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# Renewed Conflict in Lebanon

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## Author Bio

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# Renewed Conflict in Lebanon

## *INTRODUCTION*

Lebanon is at risk of experiencing renewed civil strife in the coming months, primarily as a result of the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war, now in its fourth year. Although potent memories of Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war and the desire of Lebanese political leaders to avoid a resumption of conflict have so far acted as a brake on violence, growing pressures caused by the influx of Syrian refugees and rising sectarian tensions could undermine Lebanon's fragile stability. The United States has strategic interests in preventing renewed conflict in Lebanon, namely precluding the further spread of regional instability, protecting the security of Israel, and denying jihadists ungoverned territory from which they could threaten the U.S. homeland. Resolving or at least deescalating the conflict in Syria would reduce the growing strains on Lebanon, but the prospects for this are dim in the short-to-medium term. Yet, steps can be taken to lessen the likelihood of renewed conflict in Lebanon. Bolstering the resilience of Lebanon's state institutions and seeking to deescalate growing sectarian tensions will be essential. Although this strategy does not resolve Lebanon's longstanding political and socioeconomic challenges, it aims to insulate Syria's most vulnerable neighbor from the spread of conflict.

## *THE CONTINGENCY*

The potential for renewed conflict in Lebanon hinges directly on the trajectory of the civil war in Syria. Over the next twelve to eighteen months, the security situation inside Lebanon could deteriorate due to three interrelated spillover effects stemming from Syria's ongoing civil war: growing sectarian violence, a rising influx of refugees, and the increasing paralysis of state institutions. The Syrian conflict will likely remain a protracted stalemate over this timeframe because neither the regime nor the rebels have the capacity to prevail militarily. Though the Syrian regime is consolidating military gains on the ground, an outright regime victory remains unlikely. However, should the regime emerge victorious, the prospect of widespread renewed conflict in Lebanon could diminish, particularly if Hezbollah withdraws from Syria, removing a major impetus of sectarian violence in Lebanon. Meanwhile, in an even less probable scenario for Syria, if armed rebel groups either overthrow the Assad regime or force its retreat from Damascus, the contingency would not only be more likely, but possibly worse than depicted. Major refugee flows from Damascus would be expected. Rising Sunni power in Syria and, by extension, Lebanon, would check Hezbollah's dominance and necessitate a reformulation of Lebanon's power equation, typically achieved by force of arms.

The most likely prognosis for Syria is stalemate. However, stalemate should not be confused with stasis. The conflict in Syria is dynamic, with continuing shifts in the contours of the fighting, mounting outflows of refugees, and a growing influx of foreign fighters, as well as deepening radicalization and sectarianism of its population. This ongoing stalemate would have significant spillover into Lebanon. Three interrelated developments could combine to produce renewed conflict in Lebanon:

*Growing sectarian violence.* Deepening sectarian divisions and violence inside Syria exacerbates existing tensions among Lebanon’s Sunni and Shiite communities. In particular, the Shiite militant organization Hezbollah’s unalloyed support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime—including the increased involvement of Hezbollah fighters in Syria—provokes more acute sectarian blowback in Lebanon from an outraged Sunni community.

Two notable factors contribute to Lebanon’s sectarian dynamic spinning out of control. First, as sectarian hatred deepens, leaders of Lebanon’s multiple religious communities lose control over their respective “streets.” Second, sectarian violence feeds itself with repeating cycles of hate-based attacks and reprisals. The violence grows more acute and spreads beyond traditional flashpoints to encompass a broader swath of the country. Tit-for-tat kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings proliferate, with monthly civilian death tolls rising. This contingency features several other developments:

- Lebanon’s Sunni leadership vacuum is increasingly filled by radical elements that encourage the Sunni population to form militias and take on Hezbollah more frontally.
- A marked rise in Sunni militancy occurs. Civilian areas, including markets and cafes, are hit increasingly by indiscriminate bombings as Sunni extremists mimic tactics in Iraq.
- The “shadow war” between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda as well as the Iran-Saudi proxy battle in Lebanon intensify. Syrian jihadist organizations Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) expand their presence in the Lebanese theater.
- Lebanon’s Shiite community, increasingly angered by suicide attacks in Shiite areas, ignores pleas for calm and initiates revenge attacks. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s traditional discipline over the Shiite community frays badly.
- De facto sectarian zones emerge as Lebanese citizens feel increasingly insecure. Neighborhood patrols and vigilante-style protection rackets begin to appear.

*Rising influx of refugees.* As violence in Syria deepens, refugee flows into Lebanon continue unabated, punctuated at times by spikes related to particularly acute episodes of violence in Syria. The Syrian refugee population in Lebanon balloons over twelve months from one million to two million, approximating half of Lebanon’s population of four million prior to the outbreak of conflict in Syria. The refugee flows overwhelm Lebanon’s already fragile infrastructure. Water, electricity, and waste management systems break down. Already in the throes of a historic drought, Lebanon suffers widespread and debilitating water and electricity shortages. The incidence of disease rises with the lack of sufficient sanitation. Public health and education systems collapse.

The effect reverberates through the Lebanese economy. Economic growth plummets, contracting the economy, while the unemployment rate continues to spiral upward from its current nearly 15 percent to more than 35 percent. The sharp economic decline in turn feeds a skyrocketing crime rate.

Massive refugee flows and the resulting socioeconomic distress provoke the Lebanese host population’s deepening resentment. Syrian refugees are increasingly targeted in attacks, and Syrian youth grow more disaffected, forming gangs in response. The Syrian refugee population radicalizes and increasingly looks for protection by Syrian fighters flowing in and out of Lebanon. Ties emerge between some armed elements of the Syrian refugee population and radical Islamist factions in the Palestinian refugee camps. Increasingly, these two Sunni-dominated refugee populations find common cause and undertake joint attacks against Lebanese adversaries in an increasingly fractious arena.

*Increasing paralysis of state institutions.* Political paralysis in Lebanon intensifies as ongoing stalemate in the cabinet—divided along pro- and anti-Syria lines—leads to a political vacuum. Presidential elections are continually delayed as principal political parties fail to reach consensus on a new president. The Lebanese government proves increasingly incapable of responding to the country’s proliferating challenges. More significantly, the unity of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) comes under increasing strain. The LAF’s reputation as a stalwart national institution erodes. Accusations mount within the Sunni community that the LAF is a partisan force favoring Hezbollah and the Shiite community. LAF attempts to monitor the Syrian border and prevent Sunni fighters from crossing into Syria add to the perception that the army disproportionately targets Sunnis and is doing Hezbollah’s and Iran’s bidding. Sunni extremists increasingly target LAF checkpoints and other army installations. As LAF checkpoints spread to combat growing instability, their targeting has the perverse effect of contributing to the spread of violence around the country. Radical Sunni clerics intensify their calls for Sunni soldiers to defect from the army. Some young recruits from impoverished Sunni communities begin to heed the call. Though the Lebanese army does not break up, its cohesion is badly shaken.

The cumulative effect of these three cascading spillover scenarios constitutes a critical tipping point for Lebanon. Though each development on its own would cause significant harm, the combination of all three occurring simultaneously could overwhelm Lebanon’s existing resilience.

#### WARNING INDICATORS

The warning indicators of renewed conflict in Lebanon include the following developments:

- *Sudden massive influx of Syrian refugees.* An acute uptick in violence in Syria could precipitate a sudden and significant exodus of refugees to Lebanon. In particular, should Damascus descend into deeper violence—due to either a rebel offensive or external intervention—significant numbers of refugees would flow out of Damascus, with Lebanon their most likely destination.
- *Sunni extremist suicide bombings resume and accelerate in pace and geographic spread.* The bombings move beyond Shiite strongholds such as Beirut’s southern suburbs or areas in the northern Bekaa Valley. Instead, a widespread campaign targets heavily populated civilian areas with the intention of sowing greater fear and anger throughout the populace.
- *Sectarian killings increase.* Attacks would be perpetrated based on sect and characterized by grisly, execution-style killings, with maimed bodies left in neighborhoods as a warning.
- *Mobilization of sectarian-based militias across communities.* As security grows more tenuous, communities mobilize at the grassroots and establish armed protection squads based on sect.
- *Bombings and assassinations target Sunni areas with previously unknown Shiite groups taking credit.* As violence deepens, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah increasingly loses control of his community, which seeks revenge for suicide attacks targeting Shiites.
- *Checkpoints proliferate, increasingly dividing cities and other parts of the country into de facto cantons.* As sectarian violence worsens, official and unofficial checkpoints sprout up at transition points from one sect-dominated area to another.
- *Evidence grows demonstrating the radicalization of the Syrian refugee population and/or deepening involvement of radicals from Palestinian refugee camps.* Syrian refugees increasingly settle in the Palestinian refugee camps as shelter grows scarcer. Palestinian extremists and Syrian refugees coop-

erate in an ad hoc, tactical manner, possibly forming new joint groups. Syrian refugees organize, forming gangs or armed groups that perpetrate attacks inside Lebanon.

- *Assassination of a major Lebanese leader or attack on a venerated religious site.* In particular, the assassination of Nasrallah or a leading Sunni or Christian *za'im* (leader) could unleash widespread violence that serves as a tipping point into this contingency. Likewise, the destruction of a critical mosque or shrine, such as the Shiite Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus (a “Samarra mosque moment”), could similarly provoke a sudden and acute descent into violence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

Renewed conflict in Lebanon threatens U.S. interests in three principal ways. First, it would exacerbate regional instability, further undermining the U.S. interests in promoting peaceful, democratic reform and economic development in the region. Lebanon’s descent into sectarian strife would deepen Sunni-Shiite tensions across the area, intensifying regional rivalries and potentially destabilizing neighboring countries at a time when the United States intends to “rebalance” its foreign policy priorities.

Second, renewed conflict in Lebanon could threaten the security of Israel, a critical U.S. ally, especially if jihadists gain a significant foothold in Lebanon. In particular, al-Qaeda-linked groups may seek to establish a presence close to Israel’s northern border in order to perpetrate attacks on Israel. Moreover, in a number of follow-on scenarios, Israel could be drawn directly into Lebanon, further compounding regional tensions and adversely affecting other U.S. priorities in the region.

Third, renewed conflict in Lebanon would allow for ungoverned territory to be exploited by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, with potential threats to the U.S. homeland. Should the situation in Lebanon deteriorate, Sunni jihadist groups already infiltrating the Lebanese arena could find more leeway to operate, both in terms of training as well as planning and launching attacks. These groups could use Lebanon to recruit operatives to undertake attacks in Europe or the United States.

## PREVENTIVE OPTIONS

Given the direct linkage between Syrian spillover and Lebanese instability, resolution of the conflict in Syria would be the most effective path for preventing renewed strife in Lebanon. Yet, prospects for resolving Syria are remote at this time. Instead, a strategy that focuses on mitigating the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict while bolstering Lebanon’s resilience and diminishing its sectarian tensions offers the best path forward. Specifically, to prevent renewed conflict in Lebanon, the United States has three broad sets of policy options:

*Mitigate the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict.* Efforts to ensure humanitarian access to civilians inside Syria and insulate Syria’s neighbors from spillover would help prevent renewed conflict in Lebanon. This option presents numerous challenges given the lack of international consensus on Syria and the entrenched nature of the Syrian conflict. It would also entail a broadening of the dialogue with Iran beyond nuclear-related issues, which has hitherto not been U.S. policy. Specific measures the United States could take to contain spillover from the Syrian conflict include the following:

- *Work with the United Nations and relevant global and regional actors to vastly improve humanitarian access into Syria, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2139.* Faced with roadblocks

from the Syrian regime on granting access to humanitarian organizations providing medical and food aid in rebel-controlled areas, the United States should seize on the UN consensus embodied by UNSCR 2139 to launch a full-bore multilateral effort, including the EU, Russia, and Iran, to increase humanitarian access. In particular, the United States should take advantage of Iran's professed willingness to support humanitarian access, encouraging Tehran to leverage its influence with Damascus to provide greater international access for aid.

- *Initiate a dialogue on Syria, under UN auspices, with influential regional actors to include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and Iraq.* This dialogue would highlight potential shared interests that might be leveraged to make progress on containing violence in Syria. Possible areas of overlap might include diminishing the growth of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria or facilitating humanitarian access. Some might argue that the United States should now seek to set terms that will break the ongoing stalemate, including conceivably dropping the precondition that would require President Assad to resign early in the dialogue process.

*Reinforce Lebanese resilience.* The United States can also consider measures that bolster Lebanon's resilience given the likelihood of continued Syrian spillover. This option is only feasible with a substantial influx of resources. It should therefore be undertaken in concert with European allies, particularly the United Kingdom and France, and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. These measures include the following:

- *Increase funding for humanitarian and development assistance to both Lebanon's Syrian refugee population and the Lebanese host population.* Working through the International Support Group for Lebanon and with the United Nations and the World Bank's Lebanon Trust Fund, the United States should spearhead efforts to double assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and to Lebanese citizens. The Gulf states, in particular, should be encouraged to increase their contributions, which lag significantly. This option could be difficult to implement given the lackluster global response to the UN appeal: to date, less than 15 percent of the UN's target of \$1.89 billion in humanitarian assistance to Lebanon has been funded. Donors should aim to increase funding to at least 30 percent of the UN target given the destabilizing effect of Lebanon's refugee crisis.
- *Work with the LAF and international partners to dramatically enhance Lebanon's border security.* The United States, together with the United Kingdom and France, should accelerate ongoing efforts to improve surveillance and controls along Lebanon's northern and eastern frontiers. The United States could initiate discussions with the UN to explore expanding the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) beyond its current area of operations in the south, thereby relieving the LAF of operating in particularly sensitive areas.

*Deescalate sectarian tensions.* The United States can work directly or indirectly through a variety of channels, including critical European and Gulf allies, to help reduce sectarian tensions inside Lebanon. Though the measures noted below are feasible, the United States should also encourage regional allies with deeper influence in Lebanon, such as Saudi Arabia, to resist the temptation to stoke sectarianism in Lebanon. Options include the following:

- *Initiate high level meetings with political leaders in Lebanon to encourage consensus building and work toward peaceful presidential and parliamentary elections.* The U.S. ambassador in Lebanon can urge

the representatives of Lebanon's two primary political groupings, the pro-Western March 14 coalition and the Syrian-aligned March 8 bloc, to break its existing stalemate.

- *Strengthen the National Dialogue process.* The dialogue process in Lebanon—which dates back nearly a decade—has had mixed results at best. For example, President Michel Suleiman attempted to use the National Dialogue process to seek agreement among Lebanon's polarized political factions to refrain from involvement in the Syrian conflict, to no avail. Nonetheless, in the absence of other, more effective institutional mechanisms, it can serve as a useful channel for communication among contending parties and reduce the possibility of miscommunication by providing a safe venue for discussion.
- *Reform and strengthen security institutions, namely the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF).* Work with the United Kingdom and France to integrate training and reform efforts within the LAF to safeguard against public perceptions that it is becoming a sectarian institution. The United States can ensure that part of its LAF assistance comprises enhanced training and communication skills that bolster the institution's public image. The United States could also work with allies to harmonize other flows of foreign assistance to the LAF (in particular from Saudi Arabia). Similarly, the United States should increase ISF reform and training efforts.

#### MITIGATING OPTIONS

If Lebanon descends into violent conflict, the United States will have fewer options at its disposal to mitigate the consequences. Nonetheless, it will be essential to limit the damage that might emanate from Lebanon. These options would include the following:

- *Send a high-level U.S. envoy to seek a cessation of hostilities.* This effort will be critical if the conflict expands beyond Lebanon to include Israel. In that case, the United States will need to leverage its ties to Israel and possibly work through regional actors to get both sides to stand down. Shuttle diplomacy would be undertaken by a U.S. special envoy, in coordination with the UN and European allies. If conflict remains internal, the United States could still seek the mediation of regional actors—perhaps Qatar, given its success in past efforts—to pursue a ceasefire.
- *Establish a crisis management group with important regional allies including Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to limit fallout from Lebanon.* Depending on the depth of conflict, the United States might consider establishing a regional contact group on Lebanon that would participate in intelligence sharing. Under U.S. leadership, senior representatives from these regional governments would convene to identify imminent security threats and joint measures—such as enhanced security protocols—that would forestall violent spillover.
- *Mobilize international resources for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction through a Lebanon Emergency Fund.* Once conflict breaks out in Lebanon, humanitarian needs will increase exponentially. The United States could spearhead efforts to mobilize as much as \$20 billion to \$25 billion for the Lebanese and Syrian refugee populations and infrastructure reconstruction. The large Lebanese diaspora community and Gulf states would be critical contributors to this effort.
- *Explore the possibility of enhanced UN peacekeeping in Lebanon.* Depending on the level of violence, the United States could work through UN channels to bolster UNIFIL forces once a ceasefire is achieved or to help protect various communities against sectarian massacres.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Resolving Syria's conflict would dramatically diminish prospects for renewed strife in Lebanon, but the likelihood of a resolution in the near term is slim. Instead, spillover from Syria's protracted civil war threatens to destabilize an already volatile situation in Lebanon. Concerted efforts should be made to lessen its likelihood and mitigate the effects of unrest should it occur. To achieve these goals, the United States should implement the following recommendations.

- *Deepen U.S. intelligence sharing and information gathering so as to have better insight into Lebanon's internal politics.* These measures should be undertaken by the Department of State and the CIA.
  - Enhance intelligence exchanges with regional intelligence services, especially in the Gulf, to gain greater insights into the various extremist elements operating inside Lebanon.
  - Increase monitoring of extremist elements in Palestinian camps.
  - Undertake mapping of evolving sectarian fault lines across Lebanon, as well as important actors/groups, using all sources, including “big data” resources that can make use of open-source intelligence to track sectarian violence.
  - Inventory influential online sources of sectarian rhetoric—clerics, websites, online publications—in order to refine strategies to counter sectarianism.
  
- *Intensify diplomacy in concert with the United Nations, United Kingdom, France, and Saudi Arabia to tamp down sectarian tensions and promote reconciliation in Lebanon.* These measures, undertaken by the Department of State, would focus on both Lebanon and the region.
  - Reach out to Lebanese actors across the political spectrum to encourage consensus-building on critical political milestones, including the presidential election and a new electoral law.
  - Support and actively promote the resumption and strengthening of Lebanon's National Dialogue process as an important venue for beginning to resolve political tensions among Lebanon's various sects. Its agenda should be broad and include diminishing sectarian tensions by promoting cross-confessional cooperation and enhancing internal security measures.
  - Open discussions with both Saudi Arabia and Iran on diminishing sectarian tensions. Consider the establishment of a regional dialogue that includes Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and Iraq and Turkey that aims to deescalate tensions in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.
  
- *Enhance Lebanese security, especially along the porous Lebanese-Syrian border, and pursue measures that strengthen security institutions, especially the LAF and the ISF.* These measures should be enacted alongside France, the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom share important equities.
  - Bolster U.S. defense and security assistance and cooperation with the LAF and focus new training efforts on Sunni enlisted soldiers. Pursue broader reforms and training that strengthen the institution's reputation as a national, not sectarian, force.
  - Encourage the expansion of the Lebanese army's security plan beyond Tripoli and the northern Bekaa region into other restive parts of the country.
  - Work with the French and Saudis to ensure that Saudi Arabia's \$3 billion grant to the LAF is harmonized with existing plans and structure set for the LAF's long-term development.

- Work with the United Kingdom and others to dramatically increase support for border security/training, focusing specifically on the northern border with Syria.
  - Enhance the equipping and training of the ISF by reinvigorating the State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) programming in support of the ISF. Funding should be increased from \$15 million to previous levels of \$20 million or more. This training program should emphasize human rights and the rule of law.
  - Explore the possibility of expanding UNIFIL’s mandate to assist with enhancing border security elsewhere in Lebanon beyond the Blue Line.
- *Address Lebanon’s mounting socioeconomic ills with greater resources and strong coordination with regional allies, the European Union, and international financial institutions.*
    - Mobilize significant global support for the World Bank’s Lebanon Trust Fund. The United States should use diplomatic channels to encourage Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to provide greater assistance by providing detailed reporting on the negative social and economic impacts of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon and tying this socioeconomic deterioration to prospects for renewed conflict in Lebanon. Funneling aid through this multidonor fund will ensure that it bypasses Hezbollah-controlled government ministries.
    - Implement funding conditions to harmonize new development assistance with long term national goals such as unifying the electrical grid and reforming the health care system.
    - Accelerate support job creation programming in Lebanon that seeks to harness the country’s indigenous entrepreneurialism by encouraging growth of small and medium enterprises. To the extent possible, ensure that assistance aimed at enhancing infrastructure includes job creation elements targeting both Lebanese citizens and the Syrian refugee population.
    - Encourage Lebanon’s exploitation of its offshore natural gas resources that are in *uncontested* areas as a longer-term source of energy and revenue by encouraging the Lebanese Petroleum Administration to accelerate efforts to establish the appropriate institutional and legal frameworks for enabling offshore gas exploration.
    - Expand economic development assistance programs that target impoverished areas of north Lebanon and the Palestinian camps.
    - Encourage Gulf allies to increase the number of visas available for Lebanese workers as well as encourage renewed Gulf private investment in Lebanon.
  - *Bolster support for the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon, with special focus on the needs of children.*
    - Through example and diplomatic pressure, urge interested states and regional partners to ensure the \$6.5 billion UN appeal for humanitarian aid for Syria and refugee-hosting communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and other neighboring countries is fulfilled. While public shaming of Gulf countries for their paltry contributions may be tempting, this tactic could easily backfire. The appointment of a new UN Syria envoy possibly could be linked to aid commitments. However, given that the Gulf continues to hold the UN in disdain, as evidenced by Saudi Arabia’s rejection of a Security Council seat, the special envoy may not prove a useful leverage point.
    - Accelerate efforts to resettle Syrian refugees in the United States and increase quotas.

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