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Syrian spillover: Beirut sees worst clashes in four years

The killing of a Sunni cleric at a Lebanese Army checkpoint yesterday ignited widespread protests among aggrieved Sunnis. (+video)



Lebanese citizens pass by burned scooters that were damaged during clashes between pro- and anti-Syrian Sunni groups, in Beirut, Lebanon, Monday May 21. (Hussein Malla/AP)

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Beirut, Lebanon

An overnight gun battle between rival factions in Beirut marks the worst bout of political violence in four years as the Syrian uprising increasingly spills over into neighboring Lebanon, exacerbating sectarian tensions.

The fighting, which left three dead, capped a day of escalating friction. The fatal shooting of a Sunni cleric by Lebanese soldiers yesterday tapped into a deep sense of frustration and anger felt by many Sunnis here toward the Syrian regime's brutal crackdown on the mainly Sunni opposition. Though Lebanon's government is headed by a Sunni, it is backed by Damascus and some believe it is cooperating with the Syrian crackdown.

“The reasons the Sunnis are so angry is because we used to have the power but we have had it taken away from us. Yes, we have a Sunni as prime minister but he is

not with us and he takes orders like a dog,” said an elderly man seated on a sidewalk stool in Tarik al-Jdeide, a Sunni neighborhood of Beirut.

A few blocks away, policemen, soldiers, and a crowd of onlookers gathered around the bullet-scarred and fire-blackened entrance of a seven-story building, where rival Sunni factions had clashed. A small group headed by Shaker Berjawi, allied with the Shiite Hezbollah organization, was besieged by supporters of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement, the leading Sunni political organization in Lebanon. Three were killed and 10 wounded before the Army moved in and rescued Mr. Berjawi and his followers.

“There were many men with weapons and they came into our building and broke into our apartments so they could fire at Berjawi's men. It was very frightening,” said a young female schoolteacher who lived opposite Berjawi's offices. Those interviewed in the area declined to give their names, underlining the sense of nervousness that has gripped the area.

Rising instability along Syria-Lebanon border

Even before yesterday's clashes, north Lebanon has seen a breakdown of stability as a result of the upheaval in Syria seeping across the border. For the past week, there have been intermittent gun battles that left 10 dead and dozens wounded in Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, between Sunnis living in the Bab Tebbaneh quarter and a small community of Alawites in the adjacent Jabal Mohsen district. The Alawite sect is an obscure offshoot of the Shiite faith whose adherents form the backbone of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Furthermore, in recent weeks, Lebanon's northern border with Syria has witnessed a spate of shootings, kidnappings of Lebanese and Syrians and brief military incursions allegedly by Syrian troops. On the night of May 19, one Syrian was killed and two others wounded as they tried to cross the border from Lebanon to return to their homes in Syria.

Most Sunnis in north Lebanon back the predominantly Sunni opposition in Syria, while Hezbollah and most of Lebanon's Shiite community side with the Assad regime. Some Sunnis are actively assisting the Syrian opposition. One Future Movement activist claimed that as many as 300 Sunnis from the Bekaa Valley in east Lebanon are directly helping the opposition by providing logistical support or even serving as armed combatants.

The Lebanese government follows a policy of noninterference in the Syria crisis, but many Sunnis believe that the Lebanese security forces are cooperating with the Assad regime to crackdown on anyone providing support for the Syrian opposition.

“The army has taken the side of the Alawites. The officers are all Shiites,” says

Sheikh Bilal al-Masri, a Sunni cleric from Tripoli who follows the austere Salafi branch of the faith and fought in last week's clashes in Tripoli against Alawite gunmen.

Growing anger with the Army

The latest fighting was triggered by the killing of Sheikh Ahmad Abdel-Wahad, a Sunni cleric from the Akkar district of north Lebanon. He died following a still unexplained altercation with soldiers manning a checkpoint close to the town of Halba, where the cleric was due to attend a rally to commemorate the deaths of several Future Movement members in a previous round of violence four years ago. He was shot and killed, along with a companion in the car, after he attempted to drive away from the checkpoint.

Outraged Sunnis in the Akkar province quickly blocked main roads with burning tires.

Khaled Daher, a Sunni parliamentarian from the area affiliated with the Future Movement, accused the Lebanese Army of deliberately murdering the cleric and said it was committing "militia practices."

"Some members of the army are bent on killing us. Such Army violations are taking place in various regions of Lebanon," he told Lebanon's LBC television station.

The Lebanese army in a statement offered its "deep regrets" and that an investigation would be held. Three officers and 19 soldiers who were manning the checkpoint have been detained for questioning.

The rising tensions come as Sunnis are increasingly voicing more anger toward the Lebanese Army. In Bab Tebbaneh last week, some accused soldiers of firing indiscriminately at Sunni homes. Sheikh Shadi Jabbara, a militant Sunni preacher from Bab Tebbaneh, showed a video on his cellphone that purported to show soldiers firing weapons from armored personnel carriers (APCs) passing down a street. The poor quality of the video made it impossible to tell if the noise was gunfire or the clatter of the APCs' caterpillar tracks on the road.

"The army is our enemy right now," he says. Sheikh Jabbara was speaking before the killing of Sheikh Abdel-Wahad on Sunday, an act that has only hardened Sunni resentment and suspicion toward the government and Army.

Sunnis losing group to Shiites

The frustration and bitterness voiced by many Sunnis here points to a deeper realization that the community as a whole has been losing ground in recent years to Lebanon's Shiite population.

Originally, the powerful Sunni merchant families of Lebanon's coastal cities were, along with the Maronite Christians, the backbone of the nascent Lebanese state when it gained independence from France in 1943. In Lebanon's complex sectarian power-sharing system, Sunnis were awarded the role of prime minister. The presidency went to the Maronites, while the Shiites were offered the less powerful seat of parliamentary speaker. The Shiite community was poorly represented politically and generally marginalized in the undeveloped rural peripheries of the country.

But in the past 30 years, Lebanon's Shiites have seen their fortunes grow – both financially, through an emerging middle class whose wealth is rooted in expatriate communities in Africa and South America, and politically through the rise of Hezbollah. Today, Hezbollah is the most powerful entity in the country, with a military component that is stronger than the Lebanese army.

More specifically, Saad Hariri, the leading Sunni politician, was ousted from the premiership in January 2011 when Hezbollah and its political allies secured a no-confidence vote in his government. Hariri's successor was Najib Mikati, who although an essentially neutral political figure earned the scorn of Future Movement supporters for accepting the premiership of a government in which Hezbollah exerts considerable influence.

Mr. Hariri has been living abroad since April 2011 and communicates with his followers through the occasional televised speech, press statements, and Twitter. His prolonged absence has weakened his patronage networks and lowered the morale of many of his supporters, compounding the community's sense of disenfranchisement.

“We as Sunnis are lost,” says the elderly man in Tarek al-Jdeide.

With the revolt in Syria showing every sign of worsening in the weeks and months ahead, does he think Lebanon would witness further factional and sectarian violence?

“We in Lebanon have been in conflict since the 1970s,” he says with a wry smile. “Do you think I am going to say no to your question?”

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