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Lebanon: Fighting in the South Dims Truce Prospects In Beirut (C)

An Intelligence Assessment

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The author of this paper is [redacted]
Near East/South Asia Division, Office of Political
Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and
should be directed to [redacted] (U)

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Lebanon: Fighting in the South Dims Truce Prospects in Beirut (c)

Events in Lebanon's two main areas of conflict are moving in opposite directions. In Beirut, Christian militias, the Syrians, and the Lebanese Government seem more inclined than at any time in more than a year to cooperate in easing tensions and beginning the process of national reconciliation. Both the Syrians and the militias for now appear to want to avoid major fighting. In southern Lebanon, however, fighting has increased markedly in recent weeks between Christian militias and their Israeli allies on the one hand, and on the other, Palestinians and leftist Muslims. The worsening situation in the south threatens to disrupt the efforts to arrange a Syrian-Christian accommodation in Beirut. (s)

Beirut: Edging Toward a Truce

The recent cordial talks between Presidents Sarkis and Assad in Damascus demonstrated that relations between the two have recovered from the low point they reached earlier this year over Syrian dissatisfaction with Sarkis's failure to act decisively to rein in the Christian militias. Improved relations between the Syrians and Sarkis, and between Sarkis and Christian leaders, have increased the prospects—at least in the near term—for avoiding another round of heavy fighting between the Syrian and Christian forces. (s)

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- Damascus wants to reduce the steady drain on its forces in Lebanon from the daily skirmishes with the Christian militiamen in Beirut and reduce the chances of confrontations with Israel.
- Damascus would like to demonstrate that its three-year-old peacekeeping mission in Lebanon is starting to show evidence of success, especially now that all of the other Arab contingents in the Arab Deterrent Force have withdrawn from Lebanon. (c)

Any Syrian withdrawal is likely to be limited in scope and carefully timed. President Assad is well aware that a complete Syrian pullout would probably lead to a return to civil war and threaten Syrian strategic interests in Lebanon. (c)

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Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that Assad has decided to give up his basic political objective in Lebanon of maintaining Syrian primacy in the country. Assad continues to believe that Lebanon is crucial to Syrian security and that Damascus cannot allow Israel to become the dominant power in the country. In effect the Syrians hope to reduce Israeli influence in Lebanon by political means, thus avoiding a military confrontation with Israel, for which Damascus is unprepared. (c)

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The Syrians probably have several motives for desiring a pullback:

- Damascus wants to strengthen its forces on the Golan, especially now that Egypt and Israel are at peace.

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Sarkis and the Syrians. They might attempt to undermine the fragile peace process by increasing military provocations of the Syrian forces. (S)

Two particular political problems will have to be overcome before the Syrians and the Christians can reach an accommodation in Beirut. The first is the issue of which individuals will be selected to represent the major political groups in a new government. Each group is opposed to having its rivals' extremists included in the cabinet. The Syrians and the Christians can probably reach an agreement on relatively moderate Christian and pro-Syrian politicians in a new government. The Christians, however, may demand that the more radical parties in the National Movement—the umbrella organization of leftist Muslims—be excluded. They will be especially opposed to Communist participation, but the Communists hold leadership positions in the National Movement, and their exclusion from a government would undermine its claim to represent all major factions. Assad, for his part, has demanded that Christian militant Bashir Jumayyil be excluded from a new government. (S)

Pierre Jumayyil and Camille Shamun, the two principal Christian leaders, have contributed to improving the political atmosphere by declaring their support for Sarkis—in effect, a tacit acknowledgment also of their willingness to cooperate with Syria. This is a significant shift by Shamun, who until recently was implacably hostile toward Sarkis and the Syrians. Jumayyil has always maintained cordial relations with the Lebanese president. Jumayyil's recent statements backing Sarkis have been more explicit—and probably more sincere—than those by Shamun. In May Jumayyil also made a conciliatory statement about Christian relations with the Syrians. (S)

Shamun and Jumayyil have not explicitly endorsed the concept of a national unity government, but Jumayyil personally and representatives of Shamun have participated in the consultations Sarkis is holding with all political factions on the issue.

The Christians are still determined to get the Syrians out of Lebanon, but for now they apparently want to see if they can make progress toward that goal by political rather than military means. Shamun and Jumayyil may have concluded that the Front has gained nothing from its past policy of provoking the Syrians into military retaliation against the Christian sector of Beirut. They may also be concerned that the Christian population is reluctant to support belligerent Front policies that would lead eventually to a breakdown of the cease-fire and another round of Syrian shelling. (S)

Christian militants so far have gone along with the more moderate Christian policies, but they undoubtedly have serious reservations about negotiating with

The other divisive issue is the link between the Lebanese Front, the Israelis, and the Christian militias in southern Lebanon, led by Major Haddad. The Syrians have demanded, as a precondition to accepting Front participation in a new cabinet, that the Front sever ties with Israel and condemn Haddad's declaration of "independence" for his southern enclaves. We believe, however, that the Syrians may be more flexible than they have so far indicated. (S NF NC OC)

The Front leaders will not agree to the Syrian demand as stated. They might, however, be willing to play down their ties to Israel and Haddad. The Christians are certain to bargain hard on this issue, and are likely to compromise only if Syria makes some concessions on its military presence in Lebanon and provides some indication that it accepts limitations on its political influence over the Lebanese Government. (S)

The South: Increased Hostilities

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In southern Lebanon, Haddad has become more aggressive toward both UN forces and the Palestinians since he declared his independence from Beirut in April. He has threatened to seize several villages within the UN zone if their inhabitants refuse to join his cause. His forces have intensively shelled Palestinian positions and the UN zone, ostensibly because the Palestinians had fired on Christian positions from within the UN area. The Palestinians did, in fact, initiate most of the firing that led to a heavy exchange of artillery shelling during the last week in May, but we have no evidence that their positions were located in the UN zone. (S)

Israel's publicly declared intention to strike at the Palestinians at will, apart from retaliation for specific terrorist acts, has almost certainly encouraged Haddad's belligerency. We have no hard evidence on Haddad's intentions, but he is capable of attempting to enlarge his area of control by military action, unless the Israelis explicitly oppose such a move. (S)

Haddad and the Israelis, besides wanting to disrupt Palestinian activities, may also be keeping the south in turmoil as a warning to the Lebanese Government to be careful about trying to assert its authority in the area. They view the dispatch earlier this spring of about 500 Lebanese troops to the south as the opening move of a Syrian-supported effort to undermine and eventually eliminate Haddad. The government is not at this time preparing to send any more troops south, preferring to consolidate the position of those already there. (S)

Outlook

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The increased hostilities in the south have so far not affected efforts to arrange a Syrian-Christian accommodation in Beirut. This state of affairs, however, is not likely to continue for long. The fighting is almost certain eventually to encourage all the parties to the

Lebanese imbroglio to become more intransigent. The Syrians and the Lebanese Front may find it difficult, if not impossible, to cooperate at a time when their respective allies—the Palestinians and Haddad's forces—are engaged in virtual open warfare. (S) 25X1C 9

The fighting in the south, in fact, threatens to draw the Front and Haddad closer together. [REDACTED]

The conciliatory attitude of Pierre Jumayyil and Kamille Shamun is probably not so strong that it could withstand a determined challenge by Bashir and other Christian militants. Continued serious fighting in the south could provide the militants with the leverage they need to convince Front leaders that this is not the time to be talking about even a limited truce with the Syrians. (S) 25X1C 8

Even if an agreement is reached in Beirut providing for a reduction of the Syrian presence and the formation of a government of national unity, it will at best only improve the immediate security situation. Lebanon's Christians and Muslims are still very bitterly divided, and there has been no fundamental change in the policies of any of the groups. A more secure cease-fire, however, is a necessary first step toward encouraging the groups to begin thinking more seriously about resolving basic issues. (S)