

### Trading Beirut for Damascus...

**Are the Lebanese ready to use the knives they've been sharpening?**

On March 3, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri sparked a political firestorm when he asserted, "The Arab dust, which is called the Arab Spring, is filling...the country's sky and could turn into a storm that would bring the rain of chaos unless the political groups act [to calm the security situation]."<sup>1</sup> The uncertainty regarding the nation's security is of particular interest considering Lebanon's upcoming elections tentatively scheduled for next June. Berri added, "The priority now is [to address] the security situation [rather than] the elections, which [could] trigger [an] explosion if they are held in this atmosphere."<sup>2</sup> Several days later, Prime Minister Najib Mikati echoed Berri's sentiments about security, albeit in reference to Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour's support for reinstating a representative of the current Syrian regime as a member of the Arab League. "[T]he dangers surrounding us do not allow any [official] to state their personal or political point of view as this would constitute a gap and lead to confusion...."<sup>3</sup> Yet regardless of the topic, Lebanon's national leaders are clearly concerned about altering the status quo, an uneasiness that focuses on the growing dialogue about the possibility of "impending war."

Over the past few months, local and international observers have engaged in a very public dialogue that centers on the likelihood that Lebanon could slip back toward chaos and war. During that time, exchanges about that dire extreme have transformed into conversations that all too frequently substitute the word "if" with "when." In reality, however, the concerns being expressed have evidential support. For instance, the quasi-regular conflicts—verbal and physical—Lebanon has experienced since May 2012 point toward the genuine possibility of a descent into national-level violence. Notably, Sunni Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir has played a significant role in instigating this mounting tension. As recently as March 13, Assir supporters in Tripoli and Beirut heeded his call to "take to

the streets and block [them] without resorting to burning tires or [violence]," based on his claim that the Lebanese Army had surrounded his mosque.<sup>4,5</sup> Despite al-Assir's "green," incendiary-free approach to protesting, his most recent call was made following a series of sit-ins and demonstrations staged by supporters and opponents alike—which garnered nationwide condemnation. It is also likely that despite any efforts he may have made to "soften" his rhetoric, al-Assir will continue playing the role of provocateur, whether he is busy urging citizens to protest or merely taking a ski trip.<sup>6</sup>

Unrest has also returned to some of Lebanon's most iconic Palestinian camps. Located near al-Assir's hometown of Saida, the Ain el-Hilweh camp—Lebanon's largest and most infamous—recently endured a lapse in security that culminated in a March 12–13 confrontation which left one dead and 16 injured.<sup>7</sup> Fighting between Fath and an emerging alliance of Islamist organizations comprised of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fath al-Islam, Jund ash-Sham and al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Moujahida (all purportedly "jihadist" groups which benefit substantially from their connections in the region, especially with the groups fighting in Syria) devolved into lethal machine gun and rocket duels.<sup>8</sup> Shifts in politico-religious allegiances among camp residents toward the more conservative (and in some cases "jihadist") ideology could have a significant impact on Palestinian-Lebanese relations and by extension, the approach Lebanon may take in addressing the steadily growing number of Syrian refugees. Behind the Palestinians, that population (now estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands) has emerged as the country's second largest group of refugees. To date, however, these clashes have not affected overall Lebanese security, likely because of the closed nature of the camps. Specifically, the Lebanese Army does not intervene in camp issues, and instead leaves security responsibilities to the residents.

Concurrently, the country's main Shia organization, Hezbollah, is already involved in almost daily clashes against (Sunni) Syrian rebels in several border areas of Northeast Lebanon. Not only is it watching guardedly the actions being taken by Sheikh al-Assir and other Sunni leaders, but it is also observing with some anxiety the growing number of Syrian refugees flowing into the country. Notably, it has been preparing fastidiously for the possibility of "impending violence." Well-informed sources advised *ShiaWatch* that Beirut-based unit commanders from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement were invited to participate in early March in several briefings choreographed by Hezbollah. During those events, the organizers discussed strategies to be invoked should military action or paramilitary deterrence need to be taken.

The same source indicated that for the first time in such briefings, 3-D images of Beirut's streets were projected on jumbo screens in order to identify the specific areas of responsibility assigned to each group.

Although Hezbollah and Amal have recently intensified patrols in their respective neighborhoods including the Shia quarters of West Beirut—a task referred to as *Hirasat*—the sources noted that this is the first time such technology (used to coordinate position assignments in the event military or paramilitary action is deemed necessary) has been shared with Amal militants. Moreover, the formal assignment of "battle sectors" demonstrates clearly that Hezbollah and its allies are preparing for just such a worst-case scenario.

Two primary reasons have prompted Hezbollah and its allies to begin gearing up for the expected action. First, the organization's supposed control of Beirut is being threatened by the influx of Syrian refugees. Among the tens of thousands of evacuees streaming toward Lebanon, vast numbers of them could be conscripted overnight, especially given the easy accessibility of weapons in the country. The presence of these refugees, particularly since their residency status remains "temporary," could ultimately and dramatically affect the socioeconomic makeup of the country. As mentioned previously, it is well known that the number of Syrian refugees crossing into Lebanon is increasing at a pace that cannot be controlled by any single authority, Lebanese

or otherwise. Further, many of the refugees arrive equipped with an ideology that runs counter to Hezbollah's intent. Indeed, most of those who fled Syria are at moral and ethical odds with the Assad regime, and by association, with its Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Secondly, Hezbollah is concerned with recent developments in the Palestinian camps, such as those in Bourj Barajneh (in Beirut's Southern



An article titled "The Black Deployment Causes Concern within March 14: We will not step back under the intimidation." Dated January 19, 2011, the article, published in the pro-Hezbollah/March 8 outlet *as-Safir*, described the reaction of March 14 to Hezbollah's black-shirted paramilitary show of force.

suburb) and Ain al-Hilweh (in the South). Again, the influx of Syrian refugees and others—mostly Sunni Muslims—into the camps is altering the established sociopolitical landscape in favor of one that is increasingly supportive of the Syrian revolution. In contrast to the outcome realized in May 2008 when Hezbollah demonstrated its ability to seize control of Beirut within hours, these changing attitudes have created a situation in which Hezbollah would not only find itself at odds with Lebanon's Sunni population, but also with a substantial number of extra-Lebanese Sunnis. Despite its mounting concerns, Hezbollah will not accept these camps as sources of danger. One of Hezbollah's most enduring credentials has been its championship of the Palestinian cause vis-à-vis the total rejection of Israel. As a result, should Hezbollah alarm the Lebanese regarding the Palestinians, such action would be tantamount to questioning its own dedication to the Palestinian situation.

Any causality assessment of the situation in Lebanon would suggest that the country's steadily increasing instability will soon produce a sizeable explosion. Nonetheless, Lebanon has proved time and again that accelerating hostilities and growing fear have not always resulted in the country falling victim to large-scale violence. Alternatively, one element likely to cause massive upheaval in the country is the way the organizations involved perceive the conflict—regardless of the actual level of tension. Still, it is not in Hezbollah's best interests to see Beirut cast into the flames of rampant, violent

discord. On the contrary, any military action taken in Beirut at present depends on several factors. First, the decision to engage military force is not one Hezbollah can make unilaterally. Rather, such a course of action could only be advanced if it corresponds with Iran's stated global strategy. Second, despite Hezbollah's purported ability to wrest complete control of some parts of Lebanon militarily, it would be unlikely that such an outcome would translate to genuine political gains, as was the case in 2008 with the Doha agreement. On the contrary, any armed conflict would lend credibility to latent March 14 accusations that Hezbollah (and thus the March 8-led government) is neither serving the best interests of the Lebanese nor ensuring the country's stability. Still, some local observers are convinced that if a "battle for Damascus" was indeed to threaten the legitimacy of al-Assad's regime, Beirut would be the first to feel the resultant seismic shifts.

Ultimately, the dire observations being made by the country's various politicians should be

## The Paramilitary Black Shirts Deterrence...



[https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/the\\_tyanny\\_of\\_the\\_black\\_shirts](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/the_tyanny_of_the_black_shirts)

*When the initial indictments and supporting materials were submitted January 17, 2011 to the pre-trial judge of the STL, the contents of those documents should have remained confidential. Yet leaks indeed occurred which disclosed that the indictment focused on Hezbollah members. In response, Hezbollah staged a show of force the next day involving dozens of militants. Ostensibly unarmed, scores of black-shirted men were deployed to several of Beirut's most strategic areas. Although the "exercise" lasted only a few hours, it certainly conveyed the intended message. In fact, January 18, 2011, known as the "day of the black shirts," became the Lebanese prototype for paramilitary action that clearly threatens violence but spills no blood. Given the gravitas associated historically with large-scale group adoption of black shirts, Hezbollah opponents equate the organization's prominent display of its black-shirted "emissaries" as demonstrative of Hezbollah's predilection for violence. From a pro-Hezbollah perspective, however, the black shirt has become an object of pride as well as a sought-after item of its pop culture. Noted pro-Hezbollah singer Ali Barakat even composed a song titled "The Black Shirts!"*

Barakat's song can be found online: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO-T\\_i23Yns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO-T_i23Yns)

considered part of the ongoing domestic tussles and the regional wrangling that has made its way to Lebanon. Nevertheless, there is simply no guarantee that Lebanon will be fortunate enough to escape vitriolic differences of opinion that may gravitate toward clashes and/or descend into spontaneous, reckless violence...

Kelly Stedem contributed to this article.

- 1 "Berri Stresses Security Priority: There Should be a Country for Polls to Take Place." *Naharnet*. 4 March 2013. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/74148-berri-stresses-security-priority-there-should-be-a-country-for-polls-to-take-place>
- 2 *Ibid*.
- 3 Lakkis, Hassan. "Mikati tell ministers: Stick to policy on Syria." *The Daily Star*. 13 March 2013. <http://dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Mar-13209877-/mikati-tells-ministers-stick-to-policy-on-syria.ashx#axzz2NF2CnNB4>
- 4 "Assir supporters rally in Beirut, Tripoli." *Now*. 13 March 2013. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/assir-supporters-briefly-cut-roads-in-beirut-tariq-al-jedideh>
- 5 "Assir supporters rally in Beirut, Tripoli." *Now*. 13 March 2013. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/assir-supporters-briefly-cut-roads-in-beirut-tariq-al-jedideh>
- 6 Reuters Staff. "Sunni cleric's skiing day out sparks Lebanon's latest sectarian showdown." *Reuters*. 24 January 2013. <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2013/24/01/sunni-clerics-skiing-day-out-sparks-lebanons-latest-sectarian-showdown/>
- 7 Alami, Mona. "New unrest rocks Ain el-Helweh." *Now*. 12 March 2013. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/new-unrest-rocks-ain-el-helweh>
- 8 *Ibid*.