

The Lebanese powder keg

Contributed by Olivier Guitta, Middle East Times
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After the Hezbollah (the Party of God) coup in May and its "official" endorsement by Lebanese political forces and the international community in Doha, Lebanon is still very much facing an explosive situation.

Last week's heavy fighting between Sunni militants and Alawites ? an offshoot of Shiism ? (Syrian President Bashar Assad is an Alawite) in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli left at least nine dead and many more wounded.

One may deduct from this latest violence that the Doha agreement that allowed the election of the pro-Syrian Gen. Michel Sleimane and de facto handed Hezbollah the keys of the country, is not going down well with the Sunnis, the Druze, a large portion of the Christian community and finally some anti-Hezbollah forces within the Shiite community. In fact, they feel that once again the United States and France have sold out Lebanon to fit their geopolitical interests.

For instance, a majority politician expressed his resentment of the major world powers: "They wanted Munich! Today, Iran controls the country. Tehran has restored its "border" with Israel, that had been destroyed during the war of 2006. Bravo to the international community!" Blame is not limited to France and the U.S. but also to the majority's leadership and in particular the Future Movement, Saad Hariri's party. The Hariris know that they will pay dearly among their base their decision not to call to take up arms against the Shiites. Indeed, scores of Tripoli residents that long regarded the Party of God as the "resistance" of Lebanon, view it now as the party of the devil. Already, in Tripoli, the Salafist extremists, are gaining ground. A group of them told the French daily Libération: "Hariri is our leader, we respect and support him. Now, this is the nice option. If it fails, we have another option called Ben Laden." Interestingly, Omar Bakri, the extremist preacher and alleged al-Qaida's mouthpiece who was kicked out of England after the July 7, 2005 bombings, now residing in Tripoli, confirms this trend: "Today, angry Lebanese Sunnis ask me to organize their jihad against the Shiites. I did not believe in the emergence of al-Qaida in Lebanon. But they are the only ones who can defeat Hezbollah. After the Afghans, after the Europeans converted to radical Islam by Al Zawahiri, the next al-Qaida generation will be Lebanese."

Hezbollah is obviously not sitting on its hands and is preparing its next move. As the Kuwaiti daily al-Seyassah reported last week, clashes occurred between farmers in the region of Jezzine (Christian region in the South, located at the southern tip of Mount Lebanon) and Hezbollah fighters.

The farmers have been unable to exploit their land transformed by Hezbollah in a closed military zone. Since August 2006 and the ban for Hezbollah to cross the Litani river, the Party of God has built a new line of defense in the region of Jezzine, where it has stepped up purchases of land to achieve the junction between the south of the Bekaa, in the east and the Shiite regions to the west. But the farmers are far from happy about this and that is why fighting erupted. The incident, during which explosions and gunfire were heard, has allegedly resulted in four deaths.

Hezbollah, which has imposed a full "black out," preventing journalists and the army access to the area, denies and refuses to explain the origin of the explosions. Confirming this worrisome Hezbollah activity in the south are sources close to NATO who stated that Hezbollah has two plans in the offing to neutralize the UNIFIL forces in case of a new conflict with Israel. The first one entails Hezbollah storming UNIFIL posts in a peaceful manner with large waves of civilians. The second is a full-out war in case of retaliation by UNIFIL. Hezbollah units have been recently training with anti-tank missiles to handle the Leclerc tanks of the UNIFIL forces. Nonetheless, Hezbollah thinks that in case of a war with Israel, UNIFIL would stay on the sidelines.

UNIFIL is the not the only foreign force that Hezbollah could strike. Indeed, Hezbollah has been indirectly targeting the U.S. forces in Iraq. A senior Hezbollah official was recently arrested in Sadr City and dozens of Hezbollah operatives are allegedly training Shiite and Sunni radical groups in Iraq. This veiled war could explain why according to analyst Elizabeth Picard the U.S. administration recently asked Israel to hit hard at Hezbollah during the May crisis. Hezbollah could also decide to strike at U.S. interests in the U.S., Canada, South America, Africa or Europe.

To add to the already potentially explosive cocktail, the well-informed Jane's revealed that Syrian troops are deployed in Lebanon. With so many players present in that small country, the likelihood of a new armed conflict is growing by the day. Lebanon could end up being the next stage of the war between the West and radical Islam.

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