Lebanon, Despite Tensions, Won't Import Syria's Civil War

By: **Sami Kohen** posted on Friday, Aug 24, 2012

For some time now, there has been concern over the likelihood of Syrian flames engulfing Lebanon. Recent clashes in Tripoli between majority Sunnis and minority Alawites that killed 12 people and wounded more 100 indicate that the possibility has assumed dangerous dimensions. That is why regional experts are now asking: "After Syria, is it Lebanon's turn?"

About this Article

Summary:

While clashes in the northern city of Tripoli might suggest that Syria's war is spreading to Lebanon, some political experts believe this violence is a product of long-standing rivalries that are simply fanned by Syria's flames. Sami Kohen believes Bashar al-Assad may be trying to prop himself up by exporting violence.

There are similarities in the ethnic, religious and sectarian structures of the two countries, but the origin of the events in Syria is different from recent sectarian frictions in Lebanon. The popular uprising in Syria as part of the Arab Spring is a movement against Assad's authoritarian regime and a quest for freedom and democracy. Sectarian clashes in Syria have recently become a part of the uprising against the regime.

In Lebanon, however, there is no uprising against the regime. There is a pluralist democracy in that country. The mosaic of 4.5 million people is reflected in the government. The problem in Lebanon is occasional confrontations between different ethnic and sectarian groups provoked or supported by outside.

This is why the "Syrian factor" is being questioned in latest Tripoli incidents when we ask "Is it now Lebanon's turn?"

In an article printed in Beirut's *Daily Star*, Lebanon-based writer Rami Khouri expands the question and asks whether the clashes in Lebanon are a side effect of Syrian events or whether the chronic sectarian strife in Lebanon affects the Syrian crisis. The truth, he concludes, is somewhere in between.

Nevertheless the general belief in Lebanon is that there is a Syrian hand in the Tripoli incidents and the recent spate of abductions.

Among the events that buttress such doubts are the remarks of former information minister Michel Samaha after his detention. We are told that the former minister, who has been in touch with the Assad regime, has revealed some plans that would drag Lebanon into chaos, including the infiltration of Syrian agents into the country. We already know that the Syria that "occupied" Lebanon for 30 years has not eased its influence over Lebanon and its covert operations in that country.

Is there a reason for Bashar al-Assad, who is already having a tough time with the Syrian civil war, to stir up trouble in Lebanon? According the Lebanese parliamentarian Boutros Harb, Assad wants to give this message to the world: "If Syria is destabilized, countries around it will also be destabilized. If you want to prevent that, then Syrian peace must be assured."

According to some analysts, Assad is approaching the point of declaring "*Après moi, le deluge*" and is willing to risk spreading the flames from his country to the entire region.

The possibility of Syrian influence in recent Kurdistan Workers' Party operations could be assessed in this

context.

A recent appeal to the Lebanese people by Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati is meaningful: "We should not permit those who are trying to drag Lebanon into the ring of fire around us [to do so]. We should not allow ourselves to be used for somebody else's war."

There is now ceasefire in Tripoli. It appears to be calm. But Sunni-Alawite tension and unrest between various ethnic and religious groups continue.

As writer Rami Khouri notes, the possibility of Syrian flames spreading to Lebanon is a problem, but the real issue is "for the government to successfully govern a system that serves all its citizens equally."