Introduction

Within Lebanese society, deep divisions still linger from a violent and protracted civil war that extended from 1975 to 1990. Today these divisions continue to strain social cohesion within the country. Many experts have expressed concern over the on-going violence in Syria, increasingly sectarian, which is likely to disrupt the fragile peace in Lebanon. Syria and Lebanon share a long, conflicted, military and political history and Lebanese citizens are deeply divided over the neighbouring conflict. Northern Lebanon, in particular, is a potential time bomb for violence and conflict. The North is a predominantly Sunni population, and firmly supports the Sunni rebels in their aim to overthrow President Bashar al Assad. To further complicate matters, the North is composed of small communities of Shi’ite Alawites1 allied with the Syrian government.

A similar sectarian rift exists in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, located along the Syrian border. The two-year-old Syrian conflict is an encroachment on the Lebanese border and has been for months, according to StratRisks, a security risk publication. Rival Lebanese Shi’ite and Sunni clans and factions have seemingly cast their lot with the Assad regime and rebel opposition respectively. “Lebanon is a minefield of potential flashpoints”, asserts StratRisks, but few hold as much potential for serious violence as the northern Bekaa Valley. This report will provide background on the complex Lebanon-Syria-Hezbollah alliance, briefly address the history of the Bekaa Valley and then discuss the current humanitarian, social, political and security issues within the valley that foster insecurity and risk destabilising the entire country of Lebanon.

The Lebanon-Syria-Hezbollah Relationship

The Shi’ite militant organisation Hezbollah2 is one of Lebanon’s dominant political parties, as well as a prominent social and religious movement catering heavily to the Lebanese Shi’ite community. It is a key strategic ally with Syria and often referred to as the “Axis of Resistance“3. Syria provides weapons and training to Hezbollah and has served as a conduit for Iranian arms, according to the United States Institute for Peace (USIP). Hezbollah was created in the Bekaa Valley in response to Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Today, Hezbollah not only has a military presence in Lebanon but also holds a significant number of seats in the Lebanese parliment. In 2011, Hezbollah successfully crushed the Lebanese coalition government and “rounded up votes for a prime minister of its choosing”, according to the New York Times. As a result, in June 2011, Lebanon’s new Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced a Lebanese government dominated by members and allies of Hezbollah.

Syria has a long history of “meddling” in Lebanese affairs, according to an October 2012 Associated Press article. For much of the past thirty years, Lebanon has lived under Syrian military and political domination. Since the beginning of Lebanon’s civil war in 1975, Syrian forces occupied the country. At the conclusion of the war, the October 1989 Taif Accords awarded Lebanese Muslims a greater share of political power in the country and formalised relations between Lebanon and Syria, providing Syria the role of “the guarantor of Lebanon’s security”. The Accords also set a 1992 timetable for withdrawal of Syrian troops from the Bekaa Valley; a strategic security zone between the two countries. However, Syrian troops remained in Lebanon until 2005 when, under international and Lebanese popular demand, Syria withdrew. Despite these events, Syria has remained a crucial power broker, using its long-established networks of patronage and influence to maintain continued leverage over Lebanon, reports the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Carl Wege, Professor of Political Science at the College of Coastal Georgia, suggests that Syrian dominance in the Bekaa, predominately since Syria’s

1 Shi’ite Alawites account for 12% of Syria’s population and is an offshoot of Shi’ite Islam. While a minority in Syria, Alawites have been in tight control of the Sunni-majority Syria for more than forty years.
2 Hezbollah was designated a terrorist organisation by the United States in 1977. While it continues its militant activities, it also joined the political process within Lebanon and is a dominant party with Lebanon's political landscape.
3 The “Axis of Resistance”, is the alliance of Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Assad government, united to bring down Israel.
4 The 14 February 2005 assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri turned the tide against Syria’s continued occupation of Lebanon.
intervention in the 1976 Lebanese civil war has resulted in a somewhat ambiguous Syrian-Lebanese relationship, primarily because of Syria’s reluctance to recognise Lebanon’s sovereignty.

The Bekaa Valley

The Bekaa Valley is a high plateau that lies approximately 1,000 metres above sea level and separates Lebanon’s two mountain ranges: the Lebanon Mountains to the west and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the east. The valley is an extension of the Great African Rift Valley. The Bekaa Valley, a corridor that linked the Syrian interior with the region’s coastal cities, was originally called “hollow Syria” by the Greeks and Romans. In Roman times, the Bekaa Valley was considered “the breadbasket of the Empire”, and is still one of Lebanon’s most important farming regions. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), forty per cent of Bekaa Valley households run a small family farm.

Lebanon’s four official border crossing points into Syria are at Arida, Aboudieh, Qa’a and Masna’a. At the northern edge of the Bekaa Valley, Qa’a connects Baalbek and Homs. Masna’a crossing is located on the Beirut-Damascus highway. However an estimated seventy additional non-official border crossing points exist that facilitate smuggling, an active business in the region.

With a Mediterranean climate, the Bekaa Valley receives an estimated 200-800 millimetres of rain each year and in recent years there are reports of increased water scarcity. A 2009 Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) article explains that because of water scarcity in the Bekaa and poor water management practices, a number of farmers in the region have not been able to grow fruit on a commercial scale since the 1960s. Additionally, the valley falls in the rain shadow of the Lebanon mountain range shielding it from heavy rains and snow that fall in the mountains. The rainy season in the valley is between November and March with little rain between June and October. Water has been identified as a source of conflict within the valley as evidenced by the long-standing Amhaz and Tawk clan-feud. Scarcity has triggered demonstrations at the Baalbek municipality with protesters demanding the government to take action to guarantee equal water access.

Socio-Economic Impacts in the Bekaa Valley

Wine and Hashish Cultivation

Because of water scarcity issues, Bekaa Valley farmers have been forced to adapt their cultivation practices. Reports reveal that at the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the region saw a revival of wine making as vineyards are well suited for the Bekaa terrain. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the region in 2005, a number of farmers have also resumed the growing of Hashish. The mayor of Yamouneh, a Bekaa Valley village, stated, “[i]n Yamouneh, we grow either apples or hashish. That’s all we grow here because there’s not enough water to irrigate other crops. It’s not a hobby to grow hashish; we do it to survive”. According to Christian Science Monitor (CSM), the decision to grow the cash crop is economic; a kilogram of apples is worth USD 30 cents while a kilogram of processed cannabis resin is worth USD 1,700. According to Alakhbar, the cultivation of hashish is a centuries old tradition; however, under the French mandate hashish cultivation was prohibited in 1926.

The crops were successfully eradicated under a post-civil war UN programme implemented from 1991 through 1993 but in recent years has re-emerged. Cultivation continues, as do government efforts to eradicate the substance’s cultivation. Because there is no other cash crop that is as lucrative as hashish cultivation, the fiercely independent Shi’ite tribes in the Bekaa Valley have banded together and fought against Lebanese soldiers and police who attempt to disrupt their lucrative crops. In July 2012, for example, Reuters reported Bekaa Valley farmers armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars forced Lebanese security forces to abandon their operation to destroy the cannabis fields. Security forces regularly attempt to destroy hashish production but continue to face resistance from impoverished Bekaa residents.

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5 A rain shadow is a patch of land that has been forced to become a desert because mountain ranges blocked all plant-growing, rainy weather. In a rain shadow it is warm and dry.

6 Officially referred to as the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon was a post-World War I, League of Nations mandate. Following the end of the war in 1918, France took control of Ottoman Syria (comprising modern Syria, Lebanon). The French governance of Syria lasted until 1943 when two independent countries emerged: Syria and Lebanon. French troops left Syria and Lebanon in 1946.
Poverty
The Bekaa Valley is considered to be one of Lebanon’s poorest regions. Rampant deforestation of the valley demonstrates the residents’ inability to afford kerosene fuel for their homes. In a December 2011 report by Alakbar, a family was forced to burn shoes for heat. The needs of the Bekaa Valley have been on-going for years. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project, ART Gold – Bekaa, which began in 2007, is an international cooperation programme operating in four areas of Lebanon towards the improvement of their social and economic development. The Bekaa region is one of those areas targeted in the project; namely the districts of Rashaya, West Bekaa, Hermel and Baalbek. ART Gold seeks to enhance the preservation of the environment towards an integrated management of water and forest conservation as well as assisting residents in income generation and employment opportunities, focusing on women and youth groups in the sectors of agriculture, agro-industries and small enterprises (shoe-making, pottery, glass industry, fishery, beekeeping, etc.)

Clans in Bekaa
Originating from Arab tribes in the region, the clans of Lebanon have a rich history, according to Al Jazeera. The clans initially inhabited lands between Tripoli and Beirut, but after the eighteenth century, they largely relocated to the Bekaa region where they remain. According to Wege, the Shi’ite community in Bekaa was at one time home to more than 100 clans. The clans functioned by a social framework rooted in blood relationships, familial and other arranged marriages. Long-running vendettas frequently involve disputes over land and women. According to Saadoun Hamadeh, author of “The History of Shia in Lebanon”, today’s clans share a common ancestor – the Hamadiyeh clan. From this ancestor, there are presently two main clan branches; the Chamas and the Zaaitar. The Zaaitar clan includes the Meqdad, Haj Hassan, Noon, Shreif and the Jaafar. Within the Chamas, are the Allaw, Nassereddine and Dandash (see Figure 1). Hamadeh suggests that there are currently between 30 and 35 clans in the Bekaa Valley. In a 2012 article on hashish cultivation, the Christian Science Monitor asserted that the three largest and strongest clans in the region are Jaafars, Shammas and Sheirifs with reports of other tribes potentially uniting in order to protect their crops. However many clans are considered to be powerful, each with their own militias, according to the Washington Guardian.

Figure 1: Partial List of Shi’ite Bekaa Valley Clans

Historically, the relationship between the clans and Lebanon’s political parties has been poor. When Hezbollah and Amal first moved into the Bekaa in the 1980s, they attempted to control the clans which led to violent clashes. However, the clans began showing more tolerance for Hezbollah and Amal in 2005 when Lebanese Shi’ites became targets of sectarian tensions. Hezbollah’s influence in the region has since grown and it is not uncommon for Hezbollah to mediate a feud between the clans to prevent bloodshed in the Bekaa. Today, the cities of Baalbek and Zetta are considered to be regional strongholds for Hezbollah.

The Amal movement began in 1975 by Imam Musa as Sadr, and Iranian-born Shi’ite cleric of Lebanese ancestry. The acronym stands for Alwaj al Muqawamah al Lubnaniyyah (Lebanese Resistance Detachments). In the early 1980s the organisation was the most powerful within the Shi’ite community.
Long standing feuds among clans permeate the Bekaa Valley. For example, a feud dating back to 1951 over irrigation re-ignited in 2008 between the Amhaz and Tawk clans, according to IRIN, and serves to underscore not only clan disputes but the issue of water scarcity in the region. Eleven people were killed over the long-running water dispute that was successfully mediated in 1991 by Hezbollah.

**Humanitarian Situation in Bekaa**

With the high number of displaced Syrian families and a constant flow of Syrians into the Bekaa region through one of the only crossings between Lebanon and Syria, the conflict can be widely felt throughout the valley. It is no longer limited to [Lebanese] Sunni-majority towns as was the trend in the earlier months of the Syrian conflict. As of November 2012, Syrian families have settled into all towns and villages in the Bekaa region – starting from the Sunni-majority town of Majdal Anjar, passing through the Catholic-majority city of Zahle, to the town of Aly al Nahri, whose residents are predominantly Shi’ite.

Shi’ite-Bekaa residents have claimed that the little humanitarian assistance delivered in the region is distributed based on religious affiliation, according to *al Monitor*. In Shi’ite-majority Hermel enormous pictures are displayed publically of Hezbollah leader, Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, and Iran’s spiritual leader Sayyed Ali Khamenei. Talal Iskandar, appointed by the Hermel administration to oversee aid and relief coordinator for refugees in the district, claims that there is a lack of aid. Iskandar asserts, “unlike Arsal [a Sunni-majority border town south of Hermel], for example, where aid to refugees is abundant, assistance to Hermel’s refugees is virtually non-existent” adding, “[m]aybe it has to do with the political affiliation of the Hermel people, but this is unfair treatment”. While Arsal and Hermel benefit from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), Syrian refugees within Arsal benefit from the additional aid provided by the Future Movement, Lebanon’s Highest Sunni authority Dar al Fatwa and the Qatari and Emirati Red Crescents.

An August 2012 study, “Rapid Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Crisis on Socio-Economic Situation in North and Bekaa” by Development Management International (DMI), concluded that the Syrian refugees constitute a burden on hosting Lebanese households and communities of the Bekaa Valley, who are among the poorest in Lebanon. According to residents, the flow of Syrians has increased rent prices for apartments in central Bekaa. Syrians who are able to rent apartments have to pay an advanced annual rent starting at USD 6,000. The assessment cited that “regional inflation” led to increased costs of food staples, medicines, education, utilities and transportation. Inflation resulted from an injection of large amounts of cash into specific areas of Tripoli, Wadi Khaled and Arsal. Intermittent border closures between Lebanon and Syria due to insecurity has also resulted in increased food prices, according to the Aspen Institute. Finally, DMI found that ninety per cent of residents in the North and Bekaa Valley reported a decrease in income as a result of the Syrian crisis. Those seeking work found that there was increased competition between Syrian refugees and Lebanese workers, worsening security situations, a cessation of smuggling and border trade, decreased inter-regional trade in Lebanon, and landmines on the shared border that deprived Lebanese access to their agricultural lands and grazing fields.
Social cohesion has also been impacted by the Syrian crisis. Lebanese living in the North expressed feelings of insecurity and increased anxiety and fear due to large refugee populations in their communities. There is rising resentment that relief assistance is targeted specifically toward Syrian refugees rather than the entire community. Two main drivers of instability occurred in the region. First, Lebanese families have been excluded from humanitarian assistance. Secondly, Lebanese labourers’ report unfair and unregulated competition and price inflation that substantially reduces purchasing power for lower and middle income to poor households.

**Current Insecurity in Bekaa Valley**

According to Paul Salem’s December 2012 article, “Can Lebanon Survive the Syrian Crisis”, Lebanon has been intertwined with Syria since the end of their civil war in 1976, Alignments for or against the Assad government in Syria have defined the political landscape in Lebanon since February 2005 when Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated thereby prompting the Cedar Revoluton\(^9\). Attempting to ease political tensions in Lebanon, when the Syrian conflict began in March 2011, Lebanese Prime Minister Makati adopted an official “dissociation” policy in order to insulate Lebanon from Syria’s turmoil.

Eventually, however, intermittent conflict has spilled over into Lebanon and clashes along the Syrian-Lebanese border began in October 2011 when Syrian troops chased rebel groups into Lebanon or shelled villages across the border that provided aid to the Syrian rebels. These initial attacks occurred primarily in the northern Bekaa and Akkar border areas where relations between Syrian rebels and some [Lebanese] Sunni towns and villages are strong. At the time, the Lebanese army deployed troops to the region in order to stem the flow of support and weapons to Syria and to avert instability and the potential for additional spillover violence. While Hezbollah supported the Lebanese army deployments, the army’s limited capacity to curtail weapon and rebel flows meant that incidents and clashes along the border would continue and increased over time in both frequency and intensity.

According to IRIN, most Syrian refugees are Sunni and the large influx of Sunni refugees into the valley changes the demographic make-up of the region. Lebanese Sunnis of the northeast Bekaa Valley, in the village of Arsal, are considered to be staunch backers of the Syrian armed opposition. Arsal is isolated from western Lebanon. Its proximity to Syria, through a series of routes across the mountainous regions to the north and east, make the village an ideal logistical hub for rebel militants, according to the Lebanon News Network. According to a recent report from the Daily Star, several hundred Sunnis from northern Bekaa and other Sunni enclaves in Lebanon are currently fighting in Syria after joining various rebel groups. Meanwhile, the village of Hermel in northwest Bekaa Valley is mostly populated by Shi’ites. Hezbollah is a dominant force in the Hermel-area and is reportedly operating inside Syria along 23 villages populated by Lebanese Shi’ites opposite the border town of al Qasr. Traditionally sectarian hostility between the two communities has been non-existent. However, the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict has enflamed mutual fears and suspicions of one another.

A Shi’ite businessman in Hermel said, “[w]e are very worried about the Salafists\(^{10}\) coming here and attacking us”, adding, “we all support Hezbollah here. They are our only guarantee of protection”. Shi’ite concerns are not wholly unfounded; Sunni rebels in the region maintain “When we are done there [in Syria] we are going after Hezbollah here. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) will come and clean Lebanon and then leave, just like we are helping them there”.

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8 Social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization.  
9 The protests and mass demonstrations following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, became increasing anti-Syrian and anti-government. As the grassroots movements intensified, Syria announced on 24 February that it would withdraw most troops from Lebanon in a two-stage redeployment. These series of events are commonly referred to as the “Cedar Revolution”.  
10 A Salafist is a Muslim who emphasizes the Salaf (predecessor or ancestors) as models for Islamic practice. The term has been used since the Middle Ages, but today, Salafist refers to a modern Sunni Islamic movement known as Salafism.
Arsal Shooting – A Triggering Event?

The town of Arsal has an estimated 48,000 Sunni residents. Somewhat isolated in the Anti-Lebanon mountains, the town has a history of militancy and its residents are known for “being hard-headed and stubborn”, according to CSM. In the past, residents have joined Palestinian factions to fight Israeli occupation troops in south Lebanon. Over the past two years, Arsal has become a hub for support to the Syrian rebel groups as well as a refuge for hundreds of Syrians fleeing unrest in neighbouring towns. Arsal openly supports the rebellion against the Syrian regime. According to CSM, the northern Bekaa Valley is home to Shi’ite Hezbollah militants as well as Sunni volunteers with the FSA. One Lebanese-Sunni FSA fighter from the nearby village of Fakihe says “Hezbollah wants Arsal neutralized because if its support for the revolution”.

The Daily Star reported that shelling from the Syrian side of the Arsal border, over the course of the conflict, had killed at least three Lebanese farmers since March 2011. While sectarian tensions simmered within the Bekaa Valley prior to February 2013, manifest violence broke out in Arsal on 01 February when a deadly gunbattle, which left one Sunni militant and two Lebanese soldiers dead, raised tensions to a “dangerous level!” and resulted in Lebanese Special Forces deploying around the town. The Lebanese army maintains that Khaled Hmayed, a resident of Arsal, was a member of the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al Nusra11. The Lebanese army entered the village on 01 February to apprehend Hmayed. While resisting arrest, a shootout ensued. As the army left the village, they became stranded in snow and mud. Meanwhile, news of the shootout spread in Arsal and a group of 300 gunmen pursed Lebanese soldiers. Upon reaching the soldiers, the gunmen surrounded the military vehicles and opened fire, killing an officer and sergeant and wounding several others. Arsal residents tell a slightly different version of events. According to locals, Hmayed died in his vehicle while driving to a mosque for Friday prayers. Residents report that his black pick-up truck still remains parked at the location of the army ambush. The ambush took place only a few hundred yards from his home. The black truck is riddled with 43 bullet holes. Villagers who subsequently fought against the Lebanese army maintain they killed six people; many more than the two soldiers the Lebanese army reported. Many Arsal residents now believe that the four additional casualties were members of Hezbollah who accompanied the army soldiers into Arsal to apprehend Hmayed.

The Lebanese government demanded the surrender of the gunmen who fired on Lebanese soldiers, according to the CSM. However, the town’s residents refused to hand them over until an independent investigation is launched. Arsal’s mayor Ali Hujeiry recounted “[t]here were about 200 to 300 people involved [in the fight against the soldiers]. We can’t hand them all over”. The incident is likely linked a series of violent clashes and escalating rhetoric and confrontation in Bekaa. Tensions have remained high in the Bekaa Valley as Lebanese intelligence officers continue to search for those responsible for the attacks against troops in the Sunni village.

Since the Arsal Incident

The 01 February incident and subsequent developments in Arsal and throughout the rest of Lebanon reveal deep sectarian tensions exacerbated by the Syrian conflict and suggest an increase in societal instability. While these events do not indicate that Lebanon will be pulled into the Syrian conflict, they do underscore the depth of sectarian tension within the country. Individually, the events are provocative, but seen cumulatively and left unaddressed, they suggest Lebanon could spiral into conflict.

Continued Unrest in Arsal

Three Lebanese soldiers were injured in clashes with residents protesting against the imposition of strict security measures in Arsal on 15 February, reports Daily Star. Eleven villagers were arrested after an estimated one

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11 Jabhat al Nusra, is a Sunni-jihadist militia has become a participant in the Syrian conflict. The United States has classified the rebel group as a terrorist organisation.
hundred men attempted to block a road by setting tires on fire adjacent to the Lebanese checkpoint after Friday prayers. Residents responded to tear gas by throwing stones at the Lebanese soldiers who has released canisters on the crowd. Of the eleven arrested, four were Syrian nationals and, according to authorities, all possessed arms, ammunition and other military gear. Reports suggest that the incident occurred after “Islamist figures in town” called for a demonstration at noon in front of Arsal’s municipal building. Lebanese Salafist Sheikh Bai al Islam al Shahhal and Sheikh Mustafa al Hujeiri from Arsal led the protests. Shahhal stated, “the Sunnis in this country are at the forefront of the fight against the oppression and tyranny of the Syrian-Iranian axis”.

The same day in Tripoli, a group of protesters marched to Nour Square calling upon the Lebanese Army to pull back from Arsal. On 23 February, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman called on residents of Arsal to distance themselves from the Syrian crisis, stating that an investigation into the violent incident in Arsal between the Army and gunmen was needed. He also asked residents to hand over the wanted individuals. Days later, military investigative judge Fadi Sawwan issued four arrest warrants in absentia for suspects involved in the Arsal attack.

**Humanitarian Situation**

Amal Mudallali of the Woodrow Wilson Center states that the “Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is threatening to become the real humanitarian crisis in the region”. On 01 February, the day of the Arsal incident, a total of 245,671 total refugees resided in Lebanon. According to UNHCR, of those refugees, 71,852 were located in the Bekaa Valley. Less than a month later, on 26 February, 317,229 Syrian refugees were receiving protection and assistance in Lebanon; Bekaa Valley levels for that time period increased 43 per cent to 102,470. On 06 March, *Spiegel Online* reported that Lebanon’s population had increased by ten per cent as a result of the refugee influx and the current number of refugees stood at one million. Only weeks earlier, UNHCR officials had predicted that the one million mark for Syrian refugees would not be reached until early summer.

Refugees number 102,470 in Bekaa Valley while its population in 2007 was reported by UNDP to be 470,000. With a current estimated population of 572,470, Syrian refugees comprise approximately eighteen per cent of the population in Bekaa Valley. The growing humanitarian crisis in Bekaa Valley places additional social and economic stressors within communities. Meanwhile, Lebanon continues to resist the establishment of formal Syrian refugee camps and has sought to absorb the influx in homes and communities, according to *Reuters*. Reluctance to set up camps stems in part from historic sensitivities over the waves of the Palestinian refugees who fled Israel, but aid workers express concern that the lack of response on the part of the Lebanese government, particularly in Bekaa Valley, where pockets of Christians, pro-Hezbollah Shi’ite Muslims and Sunni Muslim supporters of the Syrian rebels live close by, stresses capacity.
Oil & Gas Protests

There have been allegations that the Lebanese government is exporting kerosene or red diesel to Syria from Tripoli and Zahrani. Lebanon’s Energy and Water Ministry denied allegations of oil and fuel smuggling on 12 February, stating, “Syrian tanker trucks seen loading fuel in the Zahrani area were being filled by a nearby private oil company and not by government-owned refineries”. However one day later, despite government denials, Lebanese protestors blocked two major roads in northern Lebanon to prevent fuel tankers from crossing into Syria, according to the Associated Press (AP). Sunni protestors blocked roads leading to Arida and Dabousiyeh border crossing points, angry that diesel exported to Syria was being used by regime tanks against civilians. Eventually, the police force escorted the tanker trucks bound for Syria across the border. Again, on 16 February, residents from the Chouf village of Khaldeh blocked the highway between Beirut and south Lebanon to prevent a convoy of trucks from transporting fuel into Syria, reports The Daily Star. Three trucks transporting fuel from the Zahrani refinery and were severely damaged when they swerved off the road. Earlier in the week The Daily Star reported that protestors from the north also mobilised “to block roads on a daily basis for the same cause”. Drivers of twenty transport trucks carrying diesel were advised against entering Tripoli on 14 February in order to avoid protestors obstructing roads.

In Bekaa Valley, protesters threatened to block the passing of eleven Syrian tanker trucks on 23 February, loaded with fuel from a station in Beirut en route to the border with Syria, according to The Daily Star. Hundreds of residents along with a group of Muslim scholars and preachers gathered at the entrance of the Bekaa town of Deir Zannoun waving flags of the Syrian Revolution. The group vowed to block the road leading to the Masnaa border crossing. Similar protests erupted in North Lebanon as residents there blocked the way of trucks attempting to access the Arida border crossing.

Later in February, in an effort to avoid further protests on land that risked violence, oil exporters began shipping fuel by sea from a number of different refineries in Lebanon, according to Lebanon News Network. On 27 February, sources reported that the oil-tanker Cosmo, displaying an Italian flag, docked at the Zahrani refinery and loaded an estimated 5,000 tonnes of oil. Cosmo is headed to Syria and will be docking at the ports of Tartus or Banias. Interestingly, sources noted that exporting Lebanon’s already imported oil to another country, such as Syria, requires authorisation of Lebanon’s Energy Ministry.

Controversial Sunni Leaders: Sheikh Ahmad al Assir

Based out of the city of Sidon, Salafist Sheikh Ahmad Assir’s fiery anti-Hezbollah, anti-Shi’ite rhetoric has many concerned about the possibility for an outbreak of sectarian violence in south Lebanon. In a provocative move, shortly after the Arsal incident, Sheikh Ahman al Assir announced that he would be making a visit to the Sunni stronghold. In response, villages near the Bekaa town blocked roads, the main intersection in the village of Labweh leading to Arsal, and also gathered on the international highway linking Baalbek to Homs. In response, Sunni Assir threatened to block March 8 officials passing through his village of Sidon but eventually announced the suspension of his visit to Arsal.

Assir has also supported the protesting of oil exports to Syria. On February 16, his supporters briefly gathered in the village of Abra, east of Sidon, and obstructed the road in order to stop trucks from leaving the area. In response, March 8-affiliated parties threatened to “confront Assir” if he chose to continue protests against trucks transporting diesel to Syria from the Zahrani refinery. The Daily Star reports that Assir’s protests continue, despite the Lebanese army’s appeal for Assir to stay in his mosque. On 01 March, an estimated 400 protestors followed him as he changed the location of his sit-in from the al Karama roundabout to Sidon’s Nejmeh square, shouting slogans criticising Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Troops also cordoned off the southern city of Sidon in order to prevent Assir from visiting graves of those killed during clashes with Hezbollah loyalists linked to mounting tensions over the Syrian conflict in November 2012.

Political Rhetoric in Lebanon

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati urged local media to avoid hosting sectarian officials and politicians who are engaging in “fist fights and cursing each other [in talk show programmes]”, only adding to increasingly sectarian and hostile rhetoric among leaders. Media representatives were resistant to the idea and maintained that local media could not provide the solution to sectarianism in Lebanon because they are “not the cause of the problem”.

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[12] Protesters gathering on the International Highway did so in the villages of Telya, al Ain, Muqna and the northern entrance of Baalbed, where most residents are supporters of Shi’ite Hezbollah.

[13] Lebanon’s March 8 Alliance is a coalition of opposition mostly Shi’ite Muslim and Syrian-backed parties led by Hezbollah and the more moderate Amal party.
One television talkshow host stated, “[i]f an MP’s remarks enhance sectarian sentiment, then why is he allowed to be in Parliament? Why don’t they lift parliamentary immunity and hold him accountable?”

Lebanese politics are deeply sectarian, reflecting the engrained sectarian identity in the country, according to New York Times. An example of this can be seen in the recent cross-border fighting involving a Hezbollah fighter and Syrian rebels. March 14 officials and the Progressive Socialist Party leader, Walid Jumblatt, criticised Hezbollah over its involvement in clashes in Syria on 18 February. Kataeb Party leader Amin Gemayel, “slammed Hezbollah’s involvement in the clashes in Qusayr”, and warned that meddling in the Syrian conflict would jeopardise Lebanon’s fragile stability. Hezbollah’s Baalbek-Hermel Member of Parliament (MP) Nawar Sahli defended his party’s actions stating they were “simply defending themselves against rebels who were attacking their homes in the Syrian region of Qusayr”. Akkar MP Moeen Merhebi Merhebi stated, “What Hezbollah is doing is implicating Lebanon in the Syrian crisis and its repercussions won’t be only on this party but would involve the whole country in this war between the Syrian people and the Syrian regime”. Prime Minister Najib Makati’s comments were most telling; “Every day there are fights; I wish everyone had remained committed to the policy of disassociation”.

Lebanese-Syrian Violence
Prior to Arsal, news sources have chronicled sporadic violent clashes within Lebanon; namely in the northern city of Tripoli and the southern city of Sidon. Below, are some of the sectarian clashes occurring in Lebanon since 01 February. These incidents are not presented as a definitive list of events, but rather a sampling of sectarian-motivated violence.

According to reports on 17 February “the worst [fighting] near the border with Lebanon since the uprising erupted in Syria nearly two years ago”. Three Hezbollah fighters and twelve Syrian rebels were killed in Qusayr, where many Lebanese Shi’ites reside. Sources indicated that two artillery shells fired by Syrian rebels landed inside the Lebanese village of Qar, causing no casualties. Agence France-Presse reported on 19 February that unknown attackers in Tripoli lobbed a bomb at an Islamic aid centre, known to oppose the Assad government, and that assists Syrian refugees in the region. The attack resulted in the injury of three people.

FSA forces were prepared to fire into Lebanon in order to halt Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. The FSA again accused Hezbollah, a key ally of embattled Syrian President Bashar Assad, of “committing massacres” in Syria with “artillery cover from inside Lebanese territory”. However, FSA said its rebels launched attacks less than a day after accusing Hezbollah of shelling militant bases in Syria’s Homs province on 20 February. Hisam al Avvak, a commander of the FSA stated “we have bombed the territories of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. The Free Syrian Army will continue bombing these positions”. Additionally, Avvak reiterated his organisations commitment to target Hezbollah strongholds south of the Lebanese capital.

On 23 February, gunfire from the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon killed Hussein Ismail, the nephew of a former north Lebanon lawmaker in Wadi Khaled. The incident raised tensions in the village and hours later, fierce fighting erupted between Syrian troops and unknown gunmen, leaving a Lebanese man dead and four others wounded. Members of the slain man’s clan took part in the fighting against Syrian troops in the Bukayaa region of northern Lebanon. In the aftermath of Bekaa border hostilities, Khaled Jaafar, one of the chiefs of the Jaafar clan said that the Hermel clans will attack those supportive of the Syrian opposition groups in the area. The Hermel clans are capable of doing this because they have armed groups in the Popular Committee, “which have begun preparing for a wider confrontation with the Syrian opposition groups in the area. Ali Zeaiter, the head of the Bekaa Valley reconciliation committee, ruled out the possibility of arranging a sustainable truce between Shi’ite villages and clans and Sunnis. “Achieving a permanent truce in the region has become almost impossible, given that the development of the military situation and the confrontation between the two sides has gone beyond the limits of residents in villages on both sides”, Zeaiter said. He added that the fate of a truce now depends on the general situation and decisions made by top leaders in both the Syrian opposition and the Hezbollah leadership.

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14 Lebanon’s March 14 Alliance is a Sunni-Druze-Christian coalition that takes its name from the date of the Cedar Revolution.
15 Popular Committees are a Syrian government construct. They are comprised of local residents in neighbourhoods or villages, serving as volunteers to protect their neighbourhoods, ensuring that their villages do not become safe havens for militants fighting against the Syrian army.
16 Ali Zeaiter heads a committee that attempts to reconcile residents of the Shi’ite and Sunni villages in Bekaa Valley. Bekaa has been plagued with tensions and disputes concerning the Syrian conflict. Despite recent disputes, Zeaiter maintained in October 2012 the shared history of smuggling engendered strong tribal, social and economic ties between Bekaa residents.
On 26 February, nine shells fired from the Syrian side of the shared border landed in several border towns north of Lebanon, reports Kuwait New Agency (KUNA). Syria fired shells into Lebanon as a result of the clashes. Days later, on 01 March, FSA spokesman Louai al Meqdad reported that rockets fired from Hezbollah positions inside Lebanon struck Syrian provinces along the border. Meqdad suggested that “for months Hezbollah has been shelling targets in the Syrian governorate of al Qusayr from Hermel in Lebanon”.

Conclusion

The people of Arsal in Bekaa Valley show no sign of easing their assistance to the Syrian rebels irrespective of any measures undertaken by the Lebanese army and government to impede their assistance to rebels. Meanwhile, recent reports suggest that Hezbollah is training 4,000 to 5,000 fighters to assist the Syrian government in putting down the revolt against President Assad. A statement by the Free Syrian Army asserted that Hezbollah is actively training fighters in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley near Mahshghara. Hezbollah fighters in Bekaa are now poised to intercept FSA rebels attempting to criss-cross the border. Increasingly, northern Bekaa is looking like an active extension of the war in Syria. Noteworthy, in the progressive escalation of participation in the Syrian conflict, is Lebanese President Michel Sleiman’s call for the local population of Arsal to distance themselves from the Syrian crisis, while remaining silent over Hezbollah operations in the region.