



INSS Insight No. 428, May 21, 2013

Hizbollah's Struggle for Domestic Survival: Lebanese Discourse on the Social Networks, May 2013

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Hizbollah's increasingly apparent involvement in the bloodshed in Syria has hurt the organization's legitimacy and popularity within Lebanon. The developments and discourse in the Lebanese social media in recent months indicate the depth of the crises that Hizbollah now faces. The terms "civil war," "confrontation," "political vacuum" and "sectarian struggle" pepper the online discourse frequently, implying that Lebanon is on a trajectory towards internal strife.

The discussions on Lebanese social networks indicate that the challenges to Hizbollah's popularity are threefold: loud domestic criticism of its role in Syria and the ramifications of its activity there; loss of domestic support for the organization's political wing; and aggravation of preexisting Lebanese sectarian tensions.

Hizbollah in Syria: "Lebanon's Vietnam"

Headlines such as "Vietnam, It's Here" increasingly dominate the social media, as do YouTube clips documenting the activities of Hizbollah fighters against Syrian rebels. Most new media sources estimate that anywhere from 1,000 to 6,000 Hizbollah fighters are now active in Syria. As more and more Hizbollah fighters return to Lebanon in coffins and Syrian unrest spills over into the Beqaa and Tripoli regions, domestic criticism of the organization's involvement in Syria grows. Among those protesting Hizbollah's activities is its former leader Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, who asserts that "Hizbollah's reckless conduct in Syria will lead not to hundreds or thousands but to millions of dead."

Among the most strident critics of Hizbollah's role in the Syrian civil war is the Syrian opposition, including the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra, (affiliated with al-Qaeda), the Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In a video posted on his Facebook page, Mouaz al-Khatib, president of the Syrian National Coalition, demanded that Nasrallah recall his men from Syria at once. Al-Khatib labeled Hizbollah's involvement in Syria "an invasion" and accused them of "moral bankruptcy," making it clear that he



holds Nasrallah personally responsible for the sectarian dissolution of Lebanon and Syria. Similarly, al-Nusra forces issued a dramatic warning to Lebanese President Michel Suleiman: “We inform you, and you can consider this a final warning, that you should take immediate steps to restrain the dogs of Lebanon [Hizbollah]...Fire will soon rage in Beirut. If you do not act within 24 hours, we will view you an accomplice in the massacres that the members of the party of Satan are committing...We will then be forced to take exacting steps and burn anyone we find in Beirut.”

Domestic Politics: Hizbollah has Lost the Premiership

On March 22, 2013, only three months before the scheduled June 20 parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Najib Mikati of the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalition announced his resignation. His official statement cited the deadlock in the cabinet over the new election law and the refusal of coalition partners (Shiite Amal and Hizbollah and Maronite Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement) to extend the term of Ashraf Rifi, the head of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces. Fearing that its slipping domestic popularity would cost it the upcoming elections for the premiership, Hizbollah agreed to compromise by approving Tammam Salam as the head of Mikati's the transitional government.

Internal Rivalries: Radical Shiites vs. Radical Sunnis

Given the departure of Sunni leader Hariri and Nasrallah's ongoing physical absence from the political scene, Lebanon is most commonly described on the social networks as a "political vacuum." Stepping into this vacuum are extremist Salafist clerics, such as Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, the imam of the Bilal Ben Raba mosque in Sidon, and Sheikh Salam Rafei, the imam of the al-Taqawa mosque in Tripoli. Since early 2012, these clerics have conducted their struggle against Hizbollah from the minbars of mosques and via social media. They challenge Hizbollah's legitimacy and demand that it turn over its weapons to the Lebanese government. They have also called on the residents of south Beirut and other southern towns and villages to take to the streets, organizing sit-ins and burning tires in protest on the main roads south and north of Beirut. On April 22, 2013 the two clerics issued a *fatwa* in which they called on the youth to enlist in jihad alongside the Syrian rebels and against Hizbollah, saying “It is the religious duty of every Muslim who can do so.” Al-Assir announced the establishment of the Free Resistance Brigades in Sidon, and called on the wealthy to donate arms and funds to the struggle. He also called for the organization of underground Lebanese militias to be prepared for the day after Assad's fall, should Hizbollah's enemies in the Syrian opposition attempt to take their revenge on Lebanese soil. Spokespeople for the armed and the unarmed opposition in Syria thanked the two Lebanese clerics for their support, but asked them to “avoid



interfering in Syrian affairs and exporting the intra-Lebanese struggle between Sunnis and Shiites to Syria.”

Many new media users are deeply worried about the future of Lebanon, citing the veritable sea of black flags in the north of country, which they say belong to al-Qaeda. They express concern that after the collapse of the Assad regime, the al-Qaeda forces, and radical Salafist groups of Lebanon and certain Syrian jihadist groups will seek to take revenge against Hizbollah, saying that “today they are fighting one another in Syria; tomorrow, they will continue their struggle in Lebanon.” They add that non-state actors such as radical Salafists, jihadists, and al-Qaeda do not feel bound by the relatively internalized rules of conduct that govern Hizbollah-Israeli confrontations. Another perspective argues that as the radical Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis collapses, Hizbollah will lose its strategic support and means of leverage over Sunni jihadists. Many of these social network users believe that a violent confrontation between radical Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites is only a matter of time.

Conclusion

There is widespread agreement among Lebanese social media users that the events in Syria are already spilling over into Lebanon and that the effects will only worsen in the future. They say that Hizbollah's involvement in Syria will not go unanswered and the long term ramifications for Lebanon will be disastrous. Three possible scenarios are outlined: a) a post-Assad confrontation between Syria and Lebanon as Jabhat al-Nusra seeks its revenge against Hizbollah; b) sectarian war between radical Lebanese Shiites and Sunnis; and c) civil war in Lebanon. Although most of the Lebanese people are overwhelmingly opposed to civil war, social media users feel that the external forces driving Lebanon towards internal strife are beyond the population's control and may therefore overwhelm the collective memory of the Lebanese civil wars that until now restrained domestic tensions.

Most new media users claim that Hizbollah is now fighting for its very survival – both in Syria and Lebanon. Some express surprise that even now internal Lebanese tensions remain on a low flame, a phenomenon perhaps best described by one social media user: “In this game of Lebanese politics, you either win, or you lie low and win next time.”

One conspicuously absent aspect of the discussion is whether the mounting pressure and criticism of Hizbollah will help rein in the organization's activities vis-à-vis Israel and prevent a third confrontation. Indeed, Nasrallah's threat of open resistance to Israel on the Golan front in response to the recent alleged Israeli attack on a surface-to-surface Hizbollah-bound missile shipment testifies to the organization's reluctance to renew the conflict against Israel from Lebanese territory.