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**POST-SYRIA LEBANON: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL  
DETERMINANTS OF A CRISIS**

*by Karam Karam*

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## POST-SYRIA LEBANON: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DETERMINANTS OF A CRISIS

by Karam Karam<sup>1</sup>

On 25 April 2005, a military ceremony organised at the Rayak airbase in the Bekaa region officially put an end to Syria's thirty-year military presence in Lebanon. With the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the south of Lebanon five years earlier (May 2000), the country turned two of the most important pages in its recent history. Nevertheless, the country is in the throes of an all-engulfing crisis. In order to contain it, the leaders of the main political forces represented in Parliament met in March 2006, upon the invitation of the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, for a "conference of national dialogue". Since the declaration of war in 1975, this was the first time that 14 political leaders<sup>2</sup> entered into inter-Lebanese consultation without foreign trusteeship. The dialogue centres on three main questions that encompass others: enquiry into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri; relations with Syria; and the application of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559.<sup>3</sup> According to the participants in the conference, agreement on these points should strengthen inter-Lebanese cohesion and make it possible to work out a national strategy for the future. Yet the question springs to mind: how is it that just when the Lebanese manage to rid themselves of the occupiers and foreign trustees on whom they blamed most of their major problems, internal disputes have intensified? Starting out from the political situation, this report tries to shed light on the main interests and actors involved in the crises facing Lebanon in this transition period between the withdrawal of foreign forces and the emergence of a new order.

### **From the Lebanese spring 2005 to the conference of national dialogue 2006: the dilemmas of Lebanese society become apparent**

Since the assassination of Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005, Lebanese society has been characterised by a number of dilemmas, reflecting endemic crises in the Lebanese system that go beyond the contingencies of the current situation. Three events have been particularly instrumental in revealing these dilemmas: the demonstrations of 8 and 14 March 2005, the parliamentary elections in summer 2005 and the conference of national dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> Among them are Shia Speaker of Parliament and former head of the Amal militia N. Berri, Sunni Prime Minister F. Siniora, Druze leader and President of the Progressive Socialist Party W. Jumblatt, Sunni leader of the Current for the Future S. Hariri, former commander of the Maronite Christian militia S. Geagea, Maronite former Commander in Chief of the Lebanese Army and former Prime Minister (1988-90) M. Aoun, Shia leader of the *Hezbollah* H. Nasrallah, Maronite leader of the Kataëb Party (the Phalange) and former President of the Republic (1982-88) A. Gemayel.

<sup>3</sup> UN Resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004, a Franco-American initiative, was passed on the eve of the extension of the mandate of the President of the Republic, Emile Lahoud. The major points were the withdrawal of Syrian troops, the holding of presidential elections and the disarming of Hezbollah. <<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/498/92/PDF/N0449892.pdf?OpenElement>>.

*The Lebanese spring 2005*

Much importance has rightly been attributed to the nationwide character and the massive citizen participation in the demonstrations that took place in the wake of the assassination of Rafic Hariri as part of the *Intifadat al-Istiqlal* (independence uprising). In particular, the 14 March 2005 demonstrations drew one third of the Lebanese population into the streets of Beirut. These demonstrations were organised under the catchwords "sovereignty, freedom and independence" by various political "opposition" groups, brought together in the so-called *Liqat al-Bristol* (Bristol Gathering). The demands put forward during the demonstrations concerned the setting up of an international commission of enquiry into the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon,<sup>4</sup> the resignation of the head of the Lebanese secret services and the stepping down of Omar Karamé's government and the setting of the dates for the parliamentary elections between May and June 2005. By the end of June, all these demands had been met.

In reaction to the "opposition" demonstrations, the so-called "loyalist" political groups, mainly the two Shia parties, *Hezbollah* and *Amal*, organised counter-demonstrations. Pledging allegiance to Syria, they denounced the meddling of the United States and France in Lebanese affairs and rejected the imposition of UNSC Resolution 1559 which calls for, among other things, the disarming of the militias. In parallel, they demanded the just and non-arbitrary application of all UN resolutions concerning the region and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Quite apart from their demands, each of these two groups claimed that it represents the majority of the Lebanese people. Deviating from previous practice, the organisers of these demonstrations tried not only to minimise the divisions and the differences between the Lebanese people, presenting them as restricted to a small minority of people, but above all tried to get around the consensual rule, the foundation of all political confessionalism, each imposing its point of view by force of numbers. By trying to show that there is a majority and a minority in the country, they hoped to counter the image of a country socially and politically diversified and divided.

*Parliamentary elections, May/June 2005*

The first of the dilemmas. Although held in May/June 2005, as had been demanded during the Lebanese spring demonstrations, the way the parliamentary elections were run contradicted the expectations of the demonstrators in many ways. First of all, they felt "betrayed" by their political leaders, who were incapable of adopting a new electoral law. While Resolution 1559 called for elections to be held according to "Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence", as it turned out, given the pressure from the US, France and the United Nations as well as from the leaders of the opposition Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri to organise the elections without delay, they were finally organised in accordance with the law passed for the parliamentary elections in 2000. Unjust and tailored to specific needs, that law had been

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<sup>4</sup> The Syrian army officially entered Lebanon in June 1976 on the request of Lebanese Christian politicians, but Syrian troops were already deployed in the Bekaa Valley before that date. The withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon began on 8 March 2005 and was carried out in conformity with UN Resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004.

dictated at the time by the heads of the Syrian and Lebanese secret services to ensure a majority pledging allegiance to Syria and the powers in place.

Then, the lists of candidates drawn up on the eve of the elections in each constituency,<sup>5</sup> presented "opposition" candidates alongside "loyalists" on the same slate, giving priority to the leaders' electoral interests and the usual confessional alignments to the detriment of the demands and ideals brandished during the demonstrations. The cleavages manifested only a few months earlier seemed to have been voided of all meaning by the political leaders. Finally, the national slogans repeated during the demonstrations were replaced during the election campaign with more confessional, more sectarian and less tolerant ones.

In the end, the parliamentary majority achieved through the electoral alliances was once again unable to form a governable political majority capable of governing. Even though the Current for the Future headed by Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party allied to ensure a crushing parliamentary majority (72 out of 128 seats, approximately 60 percent)<sup>6</sup>, they were nevertheless unable to pass the test of government and had to bring in others in order to be able to govern.<sup>7</sup> The mode of governing and the decision-making process in Lebanon thus remains regulated by a search for consensus rather than by majority rule. The problems that erupted during the consultations leading up to the formation of the new government and later during the meetings of the Cabinet rekindled existing debates and conflicts on the role of a political majority. The conflicts in the Cabinet have led ministers to suspend their participation.

### *The conference on national dialogue*

To try to find a way out of the impasse, a "conference of national dialogue" was summoned and began on 2 March 2006. After the 1943 National Pact, which terminated the French mandate and laid the country's political foundations, and the 1989 Taëf Agreement, which ended the war on the initiative of the Arab League and with the consent and patronage of Syria and the United States, redefining the bases and the rules of the political game under Syrian trusteeship, the collapse of Baath rule over Lebanon made it important – essential – to redefine or rather renegotiate the terms of the Pact. But a major dilemma came to light before the conference of national dialogue even began, and that is the configuration of the dialogue itself: the conference has been set above and outside of the institutional and representative channels of the state (both the

<sup>5</sup> The elections took place on four consecutive Sundays in Beirut, South Lebanon, Bekaa and Mount Lebanon, and finally North Lebanon.

<sup>6</sup> There are three major groups in the parliament elected in 2005. The largest, called the Rafik Hariri Martyr List, won 72 seats: Current for the Future (36 seats), Progressive Socialist Party (16 seats), Lebanese Forces (5 seats), Qornet Shehwan Gathering (6 seats), Tripoli Bloc (3 seats), Democratic Renewal (1 seat), Democratic Left (1 seat), others (4 seats). The second group, the Resistance and Development Bloc, won 35 seats: *Amal* Movement (15 seats), *Hezbollah* (14 seats), Syrian Social Nationalist Party (2 seats), others (4 seats). The third group, the Aoun Alliance, won 21 seats: Free Patriotic Movement (14 seats), Skaff Bloc (5 seats), Murr Bloc (2 seats) <www.libanvote.com>.

<sup>7</sup> After long negotiation, F. Seniora formed his first government on 19 July 2005, bringing together all the major political blocs with the exception of General M. Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. The political breakdown is: Rafik Hariri Martyr List - 17 portfolios (Current for the Future - 11; Qornet Shehwan Gathering - 1; Kataëb - 1; Lebanese Forces - 1; Progressive Socialist Party - 3); three ministers affiliated to the President of the Republic E. Lahoud; two ministers members of *Hezbollah*, two ministers members of the *Amal* Movement and one minister supporter of *Hezbollah*.

Cabinet and the National Assembly) and brings together the political leaders representing the religious communities. Whether traditional political heirs such as Amin Gemayel and Walid Jumblatt or "modern" leaders like Saad Hariri or the leaders of militia or military formations converted to politics like Hassan Nasrallah, Samir Geagea, Nabih Berri and Michel Aoun, they are above all representatives of their communities. This search for representation of the communities is not so much an indictment of the representativeness of the newly elected National Assembly, since the members of parliament were also elected on the basis of their religion, as an offence to the state's institutions. Religious communities continue to take precedence over the republic.

Another dilemma appears in the background, and that is the priority given by the members of the conference to their personal interests rather than to the search for national solutions to the current crises. Not even with regard to choosing the successor to the current president of the Republic, whose mandate was extended from September 2004 at the wish of the Syrian president, have they been able to put their personal interests aside in the national interest. The matter is played out at the personal level. After seven work sessions, the conference is already at an impasse, without even having touched upon the incandescent subject of the disarming of *Hezbollah*. Once again, those who demonstrated in spring 2005 feel their expectations of change and reform have been scorned at the table of national dialogue.

### **Endemic crisis and the actors' interests**

Behind these apparent dilemmas related to the Lebanese spring are various political crises revealing of structural problems that go deeper than contingencies. It is difficult to draw up an exhaustive list of these crises, but they can be grouped into three major categories: crisis of power, namely of the presidential troika, crisis of reforms and crisis of the neighbourhood and foreign relations. It is evident that these crises which are played out on different levels – local, regional and international – and engage a multitude of actors, overlap and intertwine even if each involves specific issues and challenges. Whether internal or external, they affect Lebanon's relations with its neighbours and the international community and solving them calls for the contribution of all actors.

#### *Crisis of power*

The conflict that exploded after the amendment of the Lebanese Constitution, imposed by Syrian President Bachar al-Assad on 3 September 2004 to extend the mandate of the President of the Republic Emile Lahoud by three years, has brought to light “tug-of-wars” at the regional and international levels and a domestic crisis of power.

Outside of Lebanon, the interests involved vary depending on the actors. In spite of the withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon, Syria has tried to keep direct influence over decision-making in the country by maintaining Emile Lahoud as president of the republic and through the presence of *Hezbollah* ministers in the government. Thus, with its strategic alliance with Iran, its involvement in the Iraq conflict and its influence in Lebanon, Syria continues to play a role at the regional level and resists the pressures and demands put on it by the United Nations and certain Western countries, namely the United States and France.

The latter are boycotting the Lebanese president and hope he will step down before the end of his mandate in conformity with the terms of Resolution 1559, paving the way for the application of the other resolutions<sup>8</sup> adopted by the Security Council after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. This could weaken the position of the Syrian regime not only in Lebanon, but throughout the region, in Iraq and Palestine. These resolutions are not formally linked and do not depend on one another. Nevertheless, they suggest that the Lebanon-Syria issue could provide a means for the United States and France to shape a common political strategy in the Middle East, in spite of their strong differences over Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Inside the country, the different political forces are divided into two groups on the question of the president. The first, which calls for the president's resignation, consists mainly of the Current for the Future of Saad Hariri (Sunni), the Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblatt (Druze), the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea (Maronite) and the "Qornet Shahwan Gathering" a group of Christian politicians. Their objective is to do away with the symbols of the trusteeship of the Baath regime in Lebanon and to re-legitimise the position of president by electing a new president from among their ranks. This would allow the Current for the Future, led by Saad Hariri, to control two presidential posts – with a Sunni prime minister and a Maronite president of the Republic<sup>10</sup> – or at least not to have a president of the Republic hostile to its political aims. Agreeing on the candidate, however, seems to be one of their main problems.

The second group, which supports the president or at least opposes his resignation as long as there is no agreement on his successor, includes two Shia political formations, the *Hezbollah* led by Hassan Nasrallah and the *Amal* movement headed by the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and the Free Patriotic Movement of Maronite General Michel Aoun. After the 2005 elections, the latter presents himself as the only Maronite candidate with real representativeness and a large popular following in Christian circles, thanks to which he would be able to re-legitimise and strengthen the position. The two Shia formations, on the other hand, are concerned about preserving the privileges and prerogatives acquired by their community during the fifteen years of Syrian trusteeship.

Above and beyond the polemics, the question of the presidency of the Republic reflects a dynamic of recomposition of power in Lebanon after the withdrawal of the Syrian army at the intra- and inter-community levels. At the intra-community level, this recomposition of power is taking place within the Maronite community, which was annihilated by the 15 years of war, especially the fratricidal war. The most violent of these "Maronite wars" was the one in 1989-1990 in which Michel Aoun, then prime minister in interim and commander in chief of the Lebanese army, fought against Samir

<sup>8</sup> These resolutions are Resolution 1595 of 7 April 2005, establishing upon the request of the Lebanese government an independent international commission of enquiry, headed by Judge D. Mehlis; Resolution 1636 of 31 October 2005, calling for the mobilisation of the international community to help the Lebanese authorities shed light on the responsibility for the assassination and to get Syria to cooperate with the Mehlis Commission; Resolution 1644 of 15 December 2005, extending the mandate of the Commission of enquiry until 15 June 2006 and underscoring "Syria's obligation and commitment to cooperate fully and unconditionally with the Commission..."; Resolution 1664 of 29 March 2006, giving K. Annan the right to enter into an agreement with the Lebanese government "aimed at establishing a tribunal of an international character based on the highest international standards of criminal justice" in order to hold accountable all those involved in the assassination of R. Hariri. <<http://www.un.org/documents/scres.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Bahout, "Liban/Syrie: une alliance objective franco-américaine?" *L'Orient Le Jour*, 15 October 2005, p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Since the President of the Republic has to be a Christian Maronite.

Geagea, war lord and head of the Christian militia of the Lebanese Forces.<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of the war and under the Syrian trusteeship, these two main Maronite actors were excluded from political power, unlike the war lords of the other communities who occupied the main positions of power reserved for their confessions. Michel Aoun was exiled to France after he was defeated by the Syrian army in October 1990 and Samir Geagea was imprisoned in 1994 after refusing to bow to the rules of the political game dictated by the Syrian government. Both have returned to the political arena after the withdrawal of the Syrian army in April 2005 and both are contending, after their electoral victories, the leadership of the community by bidding for the presidency of the Republic with the support of their alliances with the other communities.

At the inter-community level, the recomposition of power is being played out within the “presidential troika”. Ever since the Taëf Agreement (22 October 1989), the central balance of power is constitutionally attributed to a Maronite President of the Republic, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shia Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. This troika regime, imposed in a precise regional and international context, was managed in the interests of the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies. They maintained their power and control over the political sphere by restricting access to political and state institutions and by setting – often arbitrary – rules of participation, in particular through the electoral laws. In this way, heterogeneous political and economic elites without any common political platform or ideology came to power in Lebanon in the period from 1990 to 2005. Their only source of cohesion was their allegiance to the Syrian regime, which in turn determined whether or not they would stay in power. These Lebanese elites easily entered and still enter into competition to protect positions of power that give access to benefits and allow for control over economic interests. For example, there are regularly disputes among the three presidents over administrative nominations. They have often resorted to Syria’s arbitration to set the rules of the game and settle their differences. The Syrian regime gives the veto right to one or the other of the three Lebanese presidents, maintaining a kind of negative equilibrium managed to its own advantage.

The troika regime has become a custom consolidated by the practice of the three presidents. They have set up a system of personal negotiations outside of the institutional framework to settle questions and matters that are a source of conflict or dispute between them, calling upon the ministers and members of parliament simply to ratify the results of their discussions, whether conflictual or consensual. This custom has distorted the representative institutions and the principle of the balance and the separation of powers.

Now, with the end of Syrian trusteeship, the debate over the president of the republic in particular and the exercise of political power in Lebanon in general has put into question even more profoundly the relevancy of the presidential troika and its practices in reaching a consensus in a plural and multicultural society. Researchers studying the application of the consensual democracy model in Lebanon say it is based on four main principles: a large government coalition, segmented autonomies, a proportional voting system and the right of veto of the minorities.<sup>12</sup> But while experts diverge on their

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<sup>11</sup> Also settled by the Taëf Agreement. Other communities, notably the two Shia militias *Hezbollah* and *Amal*, went through similar fratricidal wars in the same period.

<sup>12</sup> See F. El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967-1976* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); T. Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993); A. Lijphart, “Changement et continuité dans la théorie

analyses of the Lebanese confessional consensus system,<sup>13</sup> they all agree that the main weakness of the postwar system derives from the fact that the political elites, because of their recurrent conflicts, have been unable to use stable democratic mechanisms to overcome the differences in society. In the end, these political elites have remained above all representatives of their communities and have failed to become civil elites, founders of a national political power and reformers of the communitarian state.

### *Crisis of reform*

The main attempts at reform undertaken in Lebanon since the fifties have either failed, been aborted or suspended. Of all the political reforms decided upon in the Taëf Agreements and set down in the preamble of the Constitution in September 1990,<sup>14</sup> only a few have been undertaken.

The main difficulty with reform is the deconfessionalisation of the system. With the promulgation of the first Constitution in 1926 under the French mandate, the confessional foundation of the political system that was set up transformed the religious communities into bodies of public law and order. The system was to be transitory and gradually modified as it developed. But the confessional sharing of political representation was confirmed upon independence in 1943 in the famous National Pact, granting the Maronite community clear predominance.<sup>15</sup> This was accompanied by another, more restricted, form of sharing in which a minority of families, of all religions, controlled the main sectors of what constitutes the basis of a liberal Lebanese economy: commerce, banks, small and medium industries, land, etc.

The system managed to resist the crisis that broke out in Lebanon in 1958<sup>16</sup> and the fifteen years of war the country experienced from 1975 to 1990. Then, the Taëf

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consociative", *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, vol. , no. 3 1997, pp. 679-97; A. Messara, *Théorie générale du système politique libanais* (Paris: Cariscript, 1994); E. Picard, "Le communautarisme politique et la question de la démocratie au Liban", *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1997, p. 639-57.

<sup>13</sup> The main points of divergence concern the endogenous (factors within Lebanese society) or exogenous origins (foreign interference) of its failure, its limits (the structure of the political system put in place by the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Taëf Agreement have impeded its development), its transformation (the drift from a consensual democracy towards a tyranny of the communities), etc. Cf. E. Picard, "Le système consociatif est-il réformable?", communication to the colloquium *The Lebanese System: a Critical Reassessment* (Beirut: American University in Beirut, 18-19 May 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Almost a year passed between the signing of the agreement and the effective ceasefire on the ground, and the actual departure of General Aoun in October 1990 and the end of combat between the two Shia militias (*Hezbollah* and *Amal*) in December 1990.

<sup>15</sup> The division of the parliamentary seats was as follows: six Christian MPs for five Muslim MPs. Civil service and ministerial positions were equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Although not set down in the Pact, according to an unwritten agreement, the President of the Republic was a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament a Shia Muslim.

<sup>16</sup> That crisis was dealt with in a sectarian manner in a tormented regional and international context, revealing not only the fragility of the National Pact of 1943, but above all the profound dysfunctioning of the Lebanese socio-economic system and the division of wealth between different groups and regions. In fact, according to G. Corm, "en 1956-1958, une rupture bilatérale du Pacte national s'ajoute aux abus de pouvoir du président de la République [C. Chamoun de 1952 à 1958]: les chrétiens vont loucher très fort du côté de l'Occident, les musulmans du côté de Nasser et de la République arabe unie qui vient d'être créée entre l'Égypte et la Syrie. (...) Le vent de l'anti-impérialisme souffle fort dans la région (...)". Cf. G. Corm, *Le Liban contemporain. Histoire et société* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003) p. 101.



Agreements, proclaiming national entente,<sup>17</sup> ushered in an era of new political rules in Lebanon, both at the institutional and the practical levels, drawing strongly on the heritage of the 1943 National Pact and the confessional political system. With regard to power sharing and the equilibria between the institutions and the communities, it transferred executive power from the President of the Republic, as set down in Article 17 of the 1926 Constitution, to the Cabinet, in a kind of collegial power. And, while specifying the religious identity of the three presidents and establishing equal representation between Christian and Muslim members of parliament, the agreement established the principle of the deconfessionalisation of other public functions. From then on, according to the Constitution, no other function besides the three presidential posts and the seats in parliament were to be attributed to any specific confession. This has not been translated into fact.

Apart from these reforms, which were distorted by the practice of the presidential troika and the political class, others that could have achieved structural changes in the Lebanese system are still suspended. New institutions that are to guarantee the rule of law have either been put into place but have no real or effective power (this is the case of the Constitutional Council and the Economic and Social Council) or have not been set up at all (this is the case of the High Court, the mission of which would be to judge the presidents and ministers, and the Senate<sup>18</sup>). The setting up of these institutions continues to be a source of debate and disaccord between the political powers over the sharing and influence of each within them. Reforms related to the gradual suppression of political confessionalism, the extension of administrative decentralisation, and the adoption of a new electoral law, have not been implemented to date. Economically, the ultra-liberal option chosen by the public powers, which George Corm calls "economic neo-Lebanonism",<sup>19</sup> the cost of reconstruction, the corruption and the squandering have sent the public debt spiraling to around US\$ 40 billion, equivalent to 180 percent of GDP, in 2005.

The implementation of reforms remains subject to the interpretation of the political and administrative authorities. This gives rise to permanent bartering between political leaders and community representatives who assent to the sectarianism and clientelism in the Lebanese political system. This method of functioning, which can be described as "limited pluralism" or "slightly democratic neo-liberalism",<sup>20</sup> goes beyond the political and administrative sphere of the presidents, ministers, MPs and high officials, to all relations between individuals and the state apparatus. In this sense, while the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 reforms strengthened the legitimacy of the state, the allegiance of the Lebanese will remain divided, according to Nawaf Salam, between

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<sup>17</sup> According to J. Maïla "cet accord consacre de manière normative 'l'ordre de la coexistence', devenu une règle impérative de fonctionnement", *L'Orient Le Jour*, 25 April 2002.

<sup>18</sup> According to Article 22 of the Constitution, "With the election of the first Chamber on a national, non-confessional basis, a Senate will be established in which all the religious communities are represented. Its authority is limited to major national issues."

<sup>19</sup> Corm, *Le Liban contemporain. Histoire et société*, p. 237.

<sup>20</sup> The issues of clientelism, favouritism and corruption are recurrent in the public debate. Attempts to remedy this "system" have multiplied throughout Lebanon's contemporary history, in particular with the "Chéhabist" administrative reforms carried out under Presidents F. Chéhab (1958-64) and C. Hélou (1964-70). The postwar period has also witnessed a number of attempts at "administrative purification" (*Tathir idari*), in particular after E. Lahoud became president of the Republic in 1998, which were however contested for their political and clientist nature.

their community belonging and their deference to their patrons as long as the state does not transcend the confessional cleavages and replace them with citizens' relations.<sup>21</sup> Because of this endemic crisis of reform, the Lebanese government faces the challenge today to define a global vision that can open up parallel prospects in the public, social and economic domains. The challenge has become so great that the government is preparing a conference of donor countries called "Beirut 1" to ask for financial assistance from the Arab countries and the international community.

### *The neighbourhood crisis*

Finally, Lebanon has for many decades been and still is the theatre of a number of regional conflicts and disputes that have international dimensions and spinoffs. Today, despite the substantial changes at the international level – the end of the Cold War, the demise of the regime of Saddam Hussein – and the national level – the withdrawal of Israeli<sup>22</sup> and Syrian troops from Lebanese territory – the country is still in the midst of an ongoing crisis with its neighbours, Syria and Israel, and has numerous internal problems of regional relevance, notably the question of the Palestinian refugees. The issues, actors and challenges of these crises will be discussed here without going into their origins or the different stages of their development.

*Crisis with Syria.* The Syrian army's pull-out from Lebanon did not put an end to conflict between the two countries. Normalisation of relations is still impeded by two main disputes – border demarcation and diplomatic representation – without mentioning the issue, which is beyond the scope of this article, of Lebanese prisoners in Syria and its implications in terms of human rights and war memories.

Establishing the border between the two countries is most controversial near the geostrategic Shebaa Farm region in the south of Lebanon, at the confluence of three borders, the Lebanese, the Syrian and the Israeli. The issue arose immediately after the withdrawal of the Israeli army from South Lebanon in May 2000, when the Lebanese authorities, supported by the Syrian regime, proclaimed that the territory not evacuated by the Israeli army was Lebanese. For those areas, they have invoked application of UNSC Resolution 425 on the territorial integrity of Lebanon. Israel, on the other hand, considers the territory part of the Syrian Golan Heights occupied by its army in 1967 and insists that its evacuation relates instead to application of UNSC Resolution 242, which condemns Israeli occupation of foreign territory after the 1967 war. The United Nations has continued to treat the matter from a legal point of view. Officials have stated that "the Shebaa Farms sector lies in the Syrian territory occupied by Israel" and that "this status remains valid unless and until the time when the governments of the two countries (Lebanon and Syria) take measures, in conformity with international law, to

<sup>21</sup> N. Salam, *La condition libanaise: des communautés, du citoyen, et de l'État* (Beirut : Dar An-Nahar, 1998) pp. 67-80.

<sup>22</sup> The Israeli army invaded southern Lebanon for the first time in March 1978. It withdrew partially in June of the same year under pressure from the international community, giving way to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mandated by UNSC Resolutions 425, but maintained a presence in a "security zone" that it controlled jointly with the militia of the South Lebanese Army. In June 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon again attacking Beirut, only to withdraw progressively again towards the south between 1983 and 1985, enlarging the perimeter of its "security zone". The withdrawal of the Israeli army from Lebanon (with the exception of the disputed Shebaa Farms area) in May 2000 was carried out in conformity with UNSC Resolution 425.

change it".<sup>23</sup> Yet, on 17 May 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1680, strongly encouraging Syria to respond to the Lebanese government's request to demarcate the border between the two countries.<sup>24</sup>

The issues involved in this territorial dispute are many. The Lebanese government has asked the Syrian government to confirm that this territory is Lebanese, in conformity with international law and the procedures and principles approved by the United Nations and not merely with declarations to the media by Baath leaders. Such a legal act would allow the Lebanese government to demand the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the territory pursuant to the terms of Resolution 425, and to decide on the strategy to follow for its liberation. It would also give it some cards to play in deploying its army along its southern borders and negotiating disarmament with *Hezbollah*. Syria, on its part, refuses to provide the United Nations with the documents required to prove that the territory is Lebanese, in an attempt to keep the dispute suspended and to preserve the legal ambiguity concerning its status – pertinent to Resolution 425 or 242? This ambiguity allows Syria to maintain an indirect threat on Israel through the armed action of the *Hezbollah* and not to cede this territory legally to Lebanese sovereignty (and to keep Lebanon involved in the conflict ???). p. 14 Quark

This legal ambiguity concerning the contested territory also benefits the *Hezbollah*. As long as the issue is not settled by Syria at the United Nations, the *Hezbollah* considers the territory Lebanese and claims the right to free it by force of arms. In fact, the *Hezbollah* has managed to impose its interpretation of Resolution 1559: it rejects disarmament in that it no longer presents itself as a militia force, but as a national resistance force against occupation. In the eyes of *Hezbollah*'s leaders, this legitimates their retaining weapons, allowing them to maintain total control over activities in the south. They continue their resistance in the name of Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity, as part of a regional struggle against Israel alongside Syria, Iran and certain armed Palestinian groups.

For Israel, the question of the Shebaa Farms takes on greater geostrategic importance, since the hills in the region conceal the military outposts and alert stations that ensure their army's control over the entire region. Above and beyond this, by placing the entire issue in the framework of Resolution 242, ensuring "secure and recognised boundaries free from threats or acts of force", the Hebrew state would not envisage any evacuation of this area without security arrangements with Lebanon that would definitely include the disarming of *Hezbollah* and deployment of the Lebanese army along the entire border. The current Lebanese government is incapable of guaranteeing such arrangements, therefore, the issue is out of its hands.

The matter of the Shebaa Farms is an example of the intertwining of power relations and the interests of different players on different levels. It reveals the need for a comprehensive vision for the resolution of certain problems.

The second dispute with Syria concerns the setting up of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Since they successively gained independence in the 1940s, Syria has always felt that an exchange of diplomatic representations would ratify their political division and definitively put a seal on the separation of their geographic entities, artificially created under the French mandate. This problem was on the agenda of the

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<sup>23</sup> Terji Rode Larsen, emissary of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in charge of following the application of Resolution 1559, in his third six-month report to the Security Council. *L'Orient Le Jour*, 20 April 2006, pp. 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> <<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/351/77/PDF/N0635177.pdf?OpenElement>>

"conference of national dialogue" and for the first time there was a Lebanese consensus, at least among the participants, on the need to establish diplomatic relations with Syria and to launch negotiations with its authorities on the subject. The Syrian regime is against it, in deference to historical ties and the treaties signed between the two countries.

Even if the matter of diplomatic relations between the two countries is less serious and urgent than that of Shebaa, it nevertheless involves two major issues. The first is official and definitive recognition by Syria of Lebanon's independence and sovereignty over all of its territory, consecrated by diplomatic relations. This recognition would also imply the decoupling of "the unity of the two destinies", that of Syria and of Lebanon, patiently and progressively welded together through the decades by the master Hafez al-Assad. The second issue concerns the possibility of the emergence of a Lebanese foreign policy that is neither that of the "unity of the two diplomatic processes" – Syrian and Lebanese – set down at the Madrid Conference in 1991, nor "that of the others", in the words of Ghassan Tuéni.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries would lead to the emergence of Lebanon's own, non-aligned diplomacy – a diplomacy that tries to defend national interests in conjunction with that of the Arab countries and the international community.

UN Security Council Resolution 1680, already mentioned in connection with the demarcation of borders, also encourages the setting up of diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria.<sup>26</sup>

*The crisis with Israel.* The second neighbourhood crisis in which Lebanon has been involved for decades is the conflict with Israel. Today, the conflict can be summarised by two issues, the dispute over the Shebaa Farms region and Israeli respect for UN Security Council Resolutions 425, 426 and 1559 on the security, integrity, independence and sovereignty of Lebanese territory. In addition, there is the issue, which will not be delved into here, of the liberation of Lebanese prisoners in Israel and the handing over of the maps showing where landmines have been placed in Southern Lebanon by the Israeli army. This thorny issue is an integral part of the conflict between the two countries and its solution can in no case be separated from the other questions. By clinging to the Security Council decisions on the status of the Shebaa region, on the one hand, and regularly violating Lebanon's territorial integrity, on the other, the Israeli authorities are prolonging the crisis with Lebanon and depriving the government of the latter of the means with which to establish its authority over all of its territory. In doing so, as has been seen, the Israeli government offers Hezbollah a valid pretext for continuing its resistance, thereby complicating inter-Lebanese dialogue by undermining the position of those who call for its disarmament and fusion with the Lebanese army. Critics of Hezbollah, more precisely, the alliance formed by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Sunni leader Saad Hariri and Christian leader Samir Geagea, are demanding that the dispute with Israel over the Shebaa region be settled by the United Nations rather than by military means. This would make it possible, they think, to neutralise the southern borders and to bring into force the agreement for a ceasefire signed in 1949 and regularly violated by both parties since the end of the sixties.

<sup>25</sup> G. Tuéni, "Anatomie d'une politique étrangère otage", in Bitar, K. (ed.) *Le Liban à la croisée des chemins*, numéros hors série de la revue ENA, special issue, 2001 ([www.karimbitar.org/tueni](http://www.karimbitar.org/tueni)).

<sup>26</sup> <<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/351/77/PDF/N0635177.pdf?OpenElement>>.

If Lebanon were able to confirm its sovereignty in the Shebaa region, in accordance with the procedures and conditions set down by the United Nations, the Israeli government would have to respect that decision and withdraw from the territory and the Lebanese government could then proceed with the disarming of the Hezbollah. Yet, Hezbollah leaders point out that disarmament does not depend only on the liberation of the region. They insist that a national strategy has to be put in place to protect Lebanon from all future attacks or violations committed by the Israeli army. And it is on such a national strategy, which takes account of their alliance with Syria and Iran, that the question of their disarmament will depend. This position transfers the conflict with Israel to a regional dimension, thereby thwarting any possibility of resolving or defusing the problem bilaterally as Israel had hoped.

*The question of Palestinian refugees.* The question of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is three-pronged and involves the return of refugees, the disarming of armed groups and the refugees' socio-economic and civic rights.

The right of return of Palestinian refugees has for many decades been a major point of controversy both in domestic politics and as part of the Palestinian crisis in general. Today, the various Lebanese political groups agree on the matter. They claim the right of return for the refugees and are against them remaining in Lebanon. This position is motivated, on the one hand, by support for the Palestinian cause and the right of the Palestinians to their lands in Palestine in accordance with UN Resolution 194 and, on the other, by the argument that the settling of the refugees would cause a demographic change that could modify the balance of forces between the various religions in Lebanon.

The disarming of the Palestinian groups, inside and outside of the refugee camps in Lebanon,<sup>27</sup> is another sensitive question facing the authorities. Its implications go beyond the territories of the camps or of the Lebanese state. Palestinian authorities and their representatives in the camps assure that the weapons held by the refugees no longer constitute a source of destabilisation and domestic insecurity in Lebanon, since the end of the war in 1990. They claim the weapons are less a means of defence than a lever for exerting political pressure on Israel. The Lebanese government, supported for all political forces taking part in the national dialogue, decided, on 14 March 2006, to prohibit the detention of weapons by Palestinians in military bases outside the refugee camps and to regulate it inside them. The negotiations on this decision and the way to implement it between the Lebanese government and the representatives of the various armed Palestinian groups who dispute representation of the Palestinians in Lebanon revealed how entangled and complicated the problem is. For example, not all Palestinian groups are affiliated with the Palestinian Authority and take orders from the PLO and Fatah. Some are related to radical groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - (PFLP), Hamas or the Islamic Jihad, whose leaders are in Syria and have close relations with the Iranian regime. This allows these two regimes to intervene on these issues, strengthening the Palestinian groups' refusal to disarm. They feel that it is the balance of forces in the region that is at stake as well as their respective capacities to stand up to Israeli and US pressure. The regionalisation of the matter of disarmament undermines the ability of the Lebanese government to deal with it.

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<sup>27</sup> In addition to the refugee camps in the North Lebanon, Beirut and Southern Lebanon officially recognised as such, armed Palestinian groups have many military bases outside of the camps in various regions of the country, particularly in the mountainous regions of the Anti-Lebanon and in the south.

The third aspect of the Palestinian refugee issue concerns their social, economic and civil rights, neglected – read ignored – by Lebanese authorities. Ever since they arrived in Lebanon, the Lebanese government and Parliament, for fear of them settling permanently, have passed restrictive measures and laws towards the Palestinian refugees. These measures forbid them to take up certain professions and prohibit access to social security, the acquisition of land, organisation at the professional level, membership in trade unions, the setting up of political parties, etc. This treatment has earned the Lebanese government criticism from Lebanese, foreign and international human rights organisations and as well as from the international community.

Finally, the Lebanese government decided, with support from the national dialogue conference, to review these measures and grant the refugees certain social and economic rights. But the decision, while long demanded and expected, cannot be implemented because of interconnections with the other two problems and the reluctance of certain Lebanese groups, namely the Maronite Christian community headed by Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, which fear that the granting of such rights will constitute a first step in the settling of these refugees – mainly Sunni – in the country. They also fear that the granting of certain rights, in particular access to social security and the opening up of the liberal professions, could turn out to be detrimental to the interests of the Lebanese.

The neighbourhood crisis shows the complexity and the intertwining of the levels and actors in the different problems facing Lebanon. The challenge posed to the Lebanese government and all political forces calls for a national approach to the crisis, defining a consensual strategy involving state actors and institutions – a diplomatic strategy and a national defence strategy of the state, rather than of the different political actors representing the various religious communities. The latter, with their perpetual division on these questions, act in the name, in the place and to the detriment of the state and its institutions, pursuing a sort of parallel community diplomacy and private defence, ensured by militia forces. Resolution of this neighbourhood crisis will make it possible for Lebanon to define its role and its place in the Israeli-Arab conflict and in all regional conflicts.

This rough sketch underlines the complexity of the Lebanese situation after the withdrawal of Syrian troops and shows the intertwining of interests, actors and levels. The interconnection is so strong that even the domestic problems of Lebanese society cannot be solved without the unraveling of other problems involving other actors. Nevertheless, this is the first opportunity that Lebanon has been offered, since the outbreak of the war in 1975, to reform its socio-political system without direct foreign intervention.