

## Lebanese await the inevitable return of war

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In one of Beirut's trendier bars, four European photographers relax over cold beers. Their presence is alarming Ghassan, the barman. 'Why are there so many journalists in Beirut right now?' he asks me. "Has there been some change in 'The Situation?'"

The Lebanese can be forgiven for seeing a new slew of foreign press as a harbinger of doom, for the year since last summer's war between Hizbollah and Israel has seen crisis after crisis pummel this tiny, fractious nation with the bad luck to exist in a very tough neighbourhood.

The Situation, 'al-Wada' in Arabic, crops up in conversation a lot these days - a phrase that summarises the past 30 years since Beirut went from being the 'Paris of the Middle East' to a playground for every troublemaking faction in the region.

Lebanon's uncertain future is held hostage by three major crises: political stalemate between Hizbollah and the government; military crisis over the presence of Hizbollah near Israel's northern border, and the arrival of Sunni militants escaping the Iraq war to set up shop in Lebanon. For a nation as fragile as Lebanon, facing all three problems at once is untenable.

The aftermath of last summer's war - which killed more than 1,000 Lebanese and displaced a million - turned out to be more political than physical, when the Hizbollah-led opposition decided to move against the elected government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and his western allies. Over the ensuing 10 months, a deep schism erupted between Sunni government supporters and the primarily Shia opposition.

Periodic riots and violent street clashes have paralysed the government. And its inability even to agree on the rules for meeting, let alone to resolve 'al-Wada', has thrust the nation deeper into crisis as November's deadline for selecting a replacement for President Emile Lahoud, a Christian supporter of the opposition and a long-time ally of Syria approaches.

The government - and its Christian, Druze and Sunni supporters - want the next president to be independent of Syrian influence. The opposition wants a supporter of Hizbollah's 'armed resistance' and wants to prevent the government from installing a president aligned with the US and Europe against Syria and Hizbollah. Just weeks before his term is set to expire, the parliament can't even agree on the terms for a debate on Lahoud's replacement, let alone find an acceptable candidate.

The situation remains so tense that all sides are considering what some are calling the 'junta option,' where Lebanon voluntarily turns over the presidency, in the short-term, to the army chief of staff Michel Suleiman. He appears to be neutral in the power struggle and could be a consensus choice to avert what could become civil war should the factions fail to compromise before Lahoud's term ends.

The war of 100 days and more against radical Palestinians in the Nahr al-Bared camp has also shredded any sense of security in Lebanon. Fatah al-Islam, with an ideological link to al-Qaeda and many Iraq war veterans, remains in control of a square kilometre of the now-destroyed camp after more than three months of shelling by the Lebanese army.

The fighting, which has claimed more than 200 lives and displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians, has revealed an inherent weakness in the military and security services. The fear that Fatah al-Islam are only the first Sunni radicals with ties to Iraqi insurgents is legitimate and could be deeply destabilising in a country with little history of fundamentalism among its Sunni Muslims. But the highest profile threat is the sense of unfinished business between Israel and Hizbollah. Hizbollah claim last summer's war as a 'Divine Victory' and most people accept that another round of fighting is inevitable.

The presence of an expanded UN peacekeeping mission along the border has calmed things somewhat, but just north of the UN mandate area, Hizbollah is openly reforming its defences and rocket batteries. And the Israelis seem resigned to eventually having another go at the group. But with the elected government powerless to deter Hizbollah from instigating another war, and even more powerless to convince Israel not to pursue one, yet another spark along that longtime regional flashpoint could have repercussions not only in Lebanon but with Iran and Syria as well. The threat of regional war has never seemed greater.

But ultimately, the Lebanese remain convinced that there's little they can do to avert any of these catastrophes. With 18

different ethnic and religious groups, a weak central government and inept security services, Lebanon has long been the playground for regional powers looking for a site for a proxy war. Now everyone finds it inevitable that war will begin. They just can't agree on the direction from which it will come.

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