

Syria Withdraw from Lebanon

Keys

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Prior to exploring the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon as an essential event in 2005, both in this small country and in the entire region, it is imperative to speak of the months preceding the year of great events, which changed the internal geopolitics and external relations of Lebanon, while initiating a grand political scheme which is yet to be finalized.

A sequence of factors led to the inception of the paramount event, i.e. the Syrian withdrawal. They can be summarized as follows:

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- The Security Council's resolution 1559 of September 2nd 2004, which called for a "free and fair electoral process in Lebanon's upcoming presidential election conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules, devised without foreign interference or influence" (to be held 2 months prior to the expiration of President Lahoud's mandate on November 22nd). It also called on "all remaining foreign forces" i.e. the Syrian forces, "to withdraw from Lebanon".

However, pressured by Syria, the Lebanese Parliament convened with the Prime Minister Rafik Hariri who was to be assassinated shortly afterwards, and extended the mandate of the pro-Syrian president Lahoud by half a term. To this end, the Parliament amended the Constitution, which bans the President from staying in office beyond his 6-year term.

- The assassination of the former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri on February 14th 2005; a political quake whose main ongoing effects also expedited the Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon, a process completed by April 26th, 2005.

"Extension" of Syrian Administration

The year 2005 was riddled with the burden of the previous year, when Lebanon became the focus of the international community after a majority of Lebanese and international players rejected the extension of President Lahoud's term. The extension was challenged because it was synonymous to extending the direct Syrian administration that had infiltrated every aspect of the Lebanese governance, banking on the authority that Damascus had slowly constructed over the years in Lebanon, since the Syrians' entry in 1976, not forgetting the important security apparatus, which took an essential part in the rule and the political life in Lebanon, for it was an element of reassurance to Damascus. The influence was also felt inside the different religious rites in the Lebanese society and the political system that is based on coexistence and cooperation between these rites.

Damascus believed that the international community would be indifferent to the extension of Lahoud's term, since, according to its own theory, the United States' main concern in the region was only confined to the Syrian cooperation with it in Iraq. Syria was effectively ready to give concessions in Iraq, in exchange for the Americans' renewal of its mandate in Lebanon, and their consent to Lahoud's extension. Syria underestimated the French stance and the rapprochement of Paris and Washington although it led to UN resolution 1559. However, things took a completely different course. The decision in fact energized Lebanese opposition, which grew and unified its forces to prepare for a new presidential election process, taxing Lahoud's presidency as "unconstitutional". It was thus defying the Syrian influence in Lebanon, while calling for a complete application of the clauses in the Taef agreement that ended the Lebanese war in 1989, which stipulated that the Syrians should gradually withdraw from Lebanon (up to the Bekaa valley as a

first step). Most of the opposition avoided reliance on the resolution 1559 (the resolution represented an issue of discord among the Lebanese for it stipulated a disbandment of all militias, i.e. of Hezbollah). The international community was intent on the implementation of the international resolution, and thus sent the United Nations' special envoy on frequent trips to Damascus and Beirut. On another level, the international community kept a close watch on Syrian behavior, following the security and political pressure on the Lebanese opposition, the first manifestation of which was with the failed assassination attempt of the minister Marwan Hamade on October 1st, 2004. Damascus assembled its allies to face the opposition, following Hariri's resignation. They brought their attention to the preparations of the upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2005. They sought to ensure their grip on the internal political decision, to curb the growing opposition's chances of becoming a parliamentary majority, which would topple Lahoud and tip the balance of powers to their disadvantage.

The Syrians had been assured, on the other hand, that the Karami government would not consent to the Syrian withdrawal as laid out in the international resolution. They also believed that the presence of its military and intelligence forces inside Lebanon during the elections would ensure Syria a continuing hold on the country.

Hariri and Syria

Whether direct or indirect (through ally proxies), the Syrian counter-attack relied on the following points:

- The Karami government would pass an electoral law that redistributes the electoral circumscriptions in such a way that Hariri and his allies would be unable to win a majority of seats
- Continuous media campaigns waged by Damascus' allies as well as Syrian and Lebanese media against Hariri, accusing him of corruption and riddling Lebanon with debts.
- The tightening of the grip on Hariri's partisans in Beirut, through the Syrian and local authority-controlled judiciary; the last related incident having only ended a few hours prior to Hariri's assassination.
- The security grip on the leading Syrian opponent, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt who had been

adamant in opposing the extension, along with his parliamentary bloc and the Christian parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition.

- Last but not least was Hariri's accusation of secretly engineering the Security Council's 1559 resolution (Hamade was the object of the same accusation before his attempted assassination).

Nevertheless, the increasing pressure on Hariri had a counter-effect on Lebanese people, since it only increased the leader's popularity.

By this time, Hariri had reached the firm conclusion that it would be impossible for Lebanon to be ruled and for its problems to be solved under the continuing Syrian command of all aspects of its rule; a command he had become familiar with since 2000. Hariri thus took gradual steps to join the opposition forces (the "Bristol gathering"), in a way that would not bring on Damascus' wrath against him prior to the elections. But he had not planned for as fast and quick a withdrawal as the one that occurred after his death. He repeated his famous quote: "Lebanon can neither be ruled against Damascus, nor from within it". On the day of his assassination, the papers had published declarations in which he had assured that Damascus does not need a military presence in Lebanon to have an influence over the country.

On February 14th, a 1,000 kg of TNT detonated in Beirut, killing the former premier along with former MP Bassel Fleyhan and 18 other people.

Hariri's fame and considerable importance were such that the event which shocked the Lebanese, the Arab world and the entire world alike, also triggered a series of unexpected developments.

The public frustration that had been dormant for years exploded in an unprecedented street mobilization against the Syrian practices and the Lebanese government's policies. Demonstrations and protests rocked the heart of Lebanon as never before, toppling the Karami government after defying the ban on protests as the army stood by and watched. The protest movement reached its paroxysm on March 14, when over a million demonstrators swarmed to Hariri's tomb in downtown Beirut, crying out against Syria whom the opposition accused of perpetrating the assassination in cooperation with the Lebanese security apparatus, a mere few hours after the blast. Both Lebanese and Syrian high officials believed that there would only be a three-day mourning before life resumed its natural course. They believed in the tight control they had over Lebanon, both politically and in

security matters. So much so in fact, that the Lebanese security forces had no qualms about manipulating evidence at the crime scene; an issue that was later to be a main concern of the international investigation of the crime.

Few hours prior to the Hariri bombing, the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad met with the Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos in Damascus. Diplomatic reports conveyed that President Assad said to his guest "tell your friend (the French President Jacques) Chirac that we shall maintain our influence over Lebanon, even if we withdraw and you get to watch the tanks crossing the border".

Syria's opponents produced many an interpretation to the assassination act. But the interpretation that linked it to the withdrawal stipulated that the Syrian leadership knew it would have to implement the resolution 1559, if after a while. Therefore, it wished to be rid of the hindrance to its ongoing power over the Lebanese authority after this eventual withdrawal. It sought to do so before the elections, to ensure the loyal majority on its side until 2008, which, given the 4-year mandate of the parliament, would help it to influence the election of a new president in less than 3 years.

In this respect, Syria would have an assured power over the 6-year long presidency mandate that ends in 2013, ergo a power that would extend well over the 3-year extension of Lahoud (expires in 2007). This interpretation became a headline that the international investigation committee tried to explore when looking for a motive to the crime within the political context. After all, it links the crime to the withdrawal. The ensuing developments from Hariri's murder catapulted enormous changes in the shortest of periods. A week prior to the assassination, Roed-Larsen urged Assad to begin by "withdrawing a single soldier from Lebanon". Assad found the request odd, and Larsen therefore clarified it: start with Rustom Ghazale.

The latter being the head of the Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, Assad felt the enormity of the request. Major General Ghazale was in fact not only a personal representative of the Syrian President in Lebanon, but also the one responsible for running the country. After the Assassination, Washington, Paris, London and the European Union replaced their previous request for a withdrawal timetable with a firm demand for withdrawal. Presidents George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac first spoke of an immediate withdrawal in the shortest of delays possible. They then spelled out their demand: a non-negotiable Syrian with-

drawal before the May elections. Arab and international players, along with the Lebanese opposition agreed on this same formula, which guarantees a minimum intervention of Syrians in the upcoming elections.

Then came the defining March 3rd Saudi-Syrian summit in Riyadh, for the Saudis conveyed to the Syrians Egypt's and their own wish for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in accordance with resolution 1559, and not with the Taef agreement which Damascus was clinging to. On March 5th came the Syrian president's speech in the Parliament announcing his decision to pull back from Lebanon. A pullback that ensures Syria's implementation of its half of 1559, as he assured before repeating nonetheless that the Syrian influence in Lebanon will never wither. Immediately afterwards, the pro-Syrian political parties and forces in Lebanon, whose main foundation remains the Shiites and precisely the popular party in their midst Hizbollah, decided to show their loyalty to Syria through a massive gathering in downtown Beirut on 8th March. Four to five hundred thousand people held the banners of loyalty and gratitude to Syria for the help it gave Lebanon, its support of the resistance to end the Israeli occupation of the South and its support to end the Lebanese civil war. They also manifested their rejection of resolution 1559. This crowd spurred a reaction, which culminated in a demonstration of over a million people on March 14th to reject the direct Syrian tutelage over Lebanon. The protest comprised the main Christian powers, (whose active leadership had opposed Syrian influence since the early nineties of the last century before the Maronite Patriarch, head of the biggest Christian rites in Lebanon, became the head of Christian opposition in 2000), alongside the main Sunni and Druze leaders. This mass gathering was as much a surprise to pro-Syrian powers and Damascus officials as it was to the entire world and great powers, who marveled at its enormity. The gathering therefore pushed these powers to demand a faster Syrian withdrawal. On the other hand, however, these two big demonstrations lay the decisive foundation of an internal rift in Lebanon, whose signs had appeared during the previous year, accompanying each and every important political event.

The swift military drawback completed by April 26th, allowed for a settlement between the Shiite leadership and Damascus' opponents, who agreed to hold the elections in May. Damascus' allies had previously insisted these elections be postponed 2 years, and

then 6 months, for the opposition seemed so certain it would win the majority of votes and seats. But their insistence was met with another one by the United Nations, Washington and Paris to fill the “void” engendered by the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanese territory and rule, and replace Syrians with an elect Lebanese administration.

International investigation

The international community thus pushed Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to persuade Damascus of holding the elections on time. Consequently, Syria’s opponents and its remaining allies, namely the two major Shiite organizations, reached a settlement, by virtue of which the Muslim powers opposing Syria, i.e. the Sunni and Druze leaders refuse to refer the arms of Hezbollah to the international community, considering it a matter of “internal dialogue” instead. The newly elected majority took power, after Syria’s opponents won for the first time since 1976, the year when Syrians entered the country. The Lebanese political map was altered, and Christians saw the return of two of their leaders, who were alienated during the Syrian hegemony: General Michel Aoun, who returned from exile and won the majority of Christian votes, and Dr. Samir Geagea, who was released from prison by amnesty of the new Parliament. This change came combined with other factors, spurring Syrian concern: the Security Council had issued resolution 1595 by virtue of which an independent international investigation committee was formed on April 7th to look into Hariri’s murder. The committee had ample authority, which made for serious cooperation problems with Damascus that rose as early as last August (by the end of this month, four senior Lebanese officers, friends and proxies of the Syrian rule, were arrested). Syria was accused of failing to cooperate and the committee therefore published two reports. The second, published on December 15th, pointed to the involvement of senior Syrian security officers in the murder, a fact that Damascus continued to deny. Subsequently, the Security Council adopted two new resolutions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (1636 on October 31st and 1644 on December 15th. The latter agreed on the Lebanese government’s request to discuss the possibility of an “international court” to look into the assassination) requesting Syria to cooperate with the committee, if it wishes to avoid sanctions. The Syrian position on

the committee varied between accusing it of “politicizing” the investigation and agreeing to its questioning of Syrian officers. The committee’s renewable mandate expires in mid-June 2006.

On another level, President Assad voiced on November 10th his decision to face and oppose pressures on Syria.

Syrian cards

The deterioration of the Lebanese-Syrian relations was intensified by the Syrian media campaigns on the majority leaders on one hand, and by the majority’s accusations of Syria of orchestrating the bombings (that began in April) and the assassinations. Verily, the killing and attempted killing-series had continued throughout the elections, targeting the journalist Samir Kassir on June 2nd, the former Secretary General of the Lebanese Communist party Georges Hawi, the minister Elias el Murr, the journalist May Chidiac and lastly the journalist Gebran Tueini on December 12th. These accusations divided the Lebanese, for the pro-Syrian forces rejected them, countering them instead with their own accusations of the majority of taking orders from international, and especially American, players.

This scene of division between anti and pro-Syrians mingled with the many regional factors was the closing act of 2005. Syria still has pressure cards in Lebanon. Indeed, Damascus resorted to its Lebanese options to defend the Syrian regime, targeted, according to it by the international investigation committee which sought a meeting with president Assad, foreign minister (now vice-president) Farouk al Shara’ and others from the tight ruling circle on one hand, and by former vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam’s change of camp, and his siding with the anti-Syrian witnesses on the other hand.

Despite Washington’s assurance that it only wishes to modify the regime’s attitude both in Lebanon and the region and not change the regime itself, and Paris’s insistence on its complete disinterest in any change of this kind, Syria pursued its line and strengthened its alliance with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Iranian regime, as well as the armed Palestinian factions inside Lebanon and its allies there. Syria believes that this is an even better line now that Hamas won the Palestinian elections. In the end, all these factors make of Lebanon an ongoing battlefield.