

Gulf monarchies and US foment sectarian clashes in Lebanon

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Several days of clashes in and around Tripoli between Sunni Islamists and Alawites, a split-off Shi'ite sect, have left 10 people dead, including two soldiers, 50 people wounded and several kidnapped. This prompted shops to close, people to flee their homes and Prime Minister Najib Mikati to call in the Lebanese Armed Forces to restore order.

The armed clashes, which follow similar incidents last February, have heightened tensions and threaten to destabilise Lebanon.

Should they escalate, they could provide Washington with the pretext for launching a pseudo-humanitarian intervention and so open an alternative front from which to invade Syria, overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, and install a more pliant tool in order to further isolate Iran both politically and militarily.

The opposition movement in Syria is being shaped by its sponsors, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and, above all, the United States, as a sectarian Sunni movement against al-Assad's Alawite-based regime and Shia Iran.

The clashes followed days of demonstrations and sit-ins by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists, supporting the Syrian opposition and demanding the release of pro-Syrian rebels who have been detained. On Friday, Shadi al-Mawlawi, a Sunni Islamist, and six others, including a Jordanian, Qatari and a Palestinian, were arrested on charges of membership in a terrorist group and links to Al Qaeda and terrorists in Afghanistan. Mawlawi is believed to be on a US list of suspected terrorists and was, according to *Al-Hayat* newspaper, arrested after a tip-off by a Jordanian who is being held by the police after being kicked out of Syria.

After his arrest, hundreds of Sunni Islamist youth blocked the roads into the city, demanding Mawlawi's release, opposing the government in Beirut and

attacking the security forces, leading to gun battles with the army. Three men were killed in the largely Alawite village of Jabal Mohsen, and another was killed near the mainly Sunni village of Bab al-Tebbaneh. Other northern villages, some of which have served as entry points for arms and fighters into Syria, have seen escalating tensions with cross border shootings and rival kidnappings.

On Sunday, a sniper shot dead a Lebanese soldier in his car. A further two soldiers were injured when their patrol was attacked by armed men.

The media has portrayed the sectarian clashes as an inevitable spill-over from the Syrian civil war. In reality, the fingerprints of Washington, Riyadh and Doha are all over the spread of conflict.

The imperialists and rival regional powers have long used the tiny country of four million people as a proxy battleground for influence in the region, and have stoked sectarian conflicts to further their agendas.

The port of Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, has played a significant role in fomenting the armed strife in Syria. It is home to many Syrian oppositionists, including Abdel Halim Khaddam, the exiled former vice president of Syria and close associate of the pro-Western former Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq Hariri, assassinated in 2005, and his son Saad Hariri, who has called for intervention against Syria. Khaddam has worked closely with the US and the European powers in their plans to overthrow Assad.

The Sunni Muslim stronghold has served as a base for the Syrian opposition as wounded fighters and rebels, as well as thousands of Syrians fleeing the fighting, have poured into the city. Tripoli's port is also a crucial entry point for Arab mercenaries, largely from Libya, as well as cash and weapons financed by the

Gulf monarchies for the anti-Syrian government forces en route to Syria through Lebanon's porous borders.

The pro-Washington opposition parties are demanding that the Lebanese government set up official refugee camps near Tripoli, like those established near the Syrian borders of Turkey and Jordan. These countries are at the forefront of the efforts to destabilize and oust the Assad regime. Refugee bases, especially in Turkey, have been turned into training camps for foreign-armed Syrian opposition groups, including the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army.

Last month, the Lebanese navy intercepted a ship carrying containers filled with weapons, including belts of heavy ammunition and rocket-propelled grenades. The Sierra Leone-flagged vessel Lutfallah II, which originated in Libya, was bound for the Free Syrian Army.

Earlier this month, Jeremy Feltman, US assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, a hawk on foreign affairs, visited Beirut to discuss Lebanon's role in the attempt to unseat Assad. These talks were euphemistically described by the US Embassy as covering the "political, economic and security situation in Lebanon, as well as the developments in Syria."

Feltman was US ambassador to Lebanon between 2004 and 2008 when he micro-managed the Lebanese Future Movement government—a coalition of Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians and Armenians—in consultation with then-US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The US and Saudi Arabia had supported Rafik Hariri and his Sunni-based Future Movement as a bulwark against the Shi'ite party Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and Syria. When the elder Hariri was killed in a car bomb attack in 2005, which Washington blamed on Syrian agents, the US and the Sunni Gulf monarchies sponsored Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution", which broke out one month after the assassination.

Modelled on the Western-backed "colour revolutions" in the territories of the former Soviet Union, the "Cedar Revolution" led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, stationed there under an international agreement at the end of Lebanon's 15-year-long civil war, in return for the support of Damascus for the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1991.

But Damascus remains a powerful presence in Lebanese politics, with Hezbollah emerging at the end of 2010 as the leading political force that brought down the government of Saad Hariri. With the support of the Maronite Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and the Druze Christian-based Progressive Socialist Party, Hezbollah installed a government more sympathetic to Damascus.

Najib Mikati, the incoming prime minister, a telecommunications billionaire, is a Sunni politician with ties to Damascus. His government refused to sign onto the US-led campaign to destabilize the Assad regime, although he has been under increasing pressure to do so with one of his coalition partners, Walid Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party, supporting the arming of the Syrian opposition.

The Mikati government is already beset by domestic problems. Youth unemployment is officially at 22 percent, but is far higher, with many more under-employed. Strikes have increased because workers cannot make ends meet due to soaring prices. The government is staggering under a \$14 billion debt and a budget deficit of \$3.5 billion.

The funding of Islamist opposition groups by the Gulf countries to stoke sectarian tensions could serve to bring down the Mikati government. This would further isolate Assad and the ultimate target, Iran. Cutting Hezbollah off from its sponsor in Damascus would be a boon for the Saudi-backed forces around Saad Hariri, who has fully supported Washington and the Gulf States' efforts to unseat Assad. Currently engaged in a round of talks with leaders of the Gulf States, Hariri met the Qatari monarch twice this week.



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