



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Beirut, Oh Mistress of the World

By *Robert Sharp* and *Sterling Jensen*

Journal Article | Oct 22 2012 - 4:30am

Beirut is again burdened by the insurrections of the region. Regional proxy wars between Iran and the Arab Gulf are using Lebanon as their figurative prostitute. Friday's explosions in East Beirut that killed and wounded nearly 100 people, including Major General Wissam Al-Hassan, were likely made and coordinated by the same people who killed Rafik Al-Hariri in 2005. This time it was an attempt by extremists to stoke sectarian violence within Lebanon, as well as silence the security official in charge of uncovering a bomb plot by a pro-Assad Lebanese politician. Many fear a repeat of a civil war in Lebanon, and the return of sorrow that plagued the country for years. But we posit that this time around, the flexibility of the Lebanese government and the stabilizing role of the Lebanese Armed Forces will make the difference in ensuring that the country does not descend into a civil war, despite the overspill from Syria and Iranian meddling.

In 1978 the famed Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani published a popular poem titled: "Beirut, Oh Mistress of the World." In it, he eloquently and emotionally described the impact the Arab world was having on Beirut, which used to be considered the "Paris of the Middle East." The poem was written during the Lebanese civil war and just before the Iranian revolution, but it can help interpret what is currently going on in Lebanon in light of the recent explosions in the Christian neighborhood of Ashrefiyah.

Beirut, Oh Mistress of the World
We confess before the Only God
That we were envious of you
That your beauty hurt us
And we now confess
That we were unfair with you
We did not forgive you
We did not understand you
We gave you a dagger instead of a rose
We confess before the Just God
That we treated you like a slut
We petitioned you
We got intimate with you
Then we made you carry the burden of our insurrections

Lebanon is already tense due to polar positions among the political parties about how to deal with the turmoil in Syria. The extremist elements of the political parties are beholden to their patrons in the region. The extremists on both sides of the spectrum benefit from raising the stakes of sectarian violence. Lebanese militants who support the Syrian opposition, largely the Sunnis in the north of Lebanon-including Palestinians-are beholden to wealthy Salafist benefactors largely in the Arab Gulf who need to make Lebanon more of a safe haven for the militants going into Syria. But the Salafists are not the only ones who would benefit from sectarian violence.

It is most likely this latest assassination was executed by Hezbollah operatives and pro-Syrian agents, thinking the Salafists would be blamed. Iran's entire Middle Eastern policy relies on maintaining the status quo with Syria. This could explain why Iran ordered Hezbollah to fly a UAV over Israel at a time when such a provocative act would surely upset the tenuous political balance in Lebanon.

This incident was not at all about Lebanon's interests, but Iran's. Iran is betting that Christians in Lebanon, including thousands of Syrian Christian refugees, will look for armed protection if a Lebanese civil war breaks out. Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, with its wide network of fighters and weapons, would be one of the first militias to offer protection to the Christians. Hezbollah's leaders would do so because they know the Christians fear Sunni extremists more than the Shiites. It is largely the Christian minority in Syria that supports the Shiite-led Assad regime because they fear the rise of the Salafists in Syria. Additionally, reports that Hezbollah fighters are on the front lines in Syria abetting Assad's brutal crackdown on the opposition further strengthen Christian sympathies for Hezbollah.

The bombing incident in Ashrefiyah was a cowardly attempt to settle scores and raise the stakes. Regional actors are using the rich diversity and open culture of Lebanon to hedge against the loss of Syria.

Emotions and fear will be high in the coming weeks. We are confident, though, that the Lebanese, supported by the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Lebanese government, will see clearly that those they thought were paying them for protection were merely paying them as a mistress.

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