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Lebanon and Syria: What are the prospects for improved relations?

LSE Ideas

By Hannes Baumann

One cliché loved by Western journalists writing about Syria is the "road to Damascus." A particularly astonishing conversion occurred on the Beirut-Damascus highway on 31 March, when Lebanese-Druze leader Walid Jumblat travelled to the Syrian capital to pay his respects to President Bashar Assad. Having previously called Assad a monkey, snake, crocodile, and murderer, Jumblat recently rediscovered Syria as his "family and home." Considered the "weathervane" of Lebanese politics (another cliché loved by Western journalists), the Druze leader knows where the wind is blowing. Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri already paid a visit to Damascus in December 2009, the first such trip by a Lebanese head of government since 2005. Damascus, too, has made concessions: For the first time since independence in 1946, the two countries have exchanged ambassadors and there is talk of a final demarcation of the border.

Hariri and Jumblat had been the leaders of Lebanon's "March 14" coalition, which formed after the assassination of Saad Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, on 14 February 2005. Some Christian leaders joined Jumblat and Hariri in immediately identifying Damascus as the culprit of the assassination. They found willing allies in US President George W. Bush, French President Jacques Chirac, and the Saudi leadership. The United States withdrew their ambassador from Syria amid clamour for regime change. A UN investigation into the murder promptly – and conveniently – identified the Syrian regime as the prime suspect. Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, stationed there since 1976. Damascus' allies gathered in the "March 8" coalition, comprising the Shi'i movements Hezbollah and Amal, as well as Christian leader Michel Aoun. The tension between "March 8" and "March 14" intensified after the Israeli war with Lebanon in July 2006. Lebanon reached the brink when Hezbollah and its allies overwhelmed Druze and Sunni militants in violent clashes in May 2008. This was a turning point: with Qatari mediation, Lebanese politicians negotiated a compromise, paving the way for presidential and parliamentary elections and for improved relations with Syria. The Obama administration nominated an ambassador to Damascus to the U.S. Senate in February 2010, Saudi Arabia has resumed financial aid to Syria, and Jumblat and Hariri are reconciling with Assad. Only the two Maronite Christian leaders Samir Geagea and Amin Gemayel still oppose the rapprochement.

Does the demise of "March 14" as an "anti-Syrian" coalition signal a fundamental change in Syrian-Lebanese relations? For an answer, we need to look at the two fundamental factors that shape this relationship. First, Syria and Lebanon have had two very different experiences of state formation. Lebanon's confessional power-sharing arrangement has fostered a political elite whose members look for outside help against domestic opponents. Since independence in 1946, Lebanon has been an arena for regional conflicts. The same used to be true for post-independence Syria but the Ba'thist coup in 1963 and Hafiz Assad's takeover in 1970 insulated the military regime from foreign meddling. Syria had moved from being acted upon to being an actor in regional politics – including Lebanon. Syria's strategy in Lebanon is shaped by its stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the second major factor in Syrian-Lebanese relations. Since 1973 it has been Syria's preferred option to regain the occupied Golan Heights through a negotiated settlement with Israel. However, the Ba'thist regime sought a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement from a position of strength, rather than a succession of separate peace treaties by individual Arab states, which would leave the Palestinians out in the cold.

Lebanon has been a major irritant in Syria's aggressive quest to capture the commanding heights of Arab strategy. Militarily, Syria feared an Israeli invasion via Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. On the diplomatic level, Syria sought to prevent a separate peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel. These concerns shaped Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war 1975-1990. The Taif peace accord of 1989 shaped Lebanon's post-war political order and legitimised Syrian domination. While Assad was negotiating with Israel from 1991 to 2000, Lebanon had to await a prior Israeli-Syrian settlement. This led to contradictory developments inside Lebanon. The businessman-prime minister and Saudi ally Rafiq Hariri pursued a neoliberal reconstruction programme, which was premised on peace with Israel. While peace remained a prospect, Hariri was happy to accept Syrian domination in Lebanon. Meanwhile, southern Lebanon remained occupied by Israel. The Shi'i Hezbollah movement attacked Israeli troops and, at times, shot rockets at Israeli towns. For Assad, the Syrian alliance with Hezbollah provided a "card" he could play in negotiations with Israel. Despite two major Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 1993 and 1996, this period was marked

by relative calm in Lebanese politics. The situation changed dramatically after 2000: Israeli-Syrian negotiations collapsed, Hafiz Assad was succeeded by his son Bashar, and Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. The contradictions between Hariri's "reconstruction" and Hezbollah's "resistance" came to the fore, while US clamour for "regime change" in Syria hastened the political crisis that led to Hariri's assassination in 2005.

Syria has now reasserted its position. Saudi Arabia, the United States, and most of "March 14" have reconciled with Damascus. Prior to the Gaza war in January 2009, Assad engaged in indirect negotiations with Israel, mediated by Turkey. If the regional thaw persists, Syrian-Lebanese relations will remain cordial. However, the fundamental factors shaping the relationship remain unchanged. Lebanon's leaders are still relying on foreign allies to bolster their position. A return of Saudi-Syrian tension would spur confrontation between Hariri and Assad. Conversely, a Syrian-Israeli peace deal could break up Hezbollah's alliance with Damascus. Domestically, Hariri and Jumblat are struggling to convince their following of the need for reconciliation with Syria, which contradicts four years of popular mobilisation against Damascus. Meanwhile, the threshold for Syrian-Israel peace remains high. Israel demands that Syria break with Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah prior to returning the occupied Golan Heights, while Syria rejects any preconditions to the recovery of its territory. For Lebanese-Syrian relations, expect more of the same.

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