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Robert Fisk: Lebanon is like a Rolls Royce with square wheels... it has a lot that's worthy of praise but it doesn't run so well

If no agreement is reached on a new election law parliament will be crushed



The prime minister has resigned, there's no government to speak of, there are further street battles in Tripoli, the threat of more kidnappings. Lebanon, as we used to say in the civil war, returns to normal. And in some ways, it's true. Lebanon is always living through the greatest crisis since the last greatest crisis. But the current drama is a little more serious.

Najib Mikati – one of the world's richest politicians as well as prime minister of one of the world's smallest countries – [resigned because his government had become unworkable](#) and the country's MPs had failed to draw up a new election law. Trade unions had been striking across Lebanon – even closing the international airport for several hours – to demand higher salaries. Mikati gave way on this, one of his very final acts, but he cannot have been a happy man.

After all, living next door to a civil war is not an easy task, not least when [Syrian jets bomb two houses inside Lebanese territory](#). The Israelis invade Lebanon's airspace every day without a whimper from Washington but the Syrian aggression had the United States thundering its fury at Damascus. Lebanon is not bound by sanctions against Syria so its government had adopted a policy of 'dissociation', a snob title for the necessary neutrality which the country must adopt to prevent its own Sunnis and Shias and Christians being drawn into the battles over the border. The Sunni-Alawite conflict in Tripoli – in which six people died, including a Lebanese soldier – cannot be allowed to spread to other parts of the country. Tripoli is, by chance, Mikati's home town.

But the 'dissociation' hasn't worked very well. For a start, the pro-Syrian foreign minister infuriated the Gulf Arabs by demanding that the Arab League restore Syria's seat in the chamber. The same minister, needless to say, wasn't too quick to condemn Syria's air raid. A Sunni sheikh in Sidon – along with Sunnis living nearer the border – has prevented gasoline trucks from driving to Syria where some of their fuel is probably used by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's army. We don't know this, of course, but it's a fair bet. Now the government has used oil tankers to take the fuel up the coast to the port of Latakia, which is comparatively free of the civil war consuming the rest of Syria.

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Mikati's decision to go was therefore intended to frighten the political parties in Lebanon, especially the Shia Hezbollah and the Sunnis clustered round the absent Saad Hariri – hiding in Saudi Arabia these past two years because of his claim that there is a plot to kill him – into creating a workable government that can frame an election law and take responsibility for the wreckage of the past few weeks. The catch, as always, is long term and incurable.

For, to be a modern state, Lebanon must de-confessionalise itself. A nation in which the president must always be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, the speaker of parliament a Shia, cannot work. But if you take sectarianism out of Lebanon, it will cease to exist – because confessionalism is the identity of Lebanon. It may have beautiful mountains, fine food, an extraordinarily well-educated population, but it is sectarian. It's a bit like owning a Rolls Royce complete with fresh leather seats, a flat screen television and a cocktail bar – but with square wheels. It doesn't work.

Hence being prime minister of Lebanon is not a barrel of laughs. You can push the car along with heaps of ministers and MPs all straining in the same direction. But it will only move a few yards. And then the ministers and MPs will start arguing again. The current government, which includes the Hezbollah – which President Obama wants the EU to condemn as a 'terrorist organisation' – clearly did not represent the Sunnis whose brothers in Syria make up most of the armed opposition to Assad – one of whose allies is, of course, the same Hezbollah movement.

Hariri will have rejoiced at Mikati's departure because the removal of his cabinet was a condition of Hariri's 14 March alliance to return to politics. All Lebanese politicians, however corrupted by money, guns or sectarian bias, are now supposed to troop up to the palace at Baabda for a 'National Dialogue' with President Michel Sleiman, the ex-general who has been spending the last few precious days swanning around on official visits to west African countries. He's probably the only man who could keep his visitors in the same room for more than a few minutes – but can he persuade them to agree on an election law in time for the June poll?

For without an election, parliament's own authority is as crushed as it was during Lebanon's 15-year civil war. No parliament, no government, no prime minister. No real ceasefire in Tripoli. Only the army can control the streets – a bit like Egypt, one might add – and the Syrian war grows more frantic by the day. Lebanon deserves better than this. It means that everyone is going to have to give that Rolls Royce another shove.