

Lebanon and the Syria Crisis

Written by Vicky Kelberer and Augustus Richard Norton

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VICKY KELBERER AND AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON, AUG 17 2012

With the battle for Aleppo continuing and Syria on a course to civil war, neighboring Lebanon finds itself in a precarious spot. Sectarian divisions, especially between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, have deepened in Lebanon over the past decade, particularly since the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the 2006 war with Israel, and the Hezbollah-led incursion into West Beirut in 2008. The Syria crisis has further exacerbated communal fault-lines. As Syrian refugees pour in, the Lebanese have become increasingly divided on just how they feel their government should respond to the crisis. Periodic clashes in Tripoli along the aptly named "Syria Street", where an Alawi community abuts a Sunni majority illustrate how quickly transplanted Syrian enmities may explode, and how powerless rival political elites may be to dampen the violence.

As some Lebanese fight amongst themselves and with their newfound Syrian refugee neighbors, the question is whether Lebanon can avoid being sucked deeper into the internal Syrian conflict. An already frail political arena is unable to reach a consensus over how to respond to the crisis. Although the growing numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon prompts demands for military and material aid, the Lebanese government has tried to keep the Syrian crisis at arm's length.

The most apparent threat to the domestic stability of Lebanon is one of human security. Official estimates place the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon at approximately 36,000 as of August 10, and the number of refugees is likely much greater due to undocumented people escaping the conflict. In one 48-hour period in July, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that as many as 32,500 people poured into Lebanon. The effects of the massive influx of refugees have yet to become fully apparent for Lebanon, but the unfathomable human costs for fleeing Syrians demand profound compassion. Upon arriving, they are dependent in large part upon the kindness and donations of private citizens for everything from food to shelter to medical care. Without a formal government institution willing to address their basic needs, Syrian citizens who leave devastated homes with next to nothing have been left to call out to everyone, anyone for help. Hassana Abu Firas, a refugee from al-Qusayr (near Homs), was reported by Al-Jazeera as saying: "We call on the Lebanese government and the Lebanese army to help us, to hide us, to hide our families... We call on the Muslims and the Arab governments to help us.[1]"

These calls have gone largely unanswered by the Lebanese government. It has been reluctant to designate Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon as "refugees" for both political and financial reasons. The Arab-Israeli conflict has already injected hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon. The history of the problematic Palestinian refugee population makes many in Lebanon wary of giving Syrian refugees any incentive to come to Lebanon and stay. Palestinian refugees, many of whom trace their residence in Lebanon to the 1948 war, are typically crowded into densely settled "camps", where jobs are few and far between, food supplies limited, infrastructure inadequate, water scarce, and security in the hands of rival factions. The newly arrived Syrians face many of the same challenges. Denied even the title of "refugee," they are instead referred to as "displaced Syrians," in an apparent attempt to absolve the Lebanese government of any responsibility for their welfare.[2]

The village of Wadi Khaled in northern Lebanon, where many Syrians arrive and stay, is often without electricity and, increasingly in recent weeks, under fire by Syrian forces across the border. Having fled besieged urban quarters in Syria, such as Bab al-Amr, many refugees are living in acute deprivation in order to escape the assaults of a predatory government, not to mention a sometimes vengeful opposition.

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Given the propensity of Syrian troops to shoot across the border and the rising number of kidnappings, the benefit of safety may soon vanish as well. A woman was shot and killed, allegedly by Syrian forces, while walking with her daughter in Masharia al-Qaa on May 5. A few weeks earlier on April 9, a cameraman was shot and killed as he filmed Syrian forces from the Lebanese side of the border. On May 22, eleven Lebanese pilgrims returning from Iran were kidnapped in the province of Aleppo in Syria and have yet to be released. Since then the violence has only crept closer to the border and across it. Residents of northern towns like Wadi Khaled report skirmishes between Lebanese and Syrian forces daily. On July 8 U.S. Ambassador Maura Connelly “voiced U.S. government concern over recent reports of cross-border shelling into northern Lebanon and expressed her condolences for the deaths of Lebanese civilians.[3]” Sheikh ‘Ali al-‘Ali, a leader from Wadi Khaled, reported that incidents of cross-border violence have increased, culminating with the kidnapping of two Lebanese General Security personnel on July 2nd by Syrian forces. While the two men were released a few hours later, the confrontation triggered condemnations on the part of the Lebanese government and increased tensions between the two nations.

In subsequent weeks, instances of cross-border attacks became so numerous that news sources nearly stopped reporting specific events of violence. On July 21 in one of the bloodiest attacks, Syrian forces shelled Lebanese villages they suspected of harboring pro-opposition Syrians, killing twelve and wounding many more. Fifteen Lebanese were also wounded that day in a cross-border raid launched by some 30 Syrian government soldiers. Later that week, in two separate incidents a total of six Syrians (who may have been pro-opposition) were kidnapped, allegedly in retribution for the kidnapping of the Lebanese pilgrims in May. The proximity of Lebanon to the northern frontlines has rendered no one immune to the effects of the conflict.

Unfortunately for the Syrian refugees and Lebanese civilians on the border, the Lebanese political scene is far from prepared to deal with any of the questions raised by the Syrian conflict, let alone those of housing and feeding yet another large refugee population. Since the fall of the national unity government in January 2011, Lebanon has been split between the pro-al-Asad, Hezbollah-led March 8 Alliance and the pro-Western, Sunni-led March 14 Alliance. The Syrian crisis has only served to further polarize Lebanese politics and shake the hold of the March 8 Alliance on power. The March 14 Alliance has been quick to side with the Syrian opposition forces, a popular stance among the Lebanese citizenry that threatens to draw members from March 8 across the aisle, such as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and even Prime Minister Najib Mikati. *Al-Jumhuriya*, a newspaper sympathetic to March 14, frames the Syrian conflict as a plot between Hezbollah and Iran in many of its headlines. On July 5, a lead story reported members of March 14 describing Iran and Hezbollah as “partners in murder” for their resistance to international action against Asad’s government.[4]

Aligned with the Syrian government, the leaders of March 8 at first took to formulating the uprising in the language of President Bashar al-Asad himself. According to Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah speaking on al-Manar, the Syrian conflict is a foreign plot that aims to use the region as a chess board for the great powers, a claim that echoed the Syrian president’s own words. At present, Hezbollah’s leadership seems to have realized the growing popularity of the Syrian opposition movement in Lebanon and the group’s leaders have tempered their rhetoric. Instead of framing the conflict as a Western/Israeli-constructed ploy, al-Manar, the media outlet of Hezbollah, is now more likely to run stories describing it as fighting between remote armed factions and the government. The news outlet has also been quick to point out the perceived supplies and money being funneled into Tripoli by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The costs of political acquiescence to al-Asad for the March 8 alliance may be dear. Throughout July, reports of disagreements in the Mikati cabinet surfaced and Nasrallah came under heavy criticism for his “loyalty speech” to al-Asad following the assassination of three of his top-level ministers including his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat on July 18. The Lebanese newspaper *Al-Jumhuriya*, which is sympathetic to the March 14 Alliance, reported on July 25 that Nasrallah offered to place Hezbollah “Special Forces” (al-quwat al-khassah) at al-Asad’s disposal;[5] however, there is no public evidence that the forces have been dispatched. There is no doubt that Hezbollah has coordinated its plans for defending the strategically vital Biqa valley with Syria.

Following the defections of Syrian Brigadier General Manaf Tlas and Prime Minister Riad Hijab in July and August, respectively, the question remains: will March 8 and Hezbollah jump from al-Asad’s sinking ship? Hezbollah in particular has a huge strategic stake in Syria, not only because Syria has been the entrepôt for its arsenal and the

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only Arab state aligned unequivocally with Iran, but also due to the solidarity shared by the Syrian regime and the Hezbollah leadership. Both emphasize that only through resistance to the designs of the United States and its regional proxy Israel may independence and dignity be preserved. Even so, leading figures in Hezbollah have proven to be coolly analytic in their political calculations and it is doubtful that they intend to go down with Bashar's ship. Instead, they have to be assessing how to preserve a semblance of their privileged relationship with Syria, particularly if the present Syrian regime is toppled. It is true that Nasrallah has enunciated firm support for the regime, but supportive comments have often punctuated long periods of studied silence. Hezbollah is a major political player in Lebanon, and it needs to avoid gratuitously aggravating inter-sectarian tensions, or eroding its still impressive coalescence of support among Shi'i Muslims in Lebanon. Therefore, it enjoys fewer degrees of freedom than Washington-based analysts often presume.

While the tide of popular opinion may lean towards support for their beleaguered Syrian neighbors, many Lebanese find themselves split between sympathy for the opposition and trepidation for what may occur if the conflict is not resolved. Within the context of confessional Lebanon, sectarian and ethnic divisions become apparent. In a Pew Research Center poll conducted in April and May 2012, the Lebanese proved to be the most divided Arab population surveyed regarding whether or not al-Asad should step down. [6] Fifty-three percent of the Lebanese overall agreed that the Syrian president should go, but when broken down between Sunni and Shi'i, the divide is clear: while 80 percent of Sunnis were for al-Asad's resignation, 97 percent of Shi'ites were against it. Lebanese may support the Syrian opposition, but Christians, Druze, Sunnis and Shi'ites also view the refugee problem within their own borders from a sectarian perspective.

One point of political consensus in Lebanon is an opposition to the "tawtin" or naturalization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. A parallel consensus makes it unlikely that Syrian refugees will be permitted to resettle in Lebanon. An influx of those fleeing the crisis, for the most part Sunnis, could upset the confessional balance of power if they reach great enough numbers. In a political climate already rife with conflict, such a change in the confessional balance could be disastrous.

The multiple rifts in Lebanese society have already begun to spill over into violence. Upon the arrest of pro-Syrian opposition figure Shadi al-Moulawi, protests broke out across northern Lebanon that resulted in his release but also left at least eight people dead. On May 21, fighting between rival Sunni groups in Beirut killed two people. In Tripoli, at least 20 people have been killed this year in violence between various groups. On June 13, fighting in al-Qaa (near Hermel in the Biqa valley) left three dead and ten wounded. Throughout July, Syrians in Shi'i-dominated southern Lebanon faced harassment, violence, and even death. In one of the most notorious incidents of activist violence, on June 26 Wissam Alaaedine and others attacked pro-opposition media outlet al-Jadeed TV with guns and firebombs. The following day, youths blockaded the road to the Beirut airport in protest of his arrest. The pro-opposition al-Nahar newspaper ran a story condemning the attack and accusing Hezbollah and Amal of using the conflict to inject radicalism into Lebanese society. Yet the overlapping confessional and political boundaries of Lebanon make clear positions impossible to identify.

The ambivalence of many Lebanese towards intervention in the Syrian conflict is fueled by the perception of volatility in their own country. To get more involved in Syria makes little sense when emotional involvement has already led to violence, death, and upheaval. Add to that the picture of post-regime change instability in Iraq, Libya, and Egypt, and many Lebanese – whether Christian, Shi'i or Sunni – are reluctant to see the al-Asad government completely lose control over the situation. Given the choice between a moral grey area and chaos on the border seeping into their country, many Lebanese will choose the grey area time and time again.

Aside from the local impetus for non-involvement in Syria, regional and international power plays are ever-present in Lebanon and affect the government's choice to remain distant from the conflict. Looming large over the decision to thus far pursue a path of "disassociation" from the Syrian crisis is the ever-present threat of Israel. Fears that what is happening in Syria is simply a result of great power jostling and Israeli desires for turmoil are very real for the Lebanese, who have already spent the last four decades being pushed one way or another by Syria and Israel. What many see as the inevitable showdown between Lebanon and Israel has pressed government officials to avoid taking a stance that would commit their forces to action in Syria, even if the action were providing border security and safe

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passage to refugees. Preventing further complications in politics has become paramount over pursuing an interventionist stance in another country.

Given the Lebanese experiences with external interventions, refugee populations, and civil conflict, to ask the government to get further involved in the crisis in Syria is akin to asking a man missing one eye to give up the other. The current wait-and-see strategy of the March 8 Alliance has served to keep the country from direct involvement up to this point. Yet as the death toll in Syria mounts, Lebanese citizens themselves are killed and wounded, and the harrowing tales of the refugees diffuse throughout Lebanese society, the government's equivocal stance may prove impossible to continue.

What form that action might take, however, is up for debate. It would be unlikely for Lebanon to join the majority of the Arab League in imposing sanctions on its Syrian neighbor. Military intervention by Lebanon in Syria is also unlikely, although this does not preclude opportunistic efforts by Lebanese arms dealers to exploit the demand for bullets and guns, probably with tacit support from local elites. As long as Lebanon sees itself alone in a sea of chaos and enemies, its likely role in the Syrian conflict will be that of a destination for refugees where the blowback from the Syrian civil war will occur as displaced Syrians align with sympathetic Lebanese against Syrian foes and their Lebanese supporters. Yet as the recently resigned U.N. Special Envoy Kofi Annan pointed out on June 26, "Syria is not Libya, it will not implode, it will explode beyond its borders[7]" and Lebanon is right in the path of the blast waves.

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[1] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/20123614524629577.html>

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/2012416132131379581.html>

[3] <http://lebanon.usembassy.gov/pr070912.html>

[4] <http://m.aljournhouria.com/pages/view/15800>

[5] <http://www.aljournhouria.com/news/index/19908>

[6] <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/21/widespread-condemnation-for-assad-in-neighboring-countries/>

[7] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/06/201262475838515783.html>