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SNAPSHOT

Beirut's Center Cannot Hold

Lebanon Is On the Brink of Another Civil War

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Lebanon is again on the precipice of civil war. With the conflict in neighboring Syria spilling over its borders, Lebanese society finds itself bitterly divided between two distinct camps—one that backs the regional Sunni alliance led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the West, another that supports the alliance between Iran and the Syrian government. Tensions between these two groups are worsening by the day in Lebanon, and as a result, the country is on the brink of destabilization.

The two sides are at such odds that it will be impossible in the short term to solve the country's crisis. But its most damaging effects can be mitigated by reminding all parties of the many advantages of Lebanon's traditional consensus-based style of politics.

Historically, Beirut has depended on power-sharing arrangements to maintain stability. Lebanon's 15-year civil war ended in the early 1990s with the so-called Taif agreement which forged a new social contract for the country: it codified the expectation that future national governments would comprise coalitions representing multiple factions from Lebanese society.

Since the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, however, the country's sectarian balance has become shakier. Religious cleavages have hardened and intensified, leading to the rapid rise of two extremist factions: the March 8 alliance and the March 14 alliance.

The March 8 alliance is composed of the Marada Brigades (a Maronite Christian party), the Free Patriotic Movement (the principal Christian party and the largest parliamentary faction), the Shiite Muslim parties Amal and Hezbollah, the Lebanese Democratic Party of the Druze Muslim sect, and the traditional leadership of Sunni Muslims. The March 14 coalition comprises the Future Party (led by Saad Hariri and enjoying the support of a respectable majority of Sunni Muslims), the Maronite Christians of the Lebanese Phalange Party and the Lebanese Forces Party, a Christian Orthodox party, and a small group of Shiite families. These camps are not clearly delineated by ideology, although the March 8 coalition tends to be more liberal on social policy, whereas the March 14 coalition leans more to the right.

The coalitions have battled over four main issues: the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon, charged with investigating Hariri's death; the war against Israel in 2006; the ongoing regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and the armed conflict in Syria that involves various Lebanese groups. Predictably, the ongoing war in Syria has dramatically intensified the latter two debates in recent months.

The March 14 coalition claims that Lebanon can achieve true independence and peace only if it distances itself from Syria and Iran and ceases its armed resistance to Israel. By the same token, the group argues that an alliance with Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States would be to the country's long-term advantage. The March 8 alliance, for its part, argues that Lebanese sovereignty and national security would be imperiled if the country ceased its armed resistance to Israel before Israel vacated Shebaa Farms and the town of Ghajar along the southern border of Lebanon. This group also claims that Lebanon's alliances with Iran and Syria are strategically vital to countering Israeli dominance in the region, especially given the relative weakness of the Lebanese army. In the same sense, they believe that containing Western-Saudi influence in Lebanon is essential to preserving the country's stability and unity and creating the conditions for economic development.

The irreconcilability of these two visions has produced a series of constitutional impasses. Both sides recently managed to agree to extend the current parliamentary mandate by an additional two years and seven months (the second such extension it has enacted in the past two years), claiming that new elections would constitute a major security risk given the country's current fragility. This decision, however, is likely to only deepen tensions throughout the country by undermining the legitimacy of the constitution. Without a sense of when the next legislative elections are to take place, there are few incentives for either side to recognize the basic legitimacy of the other.

The country also continues to clash over the selection of Lebanon's next president. The Lebanese president is traditionally elected by a parliamentary body filled with a diverse array of minority parties. That means that the selection process has always been vulnerable to political deadlock. Since it is nearly impossible for a candidate representing any one political bloc to garner the two-thirds majority needed for election, legislators often resort to elevating the commander of the army to the presidential seat. Although the political debates over the presidency have been particularly bitter in this election cycle, the opposing sides will likely arrive at the same solution.

Lebanon's broader political crisis should be solved in the same spirit. Both the March 8 and the March 14 coalitions

should acknowledge that neither side stands to benefit from their harsh and extended conflict. Indeed, Lebanon seems poised to enter a long period of political entropy that could eventually push the country toward outright anarchy. The past several months have already seen a spate of terrorist attacks that have claimed the lives of various actors across the political spectrum, as well as dozens of bystanders. The country's political turmoil and deteriorating security are quietly turning the country into a breeding ground for radical Islamist groups.

Civil war in Lebanon is a real possibility, one that should weigh on the minds not only of the Lebanese, but also of governments across the region and elsewhere in the world. After all, the conflict in Lebanon is inseparable from the conflict that has swept across the Middle East, pitting Euro-American-Saudi interests against the Russian-Syrian-Iranian alliance. If political turmoil in Lebanon continues—and the rise of radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham continues apace—the population of that country will suffer immensely. But the consequences will also reach far past Lebanon's borders.

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