
Lebanon on the brink of collapse: political vacuum, economic chaos and the nightmare of war

The death of 12 children on a football field in the Golan Heights - an area inhabited by Israel's Druze minority group -, killed in a rocket attack blamed on Hezbollah, and the subsequent military response by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in seven areas of southern Lebanon, has turned what was a mere hypothesis until a few days ago into a frightening possibility. Washington, London and Berlin have urged their own citizens to leave the country, while the spokesman for UNIFIL, the UN interim force in Lebanon, Andrea Tenenti (Italy), described the scenario as "worrying", while he didn't rule out diplomatic steps. What is certain is that the massacre of Majdal Shams, the Druze village in the Syrian Golan Heights, an area occupied by Israel in 1981, has considerably complicated the negotiations, at the very time that Mossad chief David Barnea, CIA director William Burns, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed Al-Thani and Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamal were holding a meeting in Rome to discuss negotiations concerning Gaza. **Latent conflict.** "The situation in the area is unpredictable, varying from day to day. It's impossible to envisage how it could unfold", says Sister **Myrna Farah**, a Lebanese nun of the Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne Antida Thouret. "On 30 July, Israel launched an airstrike against Hezbollah's stronghold in Beirut, in the Dàaheh district, and it is not yet confirmed whether Fouad Shukr, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah's right-hand man, is dead or not. Meanwhile, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was killed by a missile in Tehran last night in a "precision strike". Events of this kind could quickly deteriorate and ignite the regional war feared by so many." **A battered country.** Five years after the outbreak of an unprecedented financial crisis and a popular uprising against a political establishment perceived as incompetent and corrupt, the Land of the Cedars now faces a situation of utter chaos, with no government and the spectre of a renewed armed conflict with Israel. The faint hopes that accompanied the May 2022 elections were quickly dashed. Hezbollah lost its parliamentary majority but still managed to elect the speaker, the unyielding Nabih Berri. However, no agreement was reached on the president of the Republic (which by law must be a Maronite), so the Sunni Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who was in office only to handle current affairs, took over on an interim basis. "Lebanon is facing a very critical situation," continues Sister Myrna. "Parliament has not convened for almost two years, despite very serious economic difficulties, and no law has been passed except to increase taxes." **Poverty, inflation...** The institutional and political chaos weighs heavily on the population. "Eighty percent of the population live below the poverty line in a very vulnerable situation, characterised by food insecurity, poor access to drinking water and medical care. The depreciation of the Lebanese lira stood at LL 89,500 against the USD at the end of 2023, after peaking at LL 140,000 against the USD the previous May, while inflation peaked at a record 225 per cent in 2023. **Resilience, pain.** "The people of Lebanon have a tremendous capacity for resilience," says Sister Myrna, "but when the pain is overwhelming, they stop speaking, and silence becomes the only form of communication. The population is under such an enormous burden to meet basic needs, to find food, drinking water, medicines, fuel, that they have neither the strength nor the time to think about anything other than survival. And in any case, to whom should they complain, to which institution?" **Hezbollah and Iran.** As if all this were not bad enough, the country is now facing the prospect of a renewed war with Israel. Since 7 October, in a show of solidarity with Hamas, Hezbollah has repeatedly fired rockets at its neighbour, receiving in return more than 1,200 attacks on its southern border. These attacks have caused hundreds of casualties and devastated at least five kilometres of land in the most fertile part of Lebanon. There are reports of phosphorus bombs, of entire buildings being shelled to target this or that political leader, in practice a de facto - albeit not openly declared - war that has brought to their knees the inhabitants of the southern part of the country. At least 95,000 people have been displaced as a result of the last few months of fighting. "In Lebanon," the nun explains, "there are two lines of action: that of Hezbollah, which is ready to go to war with Israel to liberate the occupied territories,

and that of the Liberal parties, that would rather not get embroiled in this Middle East that threatens to explode like a volcano. The strategy of both now seems to be to weigh their options and play for time. Both are gauging the risks and consequences of what would surely be an all-out regional war." (*)
Popoli e Missione

Massimo Angeli (*)