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The Syrian Conflict's Impact on Lebanese Politics

Summary

- The Syrian crisis has had a negative impact on Lebanon's political scene, including the dynamics among political factions within and across the country's major sectarian communities.
- The political fragmentation of the Sunni community has implications for the growing trend toward political violence triggered by the Syrian conflict. The rise of challengers and the decline of centralized authority within the Sunni community further increase the probability of violence perpetrated by in-group factions.
- Despite the pressures from the Syrian conflict, mounting sectarian tensions will not inexorably spark another all-out civil war.
- If Lebanon does not move past the current political deadlock and stagnation, the spillover from the Syrian crisis stands to undermine the country's stability in the longer term.

Background

The direct effects of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon—such as, increased incidents of sectarian political violence, massive refugee inflows, cross-border movements of fighters—have been well reported during the past two years. Less evident but no less important in assessing the effects of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese political scene is its impact on relations among political factions within and across the country's major sectarian communities. The political dynamics of inter- and intra-sect relations affect the nature of linkages between politicians and in- and out-group members at the grassroots level. They also influence the nature and extent of political violence, which has accelerated in the past few years in Lebanon.

The Lebanese political system incentivizes political parties and movements to become the dominant representatives of their respective sectarian communities. Executive power-sharing arrangements, which distribute political offices by sect, and the electoral system, which adopts sectarian quotas at the district level,¹ compel political factions to prevail over in-group rivals to control key levers of the state and, more fundamentally, to gain access to lucrative patronage opportunities. The dynamics of intra-sect politics are therefore particularly consequential in Lebanon.

Changes within Lebanon's Sunni community since 2005 illustrate the ramifications of intra-sect relations for the linkages between politicians and citizens and for trends in political violence. Upon the end of the Lebanese civil war in the early 1990s, Rafik Hariri, a politician originally from Sidon who earned a massive fortune in Saudi Arabia, gradually gained control over political representation of

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the Sunni community. Through the cooptation and defeat of in-group rivals as well as welfare-enhancing initiatives targeting Lebanese citizens from diverse religious communities, Hariri expanded his influence among Sunnis across much of Lebanon and even among some non-Sunnis.

In-group political dominance shapes the linkages between politicians and citizens at the grassroots level: Because political parties or movements do not need to prove their sectarian credentials as vociferously once they have outmaneuvered in-group rivals, they are more at liberty to offer social benefits across communal lines and, more generally, to position themselves as national political actors rather than merely representatives of a sectarian subset of the Lebanese population.² Thus, a position of dominance within the Sunni community granted the Hariri political machine the freedom to woo supporters from out-group communities. Having achieved a near monopoly over political representation of Lebanese Sunnis, Hariri was able to position himself as a national leader and not just a Sunni politician.

Due to an accumulation of political developments, the dynamics of intra-sect politics in the Sunni community have changed. With Hariri's assassination in 2005, the increasing polarization of Lebanese politics along the March 8 versus March 14 axis, violent clashes in May 2008 between factions led by the Future Movement and Hezbollah, and heightened struggles over the control of key government posts, Hariri's movement has positioned itself more overtly as a sectarian party. Interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009 of Future Movement officials confirmed this assessment in remarkably blunt terms. Furthermore, the Future Movement, the loose political organization established in 2007 and formally headed by Saad Hariri, Rafik Hariri's son, has weakened substantially. Poor leadership and dwindling economic fortunes, among other factors, have contributed to the gradual deterioration of the movement.

Partly in response to the Future Movement's decline, a variety of challengers within the Sunni community have emerged or strengthened. These include established organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood; local strongmen in Sidon, Tripoli and other predominantly Sunni areas; various hardline groups, some of which are linked to al-Qaida; and marginal Arab nationalist and leftist organizations such as the SSNP and Baath party. Some of these challengers, such as Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir in Sidon, have employed violence, a tactic that the Future Movement has largely avoided, despite a brief and ill-fated effort to field a militia in clashes with Hezbollah and its allies in May 2008.

The Impact of the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict has greatly amplified the trend toward political fragmentation within the Sunni community. Although many Sunni political leaders and followers have intervened directly in the Syrian conflict, no consensus has emerged on the appropriate strategy to adopt toward the crisis and its effects on the Lebanese political scene. Different factions within Lebanese Sunni politics have allied themselves with Syrian opposition forces from distinct ideological orientations and disagree on appropriate responses to acts of violence targeting Sunni areas within Lebanon. For example, after car bombs killed at least 45 people in Tripoli on August 23, one Sunni group called for communal policing initiatives (al-amn al-thati) to protect against future attacks. The Future Movement, however, rejected this approach.

The political fragmentation of the Sunni community also has implications for the growing trend toward political violence triggered by the Syrian conflict. The rise of challengers and the decline of centralized authority within the Sunni community increase the probability of violence perpetrated by in-group factions. Emerging local strongmen and clerics tied to extremist groups are not only participating directly in the fighting in Syria but also are more inclined than the Sunni establish-

ment to employ violence as a political tactic within Lebanon. Because communal leaders exercise minimal if any control over these newer Sunni challengers to their authority, they are less able to reign in in-group perpetrators of violence.

Intra-sect politics have followed a distinct trajectory within the Shia community. Thus far, the Syrian crisis has not fundamentally transformed political dynamics within the Lebanese Shia community. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's open participation in the Syrian war seems to have further undermined its reputation among non-Shia and may have caused some existing supporters to question the wisdom of the group's actions. Furthermore, the conflict has amplified preexisting tensions within the March 8th political alliance, in which Hezbollah, the Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) are the key political actors. The FPM, headed by Michel Aoun, clearly does not approve of Hezbollah's decision to engage militarily in the Syrian conflict and Aoun has held several meetings with the Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon, which some claim is an indicator that he is less committed to the coalition with Hezbollah. Yet Aoun does not appear to have imminent plans to withdraw from the alliance. At this juncture, it is still politically expedient for the FPM to remain in the March 8th bloc, despite longstanding and mounting tensions with its other main Shia "partner," the Amal Movement.

The Prospects for Deeper Sectarianism in Lebanon

In considering the ramifications of the Syrian crisis for sectarianism in Lebanon, it is important to bear in mind two general points. First, while Shia-Sunni tensions are at a high point in Lebanon and in the region, they do not reflect essential and irreconcilable differences rooted in identity. By design, the Lebanese power-sharing system, both in its post-independence and post-Taif Accord incarnations, entrenches the political salience of sectarian identity. However, sectarian identities have not been equally salient in the political lives of Lebanese citizens at all times. Since the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri in 2005 and mounting regional conflict along ostensibly Shia-Sunni lines, which has steadily intensified across the Middle East after the second Gulf War, sectarian tensions within the Lebanese political scene have spiked. The Syrian political crisis has only amplified this trend.

Nonetheless, mounting sectarian tensions will not necessarily result in a full-blown civil war in Lebanon. Thus far, inflammatory slogans have not gained mass support and incidents of political violence have not rippled out of control. As research on ethnic conflict shows, elite "political entrepreneurs" play a key role in sparking violence. At this juncture, the most prominent Lebanese political leaders with the greatest numbers of followers do not appear to favor full-blown war and have even tried to contain potential backlash following the most egregious acts of terrorism within Lebanese borders.

While the fragmentation of political representation within the Sunni community may contribute to an uptick in violent incidents, it will not inexorably lead to a return to an all-out civil war. This emphasis on the variability of sect as a politically salient category reflects the conventional wisdom among social scientists but is not merely an academic proposition. It has implications for policy-making: To the extent that political elites from Lebanon and from influential countries in the Lebanese political scene, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, are incentivized not to ratchet up inter-group conflict, then tensions may be defused.

Second, an important but largely overlooked by-product of growing sectarian tensions in Lebanon is the continued decline of living conditions for the Lebanese population. At this juncture, the major political factions have even less incentive and capacity to focus on pressing issues related to governance and to the provision of public and social goods. A robust social

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Melani Cammett is an associate professor of political science specializing in the political economy of development and the Middle East at Brown University. Her most recent book is *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. This Peace Brief is one in a five-part USIP series on sectarianism in the Middle East.

science literature contends that ethno-religious diversity is associated with suboptimal welfare inputs and outcomes, particularly at the national level. Lebanon confirms this association, at least on the national level: The Lebanese power-sharing system, which compels parties and politicians to demand equal access to socioeconomic resources, undercuts the potential achievement of national economies of scale and equity in economic and social policy initiatives.

The spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon has exacerbated the political stalemate in Lebanon. Political deadlock has postponed the holding of elections indefinitely and undercuts any possibility for serious consideration of socioeconomic reform in the country. The continuing stagnation, if not decline, of economic and social outcomes harms the well-being of the population and, as some research suggests,³ can threaten longer-term stability in Lebanon.

Notes

1. At the same time, the electoral system adopts a system of “joint electorates,” which requires that politicians win the support of out-group voters.
2. As I argue elsewhere, the choice of political strategy—state-centric or electoral v. extra-state—also affects the linkages between political organizations and members of in- and out-group communities. See Melani Cammett. *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2014; and Melani Cammett and Sukriti Issar. “Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: The Political Geography of Welfare in Lebanon.” *In World Politics* 62, no. 3 (July 2010): 381-421.
3. See Melani Cammett and Edmund Malesky. “Power-Sharing in Post-Conflict Societies: Implications for Peace and Governance.” *In Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 6 (December 2012): 982-1016.



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