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Violating Lebanon's sovereignty



For all its complaints of foreign involvement in Syria and the violation of its sovereignty, the regime of Bashar al-Assad is happy to do the same to its neighbors. One of its helicopters last week flew 20 kilometers into Lebanese airspace and fired rockets at Arsal, damaging houses. The area struck “lies several hundred meters away from a Lebanese army checkpoint,” said the town’s deputy mayor.

This is certainly not the first military attack by the Syrian regime into Lebanon since the revolution against Assad began. For example, Reuters reports that “Syrian forces regularly fire mortar rounds” at its neighbor.

It is highly unlikely to be the last such attack, despite U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty. After all, direct meddling in Beirut’s affairs is but one of the ugly traits the Syrian president inherited from his father - a bad habit that the Assads find hard to kick.

Furthermore, Lebanon is not the only neighbor whose territory has been targeted. Jordan and Turkey have also been hit - causing U.N. condemnation and retaliation by Ankara - and Syrian warplanes have entered Iraqi airspace. Jordanian authorities have also reportedly arrested members of pro-regime Syrian sleeper cells.

The latest attack against Lebanon comes despite President Michel Sleiman last month reiterating his country’s officially neutral stance vis-a-vis the conflict in Syria, and despite his denunciation of such attacks as “an unacceptable violation of Lebanese sovereignty.” This condemnation has been echoed by the United States and France, which has troops in Lebanon as part of a U.N. peacekeeping force.

Further attacks?

The Assad regime will likely carry out its threats of further attacks, because it is confident it can get away with them. The only Lebanese force with significant military muscle is Hezbollah, which will not stand in

Lebanon's army does not have the strength, cohesion, or - some believe - the will. In February, Lebanese MP Khaled Daher accused his government of supplying explosives to the Assad regime since May 2012, with the knowledge of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Daher reportedly revealed documents sent to the LAF command backing his statements. This will no doubt be of grave concern to those Lebanese who have urged their government to protect them from Syrian regime attacks.

Assad's motivations

Assad's most obvious motivation is to deter those in Lebanon who support the revolution against him. His forces have attacked areas that are largely sympathetic to the uprising, or that are giving refuge to displaced or wounded Syrians. Aarsal is but one example - almost half the town's population is made up of Syrian refugees.

Assad may be actively seeking to destabilize Lebanon for two possible reasons. One would be part of a wider strategy of exacerbating the human, economic and political costs of the revolution to such an extent that it limits the support it receives domestically and regionally. Another would be to enable its ally Hezbollah to flex its military muscle under the pretext of maintaining security in Lebanon - something the movement has done in the past.

Repercussions in Lebanon

The country - fractious at the best of times - has been deeply affected by the conflict next door. A population divided in its sympathies has experienced increasing infighting, sectarianism, and tit-for-tat kidnappings. Sectarian tensions pose "the most dangerous security challenge" to Lebanon for years, the country's army commander Jean Qahwajisaid last week.

Investment and tourism - vital to Lebanon's already-shaky economy - have been badly affected, and the country is unable to cope with the growing influx of Syrian refugees -1 million and counting, among a population of just over 4 million.

"The situation has reached an alarming level that Lebanon cannot handle on its own," former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who resigned last month, told Al Arabiya English editor-in-chief Faisal Abbas in an exclusive interview. The international community's support is "urgently" needed in order for Beirut "to be able to sustain its assistance to displaced Syrians and maintain Lebanon's internal stability and peace," Mikati added.

Self-defeating strategy

Assad's interventions may blow up in his face. Instead of deterring support for the revolution, attacks by his forces may galvanize those in Lebanon with bitter memories of Syria's decades-long military presence in their country, which ended in 2005 due to Lebanon's Cedar Revolution, triggered by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

This will make it much harder for Lebanon's president to carry out his pledge to prevent fighters crossing into and from Syria. It will also pose a major challenge to newly-named Prime Minister Tamam Salam's promise to safeguard Lebanon's security from the war next door. His very position as a consensus prime minister may be jeopardized, which would plunge the country into further turmoil.

Instead of bolstering Hezbollah's position, Assad's cross-border attacks may have the opposite effect. There are misgivings among some in its traditional support base over its continued alliance with the Syrian regime.

This stance, and Hezbollah's active presence in Syria, have been criticized by the movement's former leader Sobhi Tfaily. "Hezbollah members who kill children, terrorize people and destroy houses in Syria will not be martyrs and will end up in hell," he said, adding that the movement's fighters in Syria are only there to "defend the regime and its criminality."

A sense of helplessness among Lebanese against Assad's army, and Hezbollah's support for it, may amplify calls for the disarmament of the Shiite movement, and the arming of other Lebanese factions as a counter-weight. Such calls, which have come to nothing in the past, may get a better hearing in the current climate of increasing regional polarization and willingness to arm Syrian rebels.

France, the former colonial power in Lebanon, is among the most vocal advocates of supplying the Syrian opposition with weapons. The same is true of Britain, as well as the Arab League, which recently sanctioned such support from its member states. Saudi Arabia - a regional powerhouse, and one of the most vocal and active Arab states with regard to arming Syrian rebels - is no friend of Hezbollah.

Increasing aggression from the Assad regime, within and beyond Syria's borders, as well as Hezbollah's supporting role, may boost the determination of these countries to tilt the military balance of power. This may in turn convince Israel to strike at the Lebanese movement, in the hope of a victory that has thus far been elusive.

As such, a continuation of Assad's violations of Lebanese sovereignty may open up a Pandora's box that will not only be destructive for Lebanon, Syria, and the region as a whole, but ultimately self-defeating.

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