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A PRECARIOUS BALANCING ACT: LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Middle East Report N°132 – 22 November 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Syria's conflict is leaking out of its borders, but in few places are risks higher than in Lebanon. This is not just a matter of history, although history bodes ill: the country seldom has been immune to the travails of its neighbour. It also is a function of recent events, of which the most dramatic was the 19 October assassination of top security official Wissam Hassan, an illustration of the country's fragility and the short-sightedness of politicians unwilling to address it. Lebanon's two principal coalitions see events in Syria in a starkly different light – as a dream come true for one; as a potentially apocalyptical nightmare for the other. It would be unrealistic to expect Lebanese actors to be passive in the face of what is unfolding next door. But it is imperative to shield the country as much as possible and resist efforts by third parties – whether allies or foes of Damascus – to drag the nation in a perilous direction. In the wake of Hassan's assassination, this almost certainly requires a new, more balanced government and commitments by local and regional actors not to use Lebanese soil as an arena in which to wage the Syrian struggle.

From the Syrian crisis's early days, there was every reason to expect that Lebanon, traditionally under its neighbour's strong influence, would not long remain untouched. The two countries share a 365-kilometre, un-demarcated and largely porous border as well as extremely close communal ties. Syria's regime has a history of lashing out when it feels under siege, coupled with a tradition of oftentimes violent interference in Lebanese affairs. Many were concerned from the start that Damascus would seek to destabilise its neighbour if only to weaken its foes across the border and warn the world of potential consequences of a protracted fight. Important Lebanese communities harbour deep resentment towards the regime's conduct over the past decades; this is the case in particular of Sunnis in the north who feel solidarity with their Syrian brethren. Finally, sectarian tensions within Syria have their counterpart in Lebanon; as they rise in the former, so too do they mount in the latter.

Lebanon's factions clearly are aware of the stakes. Each wagers on success by one Syrian side or the other, waiting to translate the ensuing regional balance of power into a domestic one. Hizbollah hardly can contemplate a future with a fundamentally different Syrian regime, has tied its fate ever more tightly to its ally's, and will not remain idle should Assad be in real jeopardy. Conversely, the Sunni-dominated Future Current and its partners see no alternative to the regime's demise, however long it will take and no matter the costs. They view the uprising as doubly strategic: a golden opportunity to seek revenge against an antagonistic regime as well as a chance to challenge Hizbollah's domestic hegemony. It is hard to see Lebanon's fragile equilibrium surviving such a winner-take-all mentality.

Already, signs of Syria's spillover effects have been unmistakable. Border areas have been caught in the conflict, with weapons smuggling, refugee flows and attacks against Lebanese villages along the frontier coming from one side or the other, depending on the villagers' political allegiances.

The stream of refugees has had humanitarian but also political and security consequences as Lebanese Sunnis, bearing witness to the increasing brutality and scorched earth policy of Assad's regime, step up their involvement. Solidarity with their embattled brethren has led them to turn several regions into sanctuaries and transit points for the supply of weapons to, and staging ground for attacks by, Syrian rebel forces. This has been the case in the predominantly Sunni north, notably the border regions of Tripoli and Akkar, but also – to a lesser degree – in the eastern Bekaa Valley. Arms smuggling into Syria began as an improvised, chiefly commercial affair, but has greatly expanded, with the Future Current appearing to use Turkey as the hub for supporting armed opposition groups. More broadly, the Syrian uprising helped Islamist groups in both countries bolster their standing and mutual ties that had been debilitated if not severed in the 1980s.

Hizbollah too has entered the fray. It has had to balance competing considerations, defending the Syrian regime while safeguarding its posture in Lebanon not only at present, but also, possibly, in anticipation of eventual changes in Damascus. That is why it has, on the one hand, acqui-

esced in Prime Minister Najib Miqati's policies even when they went against the interests of the Syrian regime and, on the other, provided that regime with practical support. There is much speculation and little hard evidence as to the scope of this assistance. Lebanon's opposition and Syrian rebels long claimed that Hizbollah snipers were lending a hand to regime forces and killing protesters; U.S. officials likewise assert that Damascus, Hizbollah and Iran are in close military cooperation, even forming an elite militia. What seems clear is that the Shiite movement has intensified its involvement on the ground. How far it would go to salvage the regime is uncertain but, at a minimum, the message it wishes to send to outsiders is: far enough.

For now, notwithstanding these developments, prospects of a renewed civil war appear relatively remote. Though motivated by different interests, various parties have acted in ways that, by and large, limit the damage. Hizbollah continues to enjoy a lopsided military advantage, forcing its enemies to think twice before challenging it. Confrontation would not serve the Shiite organisation either, for it would attract further domestic and regional condemnation and isolation; for now, it has been intent on preserving the domestic status quo. Most significantly, none of Lebanon's principal political camps want to test a disaster scenario, and all fear the unpredictable and unmanageable consequences of an escalating crisis. And so, even as they have found ways to intervene in the conflict next door, Lebanese politicians for the most part have displayed noticeable restraint.

But fear of the consequences of escalation is a thin reed on which to place one's hopes. Lebanese dynamics all point in the wrong direction. Even before the 19 October killing of Wissam Hassan, Sunnis were feeling gradually more emboldened, eager for revenge; Shiites more and more exposed, fearful of their growing regional isolation. Sectarian clashes have been on the rise, with the ever-present risk of cascading intercommunal violence. Among the most immediate dangers is the dominant political forces' eroding ability to control their respective and increasingly polarised constituencies. Heightened insecurity and state impotence are leading many to take matters into their own hands, with tit-for-tat kidnappings and the erection of roadblocks that impede critical transportation routes.

It would be wrong to conclude that Lebanon has dodged the bullet. The country remains profoundly fragile and unstable. Without a strong central government capable of mastering events, violent strife could erupt in localised areas and spread. Both major coalitions have shown the limits of their ability to control their oftentimes more restive, angry and violent rank-and-file. Lebanon still is at the mercy of external interference.

In the longer term, Lebanon will have to cope with the outcome of a conflict that inevitably will have huge consequences, profoundly affecting virtually every major issue that has bedevilled the nation: relations with Israel; the status of minorities (notably Christians and Alawites); the Sunni-Shiite divide; Saudi-Iranian rivalry; as well as the rise and empowerment of Sunni Islamists. Added to this are the material consequences of the Syrian uprising, which has caused major strains on an already over-stretched economy.

Lebanese political actors typically have turned a blind eye to deep-rooted causes of the nation's enduring instability: the nature of the power structure (a communal-based apportionment of power and privileges invariably leading to paralysis at best, conflict at worse); the contradictions of its external alliances (as some turned to the "axis of resistance" and others aligned themselves with the West); and the nature of the economic system (in theory geared toward a modern, globalised service industry, in practice built around antiquated forms of patronage, corruption and nepotism). Always costly, such an approach will prove costlier still in the wake of the strategic earthquake that resolution of the Syrian conflagration – one way or another – will produce. For it will bring to the surface this host of unresolved issues at a time when Lebanese local actors will be in no position to compromise, consider sensible solutions or do anything much other than hunker down.

How much precisely Syria's evolution will affect Lebanon is not certain, but the short answer is: a lot. Apathy in the face of an incoming storm is understandable but short-sighted. For the ripple effects of Syria's conflict, once the ensuing transformations will have had time to sink in, will be dramatic, brutal and, most likely, highly destabilising.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To prevent a short-term escalation of violence

To Lebanese Political Parties:

1. Form a new government that:
   a) is composed of technocrats who are members of neither the March 14 nor March 8 coalitions and agree not to stand in the 2013 parliamentary elections;
   b) prepares for the 2013 elections; and
   c) commits to Lebanon's abstention on all Syria-related decisions at the UN, Arab League and other regional and international bodies.
2. Commit to a quick, thorough and independent investigation of Wissam Hassan's assassination, possibly with international technical assistance if necessary.

3. Seek to insulate Lebanon from the impact of the Syrian conflict by, inter alia:
   a) refraining from direct involvement in that conflict, specifically Hizbollah stopping the dispatch of fighters and the Future Current halting the supply of weapons across the border;
   b) protecting border villages, possibly with more robust Lebanese army deployment combined with March 14 and March 8 outreach to their respective Syrian allies to halt Syrian army shelling and Syrian rebels' use of these areas to smuggle arms and fighters; and
   c) ensuring adequate living conditions for Syrian refugees by providing humanitarian assistance; defining explicit rules under which security services can act against Syrian nationals while preventing arbitrary detention or deportation of opponents to Syria; and holding accountable Lebanese involved in the abduction, illegal arrest or ill-treatment of Syrian nationals.

To Regional and International States:

4. Accept the current government's and any future government's "dissociation policy", and refrain from pressuring Lebanon to adopt a more aggressive stance in favour of the Syrian regime or opposition.
5. Refrain from using Lebanese territory to channel weapons from and to Syria.
6. Assist refugees by increasing funding to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, international and national organisations.

To UN Agencies and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs):

7. Extend humanitarian support to the most deprived Lebanese families and those hosting refugees in areas of high refugee presence.
8. Involve Lebanese communities in the support of Syrian refugees by organising volunteer relief programs.

To address longer-term issues susceptible to provoke conflict or rise tensions within Lebanon

To Lebanese Political Parties:

9. Ensure an immediate and fair judicial process for Islamist prisoners held in indefinite detention.
10. Address the conflict between Tripoli's Jabal Mohsen and Bab Tebbaneh districts by deploying the army between and within the two neighbourhoods; arresting militiamen engaging in provocative acts or violence; and improving basic services, notably public education.
11. Bolster the army's role and capacity, in particular by withdrawing any protection extended by Lebanese factions to their supporters found in breach of the law.

Beirut/Brussels, 22 November 2012

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A PRECARIOUS BALANCING ACT: LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

I. INTRODUCTION

For some time already, Lebanon's political system has been in unspoken turmoil. Its foundations have been shaken. The 1989 Taef accords, which paved the way out of a fifteen-year civil war, rested on a complex equilibrium – between Riyadh and Damascus; between Israel and the Arab world; between Syria's stabilising and disruptive role; between Christians and Muslims; and between Sunnis and Shiites. Long outmoded, that balancing act no longer is workable or even relevant; the nature of the political structure has remained static even as everything beneath and around it underwent wholesale transformation.

This reality, long ignored by local actors intent on preserving the status quo, has been made blindingly evident by the Syrian conflict. For Lebanon's various actors, it is a harbinger of vast transformations around the corner – in the domestic balance of power; inter-confessional relations; and regional alliances – for which they are wholly unprepared and which each views in fundamentally different ways, as godsend or as calamity. This report examines the impact Syria's civil war already is having on Lebanon, how local political actors are positioning themselves and are likely to react to future developments, and what can be done to ensure that the country's fragile equilibrium survive the coming earthquake.

II. SYRIA'S SPILLOVER EFFECTS

A. CROSS-BORDER DYNAMICS

1. Increased support for the Syrian uprising

In the early stages of the uprising, which began in March 2011, Lebanese support for the Syrian opposition was relatively marginal. It consisted essentially of fiery speeches and sermons; public demonstrations against the Syrian regime; and modest smuggling of light weapons, generally independently initiated by specific individuals.[1] As the conflict hardened, logistical assistance also was extended to Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon. At the time, pro-rebel Lebanese, Syrian refugees and a number of wounded fighters complained bitterly to Crisis Group about the paucity of funds and assistance emanating from the regime's foreign foes, notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[2] They also had to contend with the actions of local authorities, which arrested Syrian dissidents and occasionally delivered them to the next-door regime.[3]

Over time, the influx of refugees and dissidents into north Lebanon as a result of the Syrian regime's increasing brutality and scorched earth policy – notably, as of February 2012, in Homs – changed the nature of the border areas' involvement. According to the Lebanon office of the UNHCR, by December 2011 nearly 5,000 Syrians were registered; by June 2012, as the shelling of Homs largely emptied the city, the number climbed to 29,000.[4] In Au-

[1] Syria nonetheless officially protested alleged use of Lebanese territory at an early stage. In a letter to the Security Council, its UN ambassador, Bashar Jaafari, accused "some Lebanese areas next to the Syrian border [of] incubating terrorist elements from al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, who are messing with the security of Syrian citizens and work on undermining the United Nations Special Envoy's plan". See "Syria accuses Lebanon of 'incubating' terrorists", Reuters, 18 May 2012.

[2] Crisis Group interviews, pro-opposition activists, Syrian refugees and wounded fighters, Wadi Khaled and Tripoli, December 2011-April 2012.

[3] See "Lebanon under pressure to protect Syrian dissidents", *The Daily Star*, 11 November 2011.

[4] "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", UNHCR briefing, 30 June 2012; "Revised Syria Regional Response Plan", UNHCR report, June 2012.

gust, it stood at 36,000;[5] in mid-October, by which time the civil war had reached both the nation's capital, Damascus, and its most populated city, Aleppo, Syrians who were either refugees or applying for refugee status in Lebanon exceeded 101,000.[6] Host area residents as well as refugees claim that the number in fact is much higher insofar as registration with UNHCR is voluntary and many are reluctant to do so for security reasons.[7] Among registered refugees, 56 per cent reside in the north; 41 per cent in the Bekaa; and 3 per cent in Beirut and the south.[8] Most live with Lebanese host families; others find sanctuary in public spaces and facilities traditionally reserved for prayer (*mosallah*).[9]

Cross-border ties between Lebanese and Syrians have deep roots;[10] yet, with the conflict unfolding, solidarity took on a political and even paramilitary character. Several regions became sanctuaries and staging grounds of sorts for the Syrian opposition. This has been the case in the predominantly Sunni north, notably the border regions of Tripoli and Akkar, but also – to a lesser degree – in the eastern Bekaa Valley. The latter, although largely Shiite and under the heavy influence of Hizbollah and other factions close to the Syrian regime, include majority-Sunni localities: the village of Arsal and its surrounding mountain area as well as the al-Qaa Projects (Mashari' al-Qaa) region, both in the north-eastern Bekaa, adjacent to the Syrian border.

Arms smuggling into Syria, which began as an improvised, chiefly commercial affair, expanded; the price of weapons rose as a result of mounting demand[11] and Lebanese authorities intercepted several large arms shipments.[12] Lebanese activists coordinated with Syrian fighters to carry the injured into Lebanon and provide them with medical treatment.[13] An active fundraising network progressively emerged, with money coming chiefly from Gulf Arab states and individuals as well as from wealthy Syrian expatriates and Islamic charitable organisations.[14] Lebanese militants and NGOs played an intermediary role between donors and recipients, among them combatants. In July 2012, a Wadi Khaled activist said, "ever since Saudi Arabia and Qatar decided to back the Free Syrian Army,[15] we have

[5] See "UN inter-agency update", 3-10 August 2012, www.unhcr.org/5028f9319.html.

[6] data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php. The number of Syrian refugees exceeds 112,000 in Turkey, 118,000 in Jordan and 62,000 in Iraq. Ibid.

[7] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees and Lebanese hosts, Wadi Khaled and Arsal, May-June 2012; telephone interviews, residents and mayor in Wadi Khaled, 3 October 2012.

[8] See UNHCR press note, "Registered Syrian refugees triple in three months", available at www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122.

[9] According to the UN agency report, "for the first few months, some refugees would enter Lebanon, but then return to their villages in Syria once they felt the situation there was sufficiently safe for them to do so. This movement to and from Syria slowed down by the end of the year (2011), with more people arriving and fewer returning, owing to conditions back home". See "Revised Syria Regional Response Plan", op. cit., pp. 45-46.

[10] Inhabitants of the border areas are linked through extensive intra-tribal intermarriage. They share many of the same values, customs and habits; engage in reciprocal social events like weddings and funerals; and have common economic interests. Syria is an important market for agricultural products from the Bekaa and the north. Many Lebanese pupils in the border areas attend Syrian schools. Lebanese villagers often buy cheaper goods in Syria. And both sides rely heavily on contraband trade. A teacher described relations between Wadi Khaled, a border region of northern Lebanon encompassing over twenty villages, and Syria: "In 1994, we [village residents] acquired Lebanese citizenship. Until then, we were considered Syrian. We used the Syrian currency. The Lebanese state and its symbols were nowhere to be seen. We watched Syrian, not Lebanese television. We were far closer to Syria than to Lebanon. These close ties were maintained even after our naturalisation. You would be hard-pressed to find a Wadi Khaled family that does not have relatives in Syria. We are even used to buying goods – food, clothes and other consumer products – in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Wadi Khaled (Akkar), September 2011.

[11] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli fighter, February 2012. According to several reports, the black market for weapons in Lebanon has experienced periodic surges since the outbreak of Syria's uprising. See undated articles on the Executive Magazine website, "Increasingly called to arms" and " Syria arms' economy"; and "Syria crisis amplifies black market arms demand", *The Daily Star*, 10 January 2012.

[12] This has included truckloads and shipments of light and medium weapons. See "33 Syrian gunmen held, arms seized in Lebanese border town", Naharnet, 4 March 2012. In April 2012, authorities intercepted a cargo ship, the Loutfallah 2, in Lebanese waters; it was carrying three containers of heavy and light weapons allegedly intended for Syrian rebels. *As-Safir*, 28 April 2012.

[13] Activists early on had established mobile clinics in Akkar, Tripoli, Arsal and the Al-Qaa Projects area, offering treatment to injured fighters and arranging special transportation of the severely wounded to hospitals in these regions. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese activists, Syrian refugees and wounded fighters, Wadi Khaled, Akkar, Beirut, Tripoli and Arsal, 2011-2012.

[14] Crisis Group interviews, pro-opposition Lebanese militants, Wadi Khaled, Arsal, Beirut, Tripoli, May-July 2012.

[15] During the February 2012 meeting of the Friends of Syria – a gathering of countries hostile to the regime – Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said that arming the Free Syrian Army was an "excellent idea". See *An-Nahar*, 24 February 2012. Gulf States reportedly only partially and belatedly made good on pledges to support the armed opposition, providing limited resources; by late summer 2012, however, their efforts were said to be escalating. See "Syrian opposition admits: Qatar, Saudi Arabia giving arms to rebels", Middle East online, 6 August 2012; "Exclusive: Arab states arm rebels as UN talks of Syrian civil war", *The Independent*, 13 June 2012.

been receiving more funds for Syrian fighters, however insufficient they remain".[16]

2. A rising sectarian dimension and Sunni Islamist awakening

The nature of opposition to the Syrian regime – and of the assistance provided to the rebels – has assumed a gradually more sectarian dimension, especially in the north. There are several reasons. The overwhelming majority of refugees there hail from central Syria and in particular Homs, where the civil war's confessional features have been most pronounced. In June 2012, a Syrian dissident residing in Beirut said, "there certainly are many deep-rooted economic, social and political aspects that explain the uprising in Homs governorate. But all these have become irrelevant; the only thing that counts now is sectarian identity. The main divide is confessional, between two sides of the city".[17]

Too, Sunnis in northern Lebanon harbour longstanding anger and hostility toward the Syrian regime. In the early 1980s, then-president Hafez Assad's violent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood pushed many Syrian Islamists into northern Lebanon, where they were received and sheltered by Al-Tawhid (the dominant Islamist movement at the time)[18] as well as other Islamist movements. Between 1982 and 1985, Tripoli witnessed intense fighting pitting Al-Tawhid against the Syrian army before the latter assumed control of the city. Later, both before and after the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), Syrian security services and their Lebanese allies – including a local proxy force comprising Tripoli's Alawite minority – detained, tortured, killed and otherwise persecuted a large number of Lebanese Islamist activists.[19]

In the course of Damascus' post-war tutelage of the country, Hizbollah's ongoing empowerment coupled with the gradual sidelining of the Sunnis' purported leader, Rafiq Hariri (murdered in 2005), solidified the community's belief in their collective marginalisation. The perceived loss of Iraq to both Shiite rule and Iranian influence further fuelled this confessional narrative and the sense that Sunnis were being threatened by an ever-strengthening and expanding "Shiite axis". During this same period, the steady socio-economic decline of the north – neglected by Beirut's politicians and largely cut off from its natural Syrian hinterland given bitter relations with Damascus – exacerbated Sunni feelings of abandonment and wounded pride. Little wonder that Islamist and Salafi groups in the north were quick to champion the Syrian uprising as their own cause.[20] As an Islamist activist put it:

> We, the Islamists, are the Lebanese groups that suffered most at the hands of the Syrian regime. Following the crackdown on the Syrian Muslim Brothers in the 1970s and 1980s, Assad also repressed Islamists in Lebanon. Ever since, we've been paying the price for being Sunni. We are the pioneers of resistance against this regime, long before the Future Current even existed. Assad and his regime are our long and old enemy.[21]

For these forces, the Syrian uprising is doubly strategic. On the one hand, it presents a golden opportunity to seek revenge against the regime; on the other, it offers a chance to challenge the hegemony of a domestic foe, Hizbollah.

In this sense, the Sunni-Shiite fault line that took on increased importance in Lebanon since 2005[22] has been projected onto the Syrian conflict, Sunni Islamists viewing their struggle against the Shiite movement as a mirror im-

[16] Crisis Group interview, Wadi Khaled, July 2012.
[17] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.
[18] The Islamic Unification Movement (Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami), generally known as Al-Tawhid, is a Tripoli-based Sunni Islamist group that emerged in the early 1980s with Iranian support. Influenced by Iran's Islamic revolution, it sought to impose Islamic rule in the city. It fought against Syria's military presence in Tripoli before succumbing to Iranian pressure and signing an agreement with Damascus. The movement split after its leader, Said Shaaban, died, but both factions belong to the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalition. Crisis Group interviews, Al-Tawhid members, Tripoli, 2008-2009.
[19] There are no official numbers of Islamists detained during the years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon. However, militants claimed these numbered reached in the hundreds if not thousands. One said, "the Syrian intelligence (*mukhabarat*) used to arrest anyone with a beard. Facial hair was reason enough". Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader, Tripoli, June 2012. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, 26 May 2010; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°29, *New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, 10 October 2010.
[20] These Islamist groups encompass a wide variety of actors, each with its own geographic identity, ideology and political leaning. They are divided and fragmented, united solely by shared hostility toward Hizbollah and the Syrian regime. However, Jamaa Islamiyya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, stands apart. Although it has provided medical and social support for the refugees, it seemingly has shunned any military involvement. Crisis Group interviews, Jamaa Islamiyya officials, observers and Syrian refugees, Tripoli, September 2011-June 2012.
[21] Crisis Group interview, Islamist activist formerly jailed in Syria, Tripoli, May 2012.
[22] See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007; N°87, *Lebanon's Elections: Avoiding a New Cycle of Confrontation*, 4 June 2009; N°96, *Lebanon's Politics*, op. cit.; N°100, *Trial by Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, 2 December 2010; as well as Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.

age of the Syrian insurgents' fight against the Alawite-dominated regime. In the words of a sheikh from Akkar, "they [Lebanon's Shiite movement and Syria's regime] are both enemies of the Sunnis. They will both pay the price for the humiliation they inflicted upon the Sunni community in Lebanon and Syria".[23]

The Syrian uprising helped Islamist groups in both countries bolster their standing. As Islamists in northern Lebanon sheltered and protected Syrians who crossed the border, they reactivated ties that had been debilitated if not severed in the 1980s, thereby breaking with their sense of isolation and reconnecting with their "communal depth". Expressing a view that is widespread among his constituency, a Salafi leader from Tripoli said, "we no longer are a weak community, for we are a prolongation of the courageous people next door".[24] Arguably, the financial aid destined to the Syrian opposition contributed to a broader Sunni mobilisation and even underpinned a modest local economic revival. Indeed, Syrian rebels were not alone in benefiting from donations from wealthy supporters; so too have militant Lebanese Islamists who have both influenced the destination and distribution of financial assistance and, through newly-established networks, raised funds for their own cause. Added to all this has been a far broader, region-wide sentiment of Sunni Islamist rebirth, a reflection of ground-breaking events in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere.

Buoyed by both the Syrian uprising and these regional trends, Lebanon's Islamists have not hesitated to confront their own authorities. In years past, they had tended to either maintain a low profile – notably in Tripoli – or link up with local politicians in order to gain political and security cover. With only few exceptions, escalation occurred solely with these politicians' direct or indirect complicity, short of which militants risked arrest, torture and detention for years without trial.[25] That has changed. Today, they want it to be known they can act on their own, even in the absence of local political support. As one put it:

> In the past, whenever the Future Current needed us [the Salafis] in its fight against Hizbollah, it would give us tremendous importance. But, as soon as the confrontation was over, they would abandon us. Hundreds of Islamists have been languishing in prison for years without trial and politicians, with rare exceptions, did not see it in their interest to address their cause. We can't rely on leaders; so we will fight for our own rights.[26]

So, after repeatedly thwarting attempts by security forces to go after Syrian exiled opposition members in the conflict's earlier stages,[27] Lebanon's Islamists now feel confident – as well as motivated – enough to settle old and deep scores. When, on 14 May 2012, members of General Security's General Directorate – a security branch whose head has close ties to Hizbollah – arrested Shadi Mawlawi, a Lebanese Salafi accused of maintaining ties to jihadi-leaning "terrorist groups",[28] local Islamist militants rose up in various Tripoli neighbourhoods. Violent clashes broke out between Jabal Mohsen and Bab Tebbaneh,[29] the city's Alawite and Sunni strongholds respectively; it took Mawlawi's release, a week later to restore calm.

Likewise, the 20 May 2012 killing at an army checkpoint in Akkar of a Sunni cleric – another backer of the Syrian uprising – prompted an Islamist show of force.[30] In the wake of these incidents, Islamists – but also some of the area's parliamentarians – called for the army's withdrawal from Akkar[31] and several Islamist leaders went as far as to encourage coreligionist soldiers to defect from the armed forces, which some Sunnis view as overly sympathetic to Hizbollah and Syria.[32]

More recently, as news of Wissam Hassan's assassination spread on 19 October, armed groups and masked men took

[23] Crisis Group interview, Akkar, November 2011.
[24] *As-Safîr*, 14 July 2012.
[25] On relations between Islamist groups and political leaders, see Crisis Group Briefings, *Lebanon's Politics* and *New Crisis, Old Demons*, both op. cit. Despite Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon, the issue of arbitrary detention of Lebanese Islamists has not been resolved; over 200 Islamist prisoners reportedly remain in custody without trial. Crisis Group interviews, Islamist militants, prisoner's relatives, Tripoli, June 2012; see also *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 16 May 2012; *Al-Akhbar*, 15 May 2012; *The Daily Star*, 22 June 2012.
[26] Crisis Group interview, Salafi militant, Tripoli, June 2012.
[27] On several occasions, residents of certain Tripoli neighbourhoods as well as of Akkar and Arsal have protested the arrest of Syrian dissidents, at times taking aim at the military itself. Crisis Group interviews, residents and protesters, Qobbé, Bab Tebbaneh, Akkar, Wadi Khaled and Tripoli, September 2011.
[28] See "Protests ongoing in Tripoli against Mawlawi's arrest, two wounded", Naharnet, 12 May 2012.
[29] On this conflict, see Crisis Group Briefing, *New Crisis, Old Demons*, op. cit.
[30] Followers of the sheikh blocked roads and his funeral was attended by hundreds of masked gunmen who fired their rifles in the air. The killing also sparked clashes in Beirut between pro- and anti-Assad militiamen. See *L'Orient-le-Jour*, 23 May 2012; *Al-Akhbar*, 20 May 2012; *An-Nahar*, 21 May 2012; Associated Press, 21 May 2012.
[31] Some army troops have pulled out of Akkar to avoid clashes with residents. See *As-Safîr*, 21 May 2012; *Al-Akhbar*, 20 May 2012.
[32] A Future Current official took issue with such calls: "Despite the absence of official figures, Akkar is known to be the reservoir of the Lebanese Army. More than 40 per cent of its troops originate from the area and most of them are Sunnis. Thus we were very concerned by calls aiming at provoking defections among Sunnis". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

to the streets of Tripoli, where gunmen forced the closure of shops,[33] Akkar and other areas, including Beirut.

The objectives pursued by Islamist groups likewise have evolved – and grown. Their quasi-explicit goal currently is to turn the north into a de facto Sunni enclave. Unable to challenge Hizbollah's monopoly in various parts of the country, they have chosen to replicate it instead; rather than pushing for the Shiite movement's disarmament, they have decided to arm themselves. In a mirror image of Beirut's Hizbollah-controlled southern suburbs (*al-Dahiyeh al-Janubiyeh*), they hope to establish a Sunni Islamist bastion in the north where their domination would go unchecked and where they would feel free to develop military capabilities in the service of their broader agenda. A popular slogan in Islamist circles in Tripoli aptly sums it up: "The northern suburbs to oppose the southern suburbs".[34]

Efforts to boost their military capacity – reinvigorated after the hiatus that followed Hizbollah's May 2008 takeover of Beirut[35] – are not aimed at confronting the Shiite movement, at least for now. Rather, they are intended to produce relative parity so as to deter any foray in the north by any party. In this spirit, Islamist groups are challenging the army's position in the north in hopes of curtailing its ability to constrain them and, more broadly, to curb efforts aimed at boosting the Syrian opposition. A researcher in Tripoli said:

> All these accusations against the army and calls for its withdrawal from the area are attempts at discrediting the institution and tying its hands. They want it to turn a blind eye on the arms and fighters that are being smuggled into Syria as well as on Syrian and Lebanese militants' activities. They have partially succeeded. Now soldiers have to be far more cautious in dealing with Islamists or Syrian dissidents. They know that arresting one of them could trigger a new wave of violence.[36]

3. Contained violence

An additional, and highly hazardous, consequence of the Syrian conflict has been a series of tit-for-tat abductions and violence. In May 2012, the kidnapping of eleven Shiite Lebanese pilgrims in Syria by a rebel group triggered forceful retaliation against Syrian nationals living in Lebanon. Worse, members of a Shiite tribe[37] in the Bekaa valley, the Meqdad, kidnapped twenty Syrians and a Turkish businessman to avenge the abduction of one of their relatives by a Syrian rebel group. Residents of villages in Akkar and the Bekaa recount numerous such incidents, many of which go unreported, involving Lebanese and Syrians, Sunnis, Alawites and Shiites.[38]

Yet, despite mounting tensions at the border and the consolidation of Lebanese Islamists intent on aiding their Syrian brethren, at this point the risk of a serious escalation in cross-border violence seems relatively low. Several military and security factors stand in the way. Although they face increasing challenges, March 8 officials remain in key positions within the military, security forces and state institutions, enabling them to keep their domestic foes' activities in check.[39] Lebanese authorities by and large continue to coordinate with their Syrian counterparts to secure the border, notably through a joint security committee to stem the flow of weapons and personnel to Syria.[40]

Syria's extensive military presence across Arsal's rugged mountain terrain and Hizbollah's control over much of the surrounding area on the Lebanese side of the border make it difficult to turn the region into an opposition rear base. A senior Hizbollah official dismissed the prospect altogether, "the Bekaa is not really a concern for us. Arsal plays only a minor role in supporting the Syrian opposition and we do not think it can significantly grow".[41] Northern Lebanon's Wadi Khaled, another potential corridor and conduit, sits in an open plain, which facilitates the Syrian army's monitoring of any hostile activities. For its part, and notwithstanding above-mentioned difficul-

[33] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli-based Lebanese journalist, 22 October 2012; Tripoli residents, October 2012. See *The Daily Star*, 22 October 2012; *Al-Akhbar*, 22 October 2012.
[34] See www.lebanonnews.com/details/15005/10,14.
[35] Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.
[36] Crisis Group interview, director of a research centre, Tripoli, June 2012.
[37] Referred to as a family, the al-Meqdad tribe is predominantly Shiite and originates in the Bekaa; it is heavily present in the southern suburb of Beirut (Dahiyeh). Its members, said to exceed 10,000, are bound by family and tribal ties and customs. It claims to possess an armed group that can muster as many as 2,500 fighters. See "Meeting the clans of Lebanon", Al Jazeera, 18 August 2012.
[38] Crisis Group interviews, residents and local leaders, Arsal and Wadi Khaled, February 2012.
[39] Lebanese authorities are likely to prevent weapons shipments regardless of the recipient – whether in Lebanon or Syria. In April 2012, they intercepted a cargo ship, the "Loutfallah 2", in Lebanese waters that was carrying three containers of heavy and light weapons allegedly intended for Syrian rebels. Similarly, in May, the Lebanese army confiscated weapons on board a ship in the port of Tripoli. Whether the weapons were destined to Lebanon or Syria remains unconfirmed. *As-Safir*, 28 April 2012; *The Daily Star*, 8 May 2012.
[40] "Syrian envoy says coordination with Lebanese authorities ongoing", Now Lebanon, 4 July 2012; www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=149998.
[41] Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, June 2012.

ties, the Lebanese army is able to curtail anti-regime militancy by deploying along the border and in urban areas in Akkar and Tripoli.

Overall, the Syrian army continues to enjoy clear supremacy in the border area which it monitors through various means: troop deployment; mines; frequent incursions into Lebanon – at times leading to clashes with local residents; and reported abduction or killing of people who approach the border, including farmers and smugglers.[42] Border regions that Syria considers actual or potential transit points for weapons and supplies have paid a price. Frequent shelling by Syrian forces have left several dead or wounded in Wadi Khaled and Syrian authorities have arrested or occasionally killed residents of various border villages.[43] Villagers' fears of larger Syrian retaliatory military operations can act as a deterrent, compelling self-restraint. A local Wadi Khaled leader said:

> A delegation from the area met with Lebanese military, security and political officials. They clearly told us we are on our own. Nobody can protect us from a potential Syrian incursion. So we are backing the revolution, but there are certain redlines we cannot cross, because we don't want to endanger our region.[44]

Other factors account for the fact that Lebanon has not turned into a rear base for the Syrian opposition. Much of northern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley – areas where supporters of the Syrian insurgency tend to reside – is largely underdeveloped, plagued by serious socio-economic difficulties. Lebanese militants bitterly complain of their enduring hardship. In June 2012, a militant from Bab Tebbaneh, said, "we are very poor. We struggle to get weapons and supplies to help us in our conflict with [the adjacent, Alawite neighbourhood of] Jabal Mohsen, let alone provide support to our Syrian brothers".[45]

The influence of Lebanese Salafi-jihadi networks supporting Syria's opposition, while undoubtedly growing, can be exaggerated. The spotlight shone on Arsal after Lebanon's defence minister, a member of the Maronite al-Marada party led by Suleiman Frangieh – a personal friend of Bashar Assad – accused it of harbouring "al-Qaeda" militants,[46] convinced many that the town had become a Salafi-jihadi stronghold.[47] Crisis Group fieldwork there suggests a more nuanced reality; the number of Salafi sheikhs remains relatively small and their popular base uncertain, insofar as they are generally viewed as opportunists.[48] A local politician said, "there are a handful of Salafi sheikhs who became wealthy after paying allegiance to the Future Current and by raising funds to aid Syrian refugees. So they started driving fancy cars, but people don't trust them. They don't have many followers".[49] To be sure, local residents have good reason to downplay the presence – and acceptance – of Salafi-jihadis in their midst, given their poor reputation. Still, there is no discernible sign that these militants represent more than a fringe phenomenon.

B. Inter-Lebanese Dynamics

As of now, notwithstanding recent developments, prospects of widespread sectarian strife – a sequel of the May 2008 showdown between Sunnis and Shiites – appear relatively unlikely. The lopsided balance of power in Hizbollah's favour arguably will discourage any attempt to militarily challenge the movement. Nor would it benefit from a confrontation, which would expose it to further domestic and regional condemnation. Overall, fear of unpredictable and unmanageable consequences have prompted all major players, notably Hizbollah and the Future Current, to exercise restraint. Instead, the more serious danger emanates from spontaneous clashes – harder to control and thus easier to spread – between their constituencies as well as between lesser groups nominally belonging to their respective camps. Already, both Hizbollah and the Future Current have proven unusually ineffective at containing grassroots violence originating from elements they traditionally can control – such as the Meqdad family or Tripoli's Islamists. Clashes also rapidly spread following Wissam Hassan's assassination, causing over ten deaths in two days.[50]

The most visible such outgrowth of the Syrian crisis has been intensification of the decades-long conflict opposing the areas of Jabal Mohsen and Bab Tebbaneh in Tripoli.[51]

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[42] See *Al-Ra'i*, 1 June 2012; *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 June 2012; www.naharnet.com/stories/ar/41987.

[43] *The Daily Star*, 17 October 2011; *An-Nahar*, 20 September 2012

[44] Crisis Group interview, Wadi Khaled, May 2012.

[45] Crisis Group interview, Sunni fighter, Tripoli, June 2012. For a discussion of the conflict between these two Tripoli neighbourhoods, see Crisis Group Briefing, *New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon*, op. cit.

[46] Defence Minister Fayez Ghosn accused Arsal of being a centre of weapons smuggling and of sheltering al-Qaeda members who cross the border into Syria. See *Al-Akhbar*, 27 December 2011.

[47] Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese from various confessional and geographic backgrounds, Beirut, Tripoli, southern Lebanon, January-June 2012.

[48] Crisis Group interview, residents and officials, Arsal, July 2012.

[49] Crisis Group interview, Communist Party representative, Arsal, July 2012.

[50] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Lebanese journalists, Tripoli and Beirut residents, 22-23 October 2012. See also *Al-Akhbar*, 22 October 2012; *An-Nahar*, 22 October 2012; *As-Safir*, 22 October 2012.

[51] See Crisis Group Briefing, *New Crisis, Old Demons*, op. cit.

In 2010, Crisis Group warned about the possible revival of hostilities between Sunni and Alawite communities in that northern region where historic resentments, dating back to the civil war, have been exacerbated by the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and its aftermath.[52]

Recent events in Syria added yet another layer to the conflict. Fighters of Bab Tebbaneh now see their actions against Alawites as a way to both back Syrian opponents and settle scores with Damascus and its Jabal Mohsen allies.[53] Tellingly, the slogan "Jabal Mohsen in exchange of Homs" spread widely following the Syrian regime onslaught on the latter.[54] Conversely, residents of Jabal Mohsen have tied their fate to that of the regime, wholeheartedly backing Assad and seeing in its potential fall an existential threat to their community, a small and isolated minority. A Jabal Mohsen leader said, "the Syrian regime is the protector of minorities in the Middle East. If it falls, you can bid all minorities farewell, including us [Alawites]".[55] Pictures of Syrian leaders and pro-regime slogans are displayed in the streets; community members boast about their participation in pro-regime demonstrations in Syria, posting photographs on Facebook; they praise Syrian leaders on social media, applauding the crackdown and accusing the Syrian opposition and its Lebanese allies of being terrorists as well as Israeli or Western agents.[56]

In recent months, fighting between the two neighbourhoods has been more fierce and frequent than at any given time since the May 2008 clashes, although it remains sporadic. As events in Syria unfold, however, risks of a bloodier and more perilous flare-up inevitably will grow.[57] Militants from the Arab Democratic Party, the dominant Alawite group, are heavily armed; judging by current trends, the violence of their reactions likely will escalate as their sense of insecurity worsens. Should they feel that their existence as a community is seriously endangered, they could resort to full-blown lethal force against their opponents. Conversely, the more tensions rise and affect normal life in Tripoli, the greater the level of Sunnis resentment against Alawites, viewed all at once as an alien constituency, a burden and a recurrent source of instability. A Sunni merchant whose commercial activity has suffered as a result of the fighting said, "Alawites have become parasites in the city. Bab Tebbaneh fighters ought to kick them out once and for all. Let them seek refuge in Syria with their leader, Bashar".[58]

There are other dangerous hotspots in northern Lebanon. These include risks of clashes in Tripoli and Akkar between anti-regime militants and non-Alawite allies of both Damascus and Hizbollah, namely the Islamist movement Al-Tawhid (which aligned itself with Damascus after Syrian troops confronted it in the early 1980s) and the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP).[59] Feeling besieged and trapped in a hostile environment, they perceive an existential threat, giving them all the more reason to tie their fate to their allies'. Their adversaries likewise view events in Syria as an opportunity to "purify"[60] the area, purging it of regime supporters. In the eyes of some, that Al-Tawhid is a Sunni Islamist organisation only makes its support for the regime and for Hizbollah "more shameful",[61] "a treason"[62] and "disgrace for the community".[63] As for the SSNP, its thuggish behaviour – whether during the May 2008 fighting[64] or, more recently, against anti-regime militants and Syrian dissidents – means it is an opportune target for many of Bashar's opponents in the

[52] Ibid.

[53] During the civil war, fighting periodically opposed Bab Tebbaneh's fighters to the Syrian army and its Alawite allies. Most notoriously, in 1986 Syrian forces committed a massacre in Bab Tebbaneh with the help of the Arab Democratic Party, an Alawite group then led by Ali Eid as well as other local allies. Hundreds were killed and memories remain vivid. See Crisis Group Briefing, *New Crisis, Old Demons*, op. cit., p. 6.

[54] The slogan is often repeated by Bab Tebbaneh local leaders and has spread on Facebook. Crisis Group interviews, fighters and Islamist activists, Bab Tebbaneh, February 2012. See a Bab Tebbaneh group-page on Facebook: www.facebook.com/TABENEH.

[55] Crisis Group interview, May 2012.

[56] One group named itself "Leader of Syria, Jabal Mohsen supports you; we, children women and men, will sacrifice our lives for you". Crisis Group observations, Jabal Mohsen, 2011-2012; See www.facebook.com/#!/JabalMohsen.forEver; www.facebook.com/#!/groups/355418724495862/; www.facebook.com/#!/jabal.mouhsen.network.news.

[57] The bombing that took Wissam Hassan's life triggered violent clashes between the two neighbourhoods leaving several people dead. Although security forces restored calm elsewhere, fighting between Tripoli's two communities proved both harder to contain and deadlier. Crisis Group interviews, local representative in Bab Tebbaneh; journalists, Tripoli residents, 22-24 October 2012. See *The Daily Star*, 22 October 2012.

[58] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, May 2012.

[59] Founded in 1932 by Antun Saadeh, the SSNP is a secular nationalistic party that advocates creation of a much larger Syrian state, a region known as the Syrian fertile crescent. The group operates in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. See www.ssnp.com. In the wake of Hassan's killing, armed groups attacked both the SSNP and Al-Tawhid bureaus in the north, causing the death of a sheikh belonging to the Islamic movement. *Al-Akhbar*, 22 October 2012.

[60] Crisis Group interview, Bab Tebbaneh fighter, Tripoli, May 2012.

[61] Crisis Group interview, Bab Tebbaneh fighter, Tripoli, May 2012.

[62] Crisis Group interview, Salafi sheikh in Bab Tebbaneh, Tripoli, May 2012.

[63] Crisis Group interview, Imam, Tripoli, May 2012.

[64] Party militants burned down the Future Current television station and violently assaulted a journalist working for the movement's newspaper, *Al-Mustaqbal*.

north. With such intense fear, resentment and hatred, the situation rapidly could turn ugly.[65]

Tensions in Tripoli could well snowball and spread beyond the immediate region. This occurred in the past, when escalation in the north reached the capital; in May 2012, clashes between pro- and anti-Syrian militants in Beirut left three people dead.[66] As noted, Wissam Hassan's assassination sparked violence in Tripoli, but also Beirut, Mount Lebanon, the Bekaa as well as the southern city of Saida. Given today's polarisation, risks of contagion have only increased.

Finally, the spate of abductions described above could have serious domestic repercussions, turning into a Lebanese-on-Lebanese struggle. A schoolteacher described in terms that easily could apply elsewhere the knock-on effects of tribal conflict in Wadi Khaled: "Here, communal belongings coincide with tribal ones. When a member of a tribe is killed or kidnapped, the whole tribe won't rest until it takes revenge. Mutual retaliation between Lebanese Sunnis and Alawites and, more broadly, between Syrian regime opponents and backers, could easily become a vicious – and unending – circle".[67]

III. LEBANON'S ACTORS AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Even as much of the outside world feared a Lebanese extension of the Syrian conflict, Lebanese actors were prone to view the Syrian conflict as an extension of their own, projecting onto their neighbour's battlefield the confrontation in which they had been engaged at home. Still, until recently at least, the two major factions – gathered in two antagonistic coalitions, known as "March 8" and "March 14"[68] – appeared intent on avoiding any escalation on Lebanese soil, preserving a modicum of stability and, even as they interfered in the next-door conflict, preventing massive spillover at home. The 19 October bombing in Beirut that took the life of Wissam Hassan and several others might well represent a game-changer in this regard. Whether or not Hizbollah had a hand in the attack, its continued stance in favour of the Syrian regime makes it an accomplice in Sunni eyes; by the same token, the likelihood has grown that Sunni Arab regimes might overcome past reservations and be willing to shore up the Sunni community in Lebanon or use its territory as a staging ground to combat Assad.

A. HIZBOLLAH'S PERSPECTIVE

1. A strategic partnership with Syria

In keeping with its primary self-identification as a resistance movement against Israel, since the end of the civil war Hizbollah's stance on major domestic and regional issues largely has been a function of its assessment of how these would affect its armed status.[69] Its perspective on the Syrian conflict is no exception, flowing as it does from Damascus' role as protector of Hizbollah's weapons which, always important, became critical in the aftermath of the 2006 war.

Indeed, insofar as it established a new balance of terror between Israel and its Lebanese foe, the war fundamentally altered the nature of their conflict. Convinced that a

[65] In May 2008, fourteen SSNP members were brutally executed and their bodies maimed by Sunni supporters of the Future Current in Halba-Akkar. A video of the massacre circulated widely on the internet. Circumstances surrounding the event remain opaque. A journalist wrote: "It is not clear exactly what happened in the first moments of the battle, but one version suggests that … hundreds of armed Future members and supporters attacked the SSNP office with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades. The SSNP … returned fire, two of the [Future Current] attackers were killed. Another version, equally plausible, is that a mob armed with sticks and clubs began to attack the SSNP office, and it was then that two of the Future Movement supporters were killed by the SSNP men inside. Armed attacks against the fourteen men inside the office followed". See "Aftermath … America's Wars in the Middle East", Jadaliyya, 28 October 2010.

[66] *The Daily Star*, 21 May 2012

[67] Crisis Group interview, Wadi Khaled, September 2011.

[68] This, in reference to the huge rallies each camp organised in 2005, respectively to support (on 8 March) and protest (on 14 March) Syria's role in the country.

[69] In the 1990s, despite disagreements, Hizbollah sought to keep under control tensions with Syria to a large extent because Damascus never called into question its armed status. As a result, when, in 1993, the Syrian regime gave a green light to the Lebanese army to fire on a Hizbollah-organised demonstration against the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo accords – an assault that resulted in fourteen deaths – the movement refrained from publicly blaming Damascus. See Olfa Lamloum, "La Syrie et le Hizbollah: Partenaires sous contrainte?", in Sabrina Mervin (ed.) *Le Hezbollah: état des lieux* (Paris, 2008).

future round was inevitable and that it likely would be both far bloodier and more intense, Hizbollah concluded that it needed increasingly sophisticated military and technological capabilities, making Syria's logistical and political support all the more vital.[70] A retired Lebanese general, echoing the view of several military experts, asserted that Syria constituted "Hizbollah's immediate strategic depth as well as the bridge connecting it to its far-away strategic depth, Iran".[71] As it were, the relationship between the two allies became organic.

It also simultaneously became increasingly balanced, genuine and even personal, in a stark departure from the lopsided, proxy-patron ties Hafez Assad had been keen to maintain with the Shiite movement. After Syria's 2005 military withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizbollah's political independence rose;[72] an asymmetrical relationship grew into a more authentic strategic partnership in which each side was compelled to take account of the other's core needs.[73] The Shiite movement stood by its ally when Damascus faced considerable pressure over the assassination of Rafiq Hariri just as President Assad proved a reliable partner during the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah. Interests aside, such dependability at times of existential crises contributed to the emergence of a powerful bond between Bashar Assad and Hassan Nasrallah. A Hamas official with deep knowledge of the issue said:

> Ties between Hizbollah's general secretary and the Syrian president have acquired a very personal dimension. Hassan Nasrallah believes that he owes the 2006 victory to Bashar's support. Today, he in large part is repaying that loyalty.[74]

On a strategic level, the Shiite movement likewise sees its fate as closely bound to the Syrian regime's. For years now, they have been engaged in a common struggle against Lebanese, regional and international adversaries – the March 14 coalition, Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and France – which they believe are intent on defeating the so-called axis of resistance. From Hizbollah's perspective, assessments of the Arab uprisings cannot be divorced from this context, which trumps any specific domestic dynamic. That is why the Shiite movement long doubted that unrest would spread in Syria (because its regime was considered to be in tune with popular sentiment about the U.S., Israel and the Palestinians); was slow to come to terms with the gravity of the situation;[75] and, once it did, was quick to blame it on external factors and side with the regime, notwithstanding its contrary stance in cases ranging from Egypt to Bahrain.[76]

[70] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, 2 August 2010. Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary general, articulated this deterrence strategy – in which he threatened tit-for-tat retaliation – in several speeches. He said: "I say to the Israelis that if you bomb the Rafik Hariri Airport in Beirut we will bomb Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport …. We will bomb your building if you bomb ours, your power plants if you bomb ours, your oil refineries if you bombs ours …. I announce this challenge and we accept this challenge"; and a few months later, "we told them that if you hit Beirut, we'll hit Tel Aviv …. When you next hit Dahiyeh [Beirut's southern suburb and the party stronghold that was heavily bombed in 2006] we will bomb Tel Aviv". See *Al-Manar*, 18 August 2009; *The Daily Star*, 17 February 2010.

[71] Crisis Group interview, retired army general, Beirut, August 2011.

[72] In a Hizbollah official's words: "We are participating in the government in order to better protect the resistance now that Syria is gone. During the Syrian presence, we never sought to name ministers because Syria protected us. After its withdrawal, we decided to join the cabinet for the first time because that was the way to safeguard the resistance". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2009.

[73] In 2005, at a time when Syria was widely held responsible for former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination, Hizbollah government ministers resigned to protest the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate the murder.

[74] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011. A Hizbollah official claimed that the Syrian president "provided Hizbollah with unparalleled support". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2011. During the 2006 war, the Shiite movement largely relied on Syrians for weapons supplies and strategic depth. Assad railed against other Arab countries that refused to support Hizbollah, going so far as to describe its leaders – who had accused Hizbollah of "recklessness" and "adventurism" – as "half-men": See *L'Orient le Jour*, 18 July 2006; www.metransparent.com/old/texts/egypt_jordan_vs_hizbullah.htm; "New chapter for Syria-Saudi relations, *The National*, 10 July 2009.

[75] Even as unrest spread, Nasrallah maintained that there was a key difference between Syria's situation and that of other countries in the grip of uprisings. "I personally believe that Syrian President Assad believes and is serious and determined about reform …. I know that he is ready to undertake very serious reforms but calmly, with care and responsibility. This factor influences our stance …. In Bahrain the regime was closed. Mubarak was closed. Qadhafi was closed. Zein Al Abideen Bin Ali was closed. In Syria the regime is not closed. On the contrary, he is saying: I am ready and I believe in reforms and I am serious and I want to carry them out …. The fall of the regime is an Israeli-US interest, aiming at getting Syria to sign any peace deal with Israel. … As a resistance movement against Israel, we are required to adopt a responsible stance that is committed to the security and stability of Syria as a government and people". *Al-Manar*, 25 May 2011. That same month, a senior Hizbollah official said, "I don't think the Syrian protest movement will be able to succeed because the regime is growing more solid". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2011. As late as October 2011, Nasrallah said, "Syria is largely out of the danger zone". See *Al-Manar*, 25 October 2011.

[76] Commenting on the Egyptian uprising for instance, a movement leader said, "Mubarak's fall is a huge blow for the other

To justify this position, its leader made strenuous efforts, through multiple public speeches, to fit the conflict next door within Hizbollah's preconceived frame of reference, at the cost of alienating many Syrians and Arabs enraged by what they saw as self-serving double standards and tactless moralising. In December 2011, following a statement by the then-head of the Syrian National Council – an umbrella opposition group – that a future regime would cut ties to Iran and Hizbollah,[77] Nasrallah said:

> The past couple of days revealed that we were reading things in a very correct way. The essential point is attacking the resistance movements. It is not reforms, addressing corruption and introducing pluralism that is being demanded of Syria. What is being required of Syria is that it become a treasonous Arab regime. This is the truth. With all due respect to those who demonstrate in Syria and those who fight with something else in mind, we tell them to be aware because they will be exploited on behalf of such a project. It is a project that goes against their conviction, religion, culture, national belonging, nationalism, Syrian identity and true belonging.[78]

In the same vein, Hizbollah views any threat to the Assad regime as a threat directed at its principal ally, Iran. Indeed, Syria has been Iran's closest strategic partner for the past three decades, its bridgehead to the Levant, and a country without which Tehran's ability to supply the Shiite movement would be severely constrained.[79]

That its stance came at the price of a dramatic drop in support from the Arab public in general and a large swathe of Syrian society in particular – backing that had meticulously been built over years – was not lost on Hizbollah's leaders. Indeed, Nasrallah not long ago had enjoyed tremendous popularity among Syrians, regardless of their religious affiliation.[80] A Syrian opposition activist living in Beirut commented that "a large number of Syrians saw Nasrallah as *the* Arab leader. People hung up his picture in their houses".[81] Yet the Shiite movement felt it had no choice, unwilling and unable to distance itself from – let alone break ranks with – a regime that had helped it over the years, with which it had developed an intimate strategic understanding, on which it depended for material and political support, and whose collapse inevitably would significantly weaken the movement.[82] This was in sharp contrast to Hamas, which also had close ties to the regime and whose exiled leadership had taken refuge in Damascus, but which managed to express its strong discomfort.[83]

Unlike Hamas – a Sunni movement in a position to develop stronger ties to a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Egypt as well as to countries such as Qatar and Turkey – Hizbollah never felt it had a realistic or viable alternative to supporting the Syrian regime. And so it was willing to suffer the consequences.[84] What is more, and again in sharp contrast to the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hizbollah officials acquired neither deep knowledge of, nor close ties to Syrian society, focusing instead on security and political cooperation with the regime.[85] That is another

camp, the one that favours capitulation to Israel. This axis has lost one of its central members". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2011.

[77] Then-SNC head Burhan Ghalioun said: "Our relationship with Lebanon will be [one] of cooperation, and mutual recognition and exchange of interests and seeking with the Lebanese to improve stability in the region. As our relations with Iran change, so too will our relationship with Hezbollah. Hezbollah after the fall of the Syrian regime will not be the same. Lebanon should not be used as it was used in the Assad era as an arena to settle political scores". See "Syria opposition leader interview transcript", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2011.

[78] See *Al-Manar*, 6 December 2011.

[79] In 2006, the Iranian defence minister expressed this strategic alliance in these terms: "[Iran] considers Syria's security its own security, and we consider our defence capabilities to be those of Syria". *The Daily Star*, 16 June 2006. His Syrian counterpart asserted, "our cooperation is based on a strategic pact and unity against common threats". Ibid.

[80] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian opposition members, Beirut and Tripoli, November-December 2011.

[81] Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Beirut, December 2011.

[82] A Syrian journalist, opposed to the regime yet for a long time a strong Hizbollah supporter, said, "Nasrallah and his party have become traitors. It no longer is part of the resistance; it is now a mere militia. The Syrian people, the Arab people as a whole, will make Hizbollah pay dearly for this. Its end will be ignominious". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011.

[83] Crisis Group Middle East Report N°129, *Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas and the Arab Uprisings*, 14 August 2012. A Hamas leader said, "Hizbollah is making a mistake. It is making it impossible to reverse course. It is losing the Arabs, not only the Syrian people". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011.

[84] A senior Hizbollah official said: "As a party, we don't stake out our positions based on whether people will like them or not. We have a clear vision and constant principles. When we stood against the American occupation in Iraq, the Shiites in Iraq blamed us and were opposed to us. As for the Sunnis, they are not a unified group. We still benefit from an important support in the Arab world. It is true that having a strong popular base is important for us, but we won't achieve it at any price. Popularity and support fluctuate". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[85] The 2006 war offered Hizbollah a rare opportunity to acquaint itself with Syrian society, given the influx of large numbers of Lebanese Shiite refugees, whom Syrian families spontaneously hosted; the sense of discovery was mutual, underscoring how little hosts and guests knew each other beforehand. This occurred predominantly in popular neighbourhoods that have since risen up against the regime and suffered retribution

reason why, from the outset, it was easy for it to embrace Damascus's narrative of a foreign-inspired, militant Sunni uprising, assigning disproportionate weight to early sectarian slogans put forth by Syrian protesters, which it saw as evidence of a broad conspiracy and an expression of the rebellion's true nature.[86]

2. A position of strength within Lebanon

For the past several years, Hizbollah painstakingly has established unquestioned domestic dominance, a function first and foremost of its military supremacy and of its gradual capture of key security state positions.[87] The 2006 war with Israel[88] followed by the Shiite movement's 2008 takeover of West Beirut[89] eviscerated any lingering hopes entertained by its domestic foes to confront it. In turn, military ascendancy[90] went hand in hand with heightened political confidence.[91]

Hizbollah also was bolstered by the resilience of its internal alliances, notably with Michel Aoun,[92] the Christian leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, and Nabih Berri, the head of the Shiite Amal Movement and parliamentary speaker. Having in many ways tied his fate to Hizbollah since 2006,[93] Aoun had little choice but to follow its lead when the Syrian uprising broke out, even at the cost of further damaging relations with the West and intensifying his struggle with the March 14 coalition. He explicitly backed the Syrian regime; echoing Hizbollah, he portrayed the uprising as the latest chapter in "the plot against the

as a consequence. However, relations between the two populations remained relatively superficial and short-lived. Crisis Group observations, Damascus suburbs, July-August 2006.

[86] At the time, a small number of slogans expressed anti-Shiite sentiments. These included, inter alia, "We don't want Hizbollah or Iran, we want a pious regime". Hizbollah leaders repeatedly mentioned them, suggesting they had played an early and key role in shaping their perception of protesters. Crisis group interviews, Beirut, southern suburb of Beirut and south Lebanon, May and August-September 2011.

[87] The Military Tribunal, General Security, Airport Security division as well as several critical army positions all currently are headed by individuals with close ties to Hizbollah or its allies. As a senior party official said, "we cooperate with security and military forces; we have a strong relationship with the army. This began years ago, before the crisis in Syria started". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[88] In the collective Shiite, Lebanese and Arab consciousness, the movement emerged triumphant from the conflict, notwithstanding considerable economic and human losses. A retired general said, "in 2006, Hizbollah faced the region's most powerful army. It put an end to the long era of defeats at Israel's hands and restored both the hopes and dignity of Arab people". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 2009. The conflict brought to the surface a previously unsuspected military arsenal and technical capacity; it likewise helped buttress the morale of fighters and supporters. Since then, Hizbollah actively has sought to fortify its deterrence by boosting its military stockpile and know-how. See Crisis Group Report, *Drums of War*, op. cit.

[89] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.

[90] Following the outbreak of the uprising, several reports claimed that Hizbollah was moving weapons from Syria into Lebanon. See "Report: Syria allegedly moving Scud missiles to Hizbullah", Naharnet, 16 June 2012; "Report: Hezbollah moving arms from Syria to Lebanon, fearing Assad's fall", *Haaretz*, 26 June 2011; "Lebanon and the uprising in Syria: Issue for Congress", Congressional Research Service, 2 February 2012; "Will Israel do it?", Al-Akhbar English, 16 July 2012. U.S. officials assert that the movement also has moved its out-of-country arsenal within Syria itself to more secure locations in light of rebel advances. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington DC, October 2012.

[91] The May 2008 Doha agreement between Lebanese protagonists essentially adopted Hizbollah's and its allies' position. It gave rise to a national unity government in which members of the March 8 coalition enjoyed veto power over all crucial decisions. In the wake of the 2009 elections, the victorious March 14 coalition nonetheless was compelled to grant the opposition a so-called blocking third – again, ensuring decision-making on important matters required opposition consent. Subsequently, in January 2011, Hizbollah and its allies resigned from Saad Hariri's cabinet, triggering its collapse. Five months later, Najib Miqati took the helm of a March 8-dominated cabinet.

[92] Tensions between Hizbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement have emerged regarding domestic issues (eg, the nomination of civil servants, full-employment of the state-owned electricity company's daily contract workers and plans to raise salaries minimum wages). However, the two movements overcame these differences and both assert that their alliance is strategic. See "Cabinet agrees to minimum wage increase", Now Lebanon, 7 December 2011; www.lbcgroup.tv/news/41460/LBCI NEWS5; *Al-Akhbar*, *An-Nahar*, 6 July 2012; *As-Safir*, 23 July 2012.

[93] This represented a significant turnabout for the Christian leader. Indeed, in the wake of the civil war – during which he had been a staunch foe of the Syrian regime – he was forced to flee Lebanon. He took refuge in France, from where he vehemently opposed Syria's presence in his country as well as Hizbollah's military arsenal. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°78, *The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role*, 15 July 2008. Years later, he went so far as to justify Hizbollah's brief takeover of the capital in May 2008, referring to the Shiite movement's "right to self-defence". Likewise, he repeated Hizbollah's denunciation of the international tribunal investigating Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's murder. Crisis Group interview, Michel Aoun, Beirut, December 2011; see also mplbelgique.wordpress.com/2008/03/17/michel-aoun-mon-role-est-de-denoncer-sans-relache-la-corruption-et-de-contribuer-a-la-reforme. In late 2008, Aoun visited Iran and Syria; he regularly and strongly condemns U.S. regional policies, accusing Washington of harbouring "strategic goals that are contrary to our very presence, not merely our interests. They want to solidify Israel's arrogant posture and hegemony. That's when we became ardently opposed to them". See www.nnaleb.gov.lb/newsDetailF.aspx?id=349962.

axis of resistance"[94] and depicted the eventual collapse of Assad's regime as "the fall of democracy", of which "Christians will be the first victims".[95] His party's television station OTV (Orange Television) persistently paints the Syrian opposition as an Islamist and violent movement.[96] Like Hizbollah, Aoun nuanced such statements by occasionally acknowledging legitimate grievances behind the uprising. For example, he said, "we have been calling for a change in the regime, but we do not support the cycle of violence which is being fuelled by foreign countries".[97]

In expressing such views, the Christian leader was reacting in light of his alliance with Hizbollah. But it would be wrong to view it exclusively through that lens. His position reflects a deeper malaise among Lebanese Christians as a whole, regardless of political affiliation. Although some welcome change in Syria and across the Arab world, many fear it to an equal if not greater degree; they are torn between sympathy for the victims and anxiety at the rise of Sunni Islamism within the Syrian opposition and the region at large. Echoing widespread concern, a member of the Free Patriotic Movement said, "this is not an Arab Spring. This is a Salafi Spring".[98] Many worry that the empowerment of Sunni forces in Syria will embolden their Lebanese counterparts. An Aounist activist lamented:

> The Syrian regime halted Sunni aspirations in Lebanon. If Sunnis were to rule Syria, they would ally themselves with those in Lebanon. Nothing would then stop Sunni domination over the country.[99]

Christians opposed to the Syrian regime have voiced similar concerns. A member of the Lebanese Forces – a Christian party led by Samir Geagea that belongs to the March 14 coalition – said:

> There is nothing in the world that I hate more than the Syrian regime. The day of its downfall will be the happiest of my life, one for which I have been waiting for decades. I don't accept the idea that we should prevent its fall for fear of chaos. But I have to admit I am worried. The Arab world is changing in dramatic fashion. The Islamists are coming to power – and they often are extremists: Salafis scored more than 20 per cent in Egypt! That is scary. Yes, I am concerned for the fate of Christians throughout the region. Have you not seen how they were massacred in Egypt[100] and how Muslims justified the attacks? Christians are the weakest link in the regional chain. And so they will be its first scapegoats.[101]

Hizbollah has benefited from these sentiments and particularly from shared anxiety regarding the rise of Sunni Islamism.[102] It also has sought to exacerbate them, sparing no effort to depict its immediate Sunni opponent, the Lebanese Future Current, as part and parcel of this radical Sunni Islamist wave. A Hizbollah official said, "the Future Current has contributed to transforming moderate Islamists into extremists, rebellious against the state and defiant of other communities".[103] A Future Current official conceded, "Hizbollah has quite successfully bundled together, in the minds of many, Sunnis, Salafis, the Future Current and Saudi Arabia, all lumped together into one big threat".[104]

Hizbollah's alliance with Nabih Berri's Amal has been equally resilient. If anything, the two Shiite movements have grown closer since 2005 for a variety of reasons: Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon; the 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel; the confrontation between the pro-Western March 14 and the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalitions; as well as growing Shiite-Sunni polarisation. Due to these developments, Amal – historically dependent on Damascus – increasingly has had to rely on Hizbollah as a shield against its foes[105] and in order to ensure that the larger, stronger, more popular Shiite movement not monopolise the Shiite field.[106] At the same time, partnership with the parliamentary speaker offers Hizbollah important

[94] Crisis Group interview, Michel Aoun, Rabieh, December 2011.
[95] www.lebanonfiles.com/news/415544. In late September, Aoun also said, "the Syrian regime did not collapse. It is far [from collapsing] as some are alluding". "Aoun says Syrian regime far from collapsing", Now Lebanon, 22 September 2012.
[96] Crisis Group observations, June-September 2012.
[97] "Aoun: Syria regime must remain secular, Lebanon security won't deteriorate further", Naharnet, 28 August 2012.
[98] Crisis Group interview, Free Patriotic Movement supporter, Beirut, September 2012.
[99] Crisis Group interview, Free Patriotic Movement activist, Beirut, December 2011. In this sense, the Syrian uprising brings back to the fore an issue that particularly worries Christians across the board: the relationship between Lebanon's Sunni community and Syria, ties that the Baathist regime tried hard to suppress. See Crisis Group Report, *The New Lebanese Equation*, op. cit.
[100] On 10 October 2011, clashes between Copts and security forces left 25 dead and 272 wounded.
[101] Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, November 2011.
[102] Like their Christians counterparts, many Shiites fear that victory of the Syrian opposition would strengthen their Lebanese coreligionists. Crisis Group interviews, Dahiyeh and south Lebanon Shiite residents, January-July 2012.
[103] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, June 2012.
[104] Crisis Group interview, Future Current adviser, Beirut, June 2012.
[105] For example, Hizbollah rejected a 2005 suggestion by March 14 to replace Nabih Berri as parliament speaker. See Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.
[106] Over time, Amal's influence among Shiites declined dramatically as Hizbollah's increased.

benefits.[107] Threats to the Syrian regime's stability together with Damascus's diminished clout is likely to reinforce the two allies' mutual reliance.

Perhaps most importantly, Hizbollah continues to enjoy widespread, powerful – albeit, as discussed below, not ironclad – Shiite support. If anything, the Syrian uprising exacerbated community feelings of vulnerability, pushing most Shiites to rally even more solidly behind the movement, their most potent protector. As among Christians, signs of ambivalence exist; Shiites have hosted and provided for Syrian refugees, notably in the Bekaa Valley, where many residents insist upon dissociating the political aspect of the Syrian crisis from its humanitarian dimension, not least because they had benefited from Syrian hospitality when they were displaced by the 2006 war.[108] Responding to such pressure, Hizbollah has sought to provide aid to Syrian refugees.[109] All in all, however, even among Shiites who are critical of Assad and acknowledge the legitimacy of opposition demands, fear of the implications of the regime's downfall predominates. A Hizbollah sympathiser said:

> We know what this regime is capable of; we [Lebanese Shiites] also suffered at its hand [during the Syrian occupation]. However, some external as well as Syrian players want Assad to fall merely because of his support to Hizbollah and the resistance. They don't care about freedom and rights.[110]

Another Hizbollah follower asserted, "we support the Syrian people. Some voice legitimate demands. But those who are linked to a Saudi, U.S. and Israeli agenda do not. They have a single objective: to weaken the resistance".[111] A Lebanese journalist both supportive of Hizbollah and highly critical of the Syrian regime said, "many Shiites have solved their dilemma by emphasising the Syrian opposition's misbehaviour and abuses, picturing it as exclusively Salafi. The abduction of Shiites by opposition armed groups in Syria undoubtedly further tarnished the opposition's image in their eyes".[112] Dissident Shiite voices exist, but they have not made significant inroads.[113] Overall, Hizbollah's position of strength for now appears unchallenged and unshaken.[114]

3. Adapting to a protracted conflict

As the Syrian conflict grew more widespread and intense, Hizbollah sought to both adapt to the crisis and contain its potential domestic aftershocks. Concretely, this entailed slight adjustments to its discourse without in any significant way altering its stance. An official from the movement said, "those who think that the party will change its position are indulging in wishful thinking. This simply is not going to happen".[115] Thus, after dismissing the uprising as a foreign conspiracy, Hizbollah increasingly called for dialogue between the regime and opposition. On 15 March 2012, Nasrallah went so far as to publicly urge both

[107] From 2005 onwards, Amal has followed in Hizbollah's footsteps at every stage of escalating domestic tensions. Its ministers resigned from the government together with their Hizbollah counterparts as a result of the cabinet's ratification of the treaty establishing the international tribunal investigating Hariri's December 2005 murder. Between 2007 and 2008, Amal members joined the March 8 sit-in against Fouad Siniora's government and Berri rejected March 14 demands that he call parliament into session to elect a new president. Likewise, Amal played a part in Hizbollah's May 2008 takeover of West Beirut.

[108] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees and Shiite host families, al-Hermel, July 2012; telephone interview, international organisation representative working in the Bekaa, 2 October 2012.

[109] Hizbollah has delivered aid parcels and medical care to Syrian refugees. See ibid; *The Daily Star*, 1 October 2012.

[110] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah supporter, Beirut, August 2012.

[111] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah follower, Beirut, June 2012.

[112] Crisis Group telephone interview, Lebanese journalist, 2 October 2012.

[113] A number of Shiite intellectual and clerics, traditionally at odds with Hizbollah, have tried to forge a third way calling on Shiites to support the "Syrian people's fight for freedom and justice" and accusing the party of endangering the community by pitting it against a Sunni majority in the region. See *An-Nahar*, 25 August 2012; www.newlebanon.info/articles/lebanon_now/16524. These efforts have registered only minimal success. A Shiite journalist supportive of this endeavour acknowledged its limitations: "These are important although symbolic steps. We are sending a message to our Syrian brethren that some Shiites are on their side. I hope more and more Shiites will realise how important it is not to back Bashar's criminal regime. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority today is controlled by Hizbollah and, to a lesser extent, Amal". Crisis Group telephone interview, Lebanese journalist, 2 October 2012. See also "Two top clerics call on Lebanon's Shiites to back Syrian uprising", Now Lebanon, 9 July 2012. Hizbollah's former secretary general, Subhi al-Tufayli, also criticised the party. Referring to members of the movement believed to have been killed in Syria, he said, "people who are killed in Syria are not martyrs but dead", implicitly suggesting that fighting on behalf of the regime is illegitimate and religiously unacceptable. See www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=446913

[114] Early on, one of its senior-most cadres explained the movement's strategy by referring to what it had done in the past: "After the outbreak of events in Syria, we pursued the same strategy we initiated since 2005 in the wake of Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon. Then, the party meticulously worked toward establishing itself politically in Lebanon and fortifying its domestic position. We relied on our internal popular base and consolidated our alliances with Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun and others". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2011.

[115] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012

sides to "simultaneously lay down their weapons".[116] Yet in a televised interview a month later, he laid the blame entirely at the opposition's doorstep: "We contacted … the Syrian opposition to encourage them and to facilitate the process of dialogue with the regime …. But they rejected dialogue".[117]

Syrian rebels, predictably, dismissed Hizbollah's calls for dialogue as utterly insufficient and irrelevant. The leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood said:

> The changes we saw in Nasrallah's speeches are very slight. They are essentially designed for the media. The party felt that the regime was weakening and tried to flirt with the opposition. But talk is not enough. There must be a change in their position in support of the Syrian people and against injustice.[118]

As noted, the movement – unwilling to undermine a trusted and critical alliance, fearful of the opposition and highly sceptical that any breakthrough could be achieved with it – never truly deviated from its fundamental stance of support for the regime. Indeed, and contrary to the Brotherhood leader's assessment, Nasrallah if anything has been *more* supportive of Bashar the more vulnerable the Syrian regime appeared. Following the 18 July 2012 bomb attack that killed four senior security officials in Damascus, he expressed unreserved loyalty:

> The most important weapons with which we fought Israel during the [2006] July war came from Syria …. We are sad over the killing [of the four generals] because they were comrades-in-arms to the resistance and comrades in the struggle against the [Israeli] enemy …. We are confident that the Syrian army, which has had to cope with the intolerable, has the ability, determination and resolve to endure and foil the enemies' desires.[119]

He again reiterated and justified his support to the regime in a long September 2012 interview.[120]

This is not to deny the existence of tensions and disagreements within the movement. Sources with good access to Hizbollah claim that its stance has triggered at times bitter debates[121] and that officials privately criticise the regime's "bloody and failing response to the crisis".[122] Such assertions are hard to verify, given the movement's hierarchical and secretive nature; moreover, private discussions aside, party discipline has been unimpeachable. A Hizbollah-affiliated journalist said:

> Whether reports of our internal debates are true or false is not the issue. I would even claim that vivid debate is a good sign, proof of Hizbollah's internal democracy. But the fact is that no dissenting voices emanate from the party. The Shura [religious consultative] council adopts a strategic decision, as in the case of our stance on Syria and, subsequently, every member from the highest to the lowest echelon complies.[123]

Support for the regime aside, Hizbollah's other critical goal to this point has been to preserve Lebanon's fragile stability. To that end, it has focused, until recently at least, on four objectives:

Preserving the military status quo with Israel. Early on, several observers speculated that Hizbollah might seek to provoke a confrontation with Israel to shift attention from Syria and rally Syrians (and optimally the region) against a common external enemy.[124] Instead, and to this day, it has refrained from such action. When asked, its officials argue that a war would be extremely costly; unlikely to "save the regime";[125] expose the Shiite movement to large-scale Israeli retaliation precisely at a time when it could not count on full-fledged Syrian support; and almost certainly provoke a domestic backlash by a population still licking its wounds from the devastation inflicted by Israel in 2006, chiefly on the Shiite community.

The prospect of another round of confrontation remains highly unpopular even among Lebanese Shiites. In the past, they have rallied around Hizbollah during wartime,[126] a behaviour likely to be repeated.[127] Still, opposition is wide-

[116] See *Al-Manar*,15 March 2012.
[117] See RT, 17 April 2012, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uq5gGTl31J8.
[118] Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2012.
[119] *The Daily Star*, 19 July 2012. Conversely, in March 2012, at a time when the tide appeared to be turning in the regime's favour, Hassan Nasrallah said: "Military intervention, arming the opposition or sending in Arab troops [into Syria] are all off the table… The bid to overthrow the Syrian regime militarily has failed… Talk today is on the need for dialogue between the opposition and the government under the leadership of President Bashar Assad". *The Daily Star*, 30 March 2012; *Al-Manar*, 30 March 2012.
[120] See the interview full transcript at www.manar.com/page-422-ar.html.
[121] Crisis Group interviews, journalists and officials with close ties to Hizbollah, Beirut, June-September 2012.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, September 2012.
[124] Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Western journalists and analysts, Beirut, Washington DC, April-October 2011.
[125] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, March 2012.
[126] On the 2006 war-rallying behind Hizbollah among Shiites, see Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit., pp. 5-7.
[127] A journalist living in Dahiyeh affirmed, "if a war against Israel were to be started, the community will rally behind the

spread to renewed fighting sparked by the party.[128] A Hizbollah sympathiser living in a southern border area said, "if Israel attacks us, we'll have to defend ourselves. The party's response should then be firm. However, Hizbollah shouldn't give an alibi to the enemy".[129] A Shiite resident of Dahiyeh, Beirut's southern suburb and a Hizbollah stronghold, expressed confidence that "the party won't provoke Israel into a war. Hassan Nasrallah said it in 2006. He said if he had known that the Israeli reaction would be so violent, the party wouldn't have captured the two Israeli soldiers [kidnapped in a cross-border commando operation, seen in Israel as a casus belli]".[130]

That does not mean that Hizbollah has remained passive; Israeli and U.S. officials assert that it has been involved in numerous plots aimed at killing Israelis overseas, most of which were thwarted.[131] The most spectacular attack ascribed to the Lebanese movement by both Washington and Jerusalem was the July 2012 bus bombing in Bulgaria, in which a suicide bomber killed seven Israeli tourists and the Bulgarian bus driver, wounding tens of others.[132] More verifiably, Hizbollah maintained its efforts to build up military capabilities as a strategic deterrent;[133] in one such indication, it successfully sent a reconnaissance drone over Israel in October.[134]

Avoiding a Sunni-Shiite confrontation. Sectarian divisions, festering for years, escalated with the start of the uprising, fuelled by the political forces' divergent rhetoric and interests. They climaxed with the killing of Wissam Hassan, perceived as one of few remaining strongmen within the Sunni community.

Still, and for the most part, Hizbollah has sought to contain tensions, fearing that instability could threaten its patiently acquired, powerful position in the country and, ultimately, its armed status. The party appears to have more to lose than gain from revisiting the status quo, which deepening Sunni-Shiite tensions could shake up. Renewed confrontation between the two communities likely would further damage its image in Lebanon and the Arab world. Hizbollah's May 2008 show of force in predominantly Sunni districts of Beirut was costly enough but was presented as a response to what the movement perceived as an unprecedented challenge to its military apparatus;[135] politically, it helped the Shiite movement renegotiate the rules of the game to its advantage, enabling it to acquire veto power in government.[136] Today, no such challenge exists to justify initiating further hostilities. In the face of rising Sunni Islamism throughout the region, Hizbollah fears stoking additional Sunni resentment towards it; as a senior movement official stressed, "preserving Lebanon is a priority for us".[137]

Hizbollah's lopsided military advantage notwithstanding, it cannot take prospects of sectarian confrontation lightly. Sunni groups reportedly have been arming; their regional allies are more determined than before given events in Syria; and much of the Shiite movement's sophisticated arsenal

party regardless of circumstances". Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, July 2012.

[128] Crisis Group interviews, Shiite residents in pro-Hizbollah areas, Dahiyeh and South Lebanon, June-July 2012.

[129] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah supporter, South Lebanon, July 2012.

[130] Crisis Group interview, Dahiyeh resident, July 2012.

[131] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Israeli officials, Washington DC, Tel Aviv, February-September 2012.

[132] See "Bulgaria blast: 'Suicide bomber' killed Israelis", BBC, 19 July 2012. U.S. and Israeli officials argued the attack in Bulgaria might have been in retaliation for the February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, a Hizbollah senior military commander or, alternatively, to events in Syria. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, Tel Aviv, July 2012. At the time, a senior U.S. official expressed his fear that Israel might seek harsh and immediate revenge, provoking an escalation during a period of great tension and, perhaps, helping divert the focus from Syria. Washington, he claimed, was pressing Israel to bear that in mind. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, July 2012. Another senior official said, "all signs point to Hizbollah. Israel could well go after the movement, though we hope – and believe – it will refrain from doing so now given events in Syria. A more difficult question is what Syria, Hizbollah and Iran actually want. On one hand, they might well wish for an Israeli intervention to change the narrative of this crisis. On the other hand, so far Hizbollah has more or less respected Israeli redlines, most notably in terms of the transfer and acquisition of chemical weapons". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 19 July 2012. Hizbollah officials denied any involvement in the Bulgarian attack. Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, July 2012; see also en.apa.az/news.php?id=175878.

[133] See Crisis Group Report, *Drums of War*, op. cit.

[134] Nasrallah claimed that "possession of such an aerial capacity is a first in the history of any resistance movement in Lebanon and the region". "Nasrallah admits sending drone over Israel, says fighters killed defending Lebanese-inhabited Syrian towns", Naharnet, 11 October 2012.

[135] The cabinet had decided to remove the pro-Hizbollah head of security at Beirut airport and investigate Hizbollah's independent telephone network. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.

[136] The Doha agreement that followed the clashes endorsed an essential Hizbollah demand: formation of a national unity government in which, together with its allies, it would enjoy veto power over all crucial decisions, a provision generally referred to as the "blocking third". See ibid.

[137] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012. A journalist with close ties to Hizbollah added, "I am impressed that Hizbollah has been able to remain calm despite its opponents' sectarian incitements and all that is happening in the north. The party knows that a confrontation with Sunnis is a major trap to avoid". Crisis Group interview, June 2012.

would be of little use in a domestic clash.[138] A Future Current representative said:

> In the event of renewed [Sunni-Shiite] confrontation in Lebanon, the current balance of power wouldn't matter much. Sunnis would be able to secure help and support from their allies abroad. By seeking escalation, Hizbollah would create an opportunity for its many opponents, leading them directly into Lebanon. Why would it risk jeopardising the power it holds when it has the upper hand?[139]

Too, among Hizbollah rank and file, sentiment appears to strongly favour moderation in this regard. A journalist sympathetic to the party said:

> Many within the movement think that the Sunni-Shiite divide ought to be mended not widened. Some members even consider that the party's priority should be to seek to build bridges between the two communities. A number have developed ideas toward Sunni-Shiite reconciliation not just in Lebanon but region-wide.[140]

To date, however, such intentions have not materialised in any tangible way.[141]

Containing opponents of the Syrian regime. Hizbollah, together with its March 8 coalition allies, has endeavoured to deter the Future Current, Islamist parties and regional actors from using Lebanon as a platform to channel support to the Syrian opposition; at a minimum, it has sought to ensure that what assistance goes through not become "uncontrollable and unmanageable".[142] Hizbollah accordingly rejected the creation of Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon[143] and has kept a close eye on activities of humanitarian organisations in areas it controls. A senior party official explained:

> We will not tolerate Lebanon becoming a corridor or a base for foreign meddling in Syria. This is why we rejected the establishment of refugee camps in Lebanon, although March 14 has made repeated calls to that effect. They would have used these camps as safe havens for insurgents. They would provide armed groups with areas on which to fall back and in which to seek refuge. We also opposed the idea of allowing some international organisations to operate in the Bekaa region under the pretext of helping Syrian refugees. We respect the refugees' rights and repeat that the government should take care of them. But we cannot let the humanitarian aspect be used as an entry point to boost support for the insurgents.[144]

Where the movement lacks a direct presence, as in parts of the north, it has banked on state security forces, some components of which are subject to its strong influence.[145] A senior Hizbollah official said, "the north is out of our sphere of influence; we are counting on the state and its security apparatus to control activities in that area. So far, despite some obstacles, the army and security forces have succeeded in containing the Syrian opposition there".[146]

Maintaining its position in Lebanon. Intent on preserving its position of strength, the fruit of several years of careful and deft investment, as well as on keeping March 14 out of power – and thus, as a Hizbollah ally put it, "preventing the Lebanese state from becoming a staging ground to destabilise Syria"[147] – the Shiite movement had been willing to make several significant compromises to

[138] Crisis Group interview, Lebanese analyst, October 2012.
[139] Crisis Group interview, Future Current representative, Beirut, June 2012.
[140] Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, August 2012. He added, "unfortunately, these reflections didn't go very far. In light of regional developments, some thought that any step in that direction would be interpreted as a sign of weakness by the party's foes".
[141] In September, during the controversy stirred by "Innocence of Muslims", the amateur film that disparaged Islam and provoked violent demonstrations in the region and elsewhere, Hizbollah sought to use the event to refocus attention on an anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli platform and, arguably, away from intersectarian tensions. Signalling how much the movement valued the opportunity, Nasrallah appeared in person – a rarity given threats on his life – at a massive rally orchestrated by the party. The movement leader addressed special thanks to Sunni (and Christian) clerics present at the demonstration. See *As-Safir*, 18 September 2012. Two days earlier, in a speech devoted to the same issue, Nasrallah said, "Muslims released their anger on the U.S. and Israel … which is a positive sign". *Al-Manar*, 16 September 2012.
[142] Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist with close ties to Hizbollah, Beirut, September 2011.
[143] So far, Lebanon has successfully handled the influx of refugees. However, were it to grow significantly, serious problems likely would arise. Hizbollah's stance could be hard to sustain in the event of a massive inflow.
[144] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah senior official, Beirut, June 2012.
[145] Under Lebanon's communal apportionment system, state institutions tend to be quasi-fiefdoms of a given political organisation. This includes branches of the security apparatus. Moreover, given its paramilitary activities, Hizbollah has developed close ties with several security-related institutions, notably General Security and, to a lesser degree, the military. A senior movement official said, "Yes, we cooperate with security and military forces, and we have a strong relation with the army, this started years ago". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012. Hizbollah's opponents go much further and accuse it of running the army via remote-control. Crisis Group interviews, 14 March officials, 2011-2012.
[146] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.
[147] Crisis Group interview, Amal movement official, Beirut, September 2011.

ensure government continuity. Examples include Hizbollah's acquiescence to Lebanon's continued financing of the international tribunal investigating Rafiq Hariri's assassination, despite the sensitivity of the topic and even though four of its members have been indicted. Because Prime Minister Najib Miqati had threatened to resign over this matter, the movement concluded it had no choice.[148] A Hizbollah official acknowledged the movement's discomfort, "this is not an ideal situation. Miqati is merely an ally of necessity".[149] In September 2012, Nasrallah nevertheless stressed anew the imperative of preserving the current government:

> We believe that some parties want to push things toward chaos. We believe that stability can be maintained through the survival of the current government … Should Prime Minister Miqati resign and the government collapse, we will not be able to form another government before six months and the country cannot afford a political vacuum.[150]

As a result, Hizbollah also to an extent has had to abide the prime minister's mounting criticism of Syria. That Hizbollah has become dependent on Miqati to the point that it is prepared to swallow hard and acquiesce in his policies on a matter of such import, is one of the more interesting political upshots of the crisis. Indeed, even as the prime minister has been careful to maintain a posture of neutrality vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis, adopting what he has dubbed a policy of "dissociation", he has not hesitated to distance himself from the regime.[151] Thus, following a foiled attempt by the pro-Syrian Lebanese politician Michel Samaha to carry out bomb attacks in Lebanon in coordination with Syrian officials, he threatened to take "all necessary measures" and "reconsider" the relationship with Damascus.[152]

Miqati certainly has had cause to take a hard line, even before the 19 October car bombing. He has been under constant pressure from his Sunni powerbase, increasingly incensed by the Syrian regime's violent repression. Too, he has slowly but surely been deepening relations with Saudi Arabia and the West, a reflection of the Syrian regime's diminishing ability to project itself as a potent and lasting force with which to reckon. A Lebanese website echoed widely-held perceptions when it quoted Miqati as having said, "when we pray, we look toward Mecca … My political direction (*qibla*) is Saudi Arabia".[153] A former adviser to Miqati confirmed this view: "The prime minister is a very intelligent man, and he typically calculates every move he makes. What he sees is a Syrian regime losing its influence, and Saudi Arabia poised to assume a greater role in the future".[154] Of course, Hizbollah's evident desire to preserve the government allowed the prime minister greater latitude when it came to Syria.

All in all, Hizbollah's consistent support for Miqati aptly illustrates its balancing act between two priorities: defending the Syrian regime while safeguarding its posture in Lebanon not only at present, but also, possibly, in anticipation of eventual changes in Damascus. Many times, these objectives overlapped and for the most part relations between the movement and the regime next door have remained strong. But they occasionally have diverged, with Hizbollah continuing to seek to preserve both its country's and its government's stability when the Syrian regime appeared intent on exporting its conflict across the border.

This was most flagrant in August 2012 when Michel Samaha – former Lebanese information minister and close ally of the Syrian regime – was arrested and accused of plotting to assassinate political and religious figures in coordination with Ali Mamlouk, head of Syria's security bureau.[155] Presented with reportedly powerful evidence,

[148] See *Al-Akhbar*, 30 November 2011. In 2012, Lebanon paid its share of the tribunal without much fanfare or publicity.

[149] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, June 2012.

[150] The full transcript of Hassan Nasrallah's interview on al-Mayadeen TV is available at www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=298651&frid=21&seccatid=19&cid=21&fromval=1.

[151] Although the U.S. had opposed Miqati's bid for the premiership, criticising his alliance with Hizbollah, the administration's assessment has changed over time, seeing how he has managed both to maintain domestic stability and, at times, put the Shiite movement in an awkward position. A senior U.S. official said, "so far, Lebanon has managed quite remarkably to insulate itself from the impact of Syrian events. There is a chance this could be sustained, albeit no guarantee. Overall, Miqati has played a very useful role". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 19 July 2012.

[152] *The Daily Star*, 10 September 2012. Miqati also asserted, "we have kept out of interfering in Syria, but we cannot turn a blind eye to any act being committed against Lebanon – or to the crisis being imported". *The Daily star*, 4 September 2012. He summoned the Lebanese ambassador to file a complaint against Syria's continuous shelling of the border area. See "Miqati tasks Lebanese ambassador to send message to Syrian FM over shelling of border towns", Naharnet, 3 September 2012. This so-called "dissociation policy" has not been devoid of contradictions. Lebanon voted against Syria's suspension from the Arab League in November 2011; in January 2012, it refrained from endorsing an almost unanimous Arab League plan calling on Assad to transfer powers to his vice president. Conversely, when the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation suspended Syria's membership during an August 2012 summit in Mecca, Lebanon signed on.

[153] See http://beirutobserver.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83344:Miqati&catid=39:features.

[154] Crisis Group telephone interview, Tripoli-based analyst, October 2012.

[155] See *The Daily Star*, 12 August 2012; "Is Assad trying to export Syria's crisis to Lebanon", *The Guardian*, 14 August 2012.

including Samaha's taped confession, the Shiite movement largely remained mum as its Lebanese ally and Mamlouk both were indicted – even though the arrest was conducted by the Internal Security Forces (ISF), a security body allegedly close to the March 14 coalition. As an analyst with ties to Hizbollah said, "the party was in a difficult position. Michel Samaha was caught doing something basically indefensible".[156]

What all this means in terms of Hizbollah's longer-term calculations and, notably, what the movement will do should the Syrian regime begin to crumble remains unclear – the latter a subject its leaders studiously avoid discussing. As an analyst with close ties to Hizbollah argued, the movement could live with a prolonged, drawn-out conflict; it could even live with an outcome that saw the collapse of the existing regime so far as what came afterwards were chaotic and fragmented. In that situation, it still could rely on Alawite and other allies while Sunni insurgents, divided and disorganised, hardly would present a serious threat to the movement's interests.[157] Though not an ideal outcome, this would be preferable to a transition toward a new political system resentful of Hizbollah's enduring support for the regime – let alone one that were coherent, consolidated and clearly hostile to Iran and its Lebanese ally. For now, Hizbollah seems to rule out such a scenario. A senior official said:

Even if the rebels succeed in removing this regime, there will be all-out chaos and sectarian conflict, not an alternative regime. It is simply impossible for a new regime to emerge in Syria, even if the whole world stood against Assad. His loyalists will continue to fight even if that means turning into opposition armed groups themselves. In addition, the new regime would face al-Qaeda affiliated groups and the like.[158]

Hizbollah's tendency to tie its fate to the current regime has fuelled speculation regarding the depth and scope of its implication in the ongoing military struggle. From the outset, Syrian opposition sources claimed that movement snipers were lending a hand to regime forces and killing protesters.[159] Over time, such accusations have become more pointed and widespread; U.S. officials likewise have argued adamantly, both publicly[160] and privately, that the regime, Hizbollah and Iran were closely cooperating militarily. Speaking in August 2012, an administration official claimed:

> Hizbollah has sent its militants in the dozens, perhaps low hundreds to help, train and even fight, acting as snipers. They were flown to Aleppo. We are not sure exactly why, most logically because they simply are better at it. For the Shiite movement, there could be a side-benefit, providing experience to militants who have not been battle-trained since 2006. Iran likewise has enormously deepened its involvement. Today, there are thousands of Quds force militants [Iran's army special forces] in Syria, who train fighters, intercept communications and so forth – although we are unsure whether they are doing the fighting yet. What is more, Hizbollah and Iran both appear to be focusing on forming and equipping an elite militia, something akin to an Alawite equivalent of the Shiite movement, with some of the best fighters involved. Its objective might be to deter any future assault on an Alawite stronghold were one to come about, and also to ensure that Alawites have a strong seat at the table in the event of a post-Assad configuration.[161]

The assertion regarding an Alawite militia has gained prominence in recent weeks, adding to speculation that the Shiite movement is contemplating a so-called plan B – a fragmented Syria with separate de facto zones of influence. Western officials thus contend that Hizbollah and Iran are forming a so-called *Jaish Shaabi* (Popular Army) in order to prolong the regime's lifespan and, if and when it falls, defend an area of Syria (optimally comprising Damascus, Homs and the Mediterranean coastline) that can

[156] Crisis Group interview, Lebanese analyst, Beirut, September 2012. However, another analyst with good access to Hizbollah asserted that the movement was convinced that some of the accusations levelled against Samaha were exaggerated: "The movement believes that the claim – seen in the media – that Samaha was targeting the Maronite Patriarch or Sunni politicians is baseless. The explosives [purportedly found in Samaha's car] were intended to target Syrian rebels and networks involved in arms smuggling. That said, regardless of the facts, this suggests a divergence between Hizbollah's and the regime's interests. This is not new. Hizbollah's alliance with Syria is of a strategic nature; over the years they have differed many times on tactics and views". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2012.

[157] Reflecting on this, an Arab observer said, "Hizbollah, like Iran, knows how to navigate amid chaos, amid shades of gray. The West and its Arab allies lack that ability; they are too rigid. They pick a side and, if it does not prevail outright, they are at sea. That's what happened in Iraq after the U.S. invasion. Indeed, that's what has happened in Lebanon for years!" Crisis Group interview, October 2012.

[158] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[159] See Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit., pp. 3-7.

[160] The U.S. has accused Hizbollah of actively supporting the Syrian regime with a "range of activity, including logistical support, operational support, to the Syrian Government in its violent crackdown". See www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm.

[161] Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, August 2012. He added, "the opposition has killed or captured a number of Iranians". Ibid. A senior Palestinian official with connections in Syria alleged that Damascus airport "was full of Iranians. They come and go without the Syrians even stamping their passports now". Crisis Group interview, October 2012.

be linked to predominantly Shiite regions of Lebanon.[162] Such steps might in fact reflect less a sectarian move than a more straightforward attempt to shore up elite regime troops.[163]

In September 2012, a March 14 official acknowledged lacking hard evidence of direct Hizbollah military involvement in Syria but pointed to the burials of movement "martyrs" killed under mysterious circumstances.[164] To date, anti-regime forces have yet to clearly bring forward Iranian or Hizbollah fighters who have been killed or captured in direct combat. Some observers have questioned whether the regime needs supplementary manpower and speculated that its allies would be taking a considerable risk in sending troops to fulfil missions in which they could be exposed – all the more so if dispatched in large numbers.[165]

Still, there is every reason to suspect that Syria's allies would offer their support, whether in terms of training, knowhow, hardware, intelligence and so on. The regime has made visible and obvious progress, since the outbreak of popular unrest, in developing crowd-control techniques (although this came too late to be of any practical use) as well as sophisticated communication interception capabilities (which have posed a growing challenge to opposition activists and militants); in both cases, it is highly likely that its allies provided critical help. The same logic almost certainly applies to the regime's overhaul of its military, which gradually is being reshaped in response to a threat to which it initially was ill suited.

There also are grounds to suspect that Hizbollah has assumed a more direct role in defence of Syria's Shiites, controlling areas such as Sit Zeineb in Damascus[166] and training local vigilantes in others, notably in central Syria.[167] Its protection of Lebanese Shiite villages along the Syrian-Lebanese border has prompted clashes with opposition armed groups,[168] which arguably account for at least some of the reported casualties (and mysterious funerals) in its ranks.

Whether Hizbollah would do all it could to maximise chances of the regime's survival, is uncertain. Clearly, it wishes outsiders to believe its response would be harsh. In Nasrallah's words:

> They [the Gulf states and the West] have to understand – and they understand very well – that a war on Iran and a war on Syria will not be limited to Iran or Syria; they will spread instead, to the entire region. These are rational and real considerations.[169]

But openly intervening in the conflict at a time when Assad's fate would appear sealed could come at a heavy domestic, regional and international price.[170]

Perhaps the most critical factor in Hizbollah's calculations would be whether and to what extent it fears a significant alteration of the Lebanese or regional power balance. This might follow not only from foreign direct military intervention, but also from an Israeli strike against Iran; a more intensive use of Lebanon as a transit point for arming the Syrian opposition;[171] as well as attempts to pro-

[162] Referring to this, Western officials allege that the elite force had been dispatched to several hot spots, including Deir al-Zour in the east, Aleppo and Homs, and that – despite their relatively small numbers – their superior fighting skills have made a difference. "This is what really scares me. They are tough, they are well-trained and are provided with the best equipment. It's not entirely clear to us what their endgame is, and it is not entirely clear to me to whom they owe their loyalty – to the Syrian regime or to those who have formed them". Crisis Group interview, Western official, October 2012.

[163] Reliance on a purely sectarian prism could result from the U.S. experience with and understanding of the Quds force in Iran, Shiite militias in Iraq and Hizbollah itself.

[164] Crisis Group interview, September 2012. A Hizbollah-affiliated website has posted information regarding Hizbollah members, including a commander, killed "while performing their jihadi duties"; it showed images of their funerals in the presence of senior party officials. Many have interpreted this as a confirmation that Hizbollah members were fighting in Syria. The movement's secrecy on the issue (where and how they were killed) has only further fuelled these suspicions. See www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=26124&cid=199; *The Washington Post*, 26 September 2012; www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=26429&cid=199#.UGqs2pdUe3Q.twitter; *The Daily Star*, 2 October 2012.

[165] Crisis Group interviews, Arab analysts, September-October 2012.

[166] The representative of a Palestinian faction with ties to Hizbollah claimed that "Hizbollah is present on the ground to secure Sit Zeineb. They even killed one of our men there recently, so we ought to know". Crisis Group interview, October 2012.

[167] Crisis Group interviews, security officers and regime proxies, central Syria, September 2012.

[168] Hizbollah officials allege that Syrian opposition armed groups repeatedly have sought to engage their fighters in these Lebanese areas and "suck them into the conflict". Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, September 2012. In an October 2012 speech, Nasrallah said that party members who were killed were defending their villages and families along the border. See *Al-Manar*, 11 October 2012.

[169] See *Al-Manar*, 11 November 2011.

[170] A U.S. official, after assessing how much, in the administration's view, Hizbollah and Iran already were doing to help Bashar, asked rhetorically, "let's assume we intervene militarily, say by providing surface-to-air missiles or imposing a no-fly-zone – tell me: what more can Iran and Hizbollah do?" Still, he acknowledged that many of his colleagues were not so sanguine and feared provoking far more intense outside intervention (and regional spill-over) on the regime's behalf. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, August 2012.

[171] A European diplomat closely involved in providing assistance to the Syrian opposition emphasised that the focus was on Turkey and, increasingly (due to its proximity to Damascus)

vide heavier and more substantial weapons to Lebanese Sunni militant groups that eventually could challenge the party's supremacy.[172] A journalist with close ties to the party said, "Hizbollah will not stand aside, watching its foes invade Syria and topple the regime. The movement won't tolerate the presence at its borders of enemy Saudi, French or American forces. In such a scenario, the least one should expect from it are military operations inside Syria".[173] Yet even that is not sure.

What appears clear is that, in line with its well-established practice, Hizbollah is intent on maximising its deterrence by both making explicit threats and shrouding them in ambiguity. "The party probably has planned different responses for different scenarios. But it definitely wants to hide its cards. Nobody knows how it will react. And those who pretend to know are just speculating".[174]

B. THE FUTURE CURRENT'S PERSPECTIVE

For the Sunni-dominated Future Current, led by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the Syrian crisis is of immense strategic interest – a "gift from heaven" as a former parliamentarian put it.[175] As the movement's officials and supporters view it, it represents first and foremost the beginning of the end of an implacable foe held responsible for the Sunni community's historical decline as well as for the assassination of their leader, Rafiq Hariri.[176] As a journalist put it succinctly, "the Syrian regime is little more than a reservoir of bad memories".[177]

Beyond that, the Syrian uprising offers the possibility of fundamentally altering the domestic balance of power to the Future Current's and, more generally, the Sunni community's advantage.[178] By depriving Hizbollah and its allies of their principal patron, the regime's fall, it is believed, would appreciably weaken them and tear the March 8 coalition apart. The Shiite movement, under this view, could no longer engage in strategic free-lancing, deciding alone on matters of war and peace; eventually, it would be compelled to agree to a process of disarmament. A March 14 official said, "Hizbollah's strength is based principally on its military arsenal. Without Syrian help, it will lose the key transit route for its weapons; lose its military superiority; and be compelled to fully join state institutions and accept the rules of the political game".[179]

At a regional level, Future Current officials saw equally advantageous changes: a rupture in the Syrian-Iranian axis and, more broadly, of the so-called Shiite axis stretching from Iran to Iraq to (Alawite) Syria to Lebanon; a brake on Tehran's ability to reach into the Arab world; and the re-emergence of Saudi Arabia – the party's main benefactor – as a key player in Lebanon. A senior party leader commented, "the Syrian revolution is of strategic importance. Events in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen essentially affected only their own countries. But Syria will have a huge impact on Lebanon and on the whole region. It will alter the regional equation".[180]

Reality likely is more nuanced as, in private, some Future Current leaders concede.[181] As seen, the Shiite movement possesses important assets that are not inherently dependent on who rules Damascus; accordingly, it neither immediately nor necessarily follows that Assad's downfall would strike Hizbollah a fatal blow. Similar hopes that the movement would be compelled to lay down its arms grew in 2000, in the wake of Israel's withdrawal, only to be quickly dashed.[182]

Caught between this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to undermine its adversary and concern about neither provoking a harsh Hizbollah reaction nor fuelling an unpredictable sectarian conflict, the Future Current has been

Jordan. "As for Lebanon, we know how dangerous it would be". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, September 2012.

[172] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, analysts close to Hizbollah, Beirut, January-August 2012.

[173] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[174] Crisis Group interview, journalist with close ties to Hizbollah, Beirut, July 2012.

[175] Crisis Group interview, former Future Current parliamentarian, Beirut, December 2011.

[176] A historian from Tripoli explained, "Saad Hariri is saying: you did your best to destabilise me and remove me from power. Now is my revenge. And I am delighted at the thought of your impending fall". Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, November 2011. Hariri, who has become an avid tweeter, has resorted to the online social platform to express his views: "I think of Syria his [Bashar Assad] days are numbered"; "It's a big lie everything he said about #Syria was a lie, He is the main killer in all of this". See *The Daily Star*, 8 December 2011. A Future Current sympathiser said, "the Syrian people's uprising is the perfect punishment against the criminal who killed Rafiq Hariri as well as other March 14 personalities". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2011.

[177] See Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon's politics*, op. cit., p. 6.

[178] A senior movement official said, "the balance of power will shift again, this time in favour of the March 14 coalition". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011.

[179] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2011.

[180] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2011.

[181] Crisis Group interview, Future Current official, Beirut, June 2012.

[182] At the time, the Christian opposition, Walid Jumblatt (head of the Progressive Socialist Party Druze movement), Rafiq Hariri and even Nabih Berri – who quickly shifted stance – all called for the Lebanese army's deployment to the southern border on the assumption that Israel's withdrawal would spell the end of Hizbollah's armed status.

engaging in its own balancing act. Concretely, it has tried to discredit the Miqati government without frontally opposing or seeking to oust it (at least until the 19 October attack);[183] privately, some party officials acknowledge that the prime minister has performed relatively well, keeping the country as immune as possible from the Syrian conflict and compelling Hizbollah to agree to controversial positions for the sake of maintaining the present government in place.[184]

The Future Current also has tried to keep the limelight on Hizbollah's military arsenal, blaming it for the proliferation of weapons throughout the country and for the growing sense of insecurity, without suggesting any concrete steps toward immediate disarmament. As a movement official said:

> How are we expected to control the spread of arms in Tripoli and other areas when Hizbollah has an arsenal even the Lebanese Armed Forces don't? How can we convince Sunni groups in Lebanon to throw down their weapons when we are answered "let the Shiites lay down theirs first"?[185]

Finally, the Future Current has expressed political solidarity with the Syrian opposition and adopted a very strong rhetorical stand against the regime – while simultaneously objecting to the use of Lebanon as a platform to assist the rebels. A senior Future Current official said, "our strategy is essentially to do nothing, just sit back and wait for the regime to fall".[186]

Still, there are signs that the movement at a minimum has used Turkey as a substitute arena for the support of Syrian armed groups. According to various media reports, citing Syrian rebels, Future Current representatives visited Antakya to oversee the distribution of weapons; this was confirmed to Crisis Group by U.S. and Syrian opposition sources.[187] A Future Current official added that the movement sought to keep a distance from the more militant Islamist activists whom it "should neither exclude, nor embrace",[188] not only due to the anxiety they provoke among Christians, but also because the Future Current embraces a more moderate approach of Islam and tries to reach out to a wider range of Lebanese.[189]

C. Wissam Hassan's Killing: A Game-Changer?

Wissam Hassan was not merely a security official, nor solely a senior one; he was a key player in a highly divided country. The former head of the security guard protecting then-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, he became head of the Internal Security Forces' Information Branch a year after the latter's assassination in 2005. From that time onwards, Hassan proved to be a key pillar of the Sunni community and of the March 14 coalition in terms both of security and intelligence gathering. He owed much of his domestic fame from his role in several high-profile cases: the investigation into Hariri's murder which led to the indictment of Hizbollah members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; the uncovering of a number of Israeli spy rings;[190] and, more recently, thwarting the alleged plot by former minister Michel Samaha to provoke violent incidents in Lebanon.[191] For the March 14 coalition, his kill-

[183] The Future Current's attacks on the cabinet have come in various shades. It first sought to undermine Prime Minister Miqati (a Sunni who hails from Tripoli), a potential competitor for the loyalty of Tripoli's Sunni community. Next, it sought to present the cabinet as both led by Hizbollah and beholden to Damascus. See Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon's politics*, op. cit. As stated by Saad Hariri, "this government does not represent the will of the people. It was appointed by Assad and company to side with them on everything". "Hariri: We will bring down this government", Ya Libnan, 21 November 2011. Moreover, the Future Current and its allies repeatedly underscore the government's incompetence and paralysis. For instance, Future Current leader and former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said, "the experience with the government of Hizbollah says that it succeeded in spreading misery, poverty, confusion, economic regression, political failure and nothing more …. The Lebanese want achievements". "Saniora: Those accusing Mustaqbal of armament trying to justify their own", Naharnet, 12 February 2012.

[184] A Future Current official said, "I have to acknowledge that things would have been far more complicated with Hariri as prime minister. Hizbollah in opposition would have created more trouble and we would have been in a very difficult posture. I don't like the shape of the current cabinet, but it is true that it has tied Hizbollah's hands: they are desperate for the government to remain in place, and for that they have to swallow some pretty hard concessions". Crisis Group interview, September 2012.

[185] Crisis Group interview, Future Current representative, Beirut, June 2012.

[186] Crisis Group interview, Future Current senior official, Istanbul, October 2012.

[187] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. official, Syrian opposition activist, Washington DC, September 2012. See also "Syria's secular and Islamist rebels: Who are the Saudis and the Qataris arming?", *Time World*, 18 September 2012.

[188] Crisis Group interview, September 2012.

[189] Crisis Group interviews, Future Current official and supporters, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida and Arsal, January-August 2012.

[190] Between 2008 and 2011, the ISF's Information Branch headed by Wissam Hassan uncovered more than 30 Israeli spy cells. Among its purported agents were members of the Lebanese army and officials with close ties to political parties, notably the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Current, as well as several Hizbollah members. See *An-Nahar*, 31 July 2010, *Al-Akhbar*, 5 September 2011, *As-Safir*, 17 May 2009.

[191] Several observers and politicians have sought to link his assassination to the so-called Samaha plot. A senior Future Cur-

ing represents a substantial blow. In the words of a Future Current official:

> Hassan pre-empted and prevented a number of attacks aimed at March 14 officials. Most of us [members of the coalition] repeatedly were warned by him that our lives were in danger. In my case alone, he twice uncovered very serious and dangerous plots aiming at my assassination. After his killing, we definitely all feel more vulnerable.[192]

His role in unearthing the Israeli spy rings notwithstanding, Hizbollah distrusted him, principally as a result of his part in the Hariri case. In its effort to discredit him and the results of his investigation, the Shiite movement claimed that he had fabricated evidence and relied on false witness testimony,[193] eventually calling for his removal.[194] In the view of many of his coreligionists, Hassan became a "symbol of Sunni resistance against Hizbollah's hegemony".[195]

His killing was experienced as a political earthquake, the crossing of a redline that risked upending the political situation as a whole. March 14 leaders lost little time in blaming Syria and – although not with the same unanimity – Hizbollah.[196] A senior Future Current official said, "after the assassination of Wissam Hassan, we in March 14 drew the line. No more business as usual".[197] Another movement official asserted: "Hassan's assassination brings us back to the pre-Doha period", meaning the time before an agreement was reached with the March 8 coalition and tensions were at their height. Shedding the (relative) restraint they had shown vis-à-vis Miqati and his cabinet, March 14 took the position that he and his government had to go. Hassan's funeral turned into a political demonstration in which leader after leader of the movement denounced Miqati as complicit in the assassination,[198] demanding formation of:

> A non-partisan government that all parties, including March 14, can trust; one that can shield the country and is not under Syrian and Iranian influence. A non-partisan government would also be better suited to prepare for and oversee the 2013 parliamentary elections. We need a non-partisan government that can hold the country together during the violent transition we are seeing in Syria.[199]

In the country's highly polarised, and evenly divided, context, however, the opposition's confrontational stance appeared to backfire. The demonstrations called for by the Future Current were not as massive, organised or peaceful as some of its leaders had hoped; they were unable to control Sunni protesters who, enraged by the killing, resorted to violence, spread chaos, and angrily stormed the prime minister's headquarters. The image of this mob-like behaviour on the part of a group that claimed it wanted to strengthen state institutions hurt March 14, allowed Miqati to appear more responsible and, to an extent, enabled Hizbollah and its allies to absorb the blow.

Hariri even managed to alienate Walid Jumblatt, notwithstanding his role as a key swing vote in the tug of war between March 14 and March 8. The Druze leader opposed calls for his ministers to resign, citing the risk of a political vacuum.[200] During a television interview, he blamed Hariri for what he described as a sectarian reaction to Hassan's killing, claiming that the former prime minister had told him, "Sunnis are being killed and Wissam Hassan is the martyr of Sunnis".[201] Hariri denied this, accusing Jumblatt of lying[202] and of belonging to the "Syrian-Iranian alliance".[203] Ultimately, although Miqati on 20 October offered his resignation – which President Suleiman rejected – the unrest ultimately bolstered his position. Sensing the shifting winds, he changed course a week later, asserting, "my resignation is no longer an option, and I take it back altogether because it would now mean that I agree to be held responsible for the blood of Brigadier General Wissam Hassan".[204]

rent official said, "the killing is a big blow to the judicial process against Michel Samaha. The process likely will come to a halt. The message is unmistakable: if you move forward on this case you likely will meet General Hassan's fate". Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

[192] Crisis Group interview, Future Current official, November 2012.

[193] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, 2009-2010. See also *As-Safir*, 24 November 2010.

[194] See, eg, *Al-Manar*, 20 August 2011; "Al-Moussawi accuses Wissam al-Hassan of leaking names of indictment suspects to media", Naharnet, 7 July 2011.

[195] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli sheikh, November 2012.

[196] Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said, "the pro-Assad regime, alongside Iran, is clearly and directly involved in the plot to liquidate Brigadier General Hassan, [a scheme] being carried out by Hezbollah". *The Daily Star*, 25 October 2012. A Saudi official agreed, "what happened to Wissam was Hizbollah's doing. They are trying to consolidate control as they are preparing for [the] possibility of losing their Syrian ally". Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

[197] Crisis Group interview, senior Future Current official, November 2012.

[198] See *An-Nahar*, 22 October 2012.

[199] Crisis Group email correspondence, senior Future Current official, November 2012.

[200] See "Jumblat: Govt. resignation will lead to vacuum and Syrian regime trap", Naharnet, 22 October 2012.

[201] www.lbcgroup.tv/news/57454/jumblatt-hariri-ties-enter-phase-of-high-tension-f.

[202] *The Daily Star*, 30 October 2012.

[203] *The Daily Star*, 26 October 2012.

[204] *An-Nahar*, 28 October 2012.

Even March 14's foreign allies appeared somewhat alarmed at the coalition's fervent calls for the government to step down, fearing a political and security vacuum that would further threaten stability.[205] Reflecting on this turn of events, a journalist with close ties to the Future Current said:

> One can clearly see how confused the movement leadership and its constituency are. They have been claiming for almost two years now that their aim is to topple this government. Yet they don't have a clear vision of what's next. Worse, they don't know what course of action to take in order to achieve their goal. The killing of Wissam Hassan could have been an opportunity to alter the status quo. So far, they have wasted it.[206]

In like manner, the chaos that followed the assassination hurt March 14's cause, at least for a while; even residents of Sunni areas, however much they condemned the killing, voiced discontent over the clashes and unrest that engulfed parts of the country, notably Beirut and Tripoli.[207]

The Future Current and their allies quickly sought to regain footing and, to an extent, they did. They made clear that by toppling the government they did not intend to usher in an era of uncertainty, pointing to the fact that a caretaker government with limited powers would be in charge; Western countries in particular responded by joining calls for an end to the current cabinet.[208] A Saudi official with close ties to the Future Current leadership explained:

> The U.S. has been telling us that we "cannot afford a vacuum" and thus that we can't be precipitous in calling for the government to go. But that is wrong on two counts: first, Miqati has shown he is a cover for Hizbollah's and Iran's project. True, he agreed to extend the funding for the tribunal and that was enough to buy him respectability in Washington. But that aside, all he has done has helped Hizbollah which has used the recent period to further shape the state and place its people in key positions. Second, if he steps down, he becomes the leader of a caretaker government. So there is no vacuum: the cabinet can take care of everyday affairs but it cannot pass laws or appoint people, meaning Hizbollah's efforts to control the state can be stymied. Besides, we have several precedents: both Siniora and Saad Hariri led caretaker governments. We explained this to the U.S. which has since softened its position.[209]

A Future Current parliamentarian said:

> At the beginning, we were confused and troubled. Once more, we had to think and act under the fear and threat of being killed. Yet, soon afterwards, together with our allies, we were able to regain our composure and we took several positive steps: issuance of an important communiqué;[210] organising two anti-government sit-ins, one in Tripoli and the other in Beirut; engaging in diplomatic outreach to explain our position; boycotting all parliamentarian comittees that included a minister.[211]

This does not mean that March 14 is close to achieving its goal; for now, Miqati is not indicating an intention to resign, nor do members of the March 8 coalition appear willing to relent given the considerable stakes. A Future Current official acknowledged this:

> Nobody should be deluded. No one, not us [the March 14 coalition], nor Saudi Arabia, nor the West can topple the government. Miqati will not resign. A regional equation [a Syria-Hizbollah accord] brought him to power, and he will only leave when this equation is no longer viable. All that we are doing is to attract media attention and express our discontent.[212]

Hizbollah kept a low profile following the assassination. Even among its detractors, views differ as to whether it had a hand in Hassan's killing: some, as seen, were convinced of its culpability given its alliance with Syria, and opposition to Hassan's activities; others had a hard time imagining the movement would so brazenly cross a redline and risk a domestic conflagration that could only exacerbate Sunni-Shiite tensions, further radicalise the Sunni community and, perhaps, intensify Saudi interference.

Regardless of Hizbollah's involvement, however, the attack put it on the spot: for the Shiite movement, the choice appeared to be between seeking to pacify the situation (eg,

[205] The U.S., France, the UK and the EU were among the countries that expressed concern at the prospect of a political vacuum should Miqati resign. See "Western diplomats rally around Lebanese prime minister", Al-Monitor, 22 October 2012. A U.S. official said, "we favour formation of a new government, but we would like assurances that this would be done in a way that preserves the country's stability and avoids a vacuum". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, November 2012. See also "U.S. backs calls for new Lebanese government", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2012. During his visit to Lebanon, French President François Hollande reiterated the importance of preserving stability. *L'Orient le Jour*, 4 November 2012.

[206] Crisis Group telephone interview, Lebanese journalist, 22 October 2012.

[207] Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Tripoli residents, October-November 2012.

[208] On the U.S. reaction, see "U.S. supports new Lebanese government coalition, spokeswoman says", CNN, 24 October 2012.

[209] Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

[210] See *The Daily Star*, 31 October 2012.

[211] Crisis Group interview, Future Current parliamentarian, November 2012.

[212] Crisis Group interview, Future Current official, November 2012.

by accepting a new government or distancing itself from the Syrian regime) and maintaining its stance. Partly aided by March 14's initial missteps – principally the demonstrators' attempt to break into the prime minister's headquarters – partly (or, rather, mostly) because it felt that compromise would come at too heavy a price, the movement stood firm. It condemned the attack and demanded justice but, such rhetorical pronouncements aside, did not modify its stance or (as of this writing) show openness to opposition calls for a new government. For Hizbollah, preserving the government in the current regional environment is a vital interest. A movement official explained:

> In this government, Hizbollah enjoys the full support of eighteen ministers (from the March 8 bloc). Any new government with a March 14 majority or any national unity cabinet will call into question the party's military arsenal. It will be more difficult for Hizbollah to preserve its weapons or protect against accusations that it killed Hariri. After Hassan's assassination, pressure will even increase. The party also fears that any new government will conspire against it at the regional and international levels, that it will provide direct, official support to the Syrian uprising and that the country will officially become involved in toppling Assad.[213]

Too, Hizbollah – though undoubtedly concerned about the Sunni community's likely increased militarisation – still can bank on its far superior firepower. As a Shiite journalist with deep knowledge of the movement, asked rhetorically, "why would a party that has Hizbollah's power feel compelled to compromise?"[214] Asked about its intentions, a Hizbollah official chose to cast doubt on the perpetrator of the attack: "Hassan was assassinated for one reason only: to topple this government and bring in a new one that actively supports the Syrian opposition, that will pull Lebanon in the orbit of Gulf Arab states and the U.S., whose goal is to topple Assad".[215]

IV. A BRITTLE STATUS QUO

Driven by a shared interest in sustaining a degree of calm, both Hizbollah and the Future Current until recently expressed confidence that an all-out conflict was not in the cards.[216] Both took steps to prevent sectarian tensions from spinning out of control, both continued to participate in the national dialogue (periodic meetings that began in 2006 and bring together key political leaders),[217] and both agreed to the so-called Baabda Declaration, which formalised Lebanon's "dissociation policy" from the Syrian crisis.[218] Still, the notion that Lebanon can be insulated from the effects of the Syrian crisis has been fanciful from the start and this became clear with Wissam Hassan's assassination. The two parties' fundamentally opposed visions of their neighbour's future – and their thoroughly diverging interests in this regard – by definition limits their ability to contain the crisis. If anything, what is surprising is how well Lebanon has withstood growing pressures; to a large extent, this grew out of widespread fear as to what might happen should the country revert to out-and-out conflict.

Yet, even before the 19 October bombing, trends hardly were promising. Sunnis feel increasingly emboldened, eager for revenge; Shiites feel more and more exposed, fearful of their growing regional isolation. Sectarian clashes have been on the rise, with the ever-present risk of cascading intercommunal violence.

Further down the road, the 2013 parliamentary elections – assuming they are held on time[219] – offer fresh reasons for

[213] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, November 2012.
[214] Crisis Group telephone interview, Lebanese journalist, 22 October 2012.
[215] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, November 2012.

[216] Crisis Group interviews, Future Current and Hizbollah officials, Beirut, Tripoli, May-June 2012. A Future Current adviser said, "as long as Hizbollah and the Future Current don't want a confrontation, Lebanon will benefit from a certain level of immunity". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.
[217] Although the national dialogue could serve as a platform to enhance communication between Lebanese groups, it has been largely inefficient. Not only has it focused on the divisive issue of Hizbollah's arsenal, which is unlikely to be resolved in this framework, it has never taken any steps to address the question of weapons held by Palestinian factions, the one and only decision all parties agree. Moreover, the national dialogue did not put in place follow-up mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its decisions. Thus, the so-called Baabda Declaration (see below) remained ink on paper.
[218] The Baabda Declaration refers to a document submitted by the president during a session of the national dialogue in which participants committed to, inter alia, insulate Lebanon from the Syrian crisis; preserve its stability and civil peace; and refrain from using Lebanon as a passageway for the smuggling of weapons and personnel into Syria. www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=14483.
[219] In these elections, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt is likely to play a decisive role in determining who commands a parliamentary majority. Intent on preserving his position within his

concern: a March 14 victory would exacerbate Hizbollah fears whereas a March 8 success would lead to the nomination of a Sunni prime minister viewed as unrepresentative by large segments of the community. In either case, confessional tensions are likely to mount.[220]

There are more immediate dangers. Chief among them is the dominant political forces' declining ability to control their respective and increasingly polarised constituencies notably as tempers flare and the overall climate deteriorates. As seen in the demonstrations that followed Wissam Hassan's killing, this is particularly true in the case of the Future Current, whose credibility, standing and influence have eroded among its base. The party no longer is in power. Its leader, Saad Hariri, has gone into self-imposed and prolonged exile, leaving a void that is all the more costly for a movement whose legitimacy traditionally has relied on patriarchal figures. As a movement official put it, "for sure, the long absence of Hariri has harmed the current. People want to see their leader. Today, many, including Islamists, are trying to exploit the situation and fill the empty space".[221]

The Future Current also is financially strapped, loosening the cliental bonds that long sustained loyalty and opening opportunities for others.[222] Several of its community service centres in Akkar, Tripoli and the Bekaa valley have shut down, pushing a number of supporters to seek assistance from competitors – the two Tripoli billionaires, Prime Minister Miqati and Mohamad Safadi, the finance minister, as well as various Islamist groups.[223]

This trend is particularly worrying in light of the Sunni community's radicalisation and drift toward more militant, Islamist groups which long have felt neglected, constrained and marginalised by the Future Current.[224] Many within the Sunni community blame Hariri and his leadership for failing to effectively stand up to Hizbollah, whether in March 2008 or now. The killing of Wissam Hassan fuelled further resentment and frustration, with many blaming the Future Current for its inability to topple Miqati's government.[225] A Tripoli sheikh with close ties to the Future Current said, "unfortunately, the killing of Wissam Hassan has further exposed the Future Current's weaknesses. Sunnis want a strong and bold leadership; one that can fiercely stand up to Hizbollah; one that when it declares it wants to overthrow the government, actually does it".[226]

community, Jumblatt traditionally has sided with the most powerful actors at any given time, casting himself as swing voter and kingmaker. In January 2011, as Syria regained influence in Lebanon and the region and as Hizbollah appeared stronger than ever, he moved away from the March 14 coalition and aligned himself with March 8, thus playing an instrumental role in the appointment of Najib Miqati as head of government following Saad Hariri's ouster in January. Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, Jumblatt progressively has distanced himself from Hizbollah. In August 2012, he said, "this vague partnership [with Hizbollah] under the slogan of 'Army, people and resistance', cannot continue at the expense of the state, [the Lebanese] Army, security and economy". *The Daily Star*, 12 August 2012. Jumblatt could throw his lot in with March 14 in the upcoming elections. A senior Future Current official, defending this view, said, "our relations with Jumblatt are back to normal". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, October 2012. Likewise, a Hizbollah official said, "we don't expect Walid Jumblatt to remain on our side in the next election". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012. It is unclear how the recent rift with Hariri over Hassan's killing might affect Jumblatt's stance in the next elections. In the end, personal affinities are unlikely to play a significant part. The Druze leader almost certainly will weigh more important elements, including "electoral calculations to secure a certain number of parliamentarians; how the situation evolves in Syria; whether Hizbollah will be weaker or stronger; the international community's and Arab states' stances; and so forth. For the time being, Jumblatt wants to avoid an all-out confrontation with Hizbollah. This position might or might not change in 2013". Crisis Group interview, journalist with close ties to Walid Jumblatt, November 2012.

[220] This occurred in January 2011 when Miqati became prime minister with the help of Hizbollah and its allies. Should a similar scenario repeat itself under current circumstances, it almost certainly would trigger far greater hostility on the part of Sunni militants who have made clear they will not tolerate a Sunni prime minister selected by Shiites. Echoing a view widely shared among Tripoli militants, a Salafi leader warned, "Hizbollah has to know. We [the Sunni] are not weak anymore. It can't repeat the scenario of January 2011. This will be a declaration of war against our community". Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, July 2012. Asked what the party would do if March 14 were to prevail, a senior Hizbollah official asserted, "this must not happen". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[221] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, May 2012.

[222] According to several reports, Saad Hariri faced financial problems that forced him to sell some of his Saudi telecommunication company's shares. Employees of Future Current institutions and its officials confirmed that the movement had experienced serious financial difficulties, including delays in salary payment and the firing of employees. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Akkar, Tripoli, 2011.

[223] Crisis Group interviews, current and former Future Current supporters, Tripoli and Akkar, January-February and May 2012.

[224] Tellingly, the Future Current and its allies made only very little room for Islamists on their parliamentary lists. See Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon's Politics*, op. cit.

[225] Crisis Group interviews, journalists, analysts and sympathisers of the Future Current, October-November 2012.

[226] Crisis Group interview, November 2012. A Future Current sympathiser said, "people who back the movement are fed up with statements and slogans. They want concrete actions on the ground". Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2012.

Today, as Sunni militants see their brethren rise up in Syria, they feel empowered, ready to challenge Hizbollah at home. In June 2012 in Saida – the hometown of both Saad Hariri and former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora – Ahmad al-Assir, a Salafi sheikh, took aim at the Future leadership, organising a sit-in and blocking the southern city's main entrance in protest against Hizbollah's arsenal. Rejecting the Future leaders' calls to end the sit-in, he pointedly took Siniora to task, saying, "you [might] be afraid of Hassan Nasrallah, but we [the Islamists] are not".[227] On 11 November, clashes broke between Al-Assir followers and Hizbollah members over banners the Shiite movement hung in Saida.[228] Three people were killed, including two of the Sunni sheikh's bodyguards, and two Hizbollah members were injured.[229]

In like manner, a Tripoli sheikh said, "everyone, including Hariri, has to understand this: we are not followers anymore. Politicians and the state have to deal with us as real forces".[230] To an extent, Hariri is paying a price for having encouraged anti-Hizbollah sentiment without being able to channel it or to show any tangible achievement. A journalist who used to work for the Future Current's newspaper, *al-Mustaqbal*, put it as follows:

> Hariri has radicalised the street through sectarian incitement to an extent that he no longer can control it. He committed many mistakes: he accused Syria of killing his father and then, later, he apologised;[231] he promised Akkar and Tripoli development and money but most of his announced projects never materialised. Today, the Sunni street is punishing its leader.[232]

Tellingly, when clashes erupted in Tripoli, Akkar or Beirut,[233] the Future Current was unable to contain or control them and had very little purchase over Sunni protesters. Describing the party's dilemma, one of its advisers said, "we can't adopt a subservient discourse yet, at the same time, we don't want to be led by a street that is getting more radical by the day".[234]

Dynamics differ within the Shiite community but they are not without their own perils. Shiites for the most part have been closing ranks behind Hizbollah, persuaded that the fall of the Assad regime would give rise to an Islamist or, worse, Salafi successor. In like manner, they fear an alliance of Lebanese and Syrian Sunnis at their expense. Should this come to pass, they worry, the Sunnis' first objective will be to seek revenge against Hizbollah and the community as a whole, reverse social gains achieved by the community over the past two decades and once again treat them as second-class citizens. A bus driver in Hay el-Selloum, a predominantly Shiite neighbourhood of southern Beirut, said, "if the Syrian regime falls, Sunnis will try to eliminate both Hizbollah and Amal. Shiites will lose everything; we will be finished. We will go back to taking the most menial jobs and will lose all political and social protection".[235]

Yet maintaining community loyalty has come at a cost to Hizbollah. For it has felt compelled to turn a blind eye to all manner of illicit activity in Shiite neighbourhoods, including its main stronghold in Dahiyeh, the capital's southern suburb, such as criminality, corruption and drug trafficking. This complacency has allowed these trends, along with street fights,[236] to become more prevalent in recent months.[237] *Al-Akhbar* and *As-Safir*, two newspapers with close ties to the movement, acknowledged the community's mounting frustration with the gradual erosion of the social order, notably in Dahiyeh, and in particular with the feeling that persons closely connected to Hizbollah and Amal are beyond the reach of the law, unaccountable and immune from punishment.[238]

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[227] See "Siniora responsible for safety of Saida protesters, Assir warns", Now Lebanon, 29 June 2012.

[228] A day earlier, Al-Assir said, "Hizbollah is provoking us. They are killing us and they want to hang their banners in our city. Just yesterday you [Hassan Nasrallah], you killed Wissam Hassan and now you want to hang your banners in Saida. Impossible, you'll have to walk over our bodies. There might be people who are afraid, who are cowardly … but we are not … Go to hell Hassan Nasrallah". www.youtube.com/watch?v=G10hVCuuGZk&feature=endscreen.

[229] www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rkPe9C0IQHg; *Al-Akhbar*, 12 November 2012.

[230] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, May 2012.

[231] Saad Hariri said that accusing Bashar of killing his father had been an "error". See *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 September 2010.

[232] Crisis Group interview, June 2012.

[233] *See Al-Akhbar*, 16 May 2012.

[234] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

[235] Crisis Group interview, southern suburb of Beirut, September 2011.

[236] Large families and clans are a key component of the social fabric in many parts of Lebanon, including predominantly Shiite ones. In Dahiyeh in particular, kinship ties extend into the Bekaa, an area where tribal allegiances, the possession of weapons and drug production combine with anemic development and the absence of basic services to nurture a culture of defiance toward the state. A journalist from the Bekaa living in Dahiyeh explained, "when some Bekaa families came to Beirut, they brought their own ways with them". Crisis Group interview, Dahiyeh, June 2012; see also Crisis Group interviews, residents and journalists, Dahiyeh and the Bekaa, May-August 2012.

[237] Crisis Group interviews, residents and journalists, Dahiyeh, June-August 2012. See also "Crime but no punishment in Dahiyeh", Now Lebanon, 20 November 2011; "Armed clash in Dahiyeh between Moqdad family members, 'Hizbollah gunmen'", Naharnet, 12 June 2012.

[238] *Al-Akhbar*, 22 June 2012; *As-Safir*, 10 September 2011.

Hizbollah's famed ability to control its street has shown some signs of erosion. In May 2012, following the abduction of eleven Lebanese Shiite pilgrims in Syria by an opposition armed group, family and community members retaliated by attacking Syrian nationals in the country, defying Nasrallah's calls for calm.[239] Some threatened to abduct Syrian nationals[240] and a video purportedly showing a Shiite in Dahiyeh forcibly tattooing a Syrian refugee's forehead with the name of a venerated imam circulated widely on the internet.[241] More significantly, Hizbollah proved unable to secure the release of a Turkish citizen along with more than a dozen Syrians seized by members of the Shiite al-Meqdad clan[242] in response to the kidnapping of their relative in Syria by an armed group affiliated with the opposition. Nasrallah went so far as to acknowledge, "yes there is a street that is starting to get out of control".[243]

At least part of the explanation is to be found in the party's prioritising of internal cohesion over discipline at a time of heightened threat. By the same token, the movement has hesitated to go after individuals that belong to important families or clans, fearing that tribal allegiances would prevail over political ones.[244] When asked how Hizbollah could let the Al-Meqdad gunmen abduct foreigners on Lebanese soil, a journalist close to the party explained, "the movement can't stand up to the bigger families. If it confronts one member, it may rally the whole clan against it, and would then lose a major source of support".[245] A journalist from Dahiyeh pointed to the risks of a backlash, "thuggish behaviour has become widespread in the area, and that, in the longer term, will no doubt hurt the party's image in the eyes of its popular base. Today, Shiites are united against Sunnis but they increasingly express their discontent".[246]

To be sure, the problem is not specific to Shiite constituencies. In what bears the hallmarks of a gradually reviving militia culture – with recurring street fights and tit-for-tat abductions – feelings of insecurity are spreading around the country. Several Lebanese evoke an emerging "law of the jungle"[247] and, while the fragility of institutions has long been a feature of the state, it presently is being experienced more acutely.[248] The army in particular largely has been paralysed, restricted in its ability to halt security infringements for fear of rekindling sectarian tensions within its ranks and unable to prevent Syrian army intrusions. Residents of border areas – from all communities – are most distressed, complaining of the military's powerlessness to protect them.[249]

Taken together, the combination of heightened insecurity and continued state impotence is leading many to take matters into their own hands. Abductions are one sign; roadblocks on critical arteries, such as the airport road, that are erected almost daily by citizens angered by the repeated kidnappings, arrests and power cuts are another.[250] Expressing a widespread sentiment, a former minister said, "the state is being looked down upon. This entails people ignoring traffic signals, physically attacking state institutions, taking control of major thoroughfares, fighting on the streets and abducting fellow citizens".[251]

Two additional factors compound the problem. First is the economic downturn that is directly linked to the Syrian crisis.[252] Second is the absence of an external regulator of

[239] See *Al-Akhbar*, 23 May 2012.
[240] See "Families of abducted pilgrims threaten FSA", Ya Libnan, 6 June 2012.
[241] See www.metransparent.net/spip.php?article18752; www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIvqYZYHtoE.
[242] After freeing sixteen Syrians, the clan continued to detain a Turkish citizen and four Syrians it claimed were connected to opposition armed groups. All subsequently were freed by the Lebanese army. See "Army frees Syrians kidnapped by al-Meqdad, Turkish abductee freed", Naharnet, 11 September 2012.
[243] See *Al-Manar*, 17 August 2012.
[244] Crisis Group interview, member of large Shiite clan, Beirut, August 2012.
[245] Crisis Group interview, journalist, Beirut, September 2012.
[246] Crisis Group interview, December 2011.
[247] Crisis Group interview, former minister, Beirut, June 2012.
[248] Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese residents, Tripoli, Beirut, southern and northern Lebanon, 2011-2012. Growing security-related incidents prompted the interior minister to declare July a "security month," during which the Internal Security Forces was bolstered, security forces organised additional patrols across the country and the police conducted raids against wanted people. See "Charbel: 'Security month' to include all Lebanese areas", Now Lebanon, 25 June 2012.
[249] A local leader from Wadi Khaled said, "many times, we have requested the Lebanese army to deploy in the area. They simply can't; they can't face off against the Syrian army". Another village resident lamented, "I don't understand why the army doesn't do anything to protect us; aren't we Lebanese citizens?" In Tripoli's conflict-prone areas of Bab Tebanneh and Jabal Mohsen, residents from both sides repeated a now pervasive statement: "If the Lebanese army cannot protect us, we have to defend ourselves". Crisis Group interviews, residents and local leaders, Tripoli, Akkar, Wadi Khaled, May-June 2012.
[250] Crisis Group observations, Bechara el-Khoury (Beirut); airport road, June-August 2012. See *As-Safir*, 26 June 2012. According to an eyewitness, armed members of the al-Meqdad family undertook identity checks on 16 August in an area adjacent to the airport, with full impunity: "We were told that they were looking for people to abduct. There was an army checkpoint just a few metres away, but they just watched and let them go ahead". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 18 August 2012; see also *Al-Akhbar*, 17 August 2012.
[251] Crisis Group interview, former minister, Beirut, July 2012.
[252] Among the most significant economic consequences are the drop in Lebanon's exports to Syria – the country's primary outlet; the substantial price increase for a number of basic goods, many of which were imported or smuggled from Syria; a drop

Lebanese affairs. Indeed, for all the highly deleterious and destructive consequences of Syria's intrusion in Lebanon (of which there are many), and even as Damascus fuelled conflicts in the neighbouring state, it simultaneously helped manage and contain them. Today, it no longer plays that role and, to the extent it intervenes in Lebanon, it is almost entirely in destabilising ways – as exemplified in the Samaha affair, recurrent cross-border intrusions and, as many assume, the Wissam Hassan assassination.

V. CONCLUSION

As the Syrian conflict expands and spills over into neighbouring countries, risks grow daily that it might plunge Lebanon into another devastating confrontation. This fear, arguably more than anything else, is what so far has kept the political leaders in check; in this sense, the fifteen-year bloody civil war has acted as a powerful restraining factor. Yet, beyond that, its leaders have done little to prepare the country for a deepening crisis in the neighbouring state. Quite to the contrary: by adopting deeply conflicting stances on the Syrian uprising while ignoring long-festering domestic problems (about the nature of the political system, sectarian relations and the very identity of the country), they have simultaneously polarised the situation and left the country ill adapted to deal with the consequences. The killing of Wissam Hassan and its aftermath was only the latest proof.

The degree to which Lebanon can immunise itself from what happens in Syria is self-evidently limited. Geographical ties run too deep, history weighs too heavily and communal as well as political affiliations are too close for it to be otherwise. But the stakes are too grave for Lebanon – the most vulnerable of Syria's neighbours – to maintain its customary wait-and-see approach. Instead, a series of proactive steps are necessary on three different levels.

First, both the March 14 and March 8 coalitions will have to address the immediate crisis generated by Hassan's assassination. As of this writing, they appear wedded to diametrically opposing views regarding the survival of Miqati's current cabinet. Although March 14's efforts to topple it might very well fall short, they almost certainly will manage to maintain a high level of tension. In turn, Hizbollah could be pressed to adopt a more aggressive posture. Optimally, a solution that seeks to reassure both sides should be found. Hizbollah cannot ignore the consequences of the killing and the deep emotions it unleashed. Likewise, the Future Current and its allies cannot bury their head in the sand: the Shiite movement believes it is in an existential struggle and its constituency is alarmed at the prospect of once more being vulnerable and threatened.

In 2005, in the aftermath of Rafiq Hariri's assassination, a somewhat similar dynamic was at play. Then, a government headed by Najib Miqati and composed of technical experts or technocrats was formed; its principal role was to secure a stable transition toward elections. Its members committed not to be candidates in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. It might be possible to repeat this experience: a transitional government aiming to pave the way for the 2013 elections and that would postpone consideration of some of the more controversial issues, including notably the fate of Hizbollah's military arsenal. The government also would pledge to abstain on all Syria-

of as much as 80 per cent in tourism revenues in the first nine months of 2012 due to the prevailing sense of instability; a 20 per cent drop in real-estate sector investments; and a drop in GDP growth from an average of 8 per cent between 2007 and 2010 to less than 2 per cent in 2012; *The Daily Star*, 23 May 2012; "Lebanon economic report", Bank Audi, third quarter of 2012; Kuwait News Agency, 25 September 2012; *As-Safir*, 2 October 2012; *The Daily Star*, 23 October 2012.

related decisions at the UN, Arab League and other regional and international bodies. Finally, it would commit to rapid investigation into Hassan's assassination.

The bottom line is that the current cabinet, whose legitimacy implicitly was based on its ability to protect the country from the fallout of the Syrian conflict, has not been able to fulfil its mandate. As a result, it must give way to another government. Short of that, sectarian tensions are likely to rise in dangerous fashion and the message will be sent that political killings once more can occur with impunity and without consequences.

Second, Lebanon's various actors should seek to further limit the country's involvement in the Syrian conflict. Various steps need to be discussed including, inter alia:

- investigating all cases of Lebanese nationals killed in Syria;
- granting the Lebanese army a more robust mandate to monitor the borders and intervene in villages in those areas;
- providing necessary assistance to Syrian refugees to avoid a humanitarian crisis and ensuing tensions in host areas;
- defining explicit rules pursuant to which security services would deter Syrian nationals from using Lebanon as a staging ground, all the while avoiding arbitrary detentions and deportations; and
- holding accountable all Lebanese involved in the abduction, illegal arrest or ill-treatment of Syrian nationals.

Third, the country's polarisation and paralysis on most political and economic questions should not be invoked to ignore issues most susceptible to trigger conflict or further raise domestic tensions. Such long-festering problems include the indefinite detention without trial of Islamist prisoners, which feeds into a sense of injustice underpinning Islamist mobilisation. They also include the chronic conflict between Tripoli's Jabal Mohsen and Bab Tebbaneh districts. There, alongside overdue steps to improve basic living conditions, the army should assume a most active role to stop fighting, arrest militiamen and seize weapons. Finally, it is past time to deal with the alarming rise of a militia culture that entails both the spread of weapons and violent forms of behaviour without any accountability for either.

Beirut/Brussels, 22 November 2012

APPENDIX A

MAP OF LEBANON

Map 4282 United Nations
January 2010

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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