Violence and Political Rifts on the Rise in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Recent street battles, bombings, and political defections mark the beginning of the end of Hezbollah's relative impunity in Lebanon, potentially heralding protracted violence.

On July 9, a car bomb detonated in Beirut's Hezbollah-controlled southern suburb of Dahiya, killing one person and injuring dozens of others, mostly Shiites. A day later, the parliamentary speaker announced that retired Christian general Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement would be leaving the Hezbollah-led "March 8" bloc in parliament. Since 2006, the FPM's alliance with Hezbollah has facilitated the Shiite militia's political dominance of Lebanon. If the new split persists, it will represent a significant shift in the country's political dynamics -- and further isolation of Hezbollah -- at a moment when Lebanese Sunnis are becoming increasingly militant.

FIGHTING IN SIDON

For more than two years, the war in Syria has been threatening Lebanon's stability. The presence of nearly half a million mostly Sunni refugees from next door has skewed Lebanon's delicate sectarian demographics, and the deaths of thousands of Sunnis at the hands of the nominally Shiite Alawite Assad regime have raised tensions to the boiling point. Most worrisome, Lebanese factions with rival combatants in Syria have been clashing at home as well. In Tripoli, for example, Sunni Salafists have been battling Alawite supporters of the Assad regime for nearly a year; Sunnis and Shiites have also been killing one another in the northern border region near Hermel.

The latest and most serious sectarian clashes, however, have occurred in the southern city of Sidon, culminating in a June 24 battle between Hezbollah militiamen and 200-300 heavily armed supporters of enigmatic Salafist cleric Sheikh Ahmed Assir. Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) units participated in the day-long skirmishes, including an assault on Assir's compound in the neighborhood of Abra. According to Lebanese sources, LAF soldiers fired over 400,000 rounds during the battle. By day's end, Assir's forces were routed, but eighteen Lebanese soldiers and twenty-eight other gunmen were killed.

Although there is no indication that LAF troops precoordinated their operations with Hezbollah, reports from the battle suggest that, at minimum, the militia fought alongside the military. This fact -- combined with the LAF's previous operations targeting Sunnis who support the Syrian rebels -- has only strengthened widespread suspicions that the military has a pro-Shiite bias. Meanwhile in Washington, the Abra incident may prompt questions in Congress about the continued provision of $100 million per year to the LAF.

THE NEXT SAMARRA?

On July 9, two weeks after the fighting ended in Sidon, a large car bomb detonated near Hezbollah's residential and office complex in Beirut. The incident was reportedly preceded by four other interdicted attempts to attack the neighborhood. Although it remains unclear who carried out the bombing, leading suspects include Lebanese Salafists and Syrian rebels -- no surprise given the escalating anger at Hezbollah's prominent role in killing Sunnis in Syria. The main rebel coalition, the Free Syrian Army, had previously pledged to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon, while prominent Sunni Islamist cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi declared that the so-called "Party of God" was really the "Party of Satan."

Despite this burgeoning Sunni-Shiite animosity, both Hezbollah and the Sunni-led "March 14" bloc have sought to deescalate the situation in recent days, no doubt mindful of the 2006 attack on the main Shiite shrine in Samarra, Iraq, which launched years of sectarian violence. In separate statements, Hezbollah and March 14 leader Saad Hariri blamed Israel for the July 9 bombing.

FISSURES IN MARCH 8

According to Amal Party leader and perennial speaker of parliament Nabih Berri, the FPM's July 10 departure from the March 8 bloc was based on "domestic issues," not on Hezbollah's "resistance" against Israel, which the movement still supports. Although the FPM had been politically aligned with March 8 since 2006, when Aoun signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah, the party experienced a series of very public disagreements with the militia in recent months. In particular, Aoun opposed Hezbollah's call for an eighteen-month extension of parliament and an extended term for LAF chief of staff Jean Kahwaji, who is due to retire shortly. Instead, Aoun pressed for an unobtainable agreement on a new electoral law and new elections, in addition to asking that his son-in-law, LAF special forces head Gen. Chamel Roukoz, be named the new chief of staff.

Aoun opposed the extension because parliament is slated to elect the next president of Lebanon in 2014; as the legislature is currently constituted, he would stand little chance of winning that office. At the same time, if Kahwaji remains chief of staff, precedent suggests he would quickly emerge as the consensus frontrunner for the presidency.

Aoun and Hezbollah also appear to differ on the composition of the government currently being formed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam. Until recently, the twenty-four-member cabinet was to be allocated evenly between the March 14 bloc, the March 8 bloc, and ministers selected by the premier and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Under the complicated proposed formula, March 8 Shiites would have received five cabinet seats while the FPM and the bloc's Armenian Christians would have divvied up just three seats. Aoun, it seems, was pushing for the FPM to receive five of the cabinet's twelve overall Christian seats.

With the FPM now gone, the contours of the new government are even more uncertain. March 14 was already unsure about consenting to sit in a cabinet with Hezbollah for fear of alienating its Sunni supporters. Whatever the outcome, the new government will almost certainly be even less effective and decisive than its moribund caretaker predecessor.

IMPLICATIONS

While the disagreements between the FPM and Hezbollah are clear, Aoun's calculus for leaving March 8 -- assuming it was even his choice -- is more difficult to understand. In Beirut, some say the Saudis have been pressuring Aoun as part of their efforts to undermine the Assad regime, threatening to expel his financial supporters from the kingdom if he continues to partner with Hezbollah. Aoun had dinner with the Saudi ambassador to Beirut earlier last week, further fueling the rumors. At the same time, the general may simply be using such meetings to leverage political concessions from Hezbollah; after all, many of his constituents fear the implications of a Sunni takeover in Syria and thus have little problem with Assad remaining in power.

In any case, the benefit of Aoun going solo is unclear -- March 14 is no more likely to support his presidential candidacy than before, or even to allow him to retain control of key assets such as the Ministry of Energy. One possibility, however unlikely, is that he may be hedging his bets, attempting to better position Lebanon's Christians for an eventual Sunni victory in Syria. Or perhaps the eighty-year-old politician is hoping for a detente with March 14, to make one last bid for the presidency.

For Hezbollah, too, the loss of Aoun is problematic. Although the endemic corruption in FPM-controlled ministries was an albatross for the militia, Aoun's party was still the Christian face of March 8. Without it, Hezbollah and Amal revert to a narrowly Shiite bloc at a time when Syria-related sectarian strife is spiking in Lebanon. Yet given Hezbollah's deteriorating regional stature, stubborn commitment to Assad, and dominant military posture in Lebanon, the militia may believe it no longer requires Aoun's Christian cover, particularly if a sympathetic Kahwaji becomes the presidential frontrunner. Hezbollah also likely calculates that if Assad wins, its prospects will be buoyed, while if the rebels triumph, Aoun and Lebanon's other Christians will be predisposed to pursue an alliance of minorities with the Shiites against the Sunnis.

The longer-term consequences of Aoun's defection remain to be seen. If Lebanese politics were functional, his departure from March 8 would constitute a real shakeup of stagnant parliamentary dynamics. Given the new government's limited mandate, however, the change may have little or no effect at all, barring an unlikely FPM shift toward March 14.

Equally consequential for the country's future trajectory is the Dahiya attack, which marks the beginning of the end of Hezbollah's relative impunity. For years, the militia has been intimidating and periodically attacking its political enemies, including Sunnis. Yet the Syrian uprising has emboldened Hezbollah's domestic opponents at a time when it appears to be losing political allies, and Lebanon will likely see increased sectarian violence as a result. And if the LAF continues to be viewed as supporting one constituency over another, it could face mounting stresses and casualties.

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