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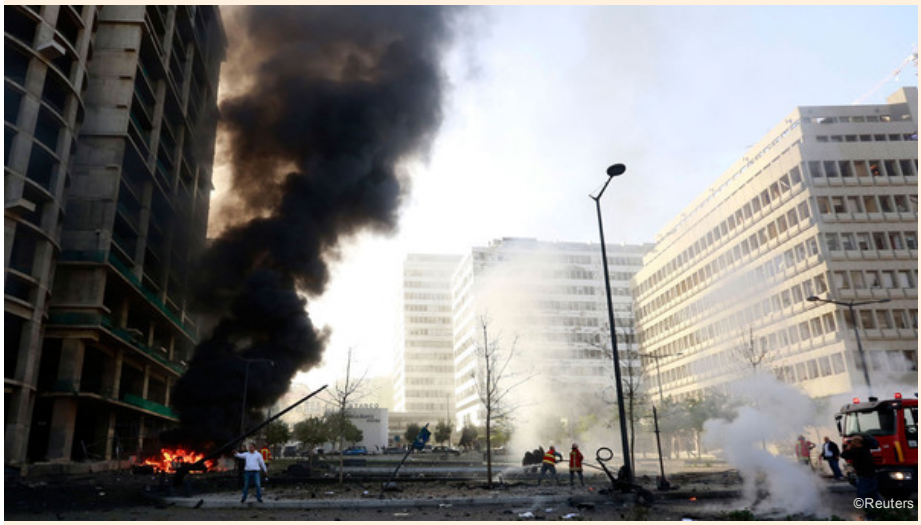
Lebanon on the brink

By David Gardner

Political gridlock, economic torpor and the machinations of pro-Syrian Hizbollah – the non-state regional superpower – have once more pushed the crossroads of the Middle East to the edge of collapse



Beirut, December 27 2013. The aftermath of the car bomb explosion that killed former Sunni minister and strategist Mohamad Chatah

Just after last Christmas, Mohamad Chatah, senior strategist to Saad Hariri, a former prime minister of Lebanon, was making his way to a meeting within the heavily guarded area of downtown Beirut occupied by the Sunni-dominated opposition. Unlike most Lebanese politicians, who travel in convoys of armoured SUVs bristling with bodyguards, Chatah was in his own, almost ostentatiously standard, sedan. He took the same shortcut he always took. Twenty minutes before he arrived, CCTV cameras show a car arriving near this road to the Hariri complex to replace another car parked there overnight. The drivers of both vehicles knew precisely where the cameras were and how to evade recognition. When Chatah got there, the 30kg explosive charge inside the second car was remotely detonated. It killed him, his driver and four bystanders, one of them a young student out for an early morning jog.

Another day, another Beirut bomb. Beirutis seemingly shrugged it off. By New Year's eve, nearby bars and restaurants that had had their windows and doors blown in were gleaming once more – and overbooked. The almost adjacent Music Hall, celebrated for its drinking, dining and dancing to eclectic east-west fusions of live music, throbbed frenetically. The show must go on.

Inured to long years of civil war, serial invasions and occupations, and a string of high-profile assassinations for which no one has been brought to justice, the Lebanese have an unhealthily high tolerance of chaos. Amnesia is considered almost a civic virtue and the absence of a state able to provide a modicum of security is paraded as a vindication of the country's freewheeling spirit: aggressively mercantile, interspersed with lots of partying but punctuated by slices of mayhem.

For a long time – through the sectarian savagery and relentless destruction of the 1975-90 civil war, through the Israeli invasions of 1978, 1982, 1996 and 2006, throughout the 22-year Israeli occupation of the south that ended in 2000 and 29 years of Syrian occupation that came to an ostensible end in 2005 – this was a heady brew, the bubbly in the fabled resilience of the Lebanese. Now, despite occasional signs of fizz, it has gone distinctly flat. It is not just that Lebanon remains a state that often seems just hours away from collapse. It is that Beirut, the faded jewel of the Mediterranean that once touted itself as the Paris of the east, looks as though it is never going to recover its lustre. The physical resurrection of Beirut and much of its hinterland is real enough. But can it ever make anything of itself?

Lebanon is saddled with a political class of warlords in suits, political entrepreneurs who treat their people not as citizens but as cattle to be herded inside the country's 18 officially recognised sects. Instead of individual rights with guarantees of religious and political

pluralism for each community, rights are vested in the sects in ways that their leaders, often the scions of political dynasties, easily usurp and then trade with external powers seeking to bolster their interests in the region.

Yet eclipsing this quasi-feudal cast of grotesques is the long shadow of Hizbollah, the Shia Islamist paramilitary movement, born out of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution and Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The spearhead of Iran in the Levant, it has grown from being one of the states-within-a-state that Lebanon seems to spawn prodigally, to becoming clearly, if not always visibly, more powerful than the state.

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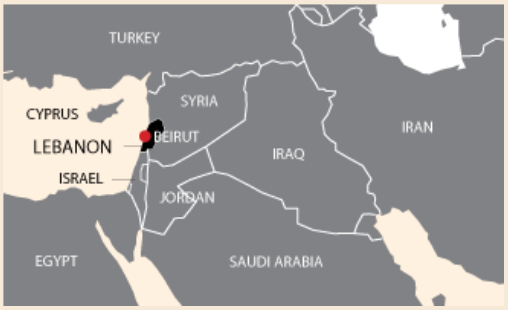
Last May, Hizbollah openly committed the full might of its militia to the civil war in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship. This fateful decision, taken in Tehran, has attached Lebanon to the Syrian battlefield, which now stretches from Beirut to Baghdad, creating another arena for the vicious struggle within Islam between Sunni and Shia.

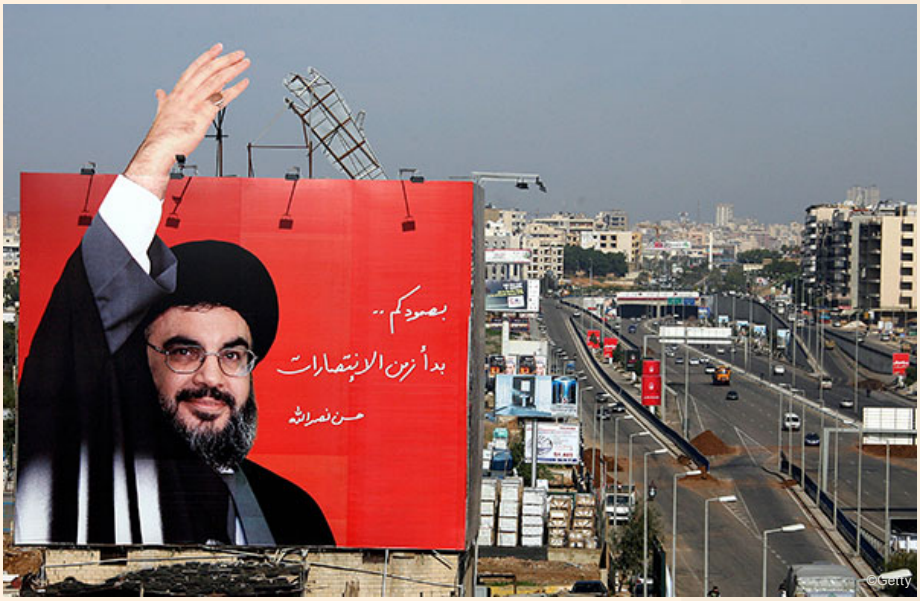


Syria is the frontline in this fratricidal conflict, reignited after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 that brought the Shia majority there to power and lengthened the regional reach of Iran – to the indignant consternation of the west's Sunni allies in the Gulf, led by Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, the Sunni-Shia fight has now almost eclipsed antagonism between Muslims and Christians – the main faultline of its civil war – with the latter now divided between the two Islamic camps.

While the petty rivalries of Lebanon's politics – with lead players endlessly changing their colours and coalitions – might be dismissed as a parochial psychodrama, the country seems unable to escape real and predatory regional menace, with neighbouring Syria and Israel, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia, the most deeply involved external players in Lebanon's recent past. The difference now is that Hizbollah, built on a reputation of fierce resistance to Israel and US-led policies in the Middle East, has taken a starring role as a regional protagonist.

This time last year it was Hizbollah that enabled the Assad regime to take al-Qusair, a small Syrian town astride the strategic Homs Gap that links the capital, Damascus, to the northwest coastal heartland of the minority Alawites, the esoteric branch of Shi'ism the Assads made the backbone of their crumbling security state. Qusair was also a staging post for arms smuggled from Lebanon to the rebels. Assad forces had failed several times to clear this corridor. In their new role as shock-troops for a Syrian regime that is morphing into a well-armed militia network under Iranian guidance, Hizbollah also cleared rebels from Syria's side of Lebanon's border in the Qalamoun hills in a just-concluded battle that began last November.

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbollah, calls these intrusions into Syria divinely sanctioned resistance, protecting the Shia and other minorities from the savagery of Sunni jihadi extremism. In 1998, on one of three occasions I interviewed him, Nasrallah argued passionately that Iran, under the reformist leadership of then President Mohammad Khatami, would light the path of Islam and eclipse obscurantists such as Osama bin Laden. Yet Hizbollah, licensed by Syria during its occupation of Lebanon as a resistance movement to Israel's occupation of the south, has always thrived on conflict. And Nasrallah has made his fighters the foot soldiers of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, under the wing of the al-Quds brigade of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The corps' leader, Qasem Soleimani, calls the shots across the enlarged Syrian battlefield and helped build this bastion on the Mediterranean for the Islamic Republic. "They have always been a part of the Revolutionary Guard," says one European ambassador in Beirut with deep experience in the region. "If it's a sin then it's an original sin."



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Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbollah, hails followers from a hoarding in Beirut

Inadequately classified as a non-state actor by social scientists and diplomats, Hizbollah is really a sort of non-state hyperpower. “They are behaving like an imperial power,” says one perplexed Lebanese Shia intellectual. “Hizbollah has taken Lebanon into a regional confrontation, and we will pay heavily for it whether they win or lose.”

It is hard for anyone who is not an Arab to grasp what Hizbollah signified at the peak of its prestige – after forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000 and then holding the region’s superpower to a draw in the last war in 2006. That is why it is so difficult to credit its claim that propping up the Assad regime is an act of “resistance” – while a predatory clan clings to power by crushing a civic uprising against tyranny with ballistic missiles and barrel bombs, artillery barrages and air strikes, industrial-scale torture and systematic starvation, using incendiary bombs on school playgrounds and cluster bombs on bakery queues.

Nasrallah, shrewd and cerebral as well as fiery and charismatic, has been virtually in hiding since 2006, fearing assassination by Israel. Every time he graces the nation with his soaring, remotely delivered oratory, celebratory gunfire rings out across Beirut. But his turban has started to slip.

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The Chatah murder last December was read by many as a message, delivered just as the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon was due to open in The Hague. Charged in absentia were five Hizbollah operatives, accused of carrying out the February 2005 assassination by truck bomb of Rafiq Hariri, the former premier and father of Saad. That was a sort of regicide that changed the course of Lebanon.


©AP

Mohamad Chatah: a leading Sunni figure whose assassination last year has been blamed on Shia forces

Hariri was the architect of the postwar rebuilding of Beirut and Lebanon, though he failed in its political reconstruction. He was a Sunni, as all prime ministers must be in Lebanon’s politico-sectarian equation, alongside a Christian president and Shia speaker of parliament, but as the *primus inter pares* of the triumvirate. A construction tycoon who diversified into banking and media before entering politics, with international allies such as Jacques Chirac, then president of France, Hariri was the only real obstacle to Iranian-Syrian designs on Lebanon. Critically, in the autumn of 2004, he moved his Sunni coalition into alignment with Christians and Druze, a millennium-old offshoot of Shi’ism, which had reconciled with the Christians in 2001.

The demonstrations that followed the Hariri assassination divided the country into two camps, named for the dates of their biggest rallies. March 8, built around Hizbollah, includes Amal, another civil war-era Shia militia, whose leader, Nabih Berri, is speaker of parliament, and the Christian party of General Michel Aoun, the messianic figure who lost a suicidal “war of liberation” against Syria and rival Christian militias in the last spasms of Lebanon’s fratricide in 1988-90. March 14 – the date of the rally that eventually forced Syria to withdraw its troops in 2005’s so-called Cedar Revolution – is a 12-party coalition built around Saad Hariri, leader of the mainly Sunni Future Movement, in alliance with the residue of the Maronite Christian militias of the Phalange and Lebanese Forces and, episodically, the Druze. Saad, a businessman thrust into a leadership role for which he was ill prepared after his father Rafiq’s assassination, lives in self-imposed exile in Paris to avoid the same fate.


©Rex

Saad Hariri: the son of Rafiq and leader of the Future Movement, who now lives in exile in Paris

Rafiq Hariri: Lebanon's current volatility dates back to the killing of the Sunni prime minister in 2005

Political paralysis has been the norm since then. Paradoxically, the withdrawal of Syria and its troops led to Iran and its Arab allies getting their claws deeper into the Lebanese political fabric. Car bombs eliminated dissidents, from the writer Samir Kassir in the summer of 2005 to Wissam al-Hassan, intelligence chief of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) in August 2012.

An agreement in May 2008 was supposed to break the political impasse, as the diplomatically ambitious gas-rich emirate of Qatar distributed $44m in cash to Lebanese politicians all but locked up in a Doha hotel, not to mention an Airbus to Bashar al-Assad. The deal in effect awarded Hizbollah a veto on government policy.

That is but part of the Hizbollah strategy towards Lebanon's Potemkin-republic institutions, which is to fill them, keep them empty or render them unworkable. For the Party of God's thrust into Syria, exposing its Lebanese rearguard to reprisals (more than a dozen car-bombings since last summer and dozens of thwarted attacks), means it has had to tighten its grip at home. Thus, it brought down a government it all but controlled in March last year by refusing to extend the mandate of Major General Ashraf Rifi, head of the Lebanese ISF, who is close to the Hariris and led the last security service it could not control. "They have a foot in every office in this country," says a retired senior intelligence officer, "and they control all the intelligence branches."

Michel Aoun: a Christian and former army commander, he has now allied his followers to Hizbollah in the March 8 coalition

Parliament limps along in a legal penumbra, after MPs awarded themselves extensions to their terms, because the constitutional tribunal empowered to adjudicate on proroguing the legislature was kneecapped by the withdrawal of Hizbollah trusties, leaving it inquorate and impotent.

As Hizbollah MP Ali Ammar put it in parliament: "We are not small and we are playing the game of the big players. We are big players and we have defeated big players." Another void threatens to open in the current election of a new president by parliament, unlikely to happen soon since the March 8 MPs either cast blank ballots or fail to turn up. "You have to safeguard stability but create a vacuum in all the organs of state that might oppose you," says the Shia intellectual. Nearly all commentary on the so far abortive contest is about personalities rather than policy. Much of it centres on General Aoun, Lebanon's would-be De Gaulle, who, at 80, and having turned on a sixpence, depends on Hizbollah to realise his unlikely ambition and become president.

Walid Jumblatt: leader of the Druze community, he has shifted allegiances numerous times

Outside powers, so often blamed by Lebanese for their woes, are both meddlers and onlookers. The Saudis, backing March 14, and the Iranians, behind March 8, stood back last month to allow an uneasy and largely inoperable coalition government between the two sides. The US, France and the UK are trying to build up the capability of the army, Lebanon's last functioning institution aside from the central bank, in full knowledge of Hizbollah's hold on military intelligence and the growing co-ordination between regular troops and the irregular but highly disciplined guerrilla force. The Saudis, just as paradoxically, are trying to boost their influence with a $3bn grant to the army. "There is a worrying perception that this is a partisan army protecting the Shi'ites," says the European ambassador. A former Shia minister and avowed foe of paramilitarism remarks ruefully that "the truth is the little stability we have here is because of Hizbollah".

March 14 and the Future Movement, many of their cadres confined behind high walls under armed protection, cannot agree. They say Chatah, a former finance minister and US ambassador, was murdered in reprisal for November's twin suicide bombing of the Iranian embassy, claimed by Sunni jihadis allied to Syria's rebels but blamed by Hizbollah on Saudi Arabia. That he was also the Future Movement's strategist would not have improved his chances of survival.

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Rafiq Hariri's postwar project was to recreate Beirut as the capital market and commercial crossroads of the Middle East. Sectarian deadlock, more wars and the rivalries of outside powers thwarted him. The project moved south, mainly to Dubai, now a major tourism, transshipment hub and budding regional financial centre that, in a cruel irony, scooped up many of the disillusioned architects of the Beirut project. That, too, is changing, as Gulf countries start driving out thousands of the Lebanese working there, targeting the Shia but catching others in the net, since they believe Hizbollah has been using its influence to arrange passports for coreligionists with Christian or Sunni-sounding names.

Much of downtown Beirut, the neo-Ottoman heart of the city's resurrection, lies empty. Almost any building of consequence is surrounded by blast barriers and razor wire. Lebanon is leaching talent, as its best-educated youngsters seek lives and livelihoods abroad, leaving their less fortunate compatriots locked up at home as the clients of communal patrons. But even some older Lebanese, who have withstood everything the country has thrown at them, say belief in a different future here is futile.

"The Lebanese love novelty and think they are so modern, but they are killing the new," says the (Sunni) owner of a bank, who is

thinking of relocating to Istanbul. “You think you have a circle, but the circle of sanity gets smaller and smaller [as] everybody ends up taking refuge where they feel safe, in their own sect with its outside protectors.” A successful (Christian) architect, expanding in the Gulf but many of whose projects at home are blocked, concludes that the only way forward is to play the game and stand for parliament, a proven path to patronage. “If you want to work in this country you need power,” he says.

Lebanon today seems unable to untie these knots. But when it does work, it can be a revelation: a country that survives on its wits. Banking and services (including tourism) are its specialities, going back in history to when it operated as go-between to the civilisations emerging along the banks of the Nile and between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Its hidden asset, invaluable for a nation making a living as an intermediary, is its diaspora, four times as numerous as the population of the country, with which millions of Lebanese keep close family and business ties.

The Lebanese economy is not really susceptible to conventional economic analysis. Lebanon is best seen, economically speaking, as the biggest island in a far-flung archipelago, stretching from Abidjan to Sydney, from Toronto to São Paulo, into the banks of Paris and the bond-dealing rooms of London and New York – wherever the irrepressibly entrepreneurial Lebanese are to be found.

The Mohammad al-Amin Mosque in central Beirut, inaugurated in 2008, surrounded by ongoing reconstruction work

Nasser Saidi, a US-educated Shia Lebanese, was vice-governor of the central bank during the Hariri era, then economy minister, before becoming chief economist for the fledgling Dubai International Financial Centre. Now a consultant, he believes diaspora talent, allied to the quality of Lebanese higher education and its regional ties, could be mobilised to make Beirut a financial conduit for the vast reconstruction costs of the region, which he estimates at $250bn for Syria alone. If the tentative rapprochement between Iran and the US and other international powers prospers, that too could clear a path to hundreds of billions of dollars in unmet investment needs for a country crippled by sanctions. “If you were talking just about financing the reconstruction of Syria and Iran, that could reignite Beirut,” he says. “We have the knowhow and the banks” – which already have a deposit base three times the size of Lebanon’s economy. Saidi adds that the Lebanese “don’t have the hang-ups of the US and the Gulf with Iran, and we could even use Gulf money coming through Beirut towards Syria and Iran. That could be a renaissance.”

Fouad Makhzoumi is a Sunni businessman and politician who over the past 30 years has created a multinational fibreglass-pipe-making business. He believes that if Lebanon can equip itself with a robust rule of law and proper training schemes, it can find new niches in providing infrastructure, especially by leveraging the country’s share of newly discovered offshore oil and gas riches. “It needs a vision,” he says, “otherwise [while] older people may keep finding their way through the minefields of doing business here, younger people simply won’t be interested.” Politics – sectarian politics – is ultimately all.

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Samir Franjieh is a centre-left intellectual from an illustrious and divided Maronite Christian dynasty, former adviser to Rafiq Hariri, and incubator of the political movement that is now the largely ineffectual March 14 coalition.

“At the political level, yes, it’s a desolate panorama but if you look at civil society, the debate is rich and vibrant,” he says. In a country without institutions he believes Lebanon’s Christians urgently need to mediate between Sunni and Shia, and proposes a truth and

reconciliation commission. “We need something that tells us our half-century of conflict and war is over.” He also wants to break the sectarian stranglehold on politics with a bicameral system, consisting of a lower house – currently divvied up by religion – representing citizens and their political preferences, and a senate to safeguard the rights of sects. These initiatives would have to be driven by civil society, he says, but if they were to prosper, they could be transferable to Syria and other countries with a mosaic of sects such as Iraq.

But for as long as Syria’s civil war fans the flames across the Levant, there is little room for nuanced debate. All Lebanon’s sect and faction leaders are united in the desire to keep the lid on and spare the country a real relapse into communal strife but it is far from clear they are all talking about the same lid. As Hizbollah’s drive into Syria shows once again, it has always been a delusion in the Middle East that those who unleash violence believe they can control it.

Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Druze who has shifted alliances many times in defence of his people, fears for the future of his and other minorities, recalling the Christian exodus from Iraq after the US-led invasion of 2003 rekindled the Sunni-Shia war. “I see a bleak future for the Christians here and in [all] the Middle East,” he says. “If they leave, the pluralism of the region will go with them and we’ll be left on our own. We have to play for time and keep extinguishing the smaller fires before they get bigger . . . or we’ll be linked directly to a Syria as disintegrated as Iraq.”

David Gardner is the FT’s international affairs editor. To comment on this article please post below, or email magazineletters@ft.com