

The Sunni-Shia Reckoning Unfinished Business of “Beirut Spring” Exposed by Syrian Uprising

“Heightened domestic tensions in Lebanon—as pro- and anti-Assad sectarian factions skirmish in the Tripoli region as well as in Beirut—indicate to us that Lebanon’s domestic stability has become increasingly more vulnerable to events in Syria.”¹ This unpleasantly frank assessment did not come from a diplomat, a journalist or even an academic. Rather, it was offered by Standard & Poor’s Rating Services in an explanation of its recent decision to downgrade Lebanon’s currency ratings. Clearly, stakeholders across the board, not the least of whom General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, are finding it increasingly difficult to separate the unrest in Lebanon and Syria from “a Sunni-Shia competition for, you know, regional control.”²

On May 21, members of a special Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) unit stationed at a checkpoint in the northern village of Kuweikat shot and killed Sunni Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed, a rising star of the Sunni militancy and outspoken critic of the Assad regime.³ Although an investigation into his death has been ordered, the killing touched off protests across Lebanon’s Sunni regions during which burning tires blocked roads and dumpsters were set alight.⁴ In Beirut, writer Nicholas Blanford observed that the protests swelled into “the worst bout of political violence in four years.”⁵ In the Sunni neighborhood of Tarik al-Jdeideh, fighting erupted between supporters of Shaker Berjawi, a Sunni Hezbollah ally, and supporters of the Future Movement, which left three people dead and 10 wounded.⁶

This recent bout of sectarian violence was triggered initially by the arrest of Shadi Mawlawi, a “little-known” Sunni Islamist who was accused of belonging to a terrorist organization.⁷ Following his arrest in May 2012, gun battles raged intermittently for more than a week in the northern city of Tripoli, killing at least 10 and leaving scores wounded.⁸ Ultimately, Mawlawi was released after the death of Sheikh Abdul-Wahed, but that action was a blatant attempt by the government and LAF to quell Sunni unrest. In reality, however, the surging violence in Lebanon is reigniting long-standing tensions

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between the minority pro-Assad Alawites and numerous but less organized pro-opposition Sunnis.⁹ This tumultuous breakup becomes evident by reviewing the sectarian makeup of the warring villages. For instance, Jabal Mohsen is an Alawite stronghold while Bab at-Tabbaneh is predominately Sunni, a demographic difference that mimics the sectarian makeup of the crisis in Syria. In an interview with *The National*, former Tripoli MP Misbah Ahdab said “There’s no doubt these are proxy battles by bigger powers—but these proxy wars are easy to wage when the state doesn’t want to disarm the militias that are allowed to fight whenever they want.”¹⁰ These heightened fears prompted Interior Minister Marwan Charbel to state

on May 22, “If the unrest in the northern city of Tripoli continues, it will be the starting point for the biggest strife in the history of Lebanon.”¹¹ For his part, Hezbollah bloc MP Nawwaf Moussawi said “that worries of the possibility of domestic strife were a result of the policy of “sectarian incitement” by March 14.”¹²



The May 22 abduction in Syria's Aleppo region of a group of Lebanese Shia pilgrims returning from Iran sparked a wave of "tire burnings" at the entrances to Dahiyeh. This relatively spontaneous action followed several days of general unrest, which included many other instances of "tire fires" throughout Lebanon to protest the assassination of Sunni Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed. In contrast to the disorganized and impromptu Sunni tire burnings ended only by the intervention of the security services, its Shia counterpart ceased astonishingly at around 7 PM following Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's demand that the crowd "withdraw from the streets." The mob's obedience, however, was certainly not as spontaneous as it appeared. In reality, Hezbollah operatives had taken control of the streets and dismissed the protestors. Clearly, maintaining the impression that it can always exert full control of Beirut's "Shia street" is a pivotal element in Hezbollah's policy, particularly where it concerns the Christian allies of General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. This "management" of the event in Dahiyeh showcased Hezbollah's ability to impose its will on its constituents versus the anarchy that defined the protests staged by its Sunni rivals!

The escalating tensions between Lebanon's Sunni and Shia follow the MENA-wide trend of increased hostility between the two groups.¹³ While inter-sectarian tensions in Lebanon were manifested typically by Christian-Muslim violence, improved Shia political visibility and increased Sunni political power since the Civil War ended has changed the nature of previous alliances within the fragile political system. By extension, contemporary political and financial agreements between regional actors and other foreign entities means that the country's stability is as dependent on events that occur throughout the region as it is on circumstances in Lebanon.

Unsurprisingly, much the recent hostilities have their roots in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. According to a 2010 report by the International Crisis Group, the elder Hariri's assassination "awoke deep, lingering fears among the Sunni community which quickly rallied around his son Saad, and shifted its national, regional and wider international alliances." His assassination also solidified the growing hostility between the two sects as the Sunnis blamed Syria, Hezbollah's ally, and forced their departure from the country. In turn, Hezbollah was prompted to join the national government in an

attempt "to preserve the Resistance." Since that time, political divisions have centered on alliances either with Hezbollah or Hariri's Future Movement.¹⁴ Lebanese Sunni-Shia hostilities came to a head on May 7, 2008 when Hezbollah fighters invaded West Beirut. In 2010, tensions escalated again when Hezbollah forced the collapse of Hariri's "unity" government and installed its own "unilateral" version. These tensions, long left to simmer, now threaten to boil over as the conflict continues in Syria.

The surging number of Syrian refugees appearing along the border has also inflamed Lebanese sectarian tensions, especially in mixed regions of the Bekaa where Sunni residents are providing a safe haven to those displaced. Local residents have indeed helped shield refugees from both the Syrian army and Lebanese security¹⁵ forces affiliated with Hezbollah. Many people in these Sunni areas consider official Lebanese security institutions to be synonymous with Hezbollah—given the control that organization asserts over Army Intelligence and Security. This belief has sharply heightened tensions between local Sunni residents and Lebanese security.

Along the border, the tensions exacerbated by the influx of refugees and perceived readily by Sunnis are also impacting the Shia. This inverse relationship became evident quickly after 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims were kidnapped near Aleppo, Syria on May 22.¹⁶ Of note, most of those pilgrims came from south Lebanon but were domiciled in the Dahiyeh, Beirut's Hezbollah-controlled suburbs, a factor that sparked mass protests throughout the area during which tires were burned and roads closed at night. Fortunately, the protesters dispersed after Hezbollah leader

Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah issued a demand for calm: "I call on everyone to show restraint... It is not acceptable for anyone to block roads or carry out violent acts."¹⁷ Initial reports stated that the Syrian Free Army, a predominately Sunni group comprised of Syrian military defectors, was to blame, but the group denied involvement in the act and instead blamed the Syrian regime. Of course, Hezbollah and Lebanese leaders have promised to recover the pilgrims as soon as possible. Following the abduction, rumors were rampant of Syrian nationals being beaten and kidnapped throughout Beirut.



Berjawi noted that some "Arafati" elements participated in the attack on his premises. In fact, that reference to former PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat is an epithet that was in vogue during the 1980s and was used to describe anti-Syrian Palestinians. On a similar note, Osama Saad, who heads the Popular Nasserite Organization, told the Lebanese daily *as-Safir* that violent incidents around Sidon and Southern Lebanon had gone unreported during the recent clashes in Beirut.¹ Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri accused Palestinians of plotting to assassinate him while Arab Tawhid Party leader Wiam Wahhab announced recently that Hezbollah's weapons cache could be used to prevent the naturalization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.²³ "Those who will target [Hezbollah] in Lebanon will be [treated] like the Israeli enemy." Ironically, when the Civil War began in 1975, Lebanon's Christian parties also justified their weapons and involvement in the violence by invoking the need to prevent the naturalization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Nevertheless, persistent and increasing rumors of Palestinian interference will only help reveal long-buried hostilities towards Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

¹ *As-Safir*, May 28, 2012.

² *Idem*.

³ "Wahhab: Resistance Weapons Could be used Internally." *Now Lebanon*. 27 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=401724>

⁴ *Idem*.

Although much of this tension was revived by the Syrian crisis, the behavior displayed during recent protests includes a distinctly sectarian tone. For example, it was no coincidence that Sunnis in Naame protesting the killing of Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed burned piles of tires in an attempt to block the littoral road that serves as the main artery between the Dahiyeh Shia and those in the South. Thus, by severing the route that connects Hezbollah's main strongholds (the Dahiyeh and the South), the Sunnis issued a symbolic warning to Shia throughout the country that they have the capability to disrupt the Shia geographical continuum. In response, the Shia operated a dramatic "controlled burn" under the supervision

of Amal and Hezbollah around Dahiyeh border areas.

Three likely conclusions can be drawn from these events:

1) Although the violence remains confined to north Lebanon at this point, the symbolism involved—on all sides—should be taken very seriously. In a country that endured years of war, the level of violence that ultimately takes place is not always proportional to the event that prompted it.

1 "S&P Drops Lebanon Outlook to Negative." *Now Lebanon*. 28 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=402312#ixzz1wCAmLjZy>

2 "Syrian Intervention 'very difficult,' top US general says." *Now Lebanon*. 19 February 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=366611>

3 "Lebanon Boils after Sheikh Killing." *The Daily Star*. 21 May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/May-21/74096-/lebanon-boils-after-sheikh-killing.ashx#axzz1vru96MbH>

4 "Two Dead in Beirut Clashes after Killing of anti-Assad Cleric." *Reuters*. 22 May 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/22/us-syria-lebanon-idUSBRE84L0J220120522>

5 "Syrian Spillover: Beirut Sees Worst Clashes in Four Years." *The Christian Science Monitor*. 21 May 2012. www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/513621

6 "Lebanon Boils After Sheikh Killing." *The Daily Star*. 21 May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/May-21/74096-/lebanon-boils-after-sheikh-killing.ashx#axzz1vru96MbH>

7 "Mawlawi: I was threatened with transfer to Syrian jail." *Now Lebanon*. 28 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=402051>

8 "One Dead, 10 Hurt as Clashes Renew in Bab al-Tabbaneh, Jabal Mohsen." *Naharnet*. 16 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40393>

9 "Eid Calls for Including Alawites in National Dialogue." *Now Lebanon*. 29 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=402702>

2) So far, the real loser has been the LAF as that organization's credibility has been compromised. The events proved that the LAF can neither impose its will on the ground nor defend its own image. Despite making up a large part of the rank and file of this institution, Sunnis now see the LAF as ultimately accountable to Hezbollah – a betrayal that will have long-term consequences.

3) Rather than being the source of Lebanon's growing volatility, it is clear that the strife in Syria has simply accelerated discord in Lebanon, which itself is an expression of Lebanon's patently dysfunctional political system. It is unsurprising that as the end of the Syrian regime apparently draws nearer, the Taef Agreement under which Lebanon's Civil War ended reaches its expiration date.

10 "Lebanese Fighting is a Mirror of Syria Battles." *The National*. 21 May 2012. www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/lebanese-fighting-is-a-mirror-of-syria-battles

11 "Charbel Warns of Sunni-Shia Strife." *Now Lebanon*. 17 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=397585>

12 "Moussawi slams March 14's 'sectarian incitement.'" *Now Lebanon*. 3 June 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=404751#ixzz1wjU9HUuD>

13 "A Spasm of Violence: How Lebanon is Threatened by Syria's Rebellion." *Time*. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2115386,00.html>

14 "Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current." International Crisis Group. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/9620%20Lebanons%20Politics%20-%20The%20Sunni%20Community%20and%20Hariris%20Future%20Current.pdf>

15 "Syrian Spillover: Beirut Sees Worst Clashes in Four Years." *The Christian Science Monitor*. 21 May 2012. www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/513621

16 "Kidnap of Lebanese pilgrims in Syria heightens tensions." *Now Lebanon*. 23 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=400086&MIID=0&PID=0>

17 *Idem*.

18 *Idem*.