

Syria and the Polarization of Lebanese Politics

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in a massive bombing in Beirut a few days ago came at a time of growing Lebanese opposition to Syria's fifteen-year "trusteeship" (occupation) of the country. Lebanese politics have become polarized by the September 2004 term extension of the pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud. UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disbanding of Hizballah, was adopted that same month in reaction to the term extension. That resolution not only helped the Lebanese opposition to the Syrian presence broaden its base of support but also gave it an international political cover.

Background

Since its overthrow of the "First Republic" in 1990, Damascus has manipulated Lebanon's parliamentary elections to prevent the victory of vocal or potential opponents, as well as coalitions of independent political candidates. The constitutional amendment to extend the term of President Lahoud in the face of almost universal Lebanese opposition was approved by a vote of ninety-six to twenty-nine with three members not present. Damascus manipulated the parliamentary elections by gerrymandering electoral districts and enforcing party lists. For example, prior to the parliamentary elections of 2000, Beirut was divided into three districts in order to reduce the number of seats won by Hariri, who had become a fierce critic of Lahoud and then-Prime Minister Salim al-Huss. Similarly, Mount Lebanon was divided into four districts, with the Druze areas set apart (enforced by a party list) to support the Druze leadership of Talal Arslan against that of Walid Jumblatt, who had begun to align himself with the Christian Maronites. Led by their patriarch, the Maronite community became vocal in calling for Syrian withdrawal following Israel's pullout from southern Lebanon in May 2000.

Despite Syrian maneuverings and threats by the Syrian and Lebanese security apparati, Hariri and Jumblatt fared extremely well in the elections. Hariri even defeated the hitherto longstanding Beirut leadership of Huss and Tamam Salam. Jumblatt moved to the center of Lebanese opposition, fuming over blatant Syrian intervention in Lebanese domestic affairs—particularly the October 2004 assassination attempt upon his ally, Member of Parliament Marwan Hamade, which was transparently the work of Syrian intelligence. The fact that Israel was not, as usual, blamed for the attempt speaks volumes about the recent Lebanese political mood.

In response to growing Lebanese opposition, pro-Syrian forces numbering in the thousands demonstrated in Beirut in late November—apparently at the behest of Damascus—to back Syria’s presence in Lebanon. The demonstrators were led by the Shiite Islamist party Hizballah, the Amal movement, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, Lebanon’s Baath party, and scores of Palestinian and Syrian immigrants and workers. In addition, so many pro-Syrian dignitaries and officials supported the demonstration that the opposition accused Lebanese prime minister Omar Karami's government of officially supporting the march. Not surprisingly, many Syrian loyalists in Lebanon owe their political fortunes and survival to Syria. In addition to Shiite parties and Druze and Sunni dignitaries, these loyalists include current Lebanese interior minister Suleiman Franjeh, a Maronite Christian leader in the north whose close alliance and friendship with the Asad family began when his grandfather (also named Suleiman Franjeh) found sanctuary in President Hafiz al-Asad’s hometown of Qardaha; he would later become president of Lebanon. Other loyalists include Greek Orthodox business tycoons Issam Fares (the current Lebanese deputy prime minister) and Michel Murr (the former Lebanese minister of interior).

Growing Opposition to Syrian Intervention

In December, chafing over incessant Syrian intervention in Lebanese domestic affairs as well as high-handedness and threats by Syrian intelligence, the Lebanese opposition called for a meeting at the Bristol hotel in Beirut. The gathering was attended by many political activists and parties from across Lebanon’s political and communal spectrum. Among those attending were Jumblatt’s Democratic Gathering and Progressive Socialist Party, the Christian Qornet Shehwan Gathering, the banned Christian Lebanese Forces, members of General Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Front, the Democratic Forum, and the Democratic Leftist Movement. Significantly, members of Hariri’s parliamentary bloc also attended. As a result of the meeting, the opposition issued a historical document known as the Bristol Declaration, in which they “denounced the amendment of the Lebanese constitution and the extension of Lahoud’s term in office under Syrian duress, [and] demanded a fair and just election law and an impartial government to supervise the upcoming [parliamentary] elections in May 2005.”

This marked the first time since Lebanon’s 1943 independence that Druze, Sunnis, leftists, Maronites, and Lebanese of various sects and political orientations had formed a cross-communal political bloc similar to the one that had established the national pact of 1943 (although Shiite participation was notably missing). Meanwhile, Hariri, who resigned as prime minister following a protracted and acerbic fallout with Lahoud, became the target of the Lebanese government, which accused him of whipping up sectarian dissent. Hariri was a silent critic of Hizballah and, recently, of Syrian high-handedness in Lebanon. Most important, Hariri opposed the parliament’s draft electoral law, which would have rearranged the districting of Beirut primarily to undermine his coalition of candidates in the upcoming May elections. Once the cabinet endorsed the electoral law, Hariri moved closer to the opposition. In fact, he sent a member of parliament, Bassil Fuleihan, to attend the meeting of the Bristol follow-up committee, which was coordinating opposition activities.

In early February 2005, the opposition met again at the Bristol hotel, and, in contrast to the first meeting, demanded a “total withdrawal” of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Suddenly, the political order created by the Syrians in Lebanon appeared to be on the verge of collapse. Hariri’s move toward the opposition completely changed Lebanon’s political equation, creating a national feeling unseen in the country’s recent history. If the past is any guide, a coalition of opposition candidates supported by Jumblatt, Hariri, and the majority of Christians would be difficult to defeat and, consequently, would change the constitutional equation that legitimized Syria’s presence in Lebanon. Given this political situation and Syria’s long record of alleged political assassinations (Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, President-elect Bashir Jumayil, President Rene Mouawad, and Mufti Hassan Khaled), Beirut’s political quarters began to buzz with the question of who would be assassinated first: Jumblatt or Hariri.

Impact of the Hariri Assassination

The swiftness with which the opposition not only blamed Syria but also held the Lebanese government responsible (even bluntly requesting that it not participate in Hariri's funeral procession) attests to the new political climate dawning in Lebanon. In a dramatic shift of political posture, Sunni Muslims held a communal meeting chaired by Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabani immediately following the assassination, in which they issued a statement condemning the assassination of Hariri and insisting that "the murder of the martyr Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri targeted the existence, role and dignity of Muslim Sunnis." They added that Sunnis "would not be satisfied with deploring this crime . . . they have had enough injustice and [their] patience could no longer be borne." In sharp contrast to the bitter reaction of the Sunnis, Druze, and Christians, the general reaction of the Shiite community was to fall into the old pattern of blaming Israel. The leading Shiite cleric Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah asserted that "plans are set in motion internationally and regionally in order to sink Lebanon in a game, which affords Israel further security at the expense of explosive Arab and Islamic nations." The Amal movement stated that the "Zionists are behind the crime, aiming at creating turmoil."

The Hariri assassination has unleashed sociopolitical forces that will take Lebanon into a new era. Between the opposition's determination to confront Syria and the willingness of pro-Syrian forces to vigorously support the status quo, Lebanon's political future has become unpredictable. The moment is ripe for active international action to press Syria to end its occupation.

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

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