

Power Dynamics of Cross-Border Conflict in Lebanon and Syria

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Abstract

This paper identifies the main conflict actors in cross-border conflict across Lebanon and Syria as being Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, and highlights the power hierarchies between those actors as well as between them and ordinary people in those border regions. The paper shows that in those two countries, both state and non-state actors (de facto authorities) are the main conflict actors who are invested in the conflict status quo that they profiteer from—the state is therefore also part of the problem. The paper additionally argues that there is a need to understand hierarchies of power among conflict actors and how they position local communities at the bottom of the conflict economy pyramid. The paper shows that local communities end up entangled in the conflict economy for the sake of economic coping and survival. Often, both conflict actors and local communities act pragmatically rather than ideologically for the sake of economic survival or gain, but conflict actors trap local communities in the coping economy by removing alternatives, cultivating relationships of dependency by coping communities on major conflict actors. The paper uses these conclusions to present recommendations for conflict response policies. The paper is published as part of the Cross-Border Conflict, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme funded by UK International Development.

Keywords: Lebanon; Syria; stabilization; cross-border conflict; power

Introduction

Cross-border conflict in the Lebanese-Syrian border regions has profoundly shaped the socio-economic and political landscape of these areas. Major conflict actors, including armed groups and state-affiliated entities, have leveraged the instability to consolidate power and accumulate wealth, often at the expense of local communities. These dynamics have drawn local populations into the conflict economy as a means of survival, transforming them into coping communities (Goodhand, 2004). Traditional stabilization policies, focused on curbing direct violence and strengthening state capacity, frequently fail to address the complex power relationships among conflict actors and between these actors and local communities. This paper argues for a nuanced approach to stabilization that takes these power hierarchies into account.

The Lebanese-Syrian border regions have long been characterized by marginalization and developmental neglect. The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 and the subsequent conflict in Syria from 2011 exacerbated these issues, creating an environment ripe for the empowerment of major conflict actors. Groups such as Hezbollah and various factions within the Syrian armed forces have exploited the chaos to establish and expand illicit networks

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involving smuggling, drug trafficking, and other forms of organized crime. These activities have significantly enriched these actors, enabling them to finance their operations and increase their influence both locally and internationally.

Hezbollah, for instance, has utilized its control over border regions to facilitate the smuggling of goods, arms, and narcotics. This has not only provided substantial financial resources but also reinforced its political and military dominance. Similarly, elements within the Syrian regime, including the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, have engaged in and profited from cross-border smuggling operations, further entrenching their power.

While major conflict actors have benefited from the conflict economy, local communities in the Lebanese-Syrian border regions have suffered. These communities have been drawn into illicit activities as a means of survival, transforming into coping communities. The lack of legitimate economic opportunities, compounded by the pervasive instability, has left residents with few alternatives but to participate in the conflict economy. Smuggling, drug production, and other illegal enterprises have become primary sources of income for many families.

The socio-economic impact on these communities is profound. Participation in illicit activities exposes residents to legal risks, violence, and exploitation. Moreover, the involvement of local populations in the conflict economy perpetuates the cycle of instability, making sustainable development and peace more elusive. The reliance on illegal trade undermines the prospects for legitimate economic growth and reinforces the power of conflict actors who thrive on disorder.

Traditional stabilization policies often adopt a simplistic approach to dealing with conflict zones, focusing primarily on stopping direct violence and strengthening state capacity. These policies typically emphasize enhancing the operational capabilities of state security forces, implementing ceasefires, and promoting political settlements among elite actors. While these measures are necessary, they are insufficient for addressing the deeper, structural issues that sustain conflict economies and power imbalances.

A significant limitation of these policies is their failure to recognize and address the intricate power dynamics among conflict actors and between these actors and local communities. Strengthening state capacity without considering the role of state actors as conflict participants can inadvertently reinforce the status quo. For instance, in Lebanon and Syria, elements within the state apparatus are deeply embedded in the conflict economy, benefiting from and perpetuating illicit activities. Therefore, simply bolstering state institutions can entrench the power of these actors rather than mitigating conflict. This paper argues for a nuanced approach to stabilization that takes these power hierarchies into account.

Structural inequalities and conflict in Lebanon and Syria's border zones

Lebanon and Syria suffer from longstanding structural inequalities and systemic corruption linked with the political status quo in each country: Lebanon being ruled through an elite pact and Syria through an authoritarian regime. The political status quo in each country has created a divide between ordinary citizens struggling to make a living and a state system that serves the interests of the elite rather than the people. This is especially seen in Lebanon and Syria's border areas which have always suffered from developmental neglect (Brandell, 2006).

The Lebanese Civil War and later the conflict in Syria which began in 2011 have not been confined to boundaries of the two countries, with the Syrian Arab Armed Forces intervening



in Lebanon during and after (and even before) the Lebanese Civil War and the Lebanese armed group Hezbollah intervening in the Syrian conflict in aid of the Syrian army. The war in Syria can therefore be characterized as a cross-border conflict where the Syrian army, Hezbollah, as well as various authorities within the Lebanese and Syrian states are major conflict actors.

This cross-border conflict in Lebanon and Syria has its roots in the corrupt political systems and social inequalities in the two countries (Dahi et al., 2020). Before the Lebanese Civil War, Lebanon's political system was based on an elite pact that allowed the ruling elite to capture power and resources. The northern, eastern, and southern border regions of Lebanon were neglected economically. Power and resources were mainly concentrated in the urban centres and parts of the Lebanese mountains. Lack of state development as well as community links across borders meant that engagement in smuggling became one of few options people in those areas had to make a living (Leenders, 2007).

The 1975 civil war in Lebanon increased illicit activity as many residents of border regions became involved in the manufacture, smuggling, and trade of drugs, in addition to activities like money laundering, kidnapping for ransom, arms dealing, and extortion, which were not limited to border regions. Since the 1980s, warlords in Lebanon as well as security actors and businesspeople affiliated with the Islamic Republic's regime in Iran and the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar al-Assad have been part of a transnational drug network that exported Lebanese-grown hashish and other drugs internationally (Marshall, 2012).

The new elite pact that ended Lebanon's civil war, the Taef Agreement of 1989, and subsequent formal and informal political settlements among the country's competing political parties, did not result in the development of peripheral areas or in reform of the country's political system, which remained based on power sharing between powerful sect-based elites. Lebanon's warlords became the country's rulers and used their profit to sustain their political power. This profiteering was enabled by the political system, which lacks accountability measures and features systemic corruption. As such, the impact of the conflict economy is not limited to neglected border regions but extends all over Lebanon and is ongoing (Makdisi, 2004).

In Syria, the rise of the Baath regime under the Assads created a political and economic system in which the distribution of wealth was done on the basis of loyalty to the regime. Bashar al-Assad's economic liberalization policies increased economic growth but also inequality and the economic benefits flowing to regime elites. The war that began in 2011 entrenched the country's regime-affiliated elite in the conflict economy and also saw the rise of new actors in today's conflict economy networks, from security and military agents pursuing personal profit to business profiteers (Khatib and Sinjab, 2018).

The role of the state in cross-border conflict

War economies often involve multiple and overlapping centres of authority that contest the state's ability to control cross-border flows (Duffield, 2000). This is why one of the overarching objectives of many stabilization programmes has been strengthening the state and its ability to impose the rule of law, notably in conflict-affected areas, in order to increase

state capacity to regulate cross-border trade and improve security. This was reflected, for example, in the UK government's Building Stability Framework (DFID, 2016).

The DFID framework, which continues to underpin the UK's approach to stabilization, recognizes the need for long-term political and institutional reform and economic development if stability is going to be sustainable. The framework acknowledges that such measures can take a generation to yield positive results, and that external actors can be limited in what they can achieve and may end up reinforcing the status quo.

Jonathan Goodhand argues that stabilization in the context of cross-border conflict requires greater investment in borderland regions to support livelihoods and increase political inclusion. Goodhand (2004) also argues that isolated country-level strategies and border securitization will fail, and that instead there needs to be regional cooperation in areas such as security, infrastructure, trade, and development. The kinds of investment and cooperation referred to by DFID and Goodhand need the state to be a main actor in their implementation.

As a stepping stone towards achieving buy-in by the state, stabilization programming and policies have in several cases—like Lebanon—been built on trying to achieve political settlements among the elite as a short-term measure. But the risk in this approach is that political settlements can become long-lasting features of the state, which ends up sustaining the status quo in terms of both inequality and conflict. Much literature on cross-border conflict addresses the role of elite capture in sustaining conflict (Malik and Gallien, 2020). This is a problem plaguing Lebanon and Syria. Dahi et al. argue that in settings usually characterized as “post conflict”, such as Lebanon,

policies with economic, political, and social implications can continue the logic of the conflict even in the absence of armed conflict. In other words, policies that entrench and further injustice and oppression are a continuation of the armed conflict by other means (2020, 6).

As for Syria, Dahi et al. (2020) argue that since 2000, multinational institutions have promoted economic liberalization in Syria, which has contributed to corruption and elite capture without promoting political liberalization, civil liberties, or judicial accountability. This has allowed the elite to dominate the war economy and sustain the drug trade in Syria. Dahi et al. (2020) conclude that economic stabilization policies must promote inclusive development and provide alternative livelihood opportunities to the population.

The cross-border conflict economy in Lebanon and Syria is fed through transactions that have intensified with the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria over the years, such as smuggling, where the state is an active perpetrator (Adal, 2021). Actors involved in smuggling across Lebanon and Syria include armed groups like Hezbollah, state armed forces, customs officials, and border guards, as well as local smuggling networks and members of border communities. Involvement extends beyond borderlands and armed actors to civil servants and businesspeople involved in importation, transport, and export, of smuggled goods including outside Syria and Lebanon.

Stabilization paradigms like the DFID framework are challenged by situations in which the state itself is a conflict actor with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. In Lebanon and Syria, in addition to conflict undermining state capacity to control cross-border flows, warfare has served to intensify pre-existing patterns of structural inequalities and elite capture



that are part of the state system. This has resulted in vicious circle fuelling cross-border conflict.

This paper presents an alternative model of understanding the problem, in which the state is investigated as a main conflict actor interacting with other conflict actors, thereby complicating Goodhand's argument and DFID's framework. While the paper agrees with the conclusion by Dahi et al. regarding elite capture, it aims to show that the notion of the elite needs further nuance because there are power hierarchies among conflict actors, and these hierarchies have an impact on community coping.

Power hierarchies

In both countries, state actors themselves are often invested in either preventing state institutions from controlling cross-border flows or in using nominal state control to install themselves as custodians to profiteer from rather than strengthen state presence. The existence of border checks for example does not necessarily mean that the state has oversight of and control over border transactions as border officials may themselves be involved in illicit transactions like smuggling or bribery.

In such cases, state actors trap people in the coping economy, where, to survive day to day, people have few options but to engage in activities that perpetuate conflict. Similar to Max Gallien's (2020) findings about border regions in North Africa, formal state actors in Lebanon and Syria, such as security officers, bureaucrats, and political elites, often benefit from illicit cross-border trade through imposing an informal regulation of this trade in the form of rents imposed on non-state actors. This helps the former to maintain political control by buying a degree of order. Such illicit cross-border trade happens both through legal crossings between the two countries and the estimated 150 illegal crossings in existence (Topalian, 2023b).

Although the actors involved in cross-border conflict in Lebanon and Syria share a vested interest in maintaining the disorder that facilitates their activities, they are not all equal. Hezbollah and high-level Syrian regime figures, including from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, are at top of the pyramid, possessing the most power and resources and generating the greatest profits. Their power is facilitated by the legitimacy they gain from being sanctioned by the state, the first as an auxiliary military force and political party and the second as part of Syrian state institutions. They are followed by major profiteers like prominent warlords and drug dealers, and then by smaller actors like local smugglers. At the bottom of the pyramid are those only involved in the supply chain to cope economically (Mehchy, Haid, and Khatib, 2021).

In the border area between Wadi Khaled in Lebanon and Talkalakh in rural Homs in Syria, local smuggling networks have existed for generations, connected through familial ties across the border. The takeover of the Baath Party in Syria benefitted this trade because of the Assad regime's ban on many foreign goods, which made them lucrative for the local smugglers. But the war in Syria and the takeover of the area by Hezbollah and the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces in 2013 caused the displacement of the residents of Talkalakh and Qusayr, which meant the disappearance of most local smugglers and loss of status for the few who remain. Since 2013, all smuggling networks in the area are armed and linked to Hezbollah and the Fourth Division. Hezbollah has installed security and military headquarters as well as

drug factories in the town of Qusayr (Adal, 2021). The only roles available for remaining residents in Talkalakh and surrounding rural areas are in the menial jobs of loading and unloading smuggled goods or as “protection” escorts (Topalian, 2023a). Hezbollah-linked smuggling networks have reportedly hired local men in rural Homs to protect their smuggling operations to and from the Iraq border. The local residents are paid \$70-100 a month to protect the smuggling routes linking Qusayr to al-Bukamal in rural Deir Ezzor (Syria.tv, 2021).

Smuggling provides a vivid illustration of the hierarchies at play. Smuggling of arms across Lebanon and Syria is mainly handled by the main conflict actors whereas the smuggling of other goods like drugs, fuel, and food involves a wider network of smaller actors.² It is important to note that the relative positions of actors in the hierarchy are not static—power differences shift with time according to political and security dynamics in the wider conflict system. In Lebanon, larger-scale profiteering from drug dealing and smuggling in the Beqaa Valley has created divisions within local communities, with a newly rich class increasingly separate from the long-existing poor in the area. Prominent smugglers are involved in the smuggling of drugs, medicine, flour, stolen cars, and petrol, and usually work for either Hezbollah or for high-level officers in the Lebanese or Syrian security services (Topalian, 2023b).

Clientelism and increased dependency on powerful conflict actors

All of the above dynamics force civilians to become clients of—and dependent on—conflict actors to cope economically. Major players at the top of the power hierarchy use military might and political clout to increase revenue for themselves. They in turn use this revenue to sustain their power by creating clientelist relationships, which generate opportunities for profit for those further down the chain—a percentage of which is in turn kicked back up to their patrons, further reinforcing the system. For example, some people in Lebanon’s border regions have used the money made from illicit activities to fund business ventures that they run in parallel, such as shops, petrol stations, or factories, with Hezbollah getting part of the revenue through extortion (Clarke, 2015).

Main conflict actors can coerce local communities to engage in harmful activities to make a living. Hezbollah and Syrian security and military authorities have forced residents in Daraa to join smuggling networks that act as security and military auxiliaries for Hezbollah in addition to generating profit for it. But Hezbollah does not pay those recruits salaries, and instead requires them to fund themselves from their smuggling operations (Remote interviews with local residents, October 2022).

The Syrian state is also relying on the availability of cheap smuggled goods to alleviate state-imposed austerity measures that officially limit citizen access to basic foods and petrol, and using smuggling networks to absolve the state from responsibility to its citizens. This is empowering smugglers and worsening social inequalities. In Sweida, the heartland of the Druze community in Syria, prominent smugglers are financially supporting a number of poor local families to gain local community approval. The drug smugglers are also exploiting IDPs

²There is also human smuggling conducted by local networks operating between Lebanon and Syria and connected to Hezbollah and the Syrian military. The paper does not include this because the scale of this smuggling is small compared with that of the smuggling of goods and because the routes used for human smuggling overlap with some of the routes used for goods. See article by Ezzi (2022).



who have moved to the region from Deir Ezzor, Hasaka, and rural Aleppo by getting them to perform the most dangerous tasks in drug operations, like carrying drugs across borders. This is because the killing or arrest of those non-local operatives would not result in local community anger against smuggling networks, which would happen were the operatives local Druze from Sweida. The internally displaced operatives are also paid less than Druze or Bedouin operatives.³

Economics trumps politics

Though the intertwined conflicts affecting Lebanon and Syria are commonly analyzed through a lens of politics, ideology or identity, the paper's research findings highlight the ways in which economic relationships between different actors in cross-border conflict sometimes transcend political differences. Major conflict actors and armed groups will work with ostensible enemies in pursuing profit, and communities are pushed to accommodate the de facto authorities in their areas to cope financially, even if their own political stances are against those authorities.

For instance, Hezbollah is taking advantage of the deterioration of Lebanon's economy to benefit from the smuggling of essential goods between Syria and Lebanon in both directions. Although Hezbollah is a Shia group, Sunni groups in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley cooperate with it on smuggling to and from Syria. The Sunni groups involved are from known clans in the area such as from the economically deprived Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, who have been involved in smuggling since well before Hezbollah became the dominant military actor controlling the border, due to the Lebanese state's chronic developmental neglect of peripheral regions.⁴

In Aleppo, successive warlords and militia leaders have taken control of the long-established pharmaceutical manufacturing industry. The Ogarit medicine factory in Khan al-Assal, owned by a regime supporter, found itself alternately under regime or rebel control throughout the Syrian conflict until regime forces took over the area in 2020. It did not cease manufacturing because its owner paid bribes to whoever was in control of the area. Since 2020, this has been the Liwa' al-Baqer militia loyal to the Syrian regime (Remote interviews with local residents, October 2022).

All across the Lebanese-Syrian border region, these marriages of convenience blur the neat boundaries of ideological, political or ethnic cleavage, binding actors together into an adaptive network of mutual need—forming a significant barrier to the sustainable resolution of conflict, or the improvement of livelihoods.

Recommendations for conflict response policies

When it comes to addressing cross-border conflict in Lebanon and Syria, one of the clearest responses by the Lebanese authorities, as well as Western donors, has been increased border security measures. The UK, EU, and US have supported the operational capacity of the

³ Remote interviews with residents from Sweida, October 2022.

⁴ The World Bank (2015) states that "The distribution of poverty has also been unequal with poverty levels being highest in the north and south of the country, and in small, dense pockets in the suburbs of large towns which reflect the unevenness of economic growth and development."

Lebanese Armed Forces, Directorate General for General Security, and the Directorate General for Customs (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2017).

With such stabilization policies based on strengthening the state, it is important to recognize, as this paper has shown, that the state can itself also play the role of conflict actor. Conflict response programmes, whether security or economy focused, will have limited effects when the higher echelons of power in Lebanon and Syria are themselves implicated in the conflict economy—in many cases capturing it and nurturing it.

Ramsbotham, Miall, and Woodhouse argue that conflict resolution must focus on “systemic conflict transformation” (2016, 141) that holistically addresses the factors constituting transnational conflict. This echoes Dahi et al.’s conclusion that conflict response cannot “simply mean the cessation of violence, but also striving toward dismantling and transforming institutions and structures of injustice and creating the possibility for societal revival” (2020, 24). As this paper has shown, such an approach needs to take account of structural factors enabling conflict.

The paper has further argued that cross-border conflict actors are engaged in transactional relationships that transcend political, ideological, or ethnic divisions, with putative rivals—including state actors—bound together by the shared vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Conflict response policies must therefore take these motivations into account rather than be built on categorizing stakeholders on the basis of politics or identity.

Policies targeting conflict actors also must recognize the power hierarchies among them and use nuanced approaches in dealing with the coping communities at the lower end of the hierarchy in the conflict system. A deep understanding of power dynamics in the conflict pyramid helps avoid the formulation of policies that aim at curbing the activities of the main conflict actors but which end up harming those at the bottom of the pyramid. Without this understanding, policies based on pursuing elite bargains may end up upgrading the status of some elite and empowering them as conflict actors.

In light of the above, political solutions must extend beyond elite bargains and include marginalized communities. Ensuring that local voices are represented in peace negotiations can help address the root causes of conflict and build more sustainable peace. Providing legitimate economic opportunities is crucial for reducing dependence on the conflict economy. Investment in infrastructure, education, and vocational training can create alternative livelihoods for local populations, diminishing the allure of illicit activities. All this should run parallel to addressing corruption within state institutions. Anti-corruption initiatives should focus on dismantling the networks that enable state actors to profit from the conflict economy. This can involve strengthening judicial independence, enhancing transparency, and fostering accountability. Local communities should also be involved in the design and implementation of security measures. Community policing and local security committees can build trust between residents and security forces, reducing the influence of illicit actors. And while all these goals can only be achieved in the medium and long terms, providing immediate humanitarian relief and improving access to social services can alleviate the hardships faced by local communities and reduce their dependency on conflict actors. Ensuring that basic needs are met can also reduce the desperation that drives individuals into the conflict economy.



The cross-border conflict in the Lebanese-Syrian border regions highlights the need for a comprehensive and nuanced approach to stabilization. Traditional policies that focus solely on curbing violence and strengthening state capacity are insufficient for addressing the complex power dynamics and economic dependencies that sustain conflict. By considering the power relationships among conflict actors and between these actors and local communities, stabilization efforts can be more effective and sustainable. Inclusive political settlements, economic development, anti-corruption measures, community-based security initiatives, regional cooperation, and humanitarian assistance are all critical components of a holistic strategy. Only by addressing the underlying causes and power dynamics of conflict and empowering local communities can lasting peace and stability be achieved in these troubled regions.

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