

## Lebanon: a predictable outbreak of violence

Violence has once again struck Lebanon. After months of tension, incidents, assassinations and a war with Israel, armed confrontations began on 7 May, causing 65 deaths, and they have once again drawn attention to this territory of four million inhabitants, recalling the worst times of the conflict lasting from 1975 to 1990. From the start, the outbreak was predictable, and this was so for many reasons.

In recent times, the indicators have been multiplying, the most significant of them being the generalised rearming of the population and the political agents. One only needs to look at the increase in the price of a Kalashnikov, which, according to the experts, moved from 100 to 1,000 dollars in only a year. The tone of political messages had become more heated, and inflammatory language from the leading players had become commonplace, raising the sectarian profile of the confrontation. Instability was growing and had taken various forms: at the beginning of January, seven people had died on a demonstration and the assassination of political and military personalities had continued, following that of the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The last of these came when General Al-Hajj was killed last December. The tension in the streets of Beirut, where the conflicts in Lebanon had always begun and from where they had extended to the rest of the country, had been palpable for some time: militarisation had increased, the opposition led by Hezbollah controlled the centre of the capital after "occupying" it in December 2006, and the profusion of symbols and posters transmitting aggression had become generalised. Alongside this, the institutions had become completely paralysed: there had been no president since November, some of the ministers had resigned, and Parliament had postponed the election of a president eighteen times faced with the impossibility of reaching an agreement. In addition, Israel's armed aggression in 2006 had had two consequences, apart from the catastrophic figures of deaths and destruction: causing a serious economic crisis and offering Hezbollah legitimacy and power. So, the current confrontation corresponds, above all, to this situation of the strengthening of Hezbollah, which has, since then, presented a show of strength to the governing majority. This meant that the events precipitated when the latter declared the organisation's telecommunications system illegal – a measure that had to be withdrawn a week later – were no coincidence. The conflict in Lebanon is the product of a double dimension – one internal and one external. The internal one corresponds to a political confrontation with Lebanese agents taking the leading roles in a country full of fragility: with a delicate religious equilibrium and a political system of weights and counterweights between the communities, and many consequences of a fifteen-year war still unresolved.

In this context, the political elites have remained and, thirty years on, many of them continue to play leading roles in the conflict. The external dimension of the conflict in Lebanon has, initially, to do with its neighbours: Israel, which occupied part of the country until 2000 and which undertook a bloody war there less than two years ago, and Syria, which had political and military presence there for almost three decades. And, in a third circle, there are regional agents such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have armed or given support to certain Lebanese allies, and the USA, which has

applied, as it has seen fit, a counterproductive policy of isolation or incentives in the region, which has only generated even more division. At the moment, the uncertainties are as numerous as the dangers. The negotiations in Doha, with the mediation of Qatar, seem to be only an *in extremis* solution to stop the violence now that both parties have been damaged in different ways by the confrontation: Hezbollah has lost credibility for breaking its promise not to use weapons in an intra-Muslim war or *fitna*, and the government has not been able to prevent Hezbollah's show of force. A solution to the conflict will require far-reaching internal changes and also decisive moves towards inclusion and regional dialogue, which few seem prepared to make.

Núria Tomàs

School for a Culture of Peace

The Catalan version of this article has been published in *El Punt*, 24/05/08