EuroMeSCo
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European Institute of the Mediterranean

BRIEF n. 37
28 February 2012

LEBANON IN THE MIDST OF THE "ARAB SPRING": PLUS ÇA CHANGE...

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In the weeks and months following Lebanon's 2005 "Independence Intifada" (better known outside of the Middle East as "Cedar Revolution"), supporters of the political and civil Lebanese movement enthusiastically referred to Lebanon as a possible model for democracy and democratization in the region. In other words, Lebanon's open denunciation of Syria and its pervasive and oppressive role within Lebanon, and the subsequent battle to end the "tutelage" of the country, in place since the end of the Civil War in 1989, was seen as a crucial event, one that could be extended or even "exported" to the rest of the region.

In hindsight, this assumption was of course deeply flawed, as–within Lebanon–the post-2005 political process never fully took off. Deeply internally divided along two strongly antagonistic political blocks–respectively, the "pro-Syrian" March 8 forces and the "anti-Syrian" March 14 coalition–Lebanon stopped short of resolving the institutional and structural problems of its political system. In addition, the continued strong involvement of regional actors in Lebanese domestic politics–like Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia–revealed the difficulties of asserting national independence. Specifically, in the post-Cedar Revolution Lebanon, the Assad regime found a way to reposition itself at the center of the political arena and to preserve its influence without having to continue its military occupation. In addition, the Cedar Revolution did not ignite–nor was it ever aimed at igniting–a regional push towards democratization.

Still, when the so-called Arab Spring erupted, challenging the status quo and demanding the creation of free, open, and fair political systems, the fact that Lebanon was not part of this process took many observers by surprise. Specifically, while the rest of the region was beginning to move towards significant domestic change, Lebanon seemed stuck in the past and deeply entrenched in its old sectarian political games. What is more, by early 2011, Lebanon was domestically witnessing the marginalization of the political forces that had led the Cedar Revolution and the return of a pro-Syria government under the Amal-Hezbollah-Free Patriotic Movement triad.

Could it then really be that Lebanon, already known as an "exceptional" actor within the Middle East, has really been immune to the spreading of the so-called Arab Spring?

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A first look at the country's political development in the past year would seem to confirm this theory: no direct political change has occurred, while the level of internal strife has not reached worrisome levels or dramatically affected the (precarious) stability of the country. However, a closer look at the Lebanese reality provides a different, more nuanced, account of the impact of the ongoing Arab uprisings.

Firstly, since the revolts began in Tunisia, Lebanon has been deeply involved in the regional debate over future values, aspirations, and models for the "new" Middle East: in this sense, the Arab Spring has definitely had an ideological impact within Lebanon and its society.

Secondly–and much more significantly–Lebanon's internal political equilibrium–willingly or unwillingly–is still very much related to Syria's, and, as such, the intense internal conflict between the Assad regime and the political opposition forces within Syria has certainly had an impact on Lebanon and on its internal stability.

Specifically, the ongoing violence in Syria and the brutality of the Assad regime's response to those who challenge it has exacerbated the already tense internal relations between the "pro-Syrian" and the "anti-Syrian" political blocks. In truth, the relation between the March 14 forces–led by Saad Hariri and his Future Movement–and the March 8 coalition–strongly associated with Hezbollah and Amal–had already progressively deteriorated in the post-2005 years, with the hostilities peaking in 2010-2011 over the issue of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

However, the beginning of the internal strife in Syria has added fuel to the fire, worsening the tone of the confrontation between the March 14 forces–who have been sharply attacking both the Assad regime as well as its Lebanese supporters–and the March 8 coalition and Hezbollah–which has been one of the strongest supporters of Assad since the beginning of the anti-regime protests. Although this escalation between the Sunni and the Shiite communities (who stand in the opposite "pro" and "anti" Syrian camps) is not enough to predict a real rise in inter-sectarian violence, still the current sharp antagonism both reflects and enhances the state of political paralysis of the country.

In addition, the debate over the role that Lebanon should play with respect to the ongoing turmoil in Syria has also contributed to shaking the government by creating a rift between the stance of groups like Hezbollah, unapologetically standing with Assad and his regime, and the more cautious approach of PM Najib Mikati, who has opted for minimizing Lebanon's support of Syria within the international arena (for example, by abstaining in the UNSC vote against the European draft resolution condemning the events in Syria). Similarly, other parties within the government have shown

discomfort with respect to Hezbollah's support of Assad, with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt openly dissociating himself from the Lebanese-Shiite political and military organization. Currently, the internal disagreement over Syria alone would not be enough to lead to a collapse of the government, but–together with the other contentious issues, like Lebanon's posture with respect to the UN Special Tribunal–it has the potential of threatening the unity and stability of the government.

Thirdly, the continuation of internal violence and instability within Syria has also had a direct impact on Lebanon's security, for example through cross-border shootings, as well as through a number of "mysterious" abductions of Syrian dissidents residing in Lebanon.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reiterated this concept on a number of occasions–in what many observers within Lebanon did not hesitate to label a veiled threat–ensuring that improved stability in Syria would benefit Lebanon, while chaos would inevitably spread into Syria's neighbor.

Finally, Lebanon has also been suffering economically from the Syrian crisis and the imposed sanctions on the Assad regime, as roughly one third of Lebanon's trade is either conducted with Syria or transported through Syria.

Therefore, when looking more in-depth at the effects and impact of the Arab Spring on Lebanon, it appears clear that the country had been affected by the ongoing social and political changes taking place within the region. At the same time, it is also clear that such an impact has largely been a direct result of Lebanon's historically tight social, political, economic, and strategic relation with Syria.

Similarly, in the coming months, Lebanon will continue feeling the impact of the growing tensions and internal strife within Syria, suffering in terms of its own security and economy, as well as in terms of its internal cohesion. This is the case because a peaceful and swift resolution of the Syrian domestic crisis does not seem on the cards at the moment. The regime, despite being profoundly unpopular and internationally semi-isolated, can still count on a fairly solid, committed, and loyal coercive apparatus; while the opposition forces–despite their popularity and growing military and political capabilities–still lack strong internal leadership and cohesion. What is more, they lack strong external support and a "sanctuary"–both of which would help tip the domestic balance of power in their favor. Therefore, in the short term, lacking strong international intervention and the creation of

the above-mentioned “safe-zone”, the most likely scenario appears to be a continuation of the hostilities, with dire repercussions on the Syrian civilian population, and with negative implications for Lebanon.

However, in the longer term, the fall of the illegitimate Assad regime seems almost inevitable. In turn, such a regime change within Syria would have a profound impact on Lebanon, providing a second wind to the Cedar Revolution and likely downsizing the disproportionate role of Syria in Lebanese domestic politics.

This would empower the March 14 forces and likely lead to a real reshuffling of the political cards within Lebanon, probably also benefitting countries like Saudi Arabia–in turn a supporter of the March 14 coalition and the Future Movement. In contrast, parties like Hezbollah–which had been stark supporters of the Assad regime since the eruption of the protests–would pay in terms of popularity and legitimacy. However, it is unlikely that this demise of the group’s political appeal would amount to its implosion. Thanks to its military force, its partnership with Iran, and its capacity to reinterpret itself and adapt to changing political circumstances, the group would likely be able to survive the crisis.

From this brief analysis, it emerges clearly that the ongoing Arab Spring has had a tangible impact on Lebanon and that, in the future, the potential collapse of the Assad regime could change the domestic rules of the political game. Of course, this would be especially the case if the ongoing regional turmoil were to reach Iran, something which does not look likely at the moment.

Simultaneously published as a Focus article at the Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean policies, www.iemed.org