

Hezbollah Involvement in Syria Fans Flames of Sectarian War

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The Party of God is not only hurting its domestic standing in Lebanon, but also inviting a wider regional conflict it cannot control.

Reports of heavy Hezbollah casualties trickling out of Syria's Qalamoun area are but the latest sign that the Party of God's involvement in Syria will continue to cost it dearly. But the real price for Hezbollah is being paid in Lebanon, where Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime has led to increased suicide car bombings, Sunni-Shiite tension, and armed clashes, not to mention recent concessions to the March 14 alliance in forming a caretaker Lebanese government. While spillover into Lebanon may seem a local issue, my interviews with Lebanese and Syrians during a recent visit to Lebanon indicate that such incidents, combined with a possible security vacuum caused by government bickering over the selection of Lebanon's next president, could fan the flames into a wider regional conflict that Hezbollah and Iran cannot put out and cannot afford. What is more, retaliating against Western targets is not the easy distraction it used to be and will only make things worse, not better, for the Iranian alliance.

In intervening in Syria to save the Assad regime, Hezbollah has made Lebanon a battleground for Syrians and Gulf-supported Salafist-jihadist groups. Fourteen different explosions targeting Hezbollah, Iran, or their affiliates have rocked Lebanon over the past year, including a blast in the Shiite village of Nabi Othman on March 17 that killed local Hezbollah leader Abdul Rahman al-Qadhi. A look at the details of each attack is telling: most have been suicide car bombs, the exception being a sniper killing Hezbollah weapons expert Hassan Lakkis. All have been in either in Beirut's southern suburbs or routes going into those areas, or in Hermel, Hezbollah's stronghold in the north Beqaa. The frequency of attacks has increased in tandem with the degree of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, with the current rate now approaching four per month. The recent effort to bomb-proof stores, hospitals, and mosques in Dahiye has not stopped residents from fleeing to safer areas. One source told me up to 150,000 apartments are now up for rent in south Beirut alone.

But it is not just Salafist bombings in Lebanon against Hezbollah targets that could inadvertently lead to wider war. Starting with the detention of pro-Syrian politician Michel Samaha, Lebanese investigators have uncovered a number of plots sponsored by the Syrian regime against Lebanese citizens, including Sunnis in sectarian tinderbox areas such as Tripoli and Akkar. Lebanese military authorities recently issued arrest warrants in absentia for Lebanese Alawite leader Ali Eid, a staunch supporter of Assad, for smuggling a man involved in an August 23 bombing against Sunnis in Tripoli out of the country to Syria. The Assad regime, recently overconfident, could intensify assassinations in Lebanon (Tripoli in particular) that would only fuel further and more devastating attacks against Hezbollah.

Keeping conflicts in Lebanon from spreading elsewhere used to be easier, mostly as a result of backroom or tacit deals between Riyadh and Tehran. Indeed, many sources in Lebanon speculated to me that the recent government formation was evidence of such efforts. But while Arab and Persian leaders may agree to tamp it down in Lebanon, the increasingly sectarian nature of the fight in Syria has drawn both Iran and the Arab Gulf countries into a bloody battle that the porous Lebanese-Syria border, never clearly demarcated, will not contain. Ironically, Hezbollah's recent efforts to secure the Qalamoun area for the Assad regime could well push the Sunni-based Syrian opposition's central front into Lebanon, making it another theatre in an increasingly regional sectarian war.

Hitting Western targets in Lebanon or Iraq as retribution for jihadist attacks would not make the situation any better, either. Public opinion in the West is gathering against Iran, and Hezbollah opening this second front would only deepen skepticism that the Islamic Republic will cut the kind of deal with Washington that would protect Western interests in the Middle East and check counter proliferation concerns among its regional allies.

To head off further escalation, Hezbollah should scale down its involvement in Syria and return its troops home to Lebanon while a graceful exit is still possible. While reports indicate that Saudi Arabia has launched a campaign to support the Sunni opposition, Hezbollah and Iran should read such support for what it is: an attempt to squeeze out extremists and peel members of Al-Qaeda affiliates over to more moderate groups under control of regional Arab countries, and an attempt to push Bashar al-Assad to the bargaining table.

Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>).

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