

Don't Pity the Nation

Syria's crisis may be spilling over into Lebanon, but Hezbollah and its rivals are perfectly capable of screwing up the country on their own.

BY MITCHELL PROTHERO | AUGUST 21, 2012



BEIRUT — There are many ways to define "democracy," but they all share one critical dimension -- the notion that the people themselves grant their consent to a government that reflects their cultural mores and values. But how to classify a state whose authority is little more than the leftover scraps that the real powers don't want to deal with? I'd suggest a one-word definition: Lebanon.

This tiny Mediterranean country seems to be coming apart at the seams. So far this week, a minor dispute over the launching of fireworks **sparked a running gun battle** between Sunnis and Alawites in the northern city of Tripoli that has so far left dozens injured and seven dead. In the predominantly Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut, residents have **taken to the streets** in abject fury over reports that suspected Hezbollah members captured by Syrian rebels in May had died in a regime air strike. And in the same neighborhood, a small but powerful Shiite clan went on **a kidnapping spree** -- targeting Syrians, Turks, and Gulf Arabs -- as leverage to gain the release of one of their compatriots captured in Damascus.

Even by Lebanon's famously liberal standards of civil unrest, it has been a nasty week. And the fate of Hezbollah

the heavily armed Shiite group and staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is the central question in this drama. The cabal of anonymous, serious-minded men who run the party have clearly realized that the Syrian regime is doomed, and have begun preparing the battlefield in Lebanon for whatever comes next.

On Aug. 15, families of the men kidnapped in Syria -- openly assisted by Hezbollah's military and security wing, though the party would later tepidly deny providing help -- tore around southern Beirut and other parts of Lebanon in dark sport utility vehicles sans license plates with masked gunmen shooting into the air to clear traffic as they delivered unlucky Syrians to their captivity.

"Hezbollah is not responsible for this," said one of the group's unit commanders, jumping in my car for a quick chat amid the overt military operations being conducted around us. "We cannot control all the [Shiite] tribes in Lebanon. This is the fault of the Gulf states who want to bring Lebanon to its knees next to Syria. We will not get involved in these fights between the family and the government. It is the responsibility of the government to protect Lebanon and its people, not the Resistance."

Even as he unabashedly lied to my face, his best friend, sitting next to me, broke into a huge grin.

"Look around at how everyone seems relieved," said this longtime Beirut resident, who was sympathetic to the party. "Finally Hezbollah is letting the Shiite respond to these insults from the Sunnis and the Syrian rebels. They can't admit that they're involved, but they had to let this happen to ease the frustration. Finally the Shiite feel like they have some power again."

In that scene, at that moment, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable analysis. But wait a second: Hezbollah isn't just the most powerful political and military element of Lebanese society, but in terms of its ability to actually get things done, it might represent the only functioning authority in the entire country. So why is Lebanon's only politically cohesive sect -- backed by a military organization that puts the nation's military to shame -- so insecure?

It all goes back to Syria. The Assad regime is going down -- maybe not imminently, and certainly not peacefully, but there doesn't seem to be any way around it. Even as the Syrian military frantically and brutally pummels the insurgency, the rebels only grow stronger with each passing week. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has repeatedly lauded Assad -- in a speech last month, he **praised** Syria as a "real military supporter of the Resistance," saying that during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, "the most important missiles that were falling on Haifa and central Israel were Syrian missiles."

Given Lebanon and Syria's interconnected politics, Assad's fall threatens to rebound against Hezbollah in Beirut. Throughout its decades-long involvement in Lebanese politics, the Syrian regime craftily ensured that there was a pro-Syrian faction in each of Lebanon's dazzlingly complex array of religious sects. Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt might be the dominant figure in his community, for example, but Wiam Wahhab and Talal Arslan -- figures bolstered by Syria's resources and political weight -- were always around to defend Assad's interests among the Druze. Even devout Sunni Salafists -- those most inclined to hate the "secular" Syrian regime -- have

leaders like Sheikh Maher Hammoud in the Sunni bastion of Sidon, whom Lebanese say Assad keeps on the payroll to deliver at least the appearance of support.

In exchange for supporting Syrian interests, these otherwise marginal figures got a seat at the table in Lebanese politics. As a result, there's an entire political class that has punched above its political weight for decades, and is currently panicking about the end of Assad's financial, political, and even military support.

This house of cards is beginning to come down -- and it's depriving Hezbollah of some important allies. On Aug. 9, former Information Minister Michel Samaha -- a Christian and Assad's most prominent powerbroker in Lebanon -- was arrested on charges he was plotting a series of bombings against Sunni targets to inflame sectarian tensions. The accusation was bizarre: It's not hard to imagine Samaha being involved in pro-Syrian maneuvering, but one might expect that the rarefied air of Syrian and Iranian influence that Samaha breathes would also mean that he'd be above personally trafficking explosives. Even his most bitter political enemies alternated between laughter that one of the most powerful Syrian allies in Lebanon had been arrested -- a concept so foreign to Lebanon-watchers that it's still hard to wrap one's head around -- and complete confusion.

"I have no problem believing that Samaha would order a murder, but explosives in his car? Seriously? Does he even know how to use explosives?" read one message I received from a prominent Western journalist who knows the man well, and even admits to liking him.

A Lebanese security official with anti-Syrian leanings, but who has kept his head down given the uncertain political landscape, told me that it did defy imagination. However, he suggested it was possible Syria's intelligence infrastructure has been so overwhelmed by the revolution that it needs all the operational help it can get.

"I choked on my coffee when the warrant was issued," he said. "The explosives were in his car. We think he was helping get them into Lebanon past the border. They're panicking in Damascus and you'll see more of it here as the Syrian loyalists in Beirut realize that they're losing their protection. Terrified people can be very dangerous."

Even President Michel Sleiman, a careful politician with some sense of sympathy to Lebanon's Syrian neighbors, spoke openly about the evidence behind the arrest of Samaha being legitimate. In public remarks, he **expressed his "hope"** that no Syrian officials were involved in the plot -- but made it clear that he would require reassurances from the very top of the regime. "I expect [Assad] to call me, but he has not yet," he said. Making such demands of Assad would have been unthinkable even a few months ago.

These are dangerous developments for Hezbollah. As much as it needs to protect the regime in Syria, it also needs a semblance of political stability in Lebanon to protect its rear flank. Normally, Hezbollah has been happy to let its pro-Syrian Lebanese allies maintain control over Beirut's streets, considering their own highly trained men too valuable to waste in street clashes with disorganized and poorly equipped rivals when they need to be in bunkers along the border with Israel preparing for the next war.

But with kidnappings targeting their own people in Syria, Lebanese Shiites had grown impatient with Hezbollah's reluctance to escalate on the street. The Shiite community had expressed frustration that Hezbollah wasn't responding in a tough enough manner to the 11 prisoners taken outside Aleppo -- to the point where Hezbollah members told me that if the men were killed, the reaction might not be containable.

Even the arrest of Samaha, a staunch supporter of the party, was met with a muted response from Hezbollah. The fact that Hezbollah appeared unwilling to expend any of its influence to save Samaha suggests the group is quietly conserving its substantial resources.

But unlike most Arab regimes, Hezbollah derives its power from the respect it commands from its community. More than any Arab leader in the modern era, Hassan Nasrallah wakes up each morning concerned how his actions will play with his supporters -- and for that reason, he could not ignore the Shiite families who were enraged that their relatives were deprived of their freedom in Damascus. So Hezbollah's military leadership had to let the clans blow off some steam and remind everyone in Lebanon that just because Bashar is on the ropes, it doesn't mean that Shiites can be targeted. And at the same time, Hezbollah preserved the right to (somewhat truthfully) argue it was helping moderate the response from the enraged street, while still sending a firm message without the disastrous fallout of widespread violence.

The Lebanese government seems more interested in bemoaning its fate than in attempting to halt the descent into chaos. Officials in Beirut have politely asked the gangs of masked gunmen to please stop abducting people off Beirut's streets -- a stark reminder that they wield no power except when Hezbollah decides to let them. In the case of both the last week's kidnappings and Tuesday's battles in Tripoli, Prime Minister Najib Miqati was **reduced to implying** that "some parties" wanted to push Lebanon into strife, and calling upon the authorities to "do what they could" to stop it.

That notion became clear for the Lebanese Army last Wednesday night on the airport road, as a friend and I quietly walked on foot into the giant gang of kids, families, and Hezbollah military officials watching from the shadows. A giant pile of burning tires blocked the road, so that airline passengers had to walk with their luggage to pass in or out of the airport. It was clear that IDs and accents were being checked as the crowd hunted for Syrians, Turks, and Gulf Arabs to kidnap, with most passengers left hassled but unmolested.

Just beyond the burning tires was a unit of Lebanese Army troops in riot gear, passively watching the crowd block the road and interrogate unarmed civilians. As my friend quietly tried to film the surreal scene with a small video camera, an angry officer and his men sprung into action, demanding that she halt filming because it was against regulations.

Just down the road, an angry crowd controlled Beirut's streets and the fates of ordinary people walking by, in plain view of armed officials of the Lebanese government.

As he demanded to see her footage and then insisted she erase it, you could hear the sound of the crowd banging on the hoods of cars, demanding to see the drivers' identifications. If the officer recognized the humiliating irony

of his position, he didn't let on. As he insisted it was illegal for us to film -- although under Lebanese law it wasn't -- the sound of crowds banging on the hoods of cars, deciding whether the passengers should join the more than 20 people they'd abducted earlier in the night, echoed in the background.

After a few minutes of watching her shuffle around on the camera's menus and being told the footage was erased, he seemed appeased to have shown at least someone on Earth he had some dignity and authority left.

But of course, she hadn't erased anything. Just as he had no understanding of the role of a government or his own obligation to the people of Lebanon, the officer didn't know how to work a video camera.