

## **Lebanon, Syrian Instability, and the Risks of Sunni-Shiite Competition**

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On Friday, October 19, 2012, a car bomb exploded in Sassine Square, a busy thoroughfare in the predominantly Christian east Beirut neighborhood of Ashrafieh. It injured more than 100 people and killed 8, including Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan, the head of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces' (ISF) intelligence branch, and his bodyguard.

It is all but certain that General al-Hassan was the intended target. Leading members of Lebanon's anti-Syrian opposition have openly accused the Ba'th-led regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria of orchestrating the killing. Leading members of Lebanon's anti-Syrian opposition also called for the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati and the collapse of a government that includes the bulk of the country's pro-Syrian factions.

The brutal death of one of Lebanon's most senior intelligence and security figures is a critical development. Known for being close to the pro-Western and anti-Syrian political opposition and the mainly Sunni Future Movement of former prime minister Saad Hariri, al-Hassan was a key figure in the ongoing investigation of the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. He was also reported to have played a pivotal role in the arrest of Michel Samaha, a former member of parliament with ties to Syria, who was arrested in August 2012 on charges of plotting bomb attacks meant to trigger sectarian violence, including in the mainly Sunni north.

After an emotionally charged funeral service, a relatively small number of protesters tried to overrun the Grand Serail, Lebanon's seat of government, followed by overnight Sunni-Shiite armed clashes in Beirut and Sunni-Alawite violence in the northern city of Tripoli. In response to events and in order to avoid any further escalation, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) quickly deployed troops to affected areas. These included elements from the Ranger Regiment to Beirut and the Navy Commando Regiment to Tripoli—both elite units willing to use lethal force against any faction that breaks the precarious peace.

The way these events unfold in Lebanon is important to the United States and its allies. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the European Union have shown a general reluctance to upset Lebanon's current political status quo or push for an immediate change in government. First, there is broad international consensus that Lebanon's current policy of "disassociating" itself from the Syrian crisis is a necessary evil. Furthermore, Western states and their regional Arab allies appear to be mindful of the risks of a power vacuum in a divided Lebanon as they seek to avoid an even steeper slide into the unknown in Syria and an unstable Levant.

### **Lebanese Dividing Lines on Syria**

In late 2012, it remains far from clear how power and politics will evolve in Syria, let alone whether or not the Assad regime could find the means to survive. That has not stopped pro- and anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon from maneuvering in a bid to reshape the internal balance of power or from playing an emerging role in the Syria crisis. What remains unclear is how much or how quickly Lebanon will be destabilized by what could be a long-term internal battle for power in Damascus.

The anti-Syrian and pro-Western March 14 forces—a cross-sectarian grouping of Lebanese political actors that included the majority of the country's Sunni representatives and part of the country's Christians—were pushed to the margins in early 2011 with the collapse of the government of Saad Hariri. However, the growing cycle of unrest in and international isolation of Syria has prompted members of the coalition to push for a reversal of their political fortunes.

The March 14 forces have since shown an increasing willingness to capitalize on Syrian instability. There were indications in 2011 that the predominantly Sunni Future Movement was keen to streamline its foreign policy

orientation in line with the broader Sunni Arab regional order centered on Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in the expectation that the Assad regime will eventually fall.

The country has also experienced a resurgence of Sunni-Alawite violence in the northern city of Tripoli. Meanwhile, Sunnis in northern Lebanon have grown increasingly sympathetic to the cause of predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition forces. There have been growing accusations of involvement by Sunni political figures with ties to the March 14 forces in helping to arm and finance Syrian insurgent groups. There have also been increasing reports of Lebanese Sunni militants and Islamist fighters crossing into Syria to join the battle against Assad.

By contrast, members of the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance—another cross-sectarian coalition led by the majority of the country's main Shiite factions, including Hezbollah, and part of the country's Christians—have largely remained strong supporters of the Assad regime. While there are concerns that Assad might not survive the current cycle of unrest, there are many that continue to believe that the Alawite-led regime—aided by Iran at the regional level and Russia and China at the international level—will weather the storm and rebuff both internal and external challenges to its autonomy and ability to rule Syria.

Assuming that Syria's crisis would be short-lived, in June 2011 Hezbollah sought to mobilize the country's Palestinian refugee population in an effort to escalate tensions on the UN Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel as a means of shifting attention from Syria. These efforts were thwarted in part by the LAF, which preempted any major flare-up along the demarcation line. While initially minimizing its footprint to avoid escalating Lebanese Sunni-Shiite tensions over Syria, there is growing evidence that Hezbollah is far more active in the Syria conflict, at least in an advisory role in training and equipping the country's Alawite sect and other Assad loyalists and, at most, engaging in active combat against mainly Sunni Syrian insurgents.

Meanwhile, the country's depleted Christian political forces—divided between the two coalitions—and the Druze led by Walid Jumblatt are wary of any Lebanese intervention in Syria's internal conflict. This is in part due to the reality that the political tug-of-war in Beirut, the struggle for Syria, and broader regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran all straddle Sunni-Shiite dividing lines.

Hezbollah's Christian allies are uneasy about the group's evolving and increasingly aggressive role in supporting the Assad regime. Christians in the March 14 alliance are not faring much better: Lebanon's northern districts—a hotbed for Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other militant cross-border activity—and the growing stature of the country's Sunni Salafists have made them similarly uncomfortable. The Druze and other minority sects also find themselves in a similarly untenable position between a proverbial Sunni rock and a Shiite hard place.

Despite a growing willingness by elements within both the March 14 and March 8 coalitions to compete actively in Syria, neither has shown large-scale support for an irreversible Lebanese role in the Syria crisis. Furthermore, neither grouping has taken the dangerous next step of trying to actively redraw the internal balance of power of Lebanon. However, this does not mean that neither side is exposing Lebanon to risks. The assumption that Assad's rule may be finite and the role Hezbollah is believed to be playing in support of that rule have led to growing calls for Hezbollah's disarmament, a de facto call for shifting the internal political and security balance of power in Lebanon. By contrast, the Sunni community's emerging role in the Syria conflict has been interpreted by Damascus as a de facto declaration of war on the Assad regime.

### **Managing Syria's Slow-Motion Tsunami**

An aggressive LAF security response and strong international support have given the Mikati government some much needed breathing room and political legitimacy in the wake of the death of General al-Hassan. However, neither solves the underlying pressures, the reality that Hezbollah will remain nothing short of Lebanon's Sparta, or that the scale of unrest in Syria poses real questions about the future stability of Lebanon regardless of the internal balance of power.

In the end, the attack attests to the stark reality that Lebanon's opposing political forces cannot escape the negative effects of competing on either side of Syria's civil conflict. Syria and Lebanon are tied together by geography, demographics, unstable regional alignments, and deepening Sunni-Shiite regional tensions. In addition, competing local political forces have yet to succeed and win outright in successive struggles for power in Lebanon. Any scenario where the country's leading Sunni and Shiite political forces miscalculate at home or in Syria is likely to have catastrophic consequences for the future stability of Lebanon and the broader Levant.

Despite the bombing and the scale of polarization in Lebanon, there are still forces in both coalitions that favor stability, even if it is precarious and uncertain. These include members of leading Sunni, Shiite, Druze, and Christian factions who recognize that any sitting government would have to try to distance the country from the Syria conflict. Lebanon's competing factions must remain focused on the reality that none of them can win decisively and that finding ways to insulate Lebanon from Syrian instability is the sectarian equivalent of discretion as the better part of valor.

Ultimately, Lebanon's future hinges on how events in Syria take shape in the coming months. Despite UN and Arab League efforts toward a short-term cease-fire, there is every reason to expect continued hostilities and long-term instability in the conflict, with as yet no tangible signs of a lasting resolution. The longer Syria's crisis persists, the more critical it will become for Lebanon and the international community, led by the United States, to minimize future spillover effects from what may be years of instability in the Levant.

Supporting Lebanon's military and security forces will prove to be especially important. The LAF in particular has and will continue to play a critical role in terms of internal security, safeguarding borders, and insulating Lebanon from regional instability. In late September 2012, the Lebanese cabinet announced its intentions to raise at least \$1.6 billion—possibly through a donor conference—over five years to bolster the resources and capabilities of the LAF to secure Lebanon from regional instability. While it remains unclear how recent unrest will impact the effort, that any sitting government in Lebanon would endorse such a move is a testament to how destabilizing the Syria crisis has become.

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