Road from Damascus:

Lebanon Hangs Suspended between Past and Present

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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Articles & Testimony

The Ghosts of Martyr's Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle By Michael Young (Simon & Schuster, 295 pages, $26.00)

This past February, Le Monde published a detailed report suggesting that Hezbollah participated in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. The story was old news -- Der Spiegel had run a comparable story last year--but its repetition in Le Monde increased the allegation's credibility. Today, fallout from the contention that the Shiite militia helped kill the leader of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community continues to reverberate in Beirut, and two decades after a civil war that cost 150,000 lives, sectarian tensions stemming from Hariri's murder once again threaten to plunge Lebanon into conflict.

These tensions provide the backdrop to an excellent new book about Lebanon by Michael Young, opinion page editor of the leading Lebanese English-language paper The Daily Star. It begins with assassination of Hariri in downtown Beirut. Young, like many Lebanese, holds Syria responsible for the massive car bomb that dispatched Hariri and 21 others that day. The motive: The Asad regime in Syria believed that Hariri, in league with then-French president Jacques Chirac, supported UN Security Council Resolution 1559 demanding an end to the decades-long Syrian occupation. Worse, Damascus feared Hariri might be preparing to ally with a growing coalition of anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians. This was, according to Young, "a high stakes game [in which Hariri's] successes endangered Syria's twenty-nine-year-old rule over Lebanon as well as Asad's authority at home."

Immediately following the blast, a cross-section of Lebanese descended on Martyr's Square in Beirut, a centrally located wide-open piazza adjacent to Hariri's temporary (now permanent) mausoleum, to demand the truth about the murder. The square, named in honor of Lebanese nationalists executed by a Turkish governor in the early 20th century, served during the civil war as a front line of fighting between Christian and Muslim militias and subsequently became home to a tent city comprised of "divergent forces that later sought to transform Hariri's killing into leverage to get the Syrians out of Lebanon."

The Asad regime and its local Lebanese supporters, led by the Shiite militia Hezbollah, sought to counter the "Independence Intifada" and reverse the anti-Syria tide. On March 8, Hezbollah held its own demonstration to "thank" Syria. While the turnout was impressive, however, the rally was overshadowed by a March 14 demonstration, when nearly 1.5 million -- or one of every three -- Lebanese gathered in Martyr's Square to rally against the Syrian occupation. By the end of April, Syrian forces were gone and an international investigation, under UN auspices, was underway to determine culpability in the Hariri slaying.

Still, the victory of the March 14 coalition proved to be short lived, and pyrrhic. The counteroffensive by Syria and its allies started almost immediately, with predictably bloody consequences: During 2005-09 nearly a dozen pro-Western politicians were assassinated, as were two senior Lebanese military officers assisting the UN inquiry. With progress slowed on the Hariri investigation, the Cedar Revolution lost momentum, culminating in the May 2008 Hezbollah invasion of Beirut, the surrender of the March 14 coalition, and the creeping return of Syrian influence in Lebanon.

Lebanon had come full circle. Unable to bring to fruition the promise of the Cedar Revolution, Lebanon returned to its more natural state of Syrian suzerainty, as March 14 politicians lined up to make pilgrimage to Damascus. Sectarian tensions -- and the threat of civil war -- crested after the 2009 Der Spiegel article implicating Hezbollah in the Hariri killing. Such revelations, said the enigmatic Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, would "open a Pandora's box between Sunnis and Shiites."

Young, a Lebanese national with an intimate knowledge of the labyrinthine world of Lebanese politics, weaves his tale of the rise and fall of the Cedar Revolution with consummate skill and erudition. He makes the exceedingly complex history and intrigue accessible and introduces the reader to the colorful cast of characters. On a Saturday morning, for example, we visit Jumblatt in his ancestral palace at Mukhtar and witnesses a distribution of patronage to Jumblatt's constituents rivaling that of Vito Corleone. Later, we travel to Paris to meet with General Michel Aoun Ã¢?? who, upon his return to Lebanon in 2005, allied himself with Hezbollah and Damascus. "He was someone who had surrounded himself with deferential devotees," Young writes, "for whom he had no visible empathy. Ã¢?Â¦ [Aoun] was an astute reader of the Christians' gut fears, but also of the bitterness of those most socially vulnerable among them."

Young's observations about Syria are equally revealing. He maintains that Syria was forced out of Lebanon because the Asad regime "took Lebanon for granted," adding by way of explanation that "Lebanon can be unforgiving to those who think that fear alone can maintain order." BAshar Assad's ;ate father Havez understood that principle: "Most politicians could spend years being demeaned by Syrian intelligence officers but at the same time accept this because

the Syrians worked through a facade of counterfeit consideration and deference."

Syrian misbehavior extends to the Syrian diplomatic corps. Young describes how, in 2007, Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem, "a rotund man with cascading terraces of fat," threatened the American ambassador to Beirut, Jeffrey Feltman, by telling UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon that Feltman should be required to leave the country, adding that he was "prepared to offer him a vacation in Hawaii" -- an offer the ambassador couldn't refuse!

The Iranian-Syrian backed Hezbollah is a "a total movement in the least totalistic of Arab societies," and in the course of pursuing its declared vision of "resistance" -- against Israel as well as its own domestic adversaries -- Hezbollah has "turn[ed] the Lebanese political system into an object of derision." Its officials claim that resistance is "a vision and a methodology," and its abundant weapons serve as an insurance policy against the remarginalization of Lebanon's historically underserved, underrepresented, and politically weak Shiite community. Of course, Hezbollah's possession of such an impressive and extensive arsenal has triggered anxieties among other Lebanese confessions or sects, who view the militia as an existential threat.

The dilemma is straightforward. Either Hezbollah disarms ... and by doing so relinquishes its reason to exist; or it refuses to do so, maintaining the Lebanese in a near-permanent state of civil dissonance.

It is this tension, born of Lebanon's sectarian and liberal society, that runs throughout Young's account. Considering divergent paths to the future, he asks a pertinent question: Will Lebanon become Hanoi or Hong Kong, "a symbol of militancy and armed struggle, as represented by Hezbollah, or would it opt for the path laid out by Rafiq al-Hariri, who [had] sought to make the country a station of liberal capitalism and ecumenical permissiveness?"

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