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BRIEF

04

2022

Lebanon ahead of the May General Elections: A Country Riddled by Permanent Instability

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Introduction

Great Lebanese writer, poet and painter, Gibran Khalil Gibran who had good opportunities in his life (1883 - 1931) to get to know both the East and the West, once said that Lebanon is an intricate political knot that time is trying to unravel - in order to experience many personal tragedies and losses this county had suffered in its long history, but also as a place of wonderful friendships and great loves. Many Lebanese these days mention the words of this great writer when talking about Lebanon, which after months of political

crisis still formed its government headed by Najib Mikati, who instead of pulling Lebanon out of the political crisis deepened the crisis. For the general elections, which should take place on 15th of May, almost all analysts believe it will not change anything because Lebanon is deeply divided politically and socially. What worries the Lebanese people most is a possible civil war as tensions rise daily, exacerbated by Saad Hariri's complete withdrawal from the political scene after failing to form a new Lebanese government in nine months, which could end a nearly nine-month gap.

Lebanon has always been a refugee refuge and a hotspot from where millions of refugees have moved to US and EU countries and Latin America. The state of Lebanon, which was established within its present borders in 1920 by a French decision after the First World War, has been a safe haven for refugees and the persecuted for decades. Tens of thousands of Armenian Christians flocked to it back in 1923, fleeing the massacres and genocide in Turkey. Likewise, with the outbreak of war and the partition of Palestine in 1948 and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants, some 110 thousand Palestinians sought refuge and settled in Lebanon. With the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, more than 2 million people fled to Lebanon, and now they make up more than a quarter of its population, a record number. There is no doubt that Lebanon has generally benefited from these successive migrations and with the money and experiences brought by refugees or some of them, but in return there have been problems of another kind, related to sectarian balances. There are constant fears among Christians of settling Muslim refugees and upsetting the religious balance. Between 1975 and 1990, a fierce and bloody civil war broke out under the pretext of turning Palestinian refugee camps into a state within a state. Given the presence of large numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Christians of almost all political orientations

fear that the vast majority of Syrian Muslims will threaten the existence of the Lebanese entity and greatly alter the religious and ethnic balance.

A country burdened by the series of economic crises

Lebanon is experiencing a financial crisis that is among the three worst crises in the world since the mid-nineteenth century. According to a recent World Bank report, the national currency lost 1000% of its purchase value between October 2019 and June 2021, i.e. from 1,500 Lebanese pounds for one US dollar to more than 15,000 Lebanese pounds for one US dollar. Economic experts expect this number to grow more in the coming weeks. Likewise, in a country that always suffers from a trade deficit, which imports more than it exports, and depends on the support of Lebanese expatriates and the diaspora as well as on the service sector such as tourism, banks, universities and hospitals, the minimum wage is still 675,000 Lebanese pounds, or just 45 US dollars, after it was equal to 450 US dollars two years ago. In short, Lebanon is on the brink of starvation and facing a major economic collapse while no political solutions are in sight. Negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have stalled due to differences and

conflicts that have erupted between political parties. Lebanon has a population of around 7 million people, of which more than 2 million are Syrian refugees, 174 thousand Palestinian refugees and many other nationalities. This situation has further aggravated the economic problems and led to an even greater decline of the Lebanese pound.

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Lebanon is a very complex state, which after the end of French rule in 1943 decided to divide power between Muslim Shiites, Sunnis, Druze and various Christian groups. This system has its good side: even today it is guaranteed that no group will be dominant in the political system. According to the Lebanese Constitution, the president must be exclusively a Maronite Christian and the prime minister a Muslim Sunni while the president of parliament must be a Muslim Shiite. Elections are nominally free, and the media are freer in this country than in the neighborhood, despite often serving as media outlets for certain groups. The downside of this multi-confessional democracy is that the mentioned groups still undermine and block each other, and they have a habit of seeking support from abroad for their goals so that they

can better pursue their interests domestically. But they often become tools in the hands of foreign “protectors” such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran or Western countries such as France and the United States. In addition, each religious group developed its own parties and structures from the very beginning, which meant that instead of one, there were several systems of corruption and nepotism. In addition to a major civil war and decades of de facto Syrian rule, Lebanon has had to endure huge waves of refugees from the Palestinian and Syrian territories, as well as several bloody conflicts with neighboring Israel.

Influence of great powers and regional players in Lebanon

The situation in Lebanon is extremely tense and tensions are growing every day, the question is how much the Lebanese army, which is poorly armed but still maintains neutrality, will be able to suppress and stop possible armed conflicts that happen every day. It is no secret that almost all political parties in Lebanon have their own paramilitary formations, i.e. military wings numbering tens of thousands of fighters armed to the teeth. There are two main opposing political blocs in Lebanon, the March 8 Alliance in favor of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad with pro-Iranian Hezbollah, as well as the pro-American and pro-Saudi March 14

Alliance movement led by Saad Hariri. Although Lebanon is a small country, the influence of not only the great powers including the US and Russia, but also of the great regional and enemy powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran is evident. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, France used religious intolerance and persecution of Lebanese Christians to establish its colonial influence in Lebanon. In 1862, Lebanon became an autonomous province within the Ottoman Empire with strong European and French influence. After the end of the World War I, France was given the mandate of the League of Nations for the present-day territory of Syria and Lebanon.

Lebanon after the World War II transformed into the most developed country in the Middle East.

In 1926, the French separated Lebanon from Syria, and in 1943 Lebanon became independent. Although without the oil resources that enabled the economic development of a number of Middle Eastern countries, small Lebanon after the World War II transformed into the most developed country in the Middle East. One of the Lebanese specifics is the religious heterogeneity of the population. The national consensus on the division of

power, created by the 1943 constitutional amendments, was based on the 1932 census, according to which Maronite Christians made up more than half of the population, giving them most of their political power. Thus, as mentioned before, the post of president of the state belonged to the Maronites, prime minister to Sunni Muslims, and the post of president of the National Assembly was reserved for Shiites. Such a system of division enabled the retention of political power in the hands of elites from the colonial period, primarily Maronite Christians. However, the Muslim population had a significantly higher rate of demographic growth than other ethnic communities, and as early as the late 1950s, Muslims made up the majority in Lebanon.

The overwhelming legacy of the civil war

The destabilization of Lebanon was mostly due to the thousands of Palestinian refugees who came to Lebanon after the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948, thus upsetting the delicate ethnic balance on which the country rested. In the early 1970s, there were 400 thousand Palestinian refugees among Lebanon's 2.9 million people. The PLO has established its own infrastructure in Lebanese territory and connected with domicile Lebanese Muslims, which has deepened the gap between

Lebanese Christians and Muslims. In April of 1975, isolated conflicts in Lebanon escalated into an open warfare. The central Lebanese government quickly ceased to function and the country was divided into a north controlled by Christian militias while the southern part of Lebanon was controlled by militias of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Druze, and Palestinian guerrillas.

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In June 1976, at the invitation of President Suleiman Frangieh, Syria entered the Lebanese civil war on the side of the Christian militias. Twenty thousand Syrian troops had occupied the Bekaa Valley and entered the fighting against Muslim militias and the PLO, and by October 1976 the Syrian army controlled half of the country. The Syrian decision to intervene in the Lebanese civil war on the side of Christian militias despite opposition in the Arab world is the result of a strategic assessment that a victory for Muslim groups and the PLO would provoke Israel's entry into the Lebanese territory. Paradoxically, in addition to Syria, assistance to Christian militias was provided by Israel, which sent military aid and carried out a naval blockade

of the Lebanese coast. Although more than 70 years have passed since the end of colonialism, the Lebanese people are still very emotionally attached to France. In addition to the official Arabic language, the second language in Lebanon is French. Many French words are also used in the Lebanese dialect. Lebanese are always proud to point out that they were a French colony. The capital Beirut was named Paris of the Middle East because everything in it is reminiscent of Paris.

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Although tensions and divisions hang in the balance, residents of Lebanon's capital Beirut, are living a perfectly normal life. Although, to this day, Beirut has remained a symbol of war and destruction, it is also still known as the Paris of the Middle East, whose modern destination is located on the Mediterranean coast. Beirut is also known as the "Mother of Law", because the world's first library of law was opened in the city and Beirut is one of the most modern cities in the Middle East with a history of thousands of years, a city where one can see a Christian church and an Islamic mosque one next to the other.

Conclusion

Despite political disagreements, Lebanon is known as a very tolerant country, home to more than 28 different religious and ethnic groups, and all are protected by law and live in equality. Beirut today is an impressive city where residents live life to the full. Although it was severely damaged seven times in the devastating earthquakes, the most destructive of which occurred in 555, and suffered many destructions throughout its turbulent history, mostly in the 15-year civil war, Beirut quickly rebuilt and became recognizable destination that attracts a lot of foreign tourists, mostly from the EU member states.

Finally, we should return to the beginning and the song of the famous Khalil Gibran which says: "Your Lebanon is an international issue

that still needs to be resolved, My Lebanon are calm, magical valleys with the ringing of church bells and the murmur of streams. Your Lebanon is a controversy between the Westerner and his adversary from the South, My Lebanon is a winged prayer that hovers at dawn, while shepherds lead the flocks to pasture, and then in the evening, when the farmers return from the fields and vineyards."

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