

Faysal Itani  
Sarah Grebowski

RAFIK HARIRI CENTER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

# Beyond Spillover: Syria's Role in Lebanon's Drift Toward Political Violence

To describe the increase in violence and instability in Lebanon since the civil war in Syria began as simply a spillover is misleading. It risks casting Lebanon as a victim to negative externalities divorced from its own political dysfunction. In truth, Lebanon's troubles long preceded the war in Syria, and the conflict's more complex and pernicious effect on Lebanon has been the exposure and deepening of pre-existing rifts among Lebanese.

Until the Syrian crisis, tensions among the Lebanese were checked by the strong foreign backing for and overwhelming military superiority of one faction, Hezbollah, and its opponents' inability to address this imbalance. The Syrian regime's troubles have forced Lebanese factions to revise their political calculations, raising their stakes in Lebanon's long-running conflict between Sunni and Shia factions and hastening the country's drift toward political violence. Absent a quick resolution of the Syrian war, which seems unlikely, it is difficult to imagine how Lebanon can avoid protracted violent unrest, a deepening humanitarian crisis, and institutional decay.

## Political Fallout

Inextricably linked by geography, history, and religion, Lebanon and Syria have never quite been able to escape one another's politics. Lebanon's civil war (1975-90) drew in Syria as a major military and political player, and in postwar Lebanon, the fortunes of rival Lebanese factions rose and fell with those of their respective Syrian patrons. The Syrian state's stability and Lebanon's weakness eventually allowed Syria to dominate Lebanese politics. Now Syria's weakness is shaping Lebanese politics.

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The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council studies political transitions and economic conditions in Arab countries and recommends US and European policies to encourage constructive change.

Over the past decade, Lebanon's major political blocs have coalesced around a growing Sunni-Shia divide, with Christian groups dividing their support for the two Muslim sects and the Druze minority playing a key balancing role between them. The blocs are further defined by their positions on Syrian involvement in Lebanon and, more recently, allegiances in Syria's current conflict. As Lebanon's most powerful Shia party and leader of the Syria-backed March 8 coalition, Hezbollah has been locked into a power struggle with the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition, led by the Sunni Future Movement.

The March 14 coalition formed a government in 2005 following the withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon, a primary demand of protesters after the assassination of Sunni prime minister Rafik Hariri for which Syria and Hezbollah were blamed. Hostilities between the coalitions deepened over time due to Hezbollah's increasingly powerful militia and culminated in a confrontation when Hezbollah forcefully took over Sunni areas of Beirut in May 2008.

Militarily defeated, March 14 was compelled to grant Hezbollah veto power over government decisions, although the coalition preserved its cabinet majority until the defection of a key ally gave Hezbollah control of the government in

*Faysal Itani is a fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Sarah Grebowski is a research assistant at the Hariri Center for the Middle East, focusing on the Levant.*

2011. From that point forward, Hezbollah excluded its rivals from the cabinet, acquired legal and political cover for its weapons, marginalized Lebanon's main Sunni leadership, and set the stage for a bitter Sunni-Shia rivalry over the Syrian civil war. Although Hezbollah and March 14 officially agreed to distance Lebanon from the war in Syria—the last cabinet even adopted a policy of nonintervention—the two factions have pursued very different policies outside of state institutions. It is this dynamic that poses the gravest danger for Lebanon and raises the prospect of prolonged political paralysis and sectarian violence.

Hezbollah is clearly demonstrating its priorities by fighting on the side of Bashar al-Assad and his regime in Syria where it has deployed fighters in a leading combat role, and maintained its broader sectarian and strategic alliance with Syria and Iran. Sending Hezbollah fighters into Syria was likely an Iranian decision, however, it is one that Hezbollah's leadership probably believes is necessary given its deep reliance on Syria as a supply route for weapons and a source of political support. If the Assad regime is defeated in Syria, Hezbollah's Lebanese rivals (perhaps in addition to Syrian rebels) could be emboldened to challenge it inside Lebanon, drawing Hezbollah into a situation in which it would have to use lethal force to protect its military autonomy as it did in 2008. To avoid the sectarian fallout and costly distraction from the fight against Israel that this scenario would bring, Hezbollah prefers to fight and win inside Syria, indirectly weakening March 14 and forcing them to agree to a formal government endorsement of its militia. Its reasoning is not entirely unsound, but killing Sunnis in Syria has only reinforced Sunni distrust and resentment of Hezbollah within Lebanon, and greatly increased the risk of the very conflict between Lebanese Sunni and Shia that it hopes to prevent.

While Hezbollah sees the Syrian crisis as a threat to its core interests, the conflict presents the March 14 coalition with an opportunity to weaken Hezbollah or at least restore sectarian balance to Lebanese politics. To exploit Hezbollah's vulnerability, Lebanon's Sunni leaders have escalated their anti-Hezbollah rhetoric, secured the nomination of a friendly prime minister, Tammam Salam, and insisted on a 'neutral' cabinet to replace the recently collapsed cabinet that was dominated by Hezbollah.<sup>1</sup> However, the overtly sectarian rhetoric that March 14 uses against Hezbollah carries its own risks, including that of empowering radical Lebanese

Sunni factions as well as hardliners within Hezbollah who are relatively less amenable to a domestic political compromise. The rise of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a Sidon-based Sunni cleric who has gained some popularity due to his vocal attacks on Hezbollah and its alleged marginalization of Sunnis, is one such unintended consequence. At the national level, Sunni Islamists remain politically marginal, but sectarian violence tends to discredit moderates and empower those groups most willing and able to use force to protect their sect—something at which Islamist groups have proven especially adept. Clearly Assir sees himself as a competitor to rather than a tool of March 14, but in reality he and other Sunni Islamists are both.

Syria's morass is deepening Lebanon's political and institutional crisis, which is evident in the inability of various Lebanese factions to agree on a cabinet and electoral law under which the next parliament and government will be formed. Hezbollah is pushing for an electoral law that would allow it to secure enough seats in cabinet to preserve its militia status should the Syrian state continue to weaken. The emboldened Sunni-led March 14 coalition has rejected such a law and has, for the first time, refused to allow the cabinet to endorse Hezbollah's right to maintain armed forces. While Hezbollah hopes to contain the sectarian conflict to Syria and check its Lebanese rivals through formal institutions, March 14 may calculate that luring Hezbollah into a drawn-out sectarian, political (and perhaps military) confrontation is better than allowing it to dominate Lebanon and fight in Syria without political consequence. In the March 14 view, prolonged political deadlock buys time for the Syrian regime to weaken further, and the absence of a functioning cabinet and a delay in parliamentary elections (originally scheduled for June 2013 but now rescheduled for November 2014) are seen as acceptable costs. As March 14 perceives the situation, it is trapping Hezbollah: if Hezbollah continues to fight in Syria or takes military action against Lebanese Sunnis, the party will only further isolate itself and trigger a domestic sectarian conflict that would eventually undermine its position in Lebanon.

Ultimately, Hezbollah is not bound by Lebanon's political process. In recent years its military power enabled it to repeatedly ignore cabinet and parliamentary decisions. Its popularity among the Lebanese Shia population grants it a deep reservoir of political support for large-scale civil unrest

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<sup>1</sup> The previous prime minister Najib Mikati resigned in March in the face of Hezbollah's refusal to endorse his policies in cabinet. He currently serves as caretaker prime minister until prime minister-elect Salam forms a government.

and, if need be, military action against its rivals. But it would strongly prefer to avoid this, and is therefore seeking political cover for its military autonomy through formal political institutions. Meanwhile, March 14 lacks military options, and these institutions are its only useful tools for pressuring a beleaguered Hezbollah. Thus, the Syrian civil war has made control of political institutions all the more critical for both sides. At the same time, by emboldening Sunnis and unnerving Shia, it has decreased both sides' willingness to compromise over issues such as the cabinet makeup, national policy on Syria, and the electoral law. Ironically, parties' heightened focus on Lebanon's institutions has deepened their dysfunction.

## Security

Lebanon's security environment has suffered both direct and indirect hits as a result of the conflict in Syria. Cross-border fighting between Syrian rebels and regime forces has opened Lebanon as a front, destabilizing an area over which the state holds little domain in the first place. From the early stages of the conflict, Syrian rebel fighters have crossed into Lebanon to establish safe havens with the support of sympathetic Lebanese Sunni communities in order to rest, regroup, and launch attacks concentrated on Assad loyalist positions near Homs and Lebanon's northern border with Syria. In return, the regime frequently targets Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels inside Lebanon and their supply lines, as well as Lebanese population zones suspected of supporting or hosting them, using tactics of cross-border shelling, machine gun and sniper fire, and raids. Lebanese actors have exacerbated this deterioration in border security. As Hezbollah continues to increase its involvement in Syria, border areas have become dangerous flashpoints for competition between the Syrian rebels and Hezbollah for control of strategic cross-border routes. FSA routes through Lebanon's northern Bekaa Valley are now dotted with Hezbollah checkpoints and ambush positions, pitting the two militias against each other on either side of the border. Tensions spiked when the FSA issued a series of threats and ultimatums to Hezbollah, warning the party to cease its activities in Syria or subject its installations in the Bekaa to attack. The spat on the Lebanese side of the border remains contained as long as both parties prefer not to divert resources from the fight inside Syria. However, recent attacks on Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut following Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's May speech vowing to defend the Syrian regime suggests

that his enemies may already be emboldened to strike on Hezbollah's own turf.

Beyond the border, Sunni strongholds of Tripoli, Arsal, and Sidon are awash in weapons and increasingly outside the control of security forces. In a microcosm of the war in Syria, militants from the Tripoli neighborhoods of Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh and Alawite Jabal Mohsen, the latter being the sect of the Assad family, regularly engage in violent sectarian clashes. The escalating violence in Tripoli has killed armed fighters from both communities, civilians, and Lebanese Army soldiers and indicates a militarization of Lebanon's sectarian conflict. Radical Sunni clerics in Lebanon's cities are effectively rallying Sunnis behind a sectarian narrative of their marginalization in Lebanon at the hands of Hezbollah and persecution in Syria at the hands of the Assad regime, and inciting them to take up arms against these enemies. Lebanon's political and religious leaders may eventually lose control of events on the ground, struggle to control their own constituencies, and come to see a nonviolent resolution of their differences as unrealistic and undesirable.

Lebanon's security institutions—weak, politicized, and divided along sectarian lines—are unable to shape the country's security environment. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the most capable state security institution, has been stretched thin by efforts to limit intermittent sectarian clashes, kidnappings, assassination attempts, and Syrian rebel activity along the border. The LAF's multi-sectarian makeup lends it some credibility as an arbiter, but also puts it at risk of fragmentation if it intervenes decisively in Lebanon's sectarian conflict. Its actions over the past two years are perceived by the Sunni community as biased, due to its targeting Lebanese and Syrian Sunni militants while allowing Hezbollah to operate freely, and its alleged intelligence cooperation with Hezbollah and Syrian regime. The Sunni-dominated Internal Security Forces (ISF) or gendarmes, on the other hand, has been accused of targeting Syria's allies inside Lebanon, a narrative likely linked to the assassination of ISF intelligence chief Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan in October 2012. Whatever their respective agendas, Lebanon's security forces are essentially incapable of playing a decisive role in the country's more contentious conflicts.

Ultimately, whether these security challenges escalate into more systemic sectarian violence depends on the continued ability of Lebanon's political elite to mitigate tensions inflamed by the Syria conflict through political backchannels. If they grant LAF permission and if there

is a political peace to be kept, the army could undertake damage control to a degree by acting as a buffer and arbiter between rival factions on the ground. But the scale of sectarian violence will most likely depend on politicians' calculations as to whether they stand to gain from an all-out conflict in Lebanon, provided political leaders themselves do not lose control of the situation on the ground. For now, emerging Sunni militias, while emboldened, cannot prevail in a confrontation with Hezbollah, which continues to prefer fighting in Syria and preserving a tenuous peace in Lebanon. However if these calculations shift, the ready availability of arms, seething sectarian tensions, and general lawlessness in many areas of Lebanon have set the stage for a serious escalation in violence.

## **Humanitarian Impact and the Refugee Problem**

The rapid and accelerating influx of Syrian refugees into northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley has been perhaps the most visible manifestation of the Syrian war in Lebanon, along with smaller numbers in Beirut and Lebanon's southern cities. At least 500,000 refugees have registered with the United Nations in Lebanon since the conflict began in March 2011—more than 10 percent of Lebanon's population—although the actual numbers are likely much higher since hundreds of thousands more remain unregistered due to logistical barriers, fear of regime reprisals, or their status as Syrian migrant workers.

These numbers would constitute a humanitarian crisis anywhere, but Lebanon's challenges in absorbing Syrian refugees are unique. For a small country with economic sectors especially vulnerable to external shocks, the infrastructural, economic, and demographic implications of the refugee influx are immense. The areas in which Syrians are settling include some of Lebanon's poorest and least developed communities. As a paradigmatic weak state, Lebanon fails to provide basic services to its own citizens in the best of times and wealthiest of neighborhoods, and it is even less equipped to support a large refugee population. The state's policy has been to encourage integration of Syrian refugees into existing Lebanese communities, which strong familial, communal, and economic ties across the Syrian-Lebanese border have facilitated. However, this is increasingly untenable as the economy weakens, Lebanese

patience with Syrians competing with them for scarce jobs runs thin, and Lebanese communities' capacity to host refugees is simply exhausted.

Syrian refugees who arrive too late to benefit from Lebanon's local integration strategy are forced to pay a high premium for shelter, healthcare, and safety. Landlords in Tripoli and Akkar charge high rent prices for apartments or makeshift shelters that fail to provide protection from the elements, especially rains, floods, and low temperatures during winter. To accommodate those who cannot afford even shared rent, shoddy and woefully underequipped unofficial camps have proliferated between buildings, in open fields, or on the sides of roads in north Lebanon and the northern Bekaa Valley. Some Syrian refugees have resorted to taking shelter in abandoned Lebanese border villages subject to regular cross-border gunfire and shelling.

Refugees face disease and malnutrition as a result of these dense and unsanitary living conditions,<sup>2</sup> and international aid organizations are struggling to provide medical relief and other basic necessities to diffuse pockets of Syrian refugees dotting Lebanon's difficult and increasingly dangerous border terrain. For registered refugees eligible for basic medical attention from international health organizations, treatment of chronic diseases and mental health problems and access to affordable drugs and hospital care are difficult to come by.

Hardships are not limited to the refugee population; Lebanese host communities, many already living in poverty, now face competition for scarce sources of income and other resources. The allocation of external humanitarian aid by the United Nations and other international organizations heavily favors refugees, leaving Lebanese unable to cope with reduced wages and rising prices, and creating resentment toward this perceived preferential treatment of Syrians. There are increasingly evident signs that the refugee presence is straining Lebanon's social fabric, particularly deepening criticism and mistrust toward and discrimination against refugees.

The refugee crisis is also politically contentious, as the mostly-Sunni refugees from Syria threaten to upset the sectarian demographic balance on which Lebanon's political power-sharing agreement is based, and evokes memories of the early 1970s when the presence of armed Palestinian

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<sup>2</sup> Medecins Sans Frontieres, *Lebanon: Abundant Medical Needs Among Syrian Refugees and Victims of Local Conflict in Tripoli*, June 4, 2013, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news/article.cfm?id=6803&cat=field-news>.

refugees helped pull the country into civil war. Sectarian patterns of refugee settlement, with Sunni Syrians naturally seeking refuge among coreligionists who are inclined to welcome them, are reinforcing Sunni-Shia tensions and further polarizing supporters and opponents of the Syrian regime. Although most refugees are women and children, the swelling of the Sunni population in Lebanon adds to non-Sunni minorities' fears of an emboldened Sunni community that identifies strongly with the Syrian rebellion.

The growing humanitarian crisis in Lebanon has thus been a subject of intense political (and increasingly sectarian) debate, but the range of politically, economically, and operationally feasible policy solutions is limited. Non-Sunni politicians, alarmed by the number of Sunni Muslims entering the country, have proffered solutions that would protect them from drastic demographic changes. In one instance in late 2012, prominent Christian political leader Gebran Bassil called for closure of the border with Syria and the repatriation of a number of refugees. However, the closure of an undemarcated and undelineated border over which Lebanese authorities have little control is a logistical impossibility, and such a move would likely provoke a strong and possibly violent response from Lebanese Sunnis.

On the other hand, Hezbollah and its March 8 allies would likely see the establishment of new refugee camps inside Lebanon as deeply unsettling, as these could serve as operational bases for Syrian rebels. Lebanese authorities would struggle to exert control over such camps, much as they have the heavily armed Palestinian refugee camps, which for decades have been under the control of militias hostile to Lebanese security forces. However, the growing migration of Sunni Syrian refugees to Shia-dominated areas of Lebanon and the looming threat of a militarized, emboldened Lebanese Sunni community may encourage Hezbollah to accept the idea of official camps as a preferred alternative that may facilitate the monitoring and control of potentially hostile Sunni Syrians.

## **Outlook and Policy Recommendations**

Many of Lebanon's political and security weaknesses predate the Syrian conflict, although there is undeniable evidence that the neighboring crisis is exacerbating underlying tensions and institutional problems. The interconnectedness of these challenges also greatly complicates efforts to address the serious political, humanitarian, and security challenges that Lebanon now faces. Thus far,

Hezbollah is the only Lebanese party able to significantly shape events in Syria, but this influence is exerted outside of Lebanon's formal institutions due to its military strength. The country's most contentious political issues—the Sunni-Shia balance of power and the fate of Hezbollah's weapons—cannot be meaningfully addressed through the policy-making process in this environment. This leaves the Lebanese state with the role of crisis manager at best. Essentially, the state's priority should be to prevent its own disintegration and irrelevance during and after the war in Syria. The government's best hope of achieving this is by managing the refugee crisis while keeping the formal domestic political process alive.

By failing to agree on an electoral law and postponing parliamentary elections, Lebanon's politicians missed a chance to help protect Lebanese institutions at a limited political cost. Holding elections would at least acknowledge the continued relevance of institutions to public life and decrease the likelihood of fragmentation of the security forces, which could hasten the militarization of the Syrian conflict inside Lebanon. The political elite underestimated the importance of this, focusing instead on potential electoral gains under various electoral laws, which is far less significant for their political relevance in the long run. Whether elections produce a Hezbollah-led majority in parliament and the cabinet would change nothing of great importance to Lebanon's factions in any case. Hezbollah was unable to eliminate its political opponents when it had a large parliamentary bloc and controlled the government, and cannot do so militarily without provoking a sectarian civil war that would probably destroy it. A March 14 victory would have made Hezbollah uncomfortable, but it certainly would not compel it to reconsider giving up its weapons or disengage from the Syrian civil war. Therefore, Lebanon's political leadership should reverse its decision to postpone elections and should agree upon an electoral law as soon as possible. For Lebanon, the existence of a political process is of greater importance than its formal outcome.

Most urgently, Lebanon needs a functioning government to address the pressure posed by the flow of refugees, which Lebanon cannot and should not block. Such a government could work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to implement its recommendation to establish transit sites near the Syrian border as a first-response mechanism to provide temporary food and shelter to refugees. The UNHCR has also made

emergency response plans, including the establishment of formal refugee camps, in the event that the opening of a new military front inside Syria further tips the scale in Lebanon. The formation of official refugee camps in Lebanon may help the government and aid organizations more effectively address refugees' needs and decrease friction between them and the Lebanese population.

If mishandled, the refugee crisis poses a potential threat to peace and prosperity for all Lebanese, and this is an outcome that all factions should be able to work together (at least to some degree) to avoid. As for the response of international actors, the international community can and should provide financial aid for Syrian refugees and Lebanese hosts, and fulfill earlier pledges of assistance. This could take the form of direct budgetary support for government programs aimed at helping refugees and host communities, in addition to the engagement of international organizations including the United Nations in managing the refugee crisis. On the security side, the army's status as Lebanon's only truly national institution is coming under threat because of its focus on targeting alleged Sunni militants while tolerating Shia ones. The United States has an interest in preserving the unity of the LAF, and also exercises significant financial leverage over it. Continuing US aid to Lebanon should be conditioned on an even-handed

LAF approach toward Lebanese from all sects, as well as the holding of elections as soon as possible. It is imperative that the international community not withdraw its support for Lebanon, but it is difficult to argue that it can or should help Lebanon if there is no functioning Lebanese state or impartial armed forces to work with.

As other Lebanese politicians quarrel over the minutiae of the electoral law and distribution of cabinet portfolios, Hezbollah has rightly recognized that these are peripheral concerns. If Hezbollah's opponents are truly interested in ensuring a sovereign and secure Lebanon, they would do well to realize that the country's ultimate fate is being decided in Syria. However, given their limited military strength in the face of a powerful militia that has opted to kill its way through political obstacles, the best option for Hezbollah's opponents is still to concentrate on preserving what remains of Lebanon's formal institutions and the political process. This course would also contribute to Lebanon's long-term stability, as the Lebanese cannot hope to see peace and prosperity when Syria finally stabilizes without having strong state institutions. In their absence, Lebanon could once again fall into the abyss of political chaos and violence.

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