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Lebanon's Evolving Relationship with Syria: Back to the Future or Turning a New Page?

Summary

- Lebanon's outreach to Syria is motivated by significant shifts in the regional political landscape, particularly Syria's renewed regional and global influence. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri appears to have made a strategic decision that rapprochement with Syria is in Lebanon's best interest, offering the greatest chance for stability and resolution of a number of outstanding bilateral issues including greater guarantees for Lebanese sovereignty.
- Syria's renewed influence in Lebanon comes in a variety of forms, but its alliance with Hezbollah is the most potent trajectory of its power and influence.
- It is too early to determine whether this shift in relations marks a return of Syrian predominance in Lebanon, or signals a new page in the bilateral relationship. Much will depend on how Syria and Lebanon as well as external players—especially the U.S. and France—contend with the inherent challenges and opportunities that accompany evolving Syrian-Lebanese ties.
- The establishment of Lebanese-Syrian diplomatic ties presents the United States with an important opportunity to help foster normal relations between the neighboring countries, particularly the long-sought goal of protecting Lebanese sovereignty. Washington should move forward with dispatching an ambassador to Damascus as part of a broader engagement with Syria. Establishment of high-level diplomatic channels in Syria will allow the United States to leverage its influence more directly and effectively to ensure that Syria moves forward on border demarcation with Lebanon and other measures to help bolster Lebanese sovereignty.

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In May 2010, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri undertook his second visit to Damascus in less than six months, underscoring Beirut's determination to pursue a rapprochement with Syria. While last month's Scud missile crisis catapulted Syria and Lebanon into international headlines amidst fears of a new war, the quietly evolving ties between Lebanon and Syria could mark a shift in longstanding regional dynamics.¹ These emerging ties reflect the challenges for Lebanon of resurgent Syrian influence—most dramatically illustrated by the Scud crisis—but also contain inherent opportunities to turn the page and establish normal state-to-state relations.

Primary Contours of an Evolving Relationship

Several important developments over the past 18 months have defined Lebanon's changing relationship with Syria. In particular, three key events help sketch the contours of these evolving

ties. First, the establishment of diplomatic ties between Lebanon and Syria in late 2008 was a historically significant event. It reflected an important, if symbolic, Syrian recognition of Lebanese sovereignty following Syria's longstanding refusal to do so.² Formal diplomatic ties have led to the exchange of ambassadors and opening of embassies and provided an important opportunity to establish normal state-to-state relations.

Prime Minister Hariri's two visits to Damascus—in May 2010 and December 2009—mark another important step in mending relations between the two countries. The visits suggest a determination by the Lebanese prime minister to move Lebanon forward on a path of rapprochement with Syria in pursuit of national interests. Moreover, Hariri's visits signal a strategic decision that the previous status quo of a staunchly anti-Syrian government in Lebanon is not tenable over the long run and acknowledge the inherent difficulties of leading Lebanon without cordial ties with Syria.

Finally, the March 2010 visit to Damascus by Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt—often called the “weathervane” of Lebanese politics—exemplifies a broader power shift within the Lebanese political arena away from those who advocate confrontation with Syria. Jumblatt's trip completed his transformation from one of Syria's most vociferous critics in Lebanon to a strong advocate of warming ties with Damascus. The Druze leader formally pulled out of the anti-Syrian March 14th coalition in August 2009. His withdrawal dealt a significant blow to the coalition and perhaps presages a reordering of Lebanese politics marked by the eventual obsolescence of the March 14th and Hezbollah-led March 8th blocs.

Syria's Phoenix-Like Resurrection

Lebanon's strategic opening to Damascus is rooted in Syria's reemergence on the regional and global stage from the depths of international isolation from 2005 through 2008. Several important events hearkened Syria's resurgence in Lebanon. First, the May 2008 violence in Beirut—followed by the Doha Accord—marked a watershed event in Syria's turnaround. Following a buildup in tension with the Lebanese government, Hezbollah's overrunning of West Beirut unleashed the worst civil violence since Lebanon's civil war. It led to the Doha Accord which brought a measure of stability to Lebanon, but also awarded Hezbollah—Syria's key ally in Lebanon—an important victory by ceding the militant organization veto power in the government. (Hezbollah implicitly retains this veto in the current cabinet.)

Syrian-Saudi rapprochement stands as another key development in Syria's renewed influence in Lebanon. Perhaps concerned by Lebanon's near descent into renewed civil war, Riyadh and Damascus embarked on a slow but steady process of reconciliation starting in late 2008. Capped by the visits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Saudi Arabia and Saudi King Abdullah to Damascus, their rapprochement led to a significant calming of the atmosphere inside Lebanon. The reconciliation process continues, and Egypt appears to be warming its relations with Syria as well.

Syria's enhanced engagement with Europe, notably France, is among the most important milestones in Syria's reemergence on the global stage. Citing Syria's “positive role” in Doha, France rewarded Damascus by inviting Syrian President Assad to a Euro-Mediterranean summit in July 2008. Assad's trip was soon followed by President Sarkozy's reciprocal visit to Syria. This exchange of visits effectively reversed French policy toward Syria which had been deeply opposed to Syria during former President Jacques Chirac's administration.³ Numerous other high-level visits followed, including Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit earlier this month, as well as visits by Spanish, British and EU dignitaries, among others.

U.S. engagement with Syria has been another factor propelling Syria's global resurgence. While high-level Congressional visits, including by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, started in the latter half

of the Bush administration, the Obama administration's engagement strategy has focused on Syria among other countries. Although still in its early stages, Washington's engagement of Syria has included a series of high-level visits to Damascus, as well as the White House nomination of Robert Ford to be ambassador to Syria, following a five-year absence. However, a number of Senate Republicans opposed to the engagement policy have placed holds on the nomination, casting the nomination in doubt.

What Lebanon Wants

The establishment of Lebanese-Syrian diplomatic ties provides Lebanon with a critical opportunity to transform its relations with Syria by achieving several key goals:

- **Border demarcation** is an essential next step in normalizing ties. While Damascus has professed its willingness to move forward, no progress has been made.
- **Amendment of bilateral agreements and treaties** signed during the Syrian hegemony in the 1990s is also critical. The agreements—covering numerous spheres—must be amended to reflect the end of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon and ideally to capture the inherent synergies of Lebanese-Syrian ties.
- **Dissolution of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council** would eliminate a key instrument of Syrian control during its occupation of Lebanon. The establishment of diplomatic ties renders the council obsolete.
- **Disarming of Syrian-supported armed Palestinian factions residing outside camps** would help eliminate an important source of instability in Lebanon.
- **Lebanese "missing" in Syrian jails** must be addressed to close the sad chapter of Lebanon's 15-year long civil war and subsequent Syrian hegemony.

Syrian Vectors of Influence

Syria's relationship with Hezbollah serves as a critical vector of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Hezbollah's exercise of power and influence in Lebanon—by force of arms, through its political power or extensive grassroots networks—somewhat serves as a multiplier of Syrian influence and power projection in Lebanon. Their ties are anchored in a quid pro quo relationship of arms for influence. Syria serves as the primary conduit and a supplier of arms to Hezbollah, while Hezbollah stands as Syria's chief ally in Lebanon, helping to insure that Syrian interests are protected. The recent Scud scandal—while details remain murky—embodies the essence of this alliance. While an actual transfer of Scud D missiles into Lebanon has not been confirmed, U.S. officials nonetheless underscore their continuing concerns about the qualitative and quantitative increase in weaponry funneled to Hezbollah through Syria.

Syria also projects influence through its other allies in Lebanon, including Amal, the other main Shiite group in Lebanon, Christian leaders General Michel Aoun and Suleiman Franjeh, and a smattering of like-minded political forces in the country.

Damascus exploits other instruments of power as well. While Syria has withdrawn militarily, it maintains a well-oiled intelligence apparatus in Lebanon which it can use to foster control. Syria also resorts to intimidation tactics and other forms of pressure. The Syrians have reportedly pressured Prime Minister Hariri to silence critics of Syria in his Future Party and used similar tactics on other politicians and media outlets to cease criticism of Syria. The net impact of these tactics may result in a chilling effect on Lebanon's otherwise vibrant political culture. Finally, Syria relies

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Following a regional tour with stops in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri will travel to the United States on May 24, when he is slated to meet with President Barack Obama in Washington and later visit New York where he will address the United Nations Security Council, currently chaired by Lebanon. This Peace Brief was written by Mona Yacoubian, director of the U.S. Institute of Peace's Lebanon Working Group and special adviser to the Muslim World Initiative, and is adapted from her remarks at a recent panel discussion sponsored by the Middle East Institute. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

on longstanding economic and social ties to ground its influence. While sometimes vectors for corruption, these relations can also serve as legitimate channels for trade and economic activity.

Back to the Future or Turning a New Page?

The future direction of Lebanese-Syrian ties is uncertain. Relations today stand at an important crossroads that lead in two different directions: a return to some form of Syrian domination or a newly defined relationship that places the two states on more equal footing. One scenario suggests a path "back to the future"—essentially a return to the status quo ante before Syria's military withdrawal in 2005. While an actual return of the Syrian military to Lebanon is unlikely, a reassertion of significant Syrian control via various vectors would inhibit the emergence of a free and sovereign Lebanon. An alternate scenario envisions turning a new page for Lebanese-Syrian relations. This reformed relationship would be characterized by a clearly delineated border, mutual respect for sovereignty, and robust economic and trade relations.

While fears of a return to Syrian control in Lebanon are well founded, this scenario is not a foregone conclusion. The establishment of diplomatic relations represents a powerful, albeit symbolic, step toward a healthy bilateral relationship. The hard work of diplomacy could yield important results that help reform bilateral relations and accrue important benefits to both sides, moving both countries forward. This nascent rapprochement holds the potential for turning the page and ushering in a new era in Lebanese-Syrian relations. Building trust, discerning where important complementarities exist and exploiting the numerous possibilities for economic growth on both sides of the border will be essential.

The Lebanese, however, cannot do this alone. Constructive engagement on these issues by the West, particularly the United States and France, is essential. U.S. engagement with Syria is important in this regard and normalized Syrian-Lebanese relations should top the list of U.S. priorities. Returning a U.S. ambassador to Damascus is a necessary first step. Having an ambassador in Damascus to lobby on Lebanon's behalf and to push for critical steps such as border demarcation will be important. The United States has an important opportunity to help ensure against Lebanon's future relations with Syria being an instance of "back to the future," and to instead help the two countries to turn a new page.

Endnotes

1. While details remain murky, Syria stood accused of possibly transferring advance Scud missiles to the militant Shiite organization Hezbollah in Lebanon.
2. After World War I, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, France gained mandatory power over Greater Syria, carving Lebanon out of the former Ottoman province. Until the establishment of diplomatic ties in 2008, Syria had not recognized Lebanese sovereignty.
3. President Chirac distanced France from Syria following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and suspicions of possible Syrian involvement.



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