

Lebanon descends further into chaos: Militants clash in streets of Beirut following protests against port explosion inquiry

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Hezbollah and Amal militants equipped with a Kalashnikov assault rifle and an RPG launcher engage unknown snipers during an afternoon of firefights in Beirut. Photo: Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The streets of Beirut were reminiscent of the Lebanese Civil War on Thursday as sectarian militias exchanged heavy fire with one another, further destabilising a nation that has suffered economic devastation, political turmoil, and national tragedy all within the last two years.

A series of sporadic firefights began just before midday as unidentified snipers opened fire on demonstrators from two Shia Muslim organisations - the Amal Movement and the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah - whilst they were protesting for the removal of a judge charged with investigating last year's Beirut port explosion which killed more than 200 people.

Immediately after the initial sniper fire, protesters briefly withdrew to retrieve Kalashnikovs and RPG rocket launchers which they then used to open fire on the high-rises where the snipers in question appeared to be situated.

Hundreds of civilians were caught up in much of the violence which ensued, the majority of whom retreated but many remained, taking cover behind cars and in side streets, encouraging the Hezbollah and Amal fighters with chants of "Shia, Shia, Shia."

Four hours of violence were gradually brought to an end once the Lebanese army was deployed, forcing militants to withdraw and leaving at least seven dead, 30 wounded, and no more than nine arrested from both sides.

According to unsubstantiated claims made by Hezbollah officials, the snipers who allegedly began Thursday's violence were members of the Lebanese Forces - a right-wing Christian political party that frequently clashes with Hezbollah.

That evening Lebanon's president, Michel Aoun, delivered a televised address in which he reaffirmed the government's commitment to the port explosion investigation and called for stability, saying "Our country needs calm dialogue, and calm solutions and the respect for our institutions."

António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, echoed these appeals and called for all parties to refrain from provocative action and inflammatory rhetoric. So far, he seems to have been listened to.

In the statements that followed Thursday's fighting, neither side seemed to directly charge the other with anything beyond being part of the clashes. Whilst each did subtly denounce the other as posing a threat to Lebanon's peace, they only did so implicitly; this seems a relatively mild ending to the worst day of violence Beirut has seen since 2008.

Tensions between these two groups are, nevertheless, considerably higher than they were several years ago due to Lebanon's many recent crises. Since September 2019, the Lebanese pound has plummeted to a level where it is now worth 90 percent less than it was pre-downturn.

The World Bank has stated that the nation's economic collapse could rank among the three worst the world has seen since the mid-nineteenth century. Prolonged fuel shortages and frequent power outages have resulted in worries that even hospitals' emergency generators might fail.

The culmination of all this economic distress is a drop in the standard of living so drastic that, according to The New York Times, it is "reducing Lebanese who were comfortably middle class to poverty," all in the space of fewer than two years.

Such economic devastation has seen an added intensity to Lebanese politics, primarily centring around last year's port blast. Many commentators have pointed out that if Lebanon fails to deliver justice and trial the culprits of one of the biggest industrial accidents in modern history, then surely it must rank as a failed state.

Delivering justice, however, has proved to be no mean feat due to the explosion being increasingly politicised. The resignation of the former prime minister, Hassan Diab, and the rest of his cabinet soon after the explosion might have appeased the outraged Lebanese public, but it also entangled the investigation in political wrongdoing and corruption from the very beginning.

Hezbollah and Amal have been extremely vocal in attempting to tarnish the inquiry's legitimacy. Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah accused the lead judge of "politically targeting" officials, inflaming tensions which lead to Thursday's protests.

This staunch opposition to the inquiry has led most involved to presume Hezbollah were somehow responsible for the explosion; as of yet, these are merely popular rumours.

Commentators such as David Gardner at The Financial Times have gone as far as to regard the investigation as not only the make-or-break moment for Lebanon as a functional democracy, but even as a sovereign nation, arguing that if Hezbollah succeeds in derailing it, the country will be well on the way to becoming an "Iranian protectorate on the Mediterranean."

Such a prediction is not especially outlandish. Hezbollah's militia is arguably as strong as Lebanon's army, possibly stronger given its arsenal of 100,000 artillery rockets and approximately as many fighters with decades of experience in combat across the Middle East, including in Yemen and Iraq.

This inquiry is therefore about far more than the hundreds of victims' families or resolving government corruption, given that its outcome could drastically shift the power balance in Lebanon, as well as the Middle East as a whole, potentially adding another civil war to the region's already plentiful list of the last decade.

Sources:

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