

Taking Aim at Syria and Hizballah:

Walid Jumblat's Brave Stance

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

On May 7, Lebanese Druze leader and member of parliament Walid Jumblat told reporters in Cairo that Hizballah should disarm. These comments came just four days after Jumblat offered his assistance to the Syrian opposition in establishing "a democratic and free Syria." Jumblat has always been an enigmatic and unpredictable interlocutor, and his recent statements on Syria and Hizballah typify his disregard for the conventions of the Lebanese political establishment. While many Lebanese may quietly support Jumblat's truth telling, his statements are sure to increase his list of powerful enemies.

No Angel

Jumblat did not always profess such laudable positions. After his father, Kamal Jumblat, was killed (purportedly by the Syrians) in 1977, Walid Jumblat became leader of the Druze and immediately struck a compromise with Syria. This accommodation involved serving in successive Syrian controlled Lebanese governments and at times establishing military alliances with the Syrians to protect the Druze community during the Lebanese Civil War. More recently, in October 2003, after then U.S. deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz came under hostile fire in Baghdad, Jumblat made a now infamous quip in which he referred to Wolfowitz as a "virus" and encouraged would-be attackers to be "more precise and efficient" in the future. As recently as April 2004, during a television interview with al-Arabiya, Jumblat implied that the September 11 attacks were part of a larger U.S. conspiracy.

By many accounts, however, Jumblat was profoundly moved by the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the change in the U.S. policy regarding support for democracy in the Middle East. These factors -- and the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri -- appear to have contributed to Jumblat's reassessment of the U.S. role in the region.

A Busy Man

Since the Hariri murder, Jumblat has emerged as a key leader in the March 14 Movement, the anti-Syrian coalition headed by Hariri's son Saad Hariri, a parliamentarian and leader of the Future Party. Jumblat is head of the Progressive Socialist Party and leader of the Lebanese Druze community, which comprises roughly 10 percent of the

population and controls some 15 of 128 parliamentary seats. But his role in Lebanon today -- and his moral authority -- far exceeds his Druze constituency. Jumblat has capitalized on his higher profile to make political statements that have pushed the envelope of Lebanese politics. This spring, Jumblat has been particularly busy with Syria:

Meeting Khaddam. In early March, Jumblat traveled to France to meet with former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had fled Syria in January 2006 to become a vocal proponent of regime change from exile in Paris. The meeting was widely reported by the press, though no details have emerged.

Visiting Washington. In March, Jumblat traveled to Washington for meetings with senior administration officials, including meetings at the vice president's office, the National Security Council, and the Departments of State and Defense. Jumblat made the trip, he said, because the Bush administration had given up its policy of supporting "friendly dictators" (such as Syria). Jumblat also met with Wolfowitz, who now heads the World Bank, and reportedly apologized for his earlier comments.

Building contacts with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In late April, Jumblat met with a delegation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood led by the organization's London based leader, Ali Sadr Eddin Bayanouni. The group is outlawed in Syria and membership is punishable by death. Following the meeting, Jumblat announced that he had signed a petition calling for an end to the ban on Muslim Brotherhood membership.

In April, Damascus responded to Jumblat's actions by issuing summonses to appear before a Syrian military court to him, his fellow anti-Syrian Druze compatriot Marwan Hamadeh, and al-Mustaqbal journalist Fares Khashan, accusing them of "inciting the U.S. administration to occupy Syria." The charges likely stemmed from comments Jumblat made to the Washington Post in January 2006 comparing Syria to Iraq: "You [the United States] came to Iraq in the name of majority rule" he said, "You can do the same thing in Syria."

So far, Jumblat appears unfazed by the charges. Following the announcement of the summons in April, Jumblat told reporters that he would "sue all of Syria for the murders they committed in Lebanon." For its part, Washington has condemned the warrant in the strongest terms. U.S. ambassador to Lebanon Jeffery Feltman described the move as "yet another cynical attempt by the Syrian government to continue its interference in the Lebanese political process . . . and intimidate the Lebanese people." Should Jumblat fail to appear in Damascus, he may be tried in absentia.

On the Domestic Front

Jumblat is also pursuing an anti-Syrian agenda in Lebanese domestic politics. Most of this effort is focused on weakening and removing Syrian appointed Lebanese president Emile Lahoud from power. Last week, Jumblat engineered a parliamentary vote on two bills concerning the Druze community, overriding Lahoud's objection to pass the bills into law. The laws in question will enable Jumblat to oust and replace the Druze spiritual leader and Jumblat's pro-Syrian political opponent Sheikh Bahjat Gaith with a Jumblat ally. This gambit will further undercut Lahoud's authority and help Jumblat consolidate control of his community.

At the same time, by publicly advocating the disarmament of Hizballah, Jumblat has entered into direct conflict with another formidable political enemy at home. Until recently, like other Lebanese politicians Jumblat had demurred on the issue of Hizballah weapons, calling instead for a national dialogue and consensus on the issue. Jumblat himself has long maintained that Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms are Syrian, not Lebanese territory, a distinction that obviates the need for Lebanese "resistance." Hence, in Cairo, Jumblat suggested that there was no longer any justification for Hizballah to bear arms. Rather, Jumblat said Hizballah should be absorbed by the Lebanese military -- a position advocated by many Lebanese politicians -- but he went one step further, asking, "Why should Lebanon alone continue to be an arena for Arab-Israeli conflict?" Not surprisingly, Hizballah was quick to condemn Jumblat's statement. Mohammed Raad, head of the Hizballah bloc in parliament, said, "No one can touch the resistance's

weapons . . . it is the pride of this country."

Jumblat's statements will likely adversely effect the relations of Hariri's Future Party -- with which Jumblat is allied - - with Hizballah. Given the import that Hizballah and its Syrian and Iranian patrons assign the weapons, it is not inconceivable that these remarks could signal the end of the ongoing Lebanese National Dialogue -- the discussions of Lebanese politicians that started in March 2006. Then again, Hizballah could seek other less benign forms of retribution against Jumblat.

Threats Abound

Jumblat's statements and meetings have assuredly secured him the enmity of Syria and Hizballah (and by proxy, possibly Iran). Jumblat is convinced the Syrians killed his father, and is under no illusions about his precarious position with Damascus. He is likewise aware of the serious threat posed by Hizballah. (Indeed, according to the Jordan Times, Hizballah warned Lebanese prime minister Fuad Siniora not to discuss the issue of disarmament with President Bush during his April 2006 trip to Washington.) Although at times Jumblat appears to be a loose cannon, given the potential repercussions, his most recent pronouncements on Syria and Hizballah likely were not off the cuff.

Jumblat is an astute politician who does not appear to harbor a desire for personal martyrdom; in fact, he is taking precautions in Lebanon and abroad to protect himself. It could be that Jumblat's recent statements represent a politician liberated from the norms, constraints, and taboos of the Lebanese system. Alternatively, Jumblat may believe the provocations of Syria and Hizballah will raise his profile to such a level such that it provides him with a degree of protection.

Washington has an interest in seeing Jumblat continue his campaign against Syria and Hizballah's weapons. The United States should show support via continued high-profile meetings of senior administration officials with Jumblat in Lebanon and abroad. Given the bold stand that Jumblat has taken, this would be an appropriate time for the United States to reinvigorate its efforts to reduce ongoing Syrian interference in Lebanon and to begin at long last resolving the problem of Hizballah's militia.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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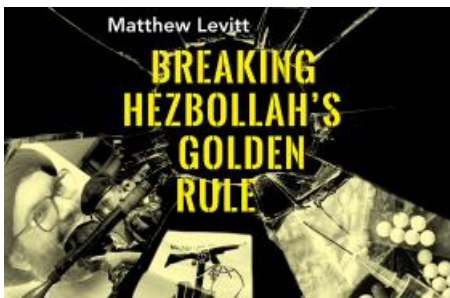
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