Lebanon and Syria

Separation without estrangement?

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In response to unfolding events in Syria, the Lebanese have demonstrated apparently paradoxical positions: on the one hand fearing serious implications for stability, on the other hoping that events may develop in ways that best suit particular domestic interests.

This situation is not entirely new. Lebanon and Syria have historically been entangled – in issues of peace and war, but also economically, politically and socially. As part of the Ottoman Empire, what was known as 'Small Lebanon' (Jabal Druze and Mount Lebanon) enjoyed limited autonomy under political arrangements known as the *Qaimaqamiyah* (1842–60) and *Mutasarrifiyya* (1861–1915). Other regions that constitute modern Lebanon and Syria were organised in *wilayas* (districts). After Ottoman collapse France was granted a League of Nations mandate over Syria and Lebanon. From this it created 'Greater Lebanon', the precedent to the present-day state, by adding a number of coastal regions and *wilayas* to Mount Lebanon.

Throughout the French mandate the economies of Lebanon and Syria were explicitly linked through a common central bank (*Banque de Syrie et du Liban*) and currency (the 'Syrian-Lebanese lira'). This association ended in 1948 after both countries gained independence. Following the 1947–48 Palestine War and the emergence of Israel, the Lebanese recognised that conflict with Israel meant their small country would have to rely on Syria to engage with much of the region. As a result, events in Syria also had consequences for Lebanon. A recent reminder was the Syrian threat to close its borders with Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

The 1989 Taif Peace Agreement for Lebanon did not end entanglement, but was followed by a series of cooperation treaties intended to 'organise' the bilateral relationship within the terms of the agreement. This included the 1991 Treaty of Cooperation, but also treaties in various sectors such as commerce and education, as well as the establishment of a Joint Coordination Council. The relationship is often seen as asymmetrically favouring Syria, but Lebanon has in fact benefited at least as much.

Political and structural ties

Political developments in Lebanon have often taken pragmatic (and seemingly contradictory) approaches to Syria. The continuing popularity of General Michel Aoun among Lebanese Christians exemplifies this. General Aoun acted as interim Prime Minister after the failure to agree a replacement for President Amine Gemayel in 1988. He rejected the Taif Agreement and in 1989–90 embarked on a failed attempt to cut ties with Syria. In October 1990, Syrian troops put an end to Aoun's rebellion, forcing him to flee the presidential palace and go into exile in Paris. When, fifteen years later, Aoun returned to Lebanon, he reconsidered his position in light of important regional changes including the occupation of Iraq and the death of Hafez al-Assad in Syria. General Aoun concluded an alliance with Hezbollah, after which he was received in Syria as a 'great leader' in 2008.

Aoun's deal with Hezbollah is reminiscent of Lebanon's 1943 National Pact: a compromise between the Sunni, acting in the name of Muslims in general and also defending their economic interests at that time, and Maronite leaders, acting on behalf of Christians. The National Pact provided the foundation for independence. It allowed Sunni Muslims to adhere to the idea of a Lebanese state separate from Syria, in return for guarantees by Christians to acknowledge Lebanon as part of the Arab world and to steer its foreign policy accordingly. It was the Pact, therefore, that permitted the real and effective emergence of the state of Lebanon, rather than the declaration of Greater Lebanon by the French in 1920.

The Lebanese civil war severely strained the terms of the National Pact, which by this time no longer reflected demographic realities. Since the war Lebanon has witnessed important structural changes, most notably

the rise in the status and role of the Shia community. Beginning with the Movement of the Dispossessed under the leadership of Imam Musa al-Sadr in the 1970s, and ending with the establishment of Hezbollah in the mid-1980s, Lebanese Shia have emerged as important political, economic and cultural players. Hezbollah includes many of Lebanon's poorest social groups. It is also a significant regional actor that has held out in armed encounters with Israel, reversing a wider Arab trend of military defeat by the Israeli Defence Forces.

There have also been changes within the Christian community. The civil war saw a revision in the ranks of Maronite leaders, particularly after the death of Bachir Gemayel in 1982, beyond the traditional and narrow recruitment from the core of the Maronite region and through familial ties, as illustrated by the rise of Samir Geagea as leader of the Lebanese Forces.

When Aoun reached an alliance with Hezbollah, he explicitly addressed Christians, and Maronites in particular, claiming that he had assured their position and role within a dynamic and emerging movement in Lebanon and the region. However, given the current regional turmoil, the alliance has in fact made Aoun dependent on the fate of Iran and Syria. Meanwhile his Maronite rivals are equally dependent on the fate of the opposing axis, led regionally by Saudi Arabia and locally by the Hariri family, who oppose the current Syrian regime.

The relationship between Syria and Lebanon is controversial and has lead to divisions within the country, as shown by mass demonstrations (labeled *milionât* – 'million people') after the assassination of Hariri in 2005. Similar divisions had characterised the Mandate period and in the late 1950s when Syria and Egypt briefly united to form the United Arab Republic.

Beyond the emergence of political alliances and counter-alliances, the entanglement of Syria and Lebanon also has structural aspects. Syrian hegemony over Lebanon was symbolically emphasised by Hafez al-Assad, who described the nations as 'one people in two states'. Syria was a major player in developments during the Lebanese civil war; from 1976 until the withdrawal of its troops in 2005, it had a continuous military presence in the country.

Syrian military leadership was particularly powerful in Lebanon during this period. The status of Lebanese political leaders from all factions was dependent on good relations with Syrian military officers and with Damascus. This influence pervaded other aspects of society; for example prospects for senior employment in universities. Syrian military would 'tax' illicit and licit cross-border commerce such as smuggling, with the complicity of Lebanese businessmen who also found it advantageous.

Looking ahead: Lebanon and the Syrian crisis

Implications of the Syrian crisis include the escalation of existing tensions and clashes, which might particularly affect border areas like Beqaa and other parts of the north, whose populations have relatives or allies across the border, and where some local political forces have developed long-term alliances with the Syrian regime. Violence in the administrative capital of northern Lebanon, Tripoli, and in parts of Beirut in May 2012 have further exacerbated tensions. Assumptions that the current Syrian regime will fall and that this will lead to the demise of Hezbollah ignore the reality of a range of potential scenarios. Protracted conflict in Syria could result in a regional 'explosion', the repercussions of which are far from clear. Nor is it inevitable that Hezbollah would disappear if the Syrian regime collapsed.

Since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, Syria has been stable for more than four decades. However, this was due to Assad's uncanny ability to position Syria strategically within shifting regional dynamics by crafting internal and external alliances as the situation demanded, keeping communication lines open and displaying a willingness to accommodate various factions. For instance, when Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976–77 with American agreement, they fought a war against Syria's former allies, the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and the Palestinian resistance, paving the way for the assassination of Progressive Socialist Party leader and LNM head, Kamal Jumblatt.

Historically, instability in Syria has not always been bad for the Lebanese. But prudence is being shown in the current situation as many Lebanese acknowledge that instability in Syria has ramifications far beyond relations between Beirut and Damascus. This may provide an opportunity for *détente* between Lebanon and Syria. Compromise and inter-sectarian balance is part of Lebanon's *raison d'être*, which has historically been held as an example of the value and strength of diversity. Prioitising this path would allow the Lebanon to renew and reinforce its regional role as a model for the value of diversity – especially for its neighbour in turmoil.

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