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Is Lebanon Headed toward Another Civil War?

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Violent clashes in Beirut on January 25 between students of rival political parties have overshadowed the promising news that Lebanon received pledges of \$7.6 billion at the Paris III donor conference on Lebanon's economy. The violence, which was largely along sectarian lines, was the latest in a series of escalating political/religious confrontations. This troubling trend raises the specter that Lebanon may once again be sliding toward civil war.

Political paralysis has gripped Lebanon since last November, when the opposition—led by Hizballah and its Christian allies—left the government and launched massive protests against prime minister Fouad Siniora's "March 14" coalition demanding more political clout. It had been hoped that Arab mediation would provide an exit to the crisis, but events on the ground in Lebanon appear to be outpacing diplomatic efforts. Meanwhile, rising sectarian tensions and clashes, both between Sunni and Shiite groups and among the divided Christian community, have endangered Lebanon's fragile intercommunal relations.

The Nature of the Fighting

Thus far, the violence has been confined to sectarian clashes in mixed areas such as Tariq al-Jadidah, a Sunni area in Beirut surrounded by Shiite neighborhoods. Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has called on his supporters to stay off the streets, and thus far, the militia has steered clear of any significant fighting. However, other predominantly Shiite groups—such as Amal—have not been as disciplined. On January 25, students from Amal and the Future Movement headed by Sunni parliamentarian Saad Hariri clashed near the Beirut Arab University. The fighting—mostly stones but also gunfire—resulted in the deaths of several young activists.

Since the civil war ended in 1990, the Lebanese have demonstrated the capacity to quickly rearm when threatened with looming civil unrest. The violent street demonstrations accompanying the Hizballah-led "strike" on January 23 resulted in only one person killed, but that number hides the fact that more than forty were wounded by gunfire. The militias that plagued Lebanon for the entirety of the 1970s and 1980s still have ready access to small arms; given the current environment, it is likely that an increasing number of Lebanese will feel the need to rearm. There are indications that these groups had already begun the rearming process in recent months. Indeed, only a few weeks ago, members of Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces were arrested while undergoing military training.

The best-armed actor in Lebanon, however, remains not Hizballah but the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). What role the LAF can play remains to be seen. Thus far, it has performed relatively well in its efforts to contain, if not stop, the student clashes. Reviews of LAF performance during the strike, however, were decidedly mixed. The question of whether the army would remain an effective actor in the event of large-scale conflict remains to be seen. It is possible, if not likely, that the ranks of the army will come under increased pressure to either split along sectarian lines or to simply remain on the sidelines, letting sectarian militias fight it out among themselves. If either of these scenarios transpires, the clashes would no doubt intensify.

What is needed now is strong leadership from sectarian leaders. Even if political leaders take action to contain this seemingly inevitable violence, however, their ability to put the sectarian genie back in the bottle is unclear. The clashes have thus far been primarily among youths. In this context, the guidance of traditional communal and current political leaders may have less import than before. Moreover, it will be difficult for these sectarian leaders themselves not to get caught up in accusations and recriminations.

A Way Out?

In recent weeks, the London-based pan-Arab press has reported extensively about an ongoing mediation effort by Saudi Arabia and Iran, the respective patrons of the March 14 movement and Hizballah. According to these reports, the basic nature of the deal involves providing Hizballah with the “blocking third”—one-third plus one cabinet seat—leaving the organization with an effective veto over Siniora government initiatives. In exchange for this rather large March 14 concession, Hizballah parliamentarians would formally approve the establishment of the international tribunal to try the assassins of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Press reports suggest that the parties are close to a deal, but there remain a number of outstanding issues that could derail it.

The big losers in this proposed agreement will be Hizballah ally Gen. Michel Aoun, who heads the (Maronite) Free Patriotic Movement, and Syria. A Hizballah-March 14 deal would be detrimental to Aoun because it would almost certainly end his chances to become president of Lebanon. When Aoun allied himself with Hizballah in 2005, it was believed he did so as a tactical move to increase his leverage against the March 14 forces in his bid for the presidency. The alliance has undercut some of his popularity among his Christian constituency. Should Hizballah make a deal that does not include Aoun, it will effectively leave him isolated, ending his presidential hopes.

For Syria and the Asad regime, the implications of this deal are potentially even more damaging. If the international tribunal moves forward, it seems likely that Syrian officials would be implicated in the killing and tried before the court. If key officials are found guilty, it could shake the very foundations of the regime. Hence, if a deal along these lines between Hizballah and March 14 is struck, it is all but certain that Aoun and Syria will endeavor to scuttle it—and that Syria will make every effort to tank the tribunal. With regime survival at stake, one could imagine several scenarios in which Syria plays the spoiler. Most worrisome is the prospect that Syria might find it useful to exacerbate the sectarian problems in Lebanon, as a tactic to delay or undermine progress on the tribunal.

Conclusion

The people and politicians of Lebanon are well aware of the human and financial costs of the last civil war. Indeed, many current leaders of Lebanon’s factions were participants in the conflagration of 1975-1990. Across the political and religious spectrum, factional leaders have repeatedly stated their concerns about fitna, or societal chaos, and have warned of the consequences of civil war for Lebanon. But even if a deal is eventually reached between the March 14 forces and Hizballah, it would not preclude the possibility that the violence will at some level continue, eventually leading to full-scale civil war.

A major difference between the context of the last civil war and today is the Sunni-Shiite divide in the region, with animosity only growing between the two sects. Perhaps calmer heads will prevail among the leadership of Lebanon’s sectarian political parties. But lack of party discipline and unforeseen developments could at any time lead to a degeneration of the situation, particularly given the questions surrounding the potential effectiveness of the LAF. In this regard, the growing contingent of Sunni Islamist militants in Lebanon—more closely associated with Osama bin Laden than with March 14 forces—constitutes a wildcard. These Sunni Islamists have no loyalty to Siniora and have extreme distain for Shiites. Likewise, there is the ever-present possibility that students will follow their own primordial sectarian allegiances, disregarding their leaders in the heat of the moment.

No doubt, civil war would be the worst-case scenario for Lebanon. And as Lebanese *Daily Star* editor Michael Young pointed out, Lebanon has already dodged this bullet three times in recent months, and its luck may soon run out. Lebanon's challenge is how to make sure that the combination of Hizballah brinkmanship and Aoun's desperation at seeing his presidential hopes vanish does not prove too much for a conciliatory Siniora government to overcome.

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