



LEBANON STARTED TO BE A REFUGEE STATE WITHOUT IDENTITY

Imad Risk



Imad Risk is founder of Isticharia for Strategic and Communication Studies-SCS in 2008, member of Muslim-Christian Committee for Dialogue in Lebanon, member of Eastern Club for Dialogue of Civilizations and member of UC2PF- press Francophone. He is also a professor in strategic planning and technology of communications in School of Staff - Lebanese Army. His research focuses on the crisis in the Middle East and counter-financing of international terrorism. He studied in the Lebanese University and holds a PhD in the Discipline of International Relations, where he specialized in negotiation and crisis management. Risk is the author of numerous publications, including most recently Silk Road in 21st century...China vision to the world (2016); Russia the Dream of warm water (2012); Middle East in the Balance of Terror (2003). The interview with Dr. Imad Risk was conducted by Dr. Murat Tinas on October 11, 2017 in Ankara.

ORSAM: Dr. Imad Risk, first of all, we are honored to host you at ORSAM and pleased to have an interview with you before today's roundtable on regional security in the Middle East. Let's start with the current issue: the discussions on the election law and the preparations for the upcoming elections. How do you see the discussions on the new election law and the coming elections? Do you see any possibility of postponement?

Risk: It is necessary, first, to talk about political situation in Lebanon and after we can talk about the new system. When you talk about the election law, you also have to talk about different things, in combination with this law. It was a debate maybe more than a twelve months to prepare this law. This is first. Second, they have presented more than two hundred fifty propositions for this law. Then, they can reach a consensus.

People say that it was the maximum to get at this moment. This is true but after all these discussions, hundreds of meetings and propositions, people was expecting more. This is very important. Second, election does not only mean law. The culture of the election, of democracy, and

also let's say, culture of cooperation with the other, you also have to promote this. In Lebanon, this is the problem. At this moment of both the local and the regional politics, the unstable situation, it is very difficult. Also, people are worried about their economic beings. They focus on how to get money to live or just to continue to exist.

Another issue related to the elections is the identity of country. It means for Lebanon why I have to support any politician or why I have to elect this party? In this new electoral law, people have to vote as a list. This law was prepared through focusing on demographic facts of the country and using the geography to benefit for the ends. Therefore, it means that when you propose this law, you propose a continuous crisis management, not the finalization of the crisis. In the end, we postponed the problem, we did not solve it.

Dr. Risk, I get your point but such changes require fundamental reconstruction of Lebanese politics. Now, we have a new law, as your said which is not very much different from the previous one, for the upcoming elections in the beginning of 2018 after so many postponements.

The problem of postponement is also related with the regional politics because it is not only an internal election in Lebanon. Every party in Lebanon is related with a regional power, after a great power. Therefore, this also means a greater balance at regional level. They propose a law to continue this balance of terror between them.

Who supports the resistance, or Hezbollah, Syrian government and Iranians and now Russians. If they lose in Lebanon, believe me, they lose in the region. For them, Lebanon is the real hub for the Mediterranean, the hub for gas and oil, the hub for Israel and also to manipulate US policy through Lebanon. If a party lose in the election, not only the party but also its partners lose their strategy in the region. This is why, I said, many things are related to the elections.

Since they are not sure about the outcome of the election, they preserve the balance. If unexpected result comes, what will happen? Instability, destruction, new war... It means you are destroying all the system. For that, everybody is searching for a balanced relation. Therefore, they do not change the election law fundamentally in Lebanon. Like in the region, there is a status quo, and they do not really let this status quo to change.

Therefore, Lebanese politics is like a mirror of the regional politics. Again, for any change in Lebanon, we also need to monitor what is happening in the broader region.

I agree, but this change may also start in Lebanon. Any party may push for a change in the upcoming elections. It will surely be an add value in Syria or Iraq. Syrian Army just enter to Deir ez-Zor. Like what happened in Homs, Hama and Aleppo. All these military issues and the creation of low-tension areas are being used for political negotiation which also have influence on political life in Lebanon. You can see the prime minister in good relation with the president, in good relation with the head of the parliament. It means something. Everybody is talking about keeping Lebanon away from what happens in the region because Lebanon is a place for discussion and dialogue.

When you have Lebanon near to Israel with lots of Palestinian and Syrian refugees, Lebanon becomes a place for real dialogue. Just think about who made the election for presidency possible after two and a half years? Regional powers agreed to have a stability in Lebanon and to finalize issues of terrorism related to al-Nusra and Daesh.

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What happened between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also influence in Lebanon because there is Saudi and Qatari influence inside the political life and social life in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia have partners from Sunni, Christian and also Shia communities but they are not, let's say, so close like Sunnis. Qatar has also good relations with the Christian communities in Lebanon. Especially Samir Geagea and they have some relations, good relations also with Sami Gemayel and Muslim Brotherhood has also a network in Lebanon. At regional level, Qatar has also good relations with Turkey. They join to make a confrontation with Saudi-Emirate in-

fluence in Lebanon. It means Sunna in Lebanon are now divided. This is inside Lebanon, but the second problem is at regional level: Qatar-Saudi, Egypt-Turkey. In the future, unstable situation may affect some other states.

When we talk about settlement, when we talk about agreements in the region, let's say in Libya, let's say in Yemen, Syria or Iraq. Inside of these communities, there is Egyptian influence. It may be financed through Saudi Arabia; but headed by Egyptians. I mean the intelligence service of Egypt, which is still very powerful.

**How about the Christians?
Where do you see them in**

these equations? And specifically President Michel Aoun?

Christians are also fragmented. Saudis just invited Samir Geagea. Historically, they have good relations. Saudis are supporting Christians in order to create a balance in Lebanon against Hezbollah. Simply, the idea is that Saudi Arabia is searching for balance with any minority, political or religious. However, one needs to be careful about Russia's relations with the Christian community in Lebanon.

The issue of President Aoun is a good question. As a president, he tries to be moderate. At the same time, his political party (Free Patriotic Movement) continues to have moderate role. However, his party is a coalition. In this coalition, you can find people close to the British, close to French, close to Emirate, close to Russians. It is a combination of relations. It is not one body, not like Hezbollah not like Geagea's party. This is totally different from other parties. When you talk about Lebanese Forces, for instance, it is one ideology, one leader, one shape. For the Free Patriotic Movement, there are lots of rumors about its future, especially after General Aoun.

After General Aoun, who will lead Lebanon? There are some rumors. The first one focuses on Samir Geagea and

the second is Suleiman Frangieh. The agreement on Geagea was made before the election of president, I think. However, we do not know whether this agreement will continue or not. If no, everybody is preparing the next step. That is why Geagea entered into the government and took an important ministry. At the same time, he tries to get more municipalities for the rural development, but he is only focusing on Christian areas.

There are also rumors in Lebanon about a possible political system. They are, at this moment, ideas and proposals: decentralization like in Iraq and Syria. In brief, the idea is to give some independence to regional cities inside the country under a federation or something like that, like city states under a loose federation.

I was in Lebanon when Samir Geagea declared his support to General Aoun. It was, I think, one of the historic moments of the post-civil war Lebanese history. Because historically, this alliance was impossible due to the memories of the past. Currently, it is also difficult because of the disagreements on the issue of Hezbollah. But despite all these obstacles, it was realized. Just few days after this declaration, I had

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an interview with a senior politician from Lebanese Forces. In that interview, he also stated similar things to what you just said: “we, the Lebanese Forces, made all necessary things to return normal political life in Lebanon, but if this does not also work, we need to search for other alternatives.”

Before General was elected as a president, they agreed to avoid conflicts and to stop any media accuse. What made Samir Geagea to sup-

port Michel Aoun who also has alliance with Hezbollah is the idea of preparation for the next step. I mean, after General Aoun. Although Free Patriotic Movement is strong now, inside of this coalition is very fragmented and they started to lose their potential. However, Geagea's community, party, hierarchy, potential, support and military are still too strong and organized as a bloc. This is why the Lebanese Forces has the potential for the future. This is why Saudis are searching for a stronger alliance with them. But to be



honest, Lebanese Forces do not care whether it is Saudi or Qatari, they care about their profit and invest in Christian areas. In a possible phase of federalism, the one who will be the most powerful inside the Christian region will lead the community.

What about the Druze community? Jumblatt and Arslan?

Druze community has the same situation. Mostly, they are under one block. After what happened in Syria between the regime and the opposition, the Druze in Lebanon are close to the opposition, but they are totally different from the Druze in Syria. At the beginning, most of the Druze in Syria did not participate in this unstable situation or the civil war. Then, they took a decision to protect their villages against the opposition who has been accusing them. So, at this moment, the government profited to make a propaganda to push the Druze inside Syria towards the regime. The Druze in Lebanon, on the other hand, have sympathy to the opposition.

There are two ways inside the Druze community like Sunnis and Christians. Although Syrian regime has a very bad reputation among Lebanese Christians, you can find people who would say

‘why not Bashar Al Assad to continue’ because they are afraid from radical alternatives. But, you cannot find this division inside the Shia.

Concerning Jumblatt’s strategy, there is a vivid problem for him. It is to control, or let’s say, to continue to control the Druze minority in Lebanon. The question is why. One hundred years ago, who made Lebanon? It was an agreement between Druze and Maronite as the two most powerful communities of the time. Now, the power has totally shifted and the most powerful community is the Shia. Secondly, there is a Sunni uprising in the region. Yes, there are big differences between Saudi and Qatari or Turkish but there are similarities also. There is also militarization of Shias across the region backed by Iran. Who is behind the Druze? It is a very small community around 200.000 in Lebanon. At this moment, Walid is also transferring some of his authority to his son Teymur. Walid can be moderate or he can manipulate these big shifts in the region between Shias and the Sunnis because he is professional. Is his son ready for this position? This is a question. After Jumblatt, we can see more fragmented Druze community in Lebanon. This is a very serious problem of existence for the future.

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So far, we have started with the current debates in Lebanon about the new electoral system and we discussed the recent regional developments and the position of the main Lebanese actors towards these issues. Indeed, it is already a quite full interview, but I do not want to finish this talk without having your comments on the refugee issue in Lebanon, which leads tough discussions in the country. Will they stay in Lebanon or should they return? What do you think about this refugee issue? What do you think about their future role?

If we don't know the modern history of Lebanon and its experience with the refugees in history, it is difficult to understand the current debates. The first one is the Palestinians. Most of the refugee camps for Palestinians had been built near big cities or industrial areas. I think, it was a planned action because they were considered as cheap labor near the cities of Saida, Tripoli and Beirut. It wasn't just a simple shift of people because somebody pushed the move and somebody organized where to put them. I think, Britain was behind that. Second, refugee issue in Lebanon is an identity problem. Some of these refu-

gees, the Christian ones, were given Lebanese identity in order to make a balance between the Christian communities in Lebanon and the Muslims. So, it was also a manipulation. Third, what people call as Lebanese Civil War, I think, was the continuance of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the USA inside Lebanon. The Soviet used Palestinians against Christians, who were supported by the US, Israel and France. Lebanese Civil war was a real war in Lebanon between the Warsaw Pact and the NATO. Fourth, after Taif Agreement, there are also Syrians in big numbers, who came to Lebanon for work. Some of them were also given Lebanese identity in the mid-1990s, but this time they were mostly Shia and Sunni. It was also a kind of demographic manipulation. Then, Lebanon hosts Iraqi and some Egyptian refugees in 2000s.

Additionally, we see the coming of Syrian refugees. I will be honest to say that if you look at these refugees, there are people also from Dara, Deir ez-Zor. Dara is so close to Amman. Deir ez-Zor is so close to Iraq and they have to pass six hours by car to arrive Lebanon. Why? It means there is some purpose. Somebody tells these people to come to Lebanon. These mean what? It means that Lebanon

started to be a refugee state without identity.

What does this mean for the future of Lebanon and the region?

Many implications in economy, society and in security matters. I can't see any resolution for the refugees before, let's say, we finalize three steps. The first one is a reconciliation within the regional status quo, or at least a political resolution inside Syria with a new government. The second one is reconstruction in Syria, because if there is nothing in Syria why should they return? Third one is the creation of job opportunities for these people.

This means that they are going to stay in Turkey and Lebanon at least for the short term because, I think, this refugee issue is a preparation for the future for some purpose. For me, the crisis does not stop at this moment. What we are experiencing now is just a de-escalation, but it is not the end. Less than a year, we may see another phase of crisis related to socio-economic situation. Throughout the region, especially in Iraq and Syria, there are so many armed gangs which just emerged in this turmoil. There are so many militias in Syria, not only under the control of regime, on

both sides. It is as organized crime. Let's assume that Assad will win and hold the power, he will definitely ask those militias to recognize the authority of the government but they won't. because they are earning money as they are like the lords of their small areas. As we had seen in Lebanon so many years ago, the lord of weapons becomes the lord of investment and finally the lord of politics. So, the situation will not stop. We have just shifted from simple militias with heavy weapons to organized gangs with organized crime in both sides.

We had an example of this transformation in Lebanon. We saw it in Iraq, we see it in Yemen: militia, investor and finally politician. Maybe, Bashar Al Assad will live, but he needs to learn to play the game with these lords.

Dr. Risk, I would like to thank you again for accepting this interview and sharing your comments with us.

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