

THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS ON LEBANON

Ioannis Th. MAZIS

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Faculty of Turkish Studies and Modern Asian studies

mazis@her.forthnet.gr

Michalis SARLIS

RSI Journal

info@rsijournal.eu

Abstract

This paper identifies and analyses the geopolitical impact that the Syrian crisis has on Lebanon. This impact is manifested in two forms: a subsystemic one (within the Syria-Lebanon subsystem) and a systemic one (exerted from the system of the wider Middle East). The first refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability of the Syrian part has on the Lebanese part of the subsystem. More specifically, the impact that have some factors of the Syrian crisis –namely, increasing sectarianism and Islamic radicalism- on the internal political and religious power relations of Lebanon.

The second form of impact refers to the indirect yet critical repercussions that the instability at the centre of the Middle Eastern system has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon subsystem, Lebanon is the primary point on which the systemic pressure is applied. As a result of this systemic impact, the internal politico-religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.

Keywords: Syria-Lebanon subsystem, Hezbollah, Sunni militia, shabiha

JEL classification: R10, R11, R30, R40

The Syria-Lebanon subsystem: from Syrian hegemony to the Syrian crisis

The Syria-Lebanon subsystem possesses a pivotal geopolitical role within the wider system of the Middle East. Syria constitutes a state that lies at the centre of the intertwined web of the power relations that define the Middle Eastern system. The other part of the subsystem, Lebanon, has been a state where the major regional powers have been projecting power through their proxy Lebanese actors for decades.

At the subsystemic level, the power relation between Syria and Lebanon has been a rather unbalanced one. For three decades -from 1975 to 2005- Lebanon was transformed to an imperative geopolitical asset for Syria. This was due to the geopolitical objectives that Damascus had set regarding the Syria-Israel subsystem, as well as within the system of the wider Middle East. Among them the sustainment of any advantage vis-a-vis Israel and the checking of any geostrategic aspirations of other competitive Arab states in Lebanon, primarily Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

After the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri and the Syrian military withdrawal, Lebanon entered a new phase of power antagonism between the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance (Shiite Hezbollah and its allies) and the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance (Saad Hariri's Sunni party and its allies). Subsequently, a series of key events have played a prominent role in the formulation of the current political power balance. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 enhanced Hezbollah's internal and regional status. The 2008 armed confrontation between Hezbollah and the Sunni militia ended in absolute victory for Hezbollah. It was a statement of intent by the Shiite organisation, which asserted its military superiority in Lebanon. In 2010 Hezbollah withdrew its ministers from the unity government and in January 2011 it supported, along with other March 8 allies, the formation of a new government under the premiership of Sunni politician Najib Mikati.

In the beginning of 2011 Syria experienced the first popular protests that swept, since 2010, the Arab world. The violent reaction of the Assad regime against the first peaceful protests in the south of the country (in the city of Deraa) set the motion for the spiral descent of Syria towards a climactic conflict. From Deraa the protests moved swiftly to other parts of the country, notably Hama, Deir az-Zur and Homs.

Gradually, within weeks, and primarily in reaction to the initial violent suppression of the Syrian security forces, the protests and demonstrations were transformed into a full armed insurgency against the Assad regime. The Syrian conflict escalated and was soon characterised by sectarian violence between the Sunni opposition and the Alawite (which is an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam) regular and irregular forces (shabiha) that support the Assad regime. Within 2012 the Syrian crisis was spread into the main cities of the country, Aleppo and Damascus¹. As the hard-liners of the regime lead the escalation of violence, many reports were providing evidence that segments of the opposition were increasingly composed of Islamic radical groups (with some of them connected with Al Qaeda elements).²

By the end of the first half of 2012, the Syrian crisis had also been firstly regionalised and then internationalised, with the formation of a loose anti-Assad 'coalition' consisting of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France and the US and an equally loose pro-Assad supporting bloc composed by Iran, Russia, China and partly Iraq³. It was only a matter of time before Lebanon, so closely intertwined with Syria, begun to feel the multiple impact of the escalation of the Syrian crisis.

The geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon

The length and the ferocity of the current Syrian conflict have a major and multiple impact on Lebanon. The Syria-Lebanon subsystem constitutes a particularly integrated one, where any major political and military action, development, shift or change on one part of the subsystem has a direct effect on the other part.

At the systemic level, that of the wider Middle East, Syria possesses a most central role. It lies at the heart of the Middle Eastern system: It constitutes a "bridge" through which its ally Iran projects its own influence in the Levant. It has a long common border with Iraq, Turkey and Jordan. It has an ongoing dispute with Israel regarding the Golan Heights. And of course, it almost engulfs geographically the much smaller state of Lebanon. In a way, Syria, by providing strategic depth to both Iran and Hezbollah⁴, is the 'lung' of the Middle East.

At the current stage of the Syrian crisis, it is possible to identify and analyse two different forms of the geopolitical impact the Syrian crisis has on Lebanon: a subsystemic one (Syria-Lebanon) and a systemic one (wider Middle East):

- a. The subsystemic impact refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability of the Syrian part has on the Lebanese part of the subsystem. Specifically, the impact that particular factors of the Syrian crisis which belong to the culture pillar of power⁵, such as sectarianism and radicalism, have on the internal politico-religious power relations of Lebanon.
- b. The systemic impact refers to the indirect repercussions that the instability at the centre of the Middle Eastern system (in Syria) has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon subsystem, Lebanon is the primary point on which the systemic pressure is applied. As a result of this systemic impact, the internal politico-religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.

Subsystemic impact

The first major manifestation of the subsystemic impact is the reactivation of the sectarian confrontation in Lebanon, between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites/Alawites. On a first level it is a direct, almost automatic, metastasis of the increasing sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese politico-religious space. The main geographical locations where this sectarian confrontation has been mostly reactivated is the city of Tripoli in north Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, two areas that are of close proximity to Syria and consist of a mixed religious composition.

Tripoli, the second largest Lebanese urban centre, is in close geographical proximity not only to Syria, but especially to major spots of armed confrontation between the Syrian regime forces and the Free Syrian Army forces, particularly Homs

and Hama. The Sunni dominated Tripoli and its surrounding area has been a logistics support centre for the Syrian opposition. Tripoli is also residence of the small community of Alawites in Lebanon and the part of the city where the Sunni and the Alawite neighbourhoods are adjoined has been in a state of low-intensity conflict since May 2012. The Alawite party in Tripoli, the Arab Democratic Party, is also believed to have been receiving funds and arms from the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad⁶.

The arrest in May of anti-Assad Sunni activist Shadi al-Moulawi by the pro-Hezbollah *General Security Directorate (GSD)* and a few weeks later the killing of a prominent anti-Assad Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmad Abdul Wahed in the northern region of Akkar by the Lebanese Armed Forces lead to the start of the sectarian clashes in Tripoli. This low intensity conflict has been mostly contained between the Sunni neighbourhood of Bab al-Tannaneh and the Alawite neighbourhood of Jabal Mohsen, that are separated by a single main street –the appropriately called Syria Street- that has been turned into an actual frontline. Its were the Syrian civil war is re-enacted in a micro-scale between the anti-Assad Sunnis of Tripoli and the pro-Assad Alawites of Tripoli⁷. Tens of people have been killed from both sides in a confrontation that has at times involved heavier weaponry, such as RPGs. The Lebanese army has been deployed in Tripoli and has often been engaged against militiamen of both sides.

The Bekaa Valley has also seen early sparks of sectarian violence, though not to the extent that Tripoli has. The Bekaa, traditionally the main transit route of legal and illegal activity, has become a transit point and logistical base for the Free Syrian Army. This has created friction between the adjoining Sunni and Shiite towns and villages, which resulted to sporadic violence and a number of abductions. Also, there are reports from journalists that refer to training camps within the Sunni controlled areas of the Bekaa that have been recently organized to train Sunni fighters destined for the Syrian war⁸. Abductions and violent incidents have also spread to the region of Wadi Khaled, north from Bekaa, in the Akkar district of north Lebanon⁹. In the midst of August 2012, sectarian violence spread also to the capital Beirut, when members of the powerful Shiite Meqdad clan of Bekaa Valley abducted more than 40 Syrian nationals (as well as a Turkish citizen) and held them in Dahiye, the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburb of Beirut. The mass abduction was a retaliation for the abduction of Shiites in Syria by the opposition forces of the Free Syrian Army¹⁰.

The second subsystemic impact is the radicalization of certain Sunni segments within Lebanon. One of the reasons for this is the increasing religious radicalization of parts of the Syrian opposition. Reports from the field indicate that as the Syrian conflict becomes longer and even more violent, the number of salafi and Sunni-wahabi jihadi groups that are drawn into the combat operations increases. In consequence, the increase of radical Islamic elements in Syria has also increased the radical Sunni-Islamic elements within Lebanon. This is particularly evident in Tripoli, which has a long history of Islamic radicalism, as well as close historical connections with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (*Ekhwan al-Islameya*)¹¹. In fact, the Islamic organization *Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami* (Islamic Unity Movement) had transformed Tripoli into an Islamic Emirate, from 1983 to 1985. The more recent major incident of Sunni Islamic radicalism in Tripoli, was the take over of part of the Palestinian camp of Naher el Bared, by the organization *Fatah al-Islam* in 2007 and its confrontation with the Lebanese army. But this was an isolated event, instigated by an obscure jihadi organization with opaque roots and funding. Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, Tripoli has been experiencing a renewed wave of Sunni Islamic radicalism, which is closely associated with the increased radicalism across the border, in Syria. One salafi cleric in Tripoli compared in a recent interview the north Lebanese city with the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar, for the role that it had played in providing support and fighters to the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan against the Soviets. The same, argued the cleric, happens now in Tripoli against the Assad regime¹².

One other reason for the radicalization of sunni elements in Lebanon is the political void that has been created during the last two years at the high echelons of Sunni political power. In the most high profile case, Saad Hariri, has been recently living in Geneva due to a series of assassination threats against him. This void is enhanced by the fragmentation of the Sunni leadership, particularly expressed in the political and economic competition between the Hariri family and the Mikati circle¹³. This void has given the opportunity to more activist and radical elements to emerge to the forefront. These elements utilise the rising sectarianism of the Syrian crisis in order to achieve higher mobilization of followers and supporters in Lebanon. The most characteristic cases are those of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir in Sidon and the imam Selim al Rafei in Tripoli¹⁴.

Systemic impact

The most evident manifestation of the systemic impact of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon is the overall pressure that it applies on an already fragile political system and its existing power structure. Lebanon's political power balance has been, during the last four decades, a micro-level representation of the balance of power of the wider Middle East system, and particularly of the regional power play between the Iran/Syria alliance against the different security and regional aspirations of Israel, Saudi Arabia, lately of Qatar and until a few years ago of Iraq. In other words, after 1975 and the start of the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon's sectarian and confessional "mosaic" composition has transformed the country into a proxy war battleground for the projection of political and military power by Teheran, Damascus, Riyadh, Baghdad and Tel Aviv. This nexus of regional interests has acquired further importance, after the eruption of the Syrian crisis, within the power dynamics of the system of the wider Middle East. Old actors have receded (Iraq) and new actors (Qatar) have entered the frame along the "traditional" systemic actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia) who compete for influence in the Levant and the subsystem of Syria-Lebanon¹⁵.

Hezbollah, the powerful Shiite organization (that controls the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Bekaa Valley and the south of Lebanon), is the most clear example of this pressure that the system applies on the proxy actors on the Lebanese ground. By being heavily relied on Iranian funding and weapons, as well as on Syrian logistical and weapons support, Hezbollah has been feeling more than any other Lebanese political/military actor the pressure exerted by the current Syrian crisis. Since its founding (in 1982 in Bekaa), Hezbollah has been the main proxy actor of Iranian and Syrian power projections in Lebanon and also a checking force of Saudi Arabian Levantine aspirations. Under that prism, the current Syrian crisis that threatens the viability of the Syrian Assad regime constitutes also a threat to the sustainment of the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah anti-Israeli, strategic, subsystemic axis. This systemic threat has led the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah to express in numerous occasions his vocal support for the Assad regime. Furthermore, reports from both Syria and Lebanon have claimed that Hezbollah has sent highly trained units to fight alongside the Syrian regime, especially in urban warfare environments where Hezbollah fighters have extensive experience¹⁶. The Shiite party has denied these claims.

On the other hand, it is also evident that within Lebanon, Hezbollah has attempted to maintain a relatively low profile in order not to further aggravate the subsystemic sectarian and Sunni Islamist factors that have been reactivated by the ongoing Syrian crisis. This may also be explained by the fact that Hezbollah controls the fragile Mikati government, which in its turn translates as a positive, if only temporary, political advantage for the pressurised Syrian and Iranian regimes.

The centrality of Hezbollah within the Lebanese power balance is of such political and military importance that any major shift in its course of action that its leadership may decide to take, whether to support more actively and openly the Assad regime or be forced to disengage from it, will have serious repercussions within the Lebanese power space but also for the Shiite organization itself.

The way that Hezbollah will react to this pressure within the Lebanese politic-religious context is part of the second systemic impact on Lebanon, namely the gradual regionalization of the Syrian conflict by proxy means on the Lebanese space. The recent assassination of the head of the Information Branch of the *Lebanese Internal Security Forces*, Wissam Hassan, on the 19th of October 2012, by a remotely detonated bomb in the Christian neighbourhood of Achrafiye in central Beirut, is a first trace of this regional war by proxies on the Lebanese ground. Hassan was head of the investigation for the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri and he was also responsible for the arrest, in August 2012, of former minister and pro-Syrian Christian Lebanese politician Michel Samaha. Samaha was arrested and accused of preparing a series of bomb attacks in Lebanon under the directions of the Syrian regime¹⁷. Whether all these cases are connected with Hassan's assassination remains still a speculation.

The *Internal Security Forces* is the only Lebanese security institution that is not controlled by Hezbollah and since 2005 and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon has been receiving substantial funding from the US. Furthermore, Wissam Hassan was in close contact with US, French and Saudi officials and was considered a key person in monitoring and checking the activities of Hezbollah and other Syrian and Iranian agents in Lebanon¹⁸.

Conclusion

The more the Syrian conflict destabilizes the current power balance of the Middle Eastern system, the higher will be its degree of regionalisation. Lebanon is the first subsystemic space which is affected by any major such shift on the systemic level. The subsystemic impact of the Syrian crisis has already started to destabilise the internal politico-religious balance of Lebanon. The growing sectarian character of the Syrian conflict, along with the increasing Islamic radicalisation of parts of the Syrian opposition, have reactivated the already existing sectarian and Islamic politics in Lebanon, which were, until the eruption of the Syrian crisis, in a state of fragile containment (with only rare and quickly resolved exceptions, such as the *Fatah al-Islam* activities in North Lebanon and the Shiite-Sunni armed confrontation in 2008 in West Beirut). This destabilisation is further enhanced by the influx in Lebanon of many thousands of Sunni refugees from Syria, a fact which also has the ability to transform the critical demographic balance of Lebanon, always a factor of central importance within the nexus of the Lebanese sectarian political antagonisms.

Yet, based on all current indications, this subsystemic impact does not possess the adequate dynamic to destabilise decisively the Lebanese politico-religious power balance. In effect to create the conditions for a full-scale metastasis of the Syrian conflict within the Lebanese territory. It is only the increasing interaction of the subsystemic impact with the systemic impact that appears to be able to create such a dynamic that could set in motion the conditions for a possible power re-shuffling within Lebanon. The initial existence of such a dynamic would then be adequate to energize in full extent the opposing forces within Lebanon.

As these lines were written, the growing regionalisation of the Syrian crisis had already started to increase the systemic impact on Lebanon. This is due to the fact that the activities of the systemic actors involved in the Syrian crisis have also started to increase. Specifically, the activities of the systemic actor of Iran have a two-fold target: the support of the Assad regime and the preparation for the day after the fall of the Assad regime. The possible covert operations by Hezbollah within the Syrian territory, along with its increasing re-armament within the Lebanese territory, are without doubt in accordance with the preparations that the Iranian leadership is crafting for a possible post-Assad Syria. Israel's military intelligence chief, Major General Aviv Kochavi, stated recently before the Israeli Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that *«Iran and Hezbollah are preparing for the day after Assad's fall from power»*. And he added that *«in Lebanon, there are today between 70-80.000 rockets that could hit Israel. The smuggling of rockets from Iran to Lebanon continues»*¹⁹.

Nevertheless, it is not at all certain that the rise in power of a Sunni radical movement, which embodies the opposition insurgency in Syria, will offer a higher degree of security to the Israeli state. On the contrary, the activities of radical Islamic elements, (such as various groups that are connected or affiliated with Al Qaeda²⁰) within the core of the, only by name, *“Free Syrian Army”* promises exactly the opposite outcome.

The systemic actors of Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also appear to have recently increased their activities within Lebanon (various, though mostly unconfirmed, reports of funding of Sunni radical militia groups from the two GCC states have been recently published), with the double target of undermining the Assad regime and counter-checking Hezbollah, the main proxy actor of Iranian influence in the Levant. The recent assassination of Wissam Hassan (key ally of Saudi Arabia and the US and equally key opponent of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran) was part of this new regionalized dimension of the Syrian crisis that has started to be conducted –albeit with covert operations- within the Lebanese territory.

Conclusively, Lebanon appears to be currently in a threshold. It has up to now managed to sustain the pressure from the subsystemic impact originating from the Syrian crisis. However, the increasing regionalization of the Syrian conflict has in the recent few months resulted to increasing pressure on Lebanon by the systemic impact originating from the main actors of the Middle Eastern system. As a consequence, the first critical traces of this impact have started to appear on the Lebanese geopolitical space. The degree of the increase of the regionalized dimension of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese geopolitical space will determine whether Lebanon will manage to sustain, with minimum effect, the pressure from the double impact (subsystemic and systemic) or it will instead be turned into the second major crisis after Syria.

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