

# Lebanon and the Middle East: A Ray of Hope Amidst Chaos and Conflicts?

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Since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, Lebanon faces a situation in which external and internal factors and conflicts threaten its delicate political and confessional equilibriums, constantly pushing Lebanon towards chaos and a spill over of the regional instability.

Over the last 2 years, the UN has passed several resolutions to deal with this situation, the most important being:

- UNSCR 1595, organizing an international investigation into the assassination of Hariri,
- UNSCR 1701, ending the war between Hizbollah and Israel on Lebanon's southern borders,
- UNSCR 1757, establishing an international tribunal to look into the assassination of Hariri.

Nevertheless, political initiatives remain necessary both internationally and nationally to support the implementation of these resolutions, to prevent an escalation of the conflict and to move toward a process of reconciliation, reforms and state building in the country.

This short paper presents the different possible scenarios that Lebanon may face in the coming months; recommends steps that the international community (and, more specifically, "Europe") might take to reinforce the dialogue and peace initiatives and suggests reforms that the Lebanese could undertake to consolidate their political system.

## **1. Risks and scenarios**

### **A- Worst case scenarios:**

Lebanon might become a place where regional conflicts play out with direct violent repercussions.

In that perspective, a conflict between the US (or Israel) and Iran might lead to a conflict between Hizbollah and Israel on Lebanon's southern borders, thereby jeopardising the UNIFIL mission and UNSCR 1701.

Any escalation to violence in Palestine between Fatah and Hamas or any massive Israeli attack on Gaza, moreover, might lead to tensions in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and to clashes threatening different parts of the country.

Additionally, risks of heightened tension between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the region (emanating from occupied Iraq) might lead to higher conflict intensity between the two blocks in Lebanon.

On the Lebanese-Syrian front, the Syrian regime might try to produce more instability in Lebanon (including more assassinations and more attacks on the UNIFIL forces) either as a response to the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination or as an attempt to compel the US, Europe and the Arab countries to recognise Syria as a key player in securing peace in the region and cajoling them to reach a deal that would guarantee the “survival” of the Syrian regime. Damascus might also attempt to offer negotiations and a peace treaty with Israel in order to avoid being brought to the international tribunal.

On top of all these risk factors, Lebanon has its own internal crisis, with little or no room for compromises before the presidential elections (according to the constitution scheduled to take place any time between 25 September and 21 November 2007). Without international mediation, the country might be heading toward a constitutional vacuum (or a two-government scenario, with each political block recognising a government of its own) – with all dire consequences for the security situation, the economy and the respect for international commitments.

## **B- Status quo**

The situation in the region might remain unstable, as it is today, with no new conflicts and without dramatic escalation. All regional and local actors would thus be waiting for the upcoming events without reaching any solutions and without steering toward new clashes. In that case, there might be an internal (and temporary) compromise in Lebanon for the election of a new president who should manage the crisis rather than solve it. He would be expected to reduce tensions without ending the conflicts. Whether he might succeed in doing remains an open question.

## **C- A change for the better?**

A regional peaceful settlement, whether on the US-Iranian conflict front or on the Arab-Israeli conflict front, and a Saudi-Iranian accord to diminish the Sunni-Shia tension would have a direct positive impact on Lebanon. Moreover, robust international pressure on the Syrian regime would make the situation improve in the country and would free the internal actors from Syrian direct pressures. In this case, the international community would make it abundantly clear to Syrian officials that no deals with them and no compromises on the international tribunal are possible prior to a radical change in their regional policies and their destabilising interference in Lebanon.

A national political process might then follow and result in an accord between the major actors to move toward sustainable political and security stability.

## **2- Europe and the UNIFIL mission**

Europe could play a very important role on the regional level as well as in Lebanon’s domestic situation.

### **A- The regional level**

- Europe could apply human rights and international law criteria in dealing with the different partners in the region (to avoid the double standards currently used by the US administration).
- Europe could strengthen the EUROMED Agreements and encourage Mediterranean countries to get involved in its processes and to respect its recommendations for democratisation.
- Europe could reconsider its position on the Palestinian situation, considering that a solution based on the UN resolutions is the key to peace and stability for the region as a whole.
- Europe could establish contacts with moderate Islamic groups and secular civil-society actors in different Arab countries, thus refuting the allegation that it prefers “secular” despotism to Islamists (since despotism has proven to be one of the causes for the radicalisation of many Islamist groups).
- Europe should reconsider its policy of normalisation toward the Syrian regime that has proven wrong so far. (Spain started talks with the Syrian regime one year ago. Yet, the Spanish UNIFIL soldiers were the first to be attacked in southern Lebanon).

### **B- Lebanon’s domestic situation**

- Europe could sponsor a “second-track dialogue” between the different protagonists (following the French initiative), followed by official dialogue.
- Europe could help to solve the issue of the occupied Shebaa Farms in order to eliminate sources of direct tension on the border with Israel.
- UNIFIL should be firmer in blocking both Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty and the influx of weaponry to militias in Lebanon across the Syrian border (in view of UNSCR 1701).
- UNIFIL could help by training the Lebanese army and by providing technical support to the security forces in order to enable them to better control the situation in the country. (The presence of the UNIFIL forces in the southern part of the country has already created an atmosphere of peacefulness and security among civilians).

### **3. The need for political action and reforms in Lebanon**

Finally, the Lebanese themselves should be encouraged to find solutions to their internal problems (even though the imminent danger today is generated by the regional rather than by the domestic situation) and start a national dialogue on:

- The role and position of Lebanon in the region.
- The presidential elections and the formation of a government of national unity with a clear agenda thereafter.
- The strengthening and developing of the state security forces and services to deal with the assassination campaigns and investigations.
- The recognition of Palestinian civil rights in the country and the improvement of their living conditions in refugee camps, the collecting of Palestinian weapons and support for UNSCR 194 on the refugees’ right of return to Palestine.

The Lebanese should also begin:

- A dynamic diplomatic campaign to liberate the Shebaa Farms from Israeli occupation and to exchange the Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails for the Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hizbollah.
- The disarming of all military groups in Lebanon and the strengthening of the Lebanese army capability to protect the country's international borders.
- Political reforms in order to counter confessional clientelism and to strengthen modern citizenship and identification with the country.