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LEBANON: CONTAINING SPILLOVER FROM SYRIA

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SUMMARY

After more than a year of conflict in Syria, Lebanon is now also vulnerable. The Syrian civil war is amplifying Lebanese political divisions, fuelling militancy and pushing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to stir up regional instability. However, the Lebanese are very aware of the risks they face and the country has strong resilience mechanisms in place. Key political actors – particularly Hezbollah, Lebanon’s dominant force – are intent on preventing wider conflict. Though tensions could yet push the country into the abyss, particularly if Assad falls, Lebanon is more likely to experience a period of prolonged but manageable instability with periodical violence rather than outright civil war.

Europe should use the influence it has to support political consensus aimed at de-escalating tensions and supporting stability. Critically – and in contrast to US policy – European states should continue to talk to Hezbollah. This is a role that will be key to de-escalating tensions and ensuring that Lebanon does not descend into chaos. Europe can help assuage fears about an international conspiracy against the movement and containing Hezbollah’s more incendiary instincts. At the same time, Europe should offer continued support towards bolstering the country’s fragmented security sector and struggling economy, as well as helping with the humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of Syrian refugees.

Since independence in 1943, Lebanon has been one of the most fragile countries in the Middle East. Weakened by centrifugal forces and external meddling, the central state has struggled to assert its hold over the country; repeated crises have provoked ongoing instability. But, with conflict worsening in neighbouring Syria, Lebanon now faces a new threat. Syria’s geographic proximity and longstanding influence over Lebanon’s delicate political balance make it particularly sensitive to developments in its eastern neighbour. With the intensification of the regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia – both of which see Lebanon as a battlefield of influence – the country risks being pulled into the maelstrom. Isolated clashes associated with the conflict have already broken out across the country and there are fears that the Syrian uprising could provoke a more significant descent into violence.

This brief identifies the central risks confronting Lebanon, the factors pushing it towards a potential breakdown and possible steps that European governments could take to help avert the threat of violent instability. Sitting in Europe’s immediate backyard, what happens in Lebanon should matter to European states. Any descent into violent conflict in Lebanon not only promises a humanitarian crisis, but also could signify a regional collapse into prolonged violence and radicalism at a moment of deep regional uncertainty. These challenges would pose considerable security and economic risks to Europe and its regional allies.

A period of instability

With the outbreak of unrest in Syria in March 2011, violence was expected to quickly spill over into Lebanon. The country's geographical proximity to, and longstanding relationship with, Syria appeared to make it particularly vulnerable. In a bid to avert this outcome, the new government of Najib Mikati quickly adopted a policy of dissociation – or neutrality – from the crisis, rejecting direct alignment with either side in the conflict. For more than a year the policy appeared to succeed, with the country remaining relatively stable despite ever-intensifying violence in Syria.

However, after more than 14 months of conflict, tensions finally erupted in May 2012. The trigger was the arrest of a prominent anti-Assad Sunni activist, Shadi al-Moulawi, in the northern city of Tripoli. The detention was carried out by the General Security Directorate (GSD), which is regarded as a pro-Hezbollah body, and in suspicious circumstances: al-Moulawi was apparently lured to his arrest under a false pretext. This provoked an immediate backlash among the city's largely Sunni population, which is sympathetic to the anti-Assad cause.

Violent clashes swiftly broke out with the city's small pro-Assad Alawite community, leading to weeks of violence that left 15 people dead. Tensions escalated when the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) shot dead two people including a prominent anti-Assad Sunni cleric, Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed, as they passed through a checkpoint in the northern district of Akkar. Clashes spread to Beirut. Days later, 11 Lebanese Shiite pilgrims were kidnapped by an armed opposition group in northern Syria – a response, some claim, to the Hezbollah movement's ongoing support for Assad. This aroused fear that Hezbollah, in turn, would retaliate, pushing the country towards wider conflict.

In the end, political leaders across the spectrum urged restraint and the deployment of the LAF in Tripoli helped restore a semblance of calm in the city.¹ Nonetheless, the series of events clearly opened the door to a period of sustained instability. Since May, the country has been racked by ongoing protests and violence.

In August, the temperature again rose significantly after Michel Samaha, the country's former information minister and a close ally of Assad, was arrested on suspicion of plotting Syrian-sponsored attacks in Lebanon. The following week, another Lebanese Shiite was seized in Syria and his family – the Meqdad clan, which is said to be more than 10,000 strong – took as many as 50 Syrians hostage in retaliation. Families of the 11 Lebanese hostages in Syria who had not yet been released then took to the streets of

Beirut, blockading roads; there were reports of retributive attacks on Syrians in Lebanon. Later in the month, renewed fighting broke out in Tripoli between Sunnis and Alawites, leaving at least 15 people dead and more than 100 wounded.

The struggle for Lebanon

Geography alone makes Lebanon vulnerable to direct spillover from the unfolding conflict in Syria. Lebanon shares a 375 kilometre-long border with Syria (its only other land border is with Israel). And with intense fighting in cities, towns and villages astride the Lebanese border, the risk of violence spreading is particularly acute. With Lebanon representing the nearest point of entry and exit to these hotspots, its border regions are also prone to refugee and weapons flows, particularly given the historically porous nature of northern border areas, which have long been used as smuggling routes between the two countries. Syrian armed forces have repeatedly shelled Lebanese territory in pursuit of so-called armed militants.

Yet geography is not the greatest threat to Lebanon. The clashes witnessed across Lebanon since May have, for the most part, not involved Syrians nor resulted from clashes along border areas. Instead, the country has witnessed fighting between Lebanese political and communal groups in the heart of the country. Current manifestations of instability – and fears about the potential for escalation – are rooted in Lebanon's own balance of power. That balance, in itself perennially contentious, is being thrown into new flux and accentuated by the conflict in Syria. This vulnerability is rooted in the historic makeup of the country's political system and the manner in which it has long been exploited by both internal and external players.

In Lebanon power is distributed among different confessional groups according to pre-assigned quotas, creating a weak central state subject to ongoing contestation as demographics and power equations shift. The result has been ongoing volatility, often violent, as demonstrated by Lebanon's long civil war between 1975 and 1990.² The entrenched internal weakness of the system invites foreign patronage, which quickly feeds into external manipulation. Over recent decades, Syria, more than any other foreign power, has exploited this vulnerability to assert its domination. Taking advantage of the civil war era power vacuum, Damascus emerged as a central player in Lebanese power politics over the course of the 1980s and imposed an effective military occupation over the country (except for the south, which was under Israeli occupation from 1982 to 2000). Syrian troops were finally forced to withdraw in 2005 after Damascus was blamed for the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri – the dominant

¹ For comments by different political leaders, see "Hariri Urges Calm in Tripoli, Hints General Security is an 'Outlaw'", *Naharnet*, 13 May 2012, available at <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40025>; "Nasrallah urges calm after kidnap of Lebanese in Syria", the *Daily Star*, 22 May 2012, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/May-22/174283-nasrallah-urges-cabinet-to-help-secure-release-of-lebanese-kidnapped-in-syria.ashx#axzz20lxGVuXA>

² The Taif Agreement of 1989 helped end the civil war but reconfirmed the system's confessional makeup: half of parliament is reserved for Christians and half for Muslims. The president must be a Maronite, the prime minister Sunni and the speaker of parliament Shiite.

character of Lebanon's post-civil-war political and business life. However, Syria remained a crucial power broker, using its long-established networks of patronage and influence to maintain continued leverage over its neighbour.

Most significantly, Damascus sought to ensure Lebanon's continued loyalty in the face of an increasingly anti-Syrian regional and international environment by cementing the dominance of its allies. In particular, it bolstered Hezbollah, the Shiite militant-cum-political movement that emerged in response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and gained wide popular support for its trumpeting of resistance and its provision of social services to the disadvantaged Shiite population in the south. Along with Iran – which also sought a forward-leaning strategic base in Lebanon – Syria facilitated Hezbollah's rise to prominence by providing key political and material support, particularly for the development of its non-state militia, currently the country's strongest armed force.

During the past decade, since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 – for which it claimed credit and which allowed it greater geographic manoeuvrability – Hezbollah has cemented its position as the most important player on the Lebanese scene. Together with the Shiite Amal Movement and the predominantly Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) – collectively identified as the March 8 coalition – Hezbollah provides Syria with a strong base of support within Lebanon, positioning the country within the Iranian-Syrian self-proclaimed resistance axis.

Hezbollah's influence – and by extension that of Syria – is neither absolute nor universally welcomed. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, it has been increasingly challenged by a vocal and internationally backed coalition known as the March 14 movement. The Sunni-dominated grouping, led by Saad Hariri (son of Rafik), has looked to Western and Gulf patronage and sought to purge the country of Syria's meddling hand. To March 14 – which includes notable Christian backing – close ties with Syria and Iran, Hezbollah's private militia and the strong focus on resistance against Israel undermine the state and undercut their preferred pro-Western and pro-business orientation. With Hezbollah's strength partly attributed to external support, the battle lines have been internationalised. Hezbollah's association with Syria and Iran, and March 14's close ties to Gulf and Western states, have turned the country into a microcosm of broader strategic ambitions at a time of intensifying Western-Iranian and Saudi-Iranian regional competition.

This domestic and regional rivalry has bubbled over with growing intensity since 2005, pushing the country into repeated crises. Despite its success in ending the Syrian military occupation and in gaining control of the government, March 14 has been on the back foot in recent years. Hezbollah's armed takeover of west Beirut in 2008 showed its superior military capacity and willingness to deploy this force to safeguard its own interests over those of the

state.³ The collapse of Hariri's "national unity" government in January 2011 attested to growing political ascendancy. The collapse, prompted by a walkout by 10 March 8 ministers, was seen as particularly treacherous by March 14 and even described by some as a "constitutional coup"⁴ They argued that March 8 had ripped up the fragile 2008 agreement behind the national unity government aimed at averting political crisis and violence.⁵ In June 2011, Mikati, a Sunni, formed a new March 8-led government without March 14 participation. While Hezbollah holds only two seats in the government, it is clearly the dominant political force. To those backing March 14, this political takeover – complementing its non-state military ascendancy – rests as much on anything on its external backing from Syria and Iran.

Here, then, lies the context for the current – and the risk of an even deeper – escalatory cycle within Lebanon. Not only have both blocs offered strong support for the competing sides of the Syria conflict, but the crisis is also injecting new fragility into Lebanon's already corroding power equation. Most notably, March 14, which believes that Hezbollah is reliant on external support via Syria, sees the crisis as an opportunity to reverse Hezbollah's ascendancy and reorient the country away from the resistance axis. This dynamic was clearly illustrated by the August arrest of Michel Samaha – an event that would have been improbable just months ago, given his strong backing from Damascus. That Samaha was seized by the pro-March 14 Internal Security Forces (ISF) and that his arrest has not been contested by his March 8 allies suggests a shift in power towards March 14. Hezbollah, however, will not accept such a reversal easily. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has made clear that the movement will not succumb to attempts to weaken it.

Sunni fragmentation and assertiveness

Feeding this political dynamic are the potential ramifications of a resurgent popular Sunni base, empowered by the Sunni-led struggle in Syria. In recent years, much of Lebanon's Sunni community, which long enjoyed political and economic dominance, has grown frustrated at the changing balance of power and its dwindling share of the state pie. This frustration reflects both political marginalisation in the face of March 8's ascendancy and a growing sense of economic discrimination. This is particularly true for Sunnis located in the north of the country, where a lack of state development has resulted in some of the highest levels of poverty in the country – and where recent clashes have been

³ Hezbollah militants took over west Beirut in response to the government's attempt to shut down the Hezbollah-controlled telecoms network.

⁴ Walid Phares, "Hezbollah's Coup in Lebanon Targets the Cedars Revolution", *World Defense Review*, 23 January 2011, available at <http://worlddefensereview.com/phares02011.shtml>

⁵ In May 2008, rival Lebanese groups signed the Doha Agreement in a bid to avoid civil conflict following deepening political and armed tensions. The agreement committed the parties to a consensus president and a government of national unity that would include the majority and the opposition, which would also hold veto power in the cabinet.

most intense. According to the last comprehensive study on poverty, the north has 20.7 percent of Lebanon's population but 46 percent of the extremely poor population and 38 percent of the entire poor population.⁶ This is particularly galling for northern Sunnis, given the huge sums of money – much of it said to come from Iran – that Hezbollah has poured into the south for reconstruction purposes since the 2006 war with Israel.

Significantly, however, growing Sunni resentment also extends inwards towards the traditional March 14 leadership under Saad Hariri, which is seen as out of touch with their ambitions and needs. With key figures such as Saad perceived to be focused on political and economic holdings linked to Beirut, the periphery has grown disenchanted. This appears to be fuelling a broader fragmentation of the March 14 leadership over the past year that has been accelerated by Saad's more than year-long absence from the country because of an alleged assassination threat. Dwindling Saudi financial support for his Movement of the Future party has also weakened Saad's ability to exert patronage and control over the Sunni community. These conditions have opened the way to an increasingly disparate group of Sunni voices, many of whom call for more aggressive Sunni positioning and some of whom are associated with Salafi tendencies.⁷

The Syrian conflict has inspired these more radical Sunni groups, who see the Sunni-dominated revolt in Syria as a guiding light for their own struggle. This dynamic has manifested itself most prominently in the north of the country, where a combination of resentment, poverty and affinity with their religious brethren in Syria is empowering some Salafi groups, but it also exists elsewhere. Sheikh Ahmad Assir, a Salafi leader who condemns Hezbollah and their foreign backers and calls for the government to confront them over their arms, recently held a sit-in protest in the southern city of Sidon. "They [Hezbollah] and Amal control the state, they give jobs to their people while ours are unemployed, and they attack us on every front while the government does nothing," he said. Assir's anger resonates with much of the Sunni population.⁸

Meanwhile, there is also the potential for Sunni assertiveness – including of a Salafi nature – to tie in with grievances among Palestinian refugees, long a source of tension and periodic violence. Most of the 400,000 descendants of the Palestinian *naqba* – those exiled since the creation of Israel – live under tight restrictions on employment, land ownership and movement in and out of camps.⁹ This has long provoked

simmering tensions with state authorities – as illustrated by June clashes with state security forces in two camps. Palestinian marginalisation and despair, and the poor hold of the Lebanese state within the camps, has allowed room for the emergence of militant Salafi groups, as demonstrated by the emergence of Fatah al-Islam forces in the Nahr al-Bared camp in 2007. While Palestinian grievances do not directly feed off the Syrian crisis, the growing vulnerability of the state could fan tensions and make them more willing to take an assertive stand, particularly – given existing Salafi trends within some of the camps – if they find ideological convergence (thereby patching over more nationalist-based divisions) with Sunnis intent on establishing their ascendancy in Lebanon and Syria.

While this phenomenon of fragmentation and assertiveness is most evident among the country's Sunni population, unity and control cannot be assured within the March 8 movement either. The summer months of 2012 witnessed repeated street protests in Beirut by the families of the 11 Shiite hostages held in Syria, despite Nasrallah's injunction to stay off the streets, and it remains uncertain how the country's Shiite population would respond in the face of a nationwide escalation. Following the Meqdad clan's August seizure of Syrian hostages, Nasrallah warned that Hezbollah was unable to exert full control over its supporters. Even so, it is clear that Hezbollah retains far more organisational discipline than the Sunni movements, particularly those in the north, over whom March 14's centralising control is increasingly questionable.

A weak state

In the face of these challenges, the Lebanese government is struggling to impose itself as the ultimate stabiliser. At its most obvious, the weakness of the state – historically poor because of a system which empowers communal leaders rather than national institutions – is reflected in the polarisation between March 14 and March 8, which has regularly thrust the country into political paralysis since 2006. Following the fall of the Hariri government in January 2011, it took five months to form a new government, which has thereafter been weakened by its own internal divisions and a lack of nationwide legitimacy in the face of strong March 14 opposition.

The ability of the government to press ahead with a much-needed legislative agenda has been limited. In its latest incarnation, this took the form of a sharp dispute between the Amal Movement and the FPM over labour reforms within the state electricity sector, resulting in a cabinet boycott by FPM ministers.¹⁰ Significantly, the long-delayed election law remains incomplete, threatening new instability as the

⁶ The study identified the northern city of Tripoli and the districts of Akkar and Miniyeh-Danniyeh as having the highest overall poverty headcounts in the country. See Heba Laithy, Khalid Abu-Isma'il and Kamal Hamdan, "Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon", International Poverty Centre, January 2008, available at <http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCCountryStudy13.pdf>

⁷ "The moderate Sunnis have lost control," commented one leading pro-March 14 Lebanese journalist, interviewed in Beirut, in May 2012.

⁸ Roula Khalaf, "Lebanese cleric takes on Hizbollah", *Financial Times*, 17 July 2012, available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87912a1c-d001-11e1-a3d2-00144feabd0c.html#axzz20tUz44hx>

⁹ Regularising the status of predominantly Sunni Palestinians has long been a sensitive issue because of the country's delicate sectarian balance and the fear among Christians, in particular, that it would further tilt the balance of power away from them.

¹⁰ Hussein Dakroub and Wassim Mroueh, "Paralysis order of the day in Cabinet, Parliament", the *Daily Star*, 4 July 2012, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Jul-04/179285-paralysis-order-of-the-day-in-cabinet-parliament.ashx#axzz20lxGVuXA>

June 2013 election date draws closer. In August, the March 8 cabinet approved a draft law implementing a switch away from the current first-past-the-post majoritarian system towards proportional representation. However, the bill was rejected by March 14 in parliament as the system is considered advantageous to March 8 and would likely give them a broader mandate in parliament.

Not only does political paralysis feed polarisation, it also contributes to growing disenchantment with a state unable to meet the key needs of its citizens. The summer months of 2012 witnessed repeated electricity cuts, and the conflict in Syria is having a marked impact on the Lebanese economy, which the government appears unable to address. While state failings and poor national infrastructure and public services is not a new phenomenon for the Lebanese, this downward trend is likely to continue so long as violence and instability engulfs the region, provoking rising unemployment, inflation and shortages across Lebanon. According to the IMF, GDP growth in 2011 slowed to 1.5 percent from 7 percent in 2010. The Lebanese Economic Association says commercial activity fell by 50 percent from the previous year over the first seven months of 2012 and that tourist numbers decreased by 12 percent compared with 2011 (and by 34 percent compared with 2010).¹¹ The combination of a weak state and a shrinking economy will exacerbate social unrest, particularly in the poverty-struck north of the country.

The one institution seen as being above the communal fray, the LAF, is now suffering its own crisis of legitimacy and fears are growing about its coherence. The suspicious circumstances surrounding the killing of Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed in the Akkar district in May (he was apparently shot passing through a standard military checkpoint and it remains unclear why the escalation of force was needed) has been met with accusations that elements of the army have sided with the Assad regime. Following the incident, the LAF was forced to temporarily withdraw from some areas within Akkar; the inability of the state to patrol some of its most volatile territories in the face of local antipathy sets a dangerous precedent. All of this coincides with new challenges, with some areas such as Wadi Khaled and the northern Bekaa witnessing increased criminality in the wake of the curtailing of cross-border economic activity with Syria.

While the army's repeated deployments to Tripoli have helped restore some semblance of calm to the city, and it has also been deployed over recent months in greater strength to Syrian border areas, the LAF's core role consists of getting between the two sides rather than confronting them directly, and there are fears that it could splinter if fighting escalates.¹² This is of critical importance. The LAF's 2007

battle against Fatah al-Islam in Nahr al-Bared cemented its role as a national institution that is less vulnerable to communal and political cleavages, a much-needed role in the current environment, accentuated by the other security apparatuses all being perceived as partisan.¹³ The LAF has hitherto represented a credible and much-needed anchor in a volatile sea and threats to its role could propel Lebanon towards very choppy waters indeed.¹⁴

Strategic rivalry

Lebanon's long history as a playground for broader regional ambitions means that none of these factors can be taken in isolation. Most worrying is the threat that Syria will use its ongoing influence to stir up instability even as Assad loses control over his own country. Many see recent events, notably the May arrests and killings in the north of the country, as attempts by Syria to cement support for Assad by targeting opposition activists, while also stirring up violence to cement fears of the cost of Syrian collapse. Samaha, a close Assad ally, was arrested in August after allegedly planning to launch a number of bomb attacks – possibly to ignite a civil war. (However, his arrest illustrates that, despite strong alliances within the country, Assad's capacity to shape the Lebanese environment is dwindling. Moreover, it's not clear that pushing Lebanon over the edge would really favour Assad. Rather than bringing down the current Hezbollah-affiliated government, it is in his interest to keep it in power.)

While direct Syrian meddling grabs most headlines, Damascus is not the only regional capital playing with Lebanese stability. The crisis in Syria has crystallised into a fierce proxy battleground between the Gulf and Western countries on the one hand and the Assad regime, Iran and Russia on the other. This broader strategic rivalry could now spill over into Lebanon. For its part, Iran can be expected to double down on its support for Hezbollah as a means of ensuring the strength of a key ally in view of the weakening power of its other ally, Assad.

Meanwhile the Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have fully embraced the Syrian opposition and are now pushing Mikati to take a more anti-Assad stance, and have introduced punitive economic measures, including the introduction of a travel warning advising Gulf nationals against travel to Lebanon, as a result of his failure to comply.¹⁵ Backers from the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia,

¹¹ Mohamad El Amin, "Private sector sounds alarm over desperate economic conditions, plummeting sales", the *Daily Star*, 29 August 2012, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2012/Aug-29/185989-private-sector-sounds-alarm-over-desperate-economic-conditions-plummeting-sales.ashx#axzz25OtiFbkh>

¹² An additional 2,000 LAF soldiers were deployed to the northern border with Syria in July.

¹³ Hezbollah is believed to exert control over the GSD, while the ISF is seen as being pro-March 14.

¹⁴ Michael Young comments that, "As in 2006 to 2008, the armed forces seem to be the last rampart between what passes for normality and chaos." Michael Young, "General electric", *Now Lebanon*, 22 June 2012, available at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?page=4&ID=411783&MID=0&PID=0&FPParentID=0&FPParentID=0&orderdir=desc>

¹⁵ While not wholly unjustified – the Meqdad clan in August stated its intention to seize Gulf nationals in retaliation for their support of Syrian rebels who have taken Lebanese hostage in Syria (a statement that was later retracted) – the initial Gulf announcement predated this turn of events.

are also reported to be channelling funds and arms to Salafi groups in the north of the country in a bid to support the rebels in Syria and also to develop the armed capabilities of militant groups within Lebanon which might be willing and able to take on Hezbollah. Gulf action of this nature is primarily driven by the Iran rivalry. With both sides likely to continue their proxy support along these lines, Lebanon risks increasingly being drawn into this wider regional conflagration.

There is also a possibility of tensions on Lebanon's southern flank – which has been relatively quiet during the past six years. Israel was quick to accuse Hezbollah – and Iran – of complicity in the July bombing in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists. The backdrop is one of growing regional tensions related to Iran's nuclear programme and fears in some quarters that an Israeli military strike on Iran will provoke an armed response by Hezbollah from southern Lebanon. Since the 2006 Lebanon war, Hezbollah is reported to have significantly increased its weapons capabilities and there are also concerns that stockpiles of Syrian arms, including chemical weapons, may flow Hezbollah's way if the Assad regime collapses. Israeli officials have occasionally suggested that such arms flows may in themselves constitute a *casus belli* and precipitate Israeli military action.¹⁶ Tensions also risk being exacerbated by a dispute between the two countries over maritime borders and control of valuable offshore gas fields. Both Hezbollah and the Israeli government have recently warned of significant escalation if provoked.

Dangers to come

As the conflict in Syria continues, the situation in Lebanon is likely to become ever more unstable – particularly given attempts to transform northern Lebanon into a transit hub for Syria's armed opposition. Channelling significant levels of weapons though the north of the country will empower and militarise those elements of the Sunni population most keen on pushing back against Hezbollah's power. Increased militarisation of the north may also draw northern Lebanon directly into the Syrian conflict by giving the Syrian army justification to intervene along the border areas. In such a febrile environment a single spark could succeed in setting off a chain of events that would unleash a deadly cycle of violence in Lebanon. Had the attempted assassination in April 2012 of Samir Geagea, the head of the pro-March 14 Christian Lebanese Forces, succeeded, it could have been that spark.

With parliamentary elections due in June 2013, the year ahead is set to be particularly bumpy. March 14 is likely to do everything in its power to weaken and discredit the current

government in the run-up to the vote. Much of its rhetoric will be focused on linking March 8 to the Assad regime's brutal crackdown and it is already agitating forcefully for the collapse of the current government. Hezbollah, for its part, is believed to have its eyes on securing a parliamentary majority with its key March 8 allies, the FPM and the Amal Movement, so that it can form a government without depending on the uncertain support of Walid Jumblatt, head of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), whose 2011 defection from March 14 handed power to March 8 (particularly as Jumblatt is now signalling that he may rejoin March 14 ahead of the election).¹⁷ In short, more – not less – political polarisation is on the menu. The atmosphere will be susceptible to external shocks that could tip the country towards crisis, particularly if the election law remains unlegislated or attempts are made by the incumbent government to postpone the election under the pretext of regional instability.

If Assad eventually falls, the challenges to Lebanese stability are likely to escalate significantly. While current violent unrest in Syria is creating cracks in the balance of power, the departure of the Assad regime would swing the door wide open. The inevitable domestic and regional vacuum that would follow Assad's demise will be enormous, considerably sharpening current levels of contestation. External meddling is also likely to become considerably more intense, with the likes of Saudi Arabia primed to aggressively increase attempts to push back against Hezbollah as a means of fatally weakening Iran's regional hold. Iran, for its part, can be expected to assist in bolstering Hezbollah's military advantage.

However, while the risks are considerable – and escalating instability points to a downward trend – Lebanon is also characterised by the considerable resilience mechanisms it has developed over the course of its turbulent history. Most notably, there is a strong collective memory of the country's long and painful civil war, which makes political leaders and much of the population wary of the potentially painful consequences of a new flare-up. The fighting in Tripoli and Beirut could have triggered a descent into wider conflict but political leaders were unanimous in urging calm. The Tripoli flare-up, though worrying, remains geographically contained so far and is unlikely to directly draw in Hezbollah or to provoke a wider eruption of hostilities.

Prime Minister Mikati has also been successful in staying out of the conflict in Syria. His policy of neutrality has avoided a direct conflict with either the Assad regime or the opposition, despite tensions. He has allowed opposition activists and refugees to flow into Lebanon and take advantage of state resources such as healthcare while continuing their anti-Assad activities (though some activists report increasing

¹⁶ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Israel will strike Lebanese state in case of Hezbollah provocation", *Haaretz*, 27 August 2012, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-israel-will-strike-lebanese-state-in-case-of-hezbollah-provocation.premium-1.460853>

¹⁷ Jumblatt, the perennial bellwether of Lebanese politics, has himself come out very vocally in support of the Syrian opposition, highlighting that the March 14/8 divide does not split wholly along anti- and pro-Assad lines.

pressure from pro-Syrian security agencies such as the GSD and 14 Syrian activists were deported to Syria in early August). The north of the country has become a hub of training activity and small-arms transfers to the opposition in Syria. Indeed, despite his pro-March 8 affiliation, Mikati has surprised people by his willingness to push back against the Assad regime at this moment.¹⁸ And, in July, Mikati's government approved funding for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), the body seeking to hold the trials of those accused of killing Rafik Hariri, for the second year running – despite the fact that the tribunal is now targeting four Hezbollah members. At the same time, the government has refused to join Arab and international efforts targeting Assad and voted against Arab League initiatives including sanctions. It has also placed some restrictions on arms flows into Syria. While both sides of the Syria conflict accuse Mikati of not doing enough to support them, he may be providing Lebanon with much-needed breathing space.

Meanwhile, President Michel Suleiman initiated a new round of national dialogue in June aimed at ensuring that disputes are aired and dealt with across the negotiating table rather than through the barrel of a gun. Though Hariri and Geagea did not themselves attend the gathering (Hariri was represented by former prime minister Fouad Siniora; Geagea boycotted the event), it brought together most of the main political parties from March 14 and 8.

Significantly, Hezbollah, Lebanon's predominant force, is playing a stabilising role and is supporting the policy of national dialogue while keeping the subject of its weapons off the table. Its strong influence over the current government, as well as its military superiority, means that it has little desire to disturb the status quo. This is a key factor holding the country back from a collapse into wider conflict. Despite its ongoing support for Assad, it would be simplistic and reductionist to view Hezbollah simply as a Syrian stooge. While it is intimately tied to the Assad regime, its primary goal is to safeguard its interests in Lebanon and it knows that any attempt to push the country into conflict would jeopardise its advantageous position. For example, it did not contest the arrest of Samaha.

The key question still looming is how Hezbollah may respond to the fall of Assad – perhaps the single most important issue in determining how powerful an impact a post-Assad regional landscape will have on Lebanese stability. Hezbollah will face the choice of working within a new domestic and regional environment in which it may no longer be so dominant, or of going on a pre-emptive offensive to demonstrate that it is still the country's leading force. The precedent of its military takeover of west Beirut in 2008 demonstrates a willingness to use its military resources to cement its own interests. However,

with dwindling external support, the movement may also choose to fall back on its institutional gains of recent years – particularly if it does well in forthcoming elections – rather than risking everything by going on the offensive once more. Ultimately, the degree to which it seeks to assert itself in the post-Assad world is likely to depend on the intensity of the challenge it faces from March 14 and its external allies.

What can Europe do?

Europe has long held meaningful influence in Lebanon. Owing to the historic depth of the relationship, strong economic ties and the perception that Europe is regarded as a more neutral arbiter than the US or the Gulf states (which are seen as too closely allied with March 14), European governments and their ambassadors on the ground have the ears of many of the leading political figures. In particular, Europe talks to Hezbollah – a role that will be key to ensuring that Lebanon does not descend into chaos. Europe must now use this influence effectively in support of Lebanese stability. In particular, it should do the following.

Keep talking to all sides

European states must maintain their co-ordinated message of support for consensus politics in Lebanon. They should offer strong backing to President Suleiman's national dialogue and Mikati's disassociation policy, and use their political influence to press Lebanese political actors to unify behind this goal. European diplomats should continue to offer themselves as much-needed political intermediaries as the country enters a period of regular crises. Calls for Lebanon to take a more assertive anti-Assad line should be rebuffed (though Europe should also make clear that any attempts to crack down on anti-Assad Syrian activists and deport them back to Syria are unacceptable). Although some see the weakness of Assad as an opportunity to dilute the influence of Iran and Hezbollah, Europe needs to prioritise neutrality for the sake of immediate stability rather than seeking to overtly side with its regional allies in the anti-Hezbollah camp.

This will necessitate taking a different approach from the US, primarily by continuing engagement with Hezbollah, with whom many EU member states maintain some level of contact. They must maintain this ongoing dialogue and use it to assuage fears of a broader international conspiracy against the movement, while continuing to press for a meaningful national dialogue over the question of its private militia. Hezbollah's alleged material support for the Syrian regime's crackdown and its history of armed militancy, both domestic and international, make it an organisation that merits being criticised and held to account. However, ongoing dialogue will be needed both now and in a post-Assad era in which any intensified pressure on Hezbollah, if not carefully calibrated, will encourage an offensive response. Hezbollah needs reassurance that there will be

¹⁸ For example, in May 2012, when Syria's representative to the United Nations accused Lebanon of acting as a hub of arms smuggling into Syria, Mikati angrily accused Syria of stoking tensions between the two countries.

political space for it in a post-Assad Lebanon. Europe must therefore resist growing US pressure – exemplified by the August imposition of new sanctions on Hezbollah – to take a more hostile line.

While pressing for national dialogue, Europe should not neglect the need for political reform to stabilise the country in a potential post-Assad period. In particular, Europe should encourage the passage of necessary electoral legislation to ensure the holding of parliamentary elections in 2013. Any bid to postpone the election could throw the country into acute crisis. The current dispute over the election law makes the passage of meaningful, non-confessional-based reform unlikely in advance of next year's election. Indeed, with March 8 and March 14 battling fiercely over the nature of electoral reform, a slower consensual passage towards reform may be preferable – and should be encouraged by European governments.

At a minimum, Europe should make a strong case for the immediate adoption of uniform, pre-printed ballot papers as a means of trying to curtail widespread vote buying.¹⁹ In order to help make the elections more transparent, the EU should also deploy a team of election monitors for the June 2013 vote, as it did during the 2009 election. More broadly, Europe should continue to provide support for reforms aimed at strengthening the rule of law and the state's non-partisan institutional capacity. For those that argue that Hezbollah's hold over Lebanon is of grave concern, pressing forward with political reforms strengthening the country's democratic institutional strength will be a far more effective counter-balance than direct confrontation.

Europe can also play a role in creating an international consensus to support stability in Lebanon. In particular, it should reach out to Gulf states sensing an opportunity to wrest Lebanon away from Hezbollah and out of the Syrian-Iranian orbit. Europe should encourage Saudi Arabia and Qatar to support the Mikati government's policy of disassociation, to lift the effective economic sanctions and to stop channelling funds to autonomous Sunni groups in Lebanon. Europe should seek to use the Gulf states' desire for international legitimacy and need for support on issues such as Iran as leverage in pressing them for a constructive policy on Lebanon. At the very least, there should be serious engagement with the Gulf over the risks of pushing Lebanon over the brink – and a clear European position that they will be called out on any support for Salafi militants in the country.

The weakness of European relations with Iran poses considerable challenges to engaging Tehran on its Lebanon policy. However, those states that maintain relations with Iran should likewise press it on the necessity of positive engagement and pressuring Hezbollah to commit to the political process.

¹⁹ On the merits of uniform ballot papers, see Elias Muhanna, "Clientelism, Vote Buying, and Ballot Reform in Lebanon", *Qifa Nabki*, 12 June 2012, available at <http://qifanabki.com/2012/06/12/lebanon-vote-buying-ballot-reform/>

Focus on security

EU member states should offer enhanced support aimed at strengthening Lebanon's institutional capacity to resist dangerous escalation – in particular, by supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). While the US government is the LAF's most important backer, EU member states such as France, Italy and the UK also provide meaningful support, which may actually become more critical if US congressional pressure forces the US administration to cut back support on account of Hezbollah's role in the ruling coalition.²⁰ A strong LAF will be important for the preservation of stability, may play an important role in safeguarding Lebanon's borders from direct spillover of violence, and weakens Hezbollah's argument that it needs to maintain its own militia for the sake of ongoing resistance against Israel. The LAF must also be pushed to ensure a transparent investigation of its killing of two people in Akkar in May.

In the context of growing cross-border threats from Syria, Europe should also maintain its focus on strengthening Lebanon's border-management capacities, namely increased inter-agency co-ordination on border strategy and greater intelligence sharing. Brussels has already committed €3.56 million and a number of member states, including France, Germany and the UK, also provide support.

International efforts to arm the Syrian opposition should not occur through northern Lebanon. Further militarisation of the north of the country will empower those elements intent on violent confrontation, while making it more likely that the north of the country will be drawn directly into the conflict as a result of fighting across the border. Lebanon needs a firewall from this danger. Arms, if they are to be provided, should therefore be channelled through alternative routes. Any indirect facilitation assistance being provided by European states should be conditioned on the weapons being channelled through non-Lebanese routes.

Europe should also keep an eye on emerging tensions on the border with Israel. If conflicts emerge, it should engage in rapid diplomatic efforts – using its contacts with both Israel and Hezbollah – to de-escalate. Europe played a similar role during the 2006 war, when the US was more willing to give Israel time to complete its military objectives. Thereafter it also successfully pushed for the creation of an enhanced version of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the UN peacekeeping mission, known as UNIFIL II. At the same time, Europe should take a lead in pushing forward mediation over the disputed maritime borders and control of the valuable East Mediterranean gas fields.

²⁰ The US Congress periodically puts the US administration under pressure to cut aid to the LAF. In August 2010, for instance, members of Congress threatened to cut military aid following armed border clashes between Israel and Lebanon which they blamed on the LAF. See Hilary Leila Krieger, "Congress may pull Lebanon military aid", the Jerusalem Post, 5 August 2010, available at <http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=183685>

Europe should continue to offer strong support for UNIFIL, which is mandated to monitor the cessation of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel and to restore peace and security to the area. In the context of a heightened risk of tensions with Israel and wider regional uncertainties, this mission may take on added significance in the months ahead. UNIFIL is also mandated to “assist the Government of Lebanon in securing its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related materiel.”²¹ The Syrian crisis makes this part of the mandate more important; in April, the Lebanese navy, with assistance from UNIFIL, held a ship carrying arms destined for Syria.²² In tandem with government authorities, Europe should seek to strengthen UNIFIL’s focus and ability to monitor and prevent arms flows into the country, whether headed to Lebanese or Syrian groups.

The mission is currently headed by Major General Paolo Serra, an Italian, who took command in January from a Spanish Major General, highlighting Europe’s lead position in supporting UNIFIL. EU member states contribute significant numbers of troops to the 11,260-strong force, led by Italy (1,100), Spain (962), France (919) and Ireland (355). Germany is also the single largest contributor to the mission’s Maritime Task Force, with three ships. UNIFIL’s recent strategic review called for a possible reduction in troops and a greater role for the LAF (France promptly withdrew a third of its troops and Spain has announced it will withdraw half of its soldiers at the end of the year). While UNIFIL chiefs say they are happy with current troop numbers, EU member states – particularly those already invested in the force – should not make further cuts and should be willing to increase capabilities to respond to any emerging tensions and requirements.²³

Deliver targeted economic assistance

Europe can also play a role in supporting Lebanon’s economy as it faces serious challenges that could provoke wider unrest. In particular, economic grievances play a central role in fuelling Sunni frustration in the north of the country, so Europe should focus development projects on Tripoli and the Akkar district, where poverty is most acute. This would weaken the appeal of potentially destabilising non-state actors. A greater chunk of the €20 million European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) budget for 2011–2013 that is focused on local development efforts (in addition to elements of the €91 million geared towards support of socio-economic reforms, as well as bilateral aid from the different member states) should be channelled towards the north rather than maintaining the current focus on reconstruction in southern areas affected by the 2006 conflict. Given that an increase in European funding support is unlikely

in the context of Europe’s own economic difficulties, it is imperative that funding efforts be channelled smartly.

To help spur local development and wider economic growth, the EU should also maintain important financial support through the European Investment Bank (EIB), which has provided more than €1.15 billion to Lebanon since 1978. This support should be boosted through the distribution of new funds made available through the €350 million budget of the recently established SPRING programme (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth), as well as new financing via the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Europe should be wary of sanctioning Lebanese banks and the wider financial sector because of US-led accusations of money laundering and complicity in helping Iran and Syria evade sanctions.²⁴ US pressure on the banking sector – and on Europe to follow suit – is likely to increase in the coming months following the August seizure by US authorities of \$150 million in connection with a Hezbollah-linked money-laundering scheme.²⁵ But while the system has clear weaknesses, Lebanese authorities and banks are taking meaningful steps to try to ensure compliance with US and European sanctions, and the targeting of the financial sector could decimate the economy and push the country into a cycle of economic despair that would fuel social tensions.²⁶

The EU is Lebanon’s most important trading partner: it accounted for 29 percent of Lebanon’s total trade in 2011, amounting to €5.6 billion.²⁷ At the moment, Europe exports far more to Lebanon (€5.2 billion a year) than it imports from the country (€0.4 billion). While Europe may be tempted to advance the 2006 Association Agreement (which sets out a 2014 date for a free trade area) by opening negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in a bid to encourage Lebanese exports and fuel the domestic economy, this may not be the best way forward.²⁸ DCFTAs are slow and unwieldy and would be unlikely to offer short-term benefits to the Lebanese economy.²⁹ Instead, Europe should consider means of fast-tracking a free trade agreement that would offer more immediate gains for the Lebanese economy, or a customs union modelled on the EU’s relationship with Turkey.

²¹ The UNIFIL Mandate is available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unifil/mandate.shtml>

²² “Lebanon holds ship ‘carrying weapons for Syria rebels’”, BBC News, 29 April 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17885085>

²³ Interview with a senior UNIFIL official, Beirut, May 2012.

²⁴ In February 2011, the US Treasury Department accused the Lebanese Canadian Bank of money laundering on behalf of Hezbollah.

²⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “U.S. Government Seizes \$150 Million in Connection with Hizballah-Related Money Laundering Scheme”, 20 August 2012, available at <http://www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2012/u.s.-government-seizes-150-million-in-connection-with-hizballah-related-money-laundering-scheme>

²⁶ Dominic Evans, “Sanctions weigh on Lebanon-Syria banking ties”, *Reuters*, 8 February 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/08/us-lebanon-syria-banks-idUSTRE81714T20120208>

²⁷ Trade figures from the European Commission, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/countries/lebanon/>

²⁸ “EU agrees to start trade negotiations with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia”, European Commission press release, 14 December 2011, available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/11/1545&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

²⁹ For a discussion on the weakness of DCFTAs in the MENA region, see ECFR’s forthcoming “Power Audit of EU–North Africa Relations”.

Help with the humanitarian crisis

Europe should also step up to share the burden of the humanitarian crisis caused by the huge influx of Syrian refugees, which may strain Lebanon's economic and social fabric. Approximately 59,000 Syrian refugees are already in the process of registering with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon, but since many choose not to register, the true number will be much higher. There are also several hundred thousand Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon, many of whom will not return to their homeland as long as the fighting continues and who will impose a considerable financial burden on Lebanon.³⁰ The inflow of refugees could also cause social tensions, particularly in areas already witnessing unrest such as Tripoli, where a large number of refugees are headed. The country has already witnessed some attacks on Syrians.

EU member states should offer the Lebanese authorities direct financial assistance, as well as increased indirect support through UNHCR, to deal with the inflow of Syrian refugees. In June, United Nations humanitarian agencies and partners launched an appeal for \$193 million to deal with the regional ramifications of the refugee crisis.³¹ Europeans have made significant commitments to the total humanitarian appeal – including approximately €38.5 million from the UK, €25 million from France, €24 million from Germany, €21.5 million from Sweden, and €19 million from Norway. But as much as 60 percent of this money has been channelled towards support inside Syria and the rest divided between neighbouring states.³² Europe should also press for the Lebanese government to maintain oversight of refugee camps. There are already reports of camps in the Bekaa valley being established beyond the remit of the government. The longstanding tensions associated with Palestinian camps in Lebanon highlight the dangers of autonomously run refugee centres.

The long unresolved Palestinian issue and the statelessness of Palestinian refugees remains another challenge for Lebanese stability. Recent clashes highlight the explosive potential of the camps. The LAF decision in July to scrap the permit system in the Nahr al-Bared camp represents a positive step, but Europe should push for a further loosening of security restrictions on camp residents and a wider expansion of Palestinian rights.³³ Continued funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which provides many of the key services to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, will be central to ensuring that the Palestinian issue does not

escalate. Europe has long been an important contributor to UNRWA's budget: EU member states contributed \$439.3 million, or 45 percent of the agency's income, in 2011.³⁴ Even in these difficult economic times, this funding must be maintained.

In recent months, Lebanon's vulnerability has been illustrated by deepening polarisation, instability and violence. It now faces a difficult road ahead as further outbreaks of violence threaten to push the country into the abyss. However, Lebanon has so far been able to weather the storm and there is a firm consensus among key political actors that implosion must be avoided – strong indicators that the country can yet overcome the challenge. Europe must do all it can to support this process, particularly in any post-Assad era. Its support, pressure and dialogue with all parties in the conflict can act as a force for both stability and reform.

³⁰ In July, Lebanon's Higher Relief Committee said it had halted medical and food assistance previously provided free of charge to Syrian refugees because of a lack of funds.

³¹ See the European Commission's ECHO factsheet on Syria, as of 21 August 2012, available at http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf (hereafter, ECHO factsheet).

³² ECHO factsheet.

³³ Annie Slemrod, "Army scraps Nahr al-Bared permit system", the *Daily Star*, 17 July 2012, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Jul-17/180851-army-scraps-nahr-al-bared-permit-system.ashx#axzz20lxGVuXA>

³⁴ Figures on the EU's contribution to UNRWA are available at <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=667>

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