

Stability in Lebanon Threatened, Again

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

This past Monday, a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) transport was targeted by a car bomb that killed five soldiers and wounded twenty-five others. The strike was the third on the LAF since June and occurred in increasingly violent northern Lebanon. In fact, violence in and around Tripoli, the largest city in the north, is now becoming routine. This explosive situation threatens the country's already fragile stability, while providing Syria with an opportunity to loosen the pro-Western ruling coalition's tenuous hold on power.

Recent Violence

In May, the Lebanese government made the unprecedented decision to curtail Hizballah's control over Beirut airport and to dismantle the Shiite militia's telecommunications network. Hizballah, a Syrian- and Iranian-backed militia, demanded that the government reverse the decision. When it refused, the organization mobilized its forces to take control of Beirut.

Sunni-Alawite fighting. Images of Hizballah manhandling March 14-aligned Sunni Muslims in the capital enraged Lebanon's Sunnis, sparking reprisal attacks against the Shiite organization's Syrian-backed allies in the Alawite community in the north. The Syrian government is dominated by that country's Alawite minority and has close ties with the community in Lebanon. Sunni Muslims, some of whom are religiously conservative Salafists -- reportedly backed by Saudi Arabia, where Salafism is the government-sanctioned school of Islam -- attacked the headquarters of the Syrian Socialist Party and other opposition strongholds in and around Tripoli. (In this complicated situation, still other Sunni militants are supported by Syria.) After nine people were killed on June 23, the LAF was deployed to quell the hostilities. Fighting was temporarily halted, but the LAF had to be redeployed in July when violence resumed.

On August 13, a bus bomb in Tripoli killed fifteen people, including ten LAF soldiers. On September 8, political leaders from northern Lebanon signed an agreement -- brokered by March 14 leader Saad Hariri -- which brought a respite from the violence until this week's attack.

Lebanese Forces-Marada killings. A few weeks after the August 13 attack, members of the March 14--allied Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) clashed with pro-Syrian Christian Marada party members near Tripoli. Skirmishes centered on an LF rally slated to be held adjacent to Marada party headquarters; in the resulting violence, Yousef Franjiyeh, head of the party's office in Bsarma, was killed. At a press conference on September 17, Marada party head Suleiman Franjiyeh accused LF leader Samir Geagea and LF parliament member Farid Habib of complicity in the killing and demanded to hear results of the investigation "within fifteen days."

Heightened Concerns about Syria

The fighting in northern Lebanon raises concerns that the conflict may escalate and broaden, bringing Lebanon once again to the brink of civil war. For March 14, reports that the Alawite Syrian regime was arming its Lebanese co-religionists resembled the events of May 2007 when the Syrian-backed al-Qaeda affiliate, Fatah Islam, beheaded twenty-five LAF officers, touching off a four-month battle in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. More troubling, however, were statements from Damascus that continued fighting in north Lebanon threatened Syrian interests. Lebanese officials were particularly incensed by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's comments on September 4 about the "fragile" security situation in the north, which he attributed to "foreign-backed [Saudi] extremism." As March 14 leader Walid Jumblatt described, "al-Asad is linking Syrian security and the situation in north Lebanon. He has used it as a new pretext to interfere in Lebanese affairs."

On September 22, the eve of Lebanese president Michel Suleiman's visit to Washington, several Lebanese networks reported Syrian troops massing on the border, a move portrayed as a measure to defend Syria against Lebanese Salafists. Less than a week later, on September 27, in the most brazen terrorist attack on Syrian soil since the 1980s, a massive car bomb exploded in Damascus.

Predictably, the Syrian government has attributed the Damascus attack to "Sunni fundamentalists" -- i.e., al-Qaeda. Given the opaque nature of Syria, the Asad regime's longstanding support for terrorists, and the government's propensity for killing its own citizens, this attribution is far from certain. For instance, the Syrians are suspected in several local political murders, including former Syrian viceroy of Lebanon Ghazi Kenaan. He is believed to have been killed because he knew too much about the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri -- a crime for which Syria is the leading suspect -- and, more recently, the killing of Muhammad Suleiman, who was in charge of Syria's nuclear program.

At the same time, it would not be surprising if Sunni fundamentalists were able to carry out operations in Syria. Since 2003, the Asad regime has assisted al-Qaeda members by facilitating their travel across Syrian territory into Iraq and, according to U.S. Central Command, has allowed the organization to train on its territory. It has also facilitated the movement of Sunni militants into Lebanon and reportedly Jordan. Through these actions, Damascus has permitted Salafist presence on its territory, leaving itself vulnerable to attacks.

Little Prospect for Progress in the National Dialogue

On September 16, Lebanese leaders convened for a national dialogue session at Baabda presidential palace, under the auspices of President Suleiman. The top item on the agenda was the national defense strategy, i.e., what role Hezbollah's military force should play in Lebanon. The issue has been at the top of a long list of controversial topics since Hezbollah unilaterally launched a cross-border raid in July 2006, bringing Lebanon into war with Israel.

More recently, the issue of a national defense strategy regained prominence due to what appeared to be a case of mistaken identity. On August 28, a Hezbollah fighter in south Lebanon opened fire on an LAF helicopter, killing the pilot. The killer, who said he believed the helicopter was Israeli, was turned over by Hezbollah to Lebanese authorities. During an early-September television appearance, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah called the incident "regrettable" -- while noting that the shooter was behaving "naturally or instinctively" -- and issued condolences to the family of the LAF "martyr."

The helicopter incident and Hezbollah's 2006 raid into Israel highlight the necessity for a national defense strategy. Beirut does not exert sovereignty over Lebanon, nor will it until Hezbollah's weapons are brought under the authority of the state. During his inaugural speech on May 26, Suleiman laid out a formula making the LAF the primary defender of Lebanon, but also noting that the army would "benefit from the capabilities of the resistance in the service of the national defense strategy." It is unclear, however, how the president intends to make this contorted plan a reality. Regardless, given Hezbollah's longstanding aversion to relinquishing any operational freedom to the state, there is little indication that the dialogue on national defense will produce a solution under which the Lebanese government controls the country -- in fact as well as in name.

Conclusion

For the immediate future, violence in the north and against the LAF will continue to challenge the country's stability. The national dialogue may serve to calm some prevailing local tensions, but it is unlikely to resolve key points of contention between the March 14 coalition and the Hezbollah-led opposition. Meanwhile, if the Asad regime remains true to form, Damascus will leverage the situation to weaken its pro-West enemies in Beirut. The Sunni problem in north Lebanon, which has been fueled at least in part by Syria, undermines the central Sunni component of the March 14 coalition to the benefit of Hezbollah. As the spring 2009 Lebanese elections approach, it is a trend that does not bode well for Washington and its allies in Beirut.

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