Three Reasons to be Concerned about Lebanon

The events surrounding Lebanon in the first two months of 2015 have revealed three things which give cause for alarm regarding the internal political situation in Lebanon. Furthermore they cast doubt on the possibility of successfully mounting an opposition to the arrival of terrorist groups in Lebanon from war-stricken Syria.

The first is the Lebanese authority’s blatant underestimation of both the population’s exhaustion from the country’s political instability and the resultant potential for unrest and protest. This potential is particularly relevant given that the number of refugees from Syria has reached 1.5 million, around a third of the country’s native population, while not forgetting about the Palestinians in Lebanon - numbering around 400,000. The current crisis in Lebanon is underlined by Lebanese society’s loss of faith in the country’s democratic institutions. The Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev has observed that in the last five years, amid falling voter participation in populations across the world, there were protest movements recorded in over 70 countries. With this in mind, Krastev puts forward that practically all of these protest movements were organised from below, not by political parties or by trade unions, support for whom seems to have collapsed. It isn’t worth linking this phenomenon directly with the problems of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations; the problem here lies in the authorities’ lack of social responsibility, their mistakes or inaction in the economic sphere, and politicians’ carelessness in the face of external threats.

Secondly, on the other hand, the Lebanese government does have a clear understanding of the pressing need to strengthen the Lebanese army. However any attempts to relay this understanding to global sponsors of the war on terror have yet to yield any fruit. Fighting between armed groups, recognized as terrorists, has been going on in Lebanon for a long time, but it wasn’t until February 8, 2015 that help promised to Lebanon to re-equip her army was delivered, when it was announced that such support would be provided by the Americans. Lebanon, who isn’t a member of the Anti-Terrorism Coalition, asked for weapons, ammunition, and equipment at a meeting of the Coalition’s leaders in Washington in October 2014. They were asking for help in order to fight IS and the al-Nusra front. Included in February’s delivery from the USA were air to ground missiles for army planes and helicopters, heavy artillery, and ammunition. At the same time the help promised to Lebanon by Saudi Arabia, $3 billion in French military technology and other military necessities has yet to be delivered. It was back in August of last year that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia voiced its intent to extend help to Lebanon, but by December 12, France and Lebanon had only agreed upon the technical details of the equipment’s delivery. Thus, the question of military help for Lebanon has been unforgivably drawn out for reasons that are unclear. The most plausible reason offered is dissatisfaction from the Saudi side at some of the behaviour of Lebanese politicians, but to say specifically what the problem was would be guesswork. Either way it took around half a year since the spilling over of fighting into Lebanon for the urgently required military assistance to be delivered. It was the Lebanese premier Tammam Salam that unequivocally insisted on the necessity of the delivery of military assistance. He did so on every level while at international meetings; for instance while giving a speech at the 69th session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2014, or when talking in front of the French National Assembly on December 10, 2014. The head of the Lebanese cabinet also talked at the Munich Security Conference on February 7, 2015 where he drew the participants attention to the successes of the Lebanese army, who were fighting an unequal war against terror amid
a humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of refugees, not to mention the deteriorating internal security of the country. It is clear that Lebanon is in dire need of financial and military help in order to stand against regional terrorism, and the Lebanese leaders will continue to draw the attention of the international community to this question. It is also clear however, that the transfer of anti-terror operations onto Lebanese soil is undesirable; indeed it could be disastrous for Lebanon. This goes some way to explain why Lebanon has not joined the Anti-Terrorism Coalition and why the Lebanese army has refused the chance to conduct joint training with foreign army units on its soil.

The third and final cause for concern is the question raised by the Lebanese army’s courageous resistance to terrorists on Lebanese territory (in the region of Ras-Baalbek and in other regions of Beqaa, including the area just 20km away from the valuable Beirut-Damascus highway). The question is what forces are obstructing the official union of the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah, as well as establishing cooperation with the Syrian Armed Forces of Bashar al-Assad? Surely this should be done for the sake of the success of resisting terrorist threats? The question is basically a rhetorical one. Curiously enough it is the same Lebanese politicians, those who advocate for the security of the country, who will not permit autonomous action from the armed wing of Hezbollah and at then at same time support the forces of the Syrian opposition. Such is the behaviour of world states, who, while accepting the goals of the Anti-Terrorist Coalition, will at the same time strive for different goals which bear no relation to those originally proclaimed.

In December 2014 Lebanese politicians set in motion a very positive process, which allowed one to view the current administration’s handling and growing control over the crisis with optimism; the announcement of new presidential elections, the adoption of a new electoral law, and parliamentary elections. There have been fruitful meetings between representatives of Hezbollah, al-Mustaqbal, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Lebanese Forces. Was it accidental that in January Hezbollah had to demonstrate its fighting capabilities and thus become a target for attacks for both its “aggressive actions” and for ignoring UN resolution 1701 (2006)? On January 18 of this year many Hezbollah members were struck by Israeli airstrikes around Quneitra (in Syria), whereby key figures in Hezbollah’s military wing were killed: the son of Imad Mughniyah (killed in February 2008), his uncle Mustafa Badr al-Din, Mohammad Ahmad Isa, and others. Hezbollah replied by attacking Israeli positions at the occupied Shebaa Farms (Lebanon), from which that same UN resolution 1701 required the full withdrawal of Israeli troops in the first place. Of course Hezbollah’s actions sparked an outcry of criticism that brought, what had seemed to be on March 14, a burgeoning reconciliation with the Coalition to an abrupt end.

An indirect result of Hezbollah’s manoeuvre was that the question of elections for the president of Lebanon returned to prominence. Thus things came full circle. On February 18 the 19th attempt to vote for a new president failed in parliament (the next session was scheduled for March 11). Consultation between politicians from different political camps continues; discussion is particularly active between S. Hariri and M. Auna. Thankfully there isn’t the feeling that certain regional interests stand on the route to achieving some kind of internal Lebanese consensus; such regional interests would go completely against any kind of recognition of Hezbollah as a constructive political force.

The recent visit this January to Lebanon by the head of the Iranian Special Forces (Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution) Qasem Soleimani served to fan the flames of fear of a Shia crescent. The fearful include members of the Anti-Terrorist Coalition. It was plain to see that the visit was intended to increase and strengthen ties, and the meetings themselves with Hassan Nasrallah and the party’s leadership featured discussions regarding tactical steps and corrective strategies for the current world climate. The meeting was intensely irritating for the pro-Sunni regional alliance, and the consequences of this irritation remain to be seen.

As one can imagine the most important thing for the Lebanese people is not to permit the deepening of a crisis in government; the dissolution of a session of parliament because of differences of opinion regarding questions of procedure represented an alarming example of this. It is important that forward momentum is maintained in strengthening all branches of governmental power in Lebanon which would then allow for the development of positive developments in the country.

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