

THE ROOTS OF CRISIS IN NORTHERN LEBANON

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Syria's civil war is having a dramatic impact on its neighbors, particularly Lebanon. The spillover is glaring in the northern city of Tripoli, where street violence is rising, sectarianism is at unprecedented levels, and Sunni extremism is flourishing. This instability threatens to spread to other areas of the country. Yet, Lebanon's problems have as much to do with domestic dynamics as with the unrest in Syria. Lebanese policymakers must address a number of issues that have long been ignored.

Domestic Polarization and Marginalization

- The Lebanese Shia party Hezbollah provides active military support to the Syrian regime and has unparalleled influence in Lebanon, which fuels a Sunni-Shia divide in the country.
- Poverty rates are high in northern Lebanon, and Tripoli is broadly divided between poor neighborhoods and richer suburbs.
- The presence of Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon has exacerbated socioeconomic tensions. A popular sense of disaffection is growing, particularly among Sunnis.
- Mainstream political parties and official religious institutions, such as the Sunni Dar al-Fatwa, have failed to channel rising discontent. Some Sunnis are radicalizing and turning to Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups.
- The majority of Tripoli's population is Sunni. The Sunni area of Bab al-Tabbaneh is engaged in a long-standing struggle with the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen.
- Most Alawites are seen as supporting the Syrian regime, which many Sunnis strongly oppose. This tension has driven Tripoli to the brink of war.
- The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are supposed to guarantee security and stability in the country. But, despite improvements stemming from the implementation of a security plan, the dynamics on the ground have not fundamentally changed.

Challenges Ahead for Lebanon

Empowering Dar al-Fatwa. The religious body has the institutional capacity to help combat radicalism by providing state-sanctioned religious education to disenfranchised Sunnis. But to be effective it must be reformed.

Easing tensions between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh. The state needs to support civil society efforts to calm tensions between rival neighborhoods and to provide a platform for dialogue.

Improving socioeconomic conditions. The state should increase its investment in education and local infrastructure while accelerating the pace of administrative decentralization to reinforce the capacity of municipalities to tackle local issues.

Enhancing security. The LAF leadership must do more to address the grievances of the Sunni community because no security plan to calm tensions in the north will succeed unless it is accompanied by a plan to win hearts and minds. The government must also decide whether Hezbollah should maintain its weapons.

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