



Lebanon's Shattered Dream

Emile El-Hokayem and Firas Maksad

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Today, the Lebanese people should be celebrating the 2005 "independence intifada" that led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops in their country and the hope of peaceful popular change in the Arab world. But they're not. This year's anniversary of the huge gathering in central Beirut after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri is marked by gloom and fear, not hope and progress.

Three years after the Beirut Spring, Lebanon's sovereignty is besieged by Syria and undermined by Iranian-backed Hezbollah. The population is exhausted and polarized, the economy is in tatters, reconstruction is lagging and the once-improving image of the country is tarnished by violence. Even by the standards of other failing colour revolutions, Lebanon stands out by its tragic recent history and the huge disillusion of its population.

Regaining full sovereignty remains the key objective, if only to open up the political space for much-needed reform of the country's Byzantine sectarian governance system. This is what so many Lebanese, much of the left and most liberals, arguably the progressive vanguard, understood when they joined hands with former warlords and feudal leaders.

Three years ago, there was unprecedented momentum for such change. But then came a war with Israel, another against a jihadi outfit and a relentless campaign of foreign inspired political violence that has left Lebanon teetering on the verge of state failure, unable to elect a new president. There are street fights between Sunni and Shia gangs and clashes between Christian factions. While civil war is not yet on the horizon, the specter of that outcome exists. And if civil war comes, the country will split along ideological lines, not sectarian ones. This would mirror the larger struggle in the Middle East, where forces aligned with ascending Iran are clashing with Arab states allied with the United States.

The Syrian problem is most acute. Damascus remains bent on reasserting its influence in Lebanon through a campaign of violence and intimidation. Fearing the international tribunal in the case of the Hariri assassination and eager to reverse the loss of Lebanon as its strategic backyard, Syria has made clear that it will break Lebanon unless it has its way. In Syria's own words, normalization of relations can happen only if and when its allies come to power in Beirut. The two countries are too intertwined to afford such bad relations, and yet Syrian aggressiveness has antagonized huge segments of the Lebanese population. Lebanon needs not pose a threat to Syrian stability or align itself with enemies of Syria, but this is Damascus's call. Only when Syria accepts to deal with Lebanon as a sovereign and equal state will the Lebanese really consider the Syrians fellow Arab brothers.

Another challenge is Hezbollah, the Shia militant organization whose agenda extends beyond Lebanon. Hezbollah is an integral part of Lebanese society and a powerful and legitimate social and political actor. But it maintains a standing militia better trained and equipped than the Lebanese military, and makes decisions of war and peace that should otherwise be the purview of the state. Hezbollah has created an organic link



between its weaponry and the security of the Shia community that is proving unbreakable under current conditions. But Hezbollah owes the country some strategic certainty about its objectives and behaviour.

Lebanon cannot afford another war provoked by Hezbollah's whims, nor can it defer political reform, economic development and integration into the global economy because of Hezbollah's grandiose agenda and foreign loyalties.

Yet, for all the violence of the past three years, the various leaders, all too conscious of the enormous costs of an all-out confrontation and the impossibility of winning a decisive victory, have repeatedly walked back on their inflammatory rhetoric. Only a few, mostly the youth, romanticize war.

If war comes, the promise of peaceful change becomes a dream deferred. The struggle today is not just over confessional power-sharing, as much of the commentary has it, but over the identity and direction of the country, and ultimately over the dream of a better future. This struggle over values and the future is as important to the West as it is to Lebanon. As a former warlord likes to put it, it is a contest between the merits of the Hong Kong model versus the Hanoi model. It is the hope of an open liberal society versus the entrenchment of a culture of resistance and radicalization.

Let's remember, when Beirut's central square got flooded with a million Lebanese flags in 2005, hopes were high. Things did not turn out well, but the values of sovereignty and freedom still resonate powerfully. If a people demonstrates peacefully and obtains what it wants, it is then the international community's responsibility to help protect this achievement when threatened by regional powers. Will the people who took to the streets in 2005, buoyed by progressive ideas, allow regional rivalries to trump their aspirations? Will the world community stand by as Lebanon once again becomes a battlefield for the wars of others? Those are questions worth asking on this anniversary.

Emile El-Hokayem is a research fellow at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington.

Firas Maksad is executive director of the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation, USA.