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Syria's Instability Reaches Lebanon

by [David Schenker](#)

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Brief Analysis

The war in Syria is raising the risk of all-out confrontation between Sunni and Shiite extremists in Lebanon, though the violence might be worse if not for the U.S.-supported Lebanese Armed Forces.

Recent fighting in Lebanon between pro- and anti-Assad forces raises the specter that spillover from Syria will engulf its neighbor. With Washington focused on the crises in Syria and Egypt, perennially-on-the-brink Lebanon is a second-tier concern for now, but it will not remain so if Islamist militants gain the upper hand politically or, worse, acquire Syrian chemical weapons.

BAABDA PRINCIPLES NOT HOLDING UP WELL

In June, Lebanese president Michel Suleiman convened a meeting of the country's diverse sectarian and political leadership. During this so-called National Dialogue, the first such gathering in nearly two years, he forged a consensus between the pro-Western "March 14" opposition bloc and the Shiite militia Hizballah's "March 8" bloc, which controls the current government. The agreement, known as the Baabda Declaration, affirmed the need for calm. It also called for enhanced support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and -- most important given the divisive nature of Syria's war -- a commitment to disassociate "from the regional axes and international conflicts, as well as abiding tensions and regional crises." Notwithstanding the war next door -- in which Hizballah backs the Assad regime and the March 14 "Future Movement" supports the rebels -- the agreement underpinned a tense quiet until October, when a car bombing in Beirut took the life of Internal Security Forces investigations chief Wissam al-Hassan.

The death of the March 14-aligned Hassan, along with two failed attacks on the bloc's prominent Christian leaders,

evoked a return to 2004-2007, when nearly a dozen senior opposition members were killed, likely by Syria and/or Hizballah. Concerned about the deteriorating security situation, March 14 announced that it would boycott the March 8 government and the National Dialogue until Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigned. It also accused Hizballah of violating the Baabda Declaration by deploying troops to Syria to defend the nominally Shiite Alawite Assad regime, and by dispatching an Iranian aerial drone over Israel -- two steps that the militia's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, claimed credit for in an October 11 speech.

Meanwhile, Hizballah has been criticizing March 14 for breaching the Baabda principles by providing Syrian rebels with arms. In late November, the pro-Hizballah Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar* published wiretap transcripts of March 14 parliamentarian Okab Sakr talking to Free Syrian Army (FSA) leaders in Turkey about transferring weapons and ammunition. Sakr has admitted such activity; his role as a conduit for Saudi weapons was first reported by *Time* magazine in September. Although opposition officials claim he was acting on his own, the *al-Akhbar* transcripts -- in which Sakr invokes March 14 leader Saad Hariri -- suggest otherwise. Hizballah and its Christian coalition partner, Michel Aoun of the Free Patriotic Movement, are demanding that Sakr's parliamentary immunity be stripped, and Lebanese courts have initiated an investigation.

HIZBALLAH IN SYRIA

Although Sakr's legal fate is uncertain, Hizballah will almost certainly face zero consequences for its activities in Syria. Nasrallah first acknowledged the militia's deployment in October, suggesting that its operations were merely intended to protect Lebanese Shiites across the border. Yet increasing Hizballah casualties -- including the loss of top military commander Ali Hussein Nassif and the kidnapping of intelligence official (and Nasrallah nephew) Ali Safa -- tell a different story, as do reports from FSA sources and former Assad regime officials.

To be sure, information from such sources must be taken with a grain of salt. Yet defectors from Assad's Air Force Intelligence Directorate have reported 1,500 Hizballah troops stationed in Syria, and the FSA claims the militia has participated in battles around Homs, Hama, and Damascus. Anecdotally, Lebanese Shiites report that quiet burials of Hizballah members have been ongoing in southern Lebanon for nearly a year. More troubling, several sources -- including the *New York Times*, citing a "senior American official" -- indicate that Hizballah units are guarding or stationed adjacent to Syrian chemical weapons depots.

LEBANESE FOMENT AND THE LAF

Spillover from Syria is having a political, economic, and social impact on Lebanon. More than 130,000 Syrians have already registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Lebanon. No formal camps have yet been established to accommodate them, even though many are destitute and facing increasingly desperate conditions with the onset of winter. Prime Minister Mikati has requested \$180 million in international assistance to cover the anticipated expenses of caring for these refugees through next year. (For more on the economic and political situation in Lebanon, see [PolicyWatch 2007](#).)

Meanwhile, political fault lines on Syria have erupted in violence in several Lebanese flash zones where rival constituencies reside in close proximity. For months, the predominantly Sunni city of Tripoli has seen sporadic fighting between Alawites and Sunnis. After seventeen Lebanese Sunni fighters were killed in Syria earlier this month, however, hostilities spiked, with skirmishes involving machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars killing more than a dozen before the LAF intervened.

The southern city of Sidon -- Hariri's hometown -- has also witnessed clashes in recent weeks, including an incident last month in which Hizballah members shot two bodyguards working for Ahmed Assir, a rival Sunni Salafi cleric. Assir has since presided over a series of large anti-Assad, anti-Hizballah demonstrations in the largely Sunni city. The violence in Lebanon's second- and third-largest cities has not yet spread to Beirut, but political tensions in the

capital could degenerate into fighting as the country prepares for parliamentary elections in 2013.

The situation might have been worse if not for the LAF, which has been deploying continuously to sectarian flashpoints over the past two years. The mission has proved difficult, and several missteps have led to local criticism that the LAF is biased in favor of Hizballah and the Assad regime. Early on, for example, LAF personnel detained Syrian refugees fleeing the carnage and did not take even symbolic measures to protect them from the regime's cross-border attacks. Then, in May 2011, an anti-Assad Sunni cleric and his colleague were killed at an LAF checkpoint in Akkar. More recently, several Hizballah militiamen were detained while on a scouting mission in the Shouf; they were rumored to have been carrying identification cards issued by military intelligence.

Despite the LAF's shortcomings, however, Washington has continued to provide it with \$75 million per year in Foreign Military Financing, which accounts for the lion's share of Lebanon's military procurement allocation. Although it has not always been effective, the LAF is perhaps the country's sole reliable military institution -- the Internal Security Forces are widely seen as Sunni, and the General Security Directorate as Shiite.

U.S. PRIORITIES IN LEBANON

If current trends continue, Lebanese Islamists seem better positioned than Washington's moderate friends to capitalize on Assad's ouster and the emergence of a Sunni-led government in Syria. To forestall such Salafist/Islamist gains, the Obama administration should cajole the March 14 coalition to get its house in order now so that it is better able to compete for Sunni hearts and minds as Syria unravels and Lebanon's elections approach. Saad Hariri has been outside Lebanon for nearly eighteen months, and his absence has led to a Sunni vacuum within the coalition.

Washington must also back up its strong statements about the security of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. Among other things, this issue is important for Lebanon's security, since such weapons could be leaked to Hizballah; while perhaps unlikely, they could also fall into the hands of Sunni militants in Syria, who might then transfer them to ideological fellow travelers in Lebanon. Either scenario would heighten the risk of chaos in Lebanon and another conflagration with Israel.

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