

Lebanon's growing Syria crisis

Posted By Sulome Anderson ■ Monday, August 20, 2012 - 11:35 AM



Armed members of the Meqdad family, a powerful Shiite Muslim clan from the Bekaa valley in Lebanon, [announced](#) on Wednesday that they had kidnapped at least 40 Syrians and a Turkish national, sparking a wave of similar kidnappings and riots across Lebanon. Although the Meqdads claimed that the Syrians they kidnapped were members of the Free Syrian Army, a spokesman for the FSA denied this, saying that the hostages were ordinary Syrians who had fled to Lebanon to escape the violence in Syria.

In videos aired on Lebanese television and [rebroadcast](#) on *Al Jazeera English*, masked gunmen from the Meqdad family stated that they had taken the hostages in retaliation for the capture of one of their relative, Hassan al-Meqdad, in Syria by a group claiming to be members of the Free Syrian Army. The Saudi-owned television station *Al-Arabiya* broadcast a [video](#) on Wednesday of a bruised Meqdad confessing that he was a Hezbollah sniper sent to Syria to aid the Assad regime.

Both Hezbollah and the Meqdad family have issued [statements](#) denying that Hassan al-Meqdad is a member of Hezbollah. His family claims that he was living in Syria for over a year and working for a Lebanese bank. In fact, media [reports](#) from June describe the relationship between the Meqdads and Hezbollah to be contentious at best, sometimes erupting into violent clashes.

To complicate things even further, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army denied ever kidnapping Hassan al-Meqdad in an interview with Lebanese television station LBCI.

Following threats made by members of the Meqdad family against nationals from Persian Gulf countries, which they see as aiding and abetting the FSA, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates began [evacuating](#) their citizens from Lebanon on Thursday. [Rumors](#) of another Lebanese civil war brewing have begun to appear in the media, and Sunni-Shiite tensions appear to be at an all-time high in Lebanon.

But who exactly are the Meqdads, and what is their connection to Hezbollah? A former diplomat who prefers to remain anonymous says that they are one of many Shiite clans from the Bekaa who maintain armed wings. The AP [reported](#) on Thursday that some of these clans are reputedly involved with the growth and trafficking of narcotics, but the source says the Meqdads are not major players in this trade.

"The Meqdads are basically a large business empire...not all very legal," he said. "Unlike other major clans they are not much involved in hashish production...but they do petty marketing of drugs over which they at times get in trouble with Hezbollah."

So are they Hezbollah or aren't they? Experts differ on this point. Bilal Saab, a fellow at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, claims that despite past flare-ups between the Meqdads and Hezbollah, the two have always worked closely together.

"The Meqdads have fought alongside Hezbollah since its inception," says Saab. "If they clashed in the past, it might be because Hezbollah overstepped their boundaries, but Hezbollah works to maintain a partnership with the Meqdads because they provide them with recruits, territory, and loyalty. In return, Hezbollah provides them with social services and protection."

Saab stresses that Hezbollah exerts iron-fisted control over Dahiye, the southern suburb of Beirut where the Meqdad's hostages are reportedly being held.

"Nobody holds hostages in the Dahiye without the knowledge and consent of Hezbollah," he says. "I believe that this represents Hezbollah's attempt to support the Syrian regime inside Lebanon."

Asked why both Hezbollah and the Meqdad family have denied a relationship with each other, Saab says that Hezbollah doesn't wish to jeopardize fragile alliances with other factions in Lebanon.

"Maintaining plausible deniability is always important," says Saab. "Hezbollah does not want to portray itself as a group that is heavily involved with the Syrian conflict. They're attempting to create a delicate balance between maintaining their political alliances at home and supporting the Syrian regime."

However, Timor Goksel, former spokesman and senior advisor to UNIFIL in Lebanon and professor at the American University of Beirut, says that although they do maintain ties with

each other, the Meqdad clan is a separate entity from Hezbollah and the two are frequently at odds.

"Today, you can find many Meqdads in the national army, police...and Hezbollah," says Goksel. "This is how they survive. As far as I know, Hezbollah maintains cordial, working relations with all the clans without interfering in their lives as long as Hezbollah's interests are not threatened. I am sure Hezbollah is not happy with the spate of kidnappings as they know well that they will be accused. I know they are trying to cool it off by discreet contacts but they won't openly declare war on a major clan that can tear apart the Shiite community."

Goksel doesn't believe that Hezbollah would be willing to take its support for Assad far enough to kidnap Syrians, even if they are thought to be members of the FSA.

"In the Bekaa, kidnappings have always been a traditional way of conflict resolution, long before Hezbollah emerged," he says. "Yes, Hezbollah vocally supports the Assad regime because their vital interests would be compromised should Assad be replaced by an unfriendly regime. But how far would Hezbollah go? It does care about the opinions of its own constituency who are not united in supporting the Syrian regime."

When asked for comment, Hezbollah Member of Parliament Ali Fayyad said that everybody affiliated with Hezbollah was under strict instructions not to speak with any members of the media.

Reuters [reported](#) on Thursday that the Meqdads had called a halt to their kidnapping operations and denied that they had ever meant to target Gulf nationals. Although they released 20 Syrians that were determined not to be members of the FSA, the Meqdads held on to a remaining 20 Syrians as well as the Turkish national. According to a [report](#) by the *Daily Star*, a Lebanese newspaper, this announcement followed a dispute that occurred when Ali Meqdad, a Hezbollah member of the Lebanese parliament who also belongs to the Meqdad clan, visited the family compound.

This makes sense, according to Goksel. "When Arab countries stop their nationals from staying in or visiting Lebanon, economically the biggest losers will be the Shiites who provide most of the tourism services," he says.

However, Goksel warns that the spate of kidnappings could lead to larger conflict.

"If the other major tribes decide to support the Meqdads, we are talking 100,000 armed men," he says. "If that happens, you don't want to be here."

Recent events seem to lend credence to this scenario. Although the Meqdads appear to have slowed their kidnapping spree, other Shiite clans have started to take up their cause. The *New York Times* [reported](#) on Thursday that members of the Zeeiter tribe, another large Shiite clan, announced that they had kidnapped four additional members of the FSA from hospitals in the Bekaa.

In the meantime, according to the *Daily Star*, Turkey, a regional sponsor of the Free Syrian Army, has [indicated](#) to Lebanon that any violence against its citizens will result in consequences for Shiites living in Turkey. This was echoed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. The warning was made in response to threats against the Turkish national by members of the Meqdad family.

"If Hassan (al-Meqdad) is killed, the first hostage we will kill is the Turk," Maher al-Meqdad, the clan's spokesman, told Reuters.

In a separate [incident](#), members of a previously unknown group calling themselves the Mukhtar al-Thaqfi Brigade announced that they had also kidnapped 10 members of the Free Syrian Army on Wednesday.

Sunni Muslims also reportedly rioted in the Bekaa valley on Thursday, protesting the kidnappings and expressing their support for the Free Syrian Army. Reuters reported that another Turkish national was [kidnapped](#) on Friday, and the U.S. Embassy issued a security [warning](#) to its citizens in Lebanon the same day. The Meqdads also [announced](#) on Friday that they had kidnapped Abdullah al-Homsy, a spokesman for the FSA.

Despite months of effort on the part of Lebanese politicians to keep violence in Syria from spreading across the border, it appears the Syrian conflict has ignited already simmering sectarian tensions in Lebanon. The next few weeks will determine to what extent happenings in Syria influence its war-weary neighbor.

Sulome Anderson is an editorial researcher at Foreign Policy and a recent alumna of Columbia University's graduate school of journalism.