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The impact of the Ukrainian war on Lebanon: a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel

Introduction

Once described as the Switzerland of the Middle East, Lebanon has been struggling because of major political, economic and social problems since 2019 due to wide-spread corruption and sectarianism in the country. For example, over the last 4 years, the Lebanese pound has lost around 98% of its value leading to unprecedented poverty and inflation in the country.¹ In addition to all of those difficulties, the Russo-Ukrainian War (2022) rubbed salt into the wound by further aggravating the economic situation in the country. Despite all the catastrophic consequences of the invasion, Lebanon has also benefited from the war since it has finally been able to delimit its maritime borders with Israel. This paper will explain the political position of the Lebanese government during the war, the economic difficulties the invasion caused to the social and economic situation in Lebanon, and also the opportunities enabling the country to solve some of its most complicated diplomatic issues.

¹ B. Mroue, *Protests in Lebanon as Pound Hits New Low against Dollar*, AP News, 21 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-pound-dollar-economy-crisis-ecce2e-773fa8c7f94090ebd67bf7d55a> [accessed: 25 March 2023].

Lebanon's political stance regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war

Lebanon is a sectarian country and adopts a consociational democracy.² In other words, all major sects participate in the decision-making process in the government regardless of the election results. Therefore, Lebanon does not have a clear foreign policy vector. Hezbollah and its allies have a strong relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran and with Syrian Arab Republic and a tense relationship with the Arab Gulf and Western countries since Hezbollah accuses them of supporting Israel. On the other hand, other political parties in the government constantly criticize Iran and accuse it of being a destabilizing factor in the country, and those political parties advocate for a solid relationship with the West instead.

When the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out on 24 February 2022, the international community was surprised that Lebanon was the first Arab country to condemn the invasion and to appeal to Russia to immediately withdraw its troops from Ukraine. In addition, Lebanon has officially backed all UN resolutions denouncing the Russian attack on Ukraine.³ The Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdallah Bou Habib clarified the position of his ministry by stating that Lebanon was against any invasion targeting other countries, especially that Lebanon itself was invaded and occupied by both Syria and Israel in the last couple of decades.⁴ However, Lebanon did not take any further steps (like imposing sanctions) against Russia due to the opposition of Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement. Even Bou Habib mentioned that the position of Lebanon was only a gesture which was not aimed at aggravating the situation with the Russian Federation adding that: 'We are keen on common interests and bilateral relations with Moscow.'⁵

Despite the initial diplomatic rift between the two countries, both Lebanon and the Russian Federation maintain a good relationship with each other. For example, on 30 March 2023, the Lebanese ambassador to Moscow Shawki Bou Nassar indicated that Russia was willing to send 25 thousand tonnes of wheat and 10 thousand tonnes of fuel to Lebanon free of charge. Bou Nassar added that Russia was inclined to support Lebanon in overcoming its deep economic crisis.⁶

² J. Maloney, *An Appraisal of Consociationalism in Lebanon*, McGill Journal of Political Studies, 06 December 2020, <https://mjps.ssmu.ca/2020/12/06/an-appraisal-of-consociationalism-in-lebanon/> [accessed: 20 February 2023].

³ *Russia Says It Is Surprised by Lebanon's Condemnation of Invasion*, Reuters, 25 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-is-surprised-by-lebanons-condemnation-invasion-2022-02-25/> [accessed: 03 January 2023].

⁴ *Lebanon's Position on Ukraine Should Not Affect Ties with Moscow – Envoy*, "Reuters", 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-position-ukraine-should-not-affect-ties-with-moscow-envoy-2022-02-27/> [accessed: 03 January 2023].

⁵ *Bou Habib Says Aoun, Miaqti Supported Statement Condemning Russia*, Naharnet, 01 March 2022, <https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/288214> [accessed: 04 January 2023].

⁶ *Russian Wheat and Fuel to Beirut*, IMLebanon, 30 March 2023, <https://www.imlebanon.org/2023/03/30/wheat-russia-lebanon44433/> [accessed: 30 March 2023].

As for the Lebanese public, the Russian invasion of Ukraine divided the society between those who defended Russia (usually Hezbollah supporters and their allies) accusing 'the imperialists' (the US) of meddling in the affairs of other sovereign countries and triggering wars against them (as it happened in Iraq and Afghanistan), while others (Hezbollah opponents) blamed Russia of invading Ukraine in order to overthrow its democratically elected government.

For example, after two weeks of the Lebanese condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, strongly criticized the Lebanese government for taking a pro-Ukrainian stance and even accused the government of obeying the commands of the US Embassy in Beirut without any reservation. For example, Nasrallah claimed that the Foreign Ministry's statement 'not only took the US stance but was written at the American Embassy'⁷ (March, 2022). Furthermore, Nasrallah further criticized the biased position of the international community by saying: 'What about all the war that the US has waged in Afghanistan and Iraq? What about the Israeli crimes in Palestine?'⁸

The economic impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Lebanon

Lebanon has been very badly impacted by the Russo-Ukrainian war for several reasons:

- 1) Lebanon is suffering from major economic problems partially caused by the presence of a huge number of Syrian refugees on its territory. Since 2011, more than 2 million Syrian refugees have fled the war and settled in Lebanon, causing massive social and economic unrest in the country. Despite the support of the UN agencies, Lebanon has been unable to cope with the pressure of Syrian refugees on the Lebanese economy, especially that Lebanon has the most refugees in the world per 1000 inhabitants.⁹ The Russo-Ukrainian war and the focus of Western countries on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine could further deteriorate the economic situation of Syrian refugees and of the host country (Lebanon), especially if the budget allocated to Syrian refugees decreases in the future.
- 2) Starting from October 2019, Lebanon's economy has collapsed totally. In 2021, the World Bank referred to the Lebanese economic collapse as one of the worst

⁷ *Hezbollah Chief Blasts Lebanon's Response to Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, L'Orient-Le Jour, 08 March 2023, <https://today.orientlejour.com/article/1293013/hezbollah-chief-blasts-lebanons-response-to-russia-ukraine-conflict.html> [accessed: 21 March 2023].

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ N. McCarthy, *Lebanon Has by Far the Most Refugees per 1,000 Population*, Statista, 19 June 2019, <https://www.statista.com/chart/8800/lebanon-has-by-far-the-most-refugees-per-capita/> [accessed: 20 February 2023].

financial crises since the mid-19th century.¹⁰ The national currency (the Lebanese pound) has lost more than 95% of its value thus significantly decreasing the purchasing power of the locals. The Russo-Ukrainian War and inflation of wheat and fuel products prices further deteriorated the situation in Lebanon. Since the end of the civil war in 1990, the Lebanese government has adopted an economic system relying exclusively on the banking and services sectors. The agriculture and industry sectors were totally abandoned. Therefore, Lebanon relied heavily on imports (particularly wheat and energy products) to meet the needs of its citizens. In order to make these commodities affordable to the Lebanese citizens, the Lebanese Central Bank subsidized wheat and fuel. However, the rising costs of food and energy due to the Russo-Ukrainian War increased the pressure on the already exhausted Lebanese economy. The factor which aggravated the situation was the fact that Lebanon imported 85% of its wheat from Ukraine and the remaining 15% from Russia.

In an interview with the American Task Force on Lebanon, the Lebanese Minister of Economy, Amin Salam, confessed that Lebanon was passing through a catastrophic economic situation which could further affect the lives of vulnerable citizens. Salam openly asked for financial help from the international community to prevent hunger in the country. 'We want prices to go down or remain stable. If they go up, it'll be a disaster.'¹¹

Furthermore, the government has completely removed all subsidies for fuel products. Thus, the prices of petrol and diesel oil increased by 6,600% (as of March 2023), depriving a lot of households of heating and nearly causing the collapse of the transportation sector. (Lebanon's transportation sector relies heavily on individual cars/taxis, especially that the government has not development a public transportation system.)

3) Following the Russo-Ukrainian War, the attention of the international community was diverted from the Middle East towards Eastern Europe. Therefore, Lebanon, which was drowning in its political, economic and social problems, felt isolated. For example, following the 2019 economic crisis and the 2020 Beirut explosion, all of the big countries rushed to Lebanon to offer their support and to mediate between the different political parties in order to reach a political consensus. Additionally, following the 2020 Beirut explosion, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon twice in one month to offer support and encourage reforms

¹⁰ *Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction*, World Bank, 01 June 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes> [accessed: 03 January 2023].

¹¹ J. AbiNader, *Lebanon in the Middle of the Russia and Ukraine Conflict*, American Task Force on Lebanon, 04 March 2022, <https://www.atfl.org/lebanon-in-the-middle-of-the-russia-and-ukraine-conflict/> [accessed: 04 January 2023].

in order to receive financial aid from the international community, mainly the International Monetary Fund.¹² Macron continued to support Lebanon in 2021, when he personally mediated in forming the current Lebanese government. However, the Russo-Ukrainian war has shifted the priorities of the West. For example, in 2022 and 2023, Lebanon's economic and political situation extremely worsened but the attitude of the international community has been passive.

Turning the Russo-Ukrainian crisis into an opportunity

Despite all the negative consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Lebanon, this same crisis offered Lebanon an unprecedented opportunity to solve some of its diplomatic problems, thus becoming an oil producing/exporting country.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his military operation in Ukraine, most western countries, and particularly the European Union, decided to impose sanctions on Russia. Therefore, most of the EU countries, especially Germany, took a very risky decision to decrease their purchase of Russian oil and gas and look for other providers. For example, many Eastern European countries resorted to Azerbaijani gas via the TANAP pipeline,¹³ whereas some Western European countries resorted to Algeria, Qatar or even the United States of America to buy their much-needed hydrocarbons. In their search for new providers, European countries also referred to the East Mediterranean countries, in particular Israel and Lebanon, to diversify their energy resources. However, the problem in the East Mediterranean was complex due to the lack of stability in the region and the increasing tensions between the two countries.

Lebanon and Israel were involved in a dispute regarding their maritime borders for about 12 years (when Israel discovered huge gas reserves in its northern Karish field bordering Lebanon).¹⁴ Despite the mediation of different US administrations, the sides were unable to find a solution to delimit their maritime borders. Therefore, none of the two countries was able to extract the vast amounts of gas deposited under the sea. However, the Russo-Ukrainian war changed the whole scenario. While the European Union was searching for new gas sources, the Biden administration intervened in the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border crisis immediately and offered its support to

¹² T. Qiblawi, *With Macron's Visit to Beirut, Lebanon's Future Is Looking a Lot like the Past*, CNN, 01 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/01/middleeast/lebanon-macron-beirut-visit-intl/index.html> [accessed: 03 January 2023].

¹³ M. Muradov, *Europe Turns to Azerbaijan for Gas: How Big Could This Be?*, Royal United Services Institute, 05 October 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/europe-turns-azerbaijan-gas-how-big-could-be> [accessed: 20 February 2023].

¹⁴ N. Ebrahim, *5 Ways the Israel-Lebanon Maritime Deal Matters*, CNN, 12 October 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/12/middleeast/lebanon-israel-maritime-deal-matters-mime-intl/index.html> [accessed: 03 January 2023].

find a final solution allowing both Israel and Lebanon to export their gas resources to EU countries. Initially, the American diplomacy was unable to find a breakthrough, especially that both parties were unwilling to make any compromises. Some were even worried about an escalation between the two sides, mainly when Hezbollah sent three drones towards one of Israeli gas rigs in the disputed areas.¹⁵ The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, clearly stated that his move was an open message to Israel that Lebanon could and was ready to strike Israeli oil rigs if Israel extracted gas from the disputed oil fields without taking the legal rights of Lebanon into consideration. In its statement following the drone incident, Hezbollah published a press release stating: ‘The mission was accomplished, and the message was received.’¹⁶

However, the American diplomacy of President Biden was ready to intervene and mediate between both sides through the former United States Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources, Amos Hochstein. After several visits to the region, Hochstein exerted pressure on both countries to find a final compromise. Eventually, his efforts turned out to be fruitful. After months of tense negotiations, both Lebanon and Israel gave their initial consent to signing a maritime border deal. Despite strong opposition from the opposition parties in both countries (Netanyahu and the right-wing political parties in Israel and the Lebanese Revolution deputies), the American side was able to press the two governments to sign a final maritime border delimitation agreement on 27 October 2022.¹⁷ The agreement stated that the Karish field would totally remain under Israel’s control, whereas the Qana field (which is expected to contain a huge gas reserve) remained under Lebanese control. After this settlement, Israel started to immediately extract gas from the Karish field and to send it to the European market, while Lebanon formally asked the well-known French company Total to begin geological work and extract gas from the Qana field.

Several Lebanese and Israeli politicians think that the maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon would not have been possible if there had been no war between Russia and Ukraine, which triggered a worldwide gas crisis. Such an argument was voiced by a former Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gebran Bassil, who clearly stated: ‘The Ukrainian War sped up the border deal with Israel.’¹⁸

¹⁵ M. Murphy, *Israel Shoots down Hezbollah Drones Heading for Gas Rig*, BBC News, 02 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62022452> [accessed: 20 February 2023].

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ H. Haşıl, *Lebanon-Israel Maritime Border Agreement: From the Line of Tension to the Regional Stability*, ORSAM, October 2022 (Policy Brief no. 226), https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/lebanon-israel-maritime-border-agreement-from-the-line-of-tension-to-the-regional-stability.pdf [accessed: 03 January 2023].

¹⁸ M. Gebeily, *Lebanon MP Sanctioned by US Says He Played behind-the-Scenes Role in Border Talk*, Reuters, 13 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-mp-sanctioned-by-us-says-he-played-behind-the-scenes-role-border-talks-2022-10-13> [accessed: 10 February 2023].

Furthermore, Bassil, who is personally sanctioned by the US government, claimed that he directly participated in the negotiation process and was in constant contact with the officials of the US government. This news caused a huge controversy in both Lebanon and the region since people were really wondering how a big state like the US could cooperate with a politician whom it personally sanctioned a couple of years ago.

The deal was a major victory for Lebanon, since the US-led mediation (and partially pressure on Israel) solved the maritime border issue in just a couple of months, whereas the conflicting parties had been unable to find a unilateral solution for more than 10 years. Moreover, this breakthrough will allow Lebanon to extract its natural resources without any delays thus saving its crumbling economy from its catastrophic situation. For this reason, the Lebanese government did not waste any time. It directly hired the French oil company Total to do the necessary geological studies and to extract gas (if any) from the wells as soon as possible. For its part, Total Energies CEO Patrick Pouyanné announced that drilling in Lebanon's offshore Block 9 (the block on the Israeli border) would start as soon as in the 3rd quarter of 2023.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian War caused a big geopolitical and economic catastrophe in the whole world, opening ways to new political alliances but also to very difficult financial situation all around the world (including developed countries). Its negative effects will be felt in the world for many years to come. However, the case of Lebanon is an exception. Despite all the catastrophic economic effects of the war on its already fragile economy, Lebanon was able to achieve a great victory which could ensure its prosperity for decades to come. The Arabic proverb 'the misfortunes of some people are benefits for others' perfectly applies to the Lebanese case. With the hope that peace and prosperity will reign over the world soon.

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¹⁹ *TotalEnergies Says Well Drilling in Lebanon's Offshore Block 9 to Begin in Q3*, Reuters, 29 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/totalenergies-says-well-drilling-lebanons-offshore-block-9-begin-q3-2023-01-29/> [accessed: 30 March 2023].

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*The impact of the Ukrainian war on Lebanon:
a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel*
Abstract

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine (2022) had a catastrophic impact on Lebanon which was already suffering from grave economic problems. Since day one, Lebanon has supported Ukraine and asked for the withdrawal of the Russian forces. The war has left negative impacts on Lebanon, raising particular concerns about famine due to a sharp rise in the food and oil prices. However, this war has also presented Lebanon with a pleasant surprise. For the first time in two decades, Lebanon and Israel have agreed to secure a maritime border deal through US-led mediation, which will allow both countries to extract gas from their marine deposits. The deadlocked negotiations were suddenly resumed because of this war and the acute energy crisis in Europe. Lebanese and Israeli

gas is expected to replace Russian gas on the European market. This paper will explain the Lebanese foreign policy and its stance regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war as well as to the political and economic impacts of the war on Lebanon.

Keywords: Lebanon, Ukraine-Russia war, Israel, Gas, inflation, maritime deal