

Learning to Interpret “Bad Things” as “Good News” The Limits of Lebanon’s Domestic Entente

Near midnight Beirut time on June 23, just when the World Cup match between Cameroon and Brazil had reached one of its peaks, a massive explosion rocked one of the northern entrances to Beirut’s southern suburbs. The location of the blast, the Hady Nasrallah entrance, was certainly not coincidental, as it was named in honor of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s son, who was killed in 1997 during a confrontation in South Lebanon against the Israel Defense Forces. Powerful enough to be heard almost anywhere in the city, the car bomb exploded between an LAF checkpoint and a street side cafe where dozens of people were enjoying the game.

While it will be difficult to confirm which location had been the primary target of the suicide bomber inside the Mercedes-Benz 300, the timing of the attack was not random: it was preceded by another just a few days earlier. On Friday, June 20, another suicide bomber detonated his deadly cargo at an Internal Security Service checkpoint in Dahr al-Baydar, the gateway to the Bekaa. From a comparative perspective, the two attacks coincided with the anniversary of the Abra clashes when the LAF—likely backed by Hezbollah—attacked the headquarters of anti-Hezbollah Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. Al-Assir escaped to an unknown location (as dozens of his supporters were being apprehended by the LAF)

and has since made several threatening appearances via the Internet.

While the temporal assessment of the two bombings referenced here certainly does not imply a definitive relationship between them and al-Assir—a leading figure among Lebanon’s militant Sunni Islam movement—this apparent *coincidence* should prompt some considerations which examine this bout of violence from the perspective of the political “entente” under which Lebanon has existed of late, and question the extent to which that entente considers the deeper dynamics brewing in the Lebanese underground.

First, a year after the assault on al-Assir, we continue to hear periodically about the Assir crowd. Moreover, similar to other Sunni clerics who sought to attain a certain level of prominence, Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir did not emerge suddenly from thin air. His ascendance (like that of his peers) represents one frustrated reaction by a faction within Lebanon’s Sunni community that is still seething about the 2005 assassination of R.al-Hariri, Hezbollah’s demonstration of power in 2008, the humiliation it suffered in 2011 when Hezbollah ousted Saad al-Hariri from his position as prime minister and perhaps other, older episodes as well. While the conflict in Syria (and Hezbollah’s active support of the Assad regime) fuels that anger

and intensifies community frustration, it has also become a source of inspiration in the development of responses to the status quo. Similarly, recent developments in Iraq have buoyed the spirits of large segments of the Sunni population throughout the Arab world, including those in Lebanon.

Despite the fact that the official LAF statement is vague about the checkpoint being the intended target of the bombing (it mentions that the explosion took place “next to an LAF checkpoint”), information and examples that have accumulated over time confirm that a steadily emerging pattern of violence (“radical Islamist vs. LAF” and possibly other state security institutions as well) is today being integrated into the range of violent acts Lebanon is experiencing.¹ As if by chance, the day after the June 23 bombing in Dahiyeh, Sheikh Siraj ed-Din Zureikat (who heads the al-Qaeda affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigade) published an audio message via Web-based social media outlets in which he reasserted the accusation that the LAF has become a tool of Hezbollah. He also invited Sunni elements of that institution to defect.² **The more visible this pattern of violence becomes and the more the LAF is discussed in sectarian terms, the less likely it will be that the Lebanese people will continue to believe that the LAF and other state security services are indeed the “last resort.”** Despite the exigent conditions introduced by the need to “fight terrorism,” there is real risk associated with the country’s absolute political bankruptcy and its unprecedented

level of sectarian tensions. More to the point, the model being used to “fight terrorism” in Lebanon (as in other countries of the region) is frighteningly reminiscent of a quasi-civil war. **Offering congratulations all around following each violent incident for having avoided an even “worse” outcome provides no real comfort.** Rather, doing so simply teaches the Lebanese to interpret these “bad” events as good news. As Interior Minister Nouhad Machnouk asserted (and he has not been alone in offering that sentiment), “Priority should go now to security issues.” But that opinion fails to provide a vision other than “civil war,” even if such a conflict were to be waged justifiably by a “state institution.”³

Thirdly, the two most recent explosions and the wave of associated rumors that have swept the country demonstrate clearly the constraints of the domestic entente between Hezbollah and the Future Movement (FM). That understanding, achieved under the auspices of the regional patrons of each party concerned, is little more than an open secret. Consider the words of Prime Minister Tammam Salam, who stated naively between the two bombings, “I feel as if there is an unofficial Saudi-Iranian agreement to distance Lebanon from all the perils of the regional situation and we must benefit from this to fortify our country.”⁴

Of course, these conditions simultaneously highlight and exacerbate the FM’s shortfalls as it purports to be a full, co-equal partner with Hezbollah in this game of

¹ <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/news/?40201#.U6nJAJSSzwo>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f2zB-MLVy8>

³ The full statement made by Interior Minister Machnouk reads, “Priority should go now to security issues. We owe to the mobilization and the seriousness of the security services the fact that the two suicidal operations of Dahr el-Baydar and Dahiyeh were put in check. We are sure that the two cars didn’t reach their targets. This is due to the people’s awareness and to the fact that security services have limited the maneuverability of the terrorists. These factors have protected a lot of Lebanese.” Extracted from newspaper articles published on June 25, 2014.

⁴ *As-Safir*. June 23, 2014.

entente. Each breach of Lebanon's security that bears the name of a Sunni militant group (even if the group is categorized technically as a "spoiler") further undermines the FM's ability to assert itself as the comprehensive representative for Lebanon's Sunni population. Regarding the largely theatrical intimacy between Hezbollah and select FM representatives (a familiarity displayed during a meeting chaired by Interior Minister Nouhad al-Mashnouk and attended by senior Hezbollah officer Wafic Safa and the heads of various Lebanese security services), many observers have noted that the effects—interpreted frequently as acquiescence to Hezbollah's *fait accompli*—have been deleterious to the FM's standing within the Sunni community. Further, the policy in effect today does not enjoy consensual support either within the FM or in the larger March 14 Alliance.⁵

As a logical consequence of this bizarre balance of power, Hezbollah will almost certainly take advantage of the situation to advance its domestic political agenda. In doing so, it will strive to promote the election of a "Resistance-friendly" president of the republic, who is not necessarily General Michel Aoun. The pool of potential candidates acceptable to Hezbollah ranges from LAF Chief of Staff General Jean Kahwaji to any tasteless, odorless and opportunistic member of the Maronite political club. Interestingly, Hezbollah's agenda incorporates the requirements specified by the "Stability Item," which is so dear to the international community. In fact, that very characteristic was expressed clearly by Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar during a visit to the Hady Nasrallah crime scene an hour after

the bombing. Following the now all too familiar words of condemnation, he noted that political instability is the breach through which terrorism can infiltrate the country, and he called for the swift election of a president in order to close that chasm.⁶

Nevertheless, while Hezbollah will likely try to leverage these attacks to advance its agenda and those of its patrons, there will indeed be a price to pay: Dahiye and other Shia areas in Lebanon are again living under the threat of indiscriminate, yet deadly violence. Interestingly, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was intended to eradicate that very threat. Although we at ShiaWatch prefer not to quote opinions we advanced previously, an observation we made on May 30, 2013 seems particularly apropos:

Without doubt, the longer the fight continues in Syria, the more it will stoke Lebanese tensions. Under those conditions, Hezbollah's image will be tarnished further and its reputation as a "maker of miracles" will certainly fade. To alter that outcome, Hezbollah's only option will be to invent increasingly "convincing" arguments that it is engaged in a just war and that Lebanese "boys" are not dying without a cause. In the meantime, these "conditions" will probably be long and agonizing, and Lebanon's Shia community will likely suffer more than ever before due to its "Hezbollah Complex," which swings from megalomania to self-deprecation and back again.

⁵ See THE BIG SALE – The True Cost of Maintaining Lebanon's "Stability" on the ShiaWatch website. <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/545>

⁶ Extracted from various newspaper articles published on June 24, 2014.