

# Conflict over Syria threatens Lebanon's stability

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Lebanon's government despatched troops to Tripoli, the second city in the north, after sectarian clashes killed 10 on Saturday.

The highest death toll yet relating to the civil war in neighbouring Syria occurred in the Sunni Bab al-Tebbaneh district and the Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighbourhood. Sunni gunmen supporting the Syrian opposition clashed with Alawites backing the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Tensions in Lebanon have been running high, following a series of armed clashes and kidnappings and the failure by the opposition Free Syrian Army to release Shi'ite pilgrims kidnapped in Syria, threatening to destabilise the country.

Tripoli is a Sunni stronghold and the logistical base for Syria's opposition forces. It has seen a significant growth of militant Islamist militias and gangs. This has in turn fuelled violent clashes between Sunni Islamists and Alawites, a split off Shi'ite sect close to Syria's ruling clique.

The growth of armed Sunni militias, like the opposition movement in Syria, is being fashioned by their sponsors, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and, above all, the United States, as a sectarian movement against Prime Minister Najib Mikati's Hezbollah-backed government. Hezbollah is a Shia movement backed by Iran and Syria. As well as restoring former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement to power, their ultimate aim is to unseat al-Assad's Alawite-based regime in Syria and the Shi'ite government in Iran.

Earlier last month, armed clashes broke out in Tripoli, resulting in the deaths of 10 people and injuries to many more. They followed days of demonstrations and sit-ins by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists demanding the release of pro-Syrian Islamist rebels, including Shadi al-Mawlawi detained on charges of belonging to a terrorist group and links to Al-Qaeda. Order was restored only

after the government mobilised the army against the Sunni Islamists. Mawlawi has since been released on bail, although the charges stand.

The fighting spread to the capital, Beirut, where two people were killed in clashes between gunmen from the Future Movement, which is backed by Riyadh and Washington, and a pro-Assad political party.

On May 21, Sunni Sheikh Ahmad Abdel Wahed was killed as his pro-Syrian opposition convoy passed through an army checkpoint in Akkar, after the Lebanese army responded to fire from Sunni gunmen.

This led to sectarian fighting in Tripoli and gun and rocket-propelled grenade battles in the Beirut neighbourhood of Tariq al-Jedideh. A 200-strong group of masked young Salafists stormed and ransacked an office belonging to Shaker Berjawi, the head of the pro-Syrian Arab Movement Party, killing two of Berjawi's men.

While Beirut has long been used to skirmishes between armed gangs, this appears to have been the work of an organised group, with access to new weapons, as all the bullets were of the same variety rather than from old guns accumulated over time. It has the hallmarks of a plan devised in Washington, Riyadh and Doha aimed at driving Hezbollah supporters out of southern Beirut, strengthening Sunni influence in the city and deepening the conflict.

On May 22, a group of 11 Lebanese Shi'ite pilgrims returning from Iran were kidnapped near Aleppo in Syria. The action was claimed by a previously unknown Syrian opposition militia, apparently as a bargaining chip to obtain the release of oppositionists and to undermine Hezbollah in Lebanon. The news prompted angry Shi'ites to take to the streets, blocking roads and burning tyres. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah made a rare television intervention to call for calm.

While there had been reports that the kidnapped men

had been released and were to be flown back from Adana in Turkey to Beirut, the men failed to return. So great have been the tensions that Prime Minister Mikati and his interior and foreign ministers flew to Istanbul to meet officials, including Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to secure their help in the return of the captured men. Erdogan had previously given assurances that the abductees were "safe and on their way to Beirut". Such action on Mikati's part is recognition of Turkey's control over the opposition forces in Syria, who command little independent or popular support.

Publicly at least, Mikati, whose government is beholden to Hezbollah and who has himself close business ties with the Syrian elite, has sought to keep Lebanon out of the conflict in Syria. But he has come under mounting pressure from the Gulf autocrats who are doing everything they can to stoke sectarian tensions as a means of torpedoing his government.

As well as aiding the Syrian opposition forces, the vast amount of ship-borne arms destined for Syria via Tripoli has fostered the growth of Sunni militant groups around Tripoli and elsewhere in Lebanon.

To cite one example, according to Lebanon's *Daily Star*, there are an estimated 300 Lebanese from the Bekaa Valley, long a Hezbollah stronghold, who have joined the rebels against the Assad regime. While most of the volunteers have joined the Free Syrian Army, there is also one exclusively Lebanese armed unit numbering between 20 and 30 men who operate between the border and the Syrian town of Qusayr. That such a number exists in the Bekaa valley indicates a far larger number in the Sunni heartlands.

The mounting tensions within Lebanon, particularly following the shootout and killing of Sheikh Wahed at Akkar, have forced Mikati to withdraw the largely Sunni army from northern Lebanon for fear that some of the soldiers may refuse to confront the Sunni militias or even join them.

In effect, Mikati is being required to provide support for Syria's opposition forces, while facing ever stronger demands from Damascus to curb the flow of fighters and arms into Syria. This is not easy under conditions where the two economies are closely integrated, with many Syrian workers commuting to Lebanon, albeit far fewer than the one million that until recently worked there. Hundreds of trucks travel in both directions.

Numerous incidents have occurred along Lebanon's porous borders, including the abductions of Lebanese men into Syria, which have fuelled demonstrations and

sectarian clashes and led to killings on both sides of the border.

The atrocity at Houla, in Syria, where dozens of people were killed including women and children, which has been attributed to the Syrian regime and its supporters without as yet any hard evidence, is being used to stoke divisions within Lebanon and destabilise the government.

Lebanon is in turn becoming a focus of already acute political conflicts between the US and Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking about the abduction of the Shi'ite Lebanese pilgrims at a news conference May 23, warned, "There is a real threat of the conflict spilling over to Lebanon, where, considering history, the ethnic and religious makeup of the population, and the principles on which Lebanon's government is based, everything can have a very bad ending".

Alluding to the international sponsors of sectarian conflict, he asked pointedly, "I would like to address those who are trying to stir up the conflict in Syria. I would like to ask them: please say openly and honestly, what do you really want, what are you trying to gain by this? If you want Bashar Assad's regime to be overthrown, why don't you openly confess of this?"

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded May 31 by accusing Russia of propping up Assad's regime and helping "contribute to a civil war."

White House spokesman Jay Carney cynically warned of a "sectarian civil war" spilling "over Syrian borders" and developing into a "proxy war" involving Iran backing Assad's government and other nations or forces backing insurgents. The reality is that such a proxy war is already being waged, but it is one that is stamped "Made in America".



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