

July 21, 2012

Analysis: With Assad Future in Question, Lebanon on Edge

by Jeff Neumann

BEIRUT – As Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's grip on power becomes increasingly tenuous, a sense of unease is growing among some of his staunchest regional allies. And even though they have dwindled in number since the start of the anti-government uprising in Syria 16 months ago, some are still betting on his survival.

In Lebanon, regime loyalists are digging in and if Assad were to fall, the political landscape here could be altered dramatically.

Hours after a suspected bomb attack purportedly killed four of Assad's top security officials, including his brother-in-law, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised speech marking the 2006 war with Israel, "These martyr leaders were comrades-in-arms on the path of the conflict with the Israeli enemy." He added, "We are confident that the Arab Syrian Army, which managed to overcome the unbearable, has enough resolve to be able to go on and crush the hopes of the enemies."

Other officials also rushed to reaffirm their ties to the regime in Syria, including both the Lebanese president and speaker of parliament. However, some members of the political opposition publicly praised the bomb attack.

Assad's long reach

Lebanon is governed by a ruling coalition called the March 8 Alliance. It is a Hezbollah-led multi-confessional patchwork of Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, seemingly held together by one common thread – loyalty to Damascus. The group's name is a reference to a large-scale protest in March 2005 called by Hezbollah to counter the "Cedar Revolution," which eventually forced the withdrawal from Lebanon of Syrian army troops following their three-decade-long occupation of the country.

After forcing the downfall of the anti-Syrian government coalition early last year, the March 8 Alliance has steadily consolidated its power. The strengthening of historical ties with its neighbor is a major platform for the alliance, with some March 8 politicians going so far as calling for a restoration of Greater Syria, the Ottoman-era designation that regarded Lebanon as an official part of Syria. The Lebanese branch of Assad's Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party holds two seats in parliament here.

On a smaller scale, there are less visible Damascus allies in Lebanon who will likely suffer in the event of a Syrian regime collapse. The Syria Socialist National Party (SSNP), for instance, stands to lose a great deal of its influence in west Beirut. In the Hamra and Manara neighborhoods of the capital, where the SSNP is strongest and where it maintains its headquarters, many small business owners complain of a mafia-style protection racket run by the party. Damascus offers material support to the party and losing its benefactor could effectively cripple the SSNP.

Bashar the "savior"

When questioned about the attack on Assad's inner circle, a young Syrian from Aleppo named Khaled replied, "Assef Shawkat?", referring to Assad's brother-in-law who reportedly was among

those killed in the Damascus blast. "We only need Bashar, he is our savior and he will win this war." Khaled has been in Lebanon for the past four years working as a day laborer. He spends his free time with SSNP members. "My brothers here make me feel as if I am home."

Sporadic outbreaks of Syria-related violence have killed dozens in Lebanon's cities in recent months. And shortly after news broke of the purported assassinations in Damascus, Sunni neighborhoods in the northern city of Tripoli erupted with six hours of celebratory gunfire. An Alawite militiaman in Tripoli reached by phone that night said his neighborhood was under siege and that his family was terrified, adding that his Sunni neighbors "act like animals."

Changes loom

However grim the future might look for Lebanon, Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, said another war here is not necessarily on the horizon.

"Lebanon won't collapse," Salem said, adding, "we have a political system in place, and we have had our civil war. Everyone is going to great lengths to avoid another war here." But the ground is being set for a change of course in politics. "There will be an obvious weakening of, and perhaps splintering, of the March 8 Alliance. The bloc could be completely dismantled when Assad falls," he added.

Salem says the opposition and its allies, led by former prime minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement, will ultimately benefit from a collapse of the Assad regime. But with Hariri in self-imposed exile and no clear leadership, the opposition remains weak. Even the question of who will lead the opposition is out of Lebanese hands, according to Salem. "Sadly, this is a Saudi call to make."

The direct effects of the war in Syria are now hitting closer to home in an increasingly divided Lebanon. The United Nations says some 30,000 refugees have poured into county fleeing the violence in Syria in the past two days leaving many here wondering just how much longer Assad's grip on power will last.