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Position Paper

Lebanon at the Eye of the Syrian Storm

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Will Lebanon, eventually, be attracted to the Syrian crisis, by virtue of its 40-year geostrategic rotation in the orbit of this larger neighbor, or will it manage to escape this time, at least relatively, from the imperatives of geography and history?

Here arises a question no less important: is the decision of engagement or disengagement from the Syrian crisis – which, according to all standards, still seems to be severe – in the hands of the conflicting Lebanese political forces or the existing Syrian regime?

The Wait-and-See Strategy

The Lebanese political forces are divided, as is known, into two major camps: the March 8 Alliance backed by Syria and Iran and led by Hezbollah, and the March 14 Alliance backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States and led by the Future Movement. For a year now, both forces have applied a wait-and-see strategy towards the Syrian crisis within the framework of a real "cold war" between them.

This strategy, distinguishably known as "the policy of self-detachment" is practically based on the tactic of remaining as calm as possible and waiting until the situation in Syria becomes clear.

However, the political wait-and-see tactic does not fall under a consented national strategy as each camp's attitude is based on a strong conviction that has been unshakable for a year and two months now (the duration of the current crisis), that victory will eventually fall in their hands, whether the Syrian regime survives the crisis, as the March 8 Alliance believes will happen, or falls, as the March 14 Alliance expects.

Based on this or that belief, each party shapes its accounts either to perpetuate the reality of the current balance of power in Lebanon, which is inclined towards Hezbollah and its allies (Michel Aoun and Suleiman Franjeh's Christian supporters, Talal Arslan and Wi'am Wahhab's Druze supporters, and members of the former Patriotic Movement of Lebanon), or to change the balance as hoped by the Future Movement and its allies [Samir Geagea's Christian supports and Kataeb (the Phalanges), Walid Jumblatt's Druze supporters, and some members of the former Lebanese National Movement].

This wait-and-see polarisation explains the complete stalemate of the Lebanese national dialogue projects that took place for several years under the auspices of President Michel Suleiman. Hezbollah totally rejected the statement recently issued by the March 14 Alliance, on the anniversary of the demonstrations that followed Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, calling for dialogue, openness, domestic peace-building, and an all-inclusive state. Moreover, when former Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri said, addressing the Shiites, "we establish our destiny together," Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah responded by saying, "You are not in a position to give guarantees in Lebanon and the region because the game is too big for you."

In return, the March 14 Alliance rejected the repeated calls of President Suleiman to resume the interrupted national dialogue and set a new precondition: Hezbollah has to declare its willingness to hand over its weapons to the state in the framework of a new national defence strategy.

In both cases, the motivation of the two parties is the same: wagering on change or non-change in Syria, which has had the upper hand in shaping the present balance of power in Lebanon since former President Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970 and adopted the strategy of stabilising Syria by exercising overwhelming regional influence particularly in Lebanon and the Palestinian issue (and later, "the Iranian issue").

"Cold War"

The waiting game is taking place between the Lebanese parties in the framework of a "cold war" concerning the Syrian crisis through various means, most notably the public and "secret" efforts made by each party to support the Syrian regime or the opposition.

The media coverage of the March 8 coalition confirms the claims of the Syrian regime denying the existence of a popular revolution in Syria, saying that there are only "terrorist criminal gangs wreaking havoc and terrorising Syrian citizens," which is what is portrayed in the discourse of satellite channels like Al-Manar, NBN, OTV, and newspapers like *As-Safir*, *Ad-Diyar*, and *Al Akhbar*.

The media coverage of the March 14 alliance, on the other hand, fully adopts the version of the Syrian opposition confirming the existence of a "historic popular revolution", referring to the Syrian army as "al-Assad's Brigades" (in analogy to the term "Gaddafi's Brigades"). This trend is obvious on Future TV and, to a lesser extent, MTV and LBC as well as in *Al-Mustaqbal*, *Al Hayat*, *Al Anwar*, *Al Liwa*.

However, things are not confined to the media as there are political accusations nearly every day between the two March alliances concerning direct intervention in Syria.

However, despite the obvious heat of Lebanese polarisation towards the Syrian crisis, the most striking of its features so far is the "cold war." In addition to the waiting game, this has three secondary justifications: first, popular Lebanese reluctance to resume a civil war that lasted more than 15 years; completely destroyed Lebanon; and killed, wounded, and displaced about half of its population. Because the horrific memories of this war live on, this reluctance turned veteran civil war leaders into advocates of maintaining civil peace.

Second, the agenda of Hezbollah, Syria's chief and strongest ally in Lebanon, is certainly a regional one as it is related to the conflict with Israel. Therefore, Hezbollah prefers not to burn its fingers in the Syrian furnace in the east, while it prepares for a raging war it believes to be inevitable with Israel in the south.

Third, the Syrian regime itself prefers (so far at least) that the situation in Lebanon remains as it is as Mikati's government was mainly formed by its allies and has taken a series of stances whether regional (in the Arab League) or international (in the Security Council and other United Nations bodies), refusing to isolate or condemn the Syrian regime even under the pretext of "self-detachment."

Moreover, the Syrian regime needs Lebanon in its current state to help break the severe economic, financial and oil siege imposed on it. This is partially being achieved through the Lebanese government's refusal to participate in the Arab sanctions on Syria. At the same time, the Lebanese government is making strenuous efforts to bring into line both the international (European and American) sanctions on Syria, and the Syrian pressure to "detach itself."

This, of course, does not mean that the Syrian regime is completely satisfied with the performance of the current Lebanese government; it is in its interest that the Lebanese government becomes more involved in breaking the siege on it and active in the pursuit of Syrian fugitive dissidents, and handing them over to it.

However, all this did not reach the extent of work to bring down the government, or change the existing political equations. Syrian necessities waive the prohibition of total Lebanese independence from Syrian decisions and orientations, as was the case for the last four decades. At the present time, these necessities seem to be limited to the cooperation between the two governments, and the status of careful and cautious waiting exercised by the Lebanese parties, including Syria's allies in Lebanon.

Perhaps the clearest embodiment of the wait-and-see strategy is the duplicitous policy practiced by the Druze leader Jumblatt. Recently, he readopted his earlier position and greatly criticised the Syrian regime to the point that he put the flag of the Syrian

Revolution on the tomb of his father, Kamal Jumblatt, whom he had accused Damascus of assassinating on 16th March 1977. Nonetheless, he retains his three ministers in a government dominated by allies of the Syrian regime.

Grim Scenarios

The balance of power in Lebanon is pending on the situation in Syria, and will change according to a number of scenarios:

The First Scenario

Continuation of the current waiting state, in conjunction with the transformation of the Syrian situation into a long and protracted crisis approaching a civil war only to eventually fall through. In this case, the "no war, no peace" situation will continue between Lebanon's warring factions and almost entirely paralyse the work of the government and the state building process.

The Second Scenario

The Syrian regime's stance on the Lebanese policy of self-detachment may shift from soft to hard pressure on Lebanon in order to divert the attention of the Syrian people away from the internal crisis and, at the same time, turn Lebanon into an arena for conflict (as Damascus used to do during the Lebanese civil war, in which Syria was one of the main driving factors) as well as demonstrate to regional and international forces the Syrian regime's unceasing ability to blow up the situation in the region if it continues to face pressure. The Syrian regime may then intentionally drag abstaining Hezbollah into a domestic Lebanese fray that it does not need.

The Third Scenario

An Alawi "palace coup" in Syria, this time under the Russian-American auspices, includes overthrowing the currently ruling Syrian troika (President al-Assad, his brother, Maher, and his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat), inaugurating a Yemeni-style transitional pluralist stage, or signing a Syrian "Taif" agreement (named after the Lebanese Taif agreement) of a new power-sharing between Sunnis and Alawites. In this case, the crisis in Lebanon may worsen, or even explode, because the March 14 Alliance will interpret this development as pulling the regional and international rug out from under the feet of Hezbollah, and will try to impose concessions on it under the slogan "All are subject to the authority of the state."

The Fourth Scenario

This scenario includes the possibility that the Lebanese parties will reach at any given moment wrong conclusions about the fate of the Syrian regime, either that its success is approaching (the March 8 Alliance), or that its fall is imminent (the March 14 Alliance). Thus, escalation operations supported by regional and international powers will eventually be carried out, resulting practically in the dragging of Lebanon back into the Syrian crisis.

Clearly, none of these scenarios is in Lebanon's interest – at least in the short run. This is not surprising. As previously mentioned, the premises of the Lebanese political forces do not stem from the national consensus on Lebanese interests, but rather on cold pragmatic accounts of domestic balances of power that are closely linked to alliances with regional and international forces abroad.

When Lebanon's abdomen is open this manner for foreign scalpels, and when each Lebanese party is waiting to shift the current balance of power when the fate of the Syrian situation provides the circumstances for such shifting, it becomes imperative to

watch Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and Deir Al-Zour to understand what is going on in Beirut, Tripoli, Moukhtara, Maarab, and the southern suburbs.

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