

Syria's Crisis Reaches Beirut

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Brief Analysis

The latest clashes in Beirut show that as long as the Syrian conflict persists, Lebanon's internal security will be increasingly at risk.

The fifteen-month Syrian crisis has finally reached the heart of Lebanon. Beginning late Sunday night, armed youths supporting two Sunni factions -- the anti-Assad Future Movement, led by Saad al-Hariri, and the pro-Assad Arab Movement Party, led by Shaker al-Berjawi -- clashed in Beirut using automatic weapons, sniper rifles, and rocket-propelled grenades, with at least three reportedly dead and nine wounded.

The clashes erupted after Sunni cleric Ahmed Abdul Wahid and a colleague were shot dead in their car at an army checkpoint in northern Lebanon. The soldier who committed the act was reportedly Shiite. Leading up to the incident, a series of clashes occurred over the past week in Tripoli between Sunnis and minority Alawites, the sect to which Bashar al-Assad belongs. The fighting was sparked by the arrest of Shadi Mawlawi, an Islamist activist who had been assisting Syrian refugees. To many Sunnis, arresting a man whom the Syrian government accused of overseeing terrorist activities was a step too far for Beirut in appeasing Damascus.

In response to unrest in the north, Sunnis took to the streets yesterday in Beirut, blocking roads and setting dumpsters on fire in Cornishe al-Mazraa, the Airport Road, Kola, Aisha Bakkar, Verdun, and the Sports City Stadium in Tariq al-Jadidah. By midnight, the army had cleared most of the capital of protestors, with smoldering dumpsters and an increased security presence the only evidence of the demonstrations.

Yet the army did not appear to intervene in Tariq al-Jadidah. Around midnight, Berjawi called in to Lebanese news channel al-Jadid, which had a live feed of the clashes, telling the station that "around 300 armed men" were trying to take over the group's headquarters in the neighborhood and calling on the army to help. Dramatically, he had to hang up suddenly after his bodyguard was shot by a sniper. His headquarters were later evacuated after the army arrived to pull him and his supporters out. In a press conference soon afterward, Berjawi claimed that the attacks were directed by the top echelon of the Future Movement, which has yet to release a statement on the matter.

POTENTIAL FOR CONFLAGRATION

Both of the factions involved in the Beirut clashes are Sunni, meaning the fighting is not sectarian in nature. Although Shiite neighborhoods such as Shiah, the Hizballah-controlled southern suburb of Dahiya, and Druze areas in the mountains above Beirut reportedly armed themselves and were put on high alert, they have preferred to remain bystanders to the violence so far.

The bad blood between the Arab and Future Movements goes back to 2008, when the former defected from the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance (which has been particularly critical of the current Lebanese government for its handling of the Syria crisis) and joined the Hizballah-dominated, pro-Syrian March 8 alliance. In an interview with Syria's al-Dunia television this past March, Berjawi stated, "Whatever happens in Syria will determine the fate of the world." He has voiced his support for the Assad regime and the "Muqawama" (i.e., resistance) in Iraq, in Lebanon, and against Israel.

A broader conflagration along sectarian lines is still possible, however. Many Future Movement supporters believe that the state -- ostensibly at Prime Minister Najib Mikati's direction -- has failed to remain neutral in the Syria crisis and has in fact become the Assad regime's accomplice in stymying any Lebanon-based efforts to help the opposition. Regarding the killing of Sheikh Wahid, for example, Future parliamentarian Khaled Daher told Reuters, "If shots were fired at the tires, we would say there was a mistake. But we consider this a direct targeting from the army." In response to the shooting, Sunni sheikh Ahmed al-Rifai threatened to form a "Free Lebanese Army" in the north, based on the idea that although many privates in the army are Sunni (particularly in the north), his community is not being represented vis-a-vis the Syria crisis.

DRAWING LINES IN THE SAND

At the funeral for Sheikh Wahid and his colleague, broadcast live on Lebanese television, Syrian opposition flags could be seen, and speakers brandished threats and called for an investigation. On one hand, a statement delivered on behalf of Wahid's family alleged that the army had planned to kill him and demanded resignations from among its leadership. The statement noted, "We are not going to take our own rights ourselves [to pursue revenge], as this will lead to civil war; we will let the army solve the situation."

On the other hand, Daher made a long speech in which he demanded retribution, calling for the arrest and prosecution of two captains, one lieutenant, and nineteen privates whom he accused of involvement in the shooting. In his view, "They deserve to be hung for their conspiracy against Sheikh Ahmed and the Lebanese people." Echoing Sheikh Rifai, he blamed both Beirut and Syrian intelligence for the killing and emphasized that most privates in the Lebanese army come from the north: "We are the spinal cord of the Lebanese army, we built this army with our tears and blood...We are telling the Syrian government that Sheikh Abdul Wahid paid the price because he helped the Syrian people against the regime...[W]ith the help of Akkar and Tripoli, we are going to fight the Syrians."

Meanwhile, protestors in parts of the north are closing off roads with burning tires, with the army clearing them only to see them closed again. At the funeral in Akkar, the spokesman for a large group of armed men told a Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation reporter that the "army means nothing to us," and that authorities have "from now until Wahid is buried" to arrest those responsible. He promised that the weapons on display were nothing, warning "you have not seen our best weapons yet."

IMPLICATIONS

The army has historically been viewed as a unifying institution in Lebanon, with all of the country's sects serving together. Without the army, so the thinking goes, Lebanon would devolve into sectarian fiefdoms. Indeed, one of the major crises of the Lebanese civil war was the army's disintegration along sectarian lines in 1975, perpetuating a long cycle of bloodshed and destruction. Fearing a repeat of that cycle, the army has had to selectively pick its fights,

evidenced by its decision against intervening between the Future and Arab Movements.

The most worrisome facet of the latest clashes and the tension in the north is that many Lebanese believe the army has lost its independence and is being used by the government to fight Syria's battle. This has led to widespread Sunni dissatisfaction, evidenced by Rifai's threat to form a splinter force as well as clear resentment emanating from northerners, who believe they are shouldering the burden of army conscription only to further Syrian goals. Future clashes and other acts that increase tension within Lebanon could impact the army's stability. In the immediate term, the army will most likely continue to be tested by road closures, protests, and, perhaps, renewed fighting.

The potential for more unrest seems to vindicate the call by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain for their nationals to leave Lebanon. As long as the conflict in Syria persists, Lebanon's peace and security will be increasingly at risk.

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, is a master's candidate at Georgetown University and is currently in Beirut. ❖

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