Lebanon in Distress is On the Verge of Collapse

The situation in Lebanon has deteriorated markedly in recent weeks, with mass protests over the deteriorating economic crisis and political collapse that have taken place in the country over the past three years. Protesters block roads and streets, set fire to tires and trash cans, protest insane price increases, another drop in the national currency against the US dollar, and the lack of access to electricity, water, and medical care. Such actions could plunge the country into absolute chaos.

On June 1, 2021, the World Bank said that the economic crisis in Lebanon is likely to be one of the top 10 or even three worst crises in the world since the mid-20th century. The lack of any solution on the horizon, coupled with the political vacuum, exacerbates the country’s situation. Food shortages threaten the country, and fuel shortages are already affecting hospitals, bakeries, and households. The collapse of the national currency led to a sharp rise in prices, including basic necessities. For the seventh time last year and the second time in a month, bread prices rose in Lebanon.

In June, Lebanon’s army chief General Joseph Aoun reported that members of the armed forces lacked enough food and medicine to live and work. He appealed to the world powers to help the country’s military. The world powers have agreed to support the Lebanese army to prevent the collapse of the armed forces of the Arab republic but have not announced the amount of the expected aid. To solve this problem, Paris organized a virtual meeting on June 17 with partners, including Russia, the United States, China, European powers, and some Persian Gulf states. As a result of these steps, Qatar, during a visit to Beirut by Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, declared his readiness to supply the Lebanese Armed Forces with 70 tons of food per month.

In addition to the deterioration of the Lebanese army, the Lebanese healthcare system is collapsing. Pharmacies in Lebanon began an indefinite strike in response to the cessation of the supply of drugs from abroad, which occurred
because the state delayed the subsidy for the relevant purchases. By now, they have almost run out of drugs to treat cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, and many other diseases, and the vaccination against COVID-19 has stopped. George Shaaban, Personal Representative of Lebanese Acting Prime Minister, said that the country expects to receive the Russian vaccine Sputnik V as humanitarian aid in the near future.

Lebanon’s two main power plants, which supply 40% of the Lebanese population with electricity, shut down on July 9 due to a lack of raw materials to power the plants, resulting in an almost total blackout across the country. The health care system is also sounding the alarm: the inability to pay for imports of foreign drugs has led to a tangible reduction in the list of available medicines, which against the coronavirus pandemic background means an absolute disaster.

The economy is not the only cause of the critical situation, but its main driving force. The power struggle between Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, on the one hand, and President Michel Aoun, on the other, was one of the leading causes of the deepening crisis. The Lebanese crisis is the product of a combination of many factors, both economic and political. The religious fragmentation also adds fuel to the controversy.

Speaking in a televised address on July 6, Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Hassan Diab, who has led the government for more than ten months as acting prime minister, called on the international community to help prevent a social explosion, stressing that Lebanon was on the brink of a catastrophe, the consequences of which would reverberate beyond its borders.

On July 14, Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri announced that he had submitted to President Michel Aoun a new cabinet of 24 potential ministers, drafted with French mediation. However, on July 15, Hariri made a statement after a meeting with President Michel Aoun and said that the president had made very significant adjustments to the proposed cabinet. As a result, Hariri refused to form a government, and the President intends to set a date for parliamentary consultations to discuss the situation as soon as possible. All this plunges Lebanon into even deeper chaos.

The US is pushing for parliamentary elections in Lebanon in 2022 and is disappointed by the resignation of Saad Hariri, who refused to form the country’s government, stated US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. According to him, it is now essential that a government “capable of implementing priority reforms” be formed.

On July 12, EU foreign ministers agreed to impose sanctions against Lebanon’s ruling elite because of the political crisis. In April, Paris had already imposed sanctions against Lebanese officials who, according to France, were responsible for hindering a way out of the crisis. Russia considers unacceptable and counterproductive external interference in the internal affairs of Lebanon, in particular threats to impose sanctions from some Western capitals, said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

Contradictions between the head of the cabinet and the president have been tearing Lebanon apart for months. The refusal of the Lebanese Prime Minister to form a government caused new turmoil. The streets of Beirut have become a war zone. Troops entered the Lebanese capital, and clashes broke out between security forces and protesters. There are casualties on both sides. They use batons and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators. The protesters responded by erecting barricades, and explosions could be heard.

Meanwhile, less than a month before the anniversary of the Beirut bombing, the families of the dead also began protesting in the streets. A confrontation with the police began, resulting in dozens of injuries on both sides. Law enforcement officers had to use tear gas to disperse the protesters. According to the investigation, on August 4, 2020, several thousand tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been stored in the port area under improper conditions since 2014, detonated. Presumably, the reaction was caused by welding work in a warehouse storing explosive products. More than seven thousand people were injured in various ways, and more than 300,000 lost their homes. Amid public frustration over the stalled investigation into the tragedy, Lebanese President Michel Aoun said that those responsible for the August 4, 2020 bombing in the capital’s port would not get any political cover.

With the loss of interest in Lebanon by Arab countries and a lack of enthusiasm in the West, Russia and China took up the country. In particular, Russia offers investments for the construction of power plants, oil refineries, and the modernization of seaports.

At the same time, according to Lebanese media reports, Israel has expressed serious concerns about Iran’s efforts to lead the Lebanese out of the crisis because it could portray itself as the savior of the Arab country. Israel fears that Hizbullah will take matters into its own hands in Beirut, exploiting the transitional government’s weakness.
According to Haaretz, Israel is considering several possible scenarios for the situation in Lebanon. According to the worst one, the situation could unfold along the lines of the 2005 Cedar Revolution after the assassination of Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri. A worsening situation is not ruled out along the civil war lines in 1975 or Hizbullah’s violent seizure of power from the center in 2008. The possible decision of Iran and Russia to intervene directly in Lebanon is also seen as very real in Israel, which could bring some stability by turning the small country into another province of the Persian empire.

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