Lebanon on the Brink of Violent Civil-Military Conflict

In recent days, a mass movement for the removal from power of a political class mired in corruption has intensified in Lebanon. On March 12-13, a protest rally outside the Lebanese parliament turned into clashes, with protesters trying to break through the gates, throwing rocks at Guardians of Order. As a result, the police had to resort to tear gas.

The citizens of Lebanon are dissatisfied with the protracted crisis in the country. The economic situation was exacerbated by the pandemic. The World Bank said that in 2020 alone, Lebanon’s gross domestic product shrank by at least 19.2%. According to Lebanon’s acting Prime Minister Hassan Diab, Lebanon is now on the verge of exploding and at a point of no return as the country’s crisis worsens.

A deep economic and political crisis has plagued Lebanon since the fall of 2019. Two governments have resigned in the meantime: Saad Hariri resigned amid protests, and Hassan Diab resigned after the Beirut port explosion last August. Seven months after the resignation of Hassan Diab’s government, a new one has still not been formed, which creates even more difficulties on the way out of the crisis, because the financial crisis cannot be solved without resuming negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, and this is impossible without reforms, which will also not happen without a new government. To date, the political forces of the country have failed to find a compromise composition of the new government that satisfies all parties.

As a result, there are protests all over Lebanon, complete with roadblocks. Attacks on stores and gas stations and
clashes with the army and police have been reported in Saida and Tripoli. Participants of the protests demand that the authorities begin to take real action to overcome the economic crisis and improve people’s lives.

The unrest escalated against the background of a sharp increase in the exchange rate of the national currency on the black market. On March 13, the Lebanese currency hit a new record low: 12,500 pounds to the US dollar, while the official rate at the banks remains at 1,500 to the US dollar. A number of analysts have called the possible price of 25,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar in the coming months, if no emergency recovery of the financial sector. Depositors’ foreign currency accounts at banks have remained frozen since October 2019, and prices of many products have risen by more than 400% in that time, according to official Lebanese statistics.

Small and medium-sized businesses are bankrupt: even before the coronavirus pandemic, half of the country’s six million people were living below the poverty line, and recently there have been significantly more Lebanese living below the poverty line. According to Lebanese police data, the crisis has also led to an increase in crime: the number of murders in the country rose in 2020 by 91% and robberies by 57%.

Protesters’ blockade of access highways prevents vital goods from coming in. The director of the Rafik Hariri Hospital has already cited the protesters’ actions as one of the reasons for the deaths of coronavirus patients who could not get oxygen in time due to traffic jams across the country.

Things got heated between Lebanese President Michel Aoun and commander-in-chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces Joseph Aoun. Discontent among the military is growing against the background of the devaluation of their salaries, they refuse to disperse protesters who are blocking the roads. As recently as last year, the Lebanese army was forced to remove meat from its ration because of worsening funding. Joseph Aoun, commander-in-chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces, warned politicians at a press conference on March 8 that the crisis has endangered the very existence of the armed forces. “Soldiers suffering and starving like the people. Do you want an army or not? You want the army to stand firm, don’t you? They don’t care. The officers also suffer and starve. I am addressing the officials: where are we going? What are you waiting for? What do you intend to do?”

In addition to starvation, power cuts of three or more hours a day have become the norm in Beirut. In some areas of the Lebanese capital there is no power for up to 12 hours. The authorities cannot give a coherent explanation as to why this is happening. At a meeting with interim Energy Minister Raymond Ghajar, Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that if a government is not formed by April at the latest, not only will there be no electricity, but the country itself.

France has taken the lead in trying to break the political deadlock in Lebanon: President Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon twice last year and the French Embassy donated food to the Lebanese army in February. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian stressed at a recent press conference that no change followed Macron’s visits in response to his proposed plan to form a government by political parties that would be able to implement economic reforms and fight corruption. In the end, France stated that it could not help Lebanon, which was sliding toward “total collapse”.

But the ultimate collapse in Lebanon could have serious negative consequences for other countries in the region, especially its neighbor, Syria, whose economy is strongly linked to that of Lebanon. This includes bank transfers from abroad, which for a long time helped many Syrians survive after the UAE was cut off from the international banking system. As well as sea cargo from Lebanon's Tripoli, which bypasses sanctions. Nor should we forget the seasonal work that brought Syrians in, nor the smuggling that kept a certain proportion of Syrians alive. Therefore, the collapse of Lebanon’s economy will inevitably have an impact on the already low standard of living in Syria, leading to even greater social losses there as well.

In these circumstances, there are few possible ways out of the situation in Lebanon. They are all related to a long period of economic and political sanitation and to an end to the backstabbing of numerous Lebanese political groups and their lobbyists. The question now is how long the various political leaders and community heads can keep in check a population that has no money to support its children, and the aggression of young people who have lost their life prospects. If the growing radicalism cannot be curbed, and if the Lebanese authorities fail to rebuild at least the rest of the economy and stop the decline of the Lebanese pound in the near future, Lebanon risks being on the verge of another violent civil-military conflict.

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