

Tripoli clashes signal escalation of Syria spillover

By Stephen Dockery

BEIRUT: The violence that seized the northern city of Tripoli this week is a worrying amplification of spillover from the Syrian conflict, according to political analysts.

The increased fighting is a clear sign that Lebanon has been pulled further into the orbit of violence from the Syrian crisis, and is a challenge for political leaders' ability to preserve stability in the country, the experts said.

"It is hard not to connect the intensity and timing of the violence in Tripoli with the Syrian regime's multidimensional strategy of survival," said Bilal Saab, a Middle East analyst at the University of Maryland. He said the Syrian government is likely playing a hand in the increased tension in Tripoli and across the country.

"The specifics are unclear to me, but specifics today are almost irrelevant. There is always a risk that fighting in Tripoli could spill over to Beirut. It has happened before and could easily happen again."

At least five people were killed and more than 40 people wounded in fighting between pro- and anti-Syrian regime forces in the north as The Daily Star went to press.

The number of casualties is a significant escalation compared to other clashes in recent months between the Alawite and pro-Assad neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the largely Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood and surrounding areas. More firepower was also used.

Lebanese Army presence in the city was heavy but the clashes between the two sides flared to such intensity that the Army was forced to withdraw from neighborhoods they were trying to bring under control.

Particularly troubling to Saab was the spike in the wounded among the Lebanese Army. Ten Lebanese soldiers were wounded, and some reports from Tripoli said the Army was the target of grenade and gunfire for being perceived as partisan in the conflict.

"The Lebanese Army is the last line of defense against greater sectarian violence in the north," Saab said. "The less able the Army is to reduce or at least contain the violence in the north, the more likely tensions will move from one region to another and eventually reach the capital."

Fighting in Tripoli between the Sunni and Alawite neighborhoods dates back to 1976 and has taken place on and off for years. The root causes are local and relate to economic and class tensions, but the frequency of the breakouts of violence has spiked ever since the Syrian uprising

began against President Bashar Assad's government.

The enmity in the northern city is perceived by many experts as a political platform for external or internal powers to exert their influence.

"This conflict definitely has root causes but the triggers for it to translate into violence and the means to translate the conflict into violence is definitely through external players," said Randa Slim, a scholar at the Middle East Institute in the United States.

"Limited outbursts of violence are maybe the scenarios we are going to be seeing for some time."

Lebanon is also being tested by a number of other political crises in the country with apparent ties to the Syria conflict. Former Minister Michel Samaha has been accused of being involved in a bomb plot allegedly under Assad's orders; armed groups have taken dozens of Syrians hostage in the past week; and a number of politicians are said to have survived attempted assassinations.

"In each case you are seeing political parties from both sides interfering at the eleventh hour to bring it back from the brink," Slim said.

But as the outbursts and crises deriving from problems in Syria increase, it may be impossible to alleviate their impact and stop a larger conflict from breaking out in Lebanon, Slim said.

Several political analysts said, however, that concerns of a civil war are likely overplayed given the resilience to instability that Lebanon has displayed since 2006.

Despite standoffish attitudes between March 8 and March 14, there are many indications and flat-out statements from both coalitions that they want to resist sectarian strife.

When the allegations against Samaha were made public, Hezbollah, Assad's supporters, said little in the former minister's defense. And when 11 Lebanese pilgrims were kidnapped in Syria, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri rushed to broker their release, although unsuccessfully.

Rex Brynen, a professor at Montreal's McGill University, says increasing sectarian tension and violence are inevitable given the conflict in Syria, but civil war is not.

"I think these [conflicts] are likely to remain local and containable for now. No major actor in Lebanon wants a civil war," Brynen said.

Nadim Shehadi, an associate fellow at London-based Chatham House, agreed. "Since Syria left [Lebanon] there have been many attempts to flare things up in Lebanon and it hasn't worked," he said.

But that's no reason to ignore the problems as they take their toll.

"Their potential for doing harm is huge," Shehadi said.