

## LEBANESE FEARS ABOUT SYRIA

Clashes between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian military are spilling into northern Lebanon where many Lebanese support the rebels who are fighting for control of Syria. Lebanon's pro-Syrian government is concerned about being drawn further into the conflict, but people living along the border fear being killed by Syrian military artillery shells.

Lebanon, lying at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea between Syria and Israel, is a cultural crossroads. Its geographic position historically made it perfect for trade between Asia and Europe. Not only were goods from the East loaded on ships bound for Europe, but multiple cultures interacted in Lebanon as well. Today, the country maintains a particularly complex cultural geography pattern, which helps explain its divisions over the conflict in Syria.

Lebanon, a relatively small country with a total area of 4,015 square miles (10,400 sq. km), is about half the size of New Jersey. Two mountain ranges, the Lebans and Antilebanons separated by the famous north-south Bekaa Valley, create both physical and cultural compartmentalization in Lebanon.

The people of Lebanon currently number almost 4.1 million. Muslims make up almost 60 percent of the population and are further divided into Shiites, Sunnis and Druzes, each with their own political agenda. Christians comprise about 39 percent of the population. Palestinians from Israel and Israeli-occupied Palestine, also have a presence in the country, as do the Syrians. To a considerable degree, these groups tend to be segregated into their own territories.

With 18 recognized religious sects and many different ethnicities, Lebanon has been

a refuge for the region's minorities for centuries, according to the BBC (May 20, 2012).

United with Syria during the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon was put under a French mandate after World War I. Given independence from France in 1943, Lebanon has since had a history of political turmoil coupled with periods of economic growth. Beirut, Syria's capital, provides most of the country's economic opportunities and is a regional hub for finance and trade.

Between 1975 and the early 1990s, Syria suffered a devastating civil war. Much of the fighting was between other regional powers including Syria, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), who used Lebanon as the front line for their own disputes.

As fighting began, Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1975 and remained for 29 years as self-proclaimed peacekeepers. Virtually the

murder. As protests in Beirut between pro- and anti-Syria factions ensued, the Lebanese government collapsed and Syria withdrew its troops. Today, Hezbollah controls much of southern Lebanon. Despite not having a military presence in Lebanon, Syria continues to wield considerable political clout in Lebanese affairs, according to BBC reports.

Syria's current conflict between the FSA and Syrian military is now reaching into northern Lebanon, creating a very volatile border between the two countries. While most Lebanese border towns support the FSA, most members of the Lebanese government remain in support of Syria's current president, Bashar al-Assad.

Northern Lebanese are helping the FSA by sheltering its members, allowing them to rest, heal and re-mobilize after clashes in Syria. They are also helping them smuggle weapons through Lebanon into Syria.

Recently, the Syrian military has been firing artillery shells into Lebanon and planting landmines on both sides of the border. Lebanon's government is faced with few good choices for handling the situation.

Anti-Assad politicians in Lebanon have called for deploying United Nation's (UN) peacekeepers along the northern border with Syria, though the Lebanese government rejects the idea. Already, 11,500 UN peacekeepers, known as UNIFIL, are stationed in southern Lebanon to watch Hezbollah and prevent arms smuggling into Lebanon. The Lebanese government is reluctant for those troops to move north to the border.

The Lebanese government says it will protest border violations by Syria and has sent reinforcing troops to the region. The Lebanese have no intention, however, of returning fire across the border towards Syria, according to the BBC.

While Turkey remains the main external base for the FSA, the situation on Lebanon's border with Syria is a definite sign of trouble. The Lebanese know all too well about hosting the Syrian military,

as they did for 29 years, and they are not interested in being occupied by Syria ever again.

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whole world, however, suspected that Syria's real interest was to reunite the two countries or at least take advantage of Lebanon's geographic position relative to Israel. Syria and Lebanon previously had been united for more than 400 years under the Ottoman Empire.

When a former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated in 2005, Lebanese opposition groups blamed the Syrian-backed Shia (Shiite) group Hezbollah for the



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