



Insight

Syria Spills Over: Sectarian Conflict in Lebanon

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Due to the complicated relationship between the two countries, Syria's protracted crisis was bound to spill over into neighboring Lebanon. Sectarian tensions, heightened by refugees, kidnappings, combatants, and terrorist plots, threaten the peace in fragile Lebanon – and the longer the war lasts, the more danger exists. Yet if Lebanon can get through this period without exploding into sectarian warfare, it might finally succeed in shaking off Syria's corrosive influence. U.S. policy should support non-sectarian elements in Lebanon, while presenting evidence to the world of Hezbollah's shameful abetting of Assad.

Lebanon was carved out of Greater Syria after the First World War as a Western-oriented territory dominated by Maronite Christians. Syria was reluctant to recognize Lebanon's independence, refusing even to appoint an ambassador until 2008.

Two legacies of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war helped Syria gain undue leverage in Lebanon. First, Syria sent troops to Lebanon during the war, ostensibly to keep the peace. Yet Syria essentially continued to occupy Lebanon a full fifteen years after the war ended, only departing in 2005 after being implicated in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Syrian intelligence agents still operate in Lebanon.

A second civil war legacy was the formation of Hezbollah as a Shia resistance front against Israeli troops, who also had invaded Lebanon to fight Palestinian militants and oppose the Syrians. Despite Israel's complete withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah remains a major force in Lebanon and is responsible for terrorist attacks around the world. It is considered a client of Syria and Iran, which supply it with weapons and political support. Hezbollah's political wing is part of Lebanon's governing coalition, while its militias operate independent of the government.

In addition to their historical links, Syria and Lebanon share many of the same sectarian divisions, though each country manages its diversity differently. The Assad regime achieved relative stability in Syria through an iron fist and manipulation of Syria's sectarian groups. In Lebanon, the government utilizes not repression, but a "confessional" political system that earmarks government positions according to religion. Lebanon's Maronites, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Palestinians, Shia, Sunni, Druze, and Alawites form shifting alliances, and the current government is considered pro-Syria.

Syria's current crisis is affecting Lebanon in a number of ways that are testing its stability.

- Refugees: The Lebanese know that a large refugee population can exacerbate tensions; their civil war was sparked by events related to Palestinian refugees. So far, according to the UN, the civil war in Syria

has brought over 218,000 refugees to Lebanon.

- **Kidnappings:** The fighting in Syria has led to a number of high-profile kidnappings on both sides of its border with Lebanon. Rebels in Syria have captured groups of Lebanese Shiites who, while professing to be peaceful pilgrims, are accused of supporting Assad. In retaliation, Lebanese Shiites have kidnapped Syrian Sunnis inside Lebanon, including a number of migrant workers.
- **Hezbollah Intervention in Syria:** Hezbollah is widely believed to be helping the Assad regime repress its domestic opponents, which tarnishes its reputation among many Lebanese. In August, the U.S. Treasury Department placed sanctions on Hezbollah for providing “training, advice, and extensive logistical support” to Assad. Quiet burials of Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon suggest they may be playing a combat role in Syria as well. While other Lebanese individuals may be helping to arm Syria’s rebels and even fighting alongside them, Hezbollah’s actions are improper for an organization that wants to be viewed as a political party focused on the needs of the Lebanese people.
- **Syrian Intervention in Lebanon:** Syria’s meddling in Lebanon did not end when its troops withdrew. Assad has always been willing to use terror to manipulate politics in Lebanon, and his problems at home may have made him more desperate. In August, former Lebanese minister Michel Samaha was arrested for allegedly planning a series of attacks on Sunni targets in Lebanon at Assad’s bidding. In October, Lebanon’s intelligence chief, Wissam al-Hassan, was killed in a car bombing, likely in retaliation for his involvement in both Samaha’s arrest and the investigation into Hariri’s assassination.
- **Violence in Tripoli:** The fighting in Syria has stoked tensions between the Sunni and Alawite populations in Lebanon’s port city of Tripoli, resulting in dozens of fatalities. Many of Tripoli’s Sunnis are believed to have joined the anti-Assad fighting in Syria, along with other Lebanese sympathizers.

Popular reaction to these challenges tests Lebanon’s cohesion. Lebanese leaders – including Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah – have appealed for peace, and so far the country has not exploded into all-out sectarian warfare.

A return to civil war in Lebanon would be counter to U.S. interests and could once again engulf many of Lebanon’s neighbors. America has enduring ties to Lebanon, not the least of which is a large and influential diaspora community here in the U.S. Despite its struggles, Lebanon has a relatively open society, vibrant economy, and cultural bonds with the West. Long-standing U.S. policy has supported a democratic, prosperous Lebanon, free from foreign (i.e., Syrian) interference. The U.S. also seeks to contain Hezbollah and promote peaceful relations between Lebanon and Israel.