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Regional Dynamics of the Syrian Uprising: The Impact on Lebanon and Hezbollah

Summary

- Lebanese society is starkly divided on Syria, but all sides fear the country's potential descent into a sectarian civil war and seek to insulate Lebanon from its fallout.
- Lebanon's key political actors hold vastly different views on their definitions of interests, threat perceptions and desirable outcomes in Syria. Lebanon has already witnessed some negative Syrian spillover.
- Going forward, key concerns will center on both directed threats and uncontrolled fallout from worsening instability inside Syria.
- Lebanon's ability to influence the conflict dynamics inside Syria is limited.

Lebanon's Core Interests and Threat Perceptions vis-à-vis Syria

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Lebanon's core interests in Syria revolve around the twin goals of preserving stability and promoting economic interests. Given the historic power imbalance between the two countries, Lebanon has traditionally deferred to Syria's predominance in the relationship. Moreover, the two countries' enduring political, economic, and social ties constitute a vast network of influence and relationships that transcend borders. Lebanon's fate is deeply intertwined with Syria's ultimate destiny. The impact of a prolonged stalemate in Syria would be more easily absorbed in Lebanon. Nonetheless, Syria's endgame will have a decisive impact on Lebanon, potentially reconfiguring the balance of power between the two countries and reshaping the Lebanese political arena.

Widespread instability in Syria—or worse, a sectarian civil war—poses the most significant threat to Lebanon. Lebanese actors across the sectarian spectrum share the perception that Syria's potential descent into chaos would *not* be in their strategic interest and thus seek to insulate Lebanon from instability in Syria. This view stems from the concern that massive unrest in Syria could spill over into Lebanon, disrupting the country's fragile status quo by provoking widespread sectarian strife.

Beyond this fundamental goal of insulating Lebanon from a potential Syrian civil war, Lebanese consensus on core national interests vis-a-vis Syria does not exist. As with most issues in Lebanon, Syria's unrest is viewed through a sectarian lens. Significant divergences characterize Lebanon's key political actors and religious communities.

The Shiite militant organization Hezbollah maintains a key strategic alliance with Damascus. As a principal ally in the “axis of resistance,” Syria provides weapons and training to Hezbollah and serves as a conduit for Iranian arms. Hezbollah also maintains control over strategic weapons based in Syria. As such, Hezbollah has a core interest in the Assad regime’s survival. Aside from the potential loss of a strategic ally, Hezbollah’s concerns over Syrian unrest also reflect the mounting threat to the organization’s credibility, both in Lebanon and the region. Increasingly, Hezbollah has been placed in the contradictory position of stridently supporting Arab uprisings elsewhere, but remaining conspicuously quiet on Syria. In recent speeches, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has tempered his support for the Syrian regime with tepid calls for reform and a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Nonetheless, Hezbollah’s double standard threatens real damage to its regional standing.

Hezbollah’s allies, including its Christian partners in the ruling March 8th bloc, thus far share Hezbollah’s position on Syria. Indeed, Amal leader Nabih Berri, has staked out an even more hard line position than Hezbollah in support of Syria. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s Christian allies—namely General Michel Aoun—reflect deepening disquiet within the Christian community over the potential threat to their Syrian co-religionists posed by a post-Assad Syria.

For its part, the March 8-dominated Lebanese government has largely deferred to Syrian positions in its capacity as the Arab seat on the UN Security Council and in the Arab League. Elsewhere, Prime Minister Najib Mikati has pled the need for non-interference in Syria, deeming the unrest an internal Syrian matter. His government’s primary concern is to minimize any negative Syrian fallout.

The opposition March 14th alliance—led by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and comprised of both Sunni and Christian elements—remains staunchly anti-Syrian and favors the Assad regime’s demise. In recent weeks, some March 14th members have sharpened their rhetoric in support of the Syrian protestors’ calls for Assad to leave. At the same time, Hariri’s Sunni Future Movement has carefully calibrated its opposition to Assad so as not to provoke Syrian ire should the regime survive. The Sunni party strongly denies Syrian accusations that it has funneled arms and financing to Syrian protestors. Unlike the March 8th bloc’s unified interest in Assad’s survival, March 14th’s core interest is less clear. While Sunni elements unequivocally support Assad’s ouster, their Christian allies are less certain about post-Assad Syria. Lebanon’s Maronite patriarch, normally aligned closely with March 14th, recently voiced these concerns, citing “transition” in Syria as a potential threat to Arab Christians across the region. He called for Assad to be given more leeway to implement reforms, sparking significant controversy within the Christian community.

Desirable End States in Syria

Not surprisingly, strong divergences exist among Lebanese actors about the desired end state in Syria. Their preferred outcomes flow directly from each actor’s perceived interests. In Hezbollah’s case, the desired end state would be the Assad regime’s survival, even if severely weakened by months of popular unrest and international isolation. Indeed, a degraded but intact Assad regime may afford Hezbollah even greater power in the relationship. This desired outcome is shared by Amal and the Shiite community in Lebanon broadly, but also by the Alawite community in the north more particularly.

Lebanon’s Sunni community would prefer to see a Sunni-dominated, Saudi-aligned government emerge from Syria’s chaos. While some fissures are apparent among the Sunnis (particularly between supporters of Mikati and those behind Hariri) the broader Sunni community remains unified in its opposition to the minority Alawite regime in Syria. The mounting repression in Syria has only deepened Lebanese Sunni antipathy toward the Assad regime and their desire for his demise. Should the situation in Syria deteriorate further, some Sunni elements may be tempted to provide

more overt support to Syrian Sunnis, and to lash out at Lebanon's Shiite and Alawite communities, stoking sectarian tensions.

The Christian community is divided over its desired end state in Syria. Some would prefer the Assad regime's survival, fearful of what would succeed Assad and the potential threat posed to Syria's Christian minority and beyond. Specifically, they are leery of a Sunni successor government in Syria dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and bent on marginalizing Christians. For others in the Christian community, their antipathy of the Assad regime appears to outweigh these concerns. They seem to remain hopeful that a post-Assad Syria would maintain the Christian minority's rights and privileges.

Syria's Potential Spillover in Lebanon

To date, the spillover of Syrian unrest into Lebanon has been limited, but not insignificant. The United Nations reports 2,300 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon as of August 2011, but numbers could be significantly higher. Many Syrian and Lebanese families straddle the porous border, with Syrian family members crossing it as warranted by spikes in violent repression. More troubling, significant Sunni-Alawite clashes took place in mid-June 2011 in the northern port city of Tripoli, resulting in several dead and requiring the Lebanese army to quell the violence. To date, at least three Syrian army incursions into Lebanon have occurred, including one instance when the Syrian army accidentally fired on Lebanese soldiers. Rival pro- and anti-Syrian rallies occur with greater frequency in both Tripoli and Beirut, serving as potential flashpoints for sectarian violence. In May, deadly clashes occurred between Israel and Lebanon as hundreds of protestors rushed the border with Israel, coordinated with similar breaches in Syria and the Palestinian territories. The episode marked one of the most serious violent incidents between Lebanon and Israel since the 2006 war.

All of these instances of Syrian spillover portend the possibility of more serious unrest in Lebanon should the situation in Syria deteriorate further. Chaos in Syria would be extremely difficult to contain, easily pushing into Lebanon. For example, should Syria dramatically escalate its repression, Lebanon could witness a significant influx of refugees, particularly in the north. This influx could in turn precipitate civil strife in Lebanon, given the delicate sectarian balance in the area. Lebanon is also vulnerable to the spillover of sectarian violence should Syria "melt down," descending into widespread sectarian unrest. As the Tripoli incident suggests, Lebanon's sectarian tensions, particularly Alawite-Sunni, can easily ignite over Syria.

If Assad falls, a number of scenarios would pose a direct threat to Lebanon. First, Assad could decide to undertake a "scorched earth" policy, enflaming regional tensions, including with Israel, in a last ditch attempt to save himself or create distractions. The rushing of the Israeli border in late spring may signal Assad's willingness to ignite the region more broadly if threatened. Assad could also choose to stir up trouble directly in Lebanon, either through his allies or more directly via a renewed assassination campaign. The Syrians may opt to exploit their allegiances with radical armed Palestinian groups to sow trouble in the Palestinian camps and beyond—a tactic that could also provoke broader sectarian unrest in Lebanon, or even war with Israel.

Among Lebanese actors, Hezbollah, if it perceives that Assad is finished, could undertake violent action inside Lebanon to consolidate its control and fend off internal threats. While other factors militate against Hezbollah resorting to violence, this scenario would become more likely if Sunni elements overreach and provoke Hezbollah, sensing a potential opportunity to weaken the Shiite organization. Such Shiite-Sunni tensions would likely precipitate more serious civil strife in Lebanon. By contrast, Hezbollah could adopt the opposite approach in sensing the imminent loss

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and across the Middle East to identify key vectors of influence Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict; to forecast how the on-going conflict in Syria will affect the delicate and volatile regional balance of power; and to examine how the Syrian opposition and the Syria regime are factoring in regional and cross-border dynamics. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, Senior Adviser for Middle East Initiatives; and Scott Lasensky, a Senior Program Officer. Through this series, several related workshops and events held in September and October, and on-going programs that bring together experts, civil society figures and officials, the Institute aims to provide applied analysis and on-the-ground conflict management tools in support of political transitions across the Arab world.

This study on Lebanon was written by Mona Yacoubian, a Senior Advisor at the Institute's Center for Conflict Management and director of USIP's Lebanon Working Group.

of a key ally. It could opt to turn inward, recalibrating its focus on the "resistance" by recasting itself as a fully Lebanese player that builds stronger alliances inside the country to further its agenda while emphasizing its role as a political actor.

Internal Syrian dynamics will dictate how the situation in Syria evolves. None of the key Lebanese players can exert "game-changing" influence inside Syria, tipping the conflict in favor of the regime or the protestors. By the same token, neither the Lebanese government, nor any individual actors, possesses sufficient influence over conflict dynamics in Syria to prevent Syria's descent into chaos if events spiral out of control.



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