



## Lebanon's Deepest Fault Line is Between Rival Christian Groups

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If civil war breaks out in Lebanon in the coming months, Aldo Khoury will be able to say that he fought in one of its opening battles. Since Dec. 1, 2006, Khoury has lived in a soiled tent at the center of the Hezbollah-led occupation of downtown Beirut. One morning this January, on a day that came to be known as "Black Tuesday," he drove with several of his camp-mates to a traffic circle on the outskirts of the city. They set up a ramshackle barricade and, as a show of strength against the U.S.-backed government, resolved to paralyze Beirut. But within a few hours, supporters of the government arrived to break up the roadblock, setting off a daylong street fight. The torched cars, shattered storefronts, and rooftop snipers evoked memories of Lebanon's last civil war and prompted a flurry of dark warnings of a return to violence.

When I asked him about the skirmish three weeks later, Khoury condemned his adversaries as warmongering militants. "They have a history of bloodshed," he said. "These are the criminals that America and Israel hide behind." We were sitting in the downtown encampment, surrounded by Hezbollah flags and small clusters of protesters smoking hookahs. Khoury had a pistol in the waist of his pants. "They started the fight with us because they don't care if there is civil war," he said. "It's what they want, and we have to be ready."

These were not the words of a Shiite denouncing a Sunni, despite all the talk of mounting tensions between Muslim sects in Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East. Khoury is a Maronite Christian. The men facing him across the barricades last month were also Maronite Christians. The current political standoff has split their community apart--and however inscrutable the internecine feuds may seem, they could prove to be the flashpoint for a broader conflict.

The situation is particularly ominous because today's main Christian antagonists--Gen. Michel Aoun, a former army commander, and Samir Geagea, the leader of a militia-turned-political-party called the Lebanese Forces--have a bitter history of confrontation. In the final years of the 1975-90 civil wars, Geagea's Lebanese Forces and the last remnants of the Aoun-led army massacred each other in the mountains above Beirut in some of the bloodiest battles Lebanon had seen. For most of the subsequent 15 years of Syrian control, both were absent from the political scene. Geagea was thrown in jail. Aoun went into exile in France. Their followers lived, as one Aounist put it, "in a gloom, a decline, without a true leader to represent or fight for us." But soon after the "cedar revolution" that drove Syrian troops out of Lebanon two years ago, Aoun and Geagea came crashing back.

It was not long before Aoun and Geagea had resumed their hostile poses. The Lebanese Forces became the key Christian player in the new Sunni-dominated, pro-Western government--known as the "March 14" government, after the massive anti-Syrian protests that followed former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination two years ago--while Aoun threw the weight of his Free Patriotic Movement (backed at the time by two-thirds of Lebanon's Christians) with Shiite Hezbollah. In December, when Hezbollah took to the streets in an effort to force early elections, Aoun's partisans--Aldo Khoury among them--joined the occupation. And when Khoury and his camp-mates seized the traffic circle last month, it was Geagea's men who came to bust them up. Now, explained one prominent political observer, "the Lebanese Forces desperately want something to happen so that Geagea can show that he is the muscle of the government. Aoun might not understand how serious the situation is, but on some level he also doesn't mind going back to the 1980s."

Lebanese Forces leaders, of course, blame the escalation on Aoun, whom they accuse of having become a Syrian lackey. When Joseph Nehmé, one of Geagea's deputies, guided me through the scene of last month's confrontation, he described Aoun's men "coming to block the road and burn the cars and break windows in order to bring chaos." The Lebanese Forces, he said, "were obligated to go into the street. We tried to make sure our guys were behaving, but they were opposed by men who started shooting. One of our guys died, and we had 50 casualties." In the wake of the fighting, Geagea warned Aoun that "if you continue, there will be civil war." Charles, a Lebanese Forces member I met at a party branch office not far from the downtown occupation, was more blunt: "Half our guys in the mountains were in militias. They have their weapons, and they will not let this go on forever."

The prize that Aoun craves is the presidency, a post that, according to Lebanon's elaborate sectarian power-sharing arrangement, must go to a Maronite. He believes the presidency was stolen from him at the end of the civil war, and his supporters paint him as the only "strong and clean" Christian leader in the country--a counterpoint to the brutality and corruption of Geagea and his allies. "We went to the streets that day [in January] with the support of the majority of the people, and the Lebanese Forces used it as an excuse to attack," said Ibrahim Kanaan, a Free Patriotic Movement leader. "They are going into the logic of militias, a logic they never really left. Gen. Aoun wants

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peace, but he does not find this encouraging." A former Aoun aide was less flattering: "[Aoun] is a megalomaniac acting out of complete desperation. He wants the presidency at any cost."

Next to Aoun and Geagea, Lebanon's Sunni and Shiite leaders are practically a picture of restraint. Hezbollah, careful not to undermine its broad appeal in the region, is always quick to confirm that it "will never turn its guns on other Lebanese," as Hezbollah official Mohamed Obeid emphasized to me. The potentially catastrophic consequences of a Sunni-Shiite clash, for both Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East, have brought about a balance of terror: The sheer horror of the fallout has induced a measure of caution on both sides. "There is rage, both in the country and regionally, but everyone knows that if Sunnis and Shiites start fighting in Beirut, there will be a Sunni-Shiite war in the whole region," said Tariq Mitri, Lebanon's acting foreign minister. "That fear can cause people to behave themselves."

At the same time, the Sunni-Shiite impasse has made the tensions between Christian factions more dangerous. With both Hezbollah and the government eager to use non-Muslim allies to highlight their cross-sectarian appeal, Christians have become the crucial swing vote in the standoff. "Until 1990, the Maronites dominated the political system," explained Hilal Khashan, a political science professor at the American University of Beirut. "Now they're the junior partners to the Shiites and the Sunnis." (Lebanon was intended as a Christian enclave in the Middle East, but the Christians' position has been eroding; although they are officially entitled to half the seats in parliament, their share of the population is probably closer to a third.) Aware of this junior-partner status, Christian partisans routinely accuse each other of doing the dirty work of their Muslim patrons. The Lebanese Forces' Nehmé claimed, "Hezbollah wants to make the Christians do the fighting, so it would be a clash between Christians. ... Gen. Aoun is being used by them." Aoun's backers level similar accusations at Geagea. A slew of assassinations of prominent anti-Syrian Christians--including, most recently, Pierre Gemayel--has only increased the rancor.

For the time being, the two sides are prepared for little more than extended bouts of low-intensity street fighting. But the Lebanese Forces often remind opponents of their past as a battle-hardened militia and of the working-class mountain toughs at the core of the party's membership. Aounists, meanwhile, invoke the army--which is filled with pro-Aoun Christians and Shiites who, if it came down to it, would mostly side with Hezbollah--as their own force. "They should remember that the army is still Gen. Aoun's army," Chebel Kassab, a young man camped downtown, warned. On the morning of last month's opposition strikes, the current army commander called in sick.

Since the clashes, the influential Maronite patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, has been working to make peace between Aoun and Geagea, and some recent polls indicate growing dissatisfaction among Christians with the belligerence of both factions. "I don't think the major players want a civil war," said political scientist Khashan. But, he added, "The game may become uncontrollable. It all depends on whether they are rational actors, and we know we can't count on that. ... We had a 15-year civil war, and we weren't able to learn a thing from it."

It is a distressingly common pattern in the run-up to larger conflagrations: Both sides proclaim their commitment to peace but insist that the aggressions and provocations of the opposing camp demand a response. In Lebanon, even as political leaders have studiously affirmed their aversion to violence, their constituents have driven up the price of Kalashnikovs sevenfold.

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