

# Syrian Strategy in Lebanon

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

As Syrian troops continue to withdraw from parts of Lebanon, three bomb attacks have occurred within eight days in predominantly Christian areas: a March 19 car bomb wrecked the front of a building in New Jdeideh, wounding nine; a March 22 bomb ripped through an elite shopping center in Kaslik, killing three; and a March 26 car bomb in the industrial sector of Sadd el-Bouchrieh wounded five and destroyed several buildings. Many Lebanese see the bombings as an attempt by Syria and its loyalists to derail the growing movement for democracy and independence in Lebanon, while at the same time deepening fears of renewed sectarian conflict.

## Syria's History in Lebanon

Syria has a long history of using violence to accomplish its purposes in Lebanon. During the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, for example, Damascus liquidated those it perceived as obstacles. Syria was allegedly behind the 1976 assassination of Kamal Jumblatt in the attempt to end his leadership of the National Movement (which combined Arabist, leftist, and Muslim forces) and to facilitate a rapprochement between Syria and the Muslim political camp. No less important, Damascus has liquidated those it perceived as potential links to foreign powers, such as president-elect Bashir Jumayil in 1982, who was viewed as an ally of Israel. In 2002, Syria is also thought to have assassinated Elie Hobeika, whose loyalty to Damascus came into question following the September 11 terror attacks, when Hobeika appeared to revive past connections with the CIA.

Car bombs in Lebanon became almost daily occurrences during the civil war, and were meant to push the country into socio-politico-economic paralysis. The current wave of bombings is reminiscent of this past Syrian use of violence. In addition, there are now disturbing indications that Syria is attempting to activate its loyalists inside Lebanon to provoke sectarian troubles. For example, on March 5, a convoy of cars circled Sassin Square in Aschrafieh (the Christian capital of East Beirut during the civil war), carrying pictures of President Bashar al-Asad and firing into the air among a crowd that had gathered there. (It is noteworthy that the shooting of a bus transporting Palestinians in a Christian Beirut suburb sparked the civil war.)

After the civil war, Syria maintained its grip on Lebanon by pursuing a divide-and-rule policy among and between Lebanon's sectarian communities. For example, it balanced the rising power of the late former Prime Minister Rafiq

Hariri by supporting traditional Sunni leadership such as Salim al-Huss and Tamam Salam. It also tried to co-opt sectarian party leaders like Karim Pakradouni in order to fragment communal unity and leadership. As head of the Christian Phalange party, Pakradouni reversed party policy by emerging as an ardent supporter of the status quo, especially of pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud.

Throughout Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations (1991-2000), Damascus used Hizballah to put pressure on Israel militarily. In the current scenario, it is distinctly possible that Syria, through Hizballah, may inflame the Lebanon-Syria border in order to deflect domestic and international attention. Indeed, according to press reports, King Abdullah of Jordan recently warned Israel and the United States about such a likelihood.

### Syria's Strategy

Given this background, Damascus will most likely try to fragment the opposition by employing a combination of terror, appeasement, and Arab intercession. Its first objective will be to drive a wedge between the two historic Mount Lebanon political communities, the Druze and the Maronites, who form the core of the opposition and who are led respectively by Walid Jumblatt and Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir. Syria will play on the differences and concerns of these two communities, which revolve around Druze pan-Arab sentiments and Maronite pro-U.S. sentiments.

For example, if Syria completes its withdrawal from Lebanon, Jumblatt will come under pressure from Arab leaders as well as his own Progressive Socialist Party to soften his demands and walk a mainstream Arab line. Following a March 22 meeting with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Jumblatt asserted that removing the pro-Syrian president was not a priority. At the same time, he pledged to “protect the resistance,” meaning Hizballah. Damascus will likely play on Jumblatt's sensitivities by promising to prevent the election of a pro-U.S. Maronite president—such as former president Camile Chamoun—who identifies with the major Christian forces.

Damascus will try to appease Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir by promising him honest elections. However, given the fact that he is a spiritual leader who prefers to rise above the factional political rivalries of the Christian community, Damascus may try to weaken the Qornet Shehwan Gathering (a mainstream Christian opposition group) by increasing Syrian support for both former interior minister Michel el-Murr (in the Metn district of Mount Lebanon) and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party leaders in Mount Lebanon, as well as for Phalangist leader Karim Pakradouni.

At the same time, Syria will try to sever the potential links between Lebanese opposition leaders and foreign states, particularly the United States. For example, Damascus could threaten former Lebanese president Amin Jumayil, who has cordial relations with the Bush administration (especially with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld). Syria will try to regain its traditional Sunni allies while at the same time persuading them to stop anti-Syrian demonstrations. Already, Bahia Hariri, a parliamentarian deputy and sister of the slain former prime minister, has canceled the celebration procession commemorating forty days since the death of her brother. Damascus may also try to appease the Sunnis by playing on their fears of Shiite demographic power, notwithstanding Syrian support for the Shiite Hizballah and Amal parties in Beirut.

### The Security Services and the Army

Despite the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon, Damascus has controlled Lebanon primarily through Lebanese institutions that it fills with pro-Syrian loyalists. In fact, the removal of pro-Syrian officials from their posts is a core demand of the Lebanese opposition. Following a meeting on March 3 in Jumblatt's stronghold of Mukhtara, the opposition called for the removal of Adnan Addoum as state prosecutor, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Jamil Sayyed as director

general of general security, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Edward Mansour as director general of the state security apparatus, Gen. Ali Hajj as director general of internal security, Gen. Mustafa Hamdan as commander of the army's Presidential Brigade, Gen. Raymond Azar as director of military intelligence, and Col. Ghassan Tufeili as chief of the military intelligence espionage unit. (Members of the opposition have expressed fear that General Sayyed might be planning a coup d'etat. In an audacious and unprecedented move, Sayyed held a press conference in which he attacked the opposition as a “political mafia” that has caused Lebanon's woes.)

In contrast to the slavishly pro-Syrian stance of the security services, the army has allowed demonstrators to stage large anti-Syria rallies despite an official ban. Indeed, while rallying, many Lebanese have been seen embracing army personnel. Michel Suleiman, commander of the army, has emerged as a stabilizing force, counteracting the power of the security chiefs. The army—Suleiman in particular—will be the target of the security authorities, who are now waging a campaign to establish that the army is incapable of filling the security vacuum created by the departing Syrian soldiers. For example, Defense Minister Abd al-Rahim Murad has recently stated, “The numbers in the army [are] not enough to replace the Syrian forces, which will leave the Bekaa completely. . . . The members of the army are still young [and inexperienced] to handle this mission.”

The recent bombings are not only a sign that Syria and its Lebanese loyalists are intent on heightening sectarian tension, but also mark the beginning of a new round of intimidation against the opposition, carried out under the pretext of compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and the Taif Accord. The international community must vigilantly monitor Syria and its loyalists while supporting the imperative of removing those security chiefs enforcing the Syrian order in Lebanon.

Robert G. Rabil is a visiting professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University and author of *Embattled Neighbors: Israel, Syria, and Lebanon* (Lynne Reiner, 2003). ❖

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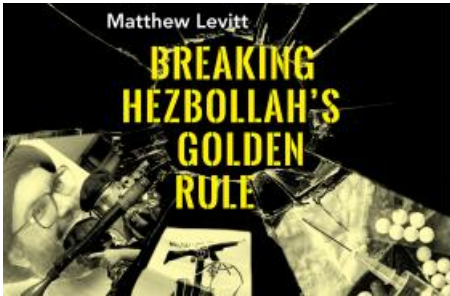
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