

# Lebanon... Perils of the Syrian Quake Aftershocks

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Although Lebanon long anticipated the formation of [Prime Minister] Najib Miqati's government, the government's late and challenging birth did not succeed in promoting a sense of stability. The interrelation between the political situation in Lebanon and the Arab sphere's balances and variables, as well as the considerable Syrian impact on the Lebanese affairs placed Lebanon now in the face of the Arab revolts, in general, and the Syrian revolt, in particular. Perhaps the eruption of clashes that occurred a few weeks ago in Tripoli between the Sunni and Alawite Lebanese is a mere initial spark for what this country could witness as an aftershock of the political quake that has lately been rocking the structure of the Syrian regime and Arab settled balances.

The following is a preliminary reading of developments in the Lebanese political situation and its prospects in light of the formation and commencement of Miqati's government that is controlled by pro-Damascus forces and in light of the internal Syrian crisis.

1. On Friday, June 17 2011, the northern city of Tripoli was a battleground for armed clashes between fighters from the Sunni quarter of Bab al Tabbanah (or al Tabbanah Gate) and the Alawite quarter of Jabal Muhsin (or Mount Muhsin). Seven people were killed and a score of others were injured including a Lebanese soldier that did not participate in the fight as well as an official from the overwhelmingly Alawite Democratic Arab Party. A demonstration in solidarity with the Syrian protests went out after the Friday prayers and included many Syrian students of the Tripoli branch of the Lebanese University. The demonstrators chanted slogans demanding the toppling of the Syrian regime which provoked residents of Jabal Muhsin. The Lebanese army intervened to stop the clashes and issued orders to silence the source of fire regardless of its nature.
2. This was not the first incident of its kind between the two areas as it has happened several times in the past but had always been attributed to local tensions. However, Tripoli and its surroundings have witnessed a growing Islamist political tide and thus giving it more importance, particularly in 2008. Since then, Tripoli has become the stronghold of Lebanon's Sunnites as Beirut became militarily indefensible from their point of view since the forces of March 8 Coalition (i.e. Hezbollah, Amal, the Baath Party, and the Syrian Social National Party) stormed Beirut defeating the March 14 Coalition on May 7, 2008, so as to break the stagnation of the internal political crisis through their own method. That confrontation is considered, in some analyses, the peak of the Shiite-Sunni confrontation. Similarly, the Tripoli incident is viewed as the first Sunni-Alawite clash against the backdrop of the current interactive events in Syria. In fact, this clash and its recurrence were expected due to various reasons and motives so long as the Syrian crisis continues.
3. Tripoli, the theatre of these clashes, is characterized by its ability to polarize both aspects of the experienced crisis in Lebanon, internally and regionally:

**First,** Tripoli has become the center of the struggle for the Sunni leadership in Lebanon. The new government, whose patron is Syria, incorporates four Sunni members from Tripoli including the prime minister, Najib Miqati, which is an unprecedented step in the formation of Lebanese governments. One explanation was that the pro-Hariri opposition in Tripoli provoked the clash that day specifically to generate tensions and prevent the four Cabinet members from celebrating the birth of the government.

**Second,** Tripoli's interaction and sympathy with the popular uprising in Syria generally were the strongest in the whole of Lebanon, for three reasons:

- The geographic proximity to Syrian provinces, such as Talkalakh and Baniyas and their vicinities (which have witnessed severe repression);
- The displacement of a few thousand Syrians to areas in northern Lebanon;
- The existence of Islamist groups and parties that have repeatedly called for demonstrations in solidarity with the Syrian people early on but were hindered by authorities that had taken early measures to contain them.

**Third**, the battle for military control of Beirut, by Hezbollah and its allies in 2008, has entailed violent reactions in the north and led later to a race between various forces to attract and arm the northern street, especially that of the Sunnis. This race is still underway, because the struggle that was depicted as Shiite-Sunni conflict, which is indeed as such partially, was and still is—in some aspect—a battle to reinstate Syria and its influence on the Sunnites that it had lost due to its “political accusation” of plotting the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri on February 14, 2005. After the withdrawal of its military forces from Lebanon, Syria’s influence transferred by proxy to its Hezbollah-led allies.

4. It must be noted, at least briefly, that the current elements of the complex and evolving crisis in Lebanon, has begun in 2005 with a series of political assassinations, starting with that of Rafiq al Hariri. An international investigation of the crime was commenced under the supervision of a special international tribunal set up by the UN Security Council resolution. With the withdrawal of the Syrians from Lebanon, the relationship between the two countries shifted from “guardianship” to crisis. Then, the summer of 2006 witnessed a war between Israel and Hezbollah that was supported by Syria. Hezbollah sensed harbingers of siege and disarmament through the activation of the international resolutions that ended the war. Hezbollah also faced other indications of delegitimization by rendering the resistance and its weapons a center of internal disagreement through a certain reading of the war and its causes. Consequently, a political crisis erupted and lasted for over 18 months until the parties involved reached a settlement through the Doha Agreement of May 2008. However, the crisis left some political and social residue that continues to interact and react until the present and the weapons of resistance are still a matter of controversy and discord. In June 2010, a new crisis hit the government of national unity when the international investigation commission was nearing the end of its work and leaks revealing that according to the coming indictment, the special international tribunal will cite some persons that belong to Hezbollah as prospective defendants were widespread. Hezbollah refused the charge, dismissed it as “politicized” to implicate the Party. After months of debates and exchanges and after Saudi-Syrian efforts to reach a settlement avoiding any repercussions of such a charge failed, the government headed by Prime Minister Saad al Hariri collapsed after losing the majority of parliamentarian support due the pressures of Syria and its local allies. Today, the Miqati government faces the prospect of crisis recurrence. Nonetheless, the pro-international tribunal party does not participate in the government as it moved to the opposition that had taken from the so called “illegitimate weapons” a center for its political battle.
5. Against this background, the popular uprising began in Syria in mid-March which in turn has lowered the priority of managing the Lebanese crisis in the Damascus agenda of interests. It seems apparent that the Syrian regime slowed down the formation of the Miqati government in order to devote itself to its crisis, hoping it will finish it quickly. Prior to that, Damascus predicted finding “partners,” other than or alongside Iran, to support the new Lebanese government, such as Saudi

Arabia or perhaps even Turkey. Syria probably expected that the United States and France would show interest in the political change that it has precipitated in Lebanon as per past traditions. But these maneuvers did not avail; Syria therefore halted government formation and attempted to link its own crisis to the Lebanese crisis through the activation of the “conspiracy theory” as it was manifested in President Bashar Assad’s first speech before the Syrian Parliament at the end of March 2011.

6. Sunnites have initially looked to the events in Syria as a popular uprising that does not have any particular sectarian identity and due to the acute politically divisive atmosphere in Lebanon, the Sunnites refrained from interfering or even expressing sympathy with the uprising despite that the severe repression has systematically targeted the Syrian Sunni population in particular. In spite of the passive Lebanese position towards the Syrian uprising, the Lebanese were surprised to find that the Syrian regime accused them of passing weapons across the borders into Syria as Syrian state television showed “confessions” of arrested persons saying that Jamal Jarrah, the Lebanese MP from al Hariri’s parliamentary bloc, provided them with money and weapons to be delivered to some protesters. The Syrian ambassador in Beirut demanded the prosecution of Jarrah but Lebanese security and judicial authorities waited for Damascus to provide them with any incriminating evidence so as to move on with the case - which did not happen. Furthermore, pro-Damascus websites and politicians repeatedly hinted at Saudi “involvement” in inciting protests in Syria without providing any proof to support such claims. Suddenly, Saad al Hariri left Beirut although he was still the head of the caretaker government. It seems that he received Arab and Western intelligence advice or warnings that necessitate moving away before becoming a palatable target of assassination, especially with the mounting prospect of the eruption of a strife associated with the Syrian crisis which may also divert the attention from what is happening in Syria. Nevertheless, some experts believe that after nearly four months of the Syrian uprising, the regime probably lost the option of “attention diversion,” considering that even the rallies organized on Syria’s borders with Israel on May 15th, the anniversary of the Palestinian nakba (or catastrophe) and then on June 5th, the anniversary of the naksa (or the 1967 Setback), did not develop to divert attention as the Syrian regime planned, despite the fall of over 30 deaths and hundreds of casualties in Golan and southern Lebanon.
7. When the new Lebanese government was eventually born, it seemed as if the Syrian regime was in a moment of resolving its crisis. On the one hand, its Lebanese allies expressed their concern that delaying government formation may be comprehended as an indication of weakness. Then they drew the Syrians’ attention to the fact that the international tribunal was about to release the indictment regarding the political assassinations of al Hariri et al. Thus, Damascus is supposed to decide whether it prefers that this release happens under the caretaker government headed by Saad al Hariri or that they face it under a government controlled by Syria’s allies. On the other hand, the moving security approach to the uprising in Syria has reached its peak in Jisr al Shughur; where the largest defection of its kind in the military ranks took place and military and security reinforcements were sent in order to re-subjugate the town and crush the insurgency. Still, the displacement of thousands from Jisr al Shughur that sought refuge in neighboring Turkey has created an embarrassing predicament that can be used to open a gap for the internationalization of the crisis.

8. The fledgling Lebanese government faces threats from three sources:

(i) If the internal struggle gets exacerbated to the extent of paralyzing the government and obstructs its work, especially if the indictment released by the international tribunal entails broad and diverse reactions from Hezbollah;

(ii) If the United States and European countries take a negative stance towards the government, as expected, which implies curbing its resolve and ability to improve the economic situation, and perhaps practicing pressures on this government through the sanctions imposed on Syria; and

(iii) If Syria does not entirely abandon using Lebanon to fight a confrontation against Western countries, especially considering that the tense and armed situation in Tripoli looks fitting for various prospects and that the past bargaining and gaining that Syria used to conduct through Lebanon has already become obsolete

The notion of “demilitarized Tripoli” currently does not appear realistic or attainable but it is a test for Syria’s willingness to fortify the position of its ally, Najib Miqati. The notion of “demilitarized Beirut” was also proposed two years ago but hit a Syrian disapproval snag because the “illegitimate weapons” are largely in the possession of Syria’s allies.

In addition to the tense situation in Tripoli, several Lebanese circles fear two looming dangerous possibilities:

- **First**, a wave of political assassinations; and
- **Second**, triggering clashes between Palestinian factions and Lebanese groups as the Palestinian weapons outside the refugee camps is one of the cards that Syria retains and does not give its consent to withdraw them, even after the Lebanese accorded to withdraw these weapons as a measure to reinforce the state authority.

9. The analyses and repercussions of the evolving Syrian situation led to open political calculations in Lebanon. While Syria’s allies think that the regime did not lose its grip on power and that it will bypass the crisis, albeit slowly, the regime’s adversaries believe that it may have entered a long dark tunnel that will keep the regime exhausted in dealing with the crisis and obliged to fight a confrontation that was long considered unlikely. But both sides, without coordination, agree that the best for Lebanon is not to interfere in any way and not to encourage any internal debating of the Syrian crisis, out of a desire to avoid adding a new division to the existing divisions. However, Syria’s adversaries are aware that the regime’s retreat or collapse could push Hezbollah, at least in the beginning, to carry out some military plans so as to assert its control, maintain its combat capacity, and prevent its adversaries from bullying the Party.

10. Regional powers involved in the Lebanese situation, such as Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries, are also occupied by these political calculations. Iran is worried about its Syrian ally as well as its future in Syria; i.e. the Iranians want to ensure they could continue their reliance on the Syrian regime, especially in supporting Hezbollah. Also, despite its clear and stated support for the Syrian regime, Iran realizes that its strategic system arrangements are passing a through difficult period. As for Turkey, it wagers the future of its relations with Syria as well as the future of its orientation towards the Middle East according to the peoples’ demands for change with or without the regime’s survival. No doubt, the absence of any Arab position or opinion, in this regard, indicates that the destiny of Arab

relations with Syria will resemble that of their relations with Iraq on the eve of the American invasion and occupation and the collapse of the Iraqi regime. However, Arabs generally believe that change in Syria should inevitably mean changing the balance of political power in Lebanon. On their part, Western countries believe that the birth of a new regime in Syria necessarily means breaking the alliance with Iran which, in turn, would change the present political reality in the Middle East.