



PolicyWatch 1974

Spillover from Syria Endangers Lebanon

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Washington must act promptly to ensure that turmoil in Syria does not weaken U.S. allies in neighboring Lebanon.

On August 15, a Shiite faction in Lebanon kidnapped twenty Syrian expatriate laborers in retaliation for the earlier snatching of two dozen Shiite "pilgrims" by a Sunni opposition group in Syria. Less covered by the Western media, but perhaps equally consequential, was the August 9 arrest of former Lebanese labor minister Michel Samaha, charged with plotting to bomb a Sunni *iftar* dinner following the Ramadan fast. The allegation against Samaha -- a prominent Christian with close ties to both the Syrian regime and the Shiite militia Hizballah -- shocked a Lebanese government already reeling from the violence in Syria. The latest incidents highlight not only concerns about spillover from the bloody eighteen-month uprising against Bashar al-Assad, but also the need for an effective U.S. strategy to promote stability and foster a viable political alliance to displace the current Hizballah-based government in Lebanon.

THE SAMAHA PLOT

Samaha has been a public figure in Lebanon for decades. An elected member of parliament from the Christian nationalist Phalange Party, he served once as minister of tourism and information, and twice as information minister in governments led by the late Rafiq Hariri. After the civil war ended and Syria occupied Lebanon in 1991, Samaha developed increasingly close ties to Hafiz al-Assad's regime in Damascus. Later, following Hariri's 2005 assassination, the Cedar Revolution, and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, he aligned politically with the pro-Syria, Hizballah-led "March 8" coalition. In 2007, he was banned from traveling to the US for his role in "destabilizing Lebanon."

Earlier this month, Lebanon's Internal Security Forces detained and charged Samaha of plotting terrorist attacks (two Syrian military officers, including State Security chief Gen. Ali

Mamlouk, were charged in absentia). Under interrogation, Samaha reportedly "confessed to smuggling explosives in his car from Syria to Lebanon" with the intention of carrying out "bombings in North Lebanon, particularly in the area of Akkar, with Syria's knowledge." Security sources told the Lebanese press that, among other incendiaries, he had transported explosives intended to be attached to vehicle undercarriages, similar to devices used previously against anti-Syrian personalities in Lebanon (e.g., LBC television anchor May Chidiac and *an-Nahar* editor Samir Kassir).

KIDNAPPINGS PROLIFERATE

In May, a previously unknown armed opposition group called the "Syrian Revolutionaries-Aleppo Province" kidnapped two dozen Lebanese Shiites in Syria. The Sunni group subsequently released the female hostages but continues to hold eleven men, five of whom it initially said were Hizballah members. To date, little progress has been made in securing their release, which the group has predicated on Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah issuing an apology to the Syrian people for supporting the Assad regime's brutal repression of the popular uprising. Nasrallah refuses to capitulate.

The kidnapping hit a nerve with Lebanese Shiites. Last week, frustrated by the lack of movement on the issue, the Meqdad clan -- one of whose relatives is among the captives -- snatched twenty Syrian laborers in Lebanon and has been adding to that total daily. The clan has also pledged to capture other innocents from states aligned with the anti-Assad rebels, prompting a mass exodus of Saudi and Qatari nationals from Lebanon; it has already announced the capture of a Turkish citizen.

SECTARIAN TENSIONS SPIKE

Although the exact relationship between Hizballah and the kidnapped Lebanese in Syria is unclear, the spate of kidnappings is unmistakably sectarian: Lebanese Shiites are abducting Syrian Sunnis as Syrian Sunnis are capturing Lebanese Shiites. To be sure, these tactics reflect the contours of the war in Syria, but they also reflect Lebanese political divisions, making the practice extremely precarious.

Unlike the abductions -- a tactic that appears to have evolved indigenously and without external encouragement -- the Samaha plot reflects the Assad regime's longstanding strategy of deflecting pressure by sowing sectarian chaos in Lebanon. Had Samaha's bombs reached their targets, the resulting carnage could have sparked the dry kindling of Sunni-Shiite tensions, reigniting longstanding sectarian hatreds and possibly returning Lebanon to civil war.

At least for now, Beirut has dodged a bullet by interdicting Samaha. But persistent sectarianism in Lebanon -- as shown by today's Alawite-Sunni clashes in Tripoli -- and the polarizing fighting next door have made the country ripe for Syrian subversion. Although Samaha seems destined for prison, Damascus has no shortage of other supporters in Lebanon. And the Assad regime would no doubt view deterioration there as a useful distraction from its ongoing bloodletting at home, and as a reminder to Washington that military intervention in Syria would have a potentially significant regional cost.

THE COLD WAR IN LEBANON

In Syria, the uprising has morphed into a sectarian war, with Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey backing their respective co-religionists. In Beirut, meanwhile, Iranian-backed Hizballah is anxious about what Assad's fall would mean and has been pressing the remnants of the pro-Western, largely Sunni "March 14" coalition to legally legitimize the militia's large arsenal. The organization also seeks to change Lebanese electoral law in the hope of undermining its political opponents, who won parliamentary majorities in the past two elections and could repeat that performance in the 2013 contest.

Syria and Iran want to shore up Hizballah's weakening position, enabling the militia to provide strategic depth in Lebanon in the event that Assad quits Damascus and establishes a rump Alawite state along the coast. So far, however, March 14 has resisted such buttressing efforts despite facing significant pressure. In fact, Hizballah's Lebanese opponents may soon be strengthened by the addition of influential Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and the critical swing votes he can muster. Once a key fixture in March 14, Jumblatt left the coalition in 2009 and helped bring the current March 8 government to power. He is now poised to rejoin a resurrected (or, more likely, reconfigured) March 14 -- a development that would improve the once-powerful bloc's political standing and deliver a further blow to Hizballah. Yet this prospect raises the specter of 2008, when the militia invaded Beirut and took over the government in order to preserve its political and military prerogatives. Although Hizballah appears reticent to turn its weapons on the Lebanese people once again, its response to Assad's potential ouster is difficult to predict.

WASHINGTON AND THE BATTLE AHEAD

From 2005 to 2008, support for the March 14 coalition was the central element of the Bush administration's Lebanon-Syria policy. And in 2009, Vice President Joe Biden visited Beirut on the eve of parliamentary elections in the hope of giving the coalition a boost. Since then, however, Washington has devoted little attention to Lebanon. Instead of helping to consolidate what was then the only pro-Western, democratically elected majority in the Arab world, Washington attempted to cultivate ties with the Syrian regime -- a policy that only ended with the advent of the Syrian uprising last year. Today, the sole remaining identifiable element of U.S. policy in Lebanon is the \$100 million in annual military support for the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Military support, while helpful, is not enough to prevent Syria from destabilizing Lebanon. Given the latter's history of violent sectarianism, some spillover from Syria may be inevitable, but Washington can and should take steps to forestall the worst. At minimum, the United States should again lend concerted political backing to Lebanese opponents of Assad and Hizballah. In addition to encouraging moderate Sunnis affiliated with March 14 to fill the leadership vacuum currently being exploited by militant Sunni Islamists, Washington should press the coalition to embrace Lebanese Shiites who oppose Hizballah, thereby making the bloc a more inclusive national force capable of assuming power should it again win national elections in 2013.

At the same time, in the absence of international consensus on the slaughter in Syria, Washington should renew its efforts to spur UN implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 -- specifically, the provisions on preventing weapons transfers to militias in Lebanon. Beirut is already intercepting weapons intended for Syrian rebels. By implementing the resolution's maritime provisions, Washington could help start the

process of closing Hizballah's main weapons lifeline -- a line that cannot be definitively severed until the Assad regime collapses.

Although the fate of Lebanon ultimately resides with the Lebanese, Assad's efforts to ignite chaos next door mean that Washington cannot remain a disinterested observer. Of course, the best way to promote stability in Lebanon is to help the Syrian opposition topple Assad. Barring that more robust approach, however, Washington should work toward stability in Beirut by supporting its Lebanese allies, especially in their efforts to contend in the 2013 elections.

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