Lebanon ranks as one of the least peaceful nations in the world, according to the Global Peace Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit, which places the country just above Pakistan. And not without good reason. 2008 is finally here, but Lebanon remains without a president, and many of the political issues which have beleaguered the country since early 2005 have yet to be resolved.

Throughout 2007, the gulf between the pro-government March 14 camp and the opposition became more pronounced, with the latter continuing to demand the resignation of Fouad Siniora government’s and the creation of a national unity government in its stead, in order to earn the bloc more “political representation” and, essentially, the power to veto all cabinet decisions.

The split has most recently manifested itself in the presidential crisis, raising
questions about the composition of the government’s next cabinet and who the premier will be. And in addition, there is still the question of whether or not the opposition will agree to the amendment of the constitution in order to elect Army Commander General Michel Sleiman in the coming months.

Indeed, many significant events of the year reflected, or were a direct result of, the opposition-March 14 divide. The opposition continued its occupation of the downtown area as part of a prolonged protest against the Siniora government, with devastating effects on the country’s economy.

The assassinations of MP Walid Eido, MP Antoine Ghanem, and most recently, Brigadier General François al-Hajj served as reminders that Lebanon is still subject to attacks from the “unidentified assailants” who operated so comfortably under Syrian tutelage.

As ever, the immediate future of Lebanon depends in a large part on regional and international developments. Throughout 2007, Syria continued its interference in Lebanon’s internal politics vis-à-vis their local proxies, most notably, Hezbollah, Amal, and more recently, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). The set-up of the international tribunal and the submission of UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz’s final report increased the focus on the tribunal, which will try the perpetrators of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s murder and those who have fallen since.

Lebanon’s environment also suffered, with forest fires ravaging several areas across the country. In addition, the Iraqi and Palestinian refugee crises continued, exacerbated by the Nahr al-Bared conflict and the war in Iraq.

Of all the issues facing Lebanon as it moves in 2008, the most urgent is clearly the presidential vacuum. But with Lebanon’s immediate future depending as much on regional developments as on local ones, it remains to be seen what the New Year has in store for our beleaguered country.
NOW Lebanon looks back at a very difficult year, with the hope that the one to come may offer more relief and resolution for all Lebanese.

Protesters wave national flags during a demonstration organized by the CGTL labor confederation outside the tax department of the finance ministry in Beirut, 09 January 2007. (AFP / RAMZI HAIDAR)

On January 8, 2007, opposition leaders announced the details of “Phase Two” of their anti-government campaign from Rabieh, after “Phase One,” the downtown sit-in, had failed to yield quick results. In a statement read by Talal Arslan, the opposition announced that it would “launch daily protests that will begin on Tuesday [January 9] and in a progressive manner will extend to all the ministries and public institutions until all our demands are met.” In alliance with the pro-Syrian labor union, the opposition protested against the government’s economic policies at the VAT offices; on January 13, they protested under the pretext of uncovering the truth behind Lebanon’s recent string of assassinations. However, turnout was low, and the strategy of daily protests was soon abandoned.
Two weeks later, on **January 23**, supporters of Lebanon’s pro-Syrian opposition began a general strike called for by leader of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah, protesting by burning tires on major roads throughout Beirut, including the road to the airport. This led to rioting and clashes between the protestors and the ISF, which had tried to open roads without using force. In some cases, the opposition fired on pro-government supporters who tried to break the strike. Three were left dead, while 133 were injured. The strike was seen as an escalation of the opposition’s downtown sit-in, which began on December 1, 2005.

Just two days later, on **January 25**, (the first day of Paris III), and despite calls for restraint by Hezbollah – which had announced an end to the strike and was calling on protestors to refrain from sectarian street quarrels – fighting broke out between Sunni and Shia students at the Beirut Arab University. The fighting spread throughout Beirut, causing civil unrest. Four were left dead, and over 150 wounded. The Lebanese army declared an overnight curfew in an attempt to curb further tensions.

On **April 26**, two [civilians](#) were found dead on a freeway three days after being kidnapped in a case that shook the nation, bringing back memories of the darkest days of the civil war era. They both came from families that supported the pro-government Progressive Socialist Party, and some analyzed the killings as “revenge” for the death of an opposition member during the January riots.

The opposition’s downtown sit-in continued throughout the year. Minister Jihad Azour estimated that the protest cost the Lebanese economy approximately $70 million a day. Though the “tent city” is ostensibly empty at the current time, with very few protestors actually remaining camped out there, the opposition has refused to have it dismantled in the absence of having their demands met.
A billboard erected by the Lebanese opposition parties in the Bekaa Valley, early January. As part of the opposition’s anti-government market campaign, the poster reads "Paris I, 26 billion dollars... Paris II, 32 billion dollars... Paris III, 45 billion dollars...,” referring to Lebanon’s soaring public debt. (AFP PHOTO/ANWAR AMRO)

Paris III, an international donor’s conference, was held in Paris on January 25, amidst political turmoil back home. Economy and finance ministers, as well as the central bank governor, attended the conference to discuss the upcoming “six-point” economic reform plans. Among the specific plans were the privatization of the mobile telecom sector. The donors – including the EU, France, Saudi Arabia, and the US, among others – pledged more than 7.6 billion dollars in aid.

On **February 13**, two explosions were detonated in the Christian suburb of Ain Alaq, killing three and wounding 23. The event came on the eve of pro-government demonstrations commemorating the second anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Fatah al-Islam
spokesperson Abu Salim Taha later named the assassins responsible for the bombings, who had been operating out of the Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli. The act foreshadowed an imminent clash between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army.

The Nahr al-Bared conflict began on May 20, when a group of militants in Tripoli, under the name Fatah al-Islam, were implicated in a bank robbery of $125,000 in Amioun in the north of Lebanon. MP Walid Jumblatt referred to the group as a “Syrian gang” intent on obstructing the international tribunal. Syria has denied any ties to the faction.

The ISF attacked the militants, and in response, a member of Fatah al-Islam killed several soldiers at an army checkpoint. The army began shelling the camp, which was obliterated by the end of the conflict. After three and a half months of fighting, the battle officially ended on Sunday, September 2. The Lebanese army now has full control of the camp, which is allegedly free of Fatah al-Islam troops. Civilians were evacuated en masse to the Beddawi Palestinian refugee camp and also Beirut, Tripoli and Saida. Prime Minister Siniora declared that the camp would be rebuilt so that the refugees could return.

Approximately 400 civilians and 163 troops died during the clashes, and some 500-600 soldiers were severely wounded. Defense Minister Michel Murr declared that the army killed 222 militants and captured 202. Most Lebanese hailed the conflict as a victory for the army, and on September 4, large crowds participated in street celebrations across the country.
Palestinian women and children at a scene of destruction at Nahr al-Bared, which endured 15 weeks of fierce clashes between the Lebanese Army and Islamic Militants (AFP).

In the early weeks of the summer, Beirut endured a wave of bombings targeted primarily against Christian and pro-government areas. Though some suggested that the bombs were tied to the establishment of the international tribunal, others accused Fatah al-Islam of being behind the attacks. Bombings struck the areas of ABC Achrafieh (May 20), killing one and leaving 11 wounded, Verdun (May 21), wounding seven, Aley (May 23), Sad al-Bouchrieh (June 4), wounding 10, injuring 16, and Zouk Mosbeh (June 7), killing one and injuring three. Smaller grenade explosions went off in Haret Hreik, Zahle and Barbir. The bombs caused alarm among the Lebanese population, who feared the outbreak of fresh civil conflict.

Following the spate of summer bombings, and during the Nahr al-Bared conflict, March 14 member and Future Movement MP Walid Eido, along with his son, Khaled Eido, was assassinated by a car bomb on Beirut’s popular seaside Corniche. Eight others, including Eido’s body guards, also died in the
attack. Eido, previously a magistrate and public prosecutor, had been elected to parliament in 2000 and 2005. He was a harsh critic of both the Syrian regime and former President Emile Lahoud. In April 2007, he advocated replacing the opposition’s resigned ministers. Eido was a close friend of Hariri and strongly supported the set up of the International Tribunal.

Lebanese deputy Mohammad Al-Amin Itani of the Future Movement was later elected to replace Eido’s in parliament. In the same by-elections, Dr. Camille Khoury replaced slain MP Pierre Gemayel, who was killed in November 2006, in the Metn district.

MP Mohammad Al-Amin Itani sits between pictures of slain Hariri and Eido at parliament in September (AFP/HASSAN IBRAHIM).

On **February 6**, the UN endorsed the Lebanese government’s plans to set up an international tribunal that would try the perpetrators responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and other related crimes. On **May 30, 2007**, Resolution **1757**, which formally put into motion the establishment International Tribunal for Lebanon, was brought into effect. On **June 10**, the agreement was entered into force under Chapter 7 of the UN
charter. The opposition, in addition to the Syrian regime, has insisted that the establishment of the tribunal goes against Lebanese interests and sovereignty. Throughout the presidential crisis and since the UN Commissioner Brammertz submitted his final report, the issue of the tribunal’s establishment has been a hot topic on both the local and regional level. Many analysts claim that Syria is attempting to hamper the election of a “consensus” president in a last-ditch attempt to prevent or to obstruct the formation of the tribunal itself.

MP Antoine Ghanem, a member of the March 14 coalition and the Kataeb party, was assassinated in Sin el-Fil, Beirut, on September 19. Previously a professor of law at the Lebanese University, Ghanem started his political career in 1961 as head of the Kataeb’s Baabda district. He was elected as MP in 2000, running on Walid Jumblatt’s list, and was a member of the Qornet Shehwan gathering. Ghanem was an active participant in the Cedar Revolution. Some attribute his assassination to the reopening of the Lebanon-Syria border, after it had been closed during the battle at Nahr al-Bared, on September 17, two days before his assassination. Some, most notably Jumblatt, implicated Syria in his death. Ghanem’s assassination also occurred just six days before the first scheduled parliamentary session to elect a new president, leading to speculation that the assassins may have been trying to whittle down March 14’s narrow majority ahead of any vote.
Lebanese youth celebrate on November 24, the day Emile Lahoud left office (AFP/ANWAR AMRO).

After nine years in office, 71-year-old Emile Lahoud departed from Baabda palace on November 23 at midnight. Preceded by an era of Syrian tutelage begun under Elias Hrawi, Lahoud will likely be most remembered for his prolonged association with, and support of, the Syrian regime. The constitution was amended to make Lahoud president, as he was army commander at the time and thus ineligible under Article 49. Though the constitution only allows for a president to serve one consecutive six-year term, in 2004 it was amended once again under Syrian pressure to allow Lahoud to remain in office. Fierce Lebanese opposition, from slain former PM Hariri and others, opposed the move. But while Hariri’s assassination was the precursor to Syrian withdrawal, it also brought about an era of political turmoil which has marked the country until today. Just before his term ended, Lahoud attempted to declare a state of emergency in the absence of a successor; however, the army disregarded his call.

With the constitutional deadline passing on November 24, negotiations
between Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and leader of the Future Movement MP Saad Hariri have failed for over two months to yield any agreements between the opposition and the March 14 bloc on a president, consensus or otherwise. Though France was heavily involved in the negotiations, with Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner making seven trips to Beirut in six months and President Nicolas Sarkozy making loud declarations, the country’s diplomatic efforts nevertheless proved to be a letdown.

Despite the fact that March 14 and the opposition have agreed in principle on electing General Michel Sleiman as president, the two blocs differ in terms of how the election will take place, with March 8 demanding a “package” deal and guarantees before allowing the elections to proceed, and March 14 stating that it wishes to agree on the cabinet after the presidential vote rather than before. The elections have been postponed by Berri 11 times, with the next session scheduled for January 12. In the coming weeks, Saudi-Syrian relations will prove to be increasingly relevant to the elections, in addition to the set-up of the international tribunal.

Burnt lands in the Chouf town of Deir al-Qamar, October 3 (AFP/Joseph Barak).
On **October 2**, large fires erupted in Deir al-Qamar, to be joined by other blazes around the country. Forests were charred, though firefighters spent hours trying to battle the woodland fires. The fires spread from Qobayat in the North to the Chouf, and to Hasbaya in the South, with the flames being fanned by winds, dry grass, and timber. The Lebanese government deployed over 200 firefighting posts in the country and requested helicopters from Cyprus and planes from Jordan and Italy to help battle the fires. Though local volunteers and emergency crews used all of its efforts, the fires continued to ravage Lebanon. Although the high temperatures of the late summer season make the countryside prone to brushfires, the fires themselves appeared to have been lit separately, raising suspicions of arson. According to head of the Civil Defense services, Darwish Hobeika, 242 fires had been set or “began burning” in just two days. One woman was left dead as a result of the blazes and dozens were wounded. Large swathes of land were destroyed and 2,000 hectares of forest were lost, most of which will not ever regenerate.

Army Commander General Michel Sleiman, Kataeb Supreme Leader Amine Gemayel, and head of the FPM Michel Aoun attend the funeral of army
Brigadier General François al-Hajj was assassinated on December 12, in the midst of the presidential crisis. As chief of the Lebanese army’s operations, Hajj led the battle in Nahr al-Bared, but in earlier days he also fought against Israeli occupation in South Lebanon as well as Syrian forces in western Beirut during the 15 year civil war. It was widely circulated in the press that Hajj was tipped to become the army commander should General Michel Sleiman be elected to the presidency. Many politicians and analysts viewed the assassination as an attack on the institution of the Lebanese army, which remains uninvolved in the political scene. Hajj was killed in Baabda, a highly secured area home to both the presidential palace and the Ministry of Defense.