

COMMENTARY

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Shadow War, Not Civil War in Lebanon

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Fears that Lebanon will be dragged into a deepening cycle of violence are palpable. Senior Lebanese security officials regard the country as already at war, one that simply hasn't been declared. Certainly, security and political conditions have deteriorated, and new threats loom as the fighting between Syrian regime forces and rebels in the Qalamoun and Damascus areas generate new flows of refugees into Lebanon and trigger widening clashes in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli.

Despite bitter political divisions over policy towards the Syrian conflict and growing sectarian sentiment in Lebanon, the reluctance of the principal political parties and communal actors to become embroiled in open military confrontation has prevented a civil war. They are likely to maintain this position for the foreseeable future. For now, the shadow war of car bombings, assassinations, and occasional rocket attacks poses the greater risk. But what makes it particularly dangerous is the growing vacuum of constitutional authority in the country, which undermines the ability of the executive branch to meet coming challenges.

Lebanon has been spared large-scale violence so far because there are few in the country with any stomach for a return to civil war. In crude sectarian terms, while the Christian community is broadly divided down the middle in terms of its sympathies towards Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the armed opposition, it is unwilling to be dragged into someone else's war, least of all one that pits Sunni and Shi'a Muslims against each other. The Shi'a community, not all of which agrees with Hezbollah's growing military involvement in the Syrian conflict, has no reason to mobilize for internal conflict either.

In even cruder terms, while hostility to Hezbollah has reached unprecedented levels among Lebanon's Sunnis, they are far from united in sectarian sentiment, let alone ready to mobilize militarily. This is partly a legacy of political and geographic fragmentation. There has never been a dominant Sunni-based party with equally strong representation in all areas of the country: instead, even at the height of Sunni mobilization in 1969-1982, Beirut had the Murabitoun, Sidon the Popular Nasserite Organization, and Tripoli the 24th of Tishrin Movement (followed by the Islamic Unification Movement), to mention only the most prominent groups.

Only Nasserism—as a current rather than an organized force—and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – as a structured political-military organization – came close to providing an umbrella for all Sunni factions, including the “traditional” leaderships. The Future Movement is undoubtedly the most significant party to win and hold Lebanese Sunni loyalty since then, but it remains essentially a vehicle for mobilizing votes at election time and is not suited to operate outside the parliamentary arena.

This is good news for all who want to avoid a sectarian civil war. What it also reveals is a clear class distinction: those Sunnis who have taken up arms, whether to fight in Syria or to confront the Assad regime's supporters in Lebanon, come predominantly from “inner city” neighbourhoods and less-developed rural areas that have suffered the brunt of government neglect and social marginalization over decades, mainly in northern and north-eastern Lebanon. Few Sunnis of any other class or region would join their ranks or accept their leadership.

This is why the main outbreaks of violence since May 2012 have been limited to Tripoli and have not spread countrywide, with the single exception of the brief confrontation between the Lebanese Army and the followers of Salafist preacher Sheikh Ahmad al-Asir in Sidon in June 2013. Even in Tripoli, clashes have centred almost exclusively on neighbourhoods that have a long history of resisting authority, whether that of the Lebanese state in 1958, 1969, and 1975, or of the Syrian army and intelligence in the 1980s.

Little has changed in these social and political realities since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The social and economic burden of absorbing 840,000 Syrian refugees (according to the latest UN count) is generating tensions with local host communities around Lebanon, but what is more striking is just how far Lebanese society has adapted and accommodated. And so while the potential for violence exists, the likelihood that it will spread beyond the established “frontlines” of Tripoli and border areas with Syria that have already been affected is low.

Instead, the greater threat comes at present from the shadow war, which is harder to predict or navigate in the absence of clear frontlines and of openly declared combatants. Monitoring and protecting all potential targets imposes a heavy burden, heightening political and economic uncertainty and creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Lebanon experienced similar conditions in the early 1980s as the intelligence agencies of Israel (working through the South

Lebanon Army), Syria, the PLO, and the rightwing Lebanese Forces targeted their rivals with car bombs in Beirut and elsewhere. It was against this backdrop of prolonged insecurity that the Israeli invasion of 1982 took place, transforming Lebanon's political and strategic landscape.

But as this experience demonstrated, shadow wars also follow a clear, if brutal logic and have defined contours and limits. Even where horrific bombings targeting innocent civilians appear motivated by blind ideology and purely murderous intentions, as in Iraq, organized actors are involved, including government agencies. In Lebanon, the tit-for-tat bombings of civilian targets in Dahia, Hezbollah's stronghold, in July 2013 and of Sunni mosques in Tripoli in August were followed by nearly three months of relative calm, suggesting an exchange of deterrent messages that was understood and acted on by both sides.

Similarly, the bombing of the Iranian embassy in Beirut on 19 November was reminiscent of the massive bombing of the Iraqi embassy in 1981, in both cases reflecting wider regional struggles. It is likely that Israel, which has carried out six air strikes since January on advanced missile shipments reportedly en route to Hezbollah via Syria, was also behind the assassination of Hassan Lakkis, a senior figure in Hezbollah's specialized technology section, on 4 December. Israel may intensify covert operations against Hezbollah in coming months, before a possible comprehensive nuclear agreement between the P5+1 group and Iran makes such action highly destabilizing and therefore difficult to undertake.

The good news is that Lebanon is likely to avoid a wider civil conflict. It will moreover benefit from a drop in domestic tensions if the Geneva-II peace conference scheduled for 22 January 2014, leads to some sort of political process, even if a negotiated solution is highly improbable in the short term. But the bad news is that the country must get over a "hump" of violence before reaching de-escalation, as the Syrian combatants and their regional backers will either resist the diplomatic approach altogether (towards both the Syrian conflict and the Iranian nuclear file) or strive to improve their starting positions ahead of serious negotiations.

This is why Lebanon needs to translate the de facto consensus of the country's political and communal leaderships on avoiding a civil war into a clear commitment to some basic "rules of engagement." Above all, the country's political class must shield the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces from its bickering, which has paralyzed the command councils of the two institutions by preventing or seriously the replacement of commanders and members due for retirement over the past one or two years.

The assignment of maintaining security in Tripoli for the coming six months to the army makes this all the more pressing. Once again, the army—and secondarily the police—is burdened with the role of permanent buffer because the parties represented in parliament will not shoulder their primary responsibility of approving a government that can formulate policy responses nor allow their rivals to form one instead. Failure to abide by genuine constitutional process as President

Michel Suleiman's term in office comes to an end in May 2014 will only deepen the vacuum. With the legitimacy of the executive and legislature so much in question, the task assigned to the military and security institutions in Tripoli may finally erode public support for them and undermine their own cohesion. Lebanon's politicians and elected officials should not continue to defer management of the country's security in the hope that diplomatic solutions in Syria and the Iranian nuclear file—which may or may not happen—will let them off the hook. Time is running out.

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