

The Murdered Fathers Club

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Articles & Testimony

On Saturday, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri traveled to Damascus for a meeting with Syrian president Bashar Asad, the man widely believed to have ordered the assassination of his father, former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri. The 2005 murder sparked the Cedar Revolution, a mass protest movement that resulted in the end of the thirty-year Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, and swept the pro-West March 14th coalition to power. Although March 14 again triumphed over the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hizballah-led opposition in elections this past June, Washington's allies in Beirut are now facing a crisis. Hariri's trip to Damascus represents the return of Syrian influence to Lebanon, and perhaps, the end of the Cedar Revolution.

Six months ago, March 14 appeared to be in good shape. The underdog coalition had defeated Hizballah at the polls, and seemed well positioned to form a government. But the process dragged out for months as the opposition held out for preponderant influence in the cabinet. In the end, facing the specter of Hizballah violence, Hariri ultimately succumbed to pressure and acceded to opposition demands.

The composition of the cabinet -- in which Hizballah wields veto power over government initiatives -- was a political defeat for Hariri. Worse, facing continued pressure from Hizballah and its allies, Hariri was compelled to make an equally loathsome concession on the Ministerial Statement, the policy guidance for his incoming administration. In contravention to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 -- which stipulates the "disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon" -- Hariri was forced to accept compromise language legitimating Hizballah's weapons.

Even more damaging, during the process of forming the government, Hariri was forced to accept the condition that he would travel to Damascus to meet Asad.

Pilgrimage to Damascus has long been a prerequisite for incoming senior Lebanese officials. During Syria's thirty-year occupation of Lebanon, Lebanese politicians -- typically appointed by the Asad regime -- would travel to Damascus to receive orders and to demonstrate fealty. More recently, since 2005 and the end of the Syrian occupation, the optics of a visit symbolically serve to reaffirm the power dynamic between Damascus and Beirut.

Years ago, it would have been unimaginable that Saad Hariri would meet with Bashar Asad. In 2005, Saad's father, Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Beirut, and Syria -- and its ally Hizballah according to Der Spiegel -- remains the leading suspect in the case. Moreover, during an interview two years after his father's murder, Hariri claimed

Damascus was responsible for the assassination of six parliamentarians in his March 14 bloc. "We all know that the Syrian regime is doing this," he said. "Action must be taken against Syria, like isolation, to make the Syrians understand that killing members of [Lebanon's] Parliament will have consequences for them."

A United Nations-mandated Special Tribunal for Lebanon was established in 2005 to prosecute Rafiq Hariri's assassins, and is currently preparing indictments. Given the sensitivities involved, it's obvious that if he had his way, Hariri would wait for indictments to be issued prior to visiting Damascus. Hariri has little inclination to meet with Asad, the man presumed to have ordered the killing of his father.

He is going under duress. In October, Hariri's chief Arab backer, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, travelled to Syria -- the first such meeting in Damascus since 2005 -- and reportedly reached an agreement with President Asad to allow the formation of a Lebanese Government. Although Syria and its Lebanese allies had nearly all their cabinet demands met -- as Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Moustapha recently quipped, "It is exactly the sort of government we think should rule Lebanon" -- the Asad regime wanted one additional concession: a Hariri visit to Damascus. As a peace offering, Saudi Arabia acceded.

But Hariri isn't the only March 14 politician slated to make the pilgrimage. Hariri will be followed closely by Walid Jumblatt, the enigmatic Druze leader, whose anti-Syrian views routinely made headlines from 2005-2008. During a speech to the Washington Institute for Near East policy in 2007, for example, Jumblatt warned U.S. policymakers as to the nature of the Asad regime. "Let nobody be fooled that the [Syrian] killing machine will stop," he said. Given the absence of effective sanctions against the regime, Jumblatt offered his own recommendation as to an effective course of action, opining, "If you could send some car bombs to Damascus, why not?"

At the same 2007 talk, Jumblatt discussed his own very personal and tragic relationship with the Asad regime. "I know the Syrian regime quite well and I have the experience of history. My father, after all, opposed Syrian interference in Lebanon. That is why he was killed." After Kemal Jumblatt was murdered in 1977, Walid was compelled to make amends with Damascus. As he later said, "When my father was killed by the Syrians, I was obliged to fix up a cynical compromise because I needed allies so, of course, I shook Assad's hand. I knew that he killed my father, but I tried to forget for some time."

In the aftermath of the 2005 Hariri assassination and the Cedar Revolution, Jumblatt had a falling out with Damascus. Lately, however, Jumblatt -- who for decades has demonstrated an uncanny ability to anticipate shifting political winds -- has started to distance himself from his March 14 coalition allies, and to signal his desire for a rapprochement with the Asad regime.

Jumblatt's about face coincides with a Syrian resurgence in Lebanon and a perceived reduction of Washington's commitment to March 14. Jumblatt's shift also reflects his recognition of the increasingly precarious position of the Druze, a community that worldwide numbers only about 200,000. In May 2008 -- when the Shiite militia invaded Beirut -- the Druze were the only faction to resist Hizballah's military aggression, fighting and killing a dozen or so Hizballahis as they tried to enter the Shouf Mountains. But the Shouf today is surrounded by Hizballah-controlled Shiite villages, and Jumblatt likely calculates that decreased tensions with the Shiite militia and Syria are required to protect his community.

To this end, last June, following elections, Jumblatt met with Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah. He also started to publicly discuss a possible visit to Damascus. For Jumblatt, it's not a matter of if, but of when. The only caveat is that he will not be first. To not unduly antagonize Lebanon's Sunni community (led by Hariri), Jumblatt says he "will only visit Syria after Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri goes."

So Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, the leaders of the Cedar Revolution, whose fathers were all but certainly killed by Syria, are paying homage to Damascus. For Jumblatt, it was a pragmatic decision. For Hariri, it's a decision taken

under extreme pressure, and one fraught with political ramifications. Not only will the visit be seen as a humiliation by Hariri's Lebanese Sunni supporters, it will likely be understood as Hariri absolving Damascus of responsibility for the murder of his father, a perception that could undermine support for the International Tribunal. Hariri is trying to mitigate the negative consequences of his trip by visiting Riyadh and Cairo prior to Damascus, but this will not blunt the impact.

Given Syrian resilience, perhaps this development was to be expected. After all, despite no perceptible change in Syrian behavior, and its ongoing violation of UN Security Council resolutions on Lebanon, Europe has made great efforts to improve relations with Damascus. In November 2009, the EU offered Syria an Economic Association agreement, essentially removing all human rights clauses from the pact to sweeten the deal for the authoritarian state.

Washington's increased diplomatic and military engagement with Damascus also appears to have had an effect, decreasing March 14 confidence in its most ardent supporter. Perhaps the leading factor in March 14 leadership's decision to return to Damascus, however, appears to be Saudi Arabia's equivocating. Riyadh had been a leading force in trying to dissuade Damascus from playing its traditionally pernicious role in Lebanon. Recently, however, Saudi appears to have made a concession on Lebanon in order to improve relations with Syria.

It's not exactly clear why Riyadh cut the deal with Damascus, but it appears that the decision was driven by concerns over Iran. To mitigate the threat posed by Tehran, Saudi Arabia is attempting to pry Syria away from its 30-year strategic ally, and the first Saudi down-payment in this ill-advised gambit has been its Lebanese allies. At least in part, this dramatic change in policy vis-à-vis Syria is related to the perceived U.S. weakness on Iran. Absent Saudi confidence that Washington will prevent a nuclear Iran, Riyadh is hedging.

For Washington and March 14, of course, the Saudi shift and the imminent expeditions of the coalition's senior leadership to Damascus is not good news. Simply stated, it is indicative of the fact that Syria has a new lease on life in Lebanon. Sadly, this pro-West coalition, which came to power on the battle-cry of Lebanese "independence," appears to have come full circle. March 14 politicians are already flocking to Damascus to ingratiate themselves with Asad, and the Lebanese president is starting to become a routine fixture in the Syrian capital. The ongoing tragedy of Lebanon will be played out in the coming days, as the murdered fathers club holds its next meeting in Damascus.

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