

# CAN LEBANON SURVIVE THE SYRIAN CRISIS?

**Paul Salem**

**DECEMBER 2012**

**CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER**

**CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE**

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# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Syria-Lebanon Connection</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Sources of Instability and Spillover</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Role of External Actors</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Lebanon's Coping Mechanisms</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Short-Term Concerns</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Longer-Term Worries</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>International Involvement</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Carnegie Middle East Center</b>	<b>26</b>



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## Summary

Of all the countries neighboring Syria, Lebanon is the most vulnerable to spill-over from the Syrian conflict. The state is weak, sectarian tensions are high, and the main political coalitions have chosen sides, either explicitly backing or opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Lebanon has already been affected by sectarian skirmishes, border clashes, targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and large refugee flows. Though the country has avoided collapse thus far, long-term dangers exist and urgent steps are needed to reinforce stability.

### Lebanon's Domestic Situation

- Political parties have been divided over support for or opposition to the Assad regime since the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.
- Hezbollah, the powerful Shia group with a dominant stake in the Lebanese government, supports Assad but is eager to avoid sectarian clashes in Lebanon.
- Some Sunni groups are directly aiding the Syrian rebels, but the main Sunni parties are also eager to maintain internal stability.
- Despite the general aversion to domestic unrest, the Syrian crisis could further inflame Sunni-Shia tensions and Sunni discontent about Hezbollah's dominance, destabilizing Lebanon.
- The government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati declared an official position of dissociation from the Syrian conflict, enabling the state to maintain a tenuous middle ground.
- The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon—already more than 120,000 registered and tens of thousands more undeclared—threatens to upset the country's precarious balance.
- Hezbollah's fate depends in part on the outcome of the Syrian crisis. If rebels defeat the Assad regime, the group might have to reconsider its political and strategic options. If the Assad regime survives, Hezbollah will likely be reinforced.

### **Recommendations for Lebanon**

**Build up the Lebanese army and Internal Security Forces.** These forces are playing an important crisis management role but need more support.

**Form either a new national unity government or a more neutral technocratic government.** Government legitimacy must be enhanced by reducing the dominance of the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition. A new national unity government should include wider representation for the opposition anti-Syrian March 14 coalition and the Sunni Future Movement. A technocratic government would consist of individuals not strictly aligned with either coalition.

**Rapidly and effectively address the needs of the growing Syrian refugee community with help from the international community.** Beyond humanitarian concerns, a more robust refugee strategy would limit the potential political and security fallout of the inflow.

**Approve an election law and hold parliamentary elections.** The current or a new government should take these steps to renew the country's democratic institutions.

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## The Syria-Lebanon Connection

Of all the countries neighboring Syria, Lebanon is the most vulnerable to spillover from the conflict there. The state is weak, sectarian relations are fraught and easily inflammable, and the main political coalitions in the country either explicitly back or oppose the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The process of domestic alignment has been accompanied by periods of high political tension or paralysis. Brief bouts of armed clashes have flared up, and there have been assassinations of anti-Syrian figures, most recently the assassination of the head of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces' intelligence branch, General Wissam al-Hassan, in October 2012.

Lebanon has been intertwined with Syria since 1976, and the alignments for and against the Assad regime have defined Lebanese politics since 2005. The assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 led to a Lebanese uprising against the Assad regime's presence in Lebanon. An anti-Syrian coalition in Lebanon, the so-called March 14 coalition made up of Sunni, Christian, and Druze parties, emerged as a result, and Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon. March 14 was backed by the Bush administration, France, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Some within the coalition hoped that the U.S. administration might take steps to dramatically weaken, or even overthrow, the Assad regime in Damascus, as happened with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Meanwhile, Syria's allies in Lebanon, led by Hezbollah, formed the March 8 coalition including the Shia Amal movement and other Sunni, Christian, and Druze parties, which openly supported the Assad regime and was backed by Iran (and Syria).

Given this history, when the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011 and deepened in the following months, it is not surprising that most observers inside and outside Lebanon feared that the country would be inexorably dragged into the conflict and might even be torn apart by it. Lebanon's political alignments dangerously mirrored the pro- and anti-Assad battle lines inside Syria. The increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria directly inflamed already-high sectarian tensions in Lebanon. And Sunnis in Lebanon gravitated to support the rebels while Hezbollah stood by the Assad regime.

And indeed, there has been considerable spillover into Lebanon. This has come in the form of sectarian conflict in the cities of Tripoli, Sidon, and the capital Beirut, increasing Sunni radicalization, a spiral of kidnappings, clashes along parts of the Lebanese-Syrian border, a growing Syrian refugee crisis, and

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targeted assassinations. The spillover has led to a deterioration of security and stability in Lebanon, rising political tension, and a slowdown in the economy.

Surprisingly, despite its many vulnerabilities, Lebanon has managed to avoid a major breakdown. But the country is dangerously close to the brink. Sectarian tensions (particularly between Sunni and Shia communities) are close to an all-time high. The government's legitimacy is disputed by a wide swath of the population, and security is deteriorating in the face of increasing communal mobilization and a growing Syrian refugee population.

Whether Lebanon can continue to hold together as the Syrian conflict presses onward in the months—and perhaps years—ahead is an open question. The sources of Lebanese instability and the potential for spillover between the Syrian conflict and Lebanon are numerous, but Lebanon also has coping mechanisms that have seen it through the conflict so far, and might still help it survive the turbulent period ahead. Though the country is likely to maintain basic stability in the short run, serious long-term risks exist. The evolution and outcome of the conflict in Syria will have a great impact on the Lebanese state, Hezbollah, and other political actors.

## Sources of Instability and Spillover

Lebanon has its own sources of instability and has been connected to Syria in many ways that render it particularly vulnerable to spillover from the conflict there.

### Soft State

Lebanon might not be a fully failed state, but unlike Syria's Turkish and Jordanian neighbors, the Lebanese state is not truly sovereign. It does not have a monopoly of force within its territory and does not fully control the country's borders. Hezbollah is the more powerful force within the country and has more control over issues of hard power, war and peace, and borders. In addition, between 1976 and 2005 Syrian troops were fully deployed in Lebanon, and for much of that period dominated Lebanese political and security affairs.

Nevertheless, the Lebanese state's security services play an important role in managing internal security and have been key to maintaining what stability prevails. However, they are weaker than Hezbollah in overall firepower and are intertwined with the political factionalism of the country. The army, for instance, has generally been positively regarded by most communities, including in the north, as an inclusive national institution, but army intelligence has been tainted in the eyes of some by its close association with Hezbollah. The office of General Security, which is in charge of border crossings, ports and airports, and visas, is also seen as politically close to Hezbollah. The Internal

Security Forces play an important role. But they are seen by some as unduly close to the anti-Syrian March 14 and the Sunni Future Movement, which is the largest within the Sunni community and is currently led by Saad Hariri, the son of former prime minister Rafik Hariri.

### **Sunni Discontent Over Hezbollah's Dominance**

The danger of instability in Lebanon relates to Sunni-Shia tensions and Sunni discontent about Hezbollah's dominance. The Sunni and Shia communities are of almost equal size in Lebanon and are allied with the competing regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. Recent Sunni discontent stretches back to 2005 and the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Sunnis accused Syria and their local ally Hezbollah of the assassination—accusations that were apparently borne out by indictments from the international Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Further stirring up tensions, in May 2008, Hezbollah responded to decisions by the government by forcibly taking over Beirut and humiliating government supporters and Sunni militiamen in the city. Then, in January 2011, Hezbollah ministers and their allies all resigned, which brought about the collapse of Hariri's government.

Sunnis in Lebanon feel increasingly marginalized and humiliated by an all-powerful Hezbollah. They saw the uprising in Syria as an opportunity not only to support fellow Sunnis to rise up against a regime dominated by Alawis that had politically marginalized Syria's Sunnis, but also a chance to bring down a regional power that stood behind Hezbollah's power in Lebanon. Sunnis in Lebanon were also energized by the rise of majority-Sunni populations against repressive regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen.

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### **First Impact**

The Syrian uprising began not with a bang, but with isolated protests, and the full import of it was not appreciated in Lebanon for several months. When protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, Lebanon was looking inward. Despite some civil society protests calling for a radical reform of Lebanon's confessional political system in which power is apportioned among leaders of the main communities, most Lebanese politicians were focused on internal issues, impervious to the so-called Arab Spring breaking out in North Africa or the potential long-term impact of the protests that were starting up in Syria.

In the wake of the government's collapse, Najib Mikati, a Lebanese Sunni billionaire businessman-politician from Tripoli who had been an electoral ally of Saad Hariri, accepted the task of forming a new government. Mikati's decision drew angry responses from Hariri and parts of the Sunni street, and was viewed negatively by Saudi Arabia's leaders. It signaled one step in the

weakening of Hariri's dominance of the Sunni community and was indicative of an emerging pattern of fragmentation of Sunni leadership.

### **Mikati's Government and the Policy of Dissociation**

As the Syrian troubles commenced in March 2011, Mikati had still not formed a government. He was mired in complex political negotiations with Hezbollah and its allies over cabinet portfolios with no near end in sight. Pressure mounted from Damascus to put a friendly government in place, and Hezbollah leaned on its allies, particularly the Christian Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun, to facilitate talks with Mikati. He was finally able to announce a new government on June 13 in which Hezbollah and its various allies controlled the majority of seats.

The government was welcomed in Damascus and Tehran, but not in the Gulf, Europe, or the United States. Nevertheless, both Gulf and Western countries—at this point more concerned with developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria than in Lebanon—accepted the change as an unfortunate *fait accompli* and dealt with the new Mikati cabinet as Lebanon's legitimate government.

In retrospect, the replacement of Hariri's government with one dominated by the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition may have been a temporary stroke of good fortune for Lebanon's stability, as it moved the Lebanese government out of the crosshairs of the embattled Syrian regime. Had the Syrian uprising developed when Hariri was still at the head of the Lebanese government, Syrian hostility toward Hariri and the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition might have led Damascus to launch a much more intense campaign of destabilization in Lebanon. And with hostile governments in Beirut and Damascus, Lebanon might have fared much worse during the Syrian uprising. Instead, Damascus's policy has been not to destabilize the government but to lash out at enemies of the Assad regime inside and outside the state.

In the first months after his government's formation, Mikati proved deft at easing potential tensions by declining the pro-Syrian moniker and declaring an official policy of "dissociation" from the Syrian conflict. He also managed to secure Lebanese funding for the international Special Tribunal, an issue that had divided and helped bring down his predecessor Hariri's government. As the conflict escalated in Syria, March 14 and its backers were initially happy to bide their time as the Syrian regime weakened and to avoid rocking the Lebanese boat or attracting the embattled regime's attention. Meanwhile, March 8 was eager to keep the government it dominated afloat and tensions in Lebanon low.

This combination of conditions did not eliminate a gradual heightening of tensions, as a Sunni community increasingly mobilized in support of the Syrian rebels—particularly in the north—and Hezbollah and the government came under pressure from Damascus to do something about it. But the

conditions did help Lebanon maintain over a year of calm as the uprising in Syria gained momentum and the conflict morphed into civil war.

### **Border Clashes**

Still, the conflict indeed spilled over the Lebanese-Syrian border. Clashes along parts of the border first started in October 2011. These were mainly in the form of Syrian regime forces chasing rebel groups across the border or shelling villages that provided support to the rebels. These attacks occurred mainly in the northern Bekaa and Akkar border areas, where links between the Syrian rebels and various Sunni towns and villages are strong. The Lebanese army tried to deploy its already thinly stretched resources to these border areas for two reasons: to stem the flow of support and arms going from Lebanon to Syria and to avoid the instability spilling into Lebanon that would result from an escalation of Syrian strikes. Hezbollah also supported this army policy for the same reasons. But the army does not have the capacity to fully undertake this task. Hence incidents and clashes have continued and increased in frequency and intensity.

Lebanon's border geography interacts with the dynamics of the Syrian conflict in complex ways. The Assad regime has been eager to maintain a land corridor between the capital Damascus in southwestern Syria and Tartus, on the Mediterranean in Syria's northwest. That is a reason many of the early battles in the uprising were around Homs and Hama, located to the east of Tartus, and the border town of Talkalakh. These towns are close to Lebanon's Akkar region.

Given the difficulties encountered along that route, the Assad regime's ally, Hezbollah, has explored a backup land bridge through Lebanese territory. The alternative route goes from Lebanon's central Bekaa Valley up through the northern Bekaa and Hermel regions and into the edge of northwestern Syria. The northern Bekaa Valley has a large Shia majority and has long been dominated by Hezbollah.

The overland route from Beirut to Damascus could also be an important strategic supply route for the Syrian capital, particularly if the regime loses control over its strategic internal highways. Hezbollah's dominance in Beirut and the Bekaa and its influence over the Lebanese government helps reassure Damascus that Beirut could maintain its function as Damascus's nearest port and a critical supply route in case of acute need.

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### **Refugee Flows**

Even before the Syrian uprising, there were already 300,000–400,000 Syrians in Lebanon mostly holding lower-income jobs in construction, agriculture,

and the services sector. Many of these workers' families remained in Syria, and the workers returned home on weekends or holidays. Reliable numbers of Syrians in Lebanon are hard to come by because Syrians do not need visas to enter Lebanon, and the office of General Security, which is responsible for keeping track of such numbers, generally does not make its data public.

The Syrian uprising saw an influx of a different kind. The first Syrian refugees began to cross into Lebanon in May 2011, fleeing regime attacks in the Syrian town of Talkalakh and seeking refuge in the Akkar region. Refugee flows steadily increased as Syrians fled fighting in Homs, Hama, Idlib, and eventually Aleppo and Damascus as well. By November 2012, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was already assisting over 120,000 refugees with numbers expected to climb steadily. But this masks other tens of thousands who crossed over and stayed with friends or relatives, or refugees with financial means who have snapped up hotel rooms or rental apartments throughout the country and set up temporary homes in Lebanon. The Lebanese government worked quietly with the UNHCR to assist these refugees but was slow to raise the issue at the national or international levels, for fear of embarrassing the Syrian regime. In early December 2012 the government finally launched an international appeal for \$178 million in financial assistance to meet refugee needs.

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The number of Syrian refugees has already strained the local communities in which they are housed, and as more refugees flow into Lebanon and summer turns to winter, the situation could spark serious local tensions. In areas where mainly Sunni refugees are hosted in or close to Shia majority areas, the situation has so far been largely calm but risks becoming a flashpoint as sectarian tensions continue to climb.

So far, only a small minority of the displaced Syrians are armed or directly involved in the armed rebellion, and they are mainly in the north. The vast majority of the remaining refugees are exhausted civilians fleeing unbearable conditions and seeking safety and repose. However, if the number of refugees jumps dramatically, or if Syrian refugees become more widely politicized and armed, the Syrian refugee presence could become as destabilizing as the Palestinian refugee presence was in Lebanon in the 1970s.

Indeed, there is a risk that the overwhelmingly Sunni Palestinian refugee camps, such as Ain al-Hilweh near Sidon and others in and around Beirut, might be dragged into the rising sectarian tensions. The main Palestinian parties, Fatah and Hamas, are adamant about not becoming involved in the Lebanese or Syrian conflicts, but a number of Islamist groups reside in the camps—such as Usbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham—with radical jihadist links, and they could more easily be engaged in sectarian fighting.

## Northern Insurrection

In May 2012, the relative calm that Lebanon enjoyed from the beginning of the Syrian uprising was shaken. On May 12, the office of General Security, led by an officer close to Hezbollah, arrested a young Sunni anti-Syrian activist, Shadi al-Mawlawi, in the northern city of Tripoli. The arrest led to an eruption of violent protests in the majority-Sunni city and other parts of the Sunni north. Salafi groups, which have had a small following in the northern city for many years and which have been emboldened by funding from the Gulf and mobilized in support of Syria's rebels, took the lead in taking to the streets with guns and anti-Hezbollah and anti-Assad slogans. The large-scale armed protests that followed the arrest of Mawlawi represented effectively a Sunni insurrection against Hezbollah's power and the government it dominated and an open declaration of support for the Syrian revolution.

The Lebanese army's attempt to restore order went terribly wrong when soldiers at an army checkpoint in the northern district of Akkar opened fire on the motorcade of a Sunni sheikh from the region, killing him and his aide. The army, generally a symbol of national unity and a pillar of Lebanon's precarious stability, was seen now as potentially hostile. Unrest in the north then spread temporarily to Beirut with several killed and injured in clashes between anti-Syrian and pro-Syrian groups. In the southern city of Sidon, a Sunni Islamist sheikh, Ahmad al-Assir, also launched a protest movement—but largely unarmed—against Hezbollah dominance and the Assad regime.

## Abductions, Arrests, and Assassinations

As the northern crisis raged on, Lebanon's stability was hit from another direction on May 22, when Syrian rebels in the Aleppo area kidnapped eleven Lebanese Shia. The Lebanese were apparently returning from religious pilgrimage in southern Iraq, but the rebels claimed that they were Hezbollah operatives working in support of the Assad regime. Hezbollah reacted calmly to the kidnappings, pulling back protesters who had initially taken to the streets and leaning on the government to negotiate their release.

The kidnappings escalated in mid-August, when another abduction of a Lebanese Shia in Syria led the Meqdad clan to which he belonged to abduct over 30 Syrians in Lebanon and to threaten the nationals of countries that supported the Syrian rebels. Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Turkey urged their nationals to leave Lebanon, but not before the self-styled "Armed Wing of the Meqdad Clan" managed to abduct a young Turkish businessman.

Hezbollah distanced itself from the actions of the Meqdad clan. It was deeply frustrated by the continued detention of Lebanese Shia in Syria but decidedly did not want to fall into the trap of escalation. In September, Hezbollah quietly encouraged the Lebanese army to go after the Meqdad group in parts

of the southern suburbs and the Bekaa Valley, leading to the release of the Turkish businessman and other persons detained by the clan.

These politically motivated kidnappings have been followed by a wave of criminally motivated kidnappings for ransom as well as a rising pattern of hijackings, robberies, and thefts. It is not surprising, with state security services stretched to the limit, worsening socioeconomic conditions, and rising numbers of refugees fleeing the fighting in Syria—many of them in desperate need, and some armed and dangerous—that there would be a rising level of lawlessness and criminality.

The Lebanese political system was also shaken in August 2012 by the arrest of former information minister Michel Samaha. The closest Lebanese adviser to President Assad, Samaha was smuggling explosives given to him by the head of Syrian intelligence for use in attacks in northern Lebanon. The arrest seemed to signal that the Syrian regime was intent on punishing the Sunni north of Lebanon and that its security network had declined to such a degree that it had to smuggle explosives in a Lebanese former minister's car. It also indicated that Syria's influence in Lebanon had ebbed so much that a Lebanese security agency could dare to arrest someone as close to Assad as Samaha. The arrest also revealed that the security agency in question—the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces—had the technology, capacity, and will to carry out the operation.

The largest blow to Lebanese stability came on October 19—and possibly in response to the Samaha arrest—when a car bomb in the Christian district of Ashrafieh in Beirut killed the head of the Lebanese Internal Security Force's Information Branch, General Wissam al-Hassan, and several civilians. The highest-level assassination to occur in years, it followed failed assassination attempts against anti-Syrian March 14 leaders Samir Geagea and Boutros Harb. Although no evidence was immediately available, March 14 laid the blame for these assassinations at Assad's doorstep.

The assassination inflamed public opinion among March 14 supporters and the Sunni community in particular and brought Lebanon once again to the brink of collapse. Protests broke out in many parts of the country, and armed clashes erupted in Tripoli as well as Beirut. The March 14 coalition demanded that the prime minister immediately resign along with his cabinet, while the president and other political leaders in Lebanon warned against the political vacuum that would ensue if the government stepped down. International powers that traditionally support March 14 denounced the assassination but warned against a hasty collapse of the government and the political uncertainty and instability that would follow.

The crisis ebbed and Lebanon once again stepped back from the brink, but it is not clear if the country could survive many more of these crises.

## Hezbollah and Damascus

Hezbollah continues to try to maintain a low profile. Once it realized that Samaha was apparently caught red-handed, it chose not to defend Assad's ally, but to stay quiet instead. The group endeavored to downplay its association with Assad in the interest of maintaining a low profile and convenient domestic calm in Lebanon. But in October 2012, reports began to mount of Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria. In Lebanese Shia villages, numerous funerals were held for Hezbollah fighters who were buried as "martyrs" without further information. Syrian rebels claimed, as they had in the past, that Hezbollah's men were fighting alongside Assad's.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, offered an explanation of the situation in a speech in early October, saying that some two dozen Shia Lebanese settlements just across the border in Syria were being attacked by the rebel Free Syrian Army. Some of the inhabitants were Hezbollah members and were defending their towns and families.

Sources close to Hezbollah in Lebanon indicate that the Assad regime had indeed asked Hezbollah for large-scale support but that the party had sent only small numbers of fighters because of its eagerness to keep a low profile in the conflict. Although they remain strategic allies, there appears to be a slight rift between Damascus and Hezbollah, as Assad could have received more open and powerful support from Hezbollah and the government it put in place. Most in Hezbollah believe that the Assad regime still has the upper hand in the fighting in Syria and that there is no urgent need for greater involvement; however, there is some speculation that if the Assad regime loses Aleppo, and a battle for Damascus ensues, Hezbollah might take a stronger and more direct role.

## Economic Slowdown

The Syrian crisis has caused a serious economic slowdown in Lebanon but not a full-scale economic collapse, which would have widespread political and possibly security consequences. GDP growth has dropped to around 1–1.5 percent, down from 4–5 percent in previous years. Tourism has declined 50 percent in 2012, compared to 2011, and exports have dropped by 20 percent in 2012. The tourist trade was hurt by the instability, and hurt even more by the wave of kidnappings that scared away Lebanon's high-spending Gulf tourists. The influx of some Syrians with means compensated only partially for the loss. Hundreds of businesses have been forced to close, adding thousands to the ranks of the unemployed. Lebanese exports were hit by the closure of overland routes through Syria that were particularly important for transporting goods to Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan; but industrialists have adapted by using sea routes, although they add to transportation costs.

The banking industry, which is the backbone of the Lebanese economy, also faced serious challenges. It has deposits of around \$120 billion, which is

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approximately 250 percent of GDP, and provides an anchor of confidence to the economy. But banks have \$42 billion out in loans to the private sector—

and some recipients of those funds have defaulted during the current crisis—and it has around \$30 billion loaned out to the public sector.<sup>1</sup> Lebanese banks are also very concerned about possible actions by the U.S. Treasury given Washington’s campaign against Hezbollah’s financing, the international sanctions against Iran, and U.S. sanctions against Syria. In February 2011 the U.S. Treasury charged a leading Lebanese bank (the Lebanese Canadian Bank) of money laundering and involvement with drug trafficking and financing Hezbollah. Lebanese bankers fear that Lebanese banks might be targeted again. Any serious run on the Lebanese banks would probably break the backbone of the Lebanese economy and would lead to an acute crisis in public debt management and in the financing of private-sector growth.

So far, however, large remittances from the over half a million Lebanese working abroad, a private sector that has considerable experience in weathering political and security shocks, and a heavily capitalized banking sector have kept the economy from collapsing.

## Role of External Actors

Clearly, the Syrian government has played a role in pushing Lebanon into the Syrian crisis. Though unhappy with Mikati’s “dissociation” policy, Damascus was glad that Lebanon opposed—or at least abstained from—votes in regional and international summits relating to Syria. The Syrian government has also succeeded in convincing the Lebanese government security forces to crack down on some anti-Syrian sympathizers. Damascus has also urged the Lebanese government to clamp down on potential arms smuggling from Lebanon to Syria and to better control its border. And the Beirut government has complied at times, intercepting a ship, *Lutfallah II*, that was docking in Tripoli in April 2012 apparently with arms for Syrian rebels. It has also intensified patrols along the border.

Nevertheless, the border remains quite porous, and Syrian raids, shelling, and sniping into Lebanese border towns has continued. Syria is unlikely to escalate these cross-border raids into larger operations because it does not wish to destabilize a friendly government. But it will likely continue to launch attacks to punish towns and villages that it perceives are giving succor to the rebels.

Of course, the Syrian rebels have also leaned on allies in Lebanon for help. Although Turkey remains their main support base, Syrian rebels have also turned to Lebanon for humanitarian relief and logistical support. Part of this came naturally because of ties of clan and kinship between towns and villages

across the northern border, but in part, it has also been organized by Islamist groups operating in northern Syria and northern Lebanon. Nevertheless, the amount of actual support that can be provided from northern Lebanon is limited by the fact that the Lebanese and Syrian security forces are cooperating to try to keep such transactions to a minimum.

Saudi and Qatari support for the Syrian rebels is largely going through Turkey and is undertaken in cooperation with Ankara, not Lebanon. Those Gulf countries perhaps recognize that the situation in Lebanon is too precarious for the country to be a major rebel support base and that Lebanon's government and Hezbollah in particular can act to block attempted support. Still, there are reports that Gulf money—whether private or public—has been coming to Islamist and Salafi groups in Lebanon that are willing to help the Syrian rebels.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, U.S. Republican lawmaker John McCain and independent Joe Lieberman made high-level visits to Lebanon trumpeting support for the Syrian rebels—in Lieberman's case from the Lebanese border region of Wadi Khaled. But the Obama administration has generally counseled calm, favoring maintaining Lebanon's stability and keeping Lebanon out of the showdown in Syria. The European Union countries have also argued for dissociation.

Indeed, unlike in 2005–2008, the Western supporters of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition have been counseling accommodation not confrontation in Lebanon. Despite simmering tensions in Lebanon, and despite a more combative Saudi position, this Western stance has been an important element of the precarious stability that has survived so far. In the future, this external counsel could change in favor of encouraging a political showdown with Hezbollah, which could quickly deteriorate into dangerous clashes.

## Lebanon's Coping Mechanisms

It has come as a surprise to many, even in the country, that Lebanon—which has been under Syria's shadow or thumb for over forty years—could maintain relative stability and calm. This is not the result simply of clever policies—although there have been some of those—but of larger factors.

First, unlike all other Arab countries at the outbreak of the uprisings of 2011, Lebanon's constitutional order was already basically democratic and based on power sharing, affording Lebanese citizens a wide margin of liberty, political participation, and freedom from repression. Despite some discontent about the political system's many shortcomings, serious contention over the issue of Hezbollah's arms, and disagreement over the representativeness of Lebanon's successive governments, no group had or has a revolutionary commitment to overthrowing the basic constitutional order.

Second, Lebanon has already gone through a long and bloody civil war. Leaders and populations—some of whom had an appetite for conflict in 1975,

when the civil war began—have little desire to rush into another such conflict. But if the Syrian conflict continues for much longer and sectarian tensions escalate even further, this relative immunity to conflict might break down.

Third, Sunni-Alawi clashes in Syria translate into Sunni-Alawi clashes within Lebanon but not directly into Sunni-Shia clashes. The Alawi population is only around 3 percent of the Lebanese population, and there are Alawi communities only in Tripoli and Akkar. As a result, these clashes have remained localized. Sunni-Shia clashes, if they escalated, would be much broader. Despite their indirect alliance through the Assad regime, the Alawi and Shia communities have distinct histories and identities, and sectarian fighting along one axis does not translate automatically onto another.

Fourth, Hezbollah has such overwhelming armed dominance in Lebanon that its political opponents are dissuaded from challenging it directly through force of arms. The Sunni armed insurrection in the north is far from Hezbollah's reach while clashes in Beirut, which Hezbollah largely controls, have been much more limited. At the same time, Hezbollah is eager to avert sectarian clashes in Lebanon and is avoiding direct conflict.

Fifth, the Christian community is playing an interesting buffer role between the Sunni and Shia communities. Part of this is geographic. Along the coastline, the armed Sunni groups are mainly in the north while the armed Shia groups are in Beirut and the south. Preventing the two from coming to direct blows is a large Christian area stretching from just south of Tripoli all the way to east Beirut. And part is political. The key positions of president of the republic and head of the army are held by Christians, which has helped the political and security systems of the state maintain the middle ground amid rising Sunni-Shia tensions.

In addition, many political disputes between the Sunni and Shia camps are played out through their two Christian allies: Samir Geagea allied with the Sunni Future Movement, and Michel Aoun allied with Hezbollah. On behalf of their more powerful allies, Geagea and Aoun can publicly argue contentious political issues like Hezbollah's arms, the election law, and government formation without directly inflaming Sunni-Shia tensions.

Also, as the Assad regime becomes increasingly mired in its own internal troubles, both the Lebanese president and prime minister have been able to assert more nationalist Lebanese positions and even direct veiled criticism at President Assad and his government—something unthinkable just two years ago. Indeed, the weakening of the Assad regime is an historic opportunity for the Lebanese state to regain some of its long-lost independence.

## Short-Term Concerns

There are many dynamics in the Syrian crisis that are well beyond Lebanon's control. Nevertheless, Lebanese leaders and authorities should build on the stability they have been able to preserve so far.

### Crisis Management

As the Syrian crisis continues, the government and security forces will have their hands full chasing down sparks and putting out brushfires. This will include managing the recurring clashes between the Alawi and Sunni neighborhoods of Tripoli and Akkar, putting out Sunni-Shia conflicts where they erupt, trying to protect against further assassinations or car bombs, combating the wave of kidnappings and criminality throughout the country, and better controlling the Lebanese border to avoid getting dragged into the nearby fighting in Syria. But the state's security capacities have been hit by the assassination of General al-Hassan, who had built an effective internal security intelligence capacity, and are stretched thin throughout the country.

Most important, the government has to quickly develop a coordinated strategy to deal with the rapidly increasing number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The influx of refugees so far has strained the country's social fabric, which is nearing its breaking point. The internally displaced in Syria already number close to 3 million, and Lebanon is the only country bordering Syria that does not effectively control its border. If worsening devastation in Syria greatly increases the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it could completely upend the political and security situation in the country—especially because most of those refugees would be from the Sunni community, and many angry, radicalized, and armed.

The Lebanese state must work with the UNHCR and other concerned organizations to prepare for a rapid increase in refugees, ensure that refugees are accommodated in conditions that provide adequate security for them and their children—especially as winter sets in—and work with political parties in the country as well as the refugee communities to make sure that the Syrian refugees do not become politicized internally. Terrible social conditions in Palestinian refugee camps as well as the irresponsible internal politicization of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon in the past partially led to Lebanon's collapse in 1975. Lebanon should learn from those failings to avoid similar humanitarian suffering and political risk with regard to the incoming Syrian refugees.

The Lebanese government needs to come up with a strategic approach to dealing with the current and potential inflow of Syrian refugees. So far it has let the UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and nongovernmental organizations take the

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lead, while providing only backup support. The size of the potential refugee influx and the humanitarian and security repercussions that it might entail require a much more robust strategy from the government.

### **Preserving the Political Process**

The March 8–leaning Mikati government proved convenient for Lebanon during the initial phase of crisis in Syria, and Mikati’s dissociation policy helped define a useful third way for otherwise polarized Lebanese groups to deal with the Syrian conflict. But the Mikati government has also become a flashpoint of discontent for the anti-Syrian March 14 opposition. After the assassination of General al-Hassan in October 2012, the broad March 14 opposition suspended all cooperation in parliament and with the government until a new government is formed.

The Mikati government still enjoys a narrow majority in parliament, provided to it by the small voting bloc of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. The external backers of March 14 appear to be split over the matter. Saudi Arabia apparently favors a rapid collapse of the Mikati government, while the United States and Europe have been counseling a more cautious approach. The March 14 coalition has been demanding the formation of a “neutral” technocratic government, while others have been suggesting the formation of a government of national unity. But both options appear difficult to achieve in the current climate of political polarization. The president has urged the revival of national dialogue meetings that he previously hosted to work on finding common ground, but the March 14 coalition refuses to participate until the Mikati government is removed. Without agreement on an alternative government, the current Mikati government is likely to endure.

A main task facing this or a future government is organizing parliamentary elections slated for the spring of 2013. These will be the first elections after the Syrian uprising; they will determine which coalition commands a majority in the next parliament, and that parliament will form Lebanon’s next government in 2013 and elect Lebanon’s next president in 2014.

Two challenges loom. The first is whether the elections will be held at all. If events in Syria create security crises and political tensions in Lebanon that go well beyond what has occurred so far, the government might be unable to organize elections. In addition, if one side or the other calculates that the coalition it leads is going to lose the election, it might use its influence to delay them. What is worrisome is that if any major group pushes in that direction, it might find many politicians and deputies happy to go along with it: deputies will simply extend their own mandate (as they did many times during the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990), the prime minister and government will govern on, and the president will probably receive an extension of his mandate as was granted to his two predecessors.

The second challenge is drafting a new election law. Several parties have spoken out against the so-called 1960 election law, which was the basis for elections in 2009, but there is no agreement on a law to replace it. The government has proposed a proportional election system with thirteen electoral districts, and the March 14 coalition has proposed a majoritarian system with around 50 small districts; both proposals are a significant departure from the 1960 law and would create different parliaments. Unresolved disagreement over the election law could eventually be used as an excuse for postponing the elections.

Lebanon should form either a new national unity government that includes more weighty Sunni participation in order to defuse the dangerous sense of Sunni marginalization or a more neutral technocratic government that cannot be perceived as giving advantage to either side.

It should also rapidly come to an agreement on a new election law and the timely holding of free and fair elections in the spring. This would reassure all Lebanese, as well as Lebanon's friends, that despite the crisis next door, Beirut is able to maintain and renew its democratic political institutions.

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### **Bolstering the State**

The decline of the Assad regime is a chance for Lebanon to regain some of its lost sovereignty and impose more state security. Indeed, the arrest of Assad's closest Lebanese adviser, Michel Samaha, demonstrated that the Internal Security Forces have new capacity and courage. And Lebanese officials, including the president and prime minister, have, for the first time in over two decades, dared to make statements openly critical of Damascus. The assassination of General al-Hassan was perhaps a warning from Damascus to Lebanese officials about overestimating Syria's decline and underestimating the country's lingering power. Still, Lebanon should reinforce its army and police even in the face of direct threats to their leadership.

Meanwhile, the government needs to revise its fiscal and economic planning to sustain a Lebanese economy cut off from its Syrian interior and suffering the fallout of the Syrian conflict for some time to come. This means an economy without overland export routes, with lower tourist trade, and carrying a large Syrian refugee population. It should particularly pay attention to the pressing economic needs of Tripoli and the impoverished north, which have created an environment conducive to radicalization.

## Longer-Term Worries

While Lebanese leaders might be able to discern the immediate challenges in the few months ahead, if the Syrian crisis drags on for years, and depending on its eventual outcomes, Lebanon might face a variety of larger challenges.

### Coping With Syrian Outcomes

There are serious worries regarding how Lebanon could cope with the various ways in which the Syrian conflict could evolve. Each outcome brings with it a set of particular concerns.

The rosiest scenario and the smoothest for Lebanon would be a negotiated settlement to the conflict with a managed transition that involves Assad's departure and a transitional government made up of state and opposition figures. This would bring the dangerous conflict to an end and take Syria forward toward political reform without upending delicate political balance in Lebanon.

What seems currently more likely, however, is a drawn-out civil war that could drag on for years. The regime might be able to sustain its control over Damascus as well as the northwest of the country, even if it loses a degree of control over Aleppo and some northern and central towns and districts. Hezbollah would be critical to maintaining supply routes to Damascus and providing an overland route through the Bekaa Valley linking Damascus and the Syrian northwest. Lebanon could possibly survive this scenario with concerted internal conflict management. But if the Syrian civil war generates a much larger flow of refugees into Lebanon, even the current delicate balance could be broken.

Currently, an outright victory by either side in the Syrian conflict seems far off, but it would create new and challenging realities for Lebanon. If by some combination of means the Assad regime manages to eventually beat back the uprising—and history is not without surprises—there would likely be a reckoning in Lebanon. The regime would feel triumphant and might turn to punish its opponents and reassert, along with Hezbollah, full dominance in Lebanon. Even in more normal times, the anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon have been subject to assassination and sabotage; the reckoning of a bloodied but resurgent Assad regime could be even more grim.

Alternatively, if the rebels, after months or years of fighting, finally bring down the regime, much will depend on the makeup and orientation of the rebel factions at that point. If they have managed to organize themselves into a unified national front that hems in radical groups and has a clear focus on Syrian transition and reform, then the transition should not bring undue instability to Lebanon. However, if the radical al-Qaeda-influenced element in the Syrian uprising eventually gains dominance and heads the effort to bring down the regime, these elements could—as many of their leaders have said<sup>3</sup>—carry the fight into Lebanon. The fall of the Alawi-dominated Iranian-allied

regime in Damascus would only be a prelude and would encourage those elements to go after the Iranian-supported, Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon. Lebanon would then be at risk of being plunged into a new and devastating civil war.

Looming over these medium- and long-term worries is that as the Assad regime weakens and Hezbollah becomes more strategically vulnerable, and as the crisis between Israel and Iran continues, Israel at some point could launch another war against Hezbollah. The logic is ominous. Hezbollah remains one of the major Iranian retaliatory instruments against Israel if the latter (or even the United States) contemplates an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities. Israel might determine that Syria can no longer facilitate the massive rearming of Hezbollah in the wake of a war between Israel and Hezbollah, and Israel might also feel that its preparations since the 2006 war and its missile defense systems might eventually make such a war against Hezbollah winnable and tolerable in terms of costs. The 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel ushered in a situation of mutual deterrence and calm along the countries' border; the fall of the Assad regime could introduce new calculations that could tip that balance.

### **Impact on Alliances and Governing Formulas**

In the long run, the outcome of the Syrian conflict will have an impact on the alliances within Lebanon and might influence positions regarding the basic governing arrangements. The March 14 alliance was born in opposition to the Assad regime seven years ago; if the Assad regime is no longer, what would still hold the various Sunni and Christian members of the alliance together? If a post-Assad Damascus emerges with a moderate Sunni profile, Christian and Druze parties might renew their alliance with majority Sunni parties in Lebanon in order to benefit from the fair wind from Damascus. However, if Damascus ends up dominated by radical jihadi Sunni elements, both Christians and Druze in Lebanon might perceive a resurgent and radical Sunni community as an existential threat and might consider a rapprochement with Shia parties.

Outcomes in Damascus could similarly impact the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance. Many members joined this alliance because they correctly surmised in the past that the Assad regime and Hezbollah had become the most powerful players in Lebanon. If the Assad regime falls, many groups will feel orphaned, but they will still have Hezbollah to lean on. And unless there is another Israel-Hezbollah war, Hezbollah will remain the strongest player in Lebanon for the near future and could sustain a strong domestic alliance.

A change of power in Damascus, accompanied by profound constitutional change there, might also raise constitutional change issues in Lebanon. In particular, if Hezbollah feels that the reemergence of Sunni power in Damascus threatens its long-term strategic position, it might propose gradual integration of its arms with the state in exchange for a renegotiation of the Taif Agreement—the power-sharing agreement of 1989 that helped end the long

Lebanese civil war—and a greater share for the Shia community in parliament and the executive branch. Such a renegotiation might include demands for replacing the 50-50 Christian-Muslim ratio in parliament and government with one in which Christians, Sunnis, and Shia each receive one-third of the seats. And it might include demands for the prime minister's post to be alternated between Sunnis and Shia or some alternative arrangement for more Shia power in the executive branch. An unraveling of the Taif Agreement, that itself was the painful result of many years of civil war and intermittent negotiation, might lead to an unraveling of the political status quo in Lebanon and a period of new unrest and uncertainty.

## International Involvement

The international community has a part to play in determining the path forward. The best way for regional and international players to help Lebanon is to help resolve or defuse the Syrian conflict. Many external players—supporters of both the March 8 and March 14 coalitions—have already made a policy of encouraging stability in Lebanon and keeping Lebanon at some distance from the conflict raging next door. That approach has been wise and beneficial.

The Gulf countries, some of whom have encouraged or allowed the funding and arming of radical groups in northern Lebanon in direct support of the Syrian rebels, need to reconsider their policies in as much as they might end up dragging Lebanon itself into internal conflict. Iran, which has encouraged or coordinated with Hezbollah to send some fighters to Syria, should also consider that this policy could also lead to internal conflict in Lebanon.

Regardless of the outcome of Lebanon's elections next spring—assuming they take place—or the conflict in Syria, external backers of both the pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian sides in Lebanon should push for the formation of an inclusive post-election government. Lebanon needs to continue to be governed very carefully and with power sharing and cooperation between its main communities and factions. There is no win-lose option for Lebanon's internal politics.

This period is also an opportunity for friends of Lebanon to increase their support and training for the Lebanese security services. This is essential for these services to manage an increasingly challenging border and internal security situation, and it is important in indicating support for the state's attempts to regain parts of its long-lost sovereignty.

The strength and credibility of the state's security services will also be important in the long term in negotiating a relationship with Hezbollah. The president has proposed a formula that allows Hezbollah to keep its arms but requires that the decision to use those arms in war be put in the hands of

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the state. Hezbollah has argued that it cannot cede any of its security functions unless the state's own security capacities are dramatically enhanced and proven effective.

The international community also needs to respond quickly and effectively to the financial appeals being made by UNHCR, UNICEF, and other agencies for handling the rapidly rising influx of Syrian refugees. If the humanitarian needs of the refugees and their families are not met, the fallout will not be on the humanitarian level alone but could also impact internal security in Lebanon. Desperate refugees would be easy targets for recruitment by radical groups and could be used to carry the Syrian conflict into Lebanon.

As Lebanon drifts toward the third year of the Syrian conflict, it is a ship afloat but quickly taking on water. It has survived the storm so far, but it faces serious challenges ahead. Lebanon's leaders, as well as its friends around the world, need to continue to encourage dissociation of Lebanon from the Syrian conflict and avoid using Lebanese politics or security as a wedge or proxy to fight other wars.



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## Notes

- 1 “Keeping Alight the Spark, Lebanese Economy Battens Down for Tougher Times,” *Executive Magazine*, no. 159, October 2012, 44–69.
- 2 For example, a local newspaper reported that Qatar was paying the monthly salaries of several religious officials in north Lebanon as well as financing a Salafist radio station there. See “Lebanon Is Shadow Country for Syria’s Opposition,” *Al-Akbar*, October 8, 2012, 4–5.
- 3 See, for example, “Syrian Rebels Warn to Take Battle to Hezbollah Stronghold,” *NOW Lebanon*, October 9, 2012, <http://goo.gl/hgu2M>.



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