

Has Lebanon's next needless civil war already been joined?

By The Daily Star

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Editorial

Lebanese both here and abroad are closely following events in their homeland, trying to determine if there are sure signs that a civil war is in the offing. By some standards, though, if one lists the typical effects of civil war and compares it to the current situation in Lebanon, it can be argued that the conflict is already well under way. There are differences, of course, but these are matters of scale and sequence.

The best-known consequences of civil war are death and dismemberment, and both have been in evidence for three years. We are also becoming increasingly familiar (again) with the physical destruction of property, the financial ruin of companies and individuals alike, and the brain drain caused by a paucity of economic opportunities. Foreign investment has almost completely collapsed if one considers that those funds which are coming in are related to reconstruction and/or purchases of real estate that only make Lebanon even more inhospitable to its own inhabitants. There is also a form of ethnic cleansing taking place: People have not yet been forcibly removed from their homes, but tensions are creating divisions in many neighborhoods, and some communities are experiencing particular heavy emigration because of the power struggle.

Another common hallmark of civil war is that some time before it ends and for years afterward, people ask, "Why did we do this?" Those Lebanese who have not been hypnotized by the sloganeering of either the government or the opposition have already undertaken this line of questioning, and neither of the combatants has so much as tried to provide an answer. Both the March 14 Forces and the March 8 Forces have shown little in the way of ideological strength, preferring instead to keep their respective governing philosophies vague at best and vapid at worst. Nor have they even bothered to be consistent about their tactical bottom lines in the current power struggle. The latest u-turn (on whether the so-called "10+10+10" formula for a national government was acceptable) apparently came from the opposition, but neither side has had a monopoly on hypocrisy, and the government has also moved the goalposts on occasion.

Not to be outdone, the outside actors - on all sides - are actively encouraging their Lebanese proxies to say and do foolish things. Damascus, for example, makes laughable claims to neutrality, but at least some of March 8's lines are obviously being written there; meanwhile Washington, capital of a country in which people can be prosecuted for organizing dogfights, is engaged in setting humans on one another here.

The key question, therefore, is not whether Lebanon will have another civil war. It is whether the current level of madness - however one defines it, war or not - will be sustained and expanded by the usual combination of domestic ditherers and foreign fomenters.