Lebanon’s Security Concerns over Syria

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Brief Analysis

Since the uprising against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad began a year ago, Lebanon has lived in fear that the worsening violence will spill across the border. In recent days, that fear has come close to being realized with reports that Syrian troops fired into Lebanon during clashes with rebels. The reports were mixed, with some stating that Syria staged an incursion across the frontier to destroy a house that allegedly harbored members of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA), while others claimed that a few machine gun rounds strayed across the border during fighting on the Syrian side. The Lebanese government, which is backed by Damascus, denied that any incursions occurred, but opposition supporters accused Syrian troops of burning homes belonging to Lebanese who sympathize with the rebels next door.

The rival views neatly reflect a deep political division in Lebanon. The poles are represented by the Future Movement, which is headed by Saad Hariri and openly champions the Syrian revolutionaries, and the Iranian-backed Shiite militia Hizballah, which continues to support its ally in Damascus. Prime Minister Najib Mikati has adopted a policy of noninterference on Syria, placing it at odds with the consensus view of the twenty-two-member Arab League. Lebanon was one of only two countries to voice reservations over the league's February decision to formally recognize the Syrian opposition and ask the UN Security Council to deploy a peacekeeping force.

Signs of Spillover

Beirut's evident discomfort in facing the crisis is hardly surprising given Lebanon's long history of living in Syria's shadow, not to mention the rift between pro- and anti-Assad camps. With its fractious politics and complex sectarian demographics, Lebanon is the neighbor most susceptible to destabilizing influences emanating from the confrontation in Syria. On February 10, for example, clashes broke out between Sunni and Alawite gunmen in the northern city of Tripoli, leaving three people dead and another twenty wounded. Indeed, Lebanon's second-largest city is probably the most volatile sectarian flashpoint in the country, and clashes routinely flare there during times of political tension.

The increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian struggle -- which pits a mainly Sunni opposition against an entrenched, mainly Alawite elite -- poses dangers for Lebanon, where Sunni-Shiite sentiment is already raw and risks becoming further enflamed. Odds are high that Tripoli and other flashpoints where Sunnis and Shiites live in close proximity will see trouble in the weeks and months ahead.

Other ominous portents include renewed tensions between the Palestinian Fatah movement and Salafi jihadist groups in the perennially unstable Ain al-Hilwa Palestinian refugee camp near Sidon, arising from the exposure of a militant cell that planned to bomb Lebanese army targets. Further south, sporadic bomb attacks against the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have resumed after a hiatus of more than three years. Since May of last year, three roadside bombs have been detonated in separate attacks against vehicles carrying French and Italian troops, wounding sixteen peacekeepers. And in November-December, unidentified militants launched Katyusha rockets into Israel, the first such fire from Lebanon in more than two years. No hard evidence has emerged linking these incidents unequivocally to the Assad regime, but few Lebanese are surprised at the spate of security breaches just as

Syria passes through its gravest crisis in four decades.

Battle Lines in the North and East

More direct examples of spillover can be found along Lebanon's northern and eastern borders. Syrian troops have planted landmines along much of the northern frontier and staged several brief incursions into Lebanese territory, notably near the town of Arsal in the eastern Beqa Valley and in the Wadi Khaled district in the north. Both areas are populated mainly by Sunnis who support the uprising against Assad and have harbored Syrian refugees and FSA members.

Given Beirut's sympathies with Damascus, the FSA cannot use Lebanon as a logistical and operational base for cross-border military actions inside Syria. Moreover, Wadi Khaled and Arsal are geographically small areas and therefore relatively controllable by the state. As it is, the FSA presence in Lebanon appears to be minimal and ad hoc -- a mix of fighters recovering from wounds or temporarily sheltering from Syrian army offensives on the other side of the border.

Implications for Hizballah and Iran

Lebanon's security situation in the months ahead will depend greatly on unfolding developments in Syria, largely because Hizballah and Iran face the potential breakup of their "axis of resistance" -- the pan-regional alliance of countries and actors opposed to Israel and Western interests in the Middle East. Hamas, the alliance's leading Sunni component, already appears to have abandoned its erstwhile hosts in Damascus.

For Hizballah (and Iran), the least favorable outcome would likely be a smooth transition from the Assad regime to a moderate, Western-friendly successor that better reflects Syria's Sunni majority and realigns itself away from Iran and toward Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Such a development could turn Iraq into the new regional battlefield, with Iran and its Iraqi allies facing off against Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. That scenario would leave Hizballah far from the front lines, geostrategically isolated on the shores of the Mediterranean.

If a Sunni-dominated government does emerge in Damascus, it could embolden Lebanon's Future Movement and the opposition March 14 coalition in general to take a firmer stance on Hizballah, particularly regarding the divisive issue of the Shiite group's weapons. Such assertiveness would not be without risks, however. Hizballah's priority will remain the defense of its formidable arsenal and military infrastructure, and it can be expected to act swiftly and preemptively if it feels threatened or cornered by a newly emboldened March 14.

Alternatively, the arrival of a moderate Sunni government in Damascus could strengthen the ruling, pro-Syria March 8 coalition in Lebanon. Should the Assad regime fall, Hizballah may fill the vacuum and become a leading source of patronage to politicians and groups that traditionally looked to Damascus for support. Although Hizballah's key coalition partner -- Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement -- would still depend on support from his Christian constituency, his anti-Sunni inclinations could compel him to deepen his alliance with Hizballah. This would in turn consolidate March 8 into a Christian-Shiite front, helping the coalition face off against a Turkish- and Saudi-backed Sunni renaissance in Syria and a more confident Future Movement in Lebanon.

Still, given the emerging insurgency and fears of civil war in Syria, a smooth transition to stable, moderate rule is perhaps the least likely scenario at the moment. Instead, the country appears to be sliding into protracted conflict, with neither the regime nor the opposition able to decisively overcome the other. International diplomacy has been hesitant to address the crisis. Russia and China's continued backing of Assad has prevented strong censure by the Security Council, leaving the West and its Arab allies to pin their hopes on successful mediation by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. Different intervention options are being considered, such as arming the FSA or establishing humanitarian corridors, but none of them is particularly palatable to nervous Western governments fearful of becoming embroiled in another Middle Eastern conflict.

Conclusion

If the West and its regional allies decide to intervene in Syria, Beirut's effort to skirt the fallout will become even more difficult, especially if Hizballah feels compelled to provide direct support to its beleaguered ally in Damascus and preserve the "axis of resistance." Given Lebanon's vulnerability to developments next door, the government will continue to distance itself as much as possible from the crisis. Accordingly, the West should not expect too much help from Beirut in resolving Syria's problems. Lebanon's deep political divisions and traditional subservience to Damascus leave it with no leverage over Syria, instead making it particularly prone to feeling the backlash.

Nicholas Blanford is the Beirut correspondent of The Times *(London) and the* Christian Science Monitor *and a consultant with IHS/Jane's. He has lived in Lebanon since 1994.* ❖

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