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P.O. Box 175 • Station H Montreal • Quebec • H3G 2K7 514-486-5544 cijr@isranet.org www.isranet.org

LEBANESE RELIGIO-POLITICAL CRISIS RADICALIZED BY SYRIAN CIVIL WAR, HEZBOLLAH—AL-NUSRAH CONFLICT

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UNCERTAINTY OVER ELECTORAL LAW PROLONGS LEBANON POLITICAL CRISIS

Nasser Chararah

Al-Monitor Lebanon Pulse, May 20, 2013

There have been mounting concerns about the situation in Lebanon during the coming period. Indeed, political factions have failed to reach a consensus on producing an electoral law that would remedy the [issue of] Christian representation, and develop the [former] electoral law that included glaring errors regarding fair representation.

For instance, the provisions of the current electoral law, dubbed the “1960 law,” are in direct conflict with the Lebanese constitution, according to which Lebanese people have equal representation quotas. Pursuant to the current electoral law, certain MPs could secure a place in parliament with thousands of votes in some constituencies, while others may need tens of thousands of votes to win a seat. This is not to mention that according to the current law, a significant part of Christian MPs are elected by Muslim votes.

During the past months, there has been a need to formulate a new, fairer electoral law. However, intense political disputes in the country — which are connected to regional differences — have prevented the drafting of a new electoral law.

With the expiration of the constitutional deadline to amend the electoral law, and given that the term of the current parliament will come to an end in the second half of June, not to mention that political factions have yet to reach a consensus on a new electoral law, Lebanon stands today at a crossroads. It can either opt to extend the term of parliament to try to formulate a new electoral law and therefore hold elections on this basis; or it can hold elections based on the 1960 law, given that is the only legitimate solution in the absence of consensus on any other law.

In any case, both solutions reflect the depth of the political and constitutional crisis that Lebanon has been going through. The most dangerous implication of the current crisis is that it could lead the political system to a structural crisis that would be difficult to overcome with cosmetic solutions. This is not to mention that, in light of domestic and regional considerations, it is impossible to make any substantial changes to the system.

There have been several key signs emerging from the current crisis indicating the nature of challenges threatening Lebanon's political stability and coexistence, according to its current rules that are not likely to be remedied in light of the internal and external situation.

First, a significant part of Lebanese Christians believe that balanced sectarian representation can be mended with their Sunni partners in peace. This representation was disturbed when Maronites were forced to relinquish some of their major political and constitutional power — which they had during the first Republic (1983-1989) — as the result of drafting the constitution of Taif.

Thus, the Orthodox electoral law has been put forth, according to which each sectarian group would elect its own candidates on a proportional basis. The major Christian political bloc (including the Free Patriotic Movement, the Marada movement, the Kataeb Party, and even Bikirki [the seat of the Maronite Patriarchy] indirectly) was expecting that the Sunni partners would accept the Orthodox proposal as an acknowledgement that the Taif Agreement needed to be amended in terms of fixing the Christian representation and not in terms of restoring the powers of the Maronite President of the Republic.

Nevertheless, the Orthodox proposal was rejected as the quorum was not reached during the parliament session due to the opposition of the Sunni bloc that is mainly allied with the Druze and some Christian parties. This indicated that Sunni partners (the biggest community in the country) have refused to establish a new settlement with Christians. Sunnis continue to insist that Christians relinquish powers under the Taif Agreement so as to reflect the new balances of power in the country and that they have to be realistic about this fact.

This also demonstrates that the Taif Agreement, which has served as a constitutional chart for the Second Republic in Lebanon, is no longer unanimously agreed upon by all Lebanese. It has become in the eyes of a large part of Christians an agreement that reflects their existence under a political system that reproduces their defeat in the civil war, which broke out during the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the Taif Agreement under Arab and International auspices.

Moreover, [rejecting the Orthodox proposal] indicates that the country is going through a crisis that has been gripping the political system at all levels. This is especially true, since the crisis of a new electoral law that can produce a just sectarian representation, coincided with the crisis of the resigned government of Najib Mikati, about two month ago, which is now limited to managing day-to-day state affairs.

These overlapping crises suggest that Lebanon's various institutions are no longer able to uphold the state's affairs. The legitimacy of the Constitutional Council, which is in charge of monitoring constitutional legitimacy, has become disreputable. Meanwhile, parliament is paralyzed as a result of sharp divisions, preventing it from producing legislation.

Moreover, the military council (which is similar to the Government of the Lebanese Army) has been also become paralyzed. Thus, the military institution is likely to embark on the path of vacuum, as most of its members are retired, while no constitutional provision has been set yet to [choose] any alternatives.

What's more, the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces is set to retire in September. Thus, all leaders of the military institutions will soon become leaders by proxy. Hence, current events clearly indicate that the Lebanese crisis has gone beyond the political situation and has gripped the entire political system, undermining the state and sectarian coexistence.

Nasser Chararah is a contributing writer for Al-Monitor's Lebanon Pulse and for multiple Arab newspapers and magazines, as well as the author of several books on the Hezbollah-Israeli conflict.

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THE IMMINENT HEZBOLLAH-NUSRA WAR

Hanin Ghaddar

[NOW Lebanon](#), May 15, 2013

The Syrian Salafist group Jabhat Al-Nusra declared in Jordan that it has set the confrontation with Hezbollah militants in Syria as a top priority. Jordan-based al-Qaeda-affiliate Mohammad Al Shalabi, alias Abi Sayyaf, said that Jabhat al-Nusra has taken a decision to fight Hezbollah militants, who have become "our Jihadists' main target" across Syria. This came after Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah declared last week that Hezbollah will stand by Syria and help it become a state of resistance. He announced that Hezbollah is ready to receive any sort of qualitative weapons even if it is going to disrupt the regional balance.

For the Syrian rebels, al-Nusra and others, this is a declaration of war against them, knowing that what Nasrallah really means is that Hezbollah is now in charge of Syria, upon Iran's decision. Hezbollah and Iran are running the show and if the Syrian rebels want to prevail, they need to target Hezbollah, not Assad or the Syrian regime. Assad has been pushed to the background to make way for Hezbollah. Therefore, it is not strange that Al-Nusra has decided to shift its priority to fighting Hezbollah as its main enemy.

Al-Nusra's main mission is not to free Syria of its dictatorship and move to build a modern democratic state. Their goal is the umma and they will fight the enemies of the umma wherever they are. Therefore, their fight against Hezbollah will not stay in Syria and will eventually move to Lebanon. They do not differentiate between Hezbollah and the Shiite community just as they do not differentiate between Assad and Alawites. This will lead to two dangerous consequences for Lebanon.

One, Shiites will be targeted by al-Nusra and other Sunni jihadist groups, especially that the sectarian tension among Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites has already reached unprecedented levels. In fact, while Hezbollah sends its fighters to Syria, many Lebanese Sunni groups are also moving to Syria to fight alongside the rebels.

What's happening is that the Lebanese Sunni-Shiite civil war is already taking place, but in Syria. It is only a matter of time before it moves to Lebanon. These fighters will return to Lebanon with increased hatred toward each other; hatred rigged with blood and a desire for revenge. Al-Nusra are not organized enough to fight against Hezbollah in a conventional war, but they could cause great damage by organizing bomb attacks and suicide bombers against Hezbollah's bases and public squares in the southern suburbs of Beirut or the South.

Their fighting tactics are usually based on bomb attacks, not bombing cities with rockets. They are an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, and they don't usually dissociate between a militant and a civilian. They just target a place aiming at the maximum damage. Therefore, Hezbollah's supporters and the Shiite community in general will be in danger.

Also, there are plenty of Lebanese jihadist and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups that had a presence in Lebanon before the Syrian conflict and can now be mobilized to target Hezbollah. Organizations like Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham or Osbat al-Ansar have had bases in Lebanon for years, but they never engaged Hezbollah in direct confrontations. However, after the beginning of the Syrian conflict, jihadists reportedly regrouped in a new radical organization inspired by the emergence and successful military operations of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

Two, Lebanon will become al-Nusra's alternative battlefield. There are no state institutions to control their growing presence in Lebanon or the spread of arms. The current void in government is not helping and Prime Minister designate Tammam Salam seems to be incapable of forming a government that does not meet Hezbollah's conditions, one that facilitates its involvement in Syria. So how can we protect Lebanon and the Shiites from the looming disaster?

Let's start with the reality that the Shiite community in Lebanon is not one single bloc that supports Hezbollah. The diversity among the Shiites is wider than it is among other sectarian communities, for religious reasons related to the diversity of religious references (Marja') and different interpretations of the Qur'an. On the political level, this community has never been as divided over Hezbollah as it is today. The feeling that Hezbollah is dragging them to hell is translating into serious discussion and refutation inside the community.

There is an urgent need to repeat this over and over. Every Lebanese official and media outlet should aim to highlight this diversity. Hezbollah will not save the Shiites. They have already determined that Lebanon and all the Lebanese will have to sacrifice their lives for their mission to serve Iran and its interests in the region. The Lebanese need to save themselves.

That's why it is also important to safeguard Lebanon today by fighting Hezbollah's hegemony over state institutions. A government that empowers Hezbollah and maintains Iran's control over state institutions should not be an option. PM-designate Tammam Salam and President Michel Suleiman should not succumb to any threats. A government to save Lebanon is urgently needed now, more than ever. If this is not achieved, Lebanon will be naturally linked to Hezbollah and the Hezbollah-Nusra war will not spare anyone. If we lose this chance, we lose everything.

Hanin Ghaddar is the managing editor of NOW.

HEZBOLLAH CAMPAIGNS FOR PREEMPTIVE WAR IN SYRIA

[Al-Monitor Lebanon Pulse](#), May 22, 2013

Several Hezbollah fighters were killed or wounded by a booby-trapped tanker truck during a recent incursion into Syria. There had been several similar incidents in preceding days. In another episode, a Syrian opposition gunman appeared to surrender to Hezbollah forces, but as he approached them, he detonated the explosive belt he was wearing.

Hezbollah admits to thus far losing 32 fighters in the battle for Qusair, but some believe the actual figure to be much higher. On May 20, the party buried two brothers who had fought in Qusair, and a rumor circulated that their father died from sorrow during the funeral. The fact that such a story was making the rounds among Hezbollah's base reflects the prevailing anxiety.

Most of the party's militia members come from the same societal group, so when one of them is killed, it affects an entire community. Hezbollah's participation in the Qusair fighting thus stands to affect the party's relationship with its base.

The organization's propaganda machine is busy in its strongholds — the Bekaa Valley, south Lebanon, and Beirut's southern suburbs — trying to preempt feelings of frustration. The campaign is focused on convincing Hezbollah supporters that Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has wisely decided to fight

Sunni takfiris in Syria because if they succeed in bringing down the Syrian regime, they will then target Lebanon and subjugate the Shiites.

In short, the propaganda campaign is about making the argument for a preemptive war. Hezbollah must fight the Sunni takfirists now, on Syrian ground beside the Syrian army, because if Hezbollah waits until the takfirists bring down the Bashar al-Assad government, it would be forced to fight them alone in Lebanon.

Another argument Hezbollah is making is that the party has a duty to defend sacred Shiite shrines in Syria, such as Sayyeda Zeinab in Damascus, which Syrian opposition militants have tried to destroy on more than one occasion.

Another part of the propaganda campaign involves promoting stories of heroic acts by party members in Qusair and portraying Hezbollah fighters as militarily superior, even to those in the Syrian army. Such boasting about Hezbollah's strength and military competence is intended to raise the morale of the base and shift attention away from news reports of Hezbollah losses.

So goes the effort to convince Hezbollah supporters that the price of losing their sons is worth it.

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HOW HEZBOLLAH SLOWLY INFILTRATED EUROPE

Alexandre Levy

[LE TEMPS/Worldcrunch](#), Apr. 9, 2013

While Cyprus was in the middle of a financial crisis, the court of Limassol, the island's second largest city, made a ruling that largely went unnoticed. Yet it was a judicial first. On March 28, the Cyprus court condemned a 24-year-old Swedish-Lebanese man, Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, to four years in prison for helping plan attacks against Israelis on the Mediterranean island. The man – a self-confessed member of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militant group – was a scout for the organization, tasked with monitoring the comings and goings of Israeli tourists on the island, in view of organizing a terrorist attack.

In front of the judges, Hossam Taleb Yaacoub denied being a terrorist, saying he had only “gathered information about Jews.” “That's what my organization does around the world,” he added. According to reports from the Cyprus police, the Hezbollah agent was particularly meticulous. He took notes on everything: flight schedules, bus license plates, the numbers of security guards, hotels, kosher restaurants etc. Hossam Taleb Yaacoub was arrested on July 7, 2012 by the Cyprus police. But it is only two weeks later that his activities started making sense, says Matthew Levitt, director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

On the other side of the Bosphorus, in Burgas, on the Bulgarian coast, a bus transporting Israeli tourists was blown up, killing seven people, including the bomber. “It is clear that Hossam Taleb Yaacoub was preparing another attack that was supposed to take place around the same time,” says Levitt. In Feb. 2013, Bulgarian authorities announced their investigations led them to believe that the Hezbollah was behind the bus bombing. Bulgaria had suddenly become a pawn on the dangerous chessboard that is the Middle-Eastern conflict.

Bulgaria's announcement also had important consequences from a European point of view. Some major countries of the EU, including France and Germany, have not designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, so as to preserve the fragile political equilibrium in Lebanon. In light of the events in Cyprus and Burgas, some are “reviewing” their stance, while others “are not sufficiently convinced,” according to Bulgarian Prime Minister Marin Raikov.

But in the U.S., there is no doubt. Early 2013, the U.S. Congress invited the EU to blacklist Hezbollah. An invitation reiterated by some of Washington's top officials, to Israel's utmost satisfaction. For Matthew Levitt, Hezbollah is a key ally of Iran – maybe even its military proxy – playing “a central role in Iran's shadow war with the West.” Taking advantage of the leniency of some European capitals, Hezbollah has strengthened its network in Europe, recruiting and positioning agents all across the continent. Bi-nationals with ties with Lebanon have the ideal profile. Recruited at age 19, Hossam Taleb Yaacoub had a Swedish passport and did not arouse the suspicion of European police. This allowed him to travel frequently from Turkey to the Netherlands, through Lyon, in east-central France, carrying mysterious packages for Hezbollah.

It was the same for the men who operated in Bulgaria: one of them was Canadian, the other Australian; they had entered the country legally. Nothing in their attitude betrayed the true objective of their stay. Bulgarian investigators describe them as smart-looking youths, dressed head to toe with big-brand clothes. They rented cars and booked hotel rooms with fake U.S. drivers' licenses. That was their only mistake. “The documents were made by a forger in Lebanon, known by our colleagues from Western intelligence services,” explains Bulgaria's organized crime czar, Stanimir Florov. Money transfers from Lebanon, as well as a photo on which relatives of one of the terrorists posed with high-ranking Hezbollah militants, convinced Bulgarian officials: All the tracks lead back to Beirut.

Counter-terrorism experts also noted a “professionalization” of Hezbollah agents abroad. “Using fake IDs, speaking foreign languages, conspiracy techniques and coded communications... as well as a secrecy between members, which is the best way to protect other members,” explains a European police official.

Hossam Taleb Yaacoub has always claimed he had never been face-to-face with his Lebanese handler and that he did not know the real purpose of his mission. This could also be the case for the young man who died in the explosion of the bomb he carried in his backpack, in front of the Israeli tourists' bus at the Burgas airport. First described as a “suicide bomber,” he was “probably fooled by the other two team members, who managed to escape the bombing,” says a Bulgarian investigator. Nothing, not even his DNA was able to establish his true identity.

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ON TOPIC

[Three in Europe Now Oppose Hezbollah](#): Nicholas Kulish, *New York Times*, [May 22, 2013](#)—Three of Europe's most powerful countries — Britain, Germany and France — have thrown their weight behind a push for the European Union to designate the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, a move that could have far-reaching consequences for the group's fund-raising activities on the Continent.

[The Jihadist Threat to Lebanon](#): Jaafar al-Attar, from *As-Safir* (Lebanon). *Al-Monitor*, [May 15, 2013](#)—Many officers do not deny that the Lebanese security services do not possess documented information on the numbers and locations of the “organized takfiri networks” in Lebanon. The head of one of those security services told *As-Safir* that “monitoring and information-gathering on terrorist networks cannot be precise, since they are located within the Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Ain al-Hilweh.”

[Hizbollah Cannot Afford to Stay Long in Syria's Quagmire](#): Michael Young, *The National* (UAE), [May 23, 2013](#) — Hizbollah is being drawn into the Syrian quagmire. as revealed by this week's reports of party members being killed fighting in the strategic Syrian town of Qusair. Victory in Qusair is vital for the Syrian regime, as it would clear a corridor between Damascus and the coast, the stronghold of the Alawite community.