

# Beirut on the brink

Sectarian violence worsens in Lebanon's resilient capital.

**Sophie Cousins** Last updated: 19 Feb 2014 07:02



A suicide bomber killed himself and one other person in southern Beirut on February 3 [Reuters]

**Beirut, Lebanon** - The Lebanese have long been known for their resilience - their ability to pick up the pieces and carry on with their lives after yet another traumatic event.

This sentiment rings true for Marwan Akil, a coffee shop owner in Lebanon's capital. Akil was making coffee for a group of customers on February 4 when a suicide bomber blew himself up in a passenger van in Beirut's southern suburbs.

The blast, which took place during the evening rush hour in the Choueifat district, happened just 20 metres from his coffee shop. "I heard a big noise and suddenly it became so misty," Akil told Al Jazeera. "I didn't know what it was. I just heard women screaming and saw so much smoke. There was no body of the suicide bomber - his parts were spread out everywhere across the road and his head actually became detached and hit the fifth floor of an apartment close by."

Although the blast happened in a Druze neighbourhood, it was adjacent to a heavily Shia Muslim area, from which Hezbollah, Lebanon's most powerful armed group, draws its base of support. It appeared to be the latest in a string of attacks in the nation's capital, which has, along with the rest of the country, become drawn into the Syrian civil war next door and polarised along sectarian lines.

Nevertheless, Akil has continued to make coffee at his shop every day since the blast. But customers are far and few between. "No one comes here anymore for coffee because they are afraid. This is not ethical, it is not right. We just want this all to stop. No matter what religion you are, it is not ethical. I wish the Syrian war wouldn't spill over into Lebanon."

## **Increasing sectarianism**

Syrian rebel groups have claimed responsibility for many of the recent bombings in Beirut's southern suburbs, retaliating against Hezbollah's armed support for Syria's government.

But as the tiny Mediterranean country anticipates its next bombing, the larger question at hand is whether each blast is just another point gained in a football match or the beginning of a new civil war.

Benedetta Berti, co-author of *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, says Lebanon has been on the brink of large-scale violent conflict for the past few years, but that it has so far been contained.

"I think so far all the main political leaders, including Hezbollah, have showed a clear interest in preventing an escalation, and I am inclined to believe that as long as that remains the case, Lebanon will be able to prevent a new civil war," she said. "Yet the current situation is very dangerous for the country and it has created a prolonged internal paralysis. I do see things getting worse in terms of polarisation, changing modus operandi and sophistication of the last terrorist attacks, and the economic and social impact of the civil war and the refugee crisis."

Other experts agree. "The situation will probably get worse until the Syrian crisis ends or a resolution is put into effect," Sami Atallah, director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, told Al Jazeera. "This may take a few months or years, depending also on how the Iranian-US rapprochement evolves and how the different actors like Saudi Arabia and Israel decide to accept this."

Berti added that while Hezbollah was heavily invested in Syria, the group was still very much devoted to having a strong presence in Lebanon. "The recent attacks have been somewhat of a blow to the group's reputation of invincibility, and have also increased insecurity within the Shiite community," she said. "Hezbollah needs to address both issues by securing its communities and being present and visible."

## **Syrian refugee impact**

To date, more than 900,000 Syrian refugees are registered or waiting to be registered in Lebanon, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Every day Lebanon registers 3,000 refugees, spokeswoman Dana Sleiman said, adding that UNHCR predicts there will

be 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon by the end of 2014.

In my opinion, there is no solution. We are, in a way, too connected to groups of other people such as the Israelis, Palestinians and Syrians."

- Shawki, taxi driver and former Lebanese army officer

The constant flow of refugees into Lebanon has had major economic and social effects on the country. The health and education sectors are struggling, jobs are scarce and housing prices have skyrocketed. According to the World Bank, by the end of 2014, the Syrian war and the influx of refugees will have cost Lebanon \$7.5bn in total economic losses.

"This is why the civil war in Syria should be treated as the most urgent regional challenge. In addition to the horrific humanitarian impact, it does have the potential of destabilising the entire Middle East," Berti said.

Georges Sassine, a US-based Lebanese policy expert, said more action had to be taken to address the issue. "The Syrian refugee crisis has created a sense of fear across Lebanese society, which is partly rooted in the country's failure to manage the Palestinian refugee crisis," he said. "The problem is the inability of the Lebanese government to manage the crisis... Lebanese policymakers have so far shown a complete lack of leadership, vision and political will to better manage the flow of Syrian refugees."

Some Lebanese, though, don't think any solution exists to the ongoing conflict. "Problems lead to problems. Action leads to reaction. I guess that interference in the Syrian crisis reflects many problems in Lebanon," said Shawki, a former Lebanese army officer who now works as a taxi driver. "There is a fire outside - let's go away from that fire and keep it alone. The Syrian war is exaggerating Lebanon's problems. In my opinion, there is no solution. We are, in a way, too connected to groups of other people such as the Israelis, Palestinians and Syrians."

But like so many Lebanese who have lived through decades of instability, Shawki is willing to pick up the pieces for a country he loves so much. "Lebanon is very beautiful. In spite of the bad things, you always find the life in Lebanon. It's an amazing country."

Source: Al Jazeera