

## CAN LEBANON SURVIVE A SYRIAN CRISIS?

PAUL SALEM

Of all the countries neighboring Syria, Lebanon is the most vulnerable to spillover from the Syrian conflict. The state is weak, sectarian tensions are high, and the main political coalitions have chosen sides, either explicitly backing or opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Lebanon has already been affected by sectarian skirmishes, border clashes, targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and large refugee flows. Though the country has avoided collapse thus far, long-term dangers exist and urgent steps are needed to reinforce stability.

### Lebanon's Domestic Situation

- Political parties have been divided over support for or opposition to the Assad regime since the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.
- Hezbollah, the powerful Shia group with a dominant stake in the Lebanese government, supports Assad but is eager to avoid sectarian clashes in Lebanon.
- Some Sunni groups are directly aiding the Syrian rebels, but the main Sunni parties are also eager to maintain internal stability.
- Despite the general aversion to domestic unrest, the Syrian crisis could further inflame Sunni-Shia tensions and Sunni discontent about Hezbollah's dominance, destabilizing Lebanon.
- The government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati declared an official position of dissociation from the Syrian conflict, enabling the state to maintain a tenuous middle ground.
- The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon—already more than 120,000 registered and tens of thousands more undeclared—threatens to upset the country's precarious balance.
- Hezbollah's fate depends in part on the outcome of the Syrian crisis. If rebels defeat the Assad regime, the group might have to reconsider its political and strategic options. If the Assad regime survives, Hezbollah will likely be reinforced.

### Recommendations for Lebanon

**Build up the Lebanese army and Internal Security Forces.** These forces are playing an important crisis management role but need more support.

**Form either a new national unity government or a more neutral technocratic government.**

Government legitimacy must be enhanced by reducing the dominance of the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition. A new national unity government should include wider representation for the opposition anti-Syrian March 14 coalition and the Sunni Future Movement. A technocratic government would consist of individuals not strictly aligned with either coalition.

**Rapidly and effectively address the needs of the growing Syrian refugee community with help from the international community.** Beyond humanitarian concerns, a more robust refugee strategy would limit the potential political and security fallout of the inflow.

**Approve an election law and hold parliamentary elections.** The current or a new government should take these steps to renew the country's democratic institutions.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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