

# **Blowback Operations as Rebel Strategy: How Sunni-Shia Violence Spread from Syria into Lebanon, 2013-14**

Nils Hägerdal  
Postdoctoral Fellow  
Center for Strategic Studies, Fletcher School  
of Law and Diplomacy  
Tufts University nils.hagerdal@gmail.com

Peter Krause  
Associate Professor, Boston College  
Research Affiliate, MIT Security Studies  
peter.krause.2@bc.edu

When and why do conflict and violence spread across international borders? Existing scholarship mostly focuses on how civil war in one country affects the probability of civil war onset in a neighboring state. We introduce a new theoretical framework for thinking about blowback operations, where a civil war combatant stages terrorist attacks in the home country of a foreign actor to coerce this actor to end a military intervention. We show that blowback can target non-state armed groups as well as states, and that perpetrators of blowback attacks frequently deploy violence in narrowly targeted ways—such as attacking supporters of particular political groups—to maximize their coercive leverage. Using this framework, we explain how military intervention by Hezbollah in Syria sparked a bombing campaign by Sunni jihadi groups inside Lebanon. Novel quantitative and qualitative evidence reveals how attackers primarily targeted Hezbollah political strongholds, rather than indiscriminately attacking Shia civilians.

10,549 words

Only three wars in the world caused over 10,000 deaths in 2019: those in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. These three wars share some unfortunate characteristics, including spreading conflict and violence to surrounding states. The seemingly endless war in Afghanistan has led to insurgent violence in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan over the past three decades; the conflict in Syria triggered a violent bombing campaign in Lebanon in 2013-14 and the rise of Islamic State with its regional ambitions; and the civil war in Yemen has generated drone and missile strikes into neighboring Saudi Arabia since 2015. All three of the deadliest wars of 2019 were also fought partly along ethnic and religious lines, including the Sunni-Shia cleavage within Islam. For instance, Shia-dominated Iran supports Hezbollah, which in turn supports the Alawi-dominated Assad regime in Syria. Syrian rebels are overwhelmingly Sunni and receive support from Sunni-dominated Turkey and Gulf Arab states. Saudi Arabia has intervened against the Houthis in Yemen, who are Shia and increasingly supported by Iran. Afghanistan is increasingly marked by Taliban and ISIS attacks against the Shia Hazara population. However, there are powerful limits to sectarian explanations of these and other contemporary conflicts. For instance, Iran also supports Sunni Islamist Hamas, while many Shia clerics consider the Alawi faith of Bashar al-Assad to be heresy.

To what extent do sectarian fault lines and ideologies drive the use and targeting of violence that spreads within and across borders? The potential for conflicts to spread past their initial borders has always been a top concern of policymakers and the general public, from the two World Wars to deadly regional conflicts like the Second Congo War and Indochina Wars that have touched every corner of the globe. Concerns about “rigid alliance structures” and “domino effects” have marked analysis of these wars, as conflict supposedly spreads either inadvertently or via the machinations of foreign states. Yet the diffusion of the three largest conflicts in 2019 was neither unintended, uncontrolled “spillover” or “wildfire,” nor was it initiated by states—or exclusively against them. Instead, much of the diffusion of violence from Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen was led by armed groups striking back at foreign actors intervening on the opposing side of their civil wars.

Such violent retaliation in response to foreign intervention, or “blowback,” has long been on the minds of scholars and policymakers. The term was coined in a CIA memo describing the potential Iranian response to the 1953 U.S. operation that helped overthrow Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, and it was subsequently used to describe harsh reactions by the Soviet Union and other states to U.S. covert operations in the Cold War (Johnson, 2001; O’Rourke, 2018). Nonetheless, the strategic logic and micro-level dynamics of blowback have not been systematically analyzed as a prominent mechanism for conflict diffusion, especially by (and against) non-state armed groups. Most existing scholarship analyzes conflict diffusion as a dichotomous measure using cross-national correlations, usually limiting their analysis to how civil wars in one country affect the probability of civil war onset in a neighboring state (Black, 2013; Forsberg, 2014a). In contrast, we focus on cases where the resultant violence takes other shapes—in particular, terrorist attacks—that may not involve regular combat or reach conventional thresholds for civil war. The expanding reach and prominence of armed non-state actors—and the growing number of foreign states intervening in civil wars—increasingly makes the diffusion of violence via blowback a prominent feature of ongoing conflicts.

We model blowback operations as a rational strategy of armed groups for coercing foreign actors to end hostile military interventions, rather than a byproduct of other factors such as ethnic animosity. We theorize the strategic logic of blowback operations, and argue that these missions can also target other non-state actors as well as foreign states. Our second contribution concerns the micro-level dynamics of violence in blowback operations. We argue that targeting strategies—whether to attack civilian or military targets, and whether to use selective or indiscriminate violence (or intermediate options, such as the “discriminate targeting of collectives”)—also differ depending on whether the perpetrator, the target, or both are non-state armed groups rather than a state (Kocher, Pepinsky & Kalyvas, 2011; Steele, 2011). If the perpetrators can identify political supporters of their enemy, they may discriminate by using violence against members of specific ethnic groups, supporters of particular political parties, or other heuristic devices that signal political loyalties. We draw on the literature on civil war violence and show that many perpetrators of other forms of political violence—such as blowback operations—face a similar calculus in how best to identify and target their enemies.

To explore our argument, we study how violence spread from Syria into Lebanon during 2013-14 using novel micro-level quantitative and qualitative data that allows us to trace the motivations for violence using target location, media accounts, perpetrator statements, and observations by local residents. Military intervention by Hezbollah into Syria on the side of President Bashar al-Assad regime led to blowback in the form of a sustained bombing campaign inside Lebanon by Sunni Jihadi groups that were fighting to unseat the Assad regime. We find that bombings were not driven by geography or Sunni-Shia resentment, but rather a coercive logic based on political affiliation. The attacks inside Lebanon were designed to coerce Hezbollah to end its involvement in Syria, and predominantly targeted Hezbollah political strongholds. Hezbollah's desire to avoid conflict on the home front—and to respond through the political system rather than with its own military forces—helped prevent this campaign of violence from escalating to another Lebanese civil war.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present blowback as a form of strategic coercion that represents a key mechanism for how conflicts in one country may cause violence in another. Second, we present our framework for thinking about blowback operations by—and against—non-state armed groups, and how the nature of the target affects variation in blowback targeting strategies. Third, we specify our hypotheses and relate them to ongoing conflict in Syria and Lebanon. Fourth, we analyze bombings of civilian targets in Lebanon during 2013-14 using original micro-level data, supplemented by case studies of violent incidents in select Lebanese Shia locations that differ in their electoral support for Hezbollah. We conclude by discussing the scholarly and policy implications of our study for research on non-state armed groups and of Sunni-Shia tensions across the Middle East. Our results show that even the most extreme sectarian groups—such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS—often deploy violence in a very strategic fashion that is more selective than many observers expect.

## THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF BLOWBACK OPERATIONS

Whether scholars call it “contagion” (Midlarsky, Crenshaw & Yoshida, 1980), “infection” (Forsberg, 2009: 16), “spillover” (Young et al., 2014), “domino effect” (LaFree, Xie & Matanock, 2018), “bandwagoning” (Forsberg, 2014a: 189), “internationalization of civil conflict” (Salehyan, 2009), or “conflict diffusion” (Forsberg, 2014a: 195) all of these terms generally refer to how conflict in one geographical area causes violence in another. Existing scholarship generally counts a diffused conflict as one with 1,000+ casualties that starts up to five years after the end of the initial conflict in a bordering state, although some studies also use lower casualty thresholds (Levy, 1982; Forsberg, 2014b). Proximity in time and space is generally used to identify diffusion using cross-national data that code diffusion as a binary variable. Previous studies have yielded powerful findings about the importance of state weakness in the diffusion of civil war due to a weak military, weak state institutions, weak border enforcement, or a weak economic situation (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Buhaug & Gleditsch, 2008; Braithwaite, 2010; Nesser & Gråtrud, 2019). Refugees can serve a further destabilizing role as recruits for insurgents, targets for neighboring states, or sources of ethnic polarization and transnational linkages (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Gleditsch, 2007; Forsberg, 2008).

Despite these significant theoretical and empirical contributions, the literature on conflict diffusion has several limitations. For instance, most studies rely on time and space between unitary states as proxy variables for diffusion of armed conflict, rather than empirically verifying whether diffusion occurred through causal mechanisms using other methods such as process tracing. As a result, the real number of diffused conflicts—where conflict in one territory had a causal effect on conflict onset in a nearby location—is far less than some early studies suggest (Buhaug & Gleditsch, 2008; Black, 2013; Forsberg, 2014a).

We contribute to the literatures on conflict diffusion, terrorism, and micro-level dynamics of conflict by focusing on two factors: the modality of diffusion and the strategic behavior of non-state armed groups. Most existing studies of conflict diffusion examine the effect of civil war in one state on the probability of civil war onset in a neighboring country. This is an

important topic, but the focus on full-blown civil war can serve to obscure other mechanisms whereby armed conflict in one country causes violence in another if the magnitude of that violence falls below conventional thresholds. For instance, our case study (Lebanon, 2013-14) would count as a case of non-diffusion according to most existing work because the civil war in neighboring Syria did not cause a civil war in Lebanon. However, as we show in the empirical sections below, the wave of terrorist attacks that shook Lebanon during those two years was a significant, direct consequence of the Syrian civil war.

In this article we study the dynamics of blowback operations: how interventions by an actor from one state into a second may cause actors in the second state to stage attacks in the first country. Blowback has generally been conceptualized and analyzed mostly from the perspective of the actor experiencing it: a state facing unintended—and undesired—consequences from its intervention abroad. That initially meant the U.S. and Soviet Union in Cold War operations. The most common recent examples involve foreign intervention in the Middle East and South Asia, where military action like supporting local militias or launching drone strikes can lead to a loss of public support from one's own citizens (Ambrozik, 2019), radicalization and attacks from those in the target country (Hudson, Owens & Flannes, 2011; Shah, 2018), or “chickens coming home to roost”—as with former Islamist rebel allies later becoming enemies. However, scholars have analyzed blowback in a variety of other forms as well, from alliance balancing (Crawford, 2011) to information warfare, where computer viruses planted in others' computers end up infecting one's own (Feaver, 1998).

We have much less theory and empirical analysis of the perpetrators staging blowback attacks. The most common purpose of blowback operations is to stop or reverse foreign military intervention into a perceived homeland by using violence to compel the foreign actor to withdraw. Shehzad Tanweer, one of the 2005 London bombers, warned the British in his pre-recorded ‘will’ that “What you have witnessed now is only the beginning of a string of attacks that will continue and become stronger until you pull your forces out of Afghanistan and Iraq” (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2007). The Irish Republican Army (IRA) made similar claims to accompany its bombs in England decades earlier, as did Al-Qaida when it hit the U.S. on 9/11.

Armed groups' relative positions of power influence their strategies, as agents of diffusion who are militarily weak relative to their target—especially in the latter's territory—are more likely to stage terrorist attacks rather than foment an insurgency (Arreguin-Toft, 2006; Krause, 2017).

Blowback generally constitutes a coercive strategy of attrition as described by Pape (2005) and Kydd and Walter (2006), whereby the attacker raises the costs on the intervener to make the latter's continued presence prohibitively costly. Attackers should aim to maximize their leverage over their target, and striking in ways and places that the intervener does not intend, expect, or desire is the best way to impose the greatest costs. However, we have a relatively limited understanding of how this process unfolds in practice. Pape (2005) largely studies non-state actors striking against intervening forces in the location of intervention, not in the intervener's home state; has no discussion of micro-level dynamics or targeting of attacks; and posits states as the sole targets of blowback operations, not other non-state actors. Almost a decade after Pape's seminal article, Schmid (2011) lamented how blowback remained one of the most understudied topics in terrorism.

## **TARGETING BLOWBACK AGAINST STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS**

Scholars generally agree that the role of non-state armed groups has been under-theorized and under-analyzed in studies of conflict diffusion. A recent RAND review of existing scholarship identified the most commonly cited causes of conflict diffusion—armed groups were included in just *one* of the eight causes listed, and were just half of a secondary cause at that (Young et al., 2014: 7–14).<sup>1</sup> As a recent review article by Erika Forsberg put it, “More research is needed on the agents that could potentially drive or block diffusion. There is a need for more precise theoretical accounts of the social agents involved in diffusion to properly model these actors empirically” (Forsberg, 2014a: 193). To address this shortcoming, we focus on micro-level

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<sup>1</sup> Even two relevant studies for our argument, which do focus on armed groups, claim that insurgents operate in different areas based on foreign state support and the relative strength of their target state (Salehyan, 2009; Beardsley, Gleditsch & Lo, 2015).

analysis of armed group behavior to make inferences about their strategic calculations (Bakke, 2013; Vasquez, 2018). In this endeavor we follow the literature on civil wars, where studies of micro-level dynamics have been perhaps the single most prominent analytical approach in recent years (Kalyvas, 2006; Steele, 2011; Balcells, 2017).

How should we expect a violent non-state actor to deploy scarce resources so as to maximize their coercive leverage during blowback operations? In other words, how and where should we expect such organizations to stage violent attacks, and against what targets? We argue that the answer depends partly on whether the actor tries to coerce the government of a sovereign state or another non-state actor (such as a political party, social movement, or militia). We focus in particular on the highly understudied situations where both perpetrator and target are non-state armed groups (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Types of Blowback by Initiator and Target**

|                        |                    | <b>Blowback Initiator</b>   |                                      |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|                        |                    | <i>State</i>                | <i>Armed Group</i>                   |
| <b>Blowback Target</b> | <i>State</i>       | Pakistan vs. India,<br>1971 | Al-Shabaab vs. Kenya,<br>2013        |
|                        | <i>Armed Group</i> | Israel vs. PLO,<br>1982     | Sunni jihadis vs.<br>Hezbollah, 2013 |

States are often the initiators and/or targets of blowback, as when Pakistan attacked India in 1971, when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, and when Kenya was attacked by Al-Shabaab in 2013. In each of those cases, however, non-state armed groups were key actors precipitating the

diffusion of violence by generating blowback. The government of Pakistan attacked India due to its support for secessionist rebel groups inside East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Israel invaded Lebanon to attack the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had been launching attacks on Israel from the southern part of Lebanon for years. The Tamil Tigers (LTTE) struck India in response to its intervention in Sri Lanka, which was initially in support of the LTTE but subsequently turned against the group.

The most neglected blowback dyads are those in which armed groups serve as both perpetrators and targets (lower-right quadrant of Figure 1). In addition to our Sunni Jihadi vs. Hezbollah case, there are several examples from conflicts in and around Afghanistan and Congo in the 1990s. Kurdish groups have recently crossed borders to attack ISIS. ISIS has itself crossed from Syria into Iraq, and has also staged bombings in several Baghdad neighborhoods where the Iran-sponsored, Shia-dominated Popular Mobilization Forces militias recruit their fighters.

When targeting a state, all of its sovereign territory and inhabitants are tied to its leadership. Therefore, non-state armed groups often target these people and places using indiscriminate violence, frequently selecting high profile locations to garner the most attention and deliver the greatest economic and emotional damage (including New York and Washington, D.C. on 9/11, London for the IRA and radical Islamist groups, and Nairobi for Al-Shabaab). In contrast, when a non-state group is the target of blowback, the perpetrator—whether it is a state or another armed group—should prefer to target their military capabilities or their supporters. Weaker military capabilities diminish the ability of a non-state armed group to fight, and attacks on their supporters may undercut public support for their war effort and also force it to devote more scarce resources to protect the home front. Unlike with states, however, most civilians and areas inside the borders of a non-state group's home territory may not be tied legally or politically to that particular group.

For blowback attacks against a non-state target to be successful, therefore, the perpetrator needs to be able to identify which individuals or local communities sympathize with, or actively support, the particular non-state actor they seek to target. How can they solve this problem? This

conundrum has occupied scholars of civil war violence for some time (Kalyvas, 2006; Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007; Kocher, Pepinsky & Kalyvas, 2011; Steele, 2011, 2017; Balcells, 2017; Hägerdal, 2019). Several key lessons from this literature should apply even in cases where the magnitude of blowback operations falls short of conventional thresholds for civil war. Most scholars find that perpetrators of political violence usually prefer to use selective violence, targeting those specific individuals who pose a threat or hold hostile political views and allegiances, but that many perpetrators revert to various indiscriminate tactics in situations where they cannot discriminate among individuals. Indiscriminate violence refers to attacks on individuals without any regard for their individual characteristics, political beliefs, or actions. In practice, however, even indiscriminate violence is often characterized by different degrees of selectivity. For instance, Steele (2011) uses the term “collective targeting” to refer to situations where perpetrators attack individuals based on some group membership that correlates with (but does not perfectly indicate) individual loyalties and behavior. Some examples could be attacks on members of a select ethnic group or political party, which discriminate among groups but not among individuals within those groups.

Several authors particularly highlight the role of elections as a source of information about political sympathies (Balcells, 2011; Steele, 2011). Elections provide a clear and transparent indication of where a particular political party has a geographic concentration of support. If a perpetrator of political violence wants to target supporters of a political party that has contested elections, the densest concentration of its supporters is likely to be where the party has had its strongest electoral returns in recent elections. Attacks on such locations thus maximize the likelihood of hurting the party and its supporters, which is precisely how blowback operations are intended to achieve coercive leverage. On the indiscriminate-selective violence spectrum, this modality of violence represents the “discriminate targeting of political collectives,” in line with (Kocher, Pepinsky & Kalyvas, 2011). Electoral support could reflect that a political party has genuine sympathizers in a particular location, that it uses patronage politics and clientelist practices to purchase support, or some combination thereof (Cammett, 2014). However, even if a party relies partly on patronage politics, the fact that it can do so in some locations but not others also signals its geographic concentration of power and influence.

In sum, the literature on civil war violence suggests multiple methods that perpetrators of blowback operations can utilize to identify supporters of a non-state armed group they are trying to target. They may solicit collaboration among locals, or rely on their own sympathizers or volunteers, to identify select individuals that support the enemy. They may stage attacks in villages or neighborhoods that vote for the enemy group in high numbers. They can also attack physical brick-and-mortar buildings if their target maintains party headquarters, social welfare institutions, or any kind of security infrastructure, which also constitute strong geographic indicators of where political actors have a social, political, and military presence. Any and all of the above methods allow perpetrators of political violence to identify likely enemy sympathizers, and therefore make compelling targets for blowback operations.

### **HOW DID VIOLENCE SPREAD FROM SYRIA TO LEBANON?**

This section specifies the empirical implications of our argument and how they differ from key existing explanations. Many observers suggest that ethnic and sectarian tensions—specifically Sunni-Shia tensions—cause violence in the contemporary Middle East (Abdo, 2013; Betts, 2013). The argument is that, whether due to doctrinal and cultural differences or tensions sparked by war and political entrepreneurs, sectarian divides in the Muslim community now constitute battle lines across numerous regional conflicts. If this account is correct, we would expect Sunni Jihadi groups to stage indiscriminate violence against Shia civilians in Lebanon based on their sectarian identity (Polo & Gleditsch, 2016). Further reason to believe this hypothesis is that the perpetrators we study include groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Nusra Front which propagate radical and extreme ideologies and hardline sectarian discourses, especially against the Shia.

*H1. Bombings are likely to indiscriminately target Shia civilians.*

Alternatively, some of the literature on conflict diffusion suggests that proximity and other spatial factors are key determinants of how violence spreads across borders (Beardsley, 2011). If geography determines where groups use violence we might expect that bombings should occur closer to the Syrian-Lebanese border; in the vicinity of Beirut, the national economic and political center; or in closer proximity to major contemporary Syrian battlegrounds, such as Homs and Damascus. We take steps below to control for all of these spatial factors that could explain where violence occurs.

*H2. Bombings are likely to occur more frequently in closer proximity to Beirut, the Syrian border, and/or important Syrian cities such as Homs and Damascus.*

In contrast to these explanations, we argue that blowback operations motivate actors from a state experiencing civil war to strike—across borders—at the social and political base of support of a foreign actor intervening militarily in that civil war. Those who stage blowback operations hope to weaken the intervening actor and/or coerce them to withdraw from the initial conflict state. According to this logic we would expect to see violence against political and civilian targets that support the intervening actor. In the particular case we study, violence perpetrated by Sunni Jihadi groups should target populations that support the armed group Hezbollah, which intervened extensively in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad. Hezbollah supporters are predominantly Shia Muslims, but not all Lebanese Shia support Hezbollah (Cammett, 2014).

*H3. Bombings by Sunni Jihadi groups in Lebanon should be more likely to target populations that support Hezbollah.*

## LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

In 2011, a wave of political protests rocked Syria and eventually escalated into a civil war between supporters and opponents of President Bashar al-Assad's regime (Abboud, 2015). The Assad family belongs to the Alawi sect, a group that has been overrepresented within Syria's security establishment for decades and largely rallied to defend the regime; other key backers include many Christians and other religious minorities, as well as Sunni business elites. The regime also has multiple foreign backers including Iran and Russia. The armed opposition is primarily Sunni Muslim, with heavy support among poor and middle-class urban populations, and has received external aid from Gulf Arab states.

The Syrian conflict has heavily affected Lebanon, a neighboring state divided demographically among Sunni and Shia Muslims and Christians. Lebanese Sunnis largely support the Syrian opposition. Aside from sectarian solidarity, the Assad regime also occupied Lebanon until 2005 and has interfered in Lebanese politics ever since. Small numbers of Lebanese have travelled to fight with Sunni extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, and senior officials of the largest Sunni Lebanese political party—the Future Movement—helped procure and smuggle arms to Syrian rebels (Rougier, 2016). Lebanon, with about four million inhabitants, also hosts over one million mostly Sunni refugees from Syria.

In contrast, on May 25, 2013 the Secretary-General of Lebanese Shia Islamist movement Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, confirmed what many already suspected: regular Hezbollah forces participate in combat operations on Syrian soil to support the Assad regime. Nasrallah consistently maintains that this intervention is necessary to fight terrorists and religious extremists that would otherwise attack Lebanon. A less charitable interpretation would be that Hezbollah is heavily dependent on Syria for funds and weapons—much of it sent from Iran—to sustain its military and social welfare operations, and can ill afford a hostile regime in Damascus (Abboud, 2015; Rougier, 2016). Lebanese Sunni and Shia thus participate on opposite sides in the Syrian civil war.

On July 9, 2013, shortly after Nasrallah announced Hezbollah's intervention into Syria, a massive explosion from a booby-trapped car rocked the parking lot of a supermarket in Bir el-Abed, a Hezbollah stronghold in south Beirut, injuring 53 persons in this predominantly Shia neighborhood (Barnard, 2013). This bombing was but the first incident in what quickly grew into a series of attacks that continued through the end 2013 and into the spring of 2014, and became part of everyday life in some parts of Lebanon.

## DATA AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

To test our theoretical predictions, we combine novel data from a range of sources to produce a micro-level dataset on political violence, Hezbollah presence, and sectarian settlement patterns in Lebanon during 2013-14. The result is a cross-sectional dataset where the unit of observation is one *cadastral zone*, a Lebanese administrative unit—similar to a municipality—that roughly corresponds to one rural village or urban neighborhood. We create a binary measure of our dependent variable, which captures whether a location experienced a bombing attack. Our independent variables include the share of Shia residents in each location, a binary indicator of whether the location elected a Hezbollah Member of Parliament (MP) in the 2009 election, and the interaction effect between these two measures. We also include control variables concerning population size, distance to strategic nodes in both Lebanon and Syria, and region fixed effects.

***Demographic variables.*** To create population measures, including Sunni and Shia population share in each location, we use data from Lebanese voter registration rolls from the 2009 election (Eid, 2010; Cammett, 2014). Lebanon has a consociational democracy where all seats in parliament are reserved for particular sectarian communities. Consequently, its voter registration rolls register the sectarian identity of every voter in every village or neighborhood to ensure fair sectarian representation. To this list we add the UNRWA-administered Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon (Chaaban et al., 2010). In total, our data set contains 1,443 locations. Table 1 shows the distribution of the Sunni and Shia population shares across these locations. Notice how uneven the distribution is: only 513 locations have any Shia residents at all, and of those 167 are 100% Shia; 547 locations have Sunni residents, of which 125 are 100% Sunni.

**Table 1. Distribution of Sunni and Shia population shares**

|       | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | 1 <sup>st</sup> Quartile | Median | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Quartile |
|-------|---------|---------|-------|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------|
| Sunni | 0%      | 100%    | 17.5% | 0%                       | 0%     | 5.8%                     |
| Shia  | 0%      | 100%    | 23.5% | 0%                       | 0%     | 25%                      |

One problem with the voter registration rolls is that it is often difficult for those who move to a new location to update their registered location, and as a result many Lebanese are registered somewhere other than where they actually live. This is a particular problem in Beirut and its suburbs as centers of significant in-migration since the 1950s (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). Among the most affected areas are those southern suburbs with large Shia populations that constitute a major political base for Hezbollah. For our purposes, it is problematic that our measure of sectarian settlement patterns significantly understates the share of Shia residents in these areas. We therefore also create an alternative Shia measure where we simply designate the six major southern suburbs as 100% Shia.<sup>2</sup> If the original measure understates their Shia populations share, the alternative measure overstates it and thus constitutes a useful robustness check.

***Political violence.*** We create two binary measures of whether a location experienced political violence using a report produced by Hayya Bina, a Beirut-based think tank (Schei & Slim, 2015). The report, which was funded by the United States Institute of Peace, contains chronological lists of major security incidents in Lebanon between January 2013 and December 2014 organized into separate chapters such as border incidents, attacks on the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security agencies, and bombings and booby-trapped cars. The report relies on media sources as well as primary interviews with affected individuals and communities.

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<sup>2</sup> The six suburbs are Chiyah, Laylake, Ghobairi, Haret Hreik, Bourj el-Barajneh, and Tahouitet el-Ghadir.

Our first measure captures whether a location experienced a bombing: any kind of intentional explosion from a grenade, car bomb, suicide bomber, or other explosive device causing bodily harm to persons. Most bombings target ostensibly civilian sites such as mosques, supermarkets, and busy commercial areas. Some also target physical installations of Hezbollah and its allies, including the most sophisticated bombing of the period whereby a coordinated set of suicide bombers demolished the Iranian embassy in Beirut. Furthermore, we also include a few incidents where car bombs were rigged to go off but security forces discovered and dismantled them, as those constitute foiled but intentional attacks. However, we exclude a couple of incidents where explosions went off during security forces' raids on terrorist hideouts, as those explosives were intended for other locations. We also exclude artillery and aerial bombardment by regular units of Israeli and Syrian forces stationed on foreign soil, which targeted a small number of locations right next to those respective borders.

The second measure captures whether a location experienced an attack on any official security agency of the Lebanese state such as local police, Lebanese Armed Forces, Internal Security Forces, or General Security. This variable includes attacks on soldiers, vehicles, patrols, checkpoints, barracks, or any other personnel or infrastructure. Attacks include gunfire, grenades, car bombs, and suicide attacks; those that involve explosions would thus also count toward our measure of bombings; however, in practice most attacks on security forces involve ambushes by armed gunmen or snipers. We use this measure in a section further below that explains why the wave of attacks stopped in 2014, but not in our main quantitative analysis.

Out of 1,443 locations, 29 experienced at least one bombing and 32 locations witnessed at least one attack on security agencies.<sup>3</sup> Some incidents have reliable body counts, but most do not and we therefore code the variables as binary measures. Some locations experience a single incident and others experience multiple; however, without a reliable way to systematically measure intensity we prefer binary measures.

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<sup>3</sup> Nine locations witnessed both.

**Hezbollah presence.** We use data from the 2009 Lebanese parliamentary election and code each location as having a Hezbollah presence if it is located in an electoral district that elected a Hezbollah Member of Parliament (MP) in the 2009 election (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2011). There are 26 electoral districts, of which seven elected at least one Hezbollah MP. There are also five other districts with a sufficiently large Shia presence to have reserved parliamentary seats specifically for Shia candidates, but where the Shia MP elected was not a member of Hezbollah (or close allies such as the Amal Movement or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party).<sup>4</sup>

Our measure of Hezbollah presence has two key strengths. First, as most electoral districts tend to be uncompetitive in most elections, there are only two kinds of districts in the data: districts where Hezbollah ran one or more candidates that won in a landslide, and districts where the party did not run any candidates. There are no marginal victories or unsuccessful Hezbollah candidates. The measure is therefore a strong indicator of where Hezbollah dominates political life. Second, when the 2009 elections occurred no one had yet the faintest idea of the political developments that rocked the Arab world from January 2011, and our measure is therefore independent from any effects of the Syrian conflict. One downside of the measure is that it captures district-level effects: a village or neighborhood could be located in a district won by Hezbollah even though the party has little support or presence in that particular location.

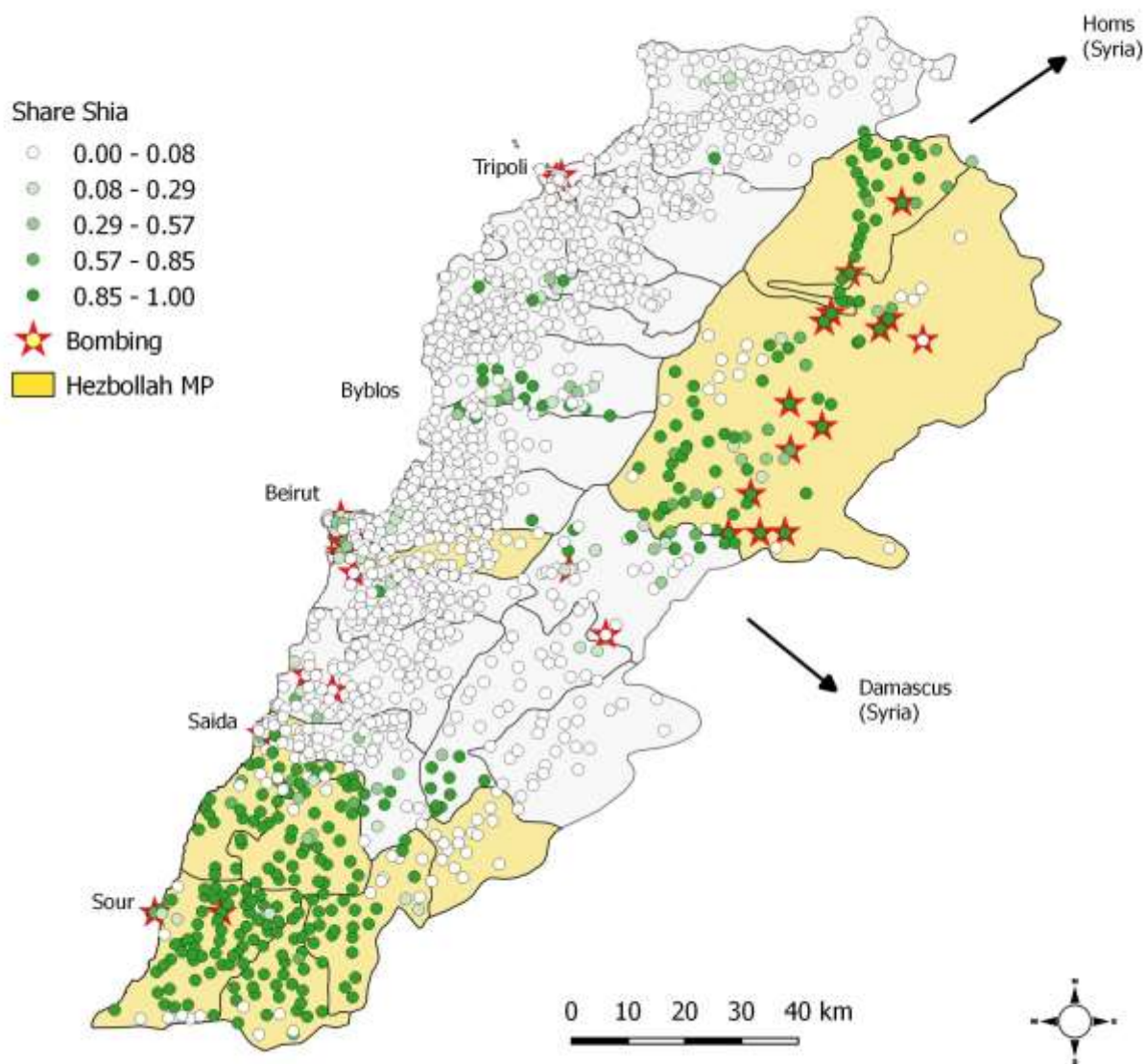
**Geographic variables.** Our dataset is geocoded, and to control for alternative explanations—and mitigate the effects of spatial auto-correlation—we include several control variables that measure geographic space. Using GPS coordinates for each location we estimate its distance from Beirut, the Syrian border, and the Syrian cities of Homs and Damascus. In addition, Lebanon’s 26 electoral districts aggregate into six administrative regions that we exploit for region fixed effects.

**GIS visualizations.** To present our quantities of interest visually we create a map, displayed in Figure 2, which reveals that a large number of bombings targeted Shia locations in Hezbollah-

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<sup>4</sup> These staunch Hezbollah allies have their own MPs in parliament, but only from districts where Hezbollah also elected at least one MP.

controlled areas. The eastern Beqaa valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut suffer particular concentrations of bombings; both are Hezbollah-dominated areas with large Shia populations.

**Figure 2. Bombings in Lebanon, 2013-14**

## MODEL CHOICE AND RESULTS

We estimate linear probability models on the correlates of a location witnessing at least one bombing. Table 2 shows the effects of Shia population share and Hezbollah MP on bombings. The first column contains the baseline model, while the second adds total population size and its quadrant as controls and the last three columns add different combinations of geographic distances. All models contain region fixed effects. Note that the sample size falls somewhat in models that include geographic distance: some of the very smallest locations in our sample do not appear on Google Maps and therefore lack GPS coordinates. None of them feature prominently in the events we study.

**Table 2. Correlates of Bombings in Lebanon, 2013-14**

| VARIABLES                           | (1)<br>Bombing<br>2013-14 | (2)<br>Bombing<br>2013-14 | (3)<br>Bombing<br>2013-14 | (4)<br>Bombing<br>2013-14 | (5)<br>Bombing<br>2013-14 |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| % Shia * Hezbollah MP               | 0.0548***<br>(0.0190)     | 0.0486***<br>(0.0186)     | 0.0577***<br>(0.0199)     | 0.0612***<br>(0.0228)     | 0.0560***<br>(0.0195)     |
| % Shia residents                    | -0.0131**<br>(0.00644)    | -0.00768<br>(0.00728)     | -0.00744<br>(0.00904)     | -0.00750<br>(0.00857)     | -0.00620<br>(0.00872)     |
| Hezbollah MP                        | 0.0341**<br>(0.0154)      | 0.0310**<br>(0.0136)      | 0.0312**<br>(0.0136)      | 0.0334**<br>(0.0135)      | 0.0261**<br>(0.0127)      |
| Population (log)                    |                           | -0.459***<br>(0.127)      | -0.482***<br>(0.134)      | -0.490***<br>(0.135)      | -0.477***<br>(0.134)      |
| Population (log)^2                  |                           | 0.0851***<br>(0.0225)     | 0.0881***<br>(0.0235)     | 0.0893***<br>(0.0235)     | 0.0876***<br>(0.0234)     |
| Distance to Beirut (km, log)        |                           |                           | -0.0139<br>(0.0187)       | -0.00785<br>(0.0183)      | -0.0244<br>(0.0193)       |
| Distance to Syrian border (km, log) |                           |                           | -0.00307<br>(0.00653)     |                           |                           |
| Distance to Damascus (km, log)      |                           |                           |                           | -0.0297<br>(0.0440)       |                           |
| Distance to Homs (km, log)          |                           |                           |                           |                           | -0.0385*<br>(0.0198)      |
| Constant                            | -0.0637***<br>(0.0182)    | 0.514***<br>(0.170)       | 0.617***<br>(0.205)       | 0.717***<br>(0.251)       | 0.829***<br>(0.237)       |
| Region fixed effects                | Yes                       | Yes                       | Yes                       | Yes                       | Yes                       |
| Observations                        | 1,443                     | 1,443                     | 1,393                     | 1,393                     | 1,393                     |
| R-squared                           | 0.053                     | 0.146                     | 0.150                     | 0.151                     | 0.153                     |

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1

Across all five models, the interaction term of the percent Shia residents and whether a location is in a district where Hezbollah won seats in 2009 consistently exhibits statistical significance at the 1% level. The share of Shia residents, surprisingly, has a negative effect on bombings, although the effect is tiny in magnitude and fails to reach statistical significance once we include any combination of control variables. Nevertheless, this result negates H1, as bombings do not

appear to target all Shia civilians in an indiscriminate fashion. In contrast, Hezbollah control of an area does increase the probability of a bombing, and the effect is statistically significant across all models. The substantive effects are enormous: the baseline probability of any given location experiencing a bombing is only 2% whereas a location that is *both* 100% Shia *and* controlled by Hezbollah has roughly a 10% probability across the three models that include geographic controls. In other words, such a location is *five times* more likely to experience a bombing. These results provide strong support for our main hypothesis, H3, that violence targets Hezbollah strongholds rather than Shia civilians in general.

Interestingly, across these sets of empirical results we find that variables associated with geographic distances are not strong predictors of where violence ensues. Only distance to Homs seems to matter, although the effect is only marginally significant at the 10% level. In other words, we do not find support for H2, which predicted that bombings should correlate with geographic proximity to certain territory. This result is surprising, especially for distance to the Syrian border as this time period represents a peak intensity of major combat operations inside Syria. Yet the diffusion of violence into Lebanon appears to be driven by other factors. On the other hand, the measure of total population is consistently strongly significant. The most likely explanation is that bombings targeted more densely populated areas, since the perpetrators tried to kill large numbers of civilians.

***Robustness checks.*** We employ a range of alternative specifications, models, and measures to ensure that our results are robust to various concerns. First, we try including % Sunni and the interaction term of % Sunni and Hezbollah MP. We also try two alternative measures of Shia demography: first the alternative measure with a higher percent Shia in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and then a second measure where we also include the small number of Lebanese Alawi (key allies of the Assad regime). Finally, we re-run all specifications using probit models instead of linear probability models to assess model sensitivity. However, our main results are consistent across all iterations with no meaningful changes in any quantities of interest.

## **A TALE OF TWO CITIES: WHY BOMBINGS IN BEIRUT BUT NOT BYBLOS?**

Our quantitative results provide valuable insight into why and how the war in Syria caused violence inside Lebanon, but without deeper examination of select attacks and their perpetrators we cannot ascertain motivations. To trace the processes resulting in violence, we compare the southern suburbs of Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold that is heavily Shia in composition and suffered a large number of bombings targeting civilians, with Shia-dominated villages in the Byblos district northeast of Beirut, which suffered no such bombings. These areas are a similar distance to the Syrian border, have large Shia populations, and were affected by the same national-level and temporal variables but differ in their support for Hezbollah.

### ***Dahiyeh: Coercive Strikes on a Hezbollah Stronghold***

The southern suburbs of Beirut are collectively known as Dahiyeh, which literally means “suburb” in Arabic. Dahiyeh technically consists of several different neighborhoods including Haret Hreik, Ghobeiri, Shiyah, and Bourj al-Barajneh, which are all overwhelmingly Shia in composition and constitute a major political stronghold for Hezbollah. Even a casual visitor notices the abundance of Hezbollah flags, banners, and posters that adorn public spaces. The area also has a high concentration of brick-and-mortar Hezbollah welfare agencies such as schools and health clinics (Cammett, 2014). Dahiyeh was among the areas worst hit by bombings in 2013-14, including the very first one on July 9, 2013 that targeted a supermarket. The victims were mostly Shia civilians, but further evidence reveals that these attacks were intended by the perpetrators—and recognized by their victims—as blowback from Syria following a coercive logic.

The perpetrators of this wave of bombings were a mix of Sunni Jihadi groups including Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria), the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (Al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Lebanon), and ISIS, among others. For instance, on November 19, 2013, the Abdullah

Azzam Brigades carried out a dual suicide bombing near the Iranian embassy that killed 25 and wounded over 150. In claiming responsibility for the attack, the group threatened to “carry out further attacks until Hezbollah withdraws its fighters from Syria” (Dakroub, 2013). Exactly three months later, the same group executed another deadly dual suicide bombing near the Iranian cultural center “to achieve the exit of Hezbollah from Syria,” as the group tweeted that “Iran’s party [Hezbollah] won’t enjoy security in Lebanon until you restore security in Syria” (Barnard & Saad, 2014). The group perceived Dahiyeh as a legitimate target because it hosted Hezbollah’s headquarters and innumerable Hezbollah supporters. ISIS entered the fray on January 2, 2014 with a suicide bombing at a Hezbollah political office that killed five, including a longtime reporter for Hezbollah-affiliated television station al-Manar. The group made their objective clear in a public statement: “[we] were able to break into the borders and infiltrate the security system of the party of Satan [Hezbollah] in Lebanon and attack it in the heart of its bastion, which is also known as its security perimeter in Beirut’s southern suburbs” (Dakroub, 2014).

The civilians of Dahiyeh clearly understood the coercive message the Jihadi groups were trying to convey. In response to the first attack on July 9, 2013, residents demonstrated in the streets by holding up pictures of Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and chanting support for him. Local residents interviewed by Al Jazeera explained that the attack was related to Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria (الوكالة الوطنية للإعلام, 2013). The deadliest attack in Beirut since the 1975-90 civil war killed 27 and injured 360 on August 15, 2013, and local residents clearly got the message: “‘It was clear that this was an attack on Hezbollah,’ said Moussa Ghamloush, 54, who was standing outside his restaurant, around the corner from the blast site... ‘This is all because of the fighting in Syria,’ Mr. Ghamloush said, accusing Al Qaeda and an extremist Syrian group linked to it, the Nusra Front” (Hubbard & Saad, 2013). Nonetheless, in a spring 2014 poll, 95% of Dahiyeh residents thought their community supported Hezbollah’s ongoing intervention in Syria, while 83% said Hezbollah’s intervention made them feel *more* secure, despite the bombings (Hayya Bina, 2014: 11–12).

The main target of the blowback attacks—Hezbollah—remained undaunted. Senior Hezbollah official Mahmoud Qomati said the Iranian embassy attacks were “a message of blood

and death” to Iran and Hezbollah for supporting the Syrian regime, but vowed the group would not change its position (Dakroub, 2013). In response to the first ISIS attack, Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, deputy head of Hezbollah’s Executive Council, proclaimed: “No matter what the size of crimes and car bombs reached, we will not change our position in Syria or in Lebanon. The [political] equations in both countries will not change” (Dakroub, 2014). In other words, the initiator, political target, and civilian victims of conflict diffusion all agreed that the attacks were blowback for Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria. The lack of such violence in other Shia-dominated areas, where Hezbollah is absent, further underscores this conclusion.

### ***Byblos: No Hezbollah Presence***

The electoral district of Byblos is a coastal area northeast of Beirut mixed between a Christian majority and a sizeable Shia minority of about 25-30% of the population. A string of towns and villages are dominated, or exclusively settled, by Shia (visible in Figure 2 above as an East-West band).<sup>5</sup> In parliamentary elections, Byblos is represented by two Christian and one Shia MP (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2011). Historically, the district was dominated by the National Bloc, technically a secular liberal party although in practice a clientelist machine run by the Edde family (Suleiman, 1967). These local Maronite Catholic potentates co-opted most other local elites not only from the Christian community but also among the Shia, and their cross-sectarian electoral list scored landslide victories in all pre-civil war elections. The National Bloc still won several seats across Mount Lebanon in the 2018 elections, although at this point it receives more competition from other parties with stronger national profiles.

Hezbollah organized some welfare activities in this district for the first time ever in preparation for the 2009 election, but eventually declined to field a candidate (Cammett, 2014). When the major wave of political violence struck Lebanon in 2013-14, Hezbollah had no meaningful local political representation, party activities, or other political infrastructure there. Byblos was not entirely spared from the unrest affecting Lebanon after the Syrian war broke out,

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<sup>5</sup> Confusingly, Byblos—Jubayl in Arabic—is the name of both the electoral district as well as its largest town.

but local unrest appears to be criminal rather than political in intent. For instance, in July 2013 an 11-year old girl was kidnapped for ransom, a crime for which two Syrian citizens were eventually arrested (Schei & Slim, 2015). In another incident, a man from the predominantly Christian town of Hrajel killed two men from the predominantly Shia town of Lassa, causing residents to block roads with burning tires and chant sectarian slogans (Daily Star, 2013).

Lebanon witnessed a general increase in crime during this period, partly because of the influx of desperate Syrian refugees and partly as security forces were stretched thin. However, there have not been any bombings or other intentional explosions aimed at causing death and destruction in Byblos at any point during the time period we study. In general, we find very little political news from Byblos making national headlines. Among the few political incidents that received national attention we find a brief article about how Sunni, Shia, and Christian clerics shared an *iftar* dinner during Ramadan and made a joint statement denouncing sectarianism (2013). “للعودة إلى أدياننا المتجذرة في هذه المنطقة: إفتار في جبيل تكريما لجمعية المبرات جعفر فضل الله”.

In the 2018 election Hezbollah fielded a candidate for the Shia seat in Byblos for the very first time but lost to independent candidate Moustafa Hussein, a local Shia businessman who formed an electoral alliance with the National Bloc and Kataeb (Abi Akl, 2018). The latter is a major national political party with an almost exclusively Christian following and an adversarial relationship to Hezbollah. Byblos and its Shia parliamentary seat thus remain outside the electoral grip of Lebanon’s dominant Shia political party and are subject to the sway of other, primarily local, electoral forces. Although Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the other Sunni Jihadi groups operating in Lebanon generally consider both Shia and Christians to be infidels, the lack of attacks on communities like those in Byblos during 2013-14 provides further evidence that bombings followed a strategic logic of coercing Hezbollah rather than general sectarian tensions.

## HEZBOLLAH'S STRATEGY: WHY BLOWBACK STOPPED

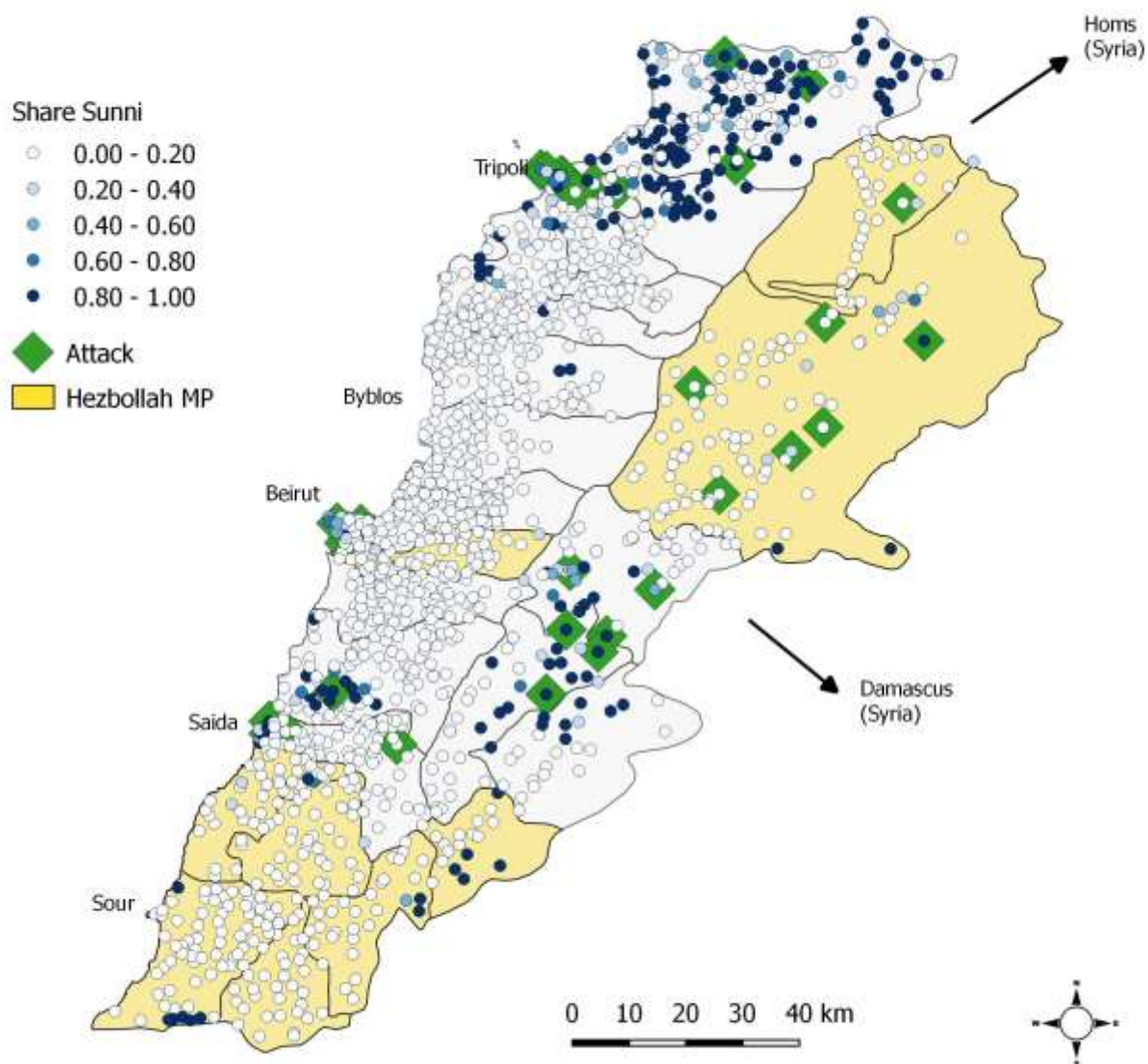
We now have firm reasons to believe that this wave of violence inside Lebanon was a result of blowback to Hezbollah's intervention into Syria, but it is also important to understand why it ended. Instead of escalating violence with attacks in Sunni-dominated areas, Hezbollah largely practiced restraint within Lebanon while redoubling its efforts in Syria (Evans, 2013). This dichotomy is driven by the relative power of the actors: Hezbollah is the most powerful political and military actor in Lebanon, and consequently has a keen interest in maintaining domestic stability. Hezbollah also bases much of its legitimacy on claiming to defend all of Lebanon—not just the Shia—from foreign threats, especially from Israel. As Heger explains, “rebel groups are less likely to attack civilians when they simultaneously participate in democratic elections. I argue that attacking civilians is not good for political business. Not only can it distinguish the group as a terrorist organization and alienate supporters as a result, but attacking civilians also imposes high costs on the group's own civilian support base” (Heger, 2015).

As a strong group with significant territorial control, Hezbollah had the capacity and incentive to use more selective violence against its enemies in Lebanon (Kalyvas, 2006). Hezbollah focused its efforts on securing the border, losing about 100 fighters in its ultimately successful struggle to capture the Syrian border town of Qusair, a key transit point for enemy Jihadis, in mid-2013. The group subsequently cleared Syrian rebels from most other towns near the border, helping to reduce infiltration and attacks. Mohammad Raad, who headed Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, noted in November 2013 that “We have pushed the strategic threat away from Lebanon and we want to remove the danger from Syria because this strengthens our stability in Lebanon” (Mroué, 2015).

Hezbollah did deploy its own forces to fight against Jihadi groups in a small number of locations inside Lebanon, primarily in and around the town of Aarsal near the Syrian border. However, on the home front Hezbollah otherwise responded primarily through the political system by advocating for greater deployment of police, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and other security services into Sunni-dominated areas sheltering attackers. Hezbollah and national

security services initiated extensive intelligence sharing and conducted joint operations against Jihadi groups, successfully uprooting cells and maintaining control over the Sunni population (Alami, 2014). The map in Figure 3 shows the distribution of Sunni residents and attacks on Lebanese security agencies. It is visually apparent that many attacks occur in locations with large Sunni populations such as the northern city of Tripoli and its surroundings.

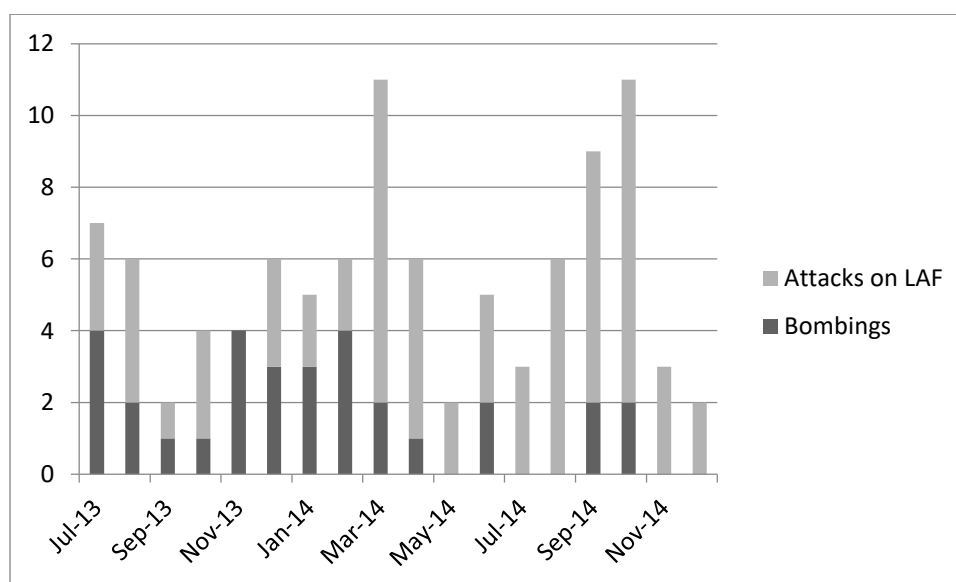
**Figure 3. Attacks on Lebanese Security Forces, 2013-14**



These operations explain both the spike in attacks on security forces during 2014 and the ultimate decline of violence in the country (see Figure 4). As a result of aggressive policing, militant Sunni groups frequently attacked Lebanese security agencies in ambushes, sniper

attacks, and regular gunfights, but carried out fewer bombings in Hezbollah-linked population centers. The Nusra Front declared the LAF a legitimate target, for working with Hezbollah, but faced increasing repression by this tactical alliance; as a result, Jihadi groups have only successfully perpetrated a few scattered violent incidents after 2014. The powerful position of Hezbollah explains its strategy of domestic restraint, and consequently why conflict diffusion into Lebanon did not escalate into magnitudes approaching full-blown civil war.

**Figure 4. Number of bombings and attacks on security forces by month, 2013-14**



## CONCLUSION

Experienced Hezbollah fighters were a critical resource as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad turned the tide of the Syrian civil war; consequently, pushing Hezbollah out of Syria became a major strategic objective for rebel groups. Shortly after Hezbollah entered the conflict, Syrian rebels began diverting scarce resources for a strategic campaign of bombings targeting Hezbollah strongholds inside Lebanon. The threat of bombings forced Hezbollah to devote more resources

to man checkpoints and guard the home front, and risked turning the Lebanese Shia community against its intervention in the Syrian conflict. Yet Hezbollah skillfully navigated this challenge, partly by relying on formal security institutions of the Lebanese state to counter terrorist attacks and partly by taking military control of the Syrian-Lebanese border. Its deft handling of this challenge prevented conflict diffusion from escalating into a civil war inside Lebanon, and domestic stability enabled the group to continue its intervention in Syria. Its supporters argue that Hezbollah acted in a pragmatic fashion to take responsibility for ending violence in Lebanon; critics claim that Hezbollah effectively seized control of Lebanese security institutions to further its military intervention in support of a brutal dictatorship in Syria.

This case study vividly illustrates the promise of studying the strategic behavior of non-state armed groups outside of traditional civil war contexts, including as instigators of foreign military interventions (Hezbollah) and perpetrators of blowback campaigns (Sunni Jihadis). Our results indicate that the tendency for foreign military interventions to generate blowback holds not only for Western militaries, but also for an indigenous non-state armed group such as Hezbollah. On the other hand, its military intervention forced this group to act with considerable pragmatism inside Lebanon to preserve domestic stability, because escalating sectarian conflict would complicate its intervention in Syria. Both of these results are likely to obtain to other non-state armed groups that decide to stage major foreign military interventions. As for perpetrators of blowback, previous research has shown that groups such as Al-Qaeda have had major internal debates over whether to focus on the “near enemy” (local Muslim regimes) or the “far enemy” in the West (Gerges, 2005). Our results indicate that at least some ideologically extreme groups are even more sophisticated than previously shown in how they utilize and target violence, and that they deploy finite resources in a strategic manner to achieve maximum coercive leverage. As a result, their attacks follow patterns that look more familiar to strategic logics outlined in the literature on civil war violence than to popular narratives of sectarian animosity (including as propagated by the groups themselves).

Non-state armed groups are becoming increasingly central to international conflicts. One reason is the rise of hybrid warfare, such as when Russia blends its regular military forces with

local militias in eastern Ukraine. Another reason is that some states—and none more skillfully than Iran—base their national security strategy on supporting non-state armed groups inside other countries to gain regional influence (Mohseni & Kalout, 2019). Some states also form temporary alliances with non-state groups, such as when the United States relied on Kurdish militias in its campaign against ISIS. All of these dynamics are particularly prevalent in the contemporary Arab world where revolutions, civil wars, and foreign interventions have created a string of weakly governed states that provide ideal conditions for non-state armed groups to thrive as alternative providers of security and governance (Arjona, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2015). As a result, we increasingly need to think of non-state armed groups not only as domestic actors, and we need more theoretical and empirical work on how these groups act on the international stage and when they choose to operate beyond the borders of their home country.

Finally, our study permits a few observations about the state of Sunni-Shia conflict in the contemporary Middle East. There is no question that Sunni and Shia communities mostly find themselves on opposite sides of political fault lines in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. Individual perpetrators, such as the young men who strap on a suicide vest or get behind the wheel in a booby-trapped car, may experience sectarian anger, resentment, or hatred. Yet reducing the entire region to simplistic notions of clashing civilizations serves more to obscure than to clarify. There are many cross-cutting cleavages; for instance, the Lebanese security services that led the fight against radical Jihadi groups have plenty of Sunni members yet have suffered very few defections. We thus add evidence consistent with explanations that blame Sunni-Shia violence partly on how Iran and Gulf Arab states pour money and weapons into select groups to serve as local proxies in a struggle for regional dominance (Gause, 2014). Countries with weak governing institutions have become battlegrounds for regional powers that feel deeply insecure in the international arena: if those two problems abated, perhaps Sunni-Shia tensions would too.

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