

Can Lebanon resist the sectarian narrative being foisted on Syria?

[Shane Farrell](#) [1], 19 August 2012

A Lebanon-based journalist examines the possibility of violence spreading from Syria to Lebanon. There are reasons enough to fear the worst, but also signs of real restraint.

The conflict in Syria is increasingly being viewed along sectarian lines, with commentators often describing it as an Alawite government pitted against Sunni rebels. Minorities such as Christians, Kurds and the Druze are caught somewhere in between. While there are of course many inconsistencies to this perception, it is the prevailing view across the Arab world and is driving a sectarian wedge between communities. The longer the conflict in Syria continues, many feel, the more religious divisions across the region are being sharpened. Talk of the violence spreading into other states, moreover, is widespread.

This is most evident in reference to Lebanon, a country whose history has long been interwoven with its larger neighbor. Syria, after all, controlled significant swaths of the country from 1976 to 2005, only withdrawing due to widespread Lebanese and international pressure. Despite the symbolic withdrawal, Syria has kept a more subtle presence in the country and, crucially, has the support of roughly one half of the Lebanese political establishment – the so-called March 8 bloc which currently heads the government.

Fears of sectarian tensions sparking deadly clashes have long been present in Lebanon. The peace agreement born out of the civil war in 1990 arguably cemented these divisions by establishing an electoral system in which a certain amount of seats are allocated to different sects depending on the perceived demographics (no formal census has been carried out since 1932). Small-scale sectarian attacks have been a regular occurrence in Lebanese politics, most dramatically during the so-called May 7 events of 2008 when gunmen led by the Shi'ite group Hezbollah succeeded in taking over parts of Beirut and other areas of the country in a conflict which left dozens dead. It was the first time the political party used its weapons against Lebanese since the civil war, undoing promises it had made to the contrary for many years.

Since 2008 numerous incidents with a sectarian face have taken place, but nothing compared to the level of the May 7 events. The uprising in Syria, however, threatens to derail this uneasy calm and stir up tensions once again.

To date the 'spill over' effect has been largely limited to border incidents in the northeast and pockets in the northern city of Tripoli, both largely Sunni areas of the country. Areas outside of this, including Beirut and the south, have remained largely unaffected.

This is due to several factors: refugee influxes from Syria, which the UNHCR estimates at around 30,000, are largely confined to the north. The majority of these refugees come from Homs, a largely Sunni city located several kilometers north-east of Lebanon which has been heavily shelled by Syrian government forces during the ongoing conflict, as well as from nearby villages. Many Syrians from these areas have relatives or friends across the border and there have been numerous reports of Lebanese families in these regions hosting large numbers of Syrians in their homes.

These porous border areas are believed to be corridors of weapons smuggling used by Syrian rebels and mines have been laid by the Syrian army to curtail cross border traffic. More worryingly, the border areas have been sites of numerous incidents involving Syrian rebels and Syrian army forces. In May, for instance, [the Syrian army crossed into Lebanese territory](#) [12] and clashed with opposition forces. In July, several soldiers briefly abducted two members of Lebanon's General Security at a border crossing and, according to [Lebanon-based Daily Star newspaper](#) [13], "warned their Lebanese counterparts not to allow armed men to shoot at Syria from the area and threatened to escalate their measures in the future should their instructions not be met". Cross-border shelling and mortar strikes [have also been a feature of the conflict](#) [14].

In Tripoli, meanwhile, developments in Syria have sparked numerous clashes between the Alawite district of Jabal Mohsen and the impoverished Sunni neighborhood of Beb el Tebbeneh. Although animosity between the two sides extends back to civil war days, and numerous incidents or random potshots have occurred ever since, developments in Syria are undoubtedly triggering the latest bouts. To take one example, following a bomb attack in July which killed several members of Syrian President Bashar Assad's inner circle, including his defense minister and brother-in-law, what began as celebratory gunfire in Beb el Tebbeneh turned into a clash with the Alawite stronghold which left one dead.

According to a journalist friend who visited Tripoli several weeks ago, the Syrian conflict is very much on people's minds and the situation is very tense. However the picture appears to be very different in Beirut's working class, mixed areas, which are often centers for early rounds of sectarian clashes in the capital. A colleague and I [recently interviewed some forty residents](#) [15] of these neighborhoods. The overwhelming impression I received was that while the Syrian crisis was certainly an issue, it was by no means the most pressing concern residents had. Instead, most people complained about a deteriorating economic situation and expressed anger with daily grievances such as power cuts, which have become increasingly frequent in past months.

But it is this undercurrent of frustration in the communities we visited that is potentially alarming. Separately, several people mentioned that intense verbal altercations had broken out over parking spaces, a luxury in short supply in these crowded neighborhoods. Several men in one of the mixed areas told us of a verbal spat between two residents, which resulted in gunshots being fired. Other people in the neighborhood avoided bringing the incident up and assured us that the situation is calm. So although the neighborhoods appeared calm and peaceful, one cannot discount the possibility that residents interviewed made a concerted effort to sugarcoat the reality and present more favorably areas which have received a lot of bad press. Worryingly, a coffee shop owner in the Barbour area, whose parents come from either side of the sectarian divide, said that since the May 7 events in 2008 he had heard numerous reports of people stocking up on weapons in Beirut, especially among Sunnis. But while the capital is potentially sitting on a powder keg, there is no saying what might ignite it.

Peacebuilding initiatives: building resilience against sectarian violence?

Efforts aimed at diffusing sectarian tensions and preventing a return to a conflagration of violence have been in existence since the civil war, with [a number of international and local](#) [16] organizations working on peacebuilding initiatives. NGOs such as the Permanent Peace Movement [PPM] adopt more traditional forms of peacebuilding by, for instance, holding dialogue sessions among residents of mixed villages and carrying out training workshops across the country, covering a range of issues from elections to civil marriage. The aim is civic awareness and the opening of channels of dialogue. According to Sonia Nakad, Project Manager at the PPM, the sessions are usually well received by attendees who often express their surprise at hearing different points of view from those they expected.

Indeed, many commentators believe that Lebanese mostly hear the narrative which they expect – or prefer – to hear. One clear reason for this is a dearth of independent media. While freedom of the press exists to a far greater degree in Lebanon than elsewhere in the Arab World, television networks and newspapers are generally owned by – or connected to – the major parties. Thus, unless they are prepared to absorb a range of media, Lebanese audiences tend to hear just one point of view; generally, the view to which they are naturally inclined.

A different type of peacebuilding is carried out by Haya Bina, an NGO which, according to its website, offers a “a platform for moderate, liberal and independent voices, committed to resisting the culture of fear and intolerance.” One of its stated principles is the right of citizens to participate in political life on the basis of civic values rather than sectarian belonging.

Lokman Slim, the head of the organization, comes from a large Shi'ite family and opposes the ideals put forward by the established Shia parties, namely Hezbollah and Amal. Haya Bina, according to Slim, “offers political coverage for people who are willing to express a point of view that deviates from the main.” In terms of peacebuilding, he believes “it is too late today to devise mechanisms of conflict prevention: the conflict is already here, we're in the midst of it.” Instead, Slim encourages NGOs to keep channels of dialogue open between possible mediators and encourage them to play a role on the ground within their respective communities. Haya Bina, for its part, has in recent years focused on appealing to religious figures in particular, and has been working with 30 clerics, especially Sunni and Shia, to advocate peace and human security as their professional and religious responsibility.

Neither of the NGOs has adapted their programs in light of current developments in Syria. Two NGOs who have started to work specifically with Syrian refugees are in the minority amongst peacebuilding organisations. For Nakad, “peacebuilding is something that takes many years. There is nothing that gives quick results, unfortunately.” She acknowledged, moreover, that while peacebuilding takes a long time, it can be quickly undone by violence, which is generally at the whim of political leaders.

Return to politics: is there reason to be optimistic?

While Lebanon has the potential to explode into a sectarian bloodbath fuelled by developments in Syria, there are many reasons to be hopeful that this will not be the case. For one, the Shia community is seen to be well controlled by Hezbollah and Amal, who have demonstrated time and again that they don't want violence. To take one example, when it was clear that eleven Shia men who were kidnapped in Syria would not be returned to their families as soon as expected, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah [appealed for calm in a televised speech](#) [17] and warned his followers against carrying out any revenge attacks on Syrians.

Opposition parties have also appealed for calm on numerous occasions and, aside from voicing their support for the Syrian opposition during a handful of ceremonial days (such as the anniversary of the creation of the opposition March 14 bloc), have for the most part refrained from inflammatory rhetoric which could threaten Lebanon's fragile détente. There are exceptions to this, of course. The most glaring involved the previously little known Sheikh Ahmed Al Assir in the southern city of Saida. Assir, who some label a Salafi although he denies the description, gained much media attention for his fiery denouncement of Hezbollah's weapons and, together with around one hundred supporters, blocked a key road in the city for several weeks demanding Hezbollah's disarmament. But the hype [appears to have died down](#) [18] and the road has reopened.

The Lebanese army too has played a role in calming tensions across the country. In Beirut, for example, it made sure that concurrent pro- and anti-Syrian regime demonstrations were out of eye-shot of each other to avoid the potential for confrontation. Along the border, it has increased its presence but is making a point not to interfere in clashes between the Syrian army and rebel groups. While the body has received some criticism for its hands-off attitude, it has so far avoided choosing sides in the conflict.

Another reason to remain optimistic is expressed by blogger and political commentator Mustapha Hamoui, who [wrote in April](#) [19]: "We forget that Lebanon just recently had a very major Sunni/Shiaa stress test. Many Lebanese Sunnis believed that the Shiaas killed Rafic Hariri, and many Lebanese Shiaas believed that the Sunnis facilitated the Israeli bombardment of their areas in 2006. In other words, we already had our peak in mutual distrust and hatred. If anything things are cooling down, partly because of our free media which allows for emotional discharge and partly because of sheer fatigue from hatred."

But while there is reason to be hopeful, it is wise to be vigilant. There is too much unknown in the Syrian conflict, too many actors with interests at stake and too many variables which make predicting an outcome extremely difficult. Dismissing the possibility of the conflict spreading to Lebanon would be foolish.

Source URL: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/shane-farrell/can-lebanon-resist-sectarian-narrative-being-foisted-on-syria>
