

Lebanese leader warns of Syrian threat

Contributed by Ferry Biedermann in Beirut, FT
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Saad Hariri, the leader of the anti-Syrian parliamentary majority in Lebanon has accused Syria of posing "a clear and direct threat" to his country's sovereignty.

Tensions have risen between Lebanon and Syria in the wake of recent bomb attacks in both countries and concerns are mounting in Lebanon over the intentions of Syrian troop reinforcements on the border between the two countries.

Mr Hariri made his comments on Tuesday in response to remarks that Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, reportedly made on Sunday to a Lebanese journalist.

Just one day after a massive car bomb killed 17 people in Damascus, president Assad said that northern Lebanon had become a bastion of extremism. Syria has blamed militant Islamic fundamentalist for Saturday's explosion.

It was the second time that Mr Assad expressed worries about fundamentalist Sunni groups in the north of Lebanon.

In the beginning of September he called the situation in Lebanon "fragile" because of such groups, shortly before sending some 8,000 troops to the border between the two countries.

Syria said the move was intended to stop smuggling but it caused concern among anti-Syrian politicians in Lebanon. They are worried that Syria may use unrest in the north as an excuse to intervene in the country and re-establish a military presence.

Syria dominated its smaller neighbour and had troops in the country for almost 30 years, until April 2005. It withdrew its army in the wake of the assassination of Mr Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri - which many Lebanese held Syria responsible for. Syria has always denied involvement.

The north of Lebanon has been the scene of continued tensions between pro- and anti-Syrian factions and of attacks on Lebanon's army. On Monday a car bomb exploded in the port city of Tripoli, killing 5 soldiers. And in August 18 people were killed in a bomb attack that also targeted the army in Tripoli.

The city is a bastion of the Sunni community that largely supports Mr Hariri's anti-Syrian Future movement. It also harbours several fundamentalist, Salafist, groups that appear to form the backbone of Sunni resistance to the pro-Syrian Shia Hizbollah movement. Mr Hariri has denied, however, that his movement has ties with the militant Salafist groups.

During fighting between anti- and pro-Syrian groups in May this year, the north was the only area where the Sunnis and their allies were able to resist the onslaught of the pro-Syrian groups led by Hizbollah. The area is also seen as crucial in the general elections that are to be held next year, as pro-Syrian groups hope to make inroads there.

Parliament on Monday finalised a new electoral law that was part of a peace deal that ended the fighting in May. The accords, brokered by Qatar in Doha, included the election of a new president and the formation of a government of national unity.

But while the agreement ended most of the fighting and partially restored the status quo on the ground, clashes continued on a smaller scale in Beirut, the eastern Bekaa valley and in Tripoli.

The fighting in the northern city was especially fierce and was concentrated between Sunnis and pro-Syrian Alawites, until they agreed to a truce earlier this month.

The north was also the scene last year of extended fighting between the army and the fundamentalist group Fatah al-Islam, which is said to be ideologically linked to Al Qaeda.

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