

## **Lebanon in the Turmoil of Regional Conflicts**

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In the face of an explosive situation created by the Constitutional crisis that has been shaking the country since November 2006, the Lebanese Army has assured everyone the space for freedom. But today, the army finds itself dangerously exposed, politically and militarily.

The destabilization of Lebanon, initiated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, then amplified by Rafic Hariri's assassination in February 2005 and the assassinations that followed that one, continues at a more worrying pace than previously. Today, a new threshold has been crossed. The little Lebanese Army has, in fact, played a key role the last two years in effectively assuring security over the entirety of Lebanese territory. It has, moreover, succeeded in remaining neutral between the different Lebanese factions, assuring the protection of different demonstrations and preventing any serious derailment of the big popular rallies of the pro-Westerners who govern the country in contested fashion, as of those of the opposition described as pro-Syrian.

Faced with an explosive situation created by a serious Constitutional crisis that has been shaking the country since November 2006, the army has assured everyone the space for freedom to demonstrate and sit-in. It had already done that when Rafic Hariri was assassinated in 2005, which had, moreover, led to the [previous] government's fall under pressure from demonstrators. It did so again, as of December 2006, when the opposition began to organize giant demonstrations and a public sit-in that is still going on. This time, however, the Lebanese government, in spite of the resignation of Shiite community ministers and of a minister from the Greek Orthodox community, refuses to leave or to enlarge the government to assume the character of a national unity government - in spite of the opposition party's giant demonstrations and permanent sit-in. The government, which has lost its multi-community legitimacy, resists the appeal of reason, strengthened by the support of the United States and the governments of the European Union.

Also, by allowing itself to be drawn without preparation into a confrontation with the armed elements of the terrorist and jihadist movement called Fatah el Islam, which claims to be a dissident branch of the Palestinian Fatah, the Lebanese army finds itself dangerously exposed, politically and militarily. On the political level, the siege of a Palestinian camp situated north of the city of Tripoli and filled with civilians, which the terrorist group appears to hold hostage, is too reminiscent of past Palestinian suffering in Lebanon (between 1975 and 1990) and, of course, in occupied Palestine. If the confrontation were to continue and the number of Palestinian civilian victims to grow further, the Lebanese Army's beautiful reputation will come out tarnished. Even more, the Lebanese Army, which already has much of its manpower immobilized in the South at the request of the UN and the Western powers, and also in the capital Beirut and in the big urban centers to maintain civic peace, will then have to concentrate on the north of the country and consequently either stretch its limited manpower and resources to the extreme or withdraw from other sensitive areas. There is also a risk of seeing unrest in other Palestinian camps.

It is, consequently, clear that the provocation offered the Lebanese Army by the Fatah el Islam group is not innocent. Still more, it objectively helps matters for those who, within the country as in Israel or the West, are vexed by the continued cooperation between the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah. Some of them, in fact, naively imagined that the Lebanese Army would throw itself into the suicide mission of removing Hezbollah's weapons, which would be the open path to internal civil war; others thought or hoped that the Lebanese Army would prevent the opposition from continuing its demonstrations and sit-ins.

Likewise, once those desires were not realized, what could be simpler than trying to draw the army into a confrontation with the Palestinian camps, and, in the event of a failure to disarm the camps, to condemn the Army for its ineffectiveness in applying the famous Resolution 1559 and the more recent 1701 resolution? Then the field would be free for another Israeli intervention or for an appeal by the Lebanese government - the legitimacy of which is strongly contested - for new international military contingents to also deploy on the borders with Syria, accused of fomenting those problems.

All this is taking place while the question of an international tribunal to judge Hariri's assassins arouses still more internal Lebanese controversy, as well as controversy between Security Council members. We should also not forget that the very serious American journalist Seymour Hersh warned us, as of last March, that certain branches of the American administration and a very influential member of the Saudi royal family (Prince Bandar ben Sultan, former ambassador to Washington) have decided to facilitate entry into Lebanon and financing for Sunni jihadist terrorist groups hostile to Shiites, notably Fatah el Islam, in order to obstruct Hezbollah and to inflame tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon.

Poor Lebanon, pray for it!

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*Translation: **t r u t h o u t** French language correspondent Leslie Thatcher.*