

A Tale of Two Countries: Defining Post-Syria Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

When Shiite ministers recently "suspended" their participation in the Lebanese cabinet, though without resigning, it highlighted an increasingly apparent reality in post-Syria Lebanon: Two powerful camps coexist today. One, led by Hizballah, in alliance with the Amal movement, sits atop a Shiite community generally, though not unanimously, supporting their positions. The other reflects a cross-communal parliamentary majority, the cornerstone of which is the Sunni-led Future Movement of Saad Hariri, son of the murdered former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

This dichotomy is imperfect. Beyond sectarian affiliation, other fault lines divide the political actors, most importantly their attitude toward Syria. However, since the Syrian military withdrawal in April 2005, it would be fair to say that Lebanon is being buffeted by two broad visions for the future, and that the sectarian backdrop to this contest is mainly Sunni-Shiite, not Muslim-Christian, which was the main divide before Lebanon's civil war began in 1975.

Two Visions for Post-Syria Lebanon

The Hariri vision is based on the classic urban merchant ideal, in which Lebanon is to be transformed into a liberal investment hub pursuing unhindered transactions with the West and the Arab world. Muslims and Christians must coexist in friendship, though the conservatism pervading this approach means the dictates of sectarianism are respected. Relations with Israel are to be governed by the 1949 Armistice Agreement, but no permanent agreement can be signed before all the Arab states accept peace. Proponents of this vision want the truth about who killed Rafiq Hariri, believe the Syrian regime was responsible, and have few qualms about seeing Damascus punished, whatever that means for regional stability. This vision is not strictly a Sunni one, but Sunnis are its main proponents and believe it embodies the values of the late prime minister.

The downside, and a potentially serious one, is that very different Sunni groups coexist under the Hariri "big tent." Rafiq Hariri always highlighted the urbane moderation of his vision, but he could never completely conceal that, as a strong Sunni leader, he also appealed to radical Sunni Islamists and a Sunni underclass, both more likely to think in harsher sectarian terms than the pragmatists Hariri preferred to advertise.

Against this stands another vision, associated with the two Shiite parties -- Hizballah and, far more ambiguously, the depleted Amal movement. This outlook is characterized by mistrust of the West, particularly the United States, and a desire to pursue the armed struggle against Israel, both in Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Proponents of this vision emphasize that Shiites have always staunchly defended Lebanese nationalism, have never cut deals with the outside, and proved their bona fides by expelling the Israelis in 2000. They refuse to regard Syria as an enemy, and recall that it was under the Syrians that Shiites were first given a prominent role in Lebanese political life. Economically, the parties oppose deep privatization of public utilities. Shiite employment in state institutions has been the paramount instrument of communal promotion in recent years. For poor Shiites, Hariri's "merchant

republic" offered few inducements. Even spatially, the community is concentrated in areas far from the rebuilt city center -- the jewel in the crown of Hariri's reconstruction of Beirut.

Many Shiites embrace this outlook, and specifically back Hizballah because, for the first time after decades of marginalization, the community is respected. No more ideological than others, Shiites nonetheless regard Hizballah's militancy a badge of honor, and a legitimate lever with which to demand more in intersectarian bargaining. That is why they feel that UN efforts to disarm Hizballah will merely weaken their community once again. This dovetails with Hizballah's own fear that, without weapons, it would be just another sectarian organization, forced to abandon its towering ambition to be a regional vanguard in the struggle against Israel and the United States. Arms also allow Hizballah to fulfill an implicit contract with Iran, whereby its threat to Israel from southern Lebanon can help deter an Israeli attack against Iranian nuclear facilities. Neither the party nor its supporters sees a contradiction between Hizballah's claim to be a guardian of Lebanese sovereignty and its alliances with Iran and Syria.

Goodbye Syria; Hello What?

Even before Syrian soldiers began pulling out of Lebanon, that prestidigitator of Lebanese minority politics, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, had grasped that the aftermath would be shaped by the struggle between the Hariri camp and Hizballah -- between Sunnis and Shiites. That is why he sought to mediate between the two, hoping to enhance his own authority. The practical impact of this was Jumblatt's engineering of a consensus around a controversial law governing parliamentary elections in summer 2005. The law gerrymandered districts so that Hizballah and Amal could maintain large blocs in the 128-seat parliament, despite the Syrian departure, while Jumblatt and Hariri expanded their sway.

The initial losers were the Christians, whose most powerful politician, Michel Aoun, was left out of the deal. However, the angry backlash in the Christian community was such that Aoun, who had just returned from exile, swept all seats in the Christian heartland, establishing his own substantial bloc. Aoun has tried to remain nonaligned in the Hariri-Hizballah faceoff, but his electors deeply mistrust Hizballah's relationship with Syria, compelling him to strengthen his ties with the Hariri-Jumblatt alliance.

After the elections, Jumblatt's strategy was to continue collaborating with the Shiites in a new government. The Druze leader induced the inexperienced Hariri to approve the re-election of Amal leader Nabih Birri as speaker of parliament, though Birri had been a main prop of Syrian hegemony. And when Hariri's associate, Fouad Siniora, formed a government, he made sure Hizballah and Amal received key portfolios -- the first time Hizballah entered the cabinet. However, this was an unnatural marriage. Soon, the compromise between the Hariri-Jumblatt camp and Hizballah and Amal turned into a virtual divorce.

The professed reason was passage, by a cabinet majority vote led by Hariri's and Jumblatt's ministers, of a decision asking the UN to form a tribunal "with an international coloring" to try those responsible for Rafiq Hariri's murder. Hizballah and Amal, at least publicly, declined to sanction the decision and suspended their participation in cabinet sessions. In fact, the dispute went deeper, capping a period of palpable tension as Hizballah and Amal refused to adopt positions that might harm Syria. Damascus fears an international or mixed tribunal because it would have the power to convict Syrians, without the Syrian regime's being able to control the outcome. The Shiite ministers were also displeased with Siniora's running of cabinet sessions, where he often outmaneuvered them. He understood they could not resign, since Hizballah views its participation in the government as institutional cover to resist surrendering its arms.

Deadlock prevails to this day, with no clear sign when a solution might be forthcoming. Hizballah sought to make Hariri back an agreement that would have traded a Shiite return to the cabinet for Hariri's approval of a resolution

defending against the party's disarmament. Hariri, rejected this, spurred on by the versatile Jumblatt, who, after failing to break Hizballah away from Syria, became the party's most vociferous critic.

No consensus exists on a vision for Lebanon. Hizballah's strategic alliances with Syria and, more significantly, Iran make improbable a serious dialogue on disarmament, which the party's leaders consider an existential threat. Nor does Hizballah feel an urge to compromise, since it retains support among Shiites. The Hariri-Jumblatt tandem, in turn, controls a slight majority in parliament, but suffers from the physical absence of Saad Hariri, who lives outside Lebanon, fearing assassination. Moreover, Hariri is said to be under pressure from the Saudis to be more conciliatory with Syria, since Riyadh does not want events in Lebanon to destabilize the Syrian regime. The sectarian contours of the Hariri-Hizballah rivalry are sharpening, and while violence remains unlikely, the fight for Lebanon's soul will continue for some time to come.

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