

# Manipulating Lebanon's Constitution:

## Bashar al-Asad's Dangerous Game

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### Brief Analysis

In the face of international criticism, Syria strong-armed Lebanon into accepting a constitutional amendment last week that would extend the term of the sitting Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud. Yet, far from being a sign of Damascus's strength against foreign intrusion, this episode should be viewed as further confirmation of the immature leadership of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad.

### Context

On September 3, the Lebanese parliament approved -- by a vote of 96 to 29, with 3 absences -- an amendment to the constitution permitting the extension of an incumbent president's term, under exceptional terms, for up to three years. Taking advantage of this amendment, the parliament is expected to meet in the coming days to extend the term of former army commander Lahoud.

The parliamentary vote came just one day after passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called on all states to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and constitution and demanded the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon and the dismantling of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. Indeed, Syria's vote can be viewed as a direct challenge to the resolution (which was adopted by a vote of nine to zero, with six abstentions). Although the final text of the resolution was toned down from the original version, with deletion of any direct reference to Syria, the French and U.S. representatives on the Security Council left no doubt that the resolution was directed toward Syria's interference in Lebanon.

### Reelecting Lahoud

Since Lebanon's constitution limits presidents to a single, six-year term, the country's political elite has been busy for several months trying to divine who would be picked to replace Lahoud. The concept of a single, six-year term is viewed as virtually sacrosanct in Lebanon, and all previous efforts to change it met with firm opposition. For example, Bishara Khuri's attempt to amend the constitution to allow himself an additional term led to political turmoil, while Kamil Shamun's attempt eventually led to the 1958 civil war. Only Lahoud's predecessor, Ilyas al-Hirawi, was able to win a three-year extension of his term in 1995, due to a unique confluence of interests among Syria, Western nations, and prominent Lebanese figures.

Although Syria's full political and military control of Lebanon is no secret, common wisdom in Beirut had been that Damascus would not try to coerce locals into accepting an extended term for its ally, Lahoud. Instead, it was assumed that Syria would try to promote the candidacy of a friendly successor through quiet dialogue with various Lebanese political factions, complemented by efforts to reach a tacit understanding on the issue with France and, if possible, the United States.

In recent weeks, however, it became increasingly apparent that Damascus was having difficulty choosing an acceptable successor and preparing the political tactics necessary to achieve his election. Eventually, Syria settled on the incumbent -- a weak leader with no substantial bases of power either inside the country or outside (in contrast to

Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who has close ties to Saudi Arabia and key Western states). Lahoud's weakness was his greatest asset in the eyes of Syria, which summoned Lebanon's political leadership to the presidential palace in Damascus so that al-Asad could inform them of his plans to extend Lahoud's presidency.

#### Al-Asad's Mistake

Syria's willingness to challenge the United States and France and insist on Lahoud's election is not necessarily a proof of strength. On the contrary, it tends to underscore al-Asad's weakness, immaturity, and lack of strategic thinking. Indeed, it is one more proof for the thesis -- increasingly held among Syrians and observers alike since his father's death four years ago -- that he is a rash, inexperienced leader who makes seemingly uncalculated, even irrational decisions.

In this instance, the Syrians ran against the legacy of their own occupation of Lebanon in not even attempting to lay the foundation for the election of their puppet candidate. With only a modicum of effort and attention, they could have arranged for the emergence of authentic Lebanese voices calling for Lahoud's reelection. Syria also disregarded the Arab and international contexts and took no steps to shore up support on those fronts. The result was an unusually strong outcry from all sides.

In Lebanon, strong rebukes were issued by the Christian Maronite leadership (headed by Patriarch Butrus Nasralla Sfeir), by leaders of Christian opposition parties, and by the supporters of exiled Gen. Michael Aoun. Druze leader Walid Junblatt took a firm stand against Lahoud's extension as well. The measure even provoked popular protests, including street demonstrations in Beirut.

Yet, the clearest manifestation of Syria's shortsightedness was in the international arena. With all the efforts at Franco-American reconciliation undertaken since the 1991 Gulf War, none have brought Washington and Paris as close together as al-Asad's plans for Lebanon. These often-estranged allies worked hand-in-hand in drafting a strongly worded resolution that was eventually softened not by the brilliance of Syrian diplomacy, but as a way to assuage the fears of countries such as Russia and China, who worried about the precedent of denouncing a country for its intrusion in a neighbor's affairs. It is worth mentioning that the lone Arab country on the Security Council -- Algeria -- rejected Syrian entreaties and abstained on the resolution, highlighting Syria's failure to gain support for its position from the Arab world.

In the short term, Syria has succeeded in getting its way in Lebanon despite the Security Council resolution. The incident is analogous to Syria's ability to withstand previous criticism of its support for Iraqi insurgents as well as its patronage of Hizballah. Yet, continual flouting of powerful states and international bodies has a cumulative effect. Al-Asad's refusal to end Syrian support for terrorism led to the imposition of U.S. sanctions via the Syria Accountability Act; now his behavior in Lebanon has given the Security Council a rationale to keep Syria in the spotlight. Indeed, according to the resolution, the UN secretary-general must report to the council regarding Lebanon within thirty days.

This pattern of behavior by al-Asad is especially difficult to comprehend given his own public statements that -- in contrast to his father -- he both recognized the many difficulties facing his country and was committed to addressing them. He had hoped to improve Syria's relations with the United States, but his policies have made them even worse. He then tried the alternative of improving relations with the European Union, but his brazenness in Lebanon has scuttled that effort. Strikingly, one former patron (France) led the Security Council's charge against Syria, while another (Russia) joined in. With Algeria's abstention symbolizing Syria's inter-Arab isolation, al-Asad is left with Iran and Hizballah as his sole allies. While both can be helpful in launching terrorist attacks on Israel, they are useless in helping Syria overcome its economic and social problems.

Against this background, one should note the sharp Israeli warnings against Syria following the August 31 Hamas

suicide bombings in Beersheva. When Israel accused Damascus of supporting the Palestinian terrorist groups responsible for the attack and threatened retaliation, Syrian leaders looked around the Middle East neighborhood and found very few friends willing to stand by its side.

## Conclusion

Al-Asad's brinkmanship helps him solve some immediate challenges inside Syria and may even increase his domestic popularity. These gains will be short-lived, however, and will come at the expense of both his and his country's long-term interests.

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