

LEBANON

Lebanon's Bad Habit: Staring into the Abyss Too Often

By Rania Abouzeid | Oct. 22, 2012

Lebanon has seen bad days before. And while the bombing in Beirut on Friday takes place in the context of a changing Middle East — and a chaotic neighboring Syria — it may still be the kind of abysmal situation the Lebanese have learned to stare at — and pull back from — before.

On Oct. 19, a senior anti-Syrian intelligence official was assassinated in a daytime car bombing in a predominantly Christian residential neighborhood of Beirut. The attack killed several others and left dozens wounded and homeless.



HASAN SHAABAN / REUTERS

A firefighter tries to put out a fire at the scene of an explosion in Ashafriyeh, central Beirut, Oct. 19, 2012.

On Sunday, General Wissam al-Hassan was laid to rest in central Beirut. The site was historic: the general was buried next to a previous victim of assassination — his former boss, ex-Premier Rafik Hariri, who died in a massive daytime car bomb in 2005 that left more than 20 dead and hundreds wounded. Many of the mourners say the same people were behind both bombings (as well as a slew of assassinations of other anti-Syrian figures in recent years) — the Assad regime in Damascus and its local Lebanese allies. Syria and its local Lebanese allies, on the other hand, point the blame at Israel, Lebanon's other neighbor.

Sunday's funeral turned violent after a small group of mourners marched the short distance from Martyrs' Square along central Beirut's elegant streets toward Prime Minister Najib Mikati's hilltop office at the Grand Serail to demand his resignation. Security forces fired into the air and lobbed tear gas into the crowd to prevent the demonstrators from storming the government office.

As head of the information department of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces, al-Hassan had recently exposed a key pro-Syrian Lebanese politician's involvement in an alleged Syrian plot to plant bombs in Lebanon. Mikati and the pro-Syrian government he leads have adopted a policy of "disassociation" from the Syrian crisis, which extends to largely ignoring repeated Syrian military infringements of Lebanese territory, even when those incursions result in Lebanese deaths.

Will this lead to bloodier times? Friday's assassination spurred the latest round of headlines and commentary about whether or not Lebanon was being sucked into the 19-month Syrian crisis. The fact is, Lebanon has historically never been disassociated from events in Syria and has always been a hostage (at times a willing one, thanks to Syria's local allies) to political machinations in Damascus, as well as to those in Israel (also thanks to Israel's local Lebanese sympathizers).

Lebanon's pro- and anti-Syrian political split is as deep and as old as modern Lebanon itself. There have always been Lebanese who consider their country a part of Greater Syria, who think that the end of the French Mandate in 1943 carved two countries out of one. On the flip side, Lebanese nationalists point to 7,000 years of history, some shared with Syria, some unique, to explain their nation state.

That polarization has existed throughout Lebanon's history. Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976 as peacekeepers, a year after the start of what was a 15-year civil war. Soon enough, the Syrians became a party to the bloody conflict, siding with different groups as the Lebanese state split along ever changing lines. By 1990, Lebanon was militarily occupied and politically dominated by Damascus. Beirut became an Orwellian place, one in which fealty to Syria was publicly and proudly proclaimed as nationalism, and opposition to it condemned as traitorous. The 2005 murder of Hariri changed that. Prior to his death, Hariri had begun to push back against Damascus.

The death of the Sunni leader immediately ruptured Sunni acquiescence to Syrian rule, bringing the sect in line with the views of the politically marginalized bulk of the Christian community, which had long railed against Syrian hegemony and the minority Druze population. Only the Shi'ites, led by Hizballah and Amal, continued — and continue — to side with Syria, which was blamed for Hariri's murder. (Damascus denies any wrongdoing. An international tribunal subsequently accused four members of the pro-Syrian Lebanese Hizballah movement of having a role in Hariri's murder, something Hizballah vigorously denies.)

Naturally in Lebanon, with its 18 official religious sects, the pro- and anti-Syrian split has a sectarian dimension. After Hariri's murder, the Sunnis, the Druze and a fair smattering of Christians were in the anti-Syrian camp, while the Shi'ites and other Christians were considered pro-Syrian. Many Lebanese recoil at the use of their sectarian identity as a marker of their political affiliation. But like so many clichés, there is a grain of truth to it.

It took just two months after Hariri's killing, and intense Western pressure, for Syria to withdraw its military from Lebanon, ending a 29-year presence. But Syria's military departure did not mean Syria had left Lebanon. It still wielded influence through its allies. Lebanon's fractious society has always provided easy opportunities for foreigners to intervene in its affairs, to play one side against the other.

And so, when politics spills out onto the streets as it usually does — often in the form of demonstrations but sometimes as riots — the episodes of spasmodic violence help propel this tiny troubled land to the verge of a new civil conflict, and then somehow the same sectarian civil-war-era warlords turned politicians, who helped incite the violence, make their deals (or listen to their regional backers), and just as abruptly, the country is pulled back from the abyss. Sunday's events were no different.

Speaker after speaker stood at the podium during the funeral, which also served as a political rally, railing against Syria and calling on Mikati to resign. When angry mourners headed toward Mikati's office, a few of the same speakers urged calm and a refrain from violence. It's a dangerous gambit in a country whose instability is so chronic that it is the only form of stability.

For his part, Prime Minister Mikati offered to resign on Saturday but accepted a request from President Michel Suleiman to remain in office to avoid a political vacuum. Still, Mikati's pro-Syrian government is just as keen to avoid a political vacuum — or worse, the return of the anti-Syrians to power at a time when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad needs his Lebanese friends, and needs them to be able to get things done.

The Lebanese have simply learnt to live in this state, with tensions always simmering just below the surface, where they can easily be tapped into by rival politicians. The resentment is further stoked by high unemployment, by a cost of living that far outpaces wages, by having to make do with some of the highest telecoms prices in the region and the slowest Internet. The result is long lines at foreign embassies of people hoping to emigrate.

Even the bombings in residential neighborhoods are nothing new. In the year after the Syrian withdrawal, it became unnervingly common for small explosions to rattle mainly Christian residential areas. In the years since, it has also become common for political disputes to result in roads quickly blocked with burning tires and to see angry young men speak in sectarian terms about "us" and "them."

There was heavy gunfire in Beirut overnight, in the usual flashpoint neighborhoods where Sunnis and Shi'ites live beside each other; there were also reports Monday of snipers roaming the streets. There is a sense that the latest eruption was inevitable, given brewing sectarian tensions and events in Syria — and that it was even a little late. Still, at the same time, it seems like a fair chunk of the Lebanese have become tired of being pawns in their sectarian leaders' games. Sunday's funeral/protest rally did not draw the kind of massive crowds seen in earlier years, when hundreds of thousands would heed the call of their particular politician to take to the streets.

Perhaps it is Lebanon's fate to experience cycles of spasmodic violence every few years, like a bad case of déjà vu or a movie stuck playing the same scenes over and over again, never progressing to reveal the ending. Given the neighborhood — with Syria on one side and Israel on the other — it's little wonder that Lebanon is in the state that it is now.