

Lebanon: the spiral of rearmament and violence

In a recent interview with Ahmed Fatfat, Lebanese minister and leader of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, he stated: "We cannot ask the Christians and Lebanese Sunnites to give up their weapons when others have them." The spiral of violence in Lebanon has begun and, judging by the number of deaths in a week and the extension of the conflict into different areas of the country, it is going to be difficult to stop it. For the moment, more than 60 people have died, and the clashes have reached Tripoli, the Bekaa valley and the Aley and Chuf mountains in south-eastern Lebanon.

The explosion of violence beginning on 7 May was sparked by two events: firstly, the government's decree to make Hezbollah's telecommunications system illegal and, secondly, the sacking of the head of security at the airport, who was supposedly close to this organisation. However, the indicators warning of this conflagration and the causes that have made it possible have been making themselves heard for some time.

Indicators in the run-up to the outbreak

Violent incidents have multiplied in the last few months in parallel with the now often repeated power vacuum caused by the lack of a president since 24 November 2007, the paralysing of parliamentary sessions for the last year and a half and the resignation of various opposition ministers (although in a semantic and institutional pirouette some have been serving as "Acting Resigned Ministers"). The acts of violence have included confrontations in the streets of Beirut between supporters of the opposition and the governing majority; several deaths in a demonstration protesting against the power cuts at the beginning of January; as well as the succession of assassinations of political or military personalities, which has not stopped since the killing of the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. In addition, in these two and a half years there has been an armed conflict in the Palestinian refugee camp of Naher al-Bared and the Israeli aggression in the summer of 2006. The effects of so much violence have been shown at many levels, above all of the 2006 war, which brought change in many senses. Firstly, it contributed to reaffirming the feeling of community, above all among the Shia, and, as a result, strengthened Hezbollah – not just militarily. Secondly, it created a huge economic crisis, not because of reconstruction – which was funded by foreign countries (i.e. Iran for the affected Shia areas) – but because tourism and foreign investment, the country's two main sources of income, dropped. Meanwhile, the end of the conflict involved the presence of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon for the first time, without this damaging Hezbollah's true stronghold (in fact, the mandate of resolution 1701 of the UN Security Council to ensure there were no arms south of the River Litani meant, in practice, that there were but they were hidden).

As an indicator of what was coming, during the past year and a half the militarisation of the streets has increased and an alarming rearmament of groups and individuals has been noted. This is confirmed by the analysts and is illustrated by the increase of the price of light arms on the Lebanese market: while a Kalashnikov was being sold on the black market for 100 dollars a year ago, it would now fetch more than 1,000. More surprisingly, and confirming the comment by Mr Fatfat given at the beginning of the article, the newspaper *Los Angeles Times* recently revealed that Saad Hariri's Future Movement had, during the past year and with the help of the US, armed a Sunni militia in the guise of a security company.

In recent years, another kind of violence - less direct but equally dangerous - has also increased: the verbal violence of political leaders, visual violence in the form of posters, and violence through the presence (although this was initially festive) of the opposition in the centre of the capital, at other times a meeting place for Beirutis of different religious loyalties. To this must be added the role played by the communication media, particularly television, which, according to several observers, have been widely responsible for stoking the dialogue of hatred. This violence has contributed to a process of religious reaffirmation, with the consequent fear and rearmament deriving from this. As evidence, a Beirut journalist told of the impact made on her by the documentary from the film maker Hady Zaccak in

which seven Lebanese university students belonging to different communities spoke in an extremely exclusive way with respect to other religious groupings.

The violence in Lebanon is also seen in another very specific form: the cult of martyrdom. Not only that of the Hezbollah fighters but, in a similar way, concerning the death of ex-prime minister Hariri, with the profusion of posters in his honour, a mausoleum right in the centre of Beirut and a counter of the days elapsed since his death. The Hezbollah cult of martyrdom, together with its use of child soldiers, has been denounced by various peace NGOs. Referring to Hezbollah, an activist stated from Beirut that "while we fight for peace, they fight for war". He added: "We need to change the war mentality and work to create a peace mentality, and to do that, resources, leadership and, above all, time are needed." In addition, and referring to the 100,000 men it is said that Hezbollah is capable of mobilising, he lamented: "Belonging to their organisation means having a job, money, education, a house and health care."

Moreover, the social and economic function of Hezbollah becomes even more significant considering the pressing economic crisis being experienced in Lebanon. The price of weapons has not been the only one that has increased in recent times: the prices of basic products have gone up too, a sign of a very severe crisis, with a large deficit managed in the times of ex-prime minister Hariri soaring after the Israeli aggression of 2006. The Lebanese have not only had to stand the fact that the price of basic products has multiplied in a short time while the minimum wage has remained at 200 dollars, they have also suffered long daily water and power cuts. All this has led to a worrying increase in the emigration of people and companies to the Gulf States, to such a point that the principality of Dubai has come to be called "the second Beirut".

Internal struggles ...

Against the analysis that reduces the conflict to the two axes of international polarisation (that is, the pro-western side and the pro-Iranian/Syrian side), two considerations should be put forward. Firstly, of course there are huge foreign interests in Lebanon, but the Lebanese conflict is, above all, a product of *Lebanese* actions. Those confronting one another, those who are not reaching political agreements and those who proclaim inflammatory messages are Lebanese. And so are the bitter adversaries from the last conflict suffered by the country - a many-sided struggle that started in 1975 and lasted 15 years. Here are Samir Geagea (ex-head of the Lebanese Forces Christian militia), Michel Aoun (ex-commander of the armed forces) or Walid Jumblatt (Druz leader who took part in the fighting against Christians on Mount Lebanon). And here we arrive at one of the country's main problems, which is very damaging to democracy and peace: the lack of renewal of the political elites. In fact, the majority of the current leaders heading each political group or block are the same as they were 30 or 40 years ago.

It can therefore be said that the current conflict in the Lebanon corresponds, above all, to a power struggle. It is no coincidence that it has been sparked by a measure involving the use of force against Hezbollah (and its telecommunication network, considered essential in its fight against Israel) or that its response was to take the access to the airport and attack the emblems of the Hariri complex (TV Future). What is at stake in Lebanon are the shares of power of the different agents, very much affected by the demands of Hezbollah (and its Maronite ally Aoun): i.e. the right of veto in the government and recognition of the right to resistance against Israel. Hezbollah, while it claims numerical superiority among the Shia population it represents, undermines the actions of the governing majority at many levels: economic policy (there is a good reason why it has supported several strikes), its international alliances (mainly the US), and, above all, Hezbollah does not forget the role of the Lebanese leaders in the 2006 war when they were accused of pressing to delay the ceasefire. So the impossible election for a president for Lebanon, postponed for the eighteenth time until 10 June, is none other than the latest political dispute in a succession of past and future confrontations.

At the root of confrontation and political opposition lies the eternal reform pending in the country which is demanded by many political sectors and by civil society: a reform of the electoral law to ensure greater proportionality, decentralisation and democratisation. It is in the context of the historical marginalisation of the Shia community in socioeconomic and political terms, accompanied by Israel's recent direct aggression, that Hezbollah brings out its fortress, raising itself as a crucial element in community fear and reaffirmation. However, it must be stated that not all Shia identify with Hezbollah and some voice clear criticism of the armed organisation.

Finally, to this situation must be added the fragilities stemming from the creation and establishment of Lebanon, like the way confessionalism have permeated all spheres, creating, in the opinion of several analysts, a mentality of divisiveness which has not only not been deactivated but which has, in recent times been encouraged *ex profeso* as a way of guaranteeing community feeling against the "other", to the point where a solid image of the "enemy" has been built up. As an example, heads of conflict prevention programmes in the country note the negative contribution of the fact that all textbooks are different depending on whether they are for Christian, Sunnite, Shia or Druze schools and that the history they explain differs substantially, extolling or vilifying the same people as the writers see fit.

...and foreign interests

Having stated that the Lebanese confrontation is a strongly internal one, the existence of countries with clear interests in this small territory cannot be denied. A first circle is formed by the neighbouring states (Syria and Israel), followed by another circle made up of their allies (principally Iran and the US). The Lebanon has undoubtedly been a historical example of "proxy wars", in which foreign powers support, incentivise and arm the opposing sides.

In the case that concerns us, and after Syria has seen itself alluded to in the confrontation, it must be said that Syria clearly has interests in Lebanon and that its relationship with the neighbouring country has been and continues to be a very complex one. But it must not be forgotten that Syria was present in Lebanon for almost 30 years with the approval of the US and of national leaders like Hariri the elder. And, while Syria has interests in the country, the US does too, demonstrated by the fact that it has deployed a naval ship off the Lebanese coast. If the US cannot allow Hezbollah to be a threat to its Israeli ally, Syria cannot forget that its enemy Israel (which attacked its territory last September) would take just two hours by tank to get from Metula to Damascus, so, the alliance with Hezbollah corresponds, above all, to this containment function. On the list of interested foreign powers, the historical links with France, the former mandatory power, should not be forgotten, in its particular function as protector of the Maronite community, as well as the immediate interests of the principal countries making up the UNIFIL (Spain, France and Italy), which are now in a very delicate position.

Concerning the classification of the opposing sides in terms of rejection of or affiliation with Syria, some clarification is required. Although when the current political polarisation began to be forged, relations with Syria were at the heart of the division, nowadays classifying the confrontation in terms of the "pro-Syrian" or "anti-Syrian" side is merely a rather loose simplification. As an example, the establishment of a special tribunal to investigate the death of Hariri (attributed from the start by the current governing majority to the Syrian regime), actually led to discord among the opposing sectors: the current governing majority, led by the son of the murdered ex-prime minister, led the petition to the United Nations for the establishment of such a legal body, while Hezbollah and its allies denounced its politicisation. However, in February 2006, Hezbollah and Michel Aoun signed an *entente* condemning the attack and declaring it was important "to pursue the investigation using the officially adopted mechanisms to find out the truth".

At this point, there are many unknown factors: will the army maintain its neutrality? Will the violence extend to Christian dominated areas (safe for the moment but now arming themselves)? What level will the confrontation between Hezbollah and the Sunnites reach, despite Hezbollah's declarations against *fitna* or inter-Muslim war? Could the accusations of betrayal against the Maronite leader Aoun by the other Christians precipitate an intra-religious confrontation? To what point will the Lebanese conflict contribute to making the existing regional polarisation (Saudi Arabia/Egypt/Jordan vs. Syria/Iran) more extreme? So there are various scenarios but, in the short term, little prospect of peace. The commitment the Arab League has just achieved for renewed dialogue between the Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the opposition could be a way of temporarily stopping the violence. But, unfortunately, the spiral of rearmament appears to have crossed a dangerous threshold.