

## **LEBANON THREATENS TO SINK BACK INTO VIOLENCE**

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Lebanon is slipping back into turmoil since the bloody attack perpetrated in downtown Beirut on Friday, October 19. As a reminder, a high power explosion from a car bomb in the middle of the afternoon in Sassine Square killed Wissam Al-Hassan, intelligence chief of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), his driver and seven other victims. According to an official statement given by government authorities, 86 people were also wounded in the attack, including several children who were coming out of schools in the Christian neighbourhood of Achrafieh. It added that the attack occurred less than 200 meters from the headquarters of the Lebanese Phalanges Party (Kataëb). A few hours after the attack, supporters of different political clans and Lebanese militia clashed in several armed incidents across the country, especially in Tripoli, Sidon, Akkar, Cola and Chtoura. On Sunday, October 21, the funeral of General Al-Hassan in Martyrs' Square erupted in clashes outside the offices of the Prime Minister Najib Mikati at the "Grand Serail" Palace in the heart of the Lebanese capital.

Violence renewed on Monday in the Sunni neighborhood of Tariq al-Jdide, which is the stronghold of the "Future Movement" of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Men armed with assault rifles and black hoods took control of the roundabout in Cola and Cornice Mazrzz to prevent access to the neighborhood by car. Elsewhere in the country, witnesses reported that snipers fired on the population in the districts of Babel-Tabbaneh and Baal Mohsen, which have been points of friction between Sunni and Alawite communities since the time of the Civil War. Tensions also remain strong in Tripoli following the death of Sunni Sheikh Abdel Razzak al-Asmar during gunfire exchange at dawn on Saturday around the offices of his party al-Tawhid (Islamic Unification Movement), which is an ally of Hezbollah within the March 8 alliance. These incidents led to the deployment of Lebanese army vehicles. Before the risk of the spread of widespread violence, the army has announced that it will take all necessary measures in sensitive areas "to prevent Lebanon from becoming a new battlefield".

### **The finger pointing to Syria**

When asked on his own television channel "Future TV", Saad Hariri accused Syrian President Bashar Al Assad of ordering the attack in Sassine Square. The entire

opposition has blamed the attack on the Syrian regime and its allies in the Lebanese government. This is indeed dominated by Hezbollah and pro-Syrian parties, despite its multi-religious composition. On the night of the attack, the opposition called on the government to resign, accusing them of offering “protection and cover” for the murders of Wissam Al-Hassan. He was in the inner circle of the murdered Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and his son Saad. On August 9, his office coordinated the arrest of former minister and MP Michel Samaha, one of the transmission belts of Bashar al-Assad in Lebanon. The latter is accused of having planned attacks and unrest between Christian, Alawite and Sunni communities in northern Lebanon.

Between 2005 and 2007, Lebanon was torn apart by a series of political assassinations, the most spectacular of which claimed the life of Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005. The victims, all known for their opposition to Syria included the Secretary Minister of Industry, Pierre Gemayel, who was shot and killed with his bodyguard in November 2006 in Jdeideh, MP Walid Eido, who was killed along with nine other in an explosion on the Beirut seafront in June 2007, and MP Antoine Ghanem, who was killed with five other people in a suicide car bombing on the outskirts of Beirut in September 2007. The last political assassination attack in the Beirut area was the death of FSI Captain Wissam Eid in January 2008, who was killed in a car bomb attack. Since then, negotiations between Sunni supporters of the Hariri clan and the Shiite militia Hezbollah have led to a process of pacification, which was concluded by the Doha Agreement of May 22, 2008.

### **The spectrum of the Civil War**

For many Lebanese, the death of Wissam al-Hassan marks the return of a period of violence that was thought to have passed four years ago. This attack may indeed be regarded as yet another replica of the assassination of Rafic Hariri, who was most likely commissioned by the first circle of damascene power. According to security sources inside the Lebanese intelligence services, Wissam al-Hassan had actively collaborated with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) and participated in the inquiry to clarify the circumstances of the assassination of the former Prime Minister. According to these sources, his death would have been both a direct response to the pro-Syrian arrest of Michel Samaha and the result of an undeclared war in a security apparatus, which itself is divided between various factions that control the country.

Beyond Lebanese internal factors, such an eruption of violence also raises the question of the overflow of the Syrian civil war beyond its borders. For weeks, the regime of Bashar al Assad has used the worst strategy to maintain power by blackmailing chaos. After the accumulation of tensions along the Turkish-Syrian border, Damascus have decided to turn toward its fragile neighbor to highlight the threat of regional disorder. Despite sporadic incidents between insurgents and loyalist Syrians on Lebanese territory, the government of Najib Mikati has so far managed to maintain the neutrality of the country in the hope of preserving stability. This strategy of “taking away” (né bel-nafess) has urged the authorities to close their borders to avoid turning Lebanon into a Northern sanctuary for the rebel Free Syrian Army (SLA). Lebanon has also abstained from all discussion with the Arab League on the Syrian crisis.

By awakening latent sectarian tensions, the Beirut bombing has reset this balance in question. Saad Hariri does not hide his desire to overthrow the government, but “in a

peaceful and democratic manner”. In parallel, the radical Sunni Imam Sheikh Ahmed al Assir has violently attacked Hezbollah and Iran, arguing that the Shiite militia and its sponsor, Tehran, were directly involved in the death of most of the anti-Syrian politicians murdered in recent years. Recall that on October 14, Hezbollah organized a large demonstration in Beirut in support of Bashar al-Assad. Lebanese authorities, including President Michal Suleiman, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and the commanders of the army, and the ambassadors of the five members of the UN Security Council, called on “all Libyan parties to preserve national unity” to escape the disaster of a new civil war. In the context of extreme violence in the region, the death of General Al- Hassan could nevertheless be the spark that finally ruins the peace efforts undertaken in the country since 2008.

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