

US proxy war in Syria spreads to Lebanon and Iraq

Eric London
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The intensifying proxy war in Syria is causing increased anxiety throughout the Middle East, where the specters of sectarian war and Western military intervention loom large. A series of kidnappings threatens to drag Lebanon deeper into the 17-month-long civil war in neighboring Syria, while 93 people were killed in Iraq on Thursday.

Al Qaeda's role as a partner in a US-led Sunni sectarian war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is apparently strengthening its operations in Iraq. Some 190 people were killed by Al Qaeda attacks in Iraq over the last two-and-a-half weeks.

"The religious legitimacy of the Syria war and the increase of funding and fighters almost unquestionably benefits Al Qaeda in Iraq," said Seth Jones, an Al Qaeda expert with the RAND Corporation. "It is heavily involved in overseeing the war in Syria."

Hundreds more Iraqis were killed in June and July, making the last three months the deadliest in over a year. Two weeks ago, over a dozen neighborhood officials resigned their posts in Baquba, citing fears that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki cannot prevent a resurgence of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

The conflict is also escalating in Lebanon, where deep-seated sectarian tensions are coming to the surface in a nation wrought with unresolved political discord.

On Tuesday night, masked gunmen belonging to the mostly Shia Muqdad tribe kidnapped over 20 alleged members of the Free Syrian Army in Beirut. The kidnapping was in retaliation for Monday's kidnapping in Damascus of a member of the Muqdad family by anti-Assad forces in Syria. They accused Hassan Salim al-Muqdad of being a Hezbollah agent and supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a claim Hezbollah and the Muqdad family denied.

The Syrian regime's political and military support for

Hezbollah—a Lebanese Shiite organization that repelled an Israeli attack in a 2006 war—is a key reason behind Washington's strategy of seeking Assad's overthrow. For its part, Hezbollah fears that, in the event of Assad's overthrow by Sunni militias, it would rapidly be isolated, cut off from its sources of weapons and financing, and threatened with destruction.

Speaking yesterday, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah warned Israel: "War with Lebanon would be very, very, very costly ... When our country is attacked, we will not wait for permission from anyone." He warned that Hezbollah would fire volleys of precision-guided missiles at Israel, which could "turn the lives of hundreds of thousands of Zionists into hell."

"What happened ... is a clear indication that we are [on] the brink of major chaos in Lebanon," a senior political Lebanese government source told Lebanon's *Daily Star* on Thursday. "The storm in Syria has reached Lebanon now and there is no going back."

Other Shia tribes in eastern Lebanon have since followed up on the retaliatory attack, kidnapping at least eight more alleged fighters of the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army (FSA). AP also reports that a Syrian businessman and supporter of Assad was kidnapped on Thursday by soldiers in the Bekaa Valley town of Chtoura.

Earlier this month, FSA fighters captured 48 Iranians in Damascus. The FSA kidnapped 11 Iranian pilgrims in February, and five Iranian technicians were kidnapped last December in Homs.

The kidnappings reflect the sectarian divide between the largely Shia or Christian backers of Assad and the mainly Sunni supporters of the Syrian opposition. May and June saw armed clashes between Sunni and Shia in Tripoli and Beirut. Although Lebanon has been involved in the Syrian conflict for months via arms

trade and minor cross-border raids, the Syrian war now threatens to ignite a full-scale civil war in Lebanon.

“This ... brings us back to the days of the painful war, a page that Lebanese citizens have been trying to turn,” said Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, referring to the 1975-1990 civil war that resulted, amongst other things, in a three-decade Syrian occupation.

Mikati is a member of the March 8th Alliance, a parliamentary coalition that includes Hezbollah and currently rules Lebanon. The coalition and the Lebanese state in general rest on a precarious balance between the nation’s Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Druze, Maronite and Orthodox factions. The government has already surrendered de facto control of many areas of Eastern Lebanon to Shia tribes like the Muqdad.

Beirut political commentator Rami Khouri explained the limits of the government’s ability to control civil strife: “The Lebanese state is not a powerful centralized state. You have people outside the control of the state, whether it’s Hezbollah or small groups like these family-based militias ... The worry is that these incidents can escalate and get out of hand. Then you end up with armed conflict in the street.”

Lebanese security forces arrested former Information Minister Michel Samaha on August 9 for allegedly plotting to incite sectarian violence through “terrorist attacks” against Sunnis together with top Syrian Army officers.

Robert Fisk, the *Independent*’s correspondent in the Middle East, noted that the charges against Samaha were made “without a thread of evidence publicly revealed.”

In a further indication of the escalating conflict, Samir Geagea, the leader of Lebanese Forces, has called for the declaration of a state of emergency. Lebanese Forces, a right-wing Christian group, is the second most powerful political party in the opposition March 14th Alliance—a group which opposes Syrian influence and backs anti-Assad forces in Syria.

“The image formed in every citizen’s mind now is that Lebanon is an uncontrollable state with no authority, constitution or rules whatsoever,” said Geagea at a press conference on Friday. “No matter how righteous and decent their cause was, nothing justifies what happened, as it paralyzed the country and annulled the state’s role.”

In response to the heightened risks, Saudi Arabia,

Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are advising their citizens to leave Lebanon as quickly as possible.

The United States and Turkey issued travel warnings for Lebanon on Friday in response to the kidnapping of a Turkish business man who was among the more than 20 people captured Wednesday by the Muqdad tribe.

“The US embassy has received reports of an increased possibility of attacks against US citizens in Lebanon,” an embassy statement read. “Possible threats include kidnapping, the potential for an upsurge in violence, the escalation of family or neighborhood disputes, as well as US citizens being the target of terrorist attacks in Lebanon.”

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius made a visit to Lebanon. According to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he met with “the highest Lebanese officials: the president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament and minister of foreign affairs. He will meet with humanitarian actors. He will also speak to opposition figures.”

The Obama administration is also ratcheting up its involvement in Lebanon, criticizing Hezbollah for giving “extensive support to the Syrian government’s violent suppression of the Syrian people,” according to David Cohen, undersecretary of the treasury for terrorism and financial intelligence. “[It] exposes the true nature of this terrorist organization and its destabilizing presence in the region.”

These claims are hypocritical. The US and its allies have been funneling vast amounts of cash and weapons, through the CIA and other intelligence agencies, to Sunni sectarian groups waging war in Syria. This war is now spreading beyond the borders of Syria, threatening to plunge the entire region into a bloodbath.



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