

# Quaderns de Construcció de Pau

Lebanon:  
opportunities beyond  
the *impasse*?

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Peacebuilding Papers (*Quaderns de Construcció de Pau*) is a publication of the School for a Culture of Peace (*Escola de Cultura de Pau*). Its objective is to disseminate the research conducted in this institution on peacebuilding and to bring it closer to the interested public. These research papers will follow three basic lines of work. First, they will offer academic analyses of a variety of topical issues. A second series of documents will make proposals to facilitate intervention by actors involved in the various aspects of peacebuilding. Finally, monographs will analyse current armed conflicts, situations of tension, peace processes or post-war rehabilitation processes, based on field work by researchers from the School for a Culture of Peace.

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**SUMMARY:**

This report analyses the political crisis unleashed in Lebanon in 2005 following the assassination of the former Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. The document assesses, on the one hand, the background to the crisis, from the characteristics and singularities of the creation of Lebanon up to the current paralysis, placing particular emphasis on the obstruction of the presidential vote and the deterioration of security within this context. On the other hand, the document considers the opportunities and the challenges facing the country that go beyond the current *impasse*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This report is the result of an exploratory mission to Lebanon from November 16 and December 1, 2007, in which several interviews were carried out with social agents and politicians both from the country itself and from the international community. At the specific request of the interviewees, no quotations have been given. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with its author. The author wishes to thank all interviewees for their valuable contribution, which has been essential to drawing up this current document. Núria Tomàs is a researcher with the Conflict and Peacebuilding Programme, at the School for a Culture of Peace (UAB, Barcelona).

## Introduction

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 marked the start of a new era of troubles in this small Middle Eastern country, unleashing mass protests, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country, a large scale political altercation, and a wave of assassinations that spread fear among both Lebanese commoners and among the ruling classes. Three years on and the tension has not only persisted but has increased, with the centre of Beirut 'occupied', institutions paralyzed, the country without a president, extreme social and political polarisation, and successive assassinations that have even caused forced politicians to remain enclosed in a maximum security hotel.

The armed Israeli aggression in the summer of 2006 intensified all of the elements of tension, leaving the country devastated, with a spiralling economic crisis, more marked social and political divides, greater international presence and a an increase, at least rhetorically, in the armed power of Hezbollah.<sup>2</sup> The 1,200 Lebanese deaths, the thousands of displaced people that this war has caused, and the vision of a country that is partially destroyed and in reconstruction continue to be a major burden on the population as a whole, whether they are directly or indirectly affected by the conflict.

In this context, qualified by many to be the worst crisis in Lebanon since the armed conflict that lasted for 15 years (1975-1990), there are numerous questions to be asked: is the country headed for another armed confrontation? Is the key for breaking the blockade a Lebanese one or will it be the actions of the regional and international actors that once again determine the future of the country? And perhaps most importantly, can the crisis present an opportunity to deal with the pending issues that the Lebanese authorities have been reluctant to tackle?

This report examines, on the one hand, the background to the present crisis, from the characteristics and singularities of the creation of Lebanon to the present stagnation, with special emphasis given to the blockade surrounding the presidential election and the deterioration of security in this context. On the other hand, it examines the opportunities and the challenges being confronted in the country beyond the present *impasse*.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the 2006 war see the report produced by the Investigation Commission of the United Nations Human Rights Council (November 2006).

## 6 | Particularities and fragilities in the creation of Lebanon

The history of Lebanon since its independence in 1943 has been replete with tension and violence. Perhaps no more than in other countries in the area, but with several particular elements that have made it a unique case in the region. Some calculations have attributed to Lebanon, which was once known as 'the Switzerland of the Middle East', one crisis for every four years since its foundation, a disturbing average for such a small country with a population of just four million.<sup>3</sup>

One of the special characteristics of Lebanon is its geographically strategic position. With a long Mediterranean coastline and almost entirely surrounded by Syria, its creation on the border of a vast and powerful neighbour in a territory where there is geographical and cultural continuity inevitably determined its future. More than sixty years after its creation, the idea of a Greater Syria is still strong and explains, to a certain extent, the political and strategic events that affect the country today. Similarly, on the southern Lebanese border, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the Arab-Israeli confrontation that has persisted ever since have marked the destiny of the country, especially due to the presence of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the territory. In short, its creation as a buffer state in the context of the struggle for control of the Mediterranean by the two major colonial powers of the time (Great Britain and France) unquestionably contributed to making Lebanon a territory vulnerable to regional conflicts.

A second characteristic of Lebanon has been what has come to be called its 'consulate culture', in reference to the widespread willingness and need of the Lebanese to maintain good relationships with consulate and embassy delegations. This dates back to the Ottoman period, when the European consulates offered and were asked by local authorities for protection, foreign intervention in Lebanese affairs has been constant right up until the present day. At that time, the intercession of powers occurred through the creation of special links with 'protected' communities: the Maronites received

the 'protection' of France, the Sunnis that of Egypt (and later Saudi Arabia), the Shias that of Iran, the Greek Orthodox community that of Russia, and the Druze that of the Ottomans and the British. This tradition has remained to the present day and the long line of diplomats who have visited in recent months to offer their 'good offices' to the Lebanese crisis is rooted in that phenomenon.

A third unique element of Lebanon is the result of its social and religious composition and structure. A unique case of diversity, Lebanon is something of a 'mosaic country' of different communities, religions and groups. Formed on the basis of 18 confessional communities, it is essentially structured around two main groups: Christians and Muslims. Of the 13 Christian communities, the biggest, both in numbers and in terms of political protagonism, are the Maronites, and among the Muslims, the Sunnis, the Shias and also the Druze. Three characteristics can be added to this panorama: the division of power on the basis of the confessional structure;<sup>4</sup> the establishment of decision making mechanisms based on 'consensus' (consensual democracy) as a guarantee for minorities;<sup>5</sup> and the protagonism provided by the French power to the Maronite Christian community in the institutional network and in circles of power, despite its progressive loss of representativeness.<sup>6</sup> All of these elements have led to tension and have contributed to the reinforcement of the sense of community. Very generally, the geographical distribution of the country by confessional criteria constitutes yet another reflection of this situation: for example, the Shia population is concentrated in the south, although since the sixties there has been emigration towards the capital, which in turn has led to practically homogenous neighbourhoods in the southern suburbs, or *Dahie*. The war that started in 1975, along with the population movements that it caused, significantly contributed to this territorial compartmentalisation according to with confessional criteria. Many neighbourhoods of Beirut are to this day clearly delimited and the profusion of symbols, flags and posters are evident signals of the confessional (re)affirmation of a large number of the population.

<sup>3</sup> After belonging to the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years, with the signing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the end of the First World War, the League of Nations awarded France the mandate over the Lebanon and Syria. In 1920, France created the State of Greater Lebanon, incorporating the autonomous Ottoman district known as Mount Lebanon (an area populated mainly by the Christian population, principally Maronites), the areas of Saida, Tripoli and the North. In 1926, France formed the Lebanese Republic and promulgated its first Constitution. In 1943, the Lebanon proclaimed its independence and instated the National Pact, an unwritten agreement between the first president of the independent Lebanon (Bishara al-Khuri) and the prime minister (Riad al-Sulh). The French troops did not withdraw until 1946.

<sup>4</sup> The 1932 census established a ratio of 6:5 for Christians and Muslims that served to define the distribution of political and administrative positions. With respect to the distribution of the high functions of the State, the president had to be Maronite, the Sunni prime minister and the Shia parliamentary spokesperson. The Taef Agreements (1989) introduced some changes to the distribution of parliamentary seats, in such a way that the Muslims had the same number of MPs as the Christians.

<sup>5</sup> See Jabbra (2001).

<sup>6</sup> This discord has intensified over the years through the emigration and low birth rates of Christian groups, at the same time as high birth rates among other communities, especially the Shias. Meanwhile, the links with France and the privileged position of Maronite groups led to a discourse of self-differentiation with respect to the remainder of the 'Arab' population. The Maronite population is also Arabic, although the leaders of this community have tended to emphasise a supposedly 'European' character. Without there currently being any reliable census and with the most recent dating as far back as 1932, there is a general consensus in recognising the political overrepresentation of the Maronite community and, at the same time, the under-evaluation of other communities, the Shias in particular. Recent statistical studies indicate that the Christian population (not only Maronite) constitutes 35.33% of the 5 million resident or expatriate Lebanese, Shia Muslims make up 29.06% and the Sunnis 29.05%; while the Druze represent 5.38% (data published in Al-Nahar newspaper on 13/11/06, and reproduced in Le Monde on 20/12/06).

All of these characteristics of the creation of Lebanon clearly demonstrate the markedly fragile nature of the Lebanese State, along with the existence of little more than a dozen highly influential families that have occupied the positions of

power and have passed this power on down the generations.<sup>7</sup> All of this has created tensions that have been resolved with a delicate balance between commitments and divides, the most drastic of which was the war that began in 1975.

## The ‘Civil War’ and the ‘Pax Syriana’

**T**wo fifteen year periods precede the crisis of 2005. First, the ‘Civil War’ that started in 1975 and lasted until 1990.<sup>8</sup> Second, from 1990 to 2005, a second period ensued that was marked by the marginalisation of the Maronite community in benefit of the Sunni and the political and military omnipresence of Syria in Lebanon (a period that is commonly known as the ‘Pax Syriana’).

The war that started in 1975 and lasted for 15 years enormously divided Lebanon and its impacts are still felt today. Not only in physical terms (damaged buildings) or political terms (such as the disagreements regarding the creation of a war museum), but mainly in terms of the non-material damage associated with the zero level of institutional care and the inexistence of transitional mechanisms of justice that might have been able to contribute to reconciliation between the opposing groups. During the war, a confrontation between Christian and Palestinian groups, accompanied by Sunnis and Druze, characterised the early years of the conflict. In 1976, the Syrian army became involved as an interventional force, by request of the Lebanese government and by mandate of the Arab League, although their real objective was to prevent the defeat of the Christians. In 1978, the invasion by Israel to suppress the armed Palestinian opposition reconfigured the alliances in such a way that hostilities broke out between the Syrian

troops and Phalange groups, who had come together with the Israelis against their common enemy, i.e. the PLO Palestinians that had arrived in their country since they were expelled from Jordan in 1971.

After the signing of the Taef Agreement in 1989, which put an end to the armed conflict, the country was devastated and more than 150,000 people had died.<sup>9</sup> At that time, and having fought a fierce battle with the Maronite opposition led by General Michel Aoun in October 1990, 35,000 Syrian troops were still stationed in the country. The link between Lebanon and Syria was formalised by the signing in May 1991 of a Fraternity, Cooperation and Coordination Treaty that, despite supposing the recognition of the independence of Lebanon from a formal point of view, in practice consecrated its condition as a Syrian protectorate.

Meanwhile, the Taef Agreement also signified the signing of the Lebanese Charter for National Reconciliation, which was associated to a package of political and constitutional reforms, the most significant of which was the suppression of the privileges of power of the Maronite Christian community, embodied the revision to reduce the power of the president. It also included an even composition of institutions, although the traditional assignation of positions by confessional criteria was maintained.

## Rafiq Hariri during the ‘Pax Syriana’

**T**he career of Rafiq Hariri’s, who would later be prime minister and be assassinated in 2005, was defined in the first of the described periods (1975-90) and consolidated in the second (1990-2005). During the ‘Civil War’, Hariri resided in Saudi Arabia, where he had moved from his native Sidon in the mid seventies in search of opportunities. There he managed to become an important business magnate, amassing a huge fortune and forging close ties with the Saudi royal family and the Middle Eastern elite. During the eighties

he was also involved in business in his native country, work that involved the mediation of agreements towards a ceasefire, always in his capacity as an envoy of the Saudi government. In fact, the organisation of the Taef Agreement (Saudi Arabia) was also his responsibility. His time in Lebanese politics came about after the legislative elections of 1992, when his profile matched the expectations of a population that was devastated by the conflict and the then president Harawi named him prime minister with the blessing of Syria.<sup>10</sup>

7 See El País (2005).

8 The war that took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 is commonly referred to as a ‘civil war’. However, several authors, including Georges Corm, agree in saying that it was not a ‘civil’ confrontation but a regional war that took place on Lebanese soil.

9 Also, it is calculated that during the same period 17,000 Lebanese civilians were kidnapped or ‘disappeared’ (Human Rights Watch, 2000). The Taef Agreements were signed on October 22, 1989, after a special session of the Lebanese parliament inaugurated on September 30 of the same year.

10 For details of Rafiq Hariri’s biography, see CIDOB (2006).

The priorities of the different mandates of Rafiq Hariri, a Sunni, were the material reconstruction of Beirut and the main urban centres, although his business interests, which included the construction sector and a major media complex, were never really separate from his public functions.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Hariri's policies faced serious protests, especially by the trade unions. As part of the 'Pax Syriana', Hariri adapted to the power exercised by Damascus in Lebanon, which included tight military, political and intelligence control, with a large amount of repression towards certain sectors.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Hariri submitted to the Syrian demand to avoid any attempt to agree to unilateral peace between Lebanon and Israel that might have meant the exclusion of the occupied Golan Heights affair. In the context of Israeli aggression and invasion, Hariri considered the armed wing of Hezbollah to be a legitimate resistance movement, which meant a certain enmity with the USA.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 completely altered the international panorama on many fronts. Pressure on Hezbollah was intensified, although Hariri continued to praise the organisation, considering it to be the only Arab force to have expelled Israel from Arab soil. At the same time, the

Syrian refusal to back an invasion of Iraq increased the pressure on the organisation, the repercussion of which was an intensification of its control over Lebanon. In April 2003, Hariri formed his fifth government, the most pro-Syrian of all of those over which he had presided. And, if in 1998 Syria had already named as president such a favourable figure as Emile Lahoud, in delicate moments like those, the Bashar el-Assad regime wanted to be assured that the mandate of such a reliable figure was going to be prolonged for a few more years, so in 2004 it declared its interest in Lahoud remaining in power until 2007. It was then that Hariri manifested his disagreement with the hegemonic position of Syria, but a quick meeting in Damascus in late August 2004 made him change his opinion.<sup>13</sup> However, there were numerous protests in Lebanon, which included the resignations of four government ministers, and Hariri eventually stood down from his position. It seems to have been in this context that Hariri became convinced of the need to join the pro-western front that at the time was exerting huge pressure on Syria in all areas (accusing it of harbouring weapons of mass destruction like in Iraq), and most especially in the Lebanese terrain, where the country was being ordered to withdraw its troops.<sup>14</sup>

## The assassination of Hariri and the internationalisation of the Lebanese question

In February 2005, Rafiq Hariri was killed in a strike in the very heart of Beirut, in which the explosion of a powerful artefact caused the deaths of 20 people and visibly destroyed the buildings near to the place of attack. The general commotion as a result had several repercussions. First, it sparked off huge public protests, led by the son of the assassinated leader, and which were crystallised in what was called the 'Cedar Revolution'.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, it marked the onset of major social and political polarisation on the question of opposition to the presence and influence in Lebanon of Syria, whose regime was immediately accused of having perpetrated the assassination. Such polarisation was particularly evident between a front classed as 'pro-Syrian' or 'March 8', led by Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah) and

Maronite leader Michel Aoun (who would later sign an entente document), and another 'anti-Syrian' or 'March 14', front, made up of the Hariri's party, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's party, and other Christian groups.<sup>16</sup> Finally, following the attack and as a consequence of national and international pressure, Syria found itself forced to withdraw its troops and intelligence services from the country.

Faithful to its role as the scenario for regional unrest, what happened in Lebanon over the course of a few weeks and what occurred as a result of the assassination on February 14 was, to a large extent, the product of an international climate that at the time had turned Syria into one of the members of the so-called 'axis of evil' coined by the president of

11 Rafiq Hariri had a first mandate from 1992 to 1998 and a second from 2000 to 2004 (October 21).

12 See Human Rights Watch (1997).

13 On August 28, 2004, the council of ministers passed a project to amend the constitution that enabled the prolongation of Lahoud's mandate until November 24, 2007. The Parliament approved the reform, with a two thirds majority, on September 3 of the same year. The day before (September 2, 2004), the UN Security Council had passed the resolution that demanded Syria's total and immediate withdrawal from the Lebanon.

14 In 2005 Syria had 15,000 soldiers concentrated in Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon and Bekaa. In June 2001 the first retreat to other zones occurred, and in July 2003, the withdrawal of 20,000 soldiers.

15 The cedar refers to the tree that symbolises eternity on the Lebanese flag.

16 The 'anti-Syrian' and 'pro-Syrian' tag is actually incorrect in that it does not refer to any opposition to or support for the Syrian population but refers instead to the Syrian regime, but it is still commonly used. It also refers to both groups as the 'majority' and 'opposition'. The Parliamentary majority includes the Future Movement Party (Sunni, with minister Saad Hariri, son of the late Rafiq Hariri), the Progressive Socialist Party, led by Druze minister Walid Jumblatt, and the Christian groups Lebanese Forces and Lebanese Phalanges (Kataeb) led by Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel, respectively. As for the opposition, apart from Hezbollah there is another Shia group, Amal, led by Nabih Berri (president of the parliament), along with the Free Patriotic Movement led by General Michel Aoun, another Christian group, Marada, led by former minister Soleiman Frangié, and Sunni groups based around the supporters of former prime minister Omar Karamé and Moustapha Saad. The opposition has also been joined by the Democratic Party led by ex minister Talal Arslan, as well as until November 2007 the president of the Republic, Emile Lahoud (Maronite Catholic), who does not belong to any party. For more details on the document signed by Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement in February 2006, see the attached bibliography.



the USA, George W. Bush, and which also demonised Hezbollah because its alliance with Iran, which was also being targeted due to its supposed responsibility for promoting international terrorism. The lack of Syrian support for the United States' invasion of Iraq marked a point of no return and Resolution 1559 of the UN Security Council in September 2004 reflected this.<sup>17</sup> The resolution demanded that Syria should respect Lebanese sovereignty and withdraw its troops from the country, and also disarm the militias, which was a clear reference to Hezbollah.<sup>18</sup> This scenario was the start of a dual dynamic that worked in parallel and would continue over time: on the one hand, the isolation of Syria from the regional and international table, and on the other, major internationalisation of the Lebanese question.

This explicit internationalisation, which was marked by the 1559 resolution, would be confirmed by successive UN resolutions, which included Resolution 1595 of April 2005 that established an International Independent Investigation Commission, the prelude to the creation of a special tribunal to judge those responsible for the death of Hariri.<sup>19</sup> These resolutions have had an extreme effect on the political life of the country over the last three years, to the point that they have caused polarisation, with their content being used in the dialogues and demands of the opposing poles. Similarly, the position in favour of the creation of the tribunal, formulated by insistence of the entourage of Hariri (son) (now in the government after having obtained spectacular results in the spring elections of 2005) was quickly adopted by the whole block defined as 'anti-Syrian'. So, international polarisation followed on from Lebanese political polarisation, and social polarisation from that, and since then it has done nothing but intensify.

However, despite this 'internationalisation' of the Lebanese question, it is important to indicate the internal dimension of the divide. From 2000, an internal movement had begun to be forged in response to the 'Pax Syriana', and this not only agglutinated the Christian sectors, but also included a wide political spectrum that stretched from the Druze leader

Walid Jumblatt to the Lebanese left. Criticisms of the shifts in authority imposed by Damascus, along with an economic crisis attributed to Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs (with the widespread presence of Syrian workers in the country), benefited from the weakening position of Syria following the death of President Hafez al-Assad. So, already at the turn of the century began the forging in Lebanon of a dividing line between those that supported the government (at the time 'pro-Syrian') and the Druze-Christian axis that led the opposition by demanding a rebalance of Lebanese-Syrian relations. It is important to note that this divide was based around one of the current points of division, i.e. the definition of Syrian-Lebanese relations, but with one significant difference: at that time, the main Sunni and Shia authorities approved of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, whether it was Rafiq Hariri as leader of the government or Hezbollah that led the Government.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to circumscribe this international setting to a constant in Lebanese history throughout the second half of the 20th century: according to several analysts, the doctrine for Lebanese security was based on a balance between two political ideals - on the one hand, the acceptance of the protection of western powers and, on the other, pacts with Arab powers in order to avoid regional threats.<sup>20</sup> So, the crisis that had its origins in 1958 led to US intervention in Lebanon, and it was not until the attack on Marines in Beirut in 1983 and the deployment of US troops (and Multinational Forces) that Syria came to fill the vacuum of 'protection' with the blessing of the USA (although its presence in the country dated back to 1976). In 2004, several factors once again changed this formula and western 'protection' was requested again. It is from this historical interpretation that the new positions could be understood, when then Prime Minister Hariri, with his close relations with France, the USA and Saudi Arabia, would have placed it in a 'western' setting. It is here that the international arena merges with Lebanese interior logic, which also shows the exploitative nature and dynamics of many of the positions and alliances.

## From crisis to blockade

**T**he assassination of Rafiq Hariri sparked off a new dynamic in the country: the streets were taken as the space for making social and political demands.

These included the demonstrations of February 27, March 8 and 14 of 2005, and the profusion of banners with messages praising one side or other.<sup>21</sup> With

17 In December 2003 the US Congress had voted in favour of the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act, which started to apply sanctions against Syria and was passed by President George W. Bush in May 2004. Resolution 1559 was adopted by demand of the USA and France, whose president, Jacques Chirac, had made a sharp U-turn in his foreign policy by siding with his American equivalent (after having previously manifested his opposition to the US invasion of Iraq).

18 See Resolution 1559 at <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>>

19 A later resolution by the Security Council, 1686 in June 2006, extended the commission's mandate to include assistance for the Lebanese authorities in its investigations of other politically motivated assassinations, assassination attempts or explosions since October 2004.

20 See introduction to the document Shehadi, N. and Wilmshurst, E. (2007)

respect to the demonstrations, what in principle was positive as it signified a public clamour that people had not been able to express for many years, progressively became an expression that led to the risk of confrontation. Testimony of this can be seen in the aggressive nature of many of the messages and the incidents that occurred between one side and the other.

All of this became all the more serious through the war in 2006 and in December of that year the opposition once again took a public space as its platform for protest. From then on, the centre of Beirut has remained 'occupied'. According to several analysts, this situation has been deplored by part of the population, who have seen how one of the few meeting areas has been appropriated by one political (and military) option. Moreover, the place they chose is especially relevant and symbolic for three reasons: because it is in the heart of the city;<sup>22</sup> because it is physical evidence, being located so close to the prime minister's headquarters, of the current social and political divide that is permeating the country; and, also, because it illustrates a dangerous phenomenon in the current scenario, the pretence of transferring politics from institutional-level to street-level.

In fact, what in 2005 started as a major crisis has developed into a total blockade of institutions and a paralysis of governmental activity. The clearest and most recent example has been the impossibility, more than three months since the end of his mandate, of electing a substitute for President Emile Lahoud.

## On the presidential election

**W**ith respect to the presidential election, it has to be asked what the elements are underlying this major polarisation. The points of blockade refer as much to the form of election as the background issues that have to be addressed once the president has been elected. The former allude to the quorum by which a president must be nominated (the parliamentary majority has threatened to accept a quorum on the basis of the 50%+1 formula, while the opposition defends the need for two thirds), a question that is the product of the debate and ambiguity regarding article 49 of the Constitution, and also the conditions that should govern the constitutional reform required for the election of the only candidate agreed upon until now, given that he is the present head of the armed forces. The background issues, although subordinate to the previous ones, offer the true keys for an understanding of the crisis.

But before that, there were other matters of controversy such as the formation of a national unity government, which was demanded by the opposition who finally withdrew its Shiite ministers in November 2006. Later, the political confrontation was centred on the instauration of the special tribunal to find out who was responsible for Hariri's death, as the Government requested from the UN, and on the subject of which the parliamentary president, Shiite Nahid Berri, refused to call a session to pass. Therefore, the lack of conformity regarding the election of the president is yet another of a long line of events in this troubled period, for after that consecutive crises can be expected to arise associated to the need to name another government, another prime minister and a new leader of the armed forces.

All of these crises have a common factor, which is the constant in the points of division of an axis with two poles that are apparently incapable of co-existence. And not only in terms of relations with Syria, but also many other matters such as the economic arena and security strategies. The 2006 war signified a considerable increase in the altercation, following the opposition's accusations that the government's entourage had encouraged the prolongation of the conflict in its own interests (i.e. the deactivation of Hezbollah). The war was a hugely destabilising factor, which contributed to an increase in the sense of threat and vulnerability felt by the Shiite community, as indicated by analysts that were interviewed for purposes of this report.

The opposition, led by Maronite General Michel Aoun and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, demand that they should be given the capacity of veto in a future national unity government (whose formation should be ratified by the future president). Their demand, based on their force representing more than half of the population of the country, seeks to obtain decision making powers on crucial issues, such as guaranteeing the right to 'resistance', i.e. defending themselves against Israel, a country considered to be an occupier and a potential attacker. Another highly relevant issue is that of guaranteeing that government actions do not damage Hezbollah's strategic alliance with Syria. This includes everything related with the future creation of a special tribunal, whose establishment is considered politicised by some of the opposition (although the 'pro-Syrian' front has condemned Hariri's assassination and is in favour of

21 From February 14, 2005 demonstrations followed on from each other: on the 27th of the same month, the first 'anti-Syrian' protests caused the 'pro-Syrian' Omar Karami Government to renounce; on March 8, the protests called for by Hezbollah were massively seconded; on March 14, another 'anti-Syrian' demonstration was so large that it was qualified as 'the Cedar Revolution'.

22 Since December 1, 2006, the opposition has installed a camp in a cordoned off area close to the Martyr's Square, next to the large mosque constructed by Hariri and the place where his body was laid to rest.

it being investigated).<sup>23</sup> There are other issues on the agenda, electoral reform being one, and which many people consider to be the real background issue.<sup>24</sup>

The permanence of the crisis for more than two years has highlighted the need to instate crisis management mechanisms to prevent these from becoming a blockade. In the opinion of several analysts, the common denominator in the successive disagreements has revolved around the interpretation of the Constitution by which they consider that the establishment of a discretionary mechanism on the matter could be a way of preventing the blockade. Specifically, the application of a clause considered by the Taef Agreement is proposed that would enable the already existing Constitutional Council to adopt a new function that has not been applied to date, namely the interpretation of the Constitution.<sup>25</sup>

The process at the end of the Emile Lahoud mandate and the attempts to elect a new president offer various considerations, some of which are positive, and others negative. On the one hand, and as positive aspects to be highlighted, it is not insignificant that Lahoud finally abandoned the presidential palace on the night of November 23, 2007 even though he had previously refused to do so until a substitute had been found for the position. As one analyst commented, this is no small issue in the Arab world, where leaders are used to staying in power. Secondly, although the election was proposed innumerable times, the event in itself was the product of an agreement between the parties. Finally, it is worth noting that, given the uncertainty of the moment and given the presidential vacancy that was produced, the messages from the leaders were ones of calm, something that led in the ensuing days to the situation being under control. With respect to the negative elements, these are manifold and constitute evident risk factors: there is still no

presidential figure, after more than ten calls by the Parliament for voting to take place; the only figure to be formally accepted by all parties has been the current leader of the armed forces, therefore a military figure, which although common in the region, cannot be interpreted favourably; and days after the proclamation of Michel Sleiman as a candidate, the person who should have been his substitute was killed in an attack, a clear message against the presidential candidate and which heightens future risks.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, an element of significant relevance in the presidential election process has been the continued presence of foreign mediators in the crisis. In fact, the delegations of ambassadors followed on from each other, and of particular relevance was the community 'troika' formed with France at the head, Spain and Italy (by no coincidence the three countries with an important number of troops in the UNIFIL). The withdrawal of the USA from the forefront, as a result of the Annapolis peace conference, was no coincidence either, but responded to the USA's desire to disassociate itself from the frontline while maintaining background influence, as shown by the calls by the USA for the participation of the Maronite patriarchy in the definition of a list of possible candidates. This international presence and interference reflected, on the one hand, the interests of foreign agents in the election of a favourable president that would be sympathetic to their own principles, but also showed how dependent Lebanon was on the exterior when it came to making internal decisions, thus following on from the tradition of community protection. This scenario clearly showed that the 'good offices' were no such thing, but responded more to the foreign agenda of certain governments than a desire to resolve differences. Several analysts agree in saying that the external 'protection' has contributed to deepening the internal divide, even increasing the confessional profile of the tension.

## The deterioration of security: a further element of instability

**I**n parallel with the political disagreements and the attempts to transfer demands away from institutions, these three years that started with the assassination of Hariri have witnessed a huge deterioration of security in the country as a whole. This phenomenon has taken different forms, the most impact having been caused by the wave of assassinations of

political, military and media figures. In this period, dozens of people have died in such circumstances.<sup>27</sup> But Lebanon has also witnessed, over this relatively short lapse of time, and aside from the 2006 war, the confluence of numerous acts of violence: in January 2007, incidents at the Arab University in the capital set the alarm bells ringing for a gene-

23 For more information on the special Tribunal, see Shehadi N. and Wilmshurts E. (2007). On the opposition's position with regard to the issue, see the document of the entente between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement.

24 The adoption of a new electoral law is one of the three questions present in the plan proposed by the Arab League and passed on January 6 2008, along with the election of a new president and the formation of a national unity government. Several sectors in the Lebanon are demanding electoral reform, including the LADE (Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections). LADE proposes, first, the need for a new law that guarantees greater proportionality (through a single constituency system that can avoid gerrymandering, a method for altering constituencies to favour certain results). It is also demanding a reduction in the voting age (from

25 An amendment to the Taef Agreements in 1990 created the Constitutional Council, a body that has three prerogatives: to establish the constitutionality of laws, to resolve electoral controversies, and to interpret the constitution. Only the first two were adopted, while the third never was, although it was contemplated.

26 General François Al Hajj, head of operations of the Lebanese armed forces and several of his bodyguards died on December 12, 2007 in an attack close to the Presidential Palace in Beirut.

ralised sectarian conflict; in June of the same year a deadly attack occurred against UNIFIL soldiers along with the launch of *katiushka* rockets towards the border; in May conflict broke out at the Naher el-Bared refugee camp between the Fatah al-Islam militia and the Lebanese army; and throughout 2007 several bombs struck different parts of the country.

All of these events have headed in a single direction: they have led to greater tension. However, there is a need to stress various aspects. On the one hand, a difference must be made between their natures, for connections cannot automatically be made simply because the events occurred at the same time, even though in some cases this may be no coincidence. On the other hand, and this statement is relevant for most cases, the authors and the true motives are still subject to speculation.<sup>28</sup>

With respect to the assassinations of Hariri and other similar victims that can be added to a long list of political killings in Lebanon,<sup>29</sup> the tribunal established for this purpose should uncover who is responsible. For the time being, four leaders of the Lebanese intelligence and security services have been held for more than two years without any charges having been pressed. At the same time, the initial accusations against the Syrian regime, based on a preliminary investigation, would have been discredited due to the lack of evidence, according to claims made by informed sources approached for purposes of this document. Therefore, the tribunal must determine, following investigation, who was behind the assassination of Hariri, and ascertain whether the successive deaths were connected (and, should that

be the case, put the authors on trial). To date, the tribunal has not even been instated, and it is anticipated that progress towards it is likely to take a long time. In any case, it seems clear that many of the assassinations had a common objective: members or people close to the '14M' coalition. Something else that is being argued is that the connection in time of the successive killings may in some way be related to the tribunal, which would represent a clear message coming from those opposed to its creation.

In relation to this situation it has to be said that the instability has been on the increase, especially over the last one and a half years. Unfortunately, some elements suggest that it will continue to increase: progress in the establishment of the Tribunal the polarisation of the international scenario, the role played by foreign intervention (one of the most recent assassinations was against a US embassy convoy), the strengthening of al-Qaeda on a global scale, and the armed conflicts on an international scale. For example, an attack on Iran, as has been mediated throughout the region for several months, would spark off unexpected reactions: Would Hezbollah take part? Would Israel take advantage of the opportunity to attack its enemies on Lebanese soil? In the interior, security threats could arise as a result of different factors: the persistence of a political blockade, a rise in the tone of the messages coming from political leaders (in this sense, there have already been changes from the end of 2007 up until first months of 2008, with several leaders alluding to the possibility of an internal war), and most of all, and most worryingly, the rearmament of militias and individuals as suggested by numerous experts.<sup>30</sup>

## The crisis as an opportunity or four unresolved issues

**T**he resolution of the current *impasse* in which Lebanon finds itself is related to a multiplicity of factors, some of which are international, others regional and many, national. Beyond the blockade currently affecting the country, and in awareness of the major influence of foreign fac-

tors on the future, several challenges are being tackled that need to be resolved in the medium term, which will only be possible through internal, inclusive, serene and profound debate. Some of these challenges also form part of the background tension, so at least recognising them and

27 The most significant deaths that have followed the assassination of Rafiq Hariri were: in June 2005, Samir Qasir, journalist and academic, and Georges Hawi, former secretary general of the Lebanese Communist Party; parliamentarian Gebran Tuani in December 2005; the minister for industry, Pierre Gemayel, on November 21, 2006; minister Walid Eido on June 13, 2007; minister Antonine Ghanem on September 19, 2007; on January 25, 2008, a high official in the anti-terrorist campaign, captain Wissam Eid, among others.

28 With respect to the attack on the Spanish contingent of the UNIFIL, its investigation is sub judice, but the suggested participation of al-Qaeda is unfounded for the time being. It is known that Hezbollah denied any responsibility for both the attack and the launching of *katiushkas*. As for the intentions of Fatah al-Islam, opposing hypotheses were formulated (according to Hezbollah, Saad Hariri and the USA they were behind the group; according to the government, Syria was pulling the strings). Recent investigations have revealed the complex evolution of the formation, not unlike a set of Russian dolls, with the participation of Syrian, Lebanese, Saudi and Palestinian individuals. For more information see Saab B.Y and Ranstorp, M. (2007).

29 In the list of political assassinations in Lebanese history there are two other Sunni prime ministers, Riyad as-Solh and Rashid Karamé (Omar Karamé's brother), killed in 1951 and 1987, respectively. Also Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, in 1977 and René Moawad, the outgoing Maronite president of Taef, in 1989. Other assassinations of important personages were: Maarouf Saad, a pro-Palestinian Sunni, in 1975; Amal Moussa as-Sadr, the Shia founder of Amal, in 1978; Tony Franjeh, the head of the pro-Syrian Christian Marada militia and son of then president, Soleimán Franjeh, in 1978; Bashir Gemayel, president elect of Lebanon, the former military chief of the Lebanese Forces organised by the Kataeb and the son of Pierre Gemayel, in 1982; Dany Chamoun, a renowned Maronite, the successor of Camille Chamoun at the head of the PNL, in 1990. More recently, in January 2002, Élie Hobeika, head of the pro-Syrian Lebanese Forces divided by the Phalangists during the war and later a member of parliament, died in an attack in Beirut whose *modus operandi* was very similar to that perpetrated against Hariri.

30 According to experts, the indicator that enables us to state that there has been an increase in the number of weapons is their price, which has shot up over the last year. It is calculated that buying a Kalashnikov is up to ten times more expensive now than it was a year ago and since the death of Rafiq Hariri the price of several models of small arms has tripled. According to the same sources, the existence of a greater number of weapons in circulation is due both to an increase in the demand (due to the increased sense of insecurity both on an individual and collective level) and in the supply. See Naharnet (2008).

committing to dealing with them, even though their resolution may require a longer period of time, could lead to improvements in the situation.

## Hezbollah: beyond disarmament

A common definition of Hezbollah compares it to a 'state within a state'. Effectively, since its creation in 1982, the organization has forged a social, economic, political and military network that is not unlike the structure, function and capacity of a state.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the weakness of the Lebanese state has even inspired a definition that goes beyond the former: Hezbollah can be said to act like a state within a *non-state*.

The new panorama that emerged following the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the south of the country in the year 2000 obliged the organization to redirect its demands. If these could no longer include an end to the occupation south of the River Litani, they now focused on three issues: an end to the occupation of the Shebaa Farms, an area included in the Syrian Golan Heights annexed in 1981;<sup>32</sup> the existence of detainees in Israeli hands; and the fear of new aggressions or invasions, i.e. the right to resistance. Therefore, the war in the summer of 2006 reaffirmed this latter justification and enabled Hezbollah to capitalize on what was proclaimed as a victory over the Israeli army (which had evident difficulties on the ground despite the high number of deaths on the Lebanese side, especially civilian ones).<sup>33</sup> In this context, the recognition of the 'right to resistance' has continued over these years to be the card played by Hezbollah, both at the international and the national tables. And the present political polarisation forms part of this: while Hezbollah is demanding recognition of its right to resistance, along with the veto power in a future government, the '14M' setting has demanded that it disarm, in the light of resolution 1559 and Hezbollah's alliances with Syria and Iran (in the context of international polarisation that has converted both into 'Rogue States', especially the latter).

Despite these situations, the demand for the disarmament of Hezbollah is still not only a demand being made by the 'anti-Syrian' axis, but also by a relatively widespread collective opinion that considers it to be a clear anomaly that needs to be corrected. The questions of how and when are matters for debate: should the international community do it, on the assumption that the Lebanese State would be incapable?<sup>34</sup> Is resolution 1559 the best way of demanding it or should an internal and agreed formula be found? Can it be done in the short term? Two things seem clear: disarmament carried out by force would not only be hugely counterproductive, but would also contradict its objectives. On the other hand, immediate disarmament is not really feasible, given the enormous tension and Israel's recent aggression. Moreover, both elements are accepted even by the parliamentary majority, so for future disarmament of Hezbollah to form part of a medium or long term national defence plan seems to be the most sensible alternative upheld by several analysts. Finally, we should also consider a highly important element that experts are also indicating: the legitimacy of Hezbollah is still relevant for part of the population, the Shias (although not all of them), who are demanding protection. In fact, Hezbollah's function is understood within the panorama of the confessional retreat of a community (that is under-represented institutionally and politically, and clearly more impoverished) that is acting from the standpoint of perceiving a threat. So, deactivating this threat continues to be the preliminary step in any strategy for integrating Hezbollah in a regular structure. Hence, its participation in the political arena in parallel with its armed activity is a value that cannot be underestimated.

## The rights of the Palestinian refugees: an imperative

Many people in Lebanon are saying that there cannot be peace in the country until the issue of the Palestinian refugees is resolved. This feeling reflects the tension brought about by the presence of an estimated 445,000 refugees on

31 Hezbollah has a political wing and an armed wing known as the 'Islamic Resistance', and is considered to be a terrorist organisation by the USA.

32 The Shebaa Farms are a small territory (14 farms in an area of 25 km<sup>2</sup>) that is claimed by the Lebanon although Syria considers them to belong to the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in 1967. In fact, all United Nations maps adjudicate this territory to Syria on the basis of the Anglo-French agreements of 1923 and the armistice of 1946. The Lebanese government presented its first claim to the sovereignty of the Farms in 2000, after the Israeli troops were withdrawn from the south of the Lebanon.

33 The importance should be noted of the deployment for the first time in the history of the country of the Lebanese army, along with UNIFIL troops, in obedience of resolution 1701, to the south of the River Litani in August 2006. However, despite this 'concession', numerous elements demonstrated the power enjoyed by Hezbollah. For a start, resolution 1701 was passed under chapter VI, i.e. not by imposition through force but as a product of the agreement between the parties, Hezbollah included. At the same time, the ambiguity reflected in the text of the resolution itself also played in Hezbollah's favour as it established that the presence of 'armed bodies' would not be permitted, but did not call for the disarmament of the armed group. The difference is subtle but extremely relevant: Hezbollah has managed not to make itself seen as an armed party, but the uncovering of weapons cache suggests the military capacity that the organisation possesses. But after the conflict it is mainly its capitalisation on the 'victory' that has conferred its true power: on the one hand, it has established itself as the institution that will reconstruct the attacked zones, both in the south of the country and in the Beirut suburbs, thus highlighting the state 'vacuum' in areas that were already marginalised as things stood. On the other, its political force has been increased, as shown by the pressure to obtain the capacity for veto in institutions, achieving alliances that have enabled it, until now, to prevent the election of a presidential candidate that does not tie in with its own interests; finally, the conflict united the Shia population more than ever around Hezbollah to the detriment of Amal, the other Shia party. At the same time, two other elements should be mentioned that have not played into its favour, as indicated by the people interviewed: first, part of the Shia population that was directly affected by the conflict accuses it of not having taken enough care of them during the bombardments (many were left without food or water while facing Israeli artillery); while another part of the population accuses it of having led the country into a war of such a magnitude simply in order to capture two soldiers; and finally, the long term negative effects that have been caused by the 'occupation' of the centre of the capital city cannot be ignored.

34 Some analysts argue for this difficulty on the basis of the fact that the army contains a large number of the Shia population.

Lebanese soil since the start of their arrival in 1948 following the creation of the State of Israel.

Welcomed at the time with open arms, both by the population and by the authorities, their situation has deteriorated to the extent that for over six decades discrimination, marginalisation and abuse have been the order of the day. They are currently spread across 11 official camps (after the virtual disappearance of Naher el-Bared following the clash with the army in 2007) in a delimited and highly limited space, the most numerous of which is that in Ein el-Hilweh, in the south of the country, which accommodates more than 45,000 people. However, despite the official figures, it is estimated that the real number of refugees is two thirds that of the official figure, as some of them have emigrated, mainly to European countries, given the difficulties they have encountered in Lebanon.

The debate regarding the matter of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has centred on their integration in the country. In fact, it was the Cairo Agreement of 1969 between the Lebanese government and the PLO, which established the recognition of social and economic rights for the refugees, which set all of the alarm bells ringing and unleashed clear tension regarding the issue. The presence of Palestinian refugees has created numerous problems in relation to a variety of questions, and not just the economic issue: the refugee camps have been spaces in which neither Lebanese state, nor its security forces, have been able to intervene, with the creation of mini *pseudo* states that are outside of anyone's control; they have been the refuge for armed groups, both with origins in the PLO and other organisations; and the internal rivalries have been and still are a cause of tension, reproducing the conflicts of the Palestinian-Israeli scenario<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, the Palestinians participated in the 'Civil War', forming part of the 'national movement' against the Phalange; and they have been exploited by external powers such as Syria, which played the Lebanese card in its own interest (seeking to reduce the influence of pro-Arafat sectors and foster a climate of permanent insecurity that would be of benefit in the post-conflict context). Finally, the marginalisation of the refugee camps has created areas of extreme radicalism, with a major presence of weapons, leaving the door open to external radical groups (as occurred with some of the members of the Fatah al-Islam militia, which fought in Naher el-Bared camp).

The complexity of the situation and the dependence on the evolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general) has led to the Lebanese authorities failing to put a stop to the problems of Palestinian refugee camps, maintaining discriminatory legal measures against this popula-

tion, which is also affected by the hostilities of some of the Lebanese population, to which the political exploitation has undoubtedly contributed. At present, the Palestinian population is forbidden from working in 70 types of employment for what are argued to be security reasons. In fact, the Lebanese government has championed this population's right of return (recognised in United Nations Resolution 194) but this has only served to postpone any solution. Until now there have been some attempts by Lebanese governments along with the Palestinian forces and the UNRWA, such as the creation of a Committee of Palestinians and Lebanese in 2005, but this has almost totally stagnated. Also, the 2006 process of national dialogue dealt with the question, but no progress was made. At the same time, in 2006 several political forces declared themselves in favour of conceding the right to work to the Palestinian population, in a law that was ultimately not passed.

On this issue, a number of elements need to be taken into account: on the one hand, the Palestinians do not aim to become nationals of the country, although the Lebanese government continues to use this argument as justification for its discriminatory policies. Also, and at least at present, the idea that offering work to the Palestinian would leave Lebanese people out of work is unfounded, given the numerous presence of immigrants from Asian countries who (despite the present crisis) cover a demand that is not covered locally. Furthermore, the contributions made by the Palestinian population to the Lebanese economy (researched in studies commissioned by human rights organisations) cannot be ignored, and neither can their future contributions should they be allowed to work, as it would be difficult for the income they make to leave Lebanon.<sup>36</sup>

So, the focus on the Palestinian population living in Lebanon requires (evidently, without forgetting the right of return), in the first instance, measures to reverse the catastrophic humanitarian situation that they are suffering. Secondly, there is a need to incorporate measures on a legislative and parliamentary level that include the recognition of their basic human rights. Finally, and as part of the package, controls need to be applied to limit the number of weapons in circulation. If all of this does not happen, there is a considerable probability of new conflicts arising whose epicentre will be the refugee camps, as several authorities have already warned.

### The economic crisis: the Dubai factor

**T**he huge advertising hoardings that flood the capital offering cheap flights to Dubai have nothing to do with any tourism based interest in that region

<sup>35</sup> According to several experts, the groups close to Fatah are a minority, although their presence is increasing, such that there is a predominance of groups that are closer to Hamas and close to the Iran-Syria axis.

<sup>36</sup> See in the bibliography the report by the Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO) (2007).

of the Gulf, but are the reflection of an increasing economic crisis in Lebanon that has led many Lebanese companies and citizens to emigrate to this small, but buoyant, Arab principality. That is why, in Lebanon, they call Dubai the 'second Beirut', something which reminds many of the case of Cyprus during the "Civil War", when it was said that while their own country was being destroyed, the Lebanese people were constructing somebody else's.

The debt amassed by Lebanon in recent years has reached 41,000 million dollars, and the 2006 war did nothing but worsen the situation. The result was a partially-destroyed country, which was reconstructed with great difficulty, where tourism and foreign investment (sources of income until then) have been practically annulled. At the same time, the citizens have witnessed how the prices of some basic products have multiplied, and electricity and water cuts became increasingly more everyday occurrences. All of this has led to spiralling emigration of both young and not so young people, and of both qualified personnel and unskilled manual labourers. As well as the general economic crisis there is another worrying factor: the divide between the rich and poor, and the urban-rural divide. In fact, crisis has not affected everybody in the same way, and has not had the same impact in the capital as it has in seriously deprived areas such as Bekaa, Akkar and Zahrani.

In the context of political polarisation, the economic crisis has also been a cause of confrontation: the opposition has criticised the neo-liberal reforms proposed by the government, while the government in turn has accused the opposition of exploiting social and economic discontent for political ends (Hezbollah has made several calls for strikes). But moreover, the economic environment has also been the terrain into which polarisation has been transferred. On the one hand, while Hezbollah has concentrated on the reconstruction of the areas affected by the 2006 conflict, Hariri's company (Solidère) has focused its efforts on a major luxury real estate operation in the centre of Beirut, illustrating the discourse being propagated by the government of a financial boom based on an economy of services and the free market. Also, while Hezbollah gets money from Iran (whose contributions are not only not concealed, but are actually shown public gratitude), the government receives support from the 'other' axis, as shown by the conference of donors held in Paris in early 2007 (known as 'Paris 3'), where the executive managed to turn Saudi Arabia into the biggest contributor with 847 million Euros, followed by the USA with 593.

In fact, although the debate on the economy has been absorbed and used in the political confrontation, this

has been done in a meaningless way. The politicians have not created any economic programmes other than simple discourses that lack precision. Several analysts agree that politics has been too omnipresent, as if the citizens' economic and social problems did not exist. Along with the *de facto* stagnation of governmental activity (with the associated uncertainty that this involves and which is so harmful to good economic perspectives) the result has been that the vast majority of the Lebanese people have intensely suffered the consequences of the economic crisis. Therefore, and in order to avoid the conflictive drift that this added tension can cause, there is a need to make place improvements to the standard of living of the population in general as a priority on the agenda. Failure to do so, in such an inflamed environment, could lead to dangerous and violent incidents, as in fact already occurred in late January 2008 when the army confronted demonstrators protesting about power cuts. In the present context, a focus of confrontation of this kind could easily be transferred to the ideological and confessional arena. Similarly, the application of redistribution and decentralisation policies (as proposed in the Taef Agreement) that seek to correct the many imbalances is essential in avoiding displacement and a flow of high value human resources towards distant shores.

### Confessionalism as a part of the tension

**T**he confessional structure has been one of the defining characteristics of Lebanon, in the sense that it has permeated into all political, social and cultural aspects of the country. During moments of tension, this element has facilitated the creation of discourses involving the reaffirmation of the community derived from discourses of exclusion. The polarisation of recent months has not been exempt from that, to the extent that there has been speculation on whether the political conflict was really a religious conflict.

Several clarifications are required with respect to this question. Despite the 'Sunni -14M' and 'Shia' - 8M' association, it should also be mentioned that the divide has transcended this apparent division in terms of sectarian profiles. Thus, prominent Sunni figures have sided with the '8M' front<sup>37</sup>, and there have also been Shias that do not identify themselves with it. Special mention should be made of the position of the Christian community: while Maronite leader Michel Aoun sympathises with the '8M' movement, Christian followers of Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel sympathise with that of the '14M'. While this has led Geagea to accuse Aoun of betrayal, the latter has argued that it is precisely his stance that has helped avoid the much feared

<sup>37</sup> Five Sunni prime ministers sided with the coalition against the Fouad Siniora Government. These included Salim El hos, president of the National Union platform, and Omar Karame, the historic leader of the city of Tripoli.

confrontation between Sunnis and Shias. Though this may be partly true (given the international panorama – see the case of Iraq, even though there are differences there with respect to Lebanon), it could be said that Aoun has, to a certain extent, operated in his own interests (aspiring to occupy the presidency until the last moment) and has allowed Hezbollah to play this card as part of the logic of rejecting the *fitna* or intra-Muslim war. Therefore, it could be considered that the political-ideological divide has not corresponded to a religious divide, although this does not mean that the religious basis has not been exploited. Moreover, it should also be remembered that the confrontation has taken place (for example, between Hezbollah and the Druze leader Jumblatt), something that can happen easily in a country with elites that remain in power for decades and have a history of confrontation. Another element to be taken into account is the fact that the major confrontations in Lebanese history have involved a major intra-confessional component.

In the present panorama, people interviewed for this report have commented that the media has been largely responsible. An example to mention are the incidents that occurred at the Arab University in January 2007 between the '14M' and '8M' groups (what was known as the *crise du jeudi noir*). What began as a personal dispute between young people ended up being presented as a political-confessional incident that, in turn, led to new tension and raised fears of a larger-scale sectarian conflict. So, certain politicians have dangerously agitated the discourse of the divide and have come to speak of a cultural divide, referring to other confessions in terms that some analysts have described as racist. These simplistic and irresponsible discourses that speak of the

possibility of dividing the territory on the basis of confessional criteria fail to take several elements into account: on the one hand, the intermixed nature of the different confessions (there are Christians in the north and Sunnis in the south); on the other, the existence of some sectors of communities that do not identify themselves with the predominant discourses of some of their leaders; and finally, they ignore the fact that coexistence among confessions that share the same language and culture has, despite everything, been possible over time.

Recently, several citizen movements have formulated demands for laicism that would, on the one hand, provide a response to the secular sectors of the population, and on the other, contribute to the creation of a Lebanese citizenship that would transcend community belonging and that would, ultimately, help to stop it being used in the conflict as a way of justifying the violence. In fact, the deconfessionalisation of the system was included in the Taef Agreement, but the political leaders have shown no interest in making it a priority, at least not in the short or medium term. It seems clear that its mobilizing effect will serve the parties' interests, both in terms of unifying their electorate, and of shaking off the ghost of the opposition. In other words, confessional affirmation has become a highly useful instrument for creating the enemy image.

Lebanon's past and its experience of flammability that has roused confessional discourse are expressions of the need to reduce the confessional burden and promote discourses for reconciliation, in both the political and social arena, and especially from within the education system, thus making it possible for the divisive mentality that predominates in the country to be progressively deactivated.



## Conclusion

Lebanon is at a dangerous impasse due to the confluence of numerous factors. These include the permanence of a major political and institutional blockade, the extreme polarisation of positions that are considered impossible to combine, large-scale economic crisis and, most importantly, the never-ending presence of different types of violent events. And all of this comes in the midst of a highly flammable regional and international context that has produced excessive alteration in the Lebanese context and radicalises local standpoints.

However, it is precisely within such a vulnerable and sensitive scenario that the need arises and the opportunity lies for the Lebanese authorities to redirect the focus towards the interior of the country in order to carry out urgent tasks: first, to reduce the overly confessional nature of political messages and stances, avoiding violent and segregating discourses that favour the rearmament both of individuals and groups; second, to activate the mechanisms of local arbitration that can prevent political conflicts from leading to institutional blockades and the stagnation of governmental activity. The medium-term challenges are of an equally unappealing nature: dealing with the economic crisis, agreeing upon a debate for electoral reform, and reinitiating Palestinian-Lebanese dialogue in relation to refugees. As for the disarmament of Hezbollah, this must be tackled by previously deactivating the notion of a threat from the Shia community, followed by internal debate for which Hezbollah has show its willingness and which puts

forward plans to create a national defence strategy. Also, relations with Syria must be decontaminated from the international pressure on the country in such a way that the demands to open embassies and define borders, formulated in fact by both sides, are a step towards standardising relations and bringing an end to the isolation of Syria, which is so detrimental to peace in the region. Similarly, the operations of the special tribunal must be depoliticised so that any reduction of its credibility is not used as yet another element of tension.

The current political confrontation conceals two elements: first, the fact that in the past the same leaders that are now confronting each other once managed to come to an agreement, specifically in previous presidential elections held in the 1980s;<sup>38</sup> second the reflection of the dynamism and instrumentality of the alliances and counter-alliances between the Lebanese factions. An element linked to this, and one which has a highly negative effect on Lebanese democracy, is the lack of renewal of its political leaders, not just in terms of the perpetuation of power, but also of past responsibility for criminal acts. Altering this tendency would probably be the first step towards reconciliation and a change of mentality that could end decades of conflict and division. As an epilogue, here is a quote from one analyst: "The Lebanese know that they cannot wait for there to be peace in the Middle East in order to try to achieve it in their country", which reflects the desperation for peace in the region but is also an invitation to pave the way towards peace both in and from the Lebanon.

<sup>38</sup> With its parliamentary composition unchanged, due to the impossibility of holding elections because of the armed conflict from 1982 to 1992, the Lebanese parliament elected presidents with very different profiles, from Bashir Gemagel in 1982 (who was replaced by his son Amine after being assassinated before he could take up his mandate) to Elias Hrawi in 1989 (who presided over the country until 1998 after his mandate was extended; a situation that was repeated with Émile Lahoud in 2004.

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## School for a Culture of Peace

The School for a Culture of Peace (*Escola de Cultura de Pau*) was founded in 1999 with the objective of organising a variety of academic and research activities related to the culture of peace, the prevention and transformation of conflicts, disarmament and the promotion of human rights.

The School for a Culture of Peace is principally financed by the Generalitat de Catalunya [autonomous government of Catalonia] via the Catalan Development Cooperation Agency, part of the Secretariat for Foreign Cooperation, and the Department for Universities, Research and the Information Society. It also receives support from other departments within the Generalitat and from local councils, foundations and other entities. The School for a Culture of Peace is run by Vicenç Fisas, who holds the UNESCO Chair on Peace and Human Rights at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

The main activities run by the School for a Culture of Peace include:

- A **Post-graduate Course on Culture of Peace** (post-graduate programme consisting of 230 classroom hours and 70 places).
- **Elective subjects:** "Peace culture and conflict management" and "Educating for peace and in conflicts".
- **Awareness-raising and conflict intervention initiatives** to facilitate dialogue amongst the parties involved in a conflict.
- The **Human Rights Programme**, which monitors the international status of human rights, and especially the thematic fields currently setting the world agenda, such as the influence of terrorism on the enjoyment of individual rights and corporate social responsibility.
- The **Programme on Education for Peace**, which strives to promote and develop knowledge, values and skills for education for peace.
- The **Programme on Music, Arts and Peace**, which focuses on research into the contribution made to peacebuilding by the arts.
- The **Disarmament Programme**, which works on various issues in the area of disarmament, with special emphasis on micro-disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes for combatants, and is also monitoring weapons exports.
- The **Conflicts and Peacebuilding Programme**, which undertakes daily monitoring of the international situation in the realms of armed conflicts, situations of tension, humanitarian crises, development and gender, in order to issue its annual report "Alert!", plus fortnightly, monthly and quarterly reports.
- The **Peace Processes Programme**, which monitors and analyses the different countries with peace processes or formalised negotiations underway and also those with negotiations still in the exploratory phase. This programme includes the "Colombia Project", devoted to giving greater visibility to the peace initiatives in Colombia.
- The **Post-war Rehabilitation Programme**, which monitors and analyses international aid in terms of peacebuilding in wartime and post-war situations.

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