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Can Hezbollah Survive the Fall of Assad?

By HANIN GHADDAR

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THE Syrian government has tried many times to transfer its crisis to Lebanon, but it has failed to cause a real explosion that would lead to another Lebanese civil war. It has, however, succeeded in inciting small outbreaks of violence that have pushed the country to the verge of a breakdown for the past 17 months.

Clashes in the northern Lebanese city of [Tripoli](#) between Sunnis and Alawites have intensified in recent days — but this time the Lebanese Army intervened to stop the fighting.

Something fundamental has changed: the Shiite militant group [Hezbollah](#), long [Syria](#)'s powerful proxy in Lebanon, has become a wounded beast. And it is walking a very thin line between protecting its assets and aiding a crumbling regime next door.

It seems that the Lebanese Army has finally received political cover, mainly from President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister [Najib Mikati](#), to confront Hezbollah and its allies and to put an end to the violence. On Sunday, 18 armed men from a family with links to Hezbollah were arrested by the Lebanese Army. Two trucks and a warehouse full of weaponry were confiscated.

This arrest is politically significant. It means that the Lebanese prime minister and president are no longer willing to jeopardize stability in Lebanon by giving Hezbollah full cover, as they have usually done since June 2011, [when a Hezbollah-dominated government came to power](#). Indeed, Syria is losing sway in Lebanon, and Hezbollah no longer exercises the same level of control over state institutions as it once did.

Today, Hezbollah is regarded by the Arab street as an ally of a dictator who is killing his people. Losing regional popularity is one thing, but losing its constituency at home is something Hezbollah cannot tolerate. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2013, and Hezbollah prefers not to take any risks. It will do whatever it takes to maintain its control in Lebanon. So will Iran. Iran is doing its utmost to prolong Mr. Assad's rule in Syria, and it would likely do much more to hang on to Lebanon. Tehran can't afford to lose both.

The erosion of Hezbollah's control started with the arrest on Aug. 9 of [Bashar al-Assad](#)'s friend and adviser, the former Lebanese information minister Michel Samaha, in connection with a seizure of explosives that were to be used in northern Lebanon. Lebanese authorities jointly

charged him and the Damascus-based Syrian national security chief, Gen. Ali Mamluk, with plotting “terrorist attacks” and the assassination of political and religious figures in Lebanon.

While none of Syria’s allies in Lebanon spoke in defense of Mr. Samaha, a reaction came from the street a few days later. A Shiite family whose son was abducted in Syria began a wave of random [kidnappings](#) of Syrians; rioters blocked the road to the Beirut airport; dozens of Syrians were abducted, and their shops were vandalized.

The political storm that followed Mr. Samaha’s arrest subsided immediately. Hezbollah did not comment on the arrest, but in a [speech](#) following the events, its chief, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, told the public that he and his party were incapable of controlling the street, hinting at more chaos to come.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese government, which is still dominated by Hezbollah, has failed to address several basic domestic issues like public services and security. Many communities, including Shiites in the south and in Beirut’s southern suburbs, have taken to the streets in the past few months to protest increasing power outages.

Mr. Assad may not yet realize that he is a dead man walking, but Hezbollah does. That does not mean, however, that the party will change its stance on Syria as the [Palestinian](#) militant group Hamas has done. If it did, it would lose its supply lines from Iran. So Hezbollah’s main objective is to avoid a full explosion before the parliamentary elections. After all, an election victory would allow Hezbollah to maintain its political control over Lebanon democratically, without having to resort to arms. Tehran would also prefer to avoid any war that would force Hezbollah to get involved — namely, a war with Israel. That could lead to the party’s losing both its weapons and its supporters.

Hezbollah has an interest in keeping the violence at a simmer for the moment, but the longer Mr. Assad stays, the greater the risk that sectarian tensions will boil over in Lebanon.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/opinion/can-hezbollah-survive-the-fall-of-assad.html?_r=4&ref=opinion&pagewanted=print