

Syria spillover or frail statehood?

By Rami G. Khouri

Most observers saw the heightened tensions in Lebanon during the past week largely as a result of the spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon. Others whispered that it was the other way around – that Lebanon’s chronic sectarian tensions have now spilled over into Syria, where the signs of a Sunni-Alawite war are on the rise.

Somewhere in between these two views lies the truth, and it is not pretty: multiple kidnappings of Lebanese and foreigners, well-armed family militias, people burning tires to block access to Beirut airport, attacks against shops owned by Syrians in Beirut, threats to kill hostages, Gulf states evacuating their nationals from Lebanon, and a fear that Lebanon could slide back into the ugly years of the Civil War.

The drama is frightening and sad, but it is mostly serious drama, I suspect, rather than a slide back into the mass kidnappings and killings of the Civil War. Regardless of who influences who in Lebanon and Syria, what happened this week highlights the deep vulnerabilities and chronic instability evident in both countries, but also in many other Arab countries that continue to grapple awkwardly with the twin challenges of statehood and sovereignty.

The main feature of the past week’s tensions was the tit-for-tat kidnappings in Syria and Lebanon. Weeks ago the Free Syrian Army in Syria kidnapped 11 Lebanese Shiites, and on Wednesday this was followed by that of another Shiite man from the Lebanese Meqdad family, who was accused of being a Hezbollah operative helping the Syrian government put down the uprising against the Assad regime. In response, the Meqdad family’s “military wing” – heavily armed hooded men in black and full battle regalia – announced on live television that it had mobilized its forces and kidnapped 20 Syrians and a Turkish businessman, targeting those it saw as helping the Syrian rebels trying to topple Syria’ regime.

Lebanese Sunnis in Majdel Anjar, near the Syrian border, retaliated by blocking the road leading to the Masnaa border crossing into Syria. These frequent tactics not only paralyze life in Lebanon, they also send a thunderbolt of fear up every spine, because they generate instant images of a civilian population that is trapped amid the turmoil, unable to leave the country, while fighting rages on all around them as innocent civilians are kidnapped or killed on the basis of their religion or nationality. That was the Civil War experience, and its memory remains fresh in every Lebanese mind.

The Lebanese government shifted into high gear when the cycle of kidnappings escalated. It then quickly opened the airport and Masnaa roads, went ahead with a “national dialogue” meeting of most but not all the sectarian and political leaders, designated a sub-committee to resolve the

hostages crisis, and promised to keep the airport road open until eternity. The Meqdad family military wing announced that it had not and would not seize citizens from Arab Gulf countries, and the next day said it would refrain from more kidnappings, because it held enough hostages to trade for those Lebanese held in Syria.

The immediate crisis eased slightly, but many of the hostages remain in captivity, and none of the underlying drivers of the crisis were addressed or resolved. A full exchange of hostages will likely take place in due course, and we will revert to square-one – which in most Arab lands is a landscape where the central government is unable to provide all citizens with the full gamut of basic needs and security guarantees that they expect from it. The vacuum is filled by family and tribal groups, religious organizations, civil society forces, the private sector, criminal gangs and thugs, or foreign patrons. We will see this drama repeated in the months and years ahead.

However, two new elements today compared to Lebanon's Civil War days make me feel that a return to total communal war will be avoided. The emergence of Hezbollah as the strongest military force in the country means that nobody will start a civil war because Hezbollah could quickly defeat any combination of foes. At the same time, the Hezbollah-backed central government and security forces are acting more decisively than previously to stamp out small flare-ups of violence around the country.

The Lebanese have had numerous opportunities in the past decade to revert to civil war ways, and they always pulled back from the brink. They did so because they are not stupid or reckless enough to repeat that senseless episode. But at the same time, they are prepared to go to the brink regularly, as they did this week.

Syria for its part is suffering the delayed consequences of over four decades of a dysfunctional governance system based on coercion, violence and corruption, which now sees hundreds of local communities or clan-based villages relying on their tribal or sectarian assets and identities to compensate for – or actively oppose – the failed central government.

Spillover is not the most important issue today, but rather the vagaries, weaknesses and intermittent failures of central government systems that have never fully mastered the mechanics of stable and sovereign statehood that serves all citizens equally.

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