



## Lebanon 2014

Standard Note: SNIA/6859

Last updated: 3 April 2014

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Section International Affairs and Defence Section

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- Lebanon is perhaps the most diverse country in the Middle East and it has a history of instability and civil war.
- The bomb that assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri still reverberates around the country
- The country's politics are complicated and prone to deadlock between the two main factions, pro-Western and pro-Syrian
- The present Prime Minister has only recently been able to form a government, many months after assuming his post
- There has been an upsurge of sectarian violence, as the Syria conflict threatens to spread into Lebanon
- Around a fifth of Lebanese residents are refugees from the Syrian conflict – an enormous burden
- The UK has given the Lebanese armed forces some aid to help with controlling its border with Syria

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Map courtesy of University of Texas

- Head of State: President Gen. Michel Suleiman
- Head of Government: Prime Minister Tammam Salam
- Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament: Nabih Berri
- Last election: Legislative, 7 June 2009
- Next election: Legislative, due November 2014<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Background

Lebanon's mountainous terrain has historically provided refuge for minority groups and that has shaped the country today. When what is now Syria became part of the Islamic empire in the seventh century, other groups in Lebanon managed to retain their identity and today's Lebanon is one of the most mixed countries in the region. Although it is overwhelmingly Arab-speaking, religiously it is very diverse.

Lebanese religious groups  
 Muslim 54% (Shia and Sunni in roughly equal proportions, Isma'ilite, Alawite or Nusayri), Christian 39% (Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Assyrian, Coptic, Protestant), Druze 5.6%, other 1.4%.  
 Source: CIA World Factbook

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations set up a mandate for present-day Lebanon and Syria to be controlled by France. The last French troops left in 1946 and the Lebanon became independent. On the formation of Israel, man thousands of Palestinians fled the new state to become refugees in Lebanon and their camps still exist today.

Such a diverse country proved difficult to govern. The Maronite Christians had had a privileged position under French rule and had been in a majority until around independence. The Muslim population grew faster, however, leading to increasing dissent. In 1975, the country descended into civil war, resulting in more than 100,000 deaths; many people remain displaced within the country. Israel and Syria both intervened at different times during the conflict and Israel occupied the south or the country for some time, while Syria's military influence was very strong until 2005.

The political set-up of modern Lebanon is largely based on the Taif Accords, negotiated in Saudi Arabia to put an end to the civil war. The agreement gave greater power to the growing Muslim majority (the country had been dominated by Maronite Christians), setting out that:

- the President (traditionally a Christian) should have less power than previously
- the Prime Minister (traditionally a Sunni) and the cabinet should have more power
- the Speaker of the Parliament (traditionally a Shia) should have more influence over both the President and the Government.

This re-balancing of power gave Muslims a much stronger voice in the country, although the country has remained dominated by sectarianism, something that the agreement aimed to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on: [Lebanon](#), in *Europa World online*. London, Routledge. House of Commons. Retrieved 31 March 2014 from

end. The disarming of all militias was also agreed and this generally happened, except for Hizballah, which many Shias support and view as a self-defence organisation.

In 2008, serious violence broke out again when the pro-Western government decided to remove Hizballah's control of its own telecommunications network and security at the international airport. Hizballah fighters took control of large areas of West Beirut, in the first fighting between the Shiite militia and other Lebanese people since the civil war.

The 2008 Doha Agreement, mediated by the Qataris, involved the government reversing the decisions that had sparked the fighting and gave the opposition a blocking third of seats in the cabinet, showing the strong hold that the heavily-armed and experienced Hizballah has over the country.

## **2 Syria and the Hariri investigation**

Syria has traditionally exerted a very strong influence over its much smaller neighbour, but this was interrupted when the murder in 2005 of Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri caused such an upsurge of public anger that Syria was forced to end its occupation.

The assassination of Rafik Hariri remains very much a live issue, with Hizballah always opposing the Lebanese government's cooperation with the UN-backed inquiry. Evidence emerging that senior Hizballah figures may have been involved,<sup>2</sup> and in January 2014 a UN-backed Special Tribunal began proceedings in their absence against four men linked to the militia. The hearings are expected to go on for over a year.

Hizballah is reported to have always feared the publication of any evidence that it was responsible for the assassination. Hizballah's widespread popularity in the Middle East is based on its reputation for successfully fighting against Israel. If that reputation is exchanged for one of anti-Sunni sectarianism, Hizballah would lose popularity among Sunnis across the Middle East.

Some fear that the conviction of the Hizballah suspects would be a threat to stability in Lebanon. It would only be one among many.

## **3 Current political situation**

In the last few years, domestic politics in Lebanon have largely been a battle between the pro-Western March 14 Alliance and its allies, and parties traditionally more favourable towards Syria, led by the March 8 alliance.

March 14 Alliance is a group of Sunni, Christian and secular parties the largest of which is the Future Movement, the party of assassinated Prime Minister's son, Saad Hariri. On the pro-Syrian side, the largest party is the Free Patriotic Movement, the largest Christian party. Hizballah also has a significant parliamentary presence.

While the three main posts remain earmarked for the three largest religious sects, the political allegiance of individual politicians is not necessarily fixed by their faith and indeed one of the biggest changes recently came when the Free Patriotic Movement the largely Christian party of Michel Aoun, switched sides, leaving the pro-Western camp.

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<sup>2</sup> ['Breakthrough in Tribunal Investigation: New Evidence Points to Hezbollah in Hariri Murder'](#), *Der Spiegel*, 23 May 2009

The system is subject to periods of deadlock and the power struggle between the two main sides has been worsened by the unrest in Syria, where they support opposing sides.

The March 14 Alliance won a majority at the 2009 elections, retaining its position against the March 8 Alliance, to the surprise of many observers. The present Prime Minister, a Sunni, is compromise candidate (like his predecessor) who has been associated with both the pro-Syrian and pro-Western groupings. Having been nominated as Prime Minister by the March 14 Alliance in April 2013, he was unable to form a government until February 2014. Parliamentary elections were also postponed because of the impasse. The new cabinet contains representatives of both major tendencies.

#### **4 Increasing instability due to the Syria conflict**

However, with the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011, Lebanon is again very much at the mercy of developments over the eastern border. At first the spill-over from the Syrian conflict was limited, but it has grown inexorably. The crisis led the Lebanese Parliament to prolong its mandate, postponing elections that were due in June 2014 until November 2014.

There are reports that many Lebanese Sunnis have joined the fight against the Assad government. The Syrian conflict has special relevance to Lebanon, where the confessional conflict between Sunni, Shia and Christian and between Hizballah and the Lebanese state's security forces has never been fully resolved. Many Lebanese Sunnis are eager for the Assad government to fall, which in turn would weaken the Shiite Hizballah and boost the Sunnis' own position in Lebanon. There are training camps in the Beka'a valley in Lebanon where Lebanese men have been preparing since 2008 to fight against Assad; they are said to have been significant in the battle for Homs in February 2012.<sup>3</sup>

At first Hizballah denied any military involvement in the Syrian conflict but, since the struggle turned into a full-blown civil war, it is now openly acknowledged. The leadership's calculation may be that the fall of the Assads' government in Syria would be an existential threat to the organisation, given the vital Iranian support channelled through Damascus, and that not to admit military support for the Syrian government would be futile.<sup>4</sup>

Instability is increasing across the country, stoked up by the Syria conflict. There has been some cross-border fighting and armed clashes between Sunnis and Shias, particularly in the north of the country and especially in the city of Tripoli, where on 2 April there was a large-scale army crackdown to restore peace.<sup>5</sup>

There has also been a wave of bombings in Lebanon, particularly in Shia areas.<sup>6</sup> In November 2013 there was a suicide bomb attack on the Iranian Embassy that killed 23 and in February there was another near an Iranian cultural centre that killed at least five. Both bombings were claimed by the Abdullah Azzam brigades, an al-Qaeda offshoot. Hizballah accused Saudi intelligence of being behind the Iranian Embassy bombing.<sup>7</sup>

In December, the Sunni politician Mohamad Chatah, who used to be an adviser to former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, was killed in a car bomb.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute of War, September 2012

<sup>4</sup> 'Why Hezbollah has openly joined the Syrian fight', *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 July 2013

<sup>5</sup> 'Army crackdown pacifies Tripoli as militia leaders flee', *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 2 April 2014

<sup>6</sup> 'Lebanon forms government after 10-month deadlock', *Reuters*, 15 February 2014

<sup>7</sup> 'Saudis behind blasts at Iran embassy, Hezbollah says', *BBC News online*, 4 December 2013

Also in December, the Saudi government promised to give the Lebanese army \$3 billion.<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Syrian refugees

Lebanon has a massive problem with Syrian refugees. There are almost a million Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon with the United Nations,<sup>9</sup> and there will be more who have not registered. This is at least one refugee for every four Lebanese citizens. Lebanon is not a particularly rich country (it has similar per capita income to Belarus and Botswana),<sup>10</sup> and its budget deficit was reported to reach 31% in 2013.

The UK has given more than £110 million to help the Lebanese with the influx of refugees,<sup>11</sup> while the total UK humanitarian funding for Syria and the region is over £600 million. This is three times the UK assistance provided for any other crisis, according to the government.<sup>12</sup> The government's general policy is that it is better to help refugees in the region than to bring them to the UK. After considerable controversy, the UK also agreed in 2014 to take more Syrian refugees.<sup>13</sup>

## 6 UK assistance to the Lebanese armed forces

In June 2013, the UK government announced a plan to help the Lebanese armed forces. This consisted of:

a package of UK assistance worth £10 million to increase the capacity of the two LAF [Lebanese Armed Forces] land border regiments to fulfil their border management role, in support of broader LAF aims to disrupt and hinder the movement and operations of armed actors party to the conflict in Syria, and interdict elements who are seeking to destabilise Lebanon, and who may subsequently pose a threat to UK interests.<sup>14</sup>

In February 2014, the government announced that it was also giving nearly £2 million-worth of equipment to the Lebanese armed forces. The donation included personal protective equipment, two Land Rovers, some technical equipment to facilitate training and radio equipment to allow the land border regiments to link back to LAF HQ in Beirut.<sup>15</sup> The government also said that it was boosting the existing training cooperation programme with the Lebanese armed forces.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Saudi Arabia 'to give Lebanon army \$3bn grant'', *BBC News Online*, 29 December 2013

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, [Syrian regional refugee response – Lebanon](#)

<sup>10</sup> IMF, [World Economic Outlook Database 2013](#)

<sup>11</sup> HL Deb [27 February 2014](#), c1014

<sup>12</sup> HC Deb [29 Jan 2014](#), c917

<sup>13</sup> For more on this see the Library Standard Note [In Brief: Syrian refugees and the UK](#), January 2014

<sup>14</sup> [HC Deb 12 February 2014](#) c52WS

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*