

Syrian Fallout in Lebanon

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The Syrian uprising has added another fault line to the Lebanese political landscape. With the death toll, the number of refugees seeking shelter in Lebanon, Syrian incursions into Lebanon, and militarization of the conflict all on the rise, Lebanon becomes increasingly likely to mire itself in the revolution raging next door.

Lebanon faced considerable challenges before the Syrian revolution erupted—from sectarianism and the challenges of confessional power-sharing, to tensions over Hezbollah's weapons and competing regional powers within the country. Lebanon is also bound to its international commitments to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which has indicted four members of Hezbollah, and to UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which calls for "the control of the government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory," with special attention to the Shiite-dominated south. Hezbollah opposes both. To further complicate matters, the Hezbollah-led March 8 Coalition took control of government on January 25, calling into question Lebanon's ability to fulfill its commitments and the neutrality of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The next day, on January 26, a young man in Al-Hasakeh set himself on fire, imitating the Tunisian Bouazizi whose self-immolation triggered the Arab uprising, in an act of protest against the Syrian regime.

Refugees and Border Violations

Six months later, the Lebanese Higher Relief Committee reported 3,954 registered refugees in Lebanon. Approximately 5,000 Syrians entered northern Lebanon in April. Many have since tried to return to Syria, only to be arrested or to find that tightened security prohibited their reentry. These refugees are living primarily with Lebanese families in poor conditions. Their presence in Lebanon has spurred numerous border violations by the Syrians, who never truly respected Lebanon's sovereignty in the first place.

In the past month, the Syrian army has entered the village of Mounseh, accidentally firing on a LAF patrol; has threatened to break into Lebanese villages along the northern border considered safe havens for refugees, such as al-Nasoub; and has crossed into the Bekaa town of Arsal twice in 48 hours, with tanks and soldiers ransacking two homes and killing a "wanted" Syrian married to a Lebanese woman. The Syrian army has crossed the border under the pretext of chasing fugitives and has engaged in psychological warfare against Lebanese citizens by shooting at their houses at night. Lebanese residents along the border describe Syrian intimidation and violations as a regular

occurrence.

Lebanese Responses

Responses have predictably broken down along party lines. The anti-Hezbollah March 14 Coalition criticized the government's silence on "Syrian behavior toward Lebanese sovereignty" and threatened to "hold the government responsible for any harm inflicted on Lebanese citizens and their belongings, and also on Syrian families that have fled to Lebanon." March 14-affiliated newspaper An-Nahar accused the cabinet of skirting the issue, while the Future Movement Bloc said that "citizens feel that there is no state to protect them." Opposition leader Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces was one of the few to offer advice, suggesting increased coordination between the two armies and the establishment of army posts in locations that have seen Syrian violations of sovereignty.

In reply to these accusations, Prime Minister Najib Mikati protested: "I am not being silent about this, we are dealing with the issue normally." In noting the permeability of the border, he added, "I don't want to blow these incidents out of proportion and I don't want to belittle them either." His comments echo those of Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Abdel Karim Ali, who said that the situation was being politicized and blown out of proportion. Rather unreassuringly, in commenting on the incursion of two Syrian tanks, Mikati said that "these incidents happen constantly." On refugees, Mikati confirmed that Lebanon's position is purely humanitarian and that the country is committed to providing shelter.

Mikati has not said much publicly and his solution is largely bureaucratic: a Lebanese-Syrian joint subcommittee under the Syrian Lebanese Higher Council. The subcommittee has met primarily to discuss arms trafficking; a week before its meeting, LAF intelligence thwarted an attempt to smuggle "a massive amount of weapons," including RPGs, into Syria. Still, the committee seems to be more concerned with the flow of weapons into Syria rather than the transport of weapons in the hands of Syrian soldiers into Lebanon; securing the border remains primarily a one-sided Syrian preoccupation.

The crisis has also caused controversy between the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Multiple news reports of LAF Intelligence assaulting Lebanese citizens for helping Syrian refugees has triggered a debate over the LAF's role in securing Lebanon's borders and internal Lebanese matters, which belongs to the ISF. The LAF, unable to enforce the borders, seems to have turned its focus inwards onto Lebanese citizens.

A Good Start, Only if More is to Come

Actively separating Lebanon from the Syrian uprising by enforcing Lebanese sovereignty, as opposed to Lebanon's current policy of passive disassociation, is the only way to ensure Lebanon's stability, which has long been Mikati's main priority in office. The U.S. should make it clear that ignoring Syrian violations of Lebanese territory will only lead to greater instability. The past month's

violations have greatly added to Lebanon's domestic political tensions, already on edge over Lebanon's commitments to fund its share of the STL, which the UN has granted a 30 day deadline to meet. To reduce tensions so that Lebanon may better face other preexisting challenges, the U.S. must pressure Lebanon to secure the border. This also represents another means of pressuring the Syrian regime.

The recent change in U.S. tactics towards Lebanon offer a window of opportunity. If Lebanese officials do interpret this as a sign to "keep up" on Syria, then the U.S. should test Mikati on easier issues such as securing and meeting the needs of Syrian refugees. Recently increased U.S.-Lebanese military coordination should be leveraged for a stronger LAF border presence to curb incursions and psychological operations while demarcating the Syrian-Lebanese border must be pursued to better deploy the LAF and to hold Syria accountable. The U.S. should closely follow up on Monday's ISF report on February's abductions, while pushing for an investigation into reports of LAF attacks and harassment against Lebanese citizens, making it known that U.S. funds and training will not come at the expense of Lebanon's citizens or stability.

Clear U.S. leadership and expectations are needed. If the UN can clearly state what it expects from Syria vis-a-vis Lebanon, as Secretary General Ban Ki-moon did last Thursday, then there is no reason that the U.S. cannot.