentalism among other groups, is contributing to growing Shiite support for Hizbollah and its involvement in Syria, regardless of the cost of that escalating conflict. The army's reluctance to challenge Shiite militancy while suppressing its more immediately threatening Sunni counterpart is deepening the divide.

The political class, which has emerged from and lived off conflict for several decades, is intent on limiting itself to containing crisis, preferring to avoid a bloody showdown it knows would be unwinnable and costly to all over attempting to address its underlying causes. While the informal domestic agreements it has struck are relatively effective stopgaps, they merely help preserve the status quo, while enabling its gradual erosion. Social and sectarian tensions are rising, as the quality of public services declines dramatically for ordinary Lebanese, and opportunities for jobs and personal fulfilment are available for a decreasing few. Instead of exhorting its politicians to represent their interests via established institutions, a weary population has lowered its expectations, circumventing the state apparatus and resorting to survival strategies. These further invigorate informal networks, relationships based on patronage and corruption and rules of the game that ensure the political class remains entrenched, unaccountable and detrimental to what is left of the state.

Poor governance, along with undemocratic, unconstitutional politics, is likely to make the problems fester to the point at which radical change will be the only means to tackle them. A cynical political class has a vested interest in putting off that moment, but, paradoxically, this is also a motivation that can be turned to the country's advantage, as long as time and regional circumstances permit. While continuing to dither is a dead-end strategy for fixing the political system, any extensive alternative would be far worse in today's dangerous environment.

The kinds of small but constructive steps that are feasible, however, include holding long-overdue parliamentary and presidential elections without waiting for an outside intervention to determine their outcomes, as has historically been the case and the excuse for postponement; adopting a policy toward Syrian refugees that both minimises security threats and ensures respect of their dignity and rights; implementing a fair judicial process for Islamist and other prisoners; and holding security personnel accountable for abuses against prisoners, refugees and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, Lebanon is a country where popular activism is still tolerated; its non-profit organisations involved in promoting common good and public reforms must do more to enhance governance and democratic values, to include fighting corruption and promoting rule of law.

If the political class and others who can influence Lebanon's course fail to take such basic, self-evident steps, the country will succeed in little more than surviving present-day contingencies by mortgaging its future.

Beirut/Brussels, 20 July 2015

Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies

I. Introduction

Regional turmoil has put Lebanon under enormous stress. Though it has become integral to Syria's conflict and is bound to suffer from growing Sunni-Shiite polarisation, it has so far avoided a much-predicted meltdown. Major security threats, notably the risk of escalating communal strife spurred by friction between Alawite and Sunni militias in the north and suicide bombings targeting predominantly Shiite areas elsewhere, have significantly receded. The society and economy remain resilient in the face of spectacular disruptions, not least the influx of over a million Syrian refugees, who now account for more than 20 per cent of the population. The country at least appears to have learnt a lesson from its tumultuous past, including the fifteen-year civil war that ended a generation ago but which it has yet to put truly behind it.

Nevertheless, Lebanon is not out of the woods. Dangerous trends are beginning to surface, of which revival of a militia culture inherited from the 1975-1990 civil war is the most worrying. A shaky security framework, paralysed political system, wobbly economy, crumbling infrastructure and the state's waning ability to perform essential duties add explosive ingredients to an already unstable mix. This report examines some of the deep-rooted problems that the Syrian war has made worse and in the face of which resilience is both an asset and an excuse to do less than required even to preserve the status quo.

II. The Internal Cold Peace

Today's situation evokes disturbing similarities with the run-up to the civil war in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the post-conflict years, after 1990, successive governments failed to seriously address the underlying causes of the original implosion; in 2005, the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops laid bare how fragile and dependent on a regional *modus vivendi* the peace had become.¹ Ever since, events have all too often appeared to be flashbacks to the pre-war era, a troubling reminiscence that also serves as a safeguard, because the memories of the price that was paid for collective breakdown are still alive.

A. Troubling Parallels

Figuring prominently in this historical parallel is the presence of armed groups acting autonomously in pursuit of a divisive cause tied into a regional dispute. On the eve of the civil war, and notwithstanding smaller factions playing a disruptive role, the primary such group was the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO);² its modern-day equivalent is the Shiite movement Hizbollah. Somewhat as the PLO saw Lebanon as a necessary staging ground for a Palestinian struggle against Israel of supposedly overriding legitimacy, Hizbollah views the country through the lens of its "legitimate resistance" to Israel, which it deems beyond dispute and for which it has received considerable support from Lebanon's communities.

The questioning of Hizbollah's armed status has increased gradually, as domestic and regional dynamics have shifted. After Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon ended in 2000, Hizbollah refocused on small enclaves, the Shebaa Farms and the Seven Villages, which it claimed remained under Israeli occupation.³ This relatively minor grievance served to deny that all occupied Lebanese territory had been liberated and so justify the movement's enduring armed status.⁴ However, the more abstract duty of supporting a generic "axis of resistance" (with Iran, Syria and Hamas) to perceived U.S. and Israeli hegemonic designs proved increasingly divisive, especially when it translated into alignment with the Syrian regime, manifest in the crisis that flowed from the Hariri assassination.⁵

¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°39, *Syria After Lebanon, Lebanon After Syria*, 12 April 2005; N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005; and N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, 26 May 2010.

² Crisis Group Middle East Report N°84, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, 19 February 2009.

³ In 2000, Israel withdrew from Lebanese territory internationally recognised under UN Security Council's Resolution 425, which did not address the disputed Shebaa Farms. See "Understanding the Shebaa Farms Dispute: Roots of the Anomaly and Prospects for Resolution", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, 2004, www.pij.org/details.php?id=9.

⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°7, *Hizbollah: Rebel without a Cause?*, 30 July 2003; and Reports N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing Out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006; and N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, 2 August 2010.

⁵ In its aftermath, the political scene was split between two coalitions, "March 8" and "March 14". They derive their names from the dates of huge rallies each held in 2005, respectively in support of the Syrian regime and to denounce its overbearing influence in Lebanon and call for the withdrawal of its troops from the country. The former brought together Damascus allies, including Hizbollah and the Shiite Amal Movement led by Nabih Berri, and was joined by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement in 2006. The latter developed around a visceral opposition to the Syrian regime and Hizbollah and included the Future Current, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and the Druze Progressive

The massive destruction Lebanon suffered (mostly but not exclusively in Shiite areas) from Israeli attacks during the 2006 war posed the problem of the collective costs to society of Hizbollah's military stance. In 2008, its military takeover of parts of Beirut to protect its autonomous communication network, which it deemed vital for the fight against Israel, revealed the extent to which the dispute revolved around a deepening sectarian fault line and how much of the militia culture of the 1960s and 1970s still impregnated political factions on all sides.⁶

Tellingly, since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011, Hizbollah and its foremost Lebanese adversary, the Future Current led by Rafic Hariri's son and former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, have adopted diagonally opposite stances that reflect their sectarian biases as well as their geopolitical calculations. The former dispatched troops to fight alongside the Syrian regime; the latter backed the Syrian opposition.⁷ Both cast their enemies in sectarian terms and adopted narratives and actions that fuelled the Sunni-Shiite divide. Likewise, Hizbollah openly endorsed a corrupt, failed leadership in Iraq that the Future Current blamed for that country's breakdown and overt oppression of Sunnis.⁸ Even a conflict as removed from Lebanese interests as Yemen sparked a war of words between Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Hariri.⁹

Entrenched enmity notwithstanding, Hizbollah's military force, which dissuades its rivals from a direct challenge,¹⁰ its broad legitimacy within significant constituencies and its powerful domestic and external alliances (with the Shiite Amal Movement and Christian Aounist current,¹¹ and Syria and Iran), in addition to widespread fear of a possible reversion to civil war, have prevented all-out confrontation. Rather, peripheral

Socialist Party of Walid Jumblatt. In 2009, Jumblatt left March 14 and took a more independent, centralist position.

⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008. Fighters included members of Hizbollah, the Sunni Future Current, the Shiite Amal Movement, the secular Syrian Social National Party (SSNP) and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), as well as Sunni Islamists parties. Most displayed the kind of military training, equipment and preparedness necessary to shift from politics to violence at short notice.

⁷ In 2012, the daily *al-Akhbar* published leaked audio recordings implicating the Future Current parliamentarian Oqab Saqr, a close collaborator of Saad Hariri, in transferring weapons to the Free Syrian Army. Saqr admitted the charges. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 December 2012.

⁸ See "Saad Hariri accuses Iraqi politicians and Bashar Assad of being the reason for terrorism in the region", *Al-Mustaqbal News*, 15 February 2015, www.almustaqbalnews.net/187547.

⁹ For instance, see *The Daily Star*, 17 April 2015; and *an-Nahar*, 27 March 2015.

¹⁰ It is impossible to independently assess Hizbollah's military capabilities, given the surrounding secretiveness and grandstanding. It is believed to have tens of thousands of short-, medium- and long-range missiles. On several occasions, its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has spoken of ability to strike targets throughout Israel. For sure, its fighting force is unrivalled domestically, in manpower, training, dedication and armament. In May 2008, it needed less than 24 hours to quash Sunni gunmen in central Beirut. *Al-Akhbar*, 23 May 2013; *As-Safir*, 25 November 2012; *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2010. Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah's Weapons*, op. cit.

¹¹ The rapprochement between the Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbollah, motivated by a common foe, March 14, materialised in a 2006 "Memorandum of Joint Understanding" defining shared principles. This entente has since grown into a solid alliance. Aoun supported his Shiite ally unwaveringly in the 2006 war against Israel, in denouncing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) set up to investigate Rafic Hariri's murder, in the May 2008 clashes against Sunni and Druze militiamen and in its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Hizbollah's alliance with the Amal Movement led by Speaker Nabih Berri has been equally resilient, despite a tumultuous history of rivalry, as a result of intensifying sectarian and political polarisation and Amal's weakening position. See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°78, *The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role*, 15 July 2008; and N°132, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, 22 November 2012.

conflicts, within the country's geographical and social fringes, in areas where Hizbollah's presence remains limited, have offered a manageable and seemingly sustainable substitute.¹² But the situation is little more than a frozen, institutionalised version of the pre-war template.

In hindsight, this is hardly surprising. The post-war arrangement did not just extend a blanket amnesty to rank-and-file fighters;¹³ it also rewarded many militiamen by assimilating them into state structures¹⁴ and their leaders by giving them key positions. This amounted to "militia-ising" state institutions, as a former minister put it.¹⁵ Militiamen became ministers, parliamentarians and high-level civil servants, expanding their influence within the public administration and profiting from the post-war economic boom. A senior civil servant explained:

Since the end of the war, militia leaders placed their people inside the state and thus enjoyed actual control over its institutions. Managers have little power over their subordinates who in reality report to their political patrons.¹⁶

Consequently, since 1990, Lebanon has perpetuated, as a ground rule of local politics, a culture of impunity that is exacerbated in times of crisis. Politicians maintain militias in various shapes and guises and protect their members from any accountability under the law by providing political cover. Recruits join, inter alia, to earn a living, acquire social status¹⁷ and draw attention to their otherwise neglected grievances.¹⁸

In this fragile status quo, the main communities, Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Druze, have developed a profound sense of vulnerability: while they decry the state's weakness, the lack of stability and the presence of other militias (which they tend to see as an existential danger), they condone or rally behind their own civil war-era leaders and associated paramilitary forces as a necessary deterrent against external threats and local rivals.¹⁹ In other words, Lebanon lacks a central state that, through a strong

¹² Tripoli, in the north, has been the main fighting arena. In Saida, in the wake of recurrent clashes between Sunni Islamist militants and a local Hizbollah proxy, a bloody confrontation pitched the army against the Sunni Islamists in December 2013.

¹³ Exceptions included members of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), an Israeli proxy; the Christian leader Michel Aoun, who rejected the Taef Accord and was forced into exile; and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, whose resistance to Syrian tutelage led to several life sentences on various charges in 1994.

¹⁴ This was particularly so for Amal, PSP members and other Syrian allies. "Reconciliation, reform and resilience: Positive peace for Lebanon", *Accord* no. 24, 2012, pp. 24-26.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, former minister, Beirut, October 2014.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2015. See also "Les habits neufs du communautarisme libanais", *Culture & Conflits*, 1994, available at www.conflits.revues.org/515.

¹⁷ An important number of fighters share the same low-level social status, with little to no education and menial, physically taxing jobs. Delinquency, including drug addiction, is not uncommon. In times of crisis, as the line between criminality and political violence blurs, "those generally perceived as thugs become the defenders of the neighbourhood, its leader, the community and its honour", a journalist explained. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2014. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida and the Beqaa, 2009-2015.

¹⁸ This is particularly the case of Tripoli's warring Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods Bab Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°29, *New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, 14 October 2010.

¹⁹ For instance, a resident of the predominantly Sunni Tariq Jdideh neighbourhood in Beirut said, "we [Sunnis] are a peaceful community. However, the state is absent, and the others [Shiites] are armed to their teeth. What alternative do we have but to defend ourselves?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2014.

judiciary and monopoly over the means of violence, can act as a neutral arbitrator of sub-national disputes.

Moreover, socio-economic grievances and geographic inequalities, an important component of the pre-civil war mix, are as pressing today, if not more so.²⁰ Although the 1989 Taef Accord that put an end to the war a year later stressed “equitable development” (a term left vague but understood as a more balanced redistribution of resources on a geographic and communal level) as a peace-building priority, quite the opposite has occurred.²¹ A free-market economy has favoured some areas over others, including some that happen to be geographically “central”, as in the case of destitute neighbourhoods adjacent to ostentatiously affluent downtown Beirut.²² Many segments of society – Shiites, Sunnis and Christians alike – feel left behind by a rehabilitated economy that excludes them and have grown disillusioned with both peace and the state. Poor governance, nepotism, corruption and clientelism have deepened this trend, while entrenching the elites responsible for them.

Finally, Lebanon, today as in the past, is vulnerable to the regional tug of war. Rebel infiltration and an influx of refugees from Syria echo the pre-civil war context, when conflicting Lebanese stances toward Palestinian refugees and fighters paralysed the political machinery and fuelled grievances and polarisation. Against this backdrop, it is unclear how and for how long the country can resist the stresses emanating from its neighbour's conflict.

B. *The Syrian Catalyst*

The Syrian conflict that erupted in the wake of popular demonstrations in 2011 has deeply transformed the Sunni and Shiite communities in Lebanon, creating disarray in the former and pushing the latter into a head-long rush to preserve an unsustainable status quo. On both sides it has fuelled radicalisation and violence.

For all intents and purposes, Lebanon's Sunnis were represented and organised between 2005 and 2010 by the Future Current, led by Saad Hariri, who assumed command with the explicit agenda of seeking justice for his father's murder by challenging the Syrian regime's grip on the country, removing Hizbollah's weapons and reinforcing the state. By the end of the period, the struggle had turned to his opponents' advantage, however: despite the Syrian troop withdrawal in the wake of the assassination, Damascus continued to employ important levers of influence,²³ Hizbollah was as strong as

²⁰ Huge socio-economic disparities were highlighted by the countrywide study, 1960-1964, of IRFED [Institut de recherche, de formation et de développement]. See “Besoins et possibilités de développement du Liban”, IRFED, Lebanese Ministry of Planning, 1964.

²¹ Taef text at, www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/proche-orient/region-liban-taef-en.

²² A case in point is al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq neighbourhood. Once wealthy, it is inhabited by impoverished, predominantly Shiite families, but adjoins downtown Beirut, the flagship of Rafic Hariri's ambitious post-war reconstruction. For many Lebanese, the downtown symbolises exclusion, with luxurious shops, restaurants and apartments that are out of reach for most. In December 2006, attempting to overthrow the government, the Hizbollah-led opposition began an eighteen-month sit-in that economically paralysed the area. A demonstrator said, “our protest was against both the buildings themselves and the people in them”, a reference to former Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss's famous criticism that Hariri's economic policy put “buildings before human beings”. Crisis Group interview, al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq, November 2013. Marwan Iskandar, *Rafic Hariri and the fate of Lebanon* (London, 2006), p. 89.

²³ Following a Syrian-Saudi rapprochement in 2009, Saad Hariri, pressed by his Saudi backers, visited Damascus and met with Bashar Assad, an admission of the latter's influence in Lebanon. Hariri's

ever, and the Future Current appeared bereft of resources and defeated.²⁴ The Sunni community, humiliated and leaderless, was left to its own devices.

As the crisis broke out in Syria, Saad Hariri went into self-imposed exile.²⁵ Over time, the Syrian regime's escalating repression of a predominantly Sunni-based opposition, the rocketing of civilian areas and use of chemical weapons, Hizbollah's military intervention²⁶ to support the regime and a divided and impotent international community together fuelled rising Sunni frustration and resentment in Lebanon and the wider region.²⁷ Various Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups, though scattered, weak and lacking a clear vision, cast themselves as leaders within segments of the community. The conflict next door enabled them to connect with their Syrian brethren²⁸ and articulate, by default, a sense of purpose: to challenge their adversaries' hegemony and defend their community.²⁹

The role of Lebanese Sunnis in the Syrian conflict remains limited, but new Syrian-Lebanese Islamist networks are pursuing a jihadi agenda in Lebanon, sparking spasms

constituency widely perceived the visit as a major concession. In September 2010, he implied it had been a mistake to accuse Syria of his father's murder, saying "this was a political accusation, and this political accusation has ended", *Al-Hayat*, 6 September 2010.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Future Current parliamentarian, members and supporters, as well as Sunni sheikhs, Beirut, Akkar, Tripoli, November 2013-March 2015.

²⁵ In January 2011, cabinet members affiliated with Hizbollah and its allies resigned causing the collapse of Saad Hariri's government. March 8's move came in defiance of March 14's cooperation with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) despite expected indictments of Hizbollah suspects. Subsequently, the Hizbollah alliance, supported by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, secured a majority in parliament to nominate Najib Mikati as prime minister. Hariri left the country and adopted a lower profile but stayed as leader of the Future Current. As the movement's bets on the Syrian regime's demise and Hizbollah's weakening proved ill-placed, it entered into cooperation with the Shiite party against the common threat of growing (Sunni) jihadi networks and activism. This was controversial in Future Current; a former member expressed frustration with its "weak, confused, hesitant and withdrawn leadership". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2014. Crisis Group interviews, sheikhs, residents, Future Current supporters, Beirut, Akkar, Tripoli, Saida, Aarsal, May 2012-March 2015; and Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit.

²⁶ It is difficult to independently measure the exact scope of Hizbollah's intervention in Syria as it gives no information on the number of its fighters there. Estimates range between 5,000 and 7,000. It also gives technical and logistical assistance and military training to its ally. It has sent fighters to major cities including Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. In 2013-2014, it was crucial in tilting the balance toward the regime. Between May 2013 and June 2015, it spearheaded offensives that helped retake areas adjacent to Lebanese borders, including Yabroud, Qusayr and important portions of the Qalamoun mountains. In May 2015, its leader declared: "We are fighting alongside our Syrian brothers, alongside the army and the people and the popular resistance in Damascus and Aleppo and Deir Ezzor and Qusayr and Hasakeh and Idlib. We are present today in many places and we will be present in all the places in Syria that this battle requires". *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2015; *An-Nahar*, 25 May 2015; *Al-Akhbar*, 20 February 2015; and "Nasrallah: Hezbollah to increase presence in Syria", *Al Jazeera*, 25 May 2015.

²⁷ Regional developments, especially in Iraq and Yemen, have exacerbated these feelings. Crisis Group interviews, Sunni sheikhs, militants, activists, Beirut and Tripoli, March 2015.

²⁸ Ties between Lebanese and Syrian Islamists had all but ended since the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on Islamists in Tripoli and central Syria in the early 1980s.

²⁹ This ranges from assisting Syrian refugees to helping rebels, fighting in Syria and, more broadly, pursuing "an Islamic project [of establishing an Islamic emirate] that has now become a realistic vision and not just a dream". Crisis Group interview, Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, March 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Sunni sheikhs, militants and activists, May 2012-March 2015.

of violence.³⁰ In 2013-2014, suicide bombings and other deadly attacks hit Hizbollah fighters, Shiite neighbourhoods, Iranian assets and the Lebanese Army, which has gradually become the primary target, both as a direct enemy in the eyes of various Islamist groups³¹ and as a perceived Hizbollah proxy.³² A worrying pattern of clashes on the eastern border pits the military and Hizbollah against rebels infiltrating from Syria, allegedly with Lebanese help. In January 2015, two Sunni Lebanese blew themselves up in Tripoli's predominantly Alawite neighbourhood of Jabal Mohsen, killing and injuring dozens. Arguably, a demonstration more of inchoate anger than organised violence. A religious sheikh in Tripoli explained:

We sheikhs are making huge efforts to dissuade young Sunnis from turning to violence. But the brutality of the Syrian regime and its allies is a deal-breaker. The belief in violence as the only way to counter Iran's regional hegemony is widespread among Islamists, and an incident can trigger emotions that annul months of rational discussions. I recall a young engineer whom I had worked hard to convince that fighting in Syria was reckless and useless. It took just one video of barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian regime on Homs to change his mind. He went there [to fight] and was killed.³³

Trends among Shiites are no more uplifting. Syria's conflict has further entrenched Hizbollah's armed status and extended militia-isation within the community through stepped-up recruitment, given the need to operate in both Lebanese and Syrian theatres. Suicide attacks in Beirut's predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods have legitimised heightened, intrusive security measures by both Hizbollah and Amal: identity checks,

³⁰ Some Lebanese Sunni Islamists have joined the fight against the Syrian regime. Assessing the full extent of their involvement is difficult; usually reliable sources estimated Lebanese pro-opposition fighters in the low hundreds as of August 2014, a figure not corroborated. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese officials, Sunni sheikhs, Tripoli, Beirut, October 2013-August 2014.

³¹ The Lebanese army has launched assaults against Islamist networks in Tripoli, Saida and Palestinian camps. *The Daily Star*, 22 March 2015; *an-Nahar*, 9 August 2014; *al-Monitor*, 9 September 2014; and "Lebanese army encircling Beddawi camp", The Electronic Intifada, 26 March 2010 (www.electronicintifada.net).

³² Perception of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), until then often seen as beholden to the Syrian regime, changed dramatically when they refrained from suppressing anti-Syrian demonstrators in the aftermath of Rafic Hariri's assassination. The multi-confessional army worked to redeem and redefine itself as a national institution equidistant from all segments of society and polity. Its posture during the May 2008 crisis was a first breach of this balancing act. Fearing for its cohesion, it watched as Hizbollah and allies took control of Future Current headquarters and facilities and a Hariri-owned television station and encircled the residences of Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt in West Beirut. March 14, Sunni Islamists and many ordinary Sunnis bitterly criticised its passivity. The notion that Hizbollah and Aoun control the army and its intelligence branch started to take root. The Syrian conflict and the fight against Sunni extremists who have repeatedly attacked its personnel brought the LAF and Hizbollah closer together. Though LAF officials stress the distinction between their mission to defend Lebanon and Hizbollah's forays into Syria, Sunnis commonly believe the army protects the home front to better enable Hizbollah to project force abroad. Crisis Group interviews, March 14 coalition members, LAF officials, Sunni Islamists and residents, Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Saida and the Beqaa, March 2014-May 2015. U.S. embassy Beirut cables at www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BEIRUT1435_a.html; and www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BEIRUT681_a.html; "The Lebanese Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 February 2009.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Sunni sheikh, Tripoli, March 2015.

vehicle controls and armed patrols have become part of everyday life, especially during political and religious events.³⁴

Shiites are not only relying ever more on Hezbollah than the state for security; they are also joining the movement in increasing numbers. The party has intensified recruitment and training to satisfy growing manpower needs in Syria. It also has re-energised the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (Sarayat al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya), a loose paramilitary formation that relies on popular mobilisation rather than the thorough vetting, indoctrination and drills Hezbollah makes its hard-core fighters undergo. In the name of fighting Sunni extremists, this militia brings together Shiites and non-Shiites who do not have to comply with Hezbollah's rigorous religious and martial discipline.³⁵ Its main objective, members say, is to secure the party's home front as a type of adjunct civil guard to its military force. Some members are reportedly dispatched to party strongholds in north-eastern Lebanon for neighbourhood guard duties.³⁶ Watching a screen running CCTV footage of a Shiite neighbourhood, a local brigade leader explained:

The Saraya's role is to have the resistance's back. We keep an eye on any move that might seem suspicious and anyone who could threaten Hezbollah from within. This includes Israeli spies and our rivals' supporters. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, *takfiri* cells and Syrian refugees are our primary concern.³⁷

Compared to Hezbollah, these brigades show little self-restraint, a result primarily of poor training and discipline. They have been involved in street-corner clashes, including against Hezbollah's allies.³⁸ Critics among Hezbollah foes and supporters say they do the party's dirty work; "they are Hezbollah's thugs", said a journalist close to the Shiite movement.³⁹ The recruitment of non-Shiites, moreover, has raised suspicions among the party's critics, who see it as an effort by Hezbollah to infiltrate, co-opt and divide other communities.⁴⁰

³⁴ Crisis Group observations, predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods, January-December 2014.

³⁵ The brigades were created in the late 1990s to attract non-party members, notably non-Shiites. Sarayat al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya was frozen after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. It was partially reactivated in the wake of the 2006 war and the standoff between Hezbollah and the Future Current-led March 14 coalition. Crisis Group interviews, members of Lebanese Resistance Brigades, journalists with close Hezbollah ties, Beirut, October 2013-May 2014.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, members, Lebanese Resistance Brigades, Beirut, October 2013-May 2014; "Hezbollah dispatches the Resistance Brigades fearing potential clashes", *South Lebanon*, 21 December 2014, at www.southlebanon.org/archives/135478.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq, October 2013. *Takfiris* are Islamists who consider those who do not follow their fundamentalist creed, including fellow Muslims, apostates.

³⁸ See *al-Liwaa*, 4 December 2013. In the run-up to a bloody December 2013 confrontation between the army and supporters of the firebrand Sunni cleric Ahmad al-Assir in a Saida suburb, the latter said brigades members had taken residence in apartments around the Bilal Bin Rabah mosque where he preached so as to spy on him, and demanded they leave. *An-Nahar*, 24 June 2013. See also, *The Daily Star*, 13 November 2013; and *al-Akhabar*, October 19 2013.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, journalist, Beirut, October 2013; Hezbollah supporters, Future Current supporters and Sunni sheikhs, Beirut, Tripoli and Saida, October 2013-May 2014.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Sunni and Christian government and party officials, Sunni sheikhs and Islamist militants, Beirut, Tripoli and Saida, October 2013-May 2014.

III. Containment and Deflection

A. *Dodging the Issues*

While the Syria conflict unquestionably puts Lebanon under great strain, it has also allowed Lebanese actors to turn a blind eye to the home-grown crisis.⁴¹ In particular, growing Sunni militancy has shifted the debate from local causes of radicalisation, including the role of Lebanese actors in fuelling it, to its manifestations. But Sunni extremism in Lebanon is not merely a by-product of regional turmoil. At root, it is an outgrowth of post-civil war shortcomings, namely persecution and manipulation of Islamists by the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus. Sunni Islamists have been subjected to indiscriminate arrests, indefinite detention without trial and torture, all of which have fostered a sense of persecution.⁴² Moreover, state neglect and bad governance have deprived certain segments of society of prospects for education and economic and social advancement.

Since the Hariri assassination, local actors have brought things to a head. Hizbollah has lumped together Sunni extremists and moderates in its accusation they serve an Israeli agenda and has fought predominantly Sunni opponents in both Lebanon (2008) and Syria (since 2012), while papering over radicalisation within its own ranks.⁴³ The Future Current has alternatively fanned flames and cooled sectarian sentiments, as its confrontation with Hizbollah ebbs and flows, and partnered with radical religious opinion leaders while maintaining its own relatively pragmatic discourse.⁴⁴ Despite a measure of cooperation initiated in 2014 to contain the deteriorating security situation, both camps are to blame for igniting intense sectarian polarisation that the regional chasm only exacerbates.⁴⁵

Portraying jihadis as an existential threat to the country has helped the Lebanese army cover up its own failings. A cross-sectarian institution once considered a comparatively neutral “backbone” of the state,⁴⁶ it has seen its legitimacy increasingly questioned in Sunni quarters for turning a blind eye to Shiite militancy, standing idle

⁴¹ Tellingly, according to a TV reporter, the labour minister, when questioned on widespread discrimination and abuse against domestic workers, replied: “Why you are interested in this issue; go focus on the crimes of [the jihadi groups] Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2015.

⁴² In June 2015, videos showed Islamist inmates being humiliated in Roumieh prison. “Lebanese police seen beating prisoners in leaked videos”, Al Jazeera, 21 June 2015. Crisis Group interviews, ex-detainees and sheikhs, Beirut and Tripoli, May 2013-March 2015. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, 26 May 2010, pp. 23-29. See also the booklet published by parents of Islamist detainees, “Dinniyeh detainees: Truth and Tragedy” (undated); and “Lebanon: Torture and unfair trial of the Dhinniyah detainees”, Amnesty International May 2003. Anger among Sunni militants peaked in May 2015, when ex-Minister Michel Samaha, arrested on terror charges in 2012, was sentenced to four-and-a-half “judicial years” (a judicial year equals nine months) in prison, while Islamists have often served much longer, without trial, on similar or lesser charges. Crisis Group interviews, Sunni sheikhs and Islamists, Beirut and the Beqaa, May 2015.

⁴³ Hizbollah leaders have on various occasions accused Future Current and the Syrian political opposition of plotting against the “axis of resistance” in the service of Israel. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, June 2011-September 2013. See also *al-Manar*, 6 December 2011, 26 May 2013.

⁴⁴ For Future Current-Islamist ties, see Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon's Politics*, op. cit., pp. 23-26.

⁴⁵ *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 April 2014; also see below.

⁴⁶ Traditionally, the army commander is a Christian Maronite. The officer corps and the rank and file are thought to be mixed. See also fn. 32 above.

in the face of Syrian regime attacks on Lebanese Sunni villages⁴⁷ and cracking down on Sunni Islamists as a perennial scapegoat, while drawing much of its manpower from downtrodden Sunni areas. Its stated goal of suppressing jihadi networks is bringing destruction to already impoverished Sunni areas such as Tripoli's old town and Bab Tebbaneh neighbourhood, as well as Aarsal in the north east, and has spurred indiscriminate raids and arrests, torture and other human rights abuses.⁴⁸ Such actions tarnish the military's standing and worsen Sunni resentment and radicalism. Ominously, perception and depiction of it as "a Hizbollah agent" is spreading across Sunni social classes.⁴⁹

To garner domestic and international support,⁵⁰ the military launched an emotionally charged advertising campaign against "terrorism"⁵¹ that did not go down well with many Sunnis, who have noted that any opposition to Hizbollah and the Syrian regime tends to be labelled as such. A Lebanese non-Islamist activist sympathetic to the Syrian opposition said, typically, "this is not a campaign in support of the army but against Sunnis".⁵²

Alongside Sunni jihadis, Syrian refugees frequently take the blame for everything wrong within Lebanon, from economic hardship to failing basic services and growing insecurity – a trump card the political class plays at every opportunity instead of agreeing on a policy to address the challenge.⁵³ Numbering over one million⁵⁴ and living mostly in dire conditions scattered in more than 1,500 locations across the country,

⁴⁷ In December 2013, the army exceptionally fired anti-aircraft missiles at Syrian planes over Aarsal. Al Jazeera, 30 December 2013.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Sunni residents, sheikhs, and Islamist militants, Tripoli, Akkar, Beirut and Saida, October 2013-March 2015. See also "Above criticism: Lebanon's army and the national media", Middle East Eye, 17 April 2015; and "Lebanon: Instability, Crackdown Harming Rights", Human Rights Watch, 29 January 2015.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Sunni residents, sheikhs, Islamists and militants, Tripoli, Akkar, Beirut and Saida, October 2013-March 2015.

⁵⁰ The U.S. and France have voiced commitment to Lebanon's stability amid regional turmoil and in the past year have stepped up assistance to the army in its fight against Sunni extremists. France has retained influence in Lebanon, even if limited, by keeping dialogue channels with all Lebanese actors, including Hizbollah. As a result, it has occasionally been able to play an important role in mediating disputes. The U.S., for its part, has paid irregular attention to Beirut politics. Its active support of 14 March during the Bush administration decreased significantly after 2008. In addition, pro-Western Lebanese officials expressed concern about the perception that the U.S. was becoming increasingly tolerant of Iran and Hizbollah's role in the region ahead of the nuclear agreement concluded on 14 July 2015. In April 2015, the State Department's request that activities of a U.S.-funded Lebanese NGO to "foster an independent moderate Shiite voice" be terminated, ostensibly because these activities were not achieving their intended objective, sparked speculation about a suspected U.S. motive to accommodate Iran. Crisis Group interviews, Future Current senior official and Lebanese Forces official, Beirut, March 2015. "US Support for Lebanese Military Surges as It Battles Terror Groups", Voice of America, 10 June 2015. Also: *Al-Akhbar*, 4 June 2014; *The Daily Star*, 11 April 2015; *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 2015; *The Daily Star*, 4 July 2015.

⁵¹ This included TV and billboard advertisements and text messages showing Lebanese of all walks of life in military fatigues and urging support and unity behind the army, with captions like "We are all an army against terrorism". Crisis Group observations, May-December 2014.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, head of a Lebanese human rights NGO, Beirut, October 2014.

⁵³ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°141, *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, 13 May 2013.

⁵⁴ See "Syria Regional Refugee Response", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122. Lebanese authorities claim that numbers exceed 1.5 million. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, March 2015.

they are easy prey for a largely corrupt security apparatus.⁵⁵ More worrying still, central authorities have partially relinquished their responsibility to maintain law and order, allowing local councils and communities to impose their own abusive, discriminatory measures and even violence against the refugees. Some municipalities have enforced curfews, specifically singling them out. Verbal and physical attacks to dissuade Syrians from staying in Lebanon are not uncommon in some areas.⁵⁶ A Syrian aid worker said:

Each day is a struggle for me. Every time I take a cab or walk in the street I have to endure or witness insults and racist comments. I continuously fear a possible physical assault. I know that I am not welcome here, but I have no other place to go.⁵⁷

Refugees' resentment toward their host country is rising, but most have no short-term prospect of either returning to Syria or being granted asylum elsewhere.⁵⁸ Draconian visa regulations implemented in January 2015 may further increase illegal entrants and reduce the mobility of those already in Lebanon, who will think twice before taking the risk of leaving the country.⁵⁹ The situation resembles a pressure cooker. The interest of the political class in using them as a scapegoat virtually guarantees they will become a growing problem.

B. *The Contradictions of Resilience*

1. Society

Lebanon's endless crisis has highlighted, tested and arguably reinforced its society's remarkable resilience. Faced with persistent political stalemate, declining basic services and various forms of violence, Lebanese have adjusted to a malfunctioning state by lowering their expectations, bypassing its institutions and resorting to privatised

⁵⁵ Some Syrians said they paid bribes at official checkpoints to obtain proof of residence in Lebanon or to have documents forged. Syrians also reported verbal abuse and threats at checkpoints. Crisis Group interview, aid workers, Beirut, March 2015. "The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", Norwegian Refugee Council, December 2013.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, Lebanese residents and municipality members, Beirut, Tripoli and Akkar, May-November 2014. See also "Lebanon: At Least 45 Local Curfews Imposed on Syrian Refugees", Human Rights Watch, 3 October 2014.

⁵⁷ Crisis group interview, Beirut, November 2014.

⁵⁸ Syrian refugees face many challenges, including growing tensions with host communities; worsening unemployment and inability of males to provide for families, undermining their status and often translating into domestic violence; and, among women, prostitution and underage, economically motivated marriage. 80 per cent of Syrian children are not in school. Begging has increased visibly. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, aid workers, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, Aarsal, Akkar and South Lebanon, October 2012-March 2015. "The Education of Syrian Refugee Children", The Middle East Institute, 20 August 2014; "Middle-class Syrian refugees forced to live in tents", *Al-Monitor*, 25 June 2015; Crisis Group Report, *Too Close for Comfort*, op. cit.

⁵⁹ The interior minister introduced nine types of visas for Syrians. For refugees, requirements include a prohibitively expensive \$200 fee, a notarised lease or deed title, a signed declaration pledging not to work in Lebanon and, for some, a notarised letter committing to return to Syria when their permits expire or if asked by the government. "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon – Quarterly Snapshot", UNHCR, January-March 2015; *The Guardian*, 12 March 2015; "Lebanese visa regulations cause more distress for Syrians", *Al-Monitor*, 22 January 2015. Also see *Taz* (Germany), 5 May 2015 article (English translation at www.lb.boell.org/en/2015/05/05/visa-requirements-syrians-lebanon-continues-destabilize).

alternatives. These apply to virtually all sectors, from health, electricity and water to more complex activities such as education, employment, justice and even security.⁶⁰

Such default devolution of state powers has enabled Lebanese to get by individually and prevented collective collapse but also had pernicious effects. Most seem to have given up hope that officials may find (or even seek) solutions to their multiplying problems within the state's formal framework. As a result, they have relinquished any notion of holding their political class accountable, seeking instead to maximise individual gains and protect private interests. Many have embraced and interiorised the game's informal rules, according to which personal networks, patronage and corruption are the dominant operating mode and basic survival principles.⁶¹ A businessman put it starkly: "No bribe, no deal".⁶²

Illegal practices have reached such a critical mass that many, while deploring them, argue it would be naively idealistic to resist. In a statement typical of the deterioration, a Tripoli resident complained about widespread vote buying but indicated he went along with the destructive practice:

We can't change the system. It is too corrupt. Whether we like it or not, political leaders buy votes. That's the law of the land. If I don't accept it, others will. So why not exploit the situation and make some money?⁶³

Worse, Lebanese are growing accustomed to violence and work their way around it more than they decry it.⁶⁴ Due to a wide sense of helplessness and resignation, protests against the spread of militias have attracted only a small minority.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ The middle class and elite have access to health services through private insurance. The more needy must seek help from NGOs and charities or reach out to political or community leaders through family connections. Privately-owned generators distribute power to households and businesses. Many buy water from privately-owned cisterns. In 2011, 54 per cent of school-age children were in private, 29 per cent in public schools. *Al-Akhbar*, 7 January 2015. Youth unemployment is as high as 34 per cent. "The jobs that the [Lebanese] economy has created have been concentrated in low productivity sectors that employed mainly low skilled workers. Although the ... education system has been generating a high numbers of skilled graduates for years, many ... migrate for job opportunities outside Lebanon". "Lebanon Needs to Create 23,000 Jobs per Year", The World Bank, 11 April 2013. Judicial system problems range from grassroots inefficiency to heavy political interference. Eight of ten members of the High Judicial Council, the first president and the attorney general of the court of cassation, and the president and members of the Judicial Inspection Committee owe appointments to the executive. The justice minister controls judiciary finances. Distrust and scepticism toward the sector is widespread. Many rely on connections to seek justice or enjoy impunity. "Lebanon: The Independence and Impartiality of the Judiciary", Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2010.

⁶¹ Lebanon is among the world's most corrupt countries according to Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index 2014: Results". A number of organisations and public figures, including the health minister, have launched anti-corruption initiatives. The health ministry has closed dozens of companies, alleging corrupt practices. Since 2014, these campaigns have had much media coverage, but many Lebanese are sceptical. Crisis Group interviews, activist with anti-corruption organisation Sakker al-Dekeneh, officials, ordinary citizens, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, March 2015. *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2015; *The Daily Star*, 19 February 2015; *al-Hayat*, 26 May 2014; *al-Modon*, 1 April 2015.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2014.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, October 2013.

⁶⁴ For instance, businessmen have reportedly paid fighters to safeguard businesses. Many interviewees said they continue normal life as if nothing is happening. In some cases, nightlife and partying, even during Israeli airstrikes in 2006, are presented as a form of resilience. Crisis Group

An individualistic, survivalist ethos rooted in a communal framework has become integral to the “regime” Lebanese endure. A public cause rarely mobilises more than a handful of activists, whereas mass mobilisation requires little effort when an appeal is based on a political-sectarian narrative.⁶⁶ A journalist lamented:

Many Lebanese feel helpless and take part in – and become part of – this corrupt and ineffective system. “Where is the state?”, they say. But its absence is also the result of our own actions. We have lost all sense of common good. Selfishness and petty interests shape our mentality. This goes from how we park our cars to how we “elect” the political class.⁶⁷

2. The political class

The political system is based on sectarian apportionment and power sharing. The unwritten National Pact of 1943 formalised the distribution of high-level posts in government according to a confessional calculus: the president of the republic, the prime minister and the speaker of parliament are respectively Christian Maronite, Sunni and Shiite.⁶⁸ For over a year, the parliament has failed to elect a new president, despite convening more than twenty times to do so, a result of political class polarisation.⁶⁹ Likewise, an intra-Christian dialogue between two rival leaders, Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea, has not yielded a significant breakthrough.⁷⁰ If anything, their dialogue highlights that governance is primarily the outcome of informal practices and arrangements.

Despite its abysmal performance, the political class is as unchallenged as ever. Representatives make themselves indispensable to constituents precisely because of the state's shortcomings: their presence in state institutions ensures a modicum of redis-

interviews, residents, journalists and militants, Beirut and Tripoli, September 2013-March 2015. Also see *The National*, 9 December 2014; and The Associated Press, 22 July 2006.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group observations, Beirut and Tripoli, September 2013-May 2014; interviews, NGO activists and residents, Tripoli, Beirut and Saida, September 2013-May 2014

⁶⁶ Rare exceptions include 2011 demonstrations calling for the “fall of the sectarian regime and its figures” and demanding democratic and secular reforms, which drew thousands; and recurrent protests by government workers and public and private school teachers for higher wages.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2015.

⁶⁸ This practice continued in post-war years. The Taef Accord, *op. cit.*, that ended fifteen years of civil war (also known as the National Agreement Document) only stipulates equal distribution between Christians and Muslims of parliament seats (with proportionality for sub-sects within each group) and of top-level public posts, without “allocating any particular post to a specific sect”. It also sets the abolishment of “political sectarianism [as] a fundamental national objective”. However, the political class has extended sectarian allocation to much of the administration.

⁶⁹ The Taef Accord considerably reduced the president's powers, though he retains important prerogatives. His actual power depends both on personality and popular and political support.

⁷⁰ Both Michel Aoun – who returned from a fifteen-year exile in 2005 – and Samir Geagea, released that year after more than a decade in prison, have presidential ambitions. However, they are polarising figures among Christians and wider society. Their main domestic backers, respectively Hizbollah and Future Current, are too divided to reach consensus, so bet on dialogue between the rivals to end stalemate. Meeting in June 2015 for the first time since 2005, the two leaders announced a “Declaration of Intent” to elect a “strong president”. A few days later, Hizbollah's deputy secretary general declared: “The other side [March 14] has two choices: either the election of General Michel Aoun as president, or facing an indefinite [presidential] vacuum. God knows how long this will last”. “Geagea and Aoun meet, announce Declaration of Intent between FPM, LF”, National News Agency, 2 June 2015; *The Daily Star*, 9 June 2015. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The New Lebanese Equation*, *op. cit.*

tribution through their patronage networks (which may have political, social, economic, judicial and security dimensions) and a measure of stability (as they share a vested interest in preventing, or at least postponing, collapse of the power structure they collectively live off). In other words, members of the political class keep the state weak but more or less functioning and hold their bases hostage to the system as it stands.

One of the greatest objects of political contention – Lebanon's outward identity, foreign policy and external alliances – has caused extreme tension while never shaking the domestic status quo; since 2005, violence has not reached the breaking point.⁷¹ For all intents and purposes, and to the extent any of the country's political actors have control over this, perpetuation of a shaky equilibrium inherited from post-civil war arrangements has become the desirable status quo. Informal agreements negotiated on the margins of any formal, institutional framework have become factions' primary tool to overcome state paralysis and preserve their mutual interest in sustaining the system. Given their ad-hoc nature, such arrangements, susceptible to shifting domestic and regional dynamics, are imperfect, easily reversed, temporary stop-gaps, not durable solutions.

Whether to halt a cycle of violence, appoint a key figure or agree on parliamentary polls and drafting electoral laws, the political class seeks consensus only under certain conditions: after extensive prevarication; if it feels a critical sense of urgency (often deriving from external pressure); through unofficial channels; and in ways expected mainly to shore up the status quo.

Agreement on issues of major national importance but on which indecision comes at no immediate cost to politicians (such as absence of an economic policy, long-term dangers of skyrocketing debt or need of a framework for dealing with refugees) has proved elusive. Symptomatically, party leaders rarely seek cabinet portfolios for themselves, instead advancing trusted aides to sit in the barely-functioning government. "We have ministers, and then we have what you could call 'super-ministers', whose power is greater but unofficial", said an observer.⁷²

Similarly to the intra-Christian dialogue, the worsening security situation pushed Hizbollah and the Future Current to reach an agreement in April 2014 – the "security plan" – which has helped restore calm in Tripoli, while failing to address deep-rooted socio-economic grievances and communal tensions, the original causes of friction.⁷³ It was subsequently extended to encompass Hizbollah's strongholds in the Beqaa and Beirut's southern suburbs.⁷⁴ This security cooperation between the Shiite party and its Sunni rival, despite the ongoing trial of Hizbollah members accused of the elder Hariri's assassination, is motivated by a shared interest in containing Sunni extremists and a common fear that things may slip out of control. It has produced important results: security has indeed improved noticeably. "For security institutions to be

⁷¹ Since 2007, it seems to be carefully measured. Even after its May 2008 takeover, Hizbollah immediately gave conquered key sites to the army. Warring parties quickly returned to talks in Qatar, signing the so-called Doha agreement, ending eighteen months of political gridlock.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, political science professor, Beirut, March 2015.

⁷³ As per the plan's terms, the Lebanese army and Internal Security Forces (ISF) set up checkpoints and patrols in tense areas and raided the homes of militiamen, seizing weapons and arresting suspects. Despite occasional relapse, the plan has largely held. Serious fighting in front-line areas, notably between Sunni and Alawite militias in Tripoli, has stopped altogether, along with suicide bomb attacks against Shiite neighbourhoods.

⁷⁴ *Al-Akhbar*, 12 February 2015. *The Daily Star*, 30 April 2015.

operative, you need cooperation between the main political factions” explained a retired army general.⁷⁵

Paradoxically, however, Lebanon’s savvy balancing act, while preventing the state’s downfall, also hinders its functioning, creating a host of problems that challenge the status quo in a different way.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2014.

IV. The Limits of the “Lebanese Model”

Lebanon is not like the autocratic regimes that ruled Arab states until the 2011 uprisings. Neither is it a functioning democracy. The political system is an unusual hybrid combining some democratic practices, relatively modern state institutions, selective respect for human rights, sect-based power sharing and traditional patronage networks. Despite many flaws and shortcomings, it has provided a greater measure (or at least a better mix) of freedom, pluralism, popular participation, economic entrepreneurship and cultural vibrancy than other states in the region. However, a closer look at national assets suggests all are eroding.

To start with, democratic processes are becoming the exception. Elections are rarely held on time, and districts are gerrymandered to reflect the changing balance of forces. The constitution is violated at will; law-breaking is the norm and often goes unpunished; a politicised judicial system guarantees impunity for the well-connected and human rights abuse against vulnerable populations (refugees, domestic workers, prisoners, homosexuals). To cite but two examples: since the end of the civil war, lawmakers have not once “elected” a president without first amending the constitution to fit a specific candidate. In 2014, parliament unconstitutionally renewed its own mandate, citing security concerns.

Such shortcomings used to be blamed on domination from Damascus, but Syria's troop withdrawal in 2005 and gradual loss of influence since 2011 have nationalised them. They now appear more clearly the result of a highly polarised society governed by an indigenous political establishment all too willing to preserve its stake in the system at the cost of years of paralysis. Even the relative freedom Lebanese have enjoyed, which many in the region see as an exception, is slowly giving way to a climate of repression, self-censorship, apathy and disarray.

The power-sharing system, a model that emphasises participation of all communities in the political process and state institutions and some world leaders have proposed as the solution for Syria, now inspires mostly disillusionment and cynicism in Lebanon itself.⁷⁶ Violence abated after 1990, but never disappeared and for years has been on a steady increase. The Christian-Muslim fault line laid bare during the civil war has been complemented by new divides opposing Sunnis, Shiites and Alawites.⁷⁷

Economically, the Lebanese paradigm, understood as modern, globalised and services-, tourism- and investment-driven, has shown its limits. Beirut no longer is an island of competence, a pioneering regional hub for banking, logistics and services, let alone intellectual fertility. Rather, it is saddled with archaic forms of patronage, corruption and nepotism; instability fuelling a damaging brain drain, notably toward the jobs market in the Gulf;⁷⁸ and one of the highest debt-per-capita ratios in the

⁷⁶ For instance, Pope Benedict XVI urged “multi-faith Lebanon to be a model of peace and religious coexistence for the Middle East”. Reuters, 15 September 2012. See also *The Syrian Observer*, 4 February 2014; and *The Daily Star*, 5 January 2013.

⁷⁷ Several areas have witnessed sectarian-motivated aggression, boycott of commerce and attack against assets, leading dozens of residents to relocate. Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli and Beirut, May 2009–October 2014.

⁷⁸ This outlet is precarious, however. In March 2015, for example, the United Arab Emirates expelled 70, mostly Shiite, Lebanese nationals. Agence France-Presse, 13 March 2015.

world.⁷⁹ Lebanese have been ranked among the most pessimistic people in the world regarding their economy and their country's future.⁸⁰

Moreover, regional turmoil is a double-edged sword. The proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran has moved the centre of conflict away from Lebanon, but the country is far from insulated against heightened Saudi-Iranian tensions, rising militia-isation, unprecedented forms of Shiite and Sunni jihadism or the intensifying role of non-state actors and their growing transnational sway. Lebanon's immune system is weak already, and the contamination risk will likely grow.

⁷⁹ Fitch Ratings put Lebanon as the third most indebted country, with a 139.5 per cent of GDP rate at end of 2012. www.finance.gov.lb/en-US/finance/PublicDebt/Documents/ReportsFromCreditAgencies/Fitch/Fitch%20Lebanon%20ofull%20rating%20report%20published.pdf.

⁸⁰ *The Daily Star*, 16 September 2014, citing a Pew Research Center poll.

V. Conclusion

The brinksmanship Lebanese politicians have honed into an art gives few assurances for the future. It would be dangerous enough for an acrobat to repeat a deadly act too often; it would be sheer folly to do so while allowing his equipment to deteriorate. Lebanon has left its problems to multiply, deepen and fester to the point at which radical, structural reforms are now badly needed.

However unrealistic a radical course may be for now, a small beginning has to be made on adopting a new set of principles and inculcating them in society and the political class if disaster is to be averted. These include the astonishingly self-obvious: abiding by the constitution and electoral processes and deadlines, rather than using regional or internal instability as a pretext to violate or ignore them; respecting the human rights of vulnerable groups; addressing the devastating effects of neglecting the country's social and geographic fringes; promoting a culture of accountability to gradually abolish widespread impunity and refraining from political interference in the judicial system; and fighting endemic corruption within both society and the political system that has become a major obstacle to economic, social and political well-being.

Regardless of what it wants, Lebanon is integral to the regional struggle and cannot hope to truly insulate itself. Still, this is no reason to do nothing, and the most important thing its political actors could do is at least try to strengthen its immune system. They should do so by implementing a number of realistic and immediate steps, including, inter alia, holding parliamentary and presidential elections; defining a policy toward Syrian refugees that both minimises security threats and ensures respect of their dignity and rights; implementing a fair judicial process for Islamist prisoners; and taking to task security personnel responsible for human rights abuse against prisoners, refugees, homosexuals and other vulnerable groups. Little can be achieved without greater engagement also by non-profit organisations that promote democratic practices; they still play too modest a role in raising awareness of corruption and recurrent rule-of-law breaches.

Otherwise, though the Lebanese political class and society have withstood internal and regional strains surprisingly well, their headlong rush into inaction will make the fall that is almost certain to come both riskier and costlier.

Beirut/Brussels, 20 July 2015

Appendix A: Map of Lebanon



Map 4282 United Nations
January 2010

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 125 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2012

Israel/Palestine

Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East, Middle East Report N°133, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Extreme Makeover? (I): Israel's Politics of Land and Faith in East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°134, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Buying Time? Money, Guns and Politics in the West Bank, Middle East Report N°142, 29 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

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The Next Round in Gaza, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions, Middle East Briefing N°39, 14 July 2014.

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Toward a Lasting Ceasefire in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°42, 23 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

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Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Syria's Phase of Radicalisation, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

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Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria, Middle East Report N°151, 8 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria, Middle East Report N°153, 27 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

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In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey, Middle East Report N°116, 23 February 2012 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).

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Yemen at War, Middle East Briefing N°45, 27 March 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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