

# **SYRIA AFTER LEBANON, LEBANON AFTER SYRIA**

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## SYRIA AFTER LEBANON, LEBANON AFTER SYRIA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri's tragic assassination capped a series of events that carry the potential of fundamentally altering not only Lebanon's future, but also Syria's and the broader regional landscape as well. For now, most international and Lebanese actors have acted with welcome wisdom; the prospect of Syria's long-overdue withdrawal from Lebanon and of Lebanese elections free from outside interference appears closer than ever. But risks of serious violence remain very real. The Syrian regime, sensing its survival at stake, may lash out using its remaining instruments and allies in Lebanon and beyond; the U.S., feeling its broader regional goals within striking distance, may well over-reach, triggering violent reactions from Syria, Hizbollah or militant Palestinian groups; Lebanon's political class, notoriously fractured, could create fresh opportunities for outside interference and pave the way for domestic chaos. What happens in Lebanon likely will have momentous regional implications -- certainly on Syria and Hizbollah, possibly on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and even Iraq. But dealing with those matters before getting the question of Lebanon right is the surest way to get it all wrong.

Whatever the intent, Hariri's assassination heightened pressure on Syria, bringing together once disparate actors and objectives: the U.S., which had given priority to ending Syrian support for militant Palestinian groups, Hizbollah and the Iraqi insurgency; France, which was most interested in Lebanon and still invested hopes in Syria's president; and Lebanese activists, who traditionally had been unable to agree on much. Because Hariri's influence far exceeded Lebanon's confines, and he embodied its links with much of the outside world, his killing accelerated the -- at least temporary -- convergence of the Syrian regime's multiple foes on a set of demands: complete withdrawal of Syria's military and intelligence (*mukhabarat*) from Lebanon; the truth on Hariri's assassination; and free Lebanese elections under international supervision.

The Lebanese opposition, in the main, has sought to stress national unity, de-emphasise the underlying confessional dimension and avoid overly provocative positions that could alienate the powerful Hizbollah or the large Shi'ite community. Hizbollah has tried both to evince solidarity

with Syria and urge a national dialogue, in effect acknowledging that Syria's time in Lebanon is over, that it has nothing to gain from civil conflict and that its priority is to preserve its position in the domestic arena. After some hesitation, Washington also displayed noteworthy restraint, intent on working closely with the French, focusing for now on the Lebanese arena and resisting the temptation to drag in broader (and evidently connected) regional and international dimensions, such as disarming Hizbollah, prosecuting the war against terrorism or changing the regime in Damascus.

Writing in early 2004, Crisis Group argued that, in order to avert a U.S.-Syria crisis, both needed to alter their approach, Washington by clearly articulating what it expected and what Damascus could expect in return; Syria by unequivocally demonstrating a decision to change course. But while neither paid heed, it is hard to dispute that a U.S. strategy of firm pressure and refusal to negotiate its demands appears to have paid off. The Baathist regime is more isolated than ever, on the verge of losing a major regional asset, and with serious questions about how long it can survive as is. From the perspective of the Bush administration, this is the time to squeeze, not to talk.

Still, neither the U.S. nor the rest of the international community can afford indifference to how Syrian and Lebanese actors react. That Syria should and will leave Lebanon is now certain but not how it departs and what it leaves behind. Many of the most apocalyptic post-withdrawal scenarios -- chaos and civil war; full-scale confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah -- appear, today, either no longer relevant or exaggerated from the start. But ingredients of violence remain. Seen from Syria's vantage, sudden excitement over Lebanon's sovereignty is just the latest U.S. ploy to destabilise it and usher in a new regional order; although significantly weakened, its regime retains instruments and allies to create havoc in the region should it conclude its survival is at risk. Seen from Hizbollah's perspective, the withdrawal is only chapter one; what comes next on U.S. and Israeli agendas is its disarmament which, in the short run at least, it is likely to resist, if necessary by force. Seen from the angle of Lebanon's fractious groups -- whether in the opposition

or loyal to Damascus -- the end of Syria's presence means re-opening issues suppressed since the close of the civil war, from sectarian relations and the distribution of power through to Hizbollah and Palestinian refugees. All these are combustible elements that disgruntled Lebanese and outside actors will be tempted to exploit. In a country awash with weapons, accustomed to being a theatre for proxy wars between Arabs, Palestinian and Israelis, and on the verge of a major redistribution of power and resources, the means and motivations for violence abound.

The temptation for the U.S. in particular to use the current situation to achieve larger objectives is understandable. But it also is dangerous, for none more than the Lebanese. The guiding principle ought to be to separate the reestablishment of Lebanon's full sovereignty, independence and stability -- including the holding of free elections without delay and with international monitors and an international investigation into Hariri's assassination -- from broader issues that could impede achieving that goal. That will require the U.S. to curb its appetite, Lebanon's opposition to maintain its moderation, and Syria to avoid a scorched-earth policy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To Lebanese Political Forces, Including the Opposition and Hizbollah:

1. Adopt a joint platform, including the following immediate, sequential steps:
  - (a) formation of an interim government tasked with organising elections;
  - (b) passage of a new electoral law based on the *qadha* (Lebanon's smallest administrative district) system and division of Beirut according to the 1960 law, and official invitation to the international community to dispatch observers sufficiently ahead of election day;
  - (c) agreement that unimplemented aspects of the 1989 Taef Accord and Security Council Resolution 1559, including Hizbollah's status, will be addressed following elections and resolved through dialogue and consensus; that Lebanon will take Syrian concerns into account while shaping its policies toward Israel, and close relations will be conducted with Syria on the basis of equality between sovereigns; and that the Taef Accord will serve as the basis for future political arrangements;
  - (d) agreement to prosecute any person found responsible for Hariri's assassination by the

UN investigation and to allow international observers at the trial;

- (e) holding of elections by the end of May 2005, or at most with very minimal delay thereafter;
  - (f) suspension of heads of intelligence services, pending the outcome of the UN investigation; and
  - (g) full withdrawal of Syrian military and intelligence personnel by the end of April 2005.
2. Engage, once free elections have been held and a new government established, in broad discussions on unimplemented aspects of the Taef Accord and Security Council Resolution 1559, on the basis of the following principles:
    - (a) respect for the Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon in accordance with Security Council resolutions and commitment not to initiate attacks against Israeli targets, including in the Shab'a farms;
    - (b) deployment of the army to the Israeli border;
    - (c) gradual integration of Hizbollah's military wing as an autonomous unit under Lebanese army control, agreement by Hizbollah to abide by decisions of the elected government and relocation of its rockets twenty to 30 kilometres from the border as a prelude to handing them over to government control; and
    - (d) full disarmament of Hizbollah in the context of progress toward Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian peace agreements.

### To the United States Government:

3. Adopt a low-profile, behind-the-scenes approach, supporting a peaceful institutional transition and free elections and, if it is agreed to by the Lebanese parties, the sequence of steps outlined above.
4. Urge Israel not to intervene through words or actions and, in particular, to cease intrusive violations of Lebanese airspace and territorial waters in accordance with Security Council Resolution 425.
5. Re-emphasise that the immediate priority is Syria's withdrawal, while making clear that acts of violence in Lebanon traced to Syria will invite further sanctions.
6. Re-emphasise that the issue of Hizbollah's final status is to be resolved by the Lebanese and that

it is prepared to treat the organisation as a legitimate political party once it disarms and ceases all violent activity.

7. Engage with Syria, following its full withdrawal and Lebanese elections, in discussions on issues of concern, including Iraq, support for militant Palestinian groups, bilateral relations and prospects for Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations.

#### **To the European Union:**

8. Use economic leverage to press the Lebanese government and the loyalist bloc to hold timely, free and fair elections.
9. Dispatch an election monitoring team sufficiently in advance of election day, provide funds to Lebanese non-governmental election observer groups and stand ready to dispatch observers to an eventual trial of those suspected in Hariri's assassination.
10. Maintain its current stance regarding non-inclusion of Hizbollah on its terrorism list, subject to reconsideration should the organisation engage in such activity, and use contacts with the organisation to encourage its full integration into the Lebanese political system.
11. Hold off ratification of the EU-Syria Association Agreement until Syria has withdrawn fully from Lebanon and free and fair elections have been conducted there.
12. Begin working on a Paris III Conference to handle Lebanon's public debt to be held after Syria's withdrawal and the formation of a new Lebanese government.

#### **To the Syrian Government:**

13. Implement its commitment to full withdrawal of military and intelligence personnel from Lebanon, consistent with Security Council Resolution 1559, by the end of April 2005, and refrain from replacing them with proxies.
14. Desist from any steps to stir instability or violence in Lebanon, including by covert action or through pro-Syrian proxies.
15. Establish normal diplomatic relations with Lebanon, including embassies in both capitals, and release Lebanese prisoners.
16. Place all its security and intelligence agencies under civilian control by establishing a civilian National Security Council.
17. Clarify its position on the Shab'a farms in a formal communication to the Security Council after its

withdrawal from Lebanon and the holding of free elections in that country.

18. Promote domestic political reform by lifting the state of emergency, legalising opposition parties, issuing an amnesty for political prisoners, and convening a national conference of political parties, opposition figures and activists to discuss national reconciliation and steps toward pluralistic elections.

#### **To the Israeli Government:**

19. Avoid any intervention in Lebanese affairs, including through statements, and cease intrusive violations of Lebanon's airspace and territorial waters in accordance with Security Council Resolution 425.
20. Consider after Syrian withdrawal, elections and a new Lebanese government, and provided adequate, verifiable assurances are received with respect to it, an arrangement under which Syria formally states that the Shab'a farms are Lebanese; Hizbollah turns over all rockets to the Lebanese army and redeploys twenty to 30 kilometres north; Lebanon's army moves to the border; and Israel withdraws from Shab'a.
21. Test Syria's peace overtures after its withdrawal and Lebanese elections, while refraining from pressing for a peace agreement with Lebanon until there is progress on peace with Syria.

#### **To the UN Security Council and Secretariat General:**

22. Keep the emphasis for now on the part of Security Council Resolution 1559, concerning full withdrawal of Syrian troops and intelligence personnel, and regularly monitor and verify that withdrawal.
23. Carry out a thorough investigation of the Hariri assassination and ensure prosecution of any persons found responsible.
24. Reiterate all parties' obligation to observe the Blue Line in accordance with Resolution 425, and denounce any intrusions of land, airspace or territorial waters.
25. Streamline the multiple activities related to Lebanon and clarify the role and mandate of UN envoys.

**Beirut/Amman/Brussels, 12 April 2005**

## SYRIA AFTER LEBANON, LEBANON AFTER SYRIA

### I. INTRODUCTION: THE MAKING OF A CRISIS

#### A. A TALE OF GROWING U.S. IMPATIENCE

Over the past several years, and in rapid succession, a series of events has accentuated Syria's regional and international isolation. This process accelerated in extraordinary fashion with the decision to extend Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's term and the assassination on 14 February 2005 of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

Some of these events, and the logic of the impending crisis, were described in Crisis Group's earlier report on Syria:<sup>1</sup> the collapse of the Israeli-Syrian peace talks in April 2000; Hafez al-Asad's death shortly thereafter and the selection of his successor, his less seasoned and less powerful son, Bashar; and the 11 September 2001 attacks on the U.S. and the ensuing emphasis on the fight against terror. All these occurred in the midst of a new U.S. approach that eschewed traditional bilateral bargaining and insisted on a comprehensive change in Syrian policy as a condition for improved relations. In an effort to prevent the cat-and-mouse game favoured by the Syrians in the past -- doing less than was asked and asking for more in return -- the U.S. described its demands as non-negotiable and refused to offer specific incentives.

Washington enunciated a list of requirements to be met in full and with no pre-agreed quid pro quo: prevent the crossing of the Syrian/Iraqi border by Iraqi insurgents; arrest and hand over insurgent supporters located in Syria, in particular former elements of Saddam Hussein's regime; turn over Iraqi assets held in Syrian banks; cease harbouring Palestinian militant groups and operatives; rein in and disarm the Lebanese movement Hizbollah. Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon also figured on the list but, as acknowledged by U.S. officials, more as an afterthought than a priority, and more as leverage for other policy goals than as an end in itself. In the U.S.

Congress, meanwhile, an effort to impose sanctions against Syria gained steam, and in December 2003, President Bush signed the Syria Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA), which denounced Damascus for supporting terrorist groups, allowing armed volunteers to slip into Iraq, developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and occupying Lebanon, and imposed a series of sanctions from which the president had to choose.

This resulted in what Crisis Group described as a dangerous dialogue of the deaf: Syrian half-measures in response to U.S. demands convinced Washington that Damascus was not serious, and the absence of reciprocal U.S. steps persuaded Damascus that Washington was seeking at best to humiliate, at worse to change its regime. As we explained at the time, averting a crisis would require a change of approach on both sides: clear presentation by the U.S. of incentives (on bilateral relations, the peace process, and the future of Iraq) for Damascus to act, and clear steps by Syria (on support for violent groups and Iraq) to demonstrate its decision to change course. Neither occurred; instead, both sides' worst expectations were confirmed.

Unaccustomed to the new U.S. approach, the Syrian regime responded with a mix of semi-positive steps for which it received virtually no credit and of negative ones for which it received heavy blame. As seen from Damascus, the gestures it made were unfairly unacknowledged and unreciprocated. As seen from the U.S. in particular, and whether concerning Iraq, the Arab-Palestinian conflict or Lebanon, Syria's essentially reactive and ad hoc actions reflected a flawed assessment of what a transformed international climate required.

**On Iraq**, the U.S. and others accused Syria of turning a blind eye to *jihadi* volunteers crossing the border and of harbouring senior Iraqi Baathists suspected of planning and financing insurgent attacks;<sup>2</sup> reports also

<sup>1</sup> See International Crisis Group, Middle East Report N°23, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004, pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> These accusations reached a climax in December 2004 when insurgents in Falluja captured by U.S. and Iraqi forces were found to have coordinated attacks from and with counterparts based in Syria. The captured insurgents were said to have carried photographs in which they are standing next to Syrian officials and to have possessed a mobile global-positioning

linked various Islamic institutions and mosques in Syria with the recruitment of *jihadists*.<sup>3</sup>

In response, Syria claimed it had taken a series of measures:

- guarding and fortifying the 700-kilometre border stretch with Iraq, placing sandwalls, dispatching surveillance units and setting up checkpoints deep into the desert.<sup>4</sup> During the clashes in Falluja in November and December 2004, Syria reportedly closed all border gates<sup>5</sup> and asserted it was "doing our utmost to close the border".<sup>6</sup> Western diplomats in Damascus acknowledged to Crisis Group that Syria had significantly bolstered its border surveillance;<sup>7</sup>
- inviting U.S. and Iraqi troops to visit Syrian positions, an invitation that reportedly was not taken up;<sup>8</sup>
- arresting suspected insurgents upon their return from Iraq and extraditing scores of them, mostly Kuwait and Moroccan nationals, to their home countries,<sup>9</sup> while holding many others in unidentified locations. According to Syrian human rights activists, since July 2004 1,000 to

2,000 suspected insurgents have been held in notorious detention centres without charge or trial, living under appalling conditions, and often subject to torture.<sup>10</sup> "Anyone who has been in Iraq and returns to Syria can be certain that he will be subjected to some tough questioning and often prolonged detention at the hands of Syria's security forces";<sup>11</sup>

- improving relations with the interim Iraqi government. In the words of an official speaking after establishment of the Interim Government, "We know Allawi well, we worked closely with him in the past [against Saddam]. We want good relations with his government; perhaps, that will even help us with the U.S.". <sup>12</sup> During his July 2004 visit to Damascus, Allawi received "red carpet treatment".<sup>13</sup> Formal diplomatic relations were restored more than twelve years after they had been broken off, and Iraq reopened its embassy in Damascus on 4 December 2004;
- transferring a limited amount of Iraqi assets held in Syria. In early January 2005, Syria released \$4 million of \$264 million in Iraqi funds still held at the Syrian Commercial Bank despite the fact that Syrian businessmen continued to claim they were owed the money for transactions that pre-dated the U.S. invasion. Syrian officials expressed their "unlimited willingness to cooperate on this issue", provided Syria's private claims would be cross-checked both in Syria and in Iraq;<sup>14</sup> and
- cooperating with the January 2005 elections by allowing the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to organise out-of-country voting by Iraqi expatriates. IOM representatives expressed satisfaction, pointing to the government's decision to air election information on state television and radio.<sup>15</sup>

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system with waypoints originating in western Syria. See the *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004; *The New York Times*, 23 December 2004. On 24 December 2004 the U.S.-sponsored *Al-Hurra* Television network aired footage of a captured insurgent confessing that he had links with Syrian intelligence officials and received training in Syria. The U.S. handed Syrian authorities a list of six former Baathists, demanding that they be arrested and turned over. An unnamed senior U.S. official was quoted as saying: "The Syrians appear to have done a little bit to stem extremist infiltration into Iraq at the border, but clearly have not helped with regards to Baathists infiltrating back and forth....We still have serious challenges there, and Syria needs to be doing a lot more", *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 2004; *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 5 December 2004. The reports quoted an imam saying that he received state allowances for recruiting volunteers to fight in Iraq. Sami al-Khaimi, Syrian ambassador to the UK, told Crisis Group: "Why would someone who really receives such rewards admit to it and jeopardise his source of income?" Crisis Group telephone interview, 9 December 2004.

<sup>4</sup> This was confirmed by a team of journalists that crossed the border to enter Iraq. Crisis Group interviews, Amman, December 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Syrian businessmen, Damascus, December 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview with Sami al-Khaimi, Syrian ambassador to the UK, 9 December 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, November-December 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See Ibrahim al-Hamidi in *Al-Hayat*, 24 October 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See *Al-Khaleej*, 28 November 2004; Arabicnews.com 10 February 2005.

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<sup>10</sup>These centres include Sednaya (22 kilometres north of Damascus) and, possibly, Abu Shammat (in Dummar, north east of Damascus). Both are run by the Syrian Military Security Forces' "Investigations [*tahqiqat*] Branch". Crisis Group interviews with Syrian lawyers Haitham al-Manah and Anwar al-Bunni, Damascus, 2 and 3 February 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview with a Western diplomat monitoring Syrian human rights policies, Damascus 1 December 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian official, July 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian journalist, Damascus, October 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Associated Press, 12 January 2005. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report are in U.S. dollars.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview with Luis Martinez-Betanzos (IOM coordinator in Syria), Damascus, 2 February 2005. That said, Syria only belatedly approved the IOM operation, leaving little time to open polling stations outside Damascus. Syria

None of this was deemed sufficient by the U.S. Syrian officials claim to have been taken aback when, only days after a meeting in Damascus with Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage on 2 January 2005 during which President Bashar presented measures taken to curtail border infiltration and pledged to act on some of the six individuals whose names Washington had given it,<sup>16</sup> President Bush singled out Syria's regime as one that "continue[s] to harbour terrorists and pursue weapons of mass murder" in his State of the Union address.<sup>17</sup> "This made no sense to us. They acknowledged we were making progress on the border. We spoke about greater cooperation. And we promised to look at the list. Then came the inflammatory rhetoric. As we told the Americans: whenever we satisfy you on one thing, you ask for another".<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, the extent of Syria's role in facilitating the insurgency is difficult to assess. Syrian officials acknowledged to Crisis Group that at the outset of the war they were lax at the border.<sup>19</sup> There is reason to believe this changed somewhat over time, as a result both of U.S. pressure and a belief in Damascus that the insurgency was chiefly a local affair that had become self-sufficient.<sup>20</sup> That former Iraqi Baathists are in Syria is widely assumed to be true given the historic ties between the two branches of that party. A generally well-informed Syrian told Crisis Group that accusations concerning weapons and money trafficking likely were inflated given that both are in ample supply in Iraq; still, he added, tribes in Syria probably provided "logistical support" to insurgents in the form of refuge before their return to Iraq.<sup>21</sup> A Syrian political activist went further, claiming that while *jihadists* were arrested and beaten up upon their return "in order to scare them from even

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was the last country to allow expatriates to vote on its territory, some two weeks after Iran, partly explaining why few Iraqis registered to vote there (16,583 of a community officially estimated at 45,000). Ibid. Moreover, a memorandum of understanding signed by the Syrian government and IOM banned use of the Kurdish language in election and campaign material distributed in Syria, although it was permitted in voting stations.

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the list of six individuals, see fn. 3 above.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. State of the Union Address, 2 February 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian official, February 2005.

<sup>19</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Syria Under Bashar (I)*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian official, December 2004.

<sup>21</sup> As tribal membership extends to both sides of the border, particularly in the region of Deir al-Zur in eastern Syria, some insurgents have relatives in Syria with whom they can seek refuge before going back to fight in Iraq. Crisis Group interview in Damascus, December 2004.

thinking of extending their battles to Syria", their initial departure for Iraq faced far less formidable obstacles.<sup>22</sup> A Syrian human rights activist described a cynical "two-edged Syrian policy" that tried to curry favour with two audiences: with the militant Islamists by facilitating what they do in Iraq; with the U.S. by clamping down on them when they return.<sup>23</sup>

As for the charge that Syrian authorities sustain rather ambivalent relations with Islamist insurgents, there are tentative indications of what some Syrian observers dub an "alliance of devout secularism" -- in effect, a coalition of *Jihadists* and pan-Arabists or Baathists against the U.S. occupation of Iraq.<sup>24</sup> According to some Syrians, security forces occasionally allow Islamists in Aleppo and, more recently, Damascus to call on militants to help the Iraqi insurgency<sup>25</sup> -- leading in this instance to a de facto convergence between "the conservatism of state-endorsed Islam and the radicalism of the Salafi movement".<sup>26</sup> That said, Crisis Group has been unable to substantiate either claim; moreover, neither incitement against Israel and the U.S., nor calls to join the *jihad*, nor glorification of suicide bombers were found in textbooks from the student bookshop at Abu Nur Institute (the largest official religious seminary in Damascus). For a secular, Alawi-dominated regime in a country that is overwhelmingly Sunni and has witnessed a growth of Islamism of late,<sup>27</sup> such a game would present a serious longer term threat and be a sign of desperation.

Whatever the actual extent of Syria's cooperation with the insurgency, its reactive posture and its policy of incremental gestures boomeranged: first, by belatedly cooperating on some issues, Damascus confirmed U.S. suspicions that it had been holding back -- and in many cases flatly lying -- for some time; secondly, by cooperating only under duress, it validated U.S. belief that pressure, not engagement -- sticks, not carrots -- was the key to further movement.

The subsequent decision to assist in the capture of Saddam's half-brother, Sibawi Ibrahim al-Hassan, one of the most wanted Iraqis (and one whose name appeared

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview in Damascus, 1 December 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview in Damascus, 3 December 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews in Damascus, December 2004-February 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. This approach -- purportedly designed to control Jihadi fighters in Iraq, co-opt their local leaders and gather intelligence about volunteers -- was reportedly applied in Aleppo immediately after the U.S. invasion. Crisis Group Report, *Syria Under Bashar (I)*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview with prominent Syrian intellectual, Damascus, December 2004.

<sup>27</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°24, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004.



on the list of six), aptly encapsulated this self-defeating approach: the rendition came after repeated Syrian denials -- of the six, the Syrians reportedly claimed that two were not on their soil, two were unknown to them, and two were elder Baathists and long-time residents of Syria with no connection to the insurgency<sup>28</sup> -- and after sustained U.S. pressure. While Syria might have intended a good will gesture, for the U.S. the message was clear: Syria indeed knew the whereabouts of key insurgent funders and organisers and was only acting for fear of further isolation. That this did not translate into warmer feelings in Washington hardly should come as a surprise.

**On Arab/Israeli matters**, according to both the U.S. and Israel, Palestinian militant groups located in Syria have continued to coordinate and finance attacks carried out in Israel and the Occupied Territories. A relatively new factor -- Hizbollah's purported infiltration of the West Bank and financial and operational assistance to various Palestinian militant groups -- has also emerged at the top of Israeli, U.S., and -- albeit more privately -- Palestinian Authority (PA) concerns.<sup>29</sup>

Again, Syrian officials point to a succession of initiatives they had hoped would mollify U.S. concerns:

- shutting down Damascus offices of militant Palestinian groups. While stating that the organisations only operated media bureaus and complaining that the same Islamist leaders could be found in Cairo,<sup>30</sup> the regime formally closed offices<sup>31</sup> and reportedly ordered Hamas leader Khaled Mishaal, his deputy, Musa Abu Marzuq,

and Islamic *Jihad* Secretary Ramadan Abdullah Shalah to stop talking to the press and otherwise maintain low profiles.<sup>32</sup> Mishaal allegedly was asked to leave the country,<sup>33</sup> though he was there to meet with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas during his visit in December 2004.<sup>34</sup> Mishaal's whereabouts, in any event, turned out to be of secondary concern to the U.S., which stressed the importance of lower level "operatives", who purportedly remain in touch with counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>35</sup>

- sending messages of Syria's desire for peace. Syria's principal response to pressure on the Israeli-Palestinian front appears to have been a diplomatic offensive aimed at persuading the international community of its willingness to restart negotiations -- and at shifting the blame back to Israel. In one forum after another, Bashar repeated this wish, going so far as to accept that talks should begin without preconditions -- code word for saying that they need not begin at the point where they had ended in 2000, a traditional Syrian demand. This last issue, viewed as critical by some Israelis, was not without its own confusion and contradictions. Sami al-Khaimi, Syria's ambassador in London, told Crisis Group that talks would not have to start "exactly" where they left off. "We have been saying for a long time 'with absolutely no preconditions'. Yet all the Israelis do is say we are bluffing".<sup>36</sup> Yet, after an Egyptian spokesperson asserted that Syria no longer demanded prior confirmation of the so-called Rabin deposit (a commitment to full withdrawal from the Golan assuming Israel's conditions were met), a Syrian official told Crisis Group that:

Legally, there is something called continuity of state. Israel may have had several governments, but we weren't negotiating with a government but with a state. Also, no

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<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian official, February 2005, and with a diplomat in Beirut, 9 February 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Allegations concerning Hizbollah support and financing of Palestinian armed operations also came from a member of the al-'Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. *Sunday Times*, 3 April 2005. For an unusually detailed Israeli account based on intelligence sources, see Amos Harel, "Hezbollah's Terror Factory in the PA", *Ha'aretz*, 11 January 2005. For an assessment based on interviews with Palestinian Authority officials and militants of the al-'Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, see Associated Press, 12 April 2004. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°21, *Dealing with Hamas*, 26 January 2004, p. 18; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°7, *Old Games, New Rules: Conflict on the Israel-Lebanon Border*, 18 November 2002, pp. 13-15. Israeli intelligence believes that, in the most recent period, Hizbollah has reduced its Palestinian activism, a response to both Lebanese developments and Syria's request. *Haaretz*, 5 April 2005.

<sup>30</sup> "Why does the U.S. assume that they are staging terrorism attacks in Syria while welcoming their presence in Cairo?", Crisis Group interview with Bushra Kanafani, Syrian Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Damascus, 29 October 2004.

<sup>31</sup> "They asked us to close down the Palestinian offices in Damascus, and so we did", *ibid*, November 2004.

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<sup>32</sup> According to Syrian reporters working for foreign news outlets, Mishaal and Abu Marzuq have since refused to give interviews. Crisis Group interviews in Damascus, September-November 2004. Crisis Group sought to contact the two in November but was told they were "not available".

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Western diplomats in Damascus, 27 October 2004.

<sup>34</sup> See *Al-Hayat*, 6 December 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, January 2005. Israel, for its part, made it increasingly clear that it would hold Damascus directly responsible for activity of Palestinian armed groups. Thus, in October 2004, it launched an air strike against what it claimed was a training camp in Syria used by Palestinian militants.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 9 December 2004.

one has ever claimed that the peace process has ended. No one declared it's over. So we are still in the same peace process, and so we should continue where the talks were left.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond that, Syrian officials evinced a clear willingness in conversations with Crisis Group to discuss substantive solutions to the conflict with Israel. When Crisis Group first issued its endgame report,<sup>38</sup> in which it put forward a comprehensive peace proposal, Syrian officials were cool to the idea that a non-state actor could make a useful contribution. Over the past several months, in stark contrast, they have engaged in surprisingly in-depth discussions of the proposal, noting points of agreement and disagreement (the latter mainly on details and sequencing rather than essence) and hinting it could serve as a useful basis for negotiations.<sup>39</sup> The 8 April 2005 handshake

between Bashar and Israeli President Katsav at Pope John Paul II's funeral, while essentially symbolic, was not without meaning: even during the height of Israeli-Syrian negotiations in 1999-2000, Syrian officials resisted public handshakes, claiming these would only follow a peace agreement.

- engaging in confidence-building measures. Departing from past dogma which considered any gesture toward Israel prior to a peace agreement an unwarranted concession, Syrian officials point to several small initiatives. In September 2004, President Bashar ordered the rebuilding of Quneitra, a town with highly symbolic value that lies on the Syrian side of the armistice line on the Golan Heights and whose dilapidated state ostensibly served as a reminder of Israel's aggression.<sup>40</sup> In October, the National Progressive Front, a coalition of seven legal parties, including the Baath, dropped anti-Israel rhetoric from its Charter.<sup>41</sup> In early December, the government agreed to a proposal by Druze farmers inhabiting the Israeli-occupied Golan to sell apples in Syria, thereby allowing hundreds of trucks to cross the otherwise sealed entry point of the Charlie Gate near Quneitra.<sup>42</sup> The Syrian government also tolerated participation by its citizens in several international conferences attended by Israelis, including seminars on non-proliferation of WMD held in Seoul (November 2004) and Cairo (January 2005).<sup>43</sup> Syrian officials told Crisis Group more visible steps were under

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<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 October 2004. Information Minister Mahdi Dakhllallah added, "This is not a condition! The opposite [starting from scratch] would be a condition", Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 October 2004.

<sup>38</sup> See Crisis Group report Middle East Report N°4, *Middle East Endgame III: Israel, Syria and Lebanon -- How Comprehensive Peace Settlements Would Look*, 16 July 2002. The plan includes full Israeli withdrawal to the lines of 4 June 1967; Israeli sovereignty over the Kinneret/Lake Tiberias and the Jordan River and access to adjoining land; Syrian sovereignty over the land up to the Kinneret/Lake Tiberias and the Jordan River and access to the adjoining water; security arrangements including de-militarised zones, water sharing arrangements and the establishment of full diplomatic and normal peaceful relations.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, October-December 2004. For example, an official familiar with past negotiations commented on the "Jordan Valley Nature Preserve" on the Syrian side of the border advocated by Crisis Group as a means of safeguarding water resources and facilitating mutual access. Forcing Syria to allow Israeli visitors was described as a "one-sided restriction on Syrian sovereignty". Crisis Group also suggested a two-year timeframe for Israel's withdrawal, which the same official criticised as too long. "I would rather put it at six months or so. After all, it took them only 24 hours to get out of south Lebanon". He also questioned the proposed U.S.-led multinational security presence designed to monitor implementation of the agreement, expressing doubt that "Syria would like to have U.S. troops at this border", in addition to the Iraqi border. Finally, while accepting the notion of normalised relations, he raised concerns about exchanging ambassadors within 72 hours of the treaty coming into effect. "We cannot accept an Israeli flag flying in Damascus and at the same time still have Israeli troops on our territory". Instead, he suggested that as long as Israeli troops remain, a third country could represent Israeli interests in Syria. While many of these comments will sound familiar to observers of

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past Israeli-Syrian negotiations, the willingness to engage in informal substantive discussions was noteworthy.

<sup>40</sup> An official of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) said that local officials had assured him work would begin in 2005. In his view, "the plan is serious". Crisis Group interview at Camp Fawar, near Quneitra, 2 December 2004. In fact, preparations appear to be under way, such as paving two new lanes to expand the road leading from Khan Arabeh to Quneitra.

<sup>41</sup> The phrase "no peace with, no negotiations with and no recognition of Israel" was replaced with one expressing commitment to "principles of international law and UN resolutions in order to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict based on the principles of rights, justice and international law". Cited in *Akhbar al-Sharq*, 15 October 2004. A member of the National Progressive Front said the amendment was a personal initiative of President Bashar, "in order to send a signal to the Americans". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 25 October 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview with UNDOF official, Camp Fawar, 2 December 2004. See also *Al-Hayat*, 24 December 2004. The first truck-loads of apples from the International Committee for the Red Cross were allowed into Syria in mid-March 2005. See BBC, 14 March 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian academic who attended the conferences, Damascus, 5 February 2005.

consideration,<sup>44</sup> provided that "we see that things are moving towards negotiations sponsored by the U.S."<sup>45</sup>

The Syrian actions elicited little if any reaction from the U.S. Their piecemeal nature, failure to break with radical Palestinian groups and the absence of a more spectacular demonstration of willingness to reach out to Israelis -- such as inviting Israeli Jews to Damascus or returning the remains of executed Israeli spy Eli Cohen, which were suggested by Crisis Group to officials -- contributed to the belief that these were taken far more in order to lessen outside pressure than to signal a bold policy change. Seen as transparently diversionary and unable to affect Israeli public opinion, they were to a large extent wasted, confirming in American and Israeli eyes that the regime was feeling under pressure and that more, not less, of it was called for. As an Israeli official remarked:

The Baathist regime is under siege, and we have no interest in throwing it a life line. Besides, we have enough on our hands with the Palestinians and our disengagement from Gaza. The Syrians want to start negotiations not to reach a deal but to salvage their rule. They are weak, and now is not the time to help them.<sup>46</sup>

Not all Israelis agreed. A former official argued strongly for Israel to test Bashar's good faith by picking up on his offer and expressed exasperation at his government's stance: "When is it precisely we want to negotiate with them? When they feel strong?"<sup>47</sup>

In any event, occurrences such as the 25 February 2005 suicide attack in Tel Aviv -- with suspicion first directed at Hizbollah then at an Islamic *Jihad* cell based in

Damascus which claimed responsibility<sup>48</sup> -- outweigh anything remotely encouraging Syria has done.

## B. SYRIA'S INCREASED ISOLATION

Throughout much of this period, France had adopted an approach that differed markedly from the U.S.'s. Traditionally keen to maintain its influence -- and minimise Washington's -- in the Lebanon/Syria theatre, Paris at first placed genuine hopes in Bashar. President Chirac invested himself personally, inviting his Syrian counterpart to make a state visit in June 2001, dispatching trusted advisers to help steer administrative modernisation and sending a close aide, Jean-François Girault (a former presidential adviser), as ambassador. Those hopes began to dissipate when promised changes did not materialise, and French-educated reformers were marginalised in new institutions supposedly created to spearhead economic and administrative reforms.<sup>49</sup> In an additional snub, a contract for exploitation of new gas fields was granted to a U.S.-British-Canadian consortium, not to France's Total.<sup>50</sup> But most important was Syria's policy toward Lebanon, given France's historical interest in that country, its strong links to several Lebanese communities, and Chirac's personal ties to Hariri. French officials repeatedly warned Bashar against excessive interference in Lebanon's domestic politics; as discussed below, the 3 September 2004 decision to extend President Lahoud's term definitively antagonised the Elysée. But by then, the confidence that had previously existed between Chirac and Bashar had evaporated. As a member of the Syrian opposition told Crisis Group, "it is one thing to have alienated the Americans. But to antagonise the French, and in particular Chirac -- who had served as a bulwark against U.S. designs -- that is something else".<sup>51</sup> For Chirac, the once promising Bashar had become the "unreformable young man".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Steps suggested by Crisis Group included inviting an Israeli media organ to interview a senior official; agreeing to a simultaneous interview on *Al-Jazeera* of a Syrian and Israeli official; inviting a prominent Israeli Jew for informal talks (Uri Sagui, who has been critical of former Prime Minister Barak's handling of the 1999-2000 negotiations, is one possibility); and handing over the remains of Israeli spy Eli Cohen, who was caught and executed some 40 years ago. As a senior Syrian official put it, "these are interesting ideas. Some go too far for us, but you will see something. Just wait". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2004. Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq as-Shara' recently remarked, "If a substantial development is made in the talks with Israel, Syria will return Eli Cohen's remains". Cited in *Yediot Ahronot*, 30 March 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Bushra Kanafani, Damascus, 28 October 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2004.

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<sup>48</sup> Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack from Beirut. See Reuters, 27 February 2005. Such outsourcing of the organisation's "media activities" to Lebanon is likely to have been directed from Damascus to circumvent international pressures.

<sup>49</sup> Maher Mujtahid, economic adviser to Bashar, is one of the few left of a team of technocrats sponsored by the French. Crisis Group interviews with Syrian official and Syrian journalist, Damascus, January 2005.

<sup>50</sup> The contract for developing gas fields around Palmyra was granted to the Petro-Canada consortium. However, it ultimately was transferred to Syria's state-owned oil company, *The Syria Report*, 7 February 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview with French official, Paris, March 2005.

Bit by bit, others began to lose faith. The UK, which also had banked on a policy of constructive engagement, welcomed Bashar and urged a resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks, gradually changed its tune.<sup>53</sup> Some Arab countries joined the chorus. Jordan -- whose king early on had tried to serve as an intermediary between Washington and the new Syrian president<sup>54</sup> -- grew increasingly frustrated. In mid-2004, senior Jordanian officials told Crisis Group they had no trust in President Bashar and felt their initial hope that he would emerge as a reformer had been misplaced. Soon, they were accusing Syria of instigating problems on their border, of allowing "plotters" into the country<sup>55</sup> and of harbouring Iraqi insurgents.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Iraqi officials accused Syria of sheltering insurgents and supporting "terrorists".<sup>57</sup>

Syria's isolation was further compounded by regional developments. Mahmoud Abbas's election as President of the Palestinian Authority, his commitment to rein in militant groups and the ensuing modest revival of the peace process, all put the spotlight on the harbouring by Damascus of Hamas and Islamic *Jihad* officials and operatives and its support for Hizbollah, which both Israel and the U.S. -- and, less vocally, PA officials -- blamed for financing and organising violence in the Occupied Territories.<sup>58</sup>

From Damascus's perspective, not all has appeared bleak. During this period, Bashar launched a diplomatic offensive to strengthen ties with a number of countries. This began in July 2004 with a visit to China, was

followed by agreements to reschedule Syria's debts to the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania<sup>59</sup> and culminated with Bashar's January 2005 visit to Moscow. These were considered significant successes, particularly the Russian debt write-off.<sup>60</sup> Relations with the Palestinian Authority improved following Arafat's death, as Abbas officially visited Damascus. Also, in an effort to soothe tensions with Jordan, Syria reached a border demarcation agreement.<sup>61</sup>

All in all, however, the picture had deteriorated to the point that, by the time of Hariri's assassination, the Baathist regime found itself in the most precarious regional and international posture in its existence. Undoubtedly there were contributory factors, including Washington's decision not to engage. But Syria's missteps and its inability to devise a coherent response to outside pressures were very much to blame.

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<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview with UK diplomat, Beirut, March 2005. Prime Minister Blair also made clear that it was time for President Bashar to change his approach fundamentally. *The Guardian*, 2 March 2005. Also Crisis Group interview with U.S. official, Washington, 4 March 2005.

<sup>54</sup> When Bashar succeeded his father, Jordanian officials and the King himself urged the U.S. to give him a chance, presenting him as part of a "new generation of modernist Arab leaders". Crisis Group interview with former U.S. official, Washington, February 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview with senior Jordanian official, Amman, December 2004; Associated Press, 27 April 2004.

<sup>56</sup> King Abdullah asserted: "foreign fighters are coming across the Syrian border that have been trained in Syria". Agence France-Presse, 8 December 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Iraqi President Yawar alleged that Syria was "offering [insurgents] a safe haven and a shelter and they are operating from there". While not directly accusing President Bashar, he pointed a finger at "entities within the Syrian government -- especially the old guards". Agence France-Presse, 16 December 2004. Interim Prime Minister Allawi repeated the charges, saying part of the leadership of "terrorist groups" lived in Syria. Agence France-Presse, 28 December 2004.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews with U.S., Israeli and Palestinian officials, Washington, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, January-March 2005.

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<sup>59</sup> Syrian debts to the Czech Republic and Slovakia amounted to \$155 million. It was agreed that Syria would pay back only 15 per cent of this amount. A similar deal is expected for Syrian debts to Romania. See *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 25 November 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Syrian debts to Russia amounted to \$13.4 billion. Russia agreed to write off \$9.8 billion. See the *Moscow Times*, 26 January 2005. "The deal inflated the regime's self-confidence as it mistakenly believed it would lessen the risk of U.S. hostility". Crisis Group interview with Syrian government adviser, Damascus, 3 February 2005.

<sup>61</sup> The agreement was announced in December 2004 and signed in February 2005. It allows Syria to retain 125 square kilometres of Jordanian territory in exchange for an equivalent swath of land on Syria's side of the border. The agreement also included cooperation on measures to counter smuggling and organised crime. See *An-Nahar*, 28 February 2005.

## II. THE LEBANESE CRUCIBLE

### A. ALL EYES ON LEBANON

Lebanon was not where the showdown between Syria and the international community was expected to occur. Most of the world looked upon its nearly 30-year presence there with indifference or even favour. The Arab world had long accepted it, and the West by and large considered it an important stabilising factor that kept Lebanon's fractious sectarian groups and militant organisations in check. Some senior Israeli officials voiced concern over the consequences of a Syrian withdrawal. And, until very recently, the U.S. -- which had suffered heavy losses during its 1982-1984 foray into Lebanon and had acquiesced in Syria's presence -- was not overly keen on a withdrawal either.

Conversely, Syria's influence over Lebanon was long considered by the Baathist regime a core interest, second only to regime survival. Syria derived strategic benefits (mainly through Hizbollah's pressure and deterrence function vis-à-vis Israel), financial benefits (through extensive networks of Syrian and Lebanese businessmen),<sup>62</sup> and social benefits (through hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon).<sup>63</sup> Having a strong hand in Lebanese affairs also was insurance against domestic instability: virtually all military coups in Syria's contemporary history have been plotted and organised from its neighbour's territory. Beyond what were once 30,000 Syrian soldiers (reduced to 14,000 by September

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<sup>62</sup> During Lebanon's reconstruction boom, which lasted until the mid-1990s, an estimated one million Syrian workers found regular employment in the country. Current figures are estimated to be somewhat lower. Crisis Group interview with Antoine Haddad, adviser to parliamentarian Nassib Lahoud, Beirut, 8 December 2004. Syrian businessmen have been particularly active in Lebanon's imports and distribution of fuel, its quarrying sector, road construction work, GSM telecommunications sector and banking sector. In addition, with some \$7 billion of Syrian assets placed in Lebanese banks, Syrian businessmen generated large profits from high yields on Lebanese treasury papers. See Reinoud Leenders, *Divided We Rule: The Politics of Institution Building and Corruption in Post-War Lebanon*, (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>63</sup> The Lebanese Ministry of Labour recently commissioned a study on Syrian workers in Lebanon. It estimated the total number at 300,000-500,000. However, the sectoral breakdown (suggesting that only 7 per cent of such workers are employed in the industrial sector, which includes construction) contradicts conventional wisdom about the large number of Syrians in construction; it is possible the study significantly underestimates the total. See *At-Thawra*, 28 March 2005. Between 1993 and 2005, total remittances to Syria are said to have reached an estimated \$7 billion. See Kamal Dib, in *An-Nahar*, 8 March 2005.

2004 and currently some 8,000),<sup>64</sup> a host of factors ensured continued Syrian dominance, including the presence of the Syrian *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) and its extensive and intricate ties with Lebanon's intelligence and security services, interference with the judicial system, and a parallel economy that benefited both Syrians and their Lebanese clients. According to a prominent member of the Lebanese opposition, "the real power in Lebanon has become Syria's intelligence services. They have neutered any genuine Lebanese politics".<sup>65</sup>

Given Lebanon's relative lack of importance for the international community and its disproportionate importance to the Syrian regime, observers anticipated (much to the Lebanese opposition's dismay) that the U.S. would use this card merely to extract concessions on issues about which it cared more and about which, ultimately, Syria would oblige. Syria's policies toward the peace process and Iraq were each seen as the more likely *casus belli* with Washington. As a Lebanese analyst sarcastically commented: "The U.S. scratched all over the Syrian body to get it to move, and when it touched Lebanon, the regime finally cried out. So that was where the U.S. decided to keep scratching".<sup>66</sup>

All this has changed in remarkably dramatic fashion. Far from being a sideshow, Lebanon has become a symptom of all that is considered wrong about the Syrian regime: its domination by a narrow, family-centred clique; the overwhelming role of its intelligence services; its disregard for the international community; and its imperviousness to change. And where calling attention to Syria's presence in Lebanon once was essentially seen by Washington as a means of achieving unrelated ends, withdrawal has become a central goal in and of itself, essential to alter the situation in Lebanon, but also in Syria and, over time, in the region as a whole.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> See *An-Nahar*, 1 April 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Since the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1559, international attention to Lebanon has reached new heights. Remarkably, the UN currently has no less than four senior envoys who, in one way or another, are tasked with overseeing Lebanese affairs: one for Southern Lebanon (Geir Pedersen); one to ensure compliance with Resolution 1559 (Terje Roed-Larsen); an envoy for the Middle East peace process (currently vacant); one to investigate Hariri's assassination (Peter Fitzgerald); all of which is in addition to the multinational forces of UNDOF, (established in 1974 to supervise a ceasefire between Syria and Israel on the Golan) and UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, established in 1978 to confirm the Israeli withdrawal and help the Lebanese government restore its authority in south Lebanon). On 7 April 2005, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution

Much of this can be explained by Syria's miscalculations and missteps, most notably its indifference to repeated warnings by European and Arab emissaries not to renew President Lahoud's term in office in contravention of the country's constitution and not to sideline Hariri.<sup>68</sup> As France -- and chiefly the Elysée<sup>69</sup> -- grew increasingly disenchanted with Bashar and concerned about Lebanon, President Chirac sought to forge a common position with the U.S.. At the June 2004 G8 Summit, for example, he tried to persuade President Bush of Lebanon's importance, arguing that it was one of the region's rare democracies, a test case of Washington's proclaimed ambitions for the Broader Middle East and a good opportunity for the two presidents to work together after tensions born of the war in Iraq.<sup>70</sup>

The newly minted cooperation between Paris and Washington found its most pointed expression in passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2 September 2004) which called on "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon" -- a clear reference to Syria -- and supported Lebanese presidential elections "according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence -- a clear warning against Syrian efforts to extend Lahoud's mandate. Against French preferences, but as a necessary condition for Washington's approval, it also called for the "disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias" -- a clear allusion to Hizbollah, a movement that Paris had typically sought not to alienate and whose critical role on the Lebanese scene it recognised.<sup>71</sup>

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1595 calling for the establishment of an international committee of inquiry into Hariri's assassination.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews with EU and Arab officials, Paris, Madrid, Washington, February-March 2005. France had successfully lobbied for a rescheduling of Lebanon's debt obligations and new aid pledges in 2002 but these were conditioned on Lebanon's commitment to economic reform measures. Since the Paris II Accord of November 2002, however, Hariri's efforts had faced stiff resistance from Lahoud, thereby seriously embarrassing the French President. Crisis Group interviews with European diplomats in Damascus, 27 October 2004. On Lebanon's stalled implementation of these reforms, see Yusef Estephan, *Ta'thir Mu'tamar Paris II fi Luban* (Shamali & Shamali, Lebanon 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Many French officials made clear that, certainly at the outset, this was very much a Chirac-led policy, questioned by members of the diplomatic corps. They point in particular to his very close ties, even friendship, with Hariri as a key determining factor. Crisis Group interviews, Paris, July 2004-March 2005.

<sup>70</sup> "He told him: here we have a democracy that is being threatened by Syrian policy. Let us work together to make sure Lebanon does not backslide". Crisis Group interview with French official, Paris, July 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Resolution 1559 (2004). French officials and members of the Lebanese opposition argued that the resolution should

Tension between Damascus and Paris was of momentous importance, costing Syria one of its most valuable partners, both a bridge to the West and a buffer against the U.S.; together with passage of an anti-Syrian resolution in the Security Council -- with Arab participation -- this highlighted Syria's unprecedented isolation. As a U.S. official told Crisis Group, "1559 matters because Syria can no longer appeal to international legitimacy. It means the regime now has to pay attention. It no longer has anywhere to hide".<sup>72</sup>

Resolution 1559 notwithstanding, the Syrian regime went forward with its plans, abruptly summoning Hariri to notify him of the decision to extend Lahoud's mandate (the extension is referred to in Lebanon as *at-tamdid*) and demanding his support.<sup>73</sup> The decision was promptly endorsed by Lebanon's parliament -- most of whose members were elected thanks to Syrian interference -- one day after passage of the UN resolution, marked a definitive break with France, and further alienated other international actors.

Of far more momentous significance was the 14 February 2005 assassination of Hariri. Although its perpetrators remain unidentified, there is widespread suspicion that an attack of that magnitude and requiring such a degree of preparation would not have been possible without, at a very minimum, the fore-knowledge and acquiescence of Syrian intelligence services. In any event, as an Arab official put it, "politically, that hardly matters. Given its role in Lebanon, given its decision to ignore international pressure not to extend Lahoud's tenure, and given its growing antagonism toward Hariri, Syria put itself in a situation whereby, whether guilty or not, it is responsible; and whether it did it or not, it will pay the price".<sup>74</sup> The March 2005 report of the UN fact-finding mission put it succinctly:

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focus on Lebanon's sovereignty and leave aside the Hizbollah question, but Washington disagreed. Crisis Group interviews, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2004.

<sup>73</sup> During a visit to Damascus on 26 August 2004, Bashar reportedly told Hariri: "Lahoud is me. If you and Chirac want me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon." *The New York Times*, 20 March 2005. The UN fact-finding mission into Hariri's assassination cited Lebanese testimony to the effect that Bashar had threatened Hariri with "physical harm" if he opposed the extension. For excerpts from the report, see the *Daily Star*, 26 March 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, 15 February 2005. A senior official from an EU country that maintains relatively good relations with Bashar echoed this view: "Politically, it is irrelevant if Bashar did it. By ignoring our advice over the past two years, he has made himself responsible". Crisis Group interview, 9 March 2005.

The specific "causes" for the assassination of Mr. Hariri cannot be reliably asserted until after the perpetrators of this crime are brought to justice. However, it is clear that the assassination took place in a political and security context marked by an acute polarisation around the Syrian influence in Lebanon and a failure of the Lebanese State to provide adequate protection for its citizens.<sup>75</sup>

Even traditional allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia (with whom Hariri entertained a very close relationship) no longer closed ranks and, to the Baathist regime's apparent surprise, sternly and bluntly told Syria that it had to implement Resolution 1559 immediately or face the consequences. A U.S. official told Crisis Group: "For the longest time, the regime was cocky, arrogant, sure of itself. Now, it is in a state of shock".<sup>76</sup>

International pressure on Syria, mainly to withdraw from Lebanon, grew exponentially. Besides the U.S. and France, Russia, other European countries and, significantly, Egypt and Saudi Arabia joined in the calls.<sup>77</sup> The alliance between the U.S. and France is particularly striking coming after a long and frosty period of distrust; Presidents Chirac and Bush as well as other senior officials are said to be in virtually constant contact.<sup>78</sup> The relationship appears to have paid off -- each is taking credit for influencing the other. As events in Lebanon unfolded -- with massive anti-Syrian demonstrations; initial suggestions by Damascus of a staged redeployment without a clear timetable for withdrawal; then a vast Hizbollah demonstration -- Washington and Paris remained on the same page, the U.S. moderating its anti-Hizbollah rhetoric and urging Israel to remain quiet, and France maintaining a firm position toward Syria.<sup>79</sup> Together, they defined a broad consensus position:

- an international investigation into the assassination of Hariri;

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<sup>75</sup> "Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Lebanon Inquiring into the Causes, Circumstances and Consequences of the Assassination of Former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, 25 February-24 March 2005".

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, 4 March 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Pointing to Resolution 1559 and the Taef Accord -- both of which call for Syria's withdrawal -- Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Ghayt said Syria had to take action. See *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 3-9 March 2005. Saudi officials told Bashar that Riyadh insisted on the full withdrawal of Syrian troops and intelligence forces from Lebanon to begin "soon". See Associated Press, 3 March 2005.

<sup>78</sup> "For Chirac, this is personal, and it is emotional. Hariri was a close friend of his, one of the few he had. His assassination crossed the Rubicon, and Chirac will not let this one go". Crisis Group interviews, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Paris and Washington, February-March 2005.

- unconditional and full withdrawal of all Syrian security and intelligence personnel from Lebanon prior to that country's parliamentary elections to be held before 31 May 2005;
- free and fair elections with international observers;
- determination to take further punitive action if the above does not happen;
- a focus on the first part of Resolution 1559, de-emphasising for the time being at least the call for Hizbollah's disarming. In remarkably similar terms, U.S. and French officials told Crisis Group that the priority was to get Syria out of Lebanon and to keep Lebanon stable in the process, which meant giving Hizbollah neither reason nor opportunity to stand in the way. In the words of a U.S. official:

we carefully distinguish between Hizbollah's international activity and its national activity. We will not give up on the former, will remain as tough as before and will continue to urge the EU to add Hizbollah to its terrorism list. But it would be counterproductive for us to push disarmament now, and it is completely unrealistic to expect the Lebanese army to take forceful action now. That issue will have to be dealt with in due time, by the Lebanese.<sup>80</sup>

Secretary of State Rice's carefully worded statements were equally illuminating:

The American view of Hizbollah has not changed. What we are focused on at this point is removing...Syrian forces and Syrian security personnel....When [they] have been withdrawn, the Lebanese will have the opportunity to chart a political future for themselves....We are going to do one thing at a time....When the Lebanese people have [this opportunity], I'm certain they will come to an understanding of the means by which they are going to provide a better life and a freer life for the Lebanese people.<sup>81</sup>

This is a noteworthy evolution for an administration that only weeks prior had made the EU's position on Hizbollah a priority item and that once labelled the organisation the "A team" of terror;<sup>82</sup> and

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<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2005.

<sup>81</sup> Briefing en route to Mexico, 10 March 2005.

<sup>82</sup> The quote by then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is cited in Reuters, 9 September 2002.

- a shared hostility toward the Syrian regime and a determination not to mollify it with guarantees or reciprocal steps. Although Paris has urged Washington to refrain from talking about regime change -- out of fear of antagonising Arab countries or pushing Bashar to the brink -- Chirac and his closest advisers appear to have reached the conclusion that the current regime has proven irredeemable and will need to go:

It is a corrupt, mafia-like, anachronistic regime that is incapable of reforming itself. Alone among countries in the region, it has not taken a single step to modernise its political system. Its presence in Lebanon has become a source of legitimacy and of revenue. Once it is no longer there, it will have lost its *raison d'être* and its resources. At that point, don't count on us for throwing it a life-line (*bouée de sauvetage*). We will not shed a tear when it falls.<sup>83</sup>

In particular, Paris appears to have given up on the idea of re-launching the Israeli-Syrian peace process as a means of engaging Damascus and providing it with an incentive to moderate its behaviour: "What for? The Israelis and Americans are not interested, and the regime would use it simply to prolong its existence".<sup>84</sup>

The united front has produced results. In particular, and after some hesitation, Syria has committed to a full withdrawal by the end of April 2005.

This is not to say that all differences within the international community have disappeared; indeed, as time goes by and particularly once Syria has withdrawn from Lebanon, they are likely to re-emerge. France remains jealous of its influence in the Levant and would oppose any attempt at U.S. dominance; likewise, the U.S. (together with Israel) remains intent on tackling the question of Hizbollah and almost certainly will return to the issue of its inclusion on the EU terrorism list, which France opposes.<sup>85</sup> Even attitudes toward the Syrian

regime probably will diverge post-withdrawal. As tempers cool, Paris may be tempted to re-engage; already there are reports of Syrian attempts to reconnect, albeit so far unsuccessfully.<sup>86</sup> The international consensus also may not survive a peaceful Syrian withdrawal; already Arab countries at their summit in Algiers in March 2005 adopted a moderate tone. After a withdrawal, they are likely to reject any intimation of regime change or of action against Hizbollah and probably will point to discrepant attitudes toward Syria -- compelled to leave Lebanon -- and Israel -- continuing to hold on to occupied territories. In other words, as soon as attention returns to the extra-Lebanese aspects of the crisis, the international consensus will be at risk.

## B. THE LEBANESE OPPOSITION

Lebanon boasts a highly segmented and fractured political landscape, with divisions reflecting clan, family, confessional and regional as well as social loyalties. In the years since its military presence began, Syria clearly has played and preyed upon these but the divides predated its intervention -- indeed, they largely facilitated it -- and almost certainly will outlast it. The contemporary history of Syria's shifting relations with various Lebanese communities is illustrative, as groups successively called upon Syria for help or denounced it for its involvement, and as one-time allies became adversaries and opponents became supporters. A Maronite president (Elias Sarkis) first invited Syrian troops in 1976 to help against a Palestinian Liberation Organisation/left-wing Lebanese alliance,<sup>87</sup> then witnessed Damascus switching sides barely a year later. Throughout the 1990s, Lebanese communal leaders visited Damascus to boost their fortunes and increase their share of power in the country's intricate political system.<sup>88</sup>

More broadly, confessional alignments have continued to define Lebanese politics and, often, plague daily political decision-making. Significantly, the Taef Accord -- which ended the civil war -- enshrined the principle of sectarian distribution of power by allocating senior positions (president, prime minister and speaker of parliament), parliamentary seats, ministerial jobs, and high-level positions in the state bureaucracy along sectarian lines, even while calling for eventual "de-confessionalisation".

officials were far less certain of its role in the Israeli-Palestinian theatre, indicating they believed U.S. and Israeli assertions in this regard were "way overstated". Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>87</sup>The alliance, called the National Movement, included in particular Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party.

<sup>88</sup> See Reinoud Leenders, *Divided We Rule*, op. cit.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview with French official, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. While hostility to the Syrian regime is shared throughout the French administration, not all officials would agree with this approach. Some told Crisis Group that, following a withdrawal from Lebanon, some form of re-engagement would be necessary, including on the peace process. Crisis Group interviews, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>85</sup> "The U.S. is making reassuring but ambiguous noises on Hizbollah. We think it is key to keep them on board; the Americans think it is essential to take them on after the withdrawal. That is when our bilateral problems will re-emerge". Crisis Group interview with French official, Paris, March 2005. As part of this divergent attitude toward Hizbollah, French



Not that confessional allegiances are always reliable predictors of political affiliation. Today, for example, some of Syria's staunchest allies include prominent Maronite leaders, such as Sulayman Franjieh from the northern town of Zghorta. Lebanese alliances have remained fragile and fickle, a function of personal and community calculations they rarely, if ever, transcend.

In this respect, the opposition movement that crystallised in the wake of Syria's decision to extend Lahoud's mandate and the appointment of the government led by Omar Karamah stands out. Whereas the anti-Syrian front had until then generally been confined to parts of the Maronite community, together with a handful of politicians and intellectuals,<sup>89</sup> this time virtually all major actors, with the notable exception of Shiite representatives, joined ranks. Syria's heavy-handed response,<sup>90</sup> its attempts to consolidate its direct political control, and adoption of UNSCR 1559 further emboldened the opposition alliance, even though many feared that Damascus would resort to violence and intimidation.

The opposition features an eclectic collection of political heavy-weights, an alliance that is both remarkable due to the diversity of its members and inherently fragile in light of their underlying differences. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt -- a former Syrian ally -- took the lead, strongly denouncing the *tamdid* and withdrawing his ministers from the government. Having inherited his father's traditional leadership (*za'ama*), Jumblatt represents most of the Druze community, some 6 per cent of the population.<sup>91</sup> After establishing a powerful militia and parallel civil administration during the war years, his Progressive Socialist Party has remained a gatekeeper for public resources and state employment for both Druze and Christians in the Shuf region and Mount

Lebanon, primarily through its control of the Ministry for the Displaced. As leader of a minority group, Jumblatt has felt the need to shift political positions and alliances, making him the target of frequent accusations of opportunism; in the eyes of some Lebanese, he has strived to gain a disproportionate share (*hissa*) of power for his community. Although Jumblatt's at times acrobatic politics has translated into shifting views on regional politics, for the most part -- and until recently -- he has been a critic of U.S. Middle East policies and of Israel's interference in Lebanese affairs. This has earned him generally good relations with Hizbollah, whose armed presence in southern Lebanon required the sympathy -- or at least non-hostility -- of Druze villages.

The opposition Maronite groups include the outlawed Lebanese Forces of Samir Ja'ja (currently imprisoned), ex-Kata'ib members grouped around Amin Gemayel<sup>92</sup> and exiled General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Trend. For the most part, they have adopted a more favourable view of the U.S., a less hostile stance toward Israel and early opposition to Syria's presence. During the 1990s, these groups were politically marginalised, a result both of electoral gerrymandering and the arrest of many of their leaders. In turn, the Aounists and Lebanese Forces in particular embodied a widely felt frustration (*ihbat*) within the Maronite community, which represents some 23 per cent of the population.<sup>93</sup> Although internally divided and beset by personal rivalries, these groups joined with independent Maronite and other Christian intellectuals and political activists to establish the gathering of Qurnet Shehwan in April 2001.<sup>94</sup> Initially intended to attract support from leaders of other sectarian communities, the gathering essentially failed in this

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<sup>89</sup>The period in 2000 when Maronite leaders and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt joined in calling for a timetable for Syria's withdrawal was an exception. See *An-Nahar*, 7 November 2000.

<sup>90</sup> On 1 October 2004, a bomb struck the car of a close Jumblatt ally and former Druze minister, Marwan Hamadeh, wounding him and killing his bodyguard. A controversial and much-criticised government-led investigation failed to reach any conclusion. Hamadeh accused Lebanon's intelligence services of "hijacking the preliminary outcome of the investigation". See *As-Safir*, 27 November 2004. His friends and colleagues have not hesitated to lay the blame directly on Damascus. Crisis Group interviews, March 2005.

<sup>91</sup> According to Lebanon's population registry, the Druze constitute 5.4 per cent of the total population. Lebanese Interior Ministry, April 2005. These figures are at best a rough approximation of current demographic realities, both because they date back to 2000 and, more importantly, because the country last held a census in 1932-1934. Druze constitute some 5.6 per cent of the registered electorate. *Ibid*.

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<sup>92</sup> Following its electoral defeat in 2000 and the return from exile of former President Amin Gemayel that same year, the Kata'ib split in two. One faction centred around veteran Armenian Christian politician Karim Pakraduni, who is allied to Syria, and the other around Gemayel.

<sup>93</sup> According to Lebanon's population registry, Maronites are 20.5 per cent of the population and 22.1 per cent of the registered electorate. Lebanese Interior ministry, April 2005. The leader of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Ja'ja, was arrested in March 1994 and sentenced to life imprisonment for his alleged role in the killing of Danny Sham'un and his family in 1990 and for the 1994 bombing of a church in Jounieh. For details on irregularities in the Ja'ja trials, see Amnesty International, "Lebanon, Human Rights Developments and Violations", 9 October 1997.

<sup>94</sup> The gathering was named after the Metn village where it first convened, with the blessing of Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir. Other prominent members include Amin Gemayel, Dory Sham'un (leader of the National Liberal Party), Tawfiq Hindi (adviser to Samir Ja'ja, imprisoned leader of the Lebanese Forces) and respected individuals such as Samir Franjieh (a left-wing intellectual) and former diplomat Simon Karam.

respect. Its relations with Syria and Hizbollah have been strained (General Aoun in particular testified before the U.S. Congress in favour of anti-Syrian sanctions), although members meet with Hizbollah's leadership.

Finally, some groups in the opposition transcend sectarian lines. These include the smaller Democratic Renewal Movement, established in July 2001 by a group of politicians and activists including parliamentarians Nassib Lahoud (a cousin but critic of the President) and Musbah al-Ahdab, the first major Sunni politician to join the opposition. Their party -- as close to a version of Lebanese social democrats as exists -- has staked out a centrist position, initially criticizing Syria's role in moderate terms, and focusing on less contentious issues, such as good governance, economic reform and respect for the Taef Accord. The Democratic Left Movement (DLM) is a loose gathering of activists from various communities. Established in October 2004 to oppose "the illegal extension of the mandate of the political class", it has brought together former members of the Lebanese Communist Party and other left-wing activists.<sup>95</sup> It also calls for more balanced Lebanese-Syrian relations, arguing that the root causes of foreign pressures on both countries need to be removed. In accordance with its left-wing and Arab nationalist leanings, it has emphasised support for the Palestinians and resistance against Israel in south Lebanon as well as opposition to U.S. regional policies.

On 13 December 2004, these opposition groups issued their first joint statement, denouncing Lahoud's extension as well as the role of Syria's intelligence services and calling for respect for Lebanon's "right to self-determination". The statement, known as the Bristol Declaration, was signed by a remarkably diverse array of organisations and parties, Christian and Muslim, right- and left-wing, many of which had barely been on speaking terms, and some of which had violently clashed during the wars of the 1980s.<sup>96</sup> At first behind the scenes,

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<sup>95</sup> DLM founding statement cited in *An-Nahar*, 6 October 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Youth movements and activists played an important role in bringing together the heretofore fragmented opposition. As late as 18 November 2004, Maronite activists sympathetic to Aoun's current and to the Lebanese Forces on the one hand and left-wing protesters on the other still marched separately. "During these demonstrations, people met and debated. We decided we could have a much bigger impact by working together, and we started to push for this". Crisis Group interview with student activist of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005. According to him, the first step toward unity among youth movements took place during American University student elections, when opposition candidates formed a single list and defeated Syrian loyalists. See also, *An-Nahar*, 26 November 2004.

later more publicly, Hariri emerged as the federator of the opposition, a result of his local and international stature, as well as prodigious economic clout.<sup>97</sup>

Hariri's shift toward the opposition was a gradual affair, triggered in the first instance by the electoral bill that was long in the making and finally presented to Parliament on 27 January 2005. According to Taef and the 1990 amended Constitution, the universal and exclusive basis for electoral districts was to be the governorate (*muhafaza*) and was to follow the redrawing (*i'adat taqsim*) of the country's local administrative borders.<sup>98</sup> Because the latter never took place, every election has been preceded by yet another electoral law dividing up the country; this has led to blatant gerrymandering since 1992, essentially allowing Syria to make or break politicians at will.<sup>99</sup> The January 2005 law proposed by the Karameh government carved the country up on the basis of the smallest electoral districts -- *qadha* -- with the important exception of Beirut. Selection of the *qadha* was designed in part to placate the Maronites; given their numbers, the larger *muhafaza* would have forced them to broker alliances with candidates from other communities, forming electoral lists that likely would have included politicians hand-picked by Syria. Other activists welcomed the *qadha* on the ground that it limits the role of money and compels politicians to forge local constituencies, thereby constraining outsiders' ability to interfere.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>The declaration also expressed the desire to "live in peace with Syria in mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and independence". For an English translation, see [www.beirutletter.com](http://www.beirutletter.com). The gathering at which the statement was penned was attended by the Democratic Forum of Habib Sadeq (a secular, Shiite politician from the south), Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, Nassib Lahoud's Democratic Renewal Movement, and the Democratic Left Movement, as well as members of the Qurnret Shehwan grouping. Hariri sent his close associate and former Economy Minister Basil Fleihan, who later sustained severe injuries in the 14 February explosion.

<sup>98</sup> Parliamentary seats also are to be allocated according to sectarian quota, half for Muslims and the other half for Christians. Prior to Taef, the Christians enjoyed a 6:5 majority.

<sup>99</sup> While Taef stipulates the *muhafaza* as the sole basis for drawing voting districts, it also calls for the *muhafazat* administrative division to first undergo a major revision. The absence of the latter offered Lebanese governments a pretext to delay adoption of the *muhafaza* system and propose instead short-term, stopgap electoral divisions. See Reinoud Leenders, *Divided We Rule*, op. cit. On gerrymandering in Lebanon's parliamentary elections in 1992 and 1996, see Tony 'Atalla, *Taqniyyat at-Tazwir al-Intikhabi wa Sibul Mukafahatiha*, (Beirut, 1996). For the 2000 elections, see Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies, *Al-Intikhabat an-Niyabiyya fi Lubnan 2000*, (Beirut, 2002).

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview with Lebanese activist, Beirut, April 2005.

The *qadha* system is not without its many detractors. The choice of narrow voting districts was seen as dividing the opposition, heightening sectarianism and increasing re-election chances of pro-Syrian Christians enjoying limited national popularity but some local support, including in the Zahrani and Baalbek areas.<sup>101</sup> But whereas most non-Maronite opposition groups appeared willing to overlook these objections, the opposition unanimously opposed the proposed division of Beirut as a transparent attempt to deprive Hariri of his expected landslide victory in the capital.<sup>102</sup> Other objections included the fact that the bill kept in place draconian and widely criticised media restrictions during election time.<sup>103</sup>

Hariri's assassination, far from undermining or intimidating the opposition, emboldened it. Convinced of the Baathist regime's responsibility, it closed ranks in demanding Syria's prompt withdrawal. On 16 February 2005, hundreds of thousands poured into the streets of downtown Beirut to bid an emotional farewell to the former Prime Minister. The crowds reached far beyond Hariri's loyalists and those who, over the years, had benefited from his largesse and generosity. In an unprecedented act of inter-confessional unity, they included Druze notables, Sunni religious sheikhs and Christian activists. Referring to the country's three principal confessions, the following words were written beneath a giant picture of the slain leader: "We are all with you Rafiq. All of us, Muhammad, Tony, 'Ali -- we are all Lebanon." Rich and poor, wearing Western garb or dressed in conservative Muslim attire, residents of Beirut and inhabitants of remote towns like 'Akkar, all --

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<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview with Walid Fakhr ad-Din, Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, 8 April 2005. Paradoxically, the system also would hurt loyalists in the south and in Mount Lebanon.

<sup>102</sup> According to the 1960 law, Beirut (which constitutes a single *qadha*), was divided into districts. The January 2005 proposal would have gerrymandered these districts and resulted in the dispersal of Hariri's Sunni constituency. Hariri would not have stood a chance in the first, predominantly Shiite-Armenian district (due to the inclusion of the predominantly Christian Rmayl area in the second district) while he would have had to forge electoral alliances with non-Sunni politicians in the other two districts (due to the removal of the primarily Sunni areas of Mina al-Hosn and 'Ayn al-Mrayseh from the second district and their inclusion in, respectively, the first and third district). See *Al-Hayat*, 27 January 2005.

<sup>103</sup> Article 68 of the election law of 2000 imposes a complete ban on election propaganda during the campaign and election period. The regulation was invoked in the June 2002 by-election for a vacant seat in the Metn region to close down Murr Television (MTV). The owner of MTV, Gabriel Murr, ran on an opposition ticket against his niece and sister of the Interior Minister, Myrna Murr. For details see Gary Gambill, "Objectives of the MTV Closure and Ensuing Crackdown", in *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, October 2002.

with the exception of political representatives of the Shiite community -- came together.

For long-time observers of the Lebanese scene, images of overt defiance of the powerful neighbour were without precedent. Protestors scribbled comments on a large banner that hung in front of the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque, Hariri's final resting place: "Syria, get out, we hate you!", "Syria, who's next?", "No more Syrian fascism in Lebanon!", "Bashar, we have had enough!", "Yes to Lebanese sovereignty, no to Syria's prison!". Speaking hours after Hariri's death, a Lebanese analyst concluded: "This day marks the end of Syria's military presence in Lebanon".<sup>104</sup> Syria's allies in the government were the targets of similar expressions of contempt. Government officials, told by members of Hariri's family not to attend the funeral, could only despair from afar at signs of their rapidly dwindling credibility.<sup>105</sup> "Hariri's assassination broke a long period of fear and silence", remarked a student activist.<sup>106</sup>

The swift and at times opportunistic alignment behind Hariri's memory and against Syria by Lebanon's political class -- many of whom had only recently castigated the former prime minister and shown loyalty to Damascus -- did not go unnoticed.<sup>107</sup> Politically, however, the winds were clearly and rapidly turning against Syria and the Lebanese government. Such polarisation may or may not have been what Hariri intended -- occasional albeit unconfirmed rumours evoked his hope of once again serving as broker between Syria and its Lebanese critics,<sup>108</sup> but his murder left no choice. Partisans and family, led by his sister Bahia, openly joined the opposition. The Jama'a al-Islamiyya, a Sunni Islamist grouping, quit the pro-Syrian bloc of Ayn at-Tineh (led by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri) to become part of the opposition as well.<sup>109</sup> More broadly, Sunnis, while still harbouring

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<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, 14 February 2005.

<sup>105</sup> Those government officials who spoke about the events hardly helped matters. Minister of State Albert Mansur remarked that "any political slogan raised in the presence of a dead body has no meaning", a comment that only further enraged large segments of the public. The *Daily Star*, 18 February 2005.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 March 2005.

<sup>107</sup> In the words of one activist, "Who are all these eleventh hour converts? Weeks ago, they were saying the exact opposite of what they fervently swear today. Even political opportunism should know some bounds. These people have no dignity!" Crisis Group interview, March 2005. A political commentator half-seriously called for an "intifadah within the intifadah" to rid the opposition of those who until recently had been Syria's staunchest allies. Samir Kassir in *An-Nahar*, 1 April 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese official, February 2005.

<sup>109</sup> *An-Nahar*, 26 February 2005.

memories of bitter and violent conflict with the country's Maronites, made common cause with the anti-Syrian front after the death of their leading representative. "[Many] Sunnis have long felt that they always paid the price for Lebanese opposition to Syria and remember the string of killings of Sunni politicians in the 1980s. In this sense, Hariri's murder was a harsh reminder".<sup>110</sup>

Upping the ante, on 18 February 2005 the opposition jointly issued a declaration announcing a "democratic and peaceful *intifadah* for independence" to continue until all of its immediate demands were met: an impartial investigation into Hariri's killing; the ousting of all Lebanese security and intelligence chiefs; and the resignation of Karameh's government.<sup>111</sup> When parliament gathered on 28 February to hold a vote of confidence in the government, thousands of protestors ignored an official ban and rallied at Martyr Square, while a strike crippled large parts of the country. "So this is what a fin-de-régime looks like!", quipped Samir Kassir, a journalist and activist.<sup>112</sup> That same day, and before members of the predominantly pro-Syrian Parliament cast their votes, Karameh announced he was stepping down. In the words of a demonstrator, "during our first demonstrations we were sceptical about our ability to make a real difference. Now that we have toppled Karameh, we feel we can change things".<sup>113</sup>

The massive turnout for the 8 March 2005 Hizbollah rally in downtown Beirut (dwarfing earlier demonstrations) set back the opposition. Beyond the impressive demonstration of the appeal of Hizbollah -- the most powerful and well organised movement of the nation's most populous community, the Shiites -- the rally also signalled that a significant part of the country did not feel represented by the opposition and could not be ignored. The event was at once political -- it strengthened the hand of the pro-Syrian, loyalist camp -- and confessional, raising the prospect of a dangerous sectarian split. His position enhanced, Lahoud rejected opposition demands for an independent inquiry into Hariri's murder and the ousting of security chiefs and asked Karameh to form a new cabinet.

In an important sense, however, the opposition's setback was only temporary. In what had become a battle of numbers, it gathered the largest crowd yet on 14 March,

exceeding most expectations.<sup>114</sup> The rally served another significant function: in earlier opposition demonstrations, the bulk of participants appeared to be young, middle class Maronites, earning them the mocking sobriquet of a "Gucci revolution".<sup>115</sup> This time, Sunnis mobilised *en masse*, coming from villages throughout Lebanon, joining Christians and Druze.<sup>116</sup> Finally, the demonstration appeared to have had an impact, as Syrian intelligence offices vacated their compounds in Beirut's district of Hamra, the seaside area of Ramlet al-Bayda and the downtown Beau Rivage district.<sup>117</sup>

For all their achievements -- and they were considerable -- opposition members could not fully overcome or conceal the differences which both reflected past divisions and prefigured future ones. United on certain key demands -- first, the question of Lahoud's extension, then, following Hariri's assassination, the request for an international investigation, the resignation of Lebanon's security chiefs and the withdrawal of Syrian troops -- various components of the opposition are divided on others. This has hurt their effectiveness and given the government and Syria manoeuvring room.

The opposition is an amalgamation of groups with very different pasts -- some long-standing opponents of Syria's presence and others that welcomed and worked with it from the start; some who had rejected Taef and others who had not -- and at times very different agendas. Differences first involved views on Resolution 1559, the question of Lahoud's resignation and attitudes toward Syria.<sup>118</sup> Whereas Aounists and some other Maronite groups openly backed the Security Council measure and thanked the U.S. for pressuring Syria, Jumblatt took a more cautious line, in particular by objecting to 1559's provision concerning the disarmament of all armed groups (read: of Hizbollah) and at first suggesting Syria could remain in the eastern Bekaa region of Lebanon as a deterrent against possible Israeli operations.<sup>119</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 3 March 2005.

<sup>111</sup> Agence France-Presse, 18 February 2005.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 28 February 2005. A Qurnet Shehwan activist noted: "The wall of fear has been broken. I have never seen this before", Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 28 February 2005.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview with demonstrator at Martyr Square, 28 February 2005.

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<sup>114</sup> According to observers, Hizbollah attracted some 500,000 demonstrators; the 14 March 2005 demonstration is said to have brought together close to 800,000. All such estimates should be treated with caution, however. See Agence France-Presse, 14 March 2005.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese analysts and activists, March 2005.

<sup>116</sup> Reflecting their routes and arrival time, Christians assembled on the east side of Martyr Square, Sunni Muslims on the west side, and Druze in the middle.

<sup>117</sup> See *An-Nahar*, 16 March 2005.

<sup>118</sup> Jumblatt, for example, had been a pillar of the Lebanese-Syrian relationship, along with Hariri until differences emerged in the late 1990s, in particular over Syria's selection of Lahoud.

<sup>119</sup> At the annual conference of his Progressive Socialist Party, Jumblatt expressed support for Hizbollah's resistance activities until Israel withdraws from the Shab'a farms. While calling for

Jumblatt initially urged President Lahoud's resignation, while Maronite groups followed Patriarch Sfeir's view that because the president must by law be a Maronite, the matter essentially should be left to that community.<sup>120</sup> That disagreement also reflected more practical political considerations: a new president chosen by the existing parliament likely would be more moderate than one selected by the future assembly, where Aounists in particular expected to fare well.<sup>121</sup>

When, on 5 March 2005, President Bashar announced an immediate troop redeployment and eventual withdrawal, opposition reactions again were split between those who welcomed a positive gesture (such as Jumblatt) and others who attacked the lack of both a clear timetable and a reference to Syria's intelligence officers in Lebanon.<sup>122</sup> Uncertainty and divisions also surfaced concerning the formation of a new government in the wake of Karameh's resignation and subsequent reappointment, with the opposition torn between refusal to join a cabinet until its demands had been met, and concern that without participating in the political process, it would have no say in shaping the crucial new electoral law.<sup>123</sup> More

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relations with Syria to be "corrected", he also stated they should remain "strong". *An-Nahar*, 29 November 2005.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interviews with opposition members, Beirut, January 2005. The question of Lahoud's fate is a complex one. While the extension of his term was at the origins of the crisis, his resignation prior to the election of a new assembly would mean either that the still pro-Syrian Parliament could elect a pro-Syrian president for a fresh six-year term or that the institutional crisis would be further deepened. "The main argument for keeping Lahoud was not to play into the Syrian game by provoking an institutional deadlock. But not everybody in the opposition agreed. The fact is, should Lahoud deepen his implication in Syrian manoeuvres, we will call for his resignation." Crisis Group interview with member of the opposition, Beirut, 4 March 2005. Another scenario feared by the opposition was that, should Lahoud resign and parliament be unable to elect a successor, the pro-Syrian Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, would become caretaker president in accordance with the Constitution. Crisis Group interview with adviser to Lebanese opposition parliamentarian, Beirut, 4 March 2005. Officials of Jumblatt's party claimed the Patriarch wanted to avoid the appearance of a Druze leader toppling a Maronite president. Crisis Group interview with politburo member of the Progressive Socialist Party, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese analysts, March 2005.

<sup>122</sup> Former Lebanese president and member of the opposition Amin al-Jumayil described Bashar's announcement as "much ado about nothing". Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, 7 March 2005. Jumblatt's more conciliatory comments were made on *Al-Jazeera*, 7 March 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Jibrán Tweini, a prominent and Greek Orthodox member of the Qurnet Shehwan and editor of the daily *An-Nahar*, called the reappointment "an insult to the Lebanese public and

recently, differences have become apparent on the question of the electoral law. Such paralysis plays into the hands of the government, which has been intent on delaying the process while blaming the opposition for inflexible and unworkable demands -- the threatened result being an institutional vacuum with no government, no electoral law, no parliament and an at best contested president.<sup>124</sup>

While differences in a coalition as vast and diverse as the opposition are to be expected -- and while to date its unity has far exceeded expectations -- they are cause for concern given the country's history of domestic strife, sectarian conflict and outside manipulation. Tactical variations cover deeper strategic disagreements on internal power sharing, future relations with Syria and Israel, and Hizbollah's fate, and these are likely to surface anew if the opposition comes to power. The first test would likely be the election of a new president. Some opposition members do not conceal their anxiety at the sight of some Maronites acting "as if they were inheriting a country they lost fifteen years ago, ignoring the vast demographic and political changes that have occurred since".<sup>125</sup> Others predict a reawakening of communal demands and grievances, extending from calls for greater power from the underrepresented Shiites to calls for a more federalist structure from outnumbered Maronites.<sup>126</sup> Heightened tensions and divisions also likely will be triggered by U.S. pressure for Hizbollah's disarming and for regime change in Syria.

Banking precisely on the re-emergence of such deep-seated differences and on the long-established tradition of Lebanese politics, a senior member of the Lahoud camp expressed confidence that -- despite the massive anti-Syrian demonstrations, international pressure, and even Syria's partial withdrawal -- the tide would turn once again:

It is nice to see and hear this talk from the opposition about independence, especially for ordinary people. "We are going to liberate Lebanon", they say, but the country is divided. Don't be fooled. That's a fact. And my belief is

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another illustration of the Lebanese authorities subservience to Syria's will". *An-Nahar*, 10 March 2005. The Qurnet Shehwan dubbed it the "second assassination of martyr Rafiq al-Hariri". *As-Safir*, 11 March 2005. Jumblatt for his part hinted that Karameh perhaps was not such a bad choice after all. *Al-Jazeera*, 11 March 2005.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 6 March 2005.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interview with opposition member, March 2005.

<sup>126</sup> A Lebanese analyst suggested that demographic changes and the Iraqi example might spur such calls, Crisis Group interview, April 2005.

that [the opposition's declared campaign for independence] is only 20 per cent of the story. 80 per cent of what is really happening remains undeclared. This is nothing more than a political pact between some political and religious leaders. It won't be long before that breaks down. Believe me, in a few months' time [Maronite opposition groups] will have more problems with Jumblatt than they have with us right now.

The irony is that all of them were part of the system they now say they oppose. They made the system what it is. It won't be long either before the people in the streets are going to realise that. What then? You will have a divided leadership and a disillusioned people. And at the end of the day we have this simple rule in Lebanon. You can't exclude anyone. We have tried that before. So in a few months time, things will be like they were before. We will get back to sharing the cake. If not, if the balance of power tilts to one side, we will be taken somewhere no one really wants and the whole vicious circle [of civil war] will start again.<sup>127</sup>

In the aftermath of the massive 14 March 2005 demonstration, in short, parts of the political situation were clarified but the institutional and confessional ones were not. The opposition's extraordinary success in mobilising the Lebanese people undoubtedly decisively contributed to Syria's decision to redeploy its troops and promise a withdrawal before the end of April. It also helped galvanise the international community and erased any lingering differences concerning Resolution 1559. In the words of a Western diplomat, "Lebanon put itself on the agenda".<sup>128</sup> And yet, there still was no resolution in sight for the governmental and institutional paralysis that followed Hariri's death, with a discredited parliament whose tenure is about to expire, a disputed president, an at best short-term government and continued efforts by loyalists to delay elections by proposing new electoral systems. As worrying, the series of demonstration and counter-demonstration revealed the depth of communal divisions.

## C. THE SHIITE COMMUNITY, HIZBOLLAH AND THE OPPOSITION

### 1. Shiites on the margins

As Jumblatt supporters marched alongside their former Maronite foes, and as pictures of a slain Sunni politician covered walls and shops in the primarily Christian Beirut quarter of Ashrafiyyeh, it was clear the opposition

movement transcended critical sectarian fault lines. Shiite leaders and community members also expressed genuine shock and grief at Hariri's assassination. In the words of a prominent cleric:

This crime made every Lebanese heart bleed, Shiites included. With Hariri's death, we lost not just a Sunni politician but a real Lebanese, Arab statesman. This is not just talk. It is how we feel. I am sure that many Shiites participated in Hariri's funeral.<sup>129</sup>

Opposition groups also underscored that their leadership and membership included many Shiites, principally within the secular Democratic Left Movement.<sup>130</sup>

By the same token, it would be a gross oversimplification to assume that Shiites do not share resentment toward aspects of Syria's role in Lebanon. According to a March 2005 opinion poll, most Shiites want Damascus to redeploy or withdraw its troops.<sup>131</sup> Criticism is widespread and often vehement. Syria's exports to Lebanon -- whether legal or smuggled -- are seen as having badly damaged its agricultural sector in the predominantly Shiite regions of the Bekaa and south Lebanon because of Syria's state subsidies to its own agricultural sector and significant wage differentials between the two countries.<sup>132</sup> Many Shiite Lebanese workers also blame their less well paid Syrian counterparts for taking low-skill jobs from them.<sup>133</sup> Syria's closest allies -- chiefly Nabih Berri's Amal -- are

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<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 March 2005. A Zogby poll confirmed that a majority of Lebanese from all confessional groups were "angered", "sad", or "shocked" by Hariri's killing. See Zogby International, 7 March 2005.

<sup>130</sup> An oft-cited example is that of Habib Sadeq, a left-wing Shiite politician. Sadeq ran on a list against Hizbollah and Amal in the 2000 parliamentary elections. He and his allies garnered over a third of Shiite votes in south Lebanon. See <http://www.libanvote.com> "It's a myth that Hizbollah and Amal control all the Shiites. They never received more than 60 per cent of the Shiite vote. Many Shiite leaders and prominent activists either joined or are close to the opposition, like Habib Sadeq, Hassan Amin [a writer] and the As'ad family". Crisis Group interview with leader of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005.

<sup>131</sup> 24.6 per cent of Shiite respondents said they preferred "a complete and immediate withdrawal"; another 39.2 per cent preferred a redeployment to the Bekaa. Roughly 36 per cent said they "do not support the withdrawal". *As-Safir*, 11 March 2005.

<sup>132</sup> Official data is unavailable. However, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) described Lebanon as "Syria's largest unofficial trade partner" in agricultural goods. See FAO, "Syrian Agriculture at the Crossroads", Rome 2003.

<sup>133</sup> Since the 1990s, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) has controlled the Lebanese Labour Ministry, allegedly to ensure entry of Syrian low-skilled workers. See Kamal Dib in *An-Nahar*, 8 March 2005.

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<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 9 March 2005.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 March 2005.

often seen as the worst perpetrators of nepotism and corruption.<sup>134</sup>

Yet, for the most part, Shiites do not feel represented by the opposition, nor do they echo its demands. While neither Hizbollah nor Amal can be said to reflect the views of the community as a whole, they clearly are its strongest organisations. Hizbollah in particular is by far the best organised and most disciplined (some would say the only organised and disciplined) of any Lebanese movement, with powerful resonance among Shiites.

Differences between Shiites and other Lebanese communities were manifest from the outset. The day after Hariri's assassination, virtually all Beirut was deserted, and virtually all its shops and businesses were closed. However, in Shiite-dominated ad-Dahyeh -- in the southern suburbs -- life went on as usual, even as its residents expressed disgust over the killing.<sup>135</sup> The discrepancy did not reflect indifference at Hariri's death, but contrasting assessments of its political impact. Harsh anti-Syrian denunciations were read as ominous signs in a regional context marked by efforts to destabilise Syria, curb and ultimately dismantle Hizbollah, strengthen Israel and weaken the Shiites. Revulsion at how quickly former Syrian allies had switched sides was widely shared, even among non-affiliated Shiite clerics and observers:

Look at the ways they express themselves. So harsh, so immoral. Many Shiites say that Jumblatt lacks *karama* (dignity). He comes across as saying, "You [the Syrians] came here, we welcomed you, we shared meals together, we helped each other out in difficult times" -- and then he turns around and becomes a bitter enemy. That is unethical. Ordinary Shiites are sensitive to this. It fuels their suspicions.<sup>136</sup>

Many Shiites interviewed by Crisis Group expressed concern that if the opposition had its way, future Israeli "aggression" would go unchecked.<sup>137</sup> "People in the

south suffered because of Israel and don't want this to happen again".<sup>138</sup> Against this background, U.S. support for the opposition is read as confirmation of a dangerous conspiracy.<sup>139</sup> While Jumblatt's behaviour is explained as naïveté or irresponsible willingness to gamble with the country's future,<sup>140</sup> Maronites are suspected of far worse. Memories of Israeli/Maronite cooperation during the civil war remain vivid, Maronites are perceived as having been indifferent to the plight of Shiites during the occupation of south Lebanon,<sup>141</sup> and the current situation is seen as a natural extension of that hated past. Resorting to a highly charged sectarian analysis, a journalist specialising in Shiite affairs asserted:

It brings back memories we would rather forget. Consider the last 25 years of Christian [Maronite] politics. They supported the South Lebanon Army [a pro-Israeli militia in south Lebanon that was dissolved in 2000], and they followed the Kata'ib and the Lebanese Forces, who fostered ties with Israel. These people don't care about the people of south Lebanon. To them only [Maronite-Druze] Mount Lebanon is important.<sup>142</sup>

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aggression. In this region, one never knows when this will be needed again. If Sharon finds a reason to attack us, he will do it. For example, when a bomb goes off in Tel Aviv, we may have to face Israeli strikes. Mind you, when Syria wasn't here in the early 1970s, Israel bombed and killed in Lebanon too". Interview with Lebanese journalist specialising in Shiite affairs, Beirut, 2 March 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> In discussions with Shiites, Crisis Group found widespread anti-U.S. sentiment. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, February-April 2005. However, opposition members suggested that recent regional development -- in particular the convergence of interests between Iraqi Shiites and the U.S. -- could affect such views. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 April 2005. A prominent Shiite cleric suggested likewise. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>140</sup> Shiites give Jumblatt high marks for his earlier opposition to Israeli military actions in Lebanon, and he generally is seen as a patriot. "It is easier to silence [imprisoned Lebanese Forces leader] Samir Ja'ja and Amin Gemayel by saying 'you were Israeli agents'. But that doesn't mean that we see Jumblatt's current position as serving our interests", Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist specialising in Shiite affairs, Beirut, 2 March 2005.

<sup>141</sup> "Among Shiites, there is strong distrust of the Maronite groups within the opposition. They say, 'haven't you seen the pictures of [veteran Maronite leaders] Samir Ja'ja and Michel Aoun they carry during the demonstrations?'" Crisis Group interview with prominent Shiite cleric, Beirut, 4 March.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis group interview in Beirut, 2 March 2005. Many residents in Shiite districts of Beirut expressed similar views. Crisis Group interviews in Haret Hreik and Jnah (Beirut), March 2005.

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<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interview with Shiite cleric, Beirut, March 2005.

<sup>135</sup> Asked to explain this, a shopkeeper in Haret Hreik (a district of ad-Dahyeh) said: "Residents of other regions are rich and we aren't. We can't afford to close shop". Another suggested Israel was to blame and remarked: "The assassination is horrible but not any more than Israel's other killings of Lebanese leaders for as long as we can remember. We didn't go on strike then either". Crisis Group interviews, Haret Hreik (Beirut), 15 February 2005. According to a poll carried out by the Beirut Centre for Research and Information, 90.6 per cent of Shiite respondents believed that "American-Israeli agencies" were behind Hariri's killing. *As-Safir*, 11 March 2005.

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview with eminent Shiite cleric, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>137</sup> "Hizbollah clearly provides protection against Israeli

In contrast, of course, Hizbollah is widely seen as the only genuinely patriotic movement, and one that paid a high price for resisting Israel.<sup>143</sup>

Moreover, observers of Shiite affairs point out that many community members suspect opposition Maronite leaders of seeking to reverse the community's relative political gains resulting from Taef.<sup>144</sup>

Shiites fear that Syria's withdrawal will jeopardise political gains they made with Syrian help since Taef. Syria means something special for Shiites, even though not all Shiites are happy about Syria's role in Lebanon, and not all Shiites support Amal or Hizbollah.<sup>145</sup>

Another Shiite observer echoed this view:

Rightly or wrongly, the fear is that the Maronite political establishment will benefit from their current international support and restore an influence disproportionate to their demographic weight, as was the case prior to the Lebanese wars.<sup>146</sup>

This combination of wariness concerning the opposition's intentions, mixed feelings regarding Syria and deep concern about the future has resulted in ambivalent and

at times conflicting Shiite attitudes toward the opposition. Those setting off to join the 8 March pro-Hizbollah rally told Crisis Group that they were going to protest "U.S. interference in Lebanon and its campaign against Syria", and they denounced the opposition for "shamelessly exploiting the U.S.-Israeli aggression".<sup>147</sup> Yet, they simultaneously expressed deep aversion toward Syrians in general and held out the hope that Syria would leave Lebanon as soon as possible.<sup>148</sup> Some young Hizbollah supporters even told organisers of the opposition's picket-line at Martyr Square, "our hearts are with you but we can't join".<sup>149</sup> In the words of a Lebanese journalist covering Shiite affairs:

I would love to see the Syrians leave today -- but with a political understanding concerning how we would protect their strategic interests in Lebanon and with the withdrawal taking place pursuant to Taef and not as a result of international pressures.<sup>150</sup>

## 2. Hizbollah under pressure

In July 2003, Crisis Group described Hizbollah as a "rebel without a cause", and "an organisation torn between its national status and its resistance movement identity; "perplexed by recent developments and still struggling to find its footing. Perhaps more than ever since its establishment in 1984, the organisation's purpose and fate hang in the balance".<sup>151</sup> Directly responding to that Crisis Group briefing, Nawwaf Mussawi, the movement's foreign relations director, listed "ten causes" that, in his view, were still worth "rebelling for", including the plight of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails and Lebanon's access to the Wazzani River's water resources. He concluded, "if Hizbollah did not exist, it would have to be created".<sup>152</sup>

At the time, Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from South Lebanon had begun to chip away at its *raison d'être*, but Hizbollah's leadership still believed it could opt for a wait-and-see attitude rather than fully integrate into Lebanon's scene by becoming a run-of-the-mill political party, "postponing an inevitably wrenching internal debate and banking on future developments in Iraq and on the Israeli-Palestinian front that, by radicalising the region, might renew either Hizbollah's purpose or its patrons' strength".<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> "Who are they to suggest that we aren't real patriots because we do not fully support the opposition? Didn't Hizbollah and the Shiites pay the highest price for getting the Israelis out?" Crisis Group interview with Shiite intellectual and left wing activist in Beirut, 8 March 2005.

<sup>144</sup> The Taef Accord of 1989 was a blueprint for Lebanon's political system. Adopted as Lebanon's new constitution in 1990, its provisions have guided the country's post-civil war political setup. For Muslims in general and Shiites in particular, Taef redressed past sectarian discrimination, giving them enhanced parliamentary and governmental representation. See Joseph Mailla, *The Document of National Understanding: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1992); Albert Mansur, *al-Inqilab 'ala at-Ta'if* (Beirut, 1993); and Albert Mansur, *Mawt Jumhuriya* (Beirut, 1994). That said, the reforms deriving from Taef have fallen short of accurately translating Shiites' demographic weight into political influence. Shiites, who constitute 26.2 per cent of the total registered electorate, are allocated fewer parliamentary seats than the significantly smaller Maronite community. Lebanese Interior Ministry, April 2005. The inequity likely is greater if one takes into account the fact that the minimum electoral age is set at 21, which disadvantages the younger Shiite population. According to Lebanon's population registry, the Shiites' total population share is 29.5 per cent as compared to 20.5 per cent for Maronites. (As noted above, these figures are themselves very rough approximates.)

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview with Shiite cleric, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview with Shiite intellectual and left wing activist, Beirut, 8 March 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview in Beirut, 8 March 2005.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group interview with student activist of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°7, *Hizbollah: Rebel Without A Cause?*, 30 July 2003., p. 1.

<sup>152</sup> *As-Safir*, 21 August 2003.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah*, op. cit., p. 1.



Instead, a string of events have only further destabilised the movement, narrowed its options and pressed it to make a clear decision on its future role. On Iraq, Hizbollah increasingly is torn between its strong opposition to the U.S. and the decision by Iraqi Shiites to work with coalition forces.<sup>154</sup> The tension is all the greater given the appalling nature of insurgent attacks against Shiites in Iraq as well as the leading moderating role played by Shiite clerics from Najaf, who enjoy considerable following among Lebanese co-religionists.<sup>155</sup> Continued opposition toward U.S. policy in Iraq and suggestions of support for the armed insurrection have thus become increasingly difficult to explain to the movement's Shiite constituency.<sup>156</sup> In turn, this tension has strengthened the pull of non-violent accommodation -- as opposed to violent confrontation -- with the West.

In Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas's election as president coupled with renewed efforts to forge a ceasefire has both reduced Hizbollah's ability to intervene and increased the cost of intervention. As U.S., Israeli and even Palestinian sources have put the spotlight on the movement's activities in the West Bank, Hizbollah must think twice before undertaking action that might trigger a strong and concerted international response. Evidence that this is having an effect can be seen in the organisation's attempts to deny any involvement in Palestinian anti-Israeli attacks, in sharp contrast to past practice. Whereas Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah once made no secret of the movement's active support for militant Palestinian groups and praised Ghalib Awali (a Hizbollah security official assassinated in Beirut in July 2004) for having "devoted the last years of [his] life to helping our brothers in occupied Palestine",<sup>157</sup> the movement now strongly denies providing any such

help.<sup>158</sup> According to a Hizbollah spokesperson interviewed by Crisis Group, allegations to the contrary merely "serve a large campaign directed at European countries to add us to their terrorism list and distort our image worldwide....We provide moral support to the Palestinians for their just cause on a media level only". He denied that Hizbollah wittingly sent funds to suicide bombers or their kin, claiming that it collects funds "for the intifada", which are then transferred to Palestinians who "give them to those in need".<sup>159</sup>

The brewing crisis in Lebanon over Syria's role is the most recent, and arguably most consequential of developments, for it directly calls into question Hizbollah's dual identity as an internationally-oriented armed movement and a national socio-political organisation principally representing the Shiite community, and because it strains one of its core relationships -- the one with Syria.

What each successive event has in common is that it has made it incrementally more difficult for the movement to cater at the same time to all constituencies, including Lebanese society, Shiites, Syria, and Iran.<sup>160</sup> But the current crisis presents the sharpest dilemma yet: to forcefully back Syria in the hope of continuing to benefit from its material and political protection but at the risk of tarnishing nationalist credentials, alienating many supporters, who resent the Syrian presence, and jeopardising its future status should the opposition prevail; or to normalise its status on the Lebanese scene at the risk of undermining its international standing, losing its Syrian and Iranian allies and either becoming vulnerable to U.S. and Israeli pressure or, after laying down its arms, being cut down to size as an ordinary political party.<sup>161</sup> Under either scenario, Hizbollah would find itself more exposed than ever before to either domestic or international pressure to forsake its military nature.

The movement long resisted the option of normalisation out of ideological conviction and pragmatic consideration. It is strongly opposed by those in the leadership who feel that Hizbollah's mission goes beyond representing the country's Shiites; moreover, its military arsenal and alliance with Syria and Iran help deter Israel, while its relative distancing from Lebanese state institutions provides the Jewish state with less obvious targets for attack.<sup>162</sup> A part in Lebanese politics has at best mixed

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<sup>154</sup> For Hizbollah's initial hostility to the U.S. in Iraq see *ibid.*, pp. 10-12. Hizbollah's weekly acknowledged that the 30 January 2005 elections constituted a "first step" toward Iraqis taking "charge of their own affairs and drawing the future of their country", *Al-Intiqad*, 7 February 2005.

<sup>155</sup> As Crisis Group explained in a briefing in the immediate aftermath of the war, "developments in Iraq may well have repercussions on intra-Shiite relations in Lebanon and, therefore, on Hizbollah's fortunes". For a discussion of the tensions raised by Najaf's re-emergence as a centre of Shiite authority, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>156</sup> In early February 2005, Iraqi Interior Minister Falah an-Naqib claimed that eighteen Lebanese members of Hizbollah had been arrested, presumably for aiding insurgents. Hizbollah issued a strong denial, saying: "the whole world is against us. We can't afford to hurt our image by having a presence in Iraq". Hizbollah press statement 9 February 2005; also Crisis Group interview with Hizbollah spokesperson Hussein Nabulsi, Beirut, 16 February 2005.

<sup>157</sup> Cited by *Al-Manar* TV, 19 July 2004.

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<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interview with Hizbollah spokesperson Hussein Nabulsi, Beirut, 16 February 2005.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> On this, see Hussein Agha, *Bitterlemons*, 23 September 2004.

<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese analyst, March 2005.

<sup>162</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

appeal, useful in terms of protecting the Shiite community, but harmful insofar as these politics typically have been petty, corrupt, and wholly dominated by traditional patron-client relationships.<sup>163</sup> As a result, and while it has been active in parliament, Hizbollah has not participated in any post-war government. Until now, Hizbollah has defended its dual mission, arguing there was no contradiction since both its civilian and military activities were aimed at establishing a "resistance society" (*mujtama' al-muqawama*) that could better withstand hostile onslaughts.<sup>164</sup>

The uncertainty and perils of Hizbollah's current predicament have translated into cautious manoeuvring designed to create some distance from Damascus without breaking ties, preserving its legitimacy and place on the domestic political scene while reminding all of its strength and special status -- and therefore, of its continued need to bear arms.<sup>165</sup> Its goal (only partially met) appears to be to project itself as the sole credible bridge between pro-Syrian and opposition elements.<sup>166</sup> An opposition member says, "Hizbollah is in the loyalist bloc, but tries not to be like the other loyalists. It does not want to appear to be directed by remote control" by a foreign hand.<sup>167</sup> For one thing, Nasrallah's relations with Hariri differed markedly from Bashar's; the former prime minister regularly met with Hizbollah's chief and made

clear his opposition to the movement's disarming.<sup>168</sup> Significantly, Hizbollah took some time prior to organising its own public demonstration and, rather than openly attack the opposition for its anti-Syrian stance, urged all parties to work in the interest of national unity. Although party members voted for Lahoud's extension, Hizbollah was careful to justify this as stemming from "strategic reasons", and made clear it opposed attempts to "politically isolate Jumblatt".<sup>169</sup> Reacting to the formation of the Karameh government in October 2004, Hizbollah registered "a number of reservations regarding the new cabinet",<sup>170</sup> no doubt fearful that the exclusion of much of the country's political class "risked eliminating the degree of national unity required to shield Hizbollah" from outside pressures.<sup>171</sup>

When it finally organised a mass demonstration on 8 March 2005, the speech, slogans and symbols were chosen to project the image of a national -- not partisan -- movement and a message that was sympathetic to Syria without being aligned with it. Lebanese flags, not Hizbollah banners, were on display; and the core slogan was opposition to outside interference and "gratitude" toward Syria, which most read as a way to bid its troops an honourable farewell rather than urge them to stay.<sup>172</sup> And, in what some interpreted as a noteworthy if carefully worded statement, Nasrallah explained that "disarming the resistance will be up for discussion, and we expect our partners [in the opposition] to offer us alternatives to defend the country and people".<sup>173</sup>

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Hizbollah justifies continued resistance by citing in particular frequent Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereign territory. It most recently claimed that Israel has transgressed Lebanese territory 9,409 times since the May 2000 withdrawal, principally by air. See *Al-Intiqad*, 3 January 2005. The UN Secretary General has expressed his "profound concern" over Israeli air violations. See "Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (for the period from 21 July 2004 to 20 January 2005)", 20 January 2005.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>164</sup> Hizbollah's "service-oriented networks ... are part and parcel of Hizbollah's notion of resistance ... and cannot be seen in opposition to the organisation's military agenda". It sees its armed and socio-political activities as complementary efforts to establish a holistic 'Islamic sphere' (*al-hala al-Islamiyya*). Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, "Know thy enemy: Hizbollah, 'terrorism' and the politics of perception", in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 26, 2005, p. 197.

<sup>165</sup> Nasrallah made clear that so long as there exists a "Lebanese consensus" about the Israeli threat, the country "will need resistance and resistance weapons", *al-Manar*, 6 March 2005.

<sup>166</sup> "Hizbollah's position has always been unique. Until recently, it saw itself as part of the opposition but without being anti-Syrian. Now it is pro-Syrian but it doesn't fall into the loyalist camp. So it falls outside all camps and that is precisely how it derives its strength", Crisis Group interview with Amal Saad Ghorayeb, Hizbollah expert, Beirut, 1 April 2005.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interview with PSP politburo member, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

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<sup>168</sup> Hussein Nabulsi, a Hizbollah spokesperson, told Crisis Group that Hariri had pledged that there would be no disarmament were he to once again become prime minister. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 16 February 2005.

<sup>169</sup> Cited in *al-Mustaqbal*, 28 November 2004.

<sup>170</sup> Cited in *An-Nahar*, 29 October 2004.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Beirut, 9 December 2004. Hizbollah likely also found little to rejoice at its rival Nabih Berri's associates being granted a significant role in the government with the ministries of Health and Labour, both of critical importance to low-income groups in the Shiite community. Another Berri associate was given Foreign Affairs. Hizbollah's weekly commented: "The way in which the ministries were distributed ... confirms that the chief concern was a further apportioning [of] state resources and [to] prepare for the next parliamentary elections, rather than to find realistic ways of confronting the foreign campaign". *Al-Intiqad*, 1 November 2005.

<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese analysts, Beirut, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>173</sup> *Al-Manar*, 16 March 2005. That said, Nasrallah also stated the following: "If there is a group in Lebanon that, together with the Lebanese army, people and state provides some kind of security or protection -- it is required to lay down its arms or else be declared a terrorist organisation. We are willing to remain a terrorist organisation for all eternity in the eyes of

In 2003, Crisis Group concluded that Hizbollah would decide whether to become a more conventional political party "only if and when absolutely necessary".<sup>174</sup> While that time has not yet come, it appears to be measurably closer. Recent events have strained the movement's complex balancing game almost, though not quite, to the breaking point. For now, it is banking upon its unique position as prestigious national organisation, dominant representative of the Shiite community, and credible interlocutor to both loyalists and opposition, coupled with the reality that any attempt at forcible disarmament would come at heavy cost, to continue to protect it and allow it to preserve its ambiguous political/military nature. For added measure, its leaders periodically encourage suspicion toward the opposition, dropping references to "some Lebanese opposition parties" with continued links with Israel and to their hidden ambition of walking away from the "state building plan" prescribed by Taef -- in other words, Shiite political emancipation -- and "leap into the unknown."<sup>175</sup>

Should that gambit fail, Hizbollah appears to be counting on the chronic paralysis of Lebanon's post-war institutional set-up and the resurgence of sectarian and political differences within the opposition once its principal goal -- getting the Syrians out -- has been achieved. After Syria's withdrawal, it believes, lofty calls for national unity will give way to political bickering, corruption and institutional gridlock, leaving such highly charged and polarising issues as disarming the "resistance" to yet another day. In the words of a Hizbollah spokesman, "Suppose that Aoun returns to Lebanon. Do you really think he will go to Mukhtara [Jumblatt's residence in the Shuf] to pay his respects and meekly operate under his umbrella? And if Aoun returns and Samir Ja'ja is released, what do you think will happen to the Qurnet Shehwan? They won't even win a single seat in Parliament!"<sup>176</sup>

### 3. The opposition's balancing act

Shiite and Hizbollah concerns did not go unnoticed by the opposition, which quickly realised the need to appease them.<sup>177</sup>

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George Bush, but we are not prepared to give up defending our country, our people's blood, and our honor". Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>175</sup> Hassan Nasrallah on *Al-Manar*, 16 March 2005.

<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interview with Hussein Nabulsi, Beirut, 1 April 2005.

<sup>177</sup> A member of the Qurnet Shehwan acknowledged that this might not have been the case at the outset, evoking the opposition's initial "clumsiness" toward the Shiites. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

- Downplaying Resolution 1559 in favour of Taef. Over time, the opposition increasingly cast its demands in terms of the 1989 Taef Accord (which had called for a redeployment of Syrian military to the Bekaa, followed by a withdrawal), thereby diluting the sense of foreign interference or imposition, lessening Shiite (and Hizbollah) concerns and to some extent softening the blow to Damascus.<sup>178</sup> Emphasizing Taef also is a way of reassuring Shiites that "the political reforms" (i.e. their political emancipation) will remain in force.<sup>179</sup>
- Excluding a separate agreement with Israel. Some opposition leaders also have rejected any suggestion that they would pursue a peace agreement with Israel prior to resolution of the Israeli-Syrian conflict -- as feared by Hizbollah and Syria and as occurred in May 1983 under former President Amin Gemayel.<sup>180</sup> Their goal has been to insulate the Lebanese question as much as possible from broader regional dynamics and tensions. This is all the more important given persistent if uncorroborated reports of contacts between Israel and the opposition and repeated Israeli statements of support for the anti-Syrian movement.<sup>181</sup> A

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<sup>178</sup> "Taef is the only national reconciliation document in the country. All Lebanese groups accept Taef, including even the Aounists", Crisis Group interview with a leader of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005. He had earlier explained: "For us the emphasis on Taef over 1559 comes naturally. We have been campaigning long before this resolution was adopted. It is an exaggeration to reduce our campaign to 1559 and foreign pressures". Crisis Group interview, 24 November 2004. The opposition sought to dismiss the argument that Resolution 1559 employs far more explicit language on the withdrawal of Syrian troops and intelligence agents than Taef. "That is the interpretation [of Syrian loyalists]. But now that Israel no longer occupies South Lebanon, the Syrian presence no longer is justified. Total withdrawal is in the spirit of Taef". Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> "That internal message is extremely important". Crisis Group interview with a leader of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005.

<sup>180</sup> See Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon* (London, 1993), pp. 282-283.

<sup>181</sup> Nasrallah referred to such reports, which appeared in the Israeli media: "They said some Lebanese opposition leaders contacted old friends in the Israeli entity and asked them to help put Israeli pressure on the U.S. administration to continue its policy towards Lebanon and not retreat. I do not accuse any in the opposition, but what the Israeli newspapers revealed needs a clear answer by the opposition", *al-Manar*, 6 March 2005. Hizbollah's weekly magazine similarly commented: "The feelings of delight and joy regarding the occurrences on the Lebanese ground were apparent in the U.S. White House and the Israeli Knesset more than any other place, particularly more than the Lebanese homes which were still overwhelmed

member of Jumblatt's party told Crisis Group, "we are against a peace treaty with Israel before a Syrian-Israeli agreement. The situation is too fragile in Lebanon to have an independent policy toward Israel".<sup>182</sup>

- Engaging with Hizbollah and members of the Shiite community. Again in an effort to mollify Shiite skeptics, leaders of the Democratic Left Movement and the Qurnet Shehwan in particular kept lines of communication open, organising symposia and debates in predominantly Shiite areas.<sup>183</sup> Pro-opposition media likewise provided a platform for Shiite writers.<sup>184</sup>
- Reassuring Hizbollah about its future. Members of the opposition have argued that they are best able to provide Hizbollah with a legitimate, internationally acceptable "Lebanese cover", or protection, against demands that it disarm.<sup>185</sup> In fact, some argue they can provide a better safeguard than Syria: whereas Damascus may choose to "sell out" Hizbollah for its own interests, "we will protect Hizbollah through national unity. Israeli aggression would not be just against Hizbollah, but against Lebanon as a whole".<sup>186</sup> In this, they have sought to distance themselves from the U.S. characterisation of Hizbollah as a "terrorist organisation". Indeed, prior to his death, Hariri had lobbied President Chirac on this issue, emphasizing that inclusion of Hizbollah on the terrorism list would vastly complicate the situation.<sup>187</sup> The opposition made clear that disarming Hizbollah was currently not on its agenda and that, when it would be, this

would be a purely domestic issue to be resolved peacefully through a dialogue involving all Lebanese. Opposition members held several meetings with Hizbollah's leadership to reassure it on this point. Speaking ahead of Hizbollah's mass rally on 8 March, an opposition adviser said:

Hizbollah is getting closer to an agreement with the opposition. Their choices are getting narrower by the day. Hizbollah is caught between three distinct logics. First is the logic of 1559 which says, "dissolve and disarm now under international pressure". Second is the logic of Syria's position, which is at risk of becoming wholly irrelevant or, worse, operate a U-turn if Damascus decides to sacrifice the organisation as the price for a deal with the U.S. Third is the logic of our position: national dialogue and a readiness to tell the U.S. that it must let the future of the resistance remain a Lebanese issue. If I were in Hizbollah's shoes, I would think that ours is the best offer.<sup>188</sup>

- Giving a prominent role to Jumblatt. Partly in order to alleviate fears of renewed Christian dominance, Maronite elements "have deliberately played second fiddle", allowing the Druze leader to become the opposition's most vocal leader<sup>189</sup> -- much to the dismay of other Maronites, who fear Jumblatt is using the opposition's platform to further his own interests.<sup>190</sup>

On more symbolic matters as well, the opposition sought to take account of Shiite sensitivities. Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party urged demonstrators to lower their "triumphalist rhetoric" and use only Lebanese national banners as opposed to the partisan flags that would conjure up unpleasant war-time memories.<sup>191</sup> Based on

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by sadness for the hideous crime that took place in Beirut on 14 February". *Al-Intiqadh*, 7 March 2005.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>183</sup> An opposition student activist explained: "We began working at the grassroots level with young Shiites in the south even before Hariri's death. We organised debates in Nabatiyya where [Democratic Left Movement leader] Elias Atallah and Faris Shweid [a leader of the Qurnet Shehwan] addressed a large audience composed principally of Shiites". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 March 2005. Simon Karam (another Maronite opposition member who has had contacts with Hizbollah) participated in a debate with Shiite intellectuals on the question "what would we do when the Syrians leave?" Crisis Group interview with Simon Karam, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>184</sup> *An-Nahar's* cultural supplement published a series of contributions concerning the opposition and its demands, including a Syrian withdrawal. Eight out of ten authors were Shiites. *Mulhaq an-Nahar*, 27 February 2005.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, March 2005.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group interview with member of opposition Lebanese Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese observers and French officials, March 2005.

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<sup>188</sup> Crisis group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group interview with member of the Qurnet Shehwan, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>190</sup> Crisis Group interview with Aounist activist, Beirut, 7 March 2005.

<sup>191</sup> "Especially after the fall of the Karameh government, we didn't want to engage in provocative behaviour. Jumblatt called for an immediate end to this. He issued a strong call to control our emotions. Most importantly, we contained and condemned racist anti-Syrian discourse, in order not to upset those who still have sympathies for the Syrians, whether in the Shiite or other communities". Crisis Group interview with a leader of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 March 2005. In a similar effort, Samir Kassir stood on a podium at Martyr Square to read a declaration of Syrian intellectuals supporting the Lebanese opposition. "Some in the audience booed. But even the Aounists responded decently. This is about democracy; the

the above, a French official discerned a possible compromise between Hizbollah and the opposition pursuant to which the former would support Syria's withdrawal, lesser (though not zero) Syrian influence, and internationally supervised elections, while the latter would pledge neither to disarm the movement nor reach a separate peace with Israel.<sup>192</sup>

The opposition's moderate and inclusive approach to issues of concern to the Shiite community and to Hizbollah in particular has not gone unnoticed, though underlying fears remain. A prominent Shiite cleric thus conceded that "the opposition is restraining itself right now. It has, remarkably, reverted back to Taef and it is careful to reassure Hizbollah. But I question whether many ordinary Shiites have noticed this shift or that it has removed their fears and apprehensions".<sup>193</sup>

On Hizbollah's part too, the response has been reserved. Undoubtedly, it welcomed opposition signals that disarmament was not on the current agenda, foreign pressures notwithstanding.<sup>194</sup> But future prospects are far less soothing. Hizbollah's leaders understandably question the sustainability of the opposition's stance, particularly if once Syria has withdrawn, the opposition takes control and foreign pressure (for now in check) redoubles.<sup>195</sup> Hizbollah, therefore, puts only limited faith in the promised "Lebanese cover" or peaceful national dialogue as insurance against outside intervention. Though Jumblatt has been emphasising that a change is not in the cards,<sup>196</sup> comments from Michel Aoun, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and Amin Gemayel concerning the need to disarm Hizbollah suggest the opposition's united stance is likely to come under strain.<sup>197</sup>

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opposition movement shouldn't be racist". Crisis Group interview with Samir Kassir, 1 March 2005.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 March 2005.

<sup>194</sup> In a commentary, Hizbollah's weekly wrote: "[The] parties in the Lebanese opposition seem to be persistent in separating their views and actions from the ... course taken by the U.S. and in refusing to tie their demands [and] pressures to U.S. [policies] toward Lebanon and the region". *Al-Intiqad*, 7 March 2005.

<sup>195</sup> Some members of Hizbollah's leadership "view the opposition's assurances about providing 'Lebanese protection' as pure media talk without real consequence". Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 2 March 2005.

<sup>196</sup> Jumblatt made these comments after meeting with Hizbollah leader Nasrallah, *Al-Manar* TV, 29 March 2005.

<sup>197</sup> Cited in *An-Nahar*, 19 March 2005. Gemayel called for Hizbollah to be disarmed immediately after the elections. *Daily Star*, 31 March 2005. A Qurnet Shehwan member explained these calls by noting that Hizbollah is "not serious about engaging in a real dialogue on key issues. Instead they hold demonstrations and embark on sectarian tactics. We answered that by telling them that the issue of their weapons is

In short, the attitude of the international community more than opposition behaviour will shape Hizbollah's actions during this delicate transitional phase. As discussed, France (predictably) and the U.S. (more surprisingly) have put the question of Hizbollah's future on the back burner, albeit in different tones and with differing degrees of conviction. Whereas Paris appears persuaded of the need to integrate Hizbollah (and, therefore, the Shiite community) more fully into the political equation and, to that end, offer reassurances about its future, Washington has been balancing its Lebanon focus with its broader anti-terrorism campaign, leading to often conflicting messages.<sup>198</sup> Pressure from Congress, more hard-line administration officials and groups supportive of Israel also play an important part.<sup>199</sup>

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on the table. So far we have accepted the game of bestowing legitimacy on the Resistance but they keep refusing a real dialogue". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 April 2005.

<sup>198</sup> U.S. officials indicated they would accept a disarmed Hizbollah as a political party in Lebanon. *The New York Times*, 10 March 2005. U.S. envoy David Satterfield explained that "our concern is with Hizbollah's engagement -- globally and regionally -- in violence and terror. That is the concern. Not Hizbollah as a political force in Lebanon". *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2005. At the same time, a U.S. official strongly denied reports of a policy "softening" toward Hizbollah. "We still consider it a terrorist organisation and we will treat it as such". Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2005. Satterfield's subsequent remarks that Hizbollah, together with Syria and Iran, should stop "interfering" in Lebanon's domestic affairs were seen as undercutting his earlier, more welcoming statements. They were angrily dismissed by Hizbollah, which pointed to Washington's own "blatant interference in Lebanon". Crisis Group interviews with Hizbollah spokesperson Hussein Nabulsi, Beirut, 1 April 2005 and with Lebanese observers and journalists, March-April 2005.

<sup>199</sup> On 8 March 2005, members of the House of Representatives introduced the Lebanon and Syria Liberation Act, which describes Syrian policies as a threat to the national security interests of the United States and international peace", and would impose a series of additional sanctions on Syria and authorise the President to provide assistance to "pro-democracy" groups in Syria. H.R.1141. Israel has not let up its efforts to persuade the EU to add Hizbollah to its terrorism list. See *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 11 March 2005. "Israel wants the West to deal with Hizbollah more immediately. Israel is and will be putting pressure on the international community to [designate Hizbollah as a terrorist organisation]". Crisis Group interview with Eyal Zisser, Israeli expert on Syrian affairs, Tel Aviv, 10 March 2005. Europe has sent conflicting signals on this issue. While it so far has resisted U.S. and Israeli pressure on the terrorism list question, the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution characterising Hizbollah as a terrorist organisation. Besides the U.S., Israel, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (which, however, singles out Hizbollah's "external security branch") and, in November 2004, the Netherlands (albeit without real consequence unless and until

Many in the opposition worry about the impact of U.S. ambivalence on Hizbollah's calculations and wish to see clearer indications that Washington will not take the organisation on once Syria is out. From their perspective, the priority should be to ensure that Hizbollah plays a constructive role during the transitional process, that it see its future in terms more of integration within the political system than of its ties to Syria, and that it refrains from violent activity on the Israeli border, while the issue of its disarmament or integration into the Lebanese army is left to a future date and to the Lebanese.<sup>200</sup> As one opposition member who maintains contacts with Hizbollah saw it, "the movement can play a vital role if it is brought into the process: it can help get Syria out peacefully; preserve Lebanon's national unity; and provide a sense of protection against Israel".<sup>201</sup>

In the longer term, steps will have to be taken in accordance with Taef and Resolution 1559 to transform Hizbollah gradually into a disarmed, strictly political organisation. In this context, some opposition members have floated the idea of an Israeli withdrawal from Shab'a after Syria's withdrawal and free and fair Lebanese elections, as a means of exerting further pressure on Hizbollah to abandon any resistance pretence.<sup>202</sup> In the words of a Shiite cleric:

If the Israelis were to move out of Shab'a, that would be the end of the Resistance. Any Shiite, any Lebanese, will accept that. What options will Hizbollah have left? It could either cease its operations or insist on the liberation of Jerusalem. I don't think they will enjoy much popular support for the latter. It is not our responsibility. I would openly speak out and say so.<sup>203</sup>

Na'im Qasem, Hizbollah's deputy-secretary general, suggested that the organisation's disarmament or integration into Lebanon's regular army could be discussed after Israel withdraws from Shab'a.<sup>204</sup> Some specific proposals are further discussed below.

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the EU adds Hizbollah to its terrorism list) have designated Hizbollah a terrorist organisation. Crisis Group interviews in Damascus and Beirut, November-December 2004. France's broadcast regulator banned Hizbollah's *al-Manar* television channel in December after it concluded it was anti-Semitic. The European broadcasting authorities, comprising 25 government watchdogs, also recently took *al-Manar* off the air.<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interview with member of the opposition, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>201</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>202</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, February-March 2005.

<sup>203</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 March 2005.

<sup>204</sup> "We will discuss [Hizbollah's] arms after Shab'a but on condition that a credible alternative is found to protect Lebanon", he said. He specifically mentioned the idea of becoming a kind of reservist army working with Lebanese

### III. MAKING SENSE OF SYRIAN POLICIES

One of the more puzzling aspects of this crisis is the degree to which the regime in Damascus appears to have misread the gravity of the situation and has repeatedly committed missteps that only further intensify its isolation. Two days after Hariri's assassination, for instance, a Syrian journalist remarked that the regime "seems to think nothing unusual has happened. The Syrian state newspapers are reporting on the murder as if it had happened in a remote place in Central Asia".<sup>205</sup> Perhaps best summing up the distinction between the current leadership and that of Hafez al-Asad -- which could be no less inflexible and far more ruthless but had a unique capacity to calibrate its actions and generally appeared to know how far not to go -- another Syrian journalist quipped: "Bashar is doing what his father said, not what he did".<sup>206</sup>

The policies of the Bush administration, far more inflexible and less open to compromise than those Bashar's predecessor faced, are part of the explanation. Still, even taking this into account, the Syrian regime's often baffling behaviour -- from the at times ambivalent, often dismissive, reactions to foreign pressure, through the slighting of old allies, to the braggadocio of official pronouncements -- its perpetual "balancing on the edge of a cliff" (*haffat al-hawiya*)<sup>207</sup> -- require further elucidation. Several different, seemingly inconsistent but to a large extent complementary explanations have been offered.

#### A. NOT READING THE SITUATION WELL ENOUGH: "TIME WILL PROVE US RIGHT"

Syrian officials interviewed over the past several months by Crisis Group confidently predict that, in the end, regional developments -- the insurgency in Iraq, Prime Minister Sharon's policies, the fear of rising Islamic fundamentalism -- will provoke a reappraisal of U.S.

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authorities, adding, "a reservist army doesn't mean the resistance becomes part of the army but it is a formula of co-ordination with the army. It is resistance by another name". *Financial Times*, 7 April 2005. In response, the leader of the Israeli left-wing Yahad party, Yossi Beilin, called on Prime Minister Sharon to withdraw from Shab'a to put Hizbollah to the test. *Ha'aretz*, 8 April 2005.

<sup>205</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 February 2005.

<sup>206</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2005.

<sup>207</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

policy toward their country.<sup>208</sup> Whether driven by "ignorance about the feelings and aspirations of Arabs and Muslims" or by an elaborate "neo-conservative plot to cause chaos in the region and eventually overthrow all Arab regimes",<sup>209</sup> it is said, Washington's "consistently pro-Israeli and anti-Arab"<sup>210</sup> policy is working against its own interests, "building a huge factory for global terrorism",<sup>211</sup> and, therefore, in the longer run will prove "unsustainable".<sup>212</sup> As U.S. policy radicalises popular regional sentiment, and its projects in Iraq and Palestine collapse, the administration will come to terms with the need to deal with the Baathist regime and even to seek its help. "If they don't want to deal with the government of Bashar al-Asad, the alternatives will be al-Qaeda, *Jihadists* and the Islamists generally."<sup>213</sup>

Under this view, the regional situation also considerably constrains Washington's manoeuvring room. Perceived as both militarily and politically overstretched, the U.S. is believed unable to open up yet another front. "The U.S. cannot do what it wishes concerning Syria. It is a complicated game".<sup>214</sup> Nor is the U.S. or the West generally believed to have the requisite staying power in a region where it takes patience and not only power to prevail. This is expressed with particular conviction in the case of Lebanon. The argument is that the Lebanese opposition and the international actors that support it:

...will all be proven wrong. At the end of the day we possess the real influence in Lebanon. We

border the country, we share our resources, there are people crossing the border, and we trade. The Lebanese opposition doesn't understand this: When all foreign powers have left or lost interest, we will remain. We have a geographic strategy, not a transient political strategy like the U.S. and France.<sup>215</sup>

That the Syrian regime has been counting on a strategic turning of the tide is further suggested by its efforts, described above, to forge new alliances as a means of countering the U.S. -- an attempt to demonstrate the absence of an international consensus behind Washington's approach as a first step toward altering it.

Even France's leadership on Resolution 1559 seemingly failed to impress. Damascus acted as if the resolution was merely hortatory and not meant to be implemented,<sup>216</sup> and as if it believed President Chirac's hostility was motivated by material damage (the marginalisation of his friend and benefactor Hariri; the aborted gas deal) and could be mollified by material reward.<sup>217</sup>

## **B. READING THE SITUATION TOO WELL: "WHY GIVE IN WHEN THEY WANT TO TAKE US OUT?"**

In the wake of Hariri's assassination, a well-informed Lebanese observer remarked: "I used to think that the Syrian regime did not understand the situation well enough. Now I am beginning to believe they understand it too well".<sup>218</sup> Far from underestimating the seriousness of U.S. purpose, Damascus arguably grasped it early on, realised that the ultimate goal was either total abnegation or regime change and concluded there was little it could do about it. This appreciation of Washington's objective is widely shared among Syrian and Lebanese observers, including both supporters and critics of the Syrian regime.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Syrian officials in Damascus, November 2004-February 2005.

<sup>209</sup> Crisis Group interview with Imad Shueibi, former foreign policy adviser to President Bashar al-Assad, Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>210</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian diplomat and foreign policy adviser in Damascus, December 2004

<sup>211</sup> Crisis Group interview with Muhammad Habash (Syrian parliamentarian) in Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>212</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian diplomat and foreign policy adviser in Damascus, December 2004. According to Buthania Shaaban, Minister for Emigrant Affairs and former Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Arab public opinion will play a key role in this respect. "If you carry out a real survey among Arabs and ask them what they think of the U.S., you will find that most people see a huge gap between its stated policy and what it is actually doing." Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2004.

<sup>213</sup> Crisis Group interview with Imad Shueibi, Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>214</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian diplomat and foreign policy adviser, Damascus, December 2004. At the same time, Syrian officials or businessmen did not appear overly concerned by the effect of U.S. sanctions. "Their impact is more serious than we initially thought. But it is not alarming as it is alleviated by rising oil prices and growing trade with Iraq". Crisis Group interview with Syrian economist, Damascus, 1 December 2004.

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<sup>215</sup> Crisis Group interview with Imad Shueibi, Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>216</sup> Syrian observers and Western diplomats in Damascus confirm this initial apparent lack of concern over Resolution 1559. Crisis Group interviews in Damascus, December 2004-February 2005.

<sup>217</sup> Maher al-Assad, the president's brother, reportedly visited Paris in early October 2004 to offer lucrative oil and trade deals. Crisis Group interview with European diplomat, Damascus November 2004. See also *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 18 October 2004.

<sup>218</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, February 2005.

<sup>219</sup> In the words of Syrian human rights activist Haytem al-Maleh, "The U.S. army is all around us. They are in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Gulf. This puts us at great risk. There is a

From this perspective, demands concerning the peace process, Iraq or Lebanon are essentially pretexts, used as instruments with which to weaken the regime and, eventually, occasion its collapse. Washington's sudden interest in Lebanon, coming after years of neglect, certainly bolstered this view, as it was seen as a means of depriving Syria of one of its last remaining strategic assets.<sup>220</sup> The result was a collective digging-in of heels, including among more reform-minded officials for whom a more conciliatory approach now took on the appearance of unilateral disarmament. In the words of a Syrian governmental adviser, "Why make concessions when the U.S. raises the banner of regime change?"<sup>221</sup> Instead, the priority became to hold on to its residual cards. Speaking before Hariri's assassination, a former Syrian official put it bluntly:

If the U.S. wants trouble, it can get it. You can take back 600,000 Palestinians in Syria -- all of them terrorists if you insist. If we are forced to withdraw from Lebanon, you also will get what you want: bombs in Beirut, fighting between Amal and Hizbollah, *Jihadists* in 'Akkar, and Palestinians in southern Lebanon. The Christians will get nervous and you'll have a recipe for civil war.<sup>222</sup>

With the perceived threat of regime change on the horizon, the regime at first reacted by tightening its domestic grip as well. In September 2004, it arrested Nabil Fayyad, leader of the recently established Liberal Grouping.<sup>223</sup> Security services rounded up Syrian-Kurdish activists, particularly students, and the regime reneged on its commitment to naturalise up to 200,000 stateless Kurds.<sup>224</sup> Likewise, Western diplomats were

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superpower out there with no limits as to what it can do. And they seem determined to get rid of the Syrian regime. That is the real problem, not Syria or Syrian policy." Crisis Group interview in Damascus, 3 February 2005.

<sup>220</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Syrian political activists and journalists, November-December 2004.

<sup>221</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2004.

<sup>222</sup> Crisis Group interview in Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>223</sup> Fayyad was arrested on 30 September 2004 and held for a month. He reportedly elicited the authorities' ire after criticising Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam for praising Islamism movements in the region. Fayyad spoke out on many occasions against the Syrian regime's flirtations with Islamism and headed the Liberal Gathering, which was banned in September 2004. For his writings see <http://www.nabulfayyad.com/>.

<sup>224</sup> The regime promise followed riots in the primarily Kurdish area of Hasakeh and other northern towns in March 2004. Former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass said in May 2004 that President al-Assad had ordered preparations for a new law to naturalise the stateless Kurds. See interview in *Al-Hayat*, 21 May 2004. A Syrian parliamentarian told Crisis Group, "five or six months ago we called for naturalisation.

barred from attending political trials in state security courts.<sup>225</sup> According to a Syrian opposition activist., "the regime's hardened policies are a direct consequence of anticipation that the U.S. eventually wants to get rid of them. Bashar found common ground with regime hardliners who want Syria to stick to its cards. The regime's survival is now at stake".<sup>226</sup> A fortnight prior to Hariri's assassination, a diplomat in Beirut remarked: "There is a risk in putting the Syrians under too much pressure. They might start to feel like a cat in a corner. And act like one".<sup>227</sup>

### C. REGIME FRAGMENTATION

Syria's confusing and ultimately self-defeating Lebanon policy has given added credence to a third explanatory model, that of increased regime fragmentation coupled with the narrowing of Bashar's power base to his immediate family and entourage. Long the surrogate theatre for Israeli-Arab, intra-Arab, and intra-Palestinian conflicts, Lebanon appears to have become the arena in which intra-Syrian struggles for power are now playing themselves out. Over the past three decades, Syrian officials and Lebanese politicians had built extraordinarily intimate and at times mutually beneficial business and financial relationships, which also ensured continued Syrian hegemony. While extracting their own considerable profit, Syrian officials also parceled out economic fiefdoms and lucrative ministries to Lebanese allies, thoroughly investing Lebanon's political, security and economic scenes.

But while Lebanon's economic and political life was deeply affected, so too was Syria's. Some regime stalwarts -- including Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam (a Sunni who gained a reputation as Lebanon's kingmaker as early as 1975 and remained close to Hariri), General Hikmet Shihabi (a Sunni who enjoyed close ties to Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt); and Ghazi Kana'an (an Alawi who, as Syria's head of intelligence in Lebanon, had overseen and brokered Syrian-Lebanese connections since the 1980s) -- exercised vast influence and enjoyed considerable benefit. For Syrian observers, it is no coincidence that Hafez al-Asad programmed his son's rise to power by handing him the Lebanon file in 1998 and simultaneously sidelining Khaddam and

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We believe they have this right. But I am not a decision-maker here. I don't change the laws". Crisis Group interview with Muhammad al-Habash in Damascus, November 2004.

<sup>225</sup> Crisis Group interview with Western diplomat in Damascus, 1 December 2004.

<sup>226</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian opposition activist, Damascus, 24 October 2004.

<sup>227</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 21 January 2005.



Shihabi.<sup>228</sup> Nor is it surprising that, in an attempt to consolidate his authority, Bashar sought to reconfigure both the power structure in Syria and the tight networks of power and influence that had been established in Lebanon. Bashar and his allies were convinced that members of the so-called old guard "used their connections in Lebanon to strike lucrative business deals, subsequently using their profits to buy loyalty and leverage in Syria".<sup>229</sup>

The intention initially may well have been to diminish resistance to internal reform by veteran Baathists;<sup>230</sup> but as domestic and regional events unfolded, the primary purpose clearly became to strengthen the hold of Bashar's inner circle, which is based on a combination of family and sectarian ties.<sup>231</sup> Reportedly, a number of senior officials in the intelligence and military sectors were forced into retirement, replaced by younger Alawi officers.<sup>232</sup> In Lebanon, the struggle played out in the tug of war between then-Prime Minister Hariri (who had worked closely with some elements of the Baathist regime for decades) and President Emile Lahoud, a close Bashar ally. Under the guise of centralising and rationalising the Lebanese-Syrian relationship, Lahoud in effect was seeking to substitute a direct link between

his office and the Syrian presidency for the patchwork of individual connections that had emerged over time. Some observers go further, arguing that by the late 1990s, as the succession process was in train, Syria sought to "establish a regime that would resemble its own, taking into account Lebanese specificities, with a military head of state and a greater role for the intelligence services".<sup>233</sup>

The next step was the formation of a cabinet in Beirut in October 2004 composed essentially of little known politicians closely allied to Lahoud, to the detriment of Hariri and Jumblatt loyalists. In his address to the Syrian parliament on 5 March 2005, following Hariri's assassination, Bashar put the following gloss on this dynamic:

Of course some people have exploited the presence of Syrian forces for narrow material or electoral reasons, which led to a number of negative [consequences]. Some called themselves Syria's allies and used their relationship with Syria in order to achieve their private interests. Some Lebanese used to call them political traders. Of course trading in products is a respected activity but trading in politics is like slave trade. They were political traders. They used to sell and buy positions; and they moved from one position to another; and most of them are well known to you.<sup>234</sup>

Hariri, who had served as prime minister in ten of the twelve years since 1992, was the force behind the rebuilding of downtown Beirut, enjoyed unrivalled regional and international stature and was manifesting greater independence toward Syria; together with other former ministers and officials, he became the target of an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign spearheaded by the President.<sup>235</sup> The October 2002 replacement of Ghazi Kana'an as Syria's head of intelligence in Lebanon was another step in the gradual reconfiguration of the Syrian/Lebanese relationship. In this context, the decision in 2004 to extend Lahoud's mandate -- in defiance of strongly expressed U.S. and French views --

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<sup>228</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, October 2004-January 2005.

<sup>229</sup> Crisis group interview with Syrian government adviser, Damascus, February 2005.

<sup>230</sup> Of late, the notion of Bashar as a frustrated reformer has lost considerable currency, but there are some indications that he had gradually been seeking to place more modern-oriented officials in positions of influence. For instance, he appointed Abdallah Dardari, reform-minded technocrat, as head of the State Planning Board at the end of 2003 and a critic of the regime's official media, Mahdi Dakhlallah as minister of information in October 2004. Bashar also is said to have pushed for more rapid conclusion of the Euro-Mediterranean negotiations with the EU, which some elements of the regime resisted for fear of the consequences of reform.

<sup>231</sup> Some analysts argue that the growing role played by sectarianism in Iraq in the aftermath of the war heightened concern within the Syrian regime about potential Sunni and Kurdish disquiet and reinforced the tendency to rely on a small clique of loyal Alawis. Crisis group interviews, Beirut, February 2005.

<sup>232</sup> According to a Syrian academic who is close to the regime, the objective was to replace veterans with more trusted, younger recruits who "owed their position directly to Bashar". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2004. Ghazi Kana'an, who was recalled from Lebanon and then became interior minister in September 2004, remained in a powerful position (in part due to his membership in a prominent Alawi tribe), and is reported to have continued the officer shakeup. Among alleged high-level evictions was that of the head of the Political Security Branch (*Amn as-Siyyasi*) in the area around Damascus (*Rif as-Sham*). Crisis Group interview with Western diplomat, Damascus, 1 December 2004. See also *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 28 November 2004.

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<sup>233</sup> Ghassan Salamé in *Le Monde*, 31 March 2005.

<sup>234</sup> Bashar added: "That is why we don't want our relationship with Lebanon to be a victim of the mistakes of others, mainly politicians". He also claimed credit for an improvement in Syrian-Lebanese relations starting with Syrian troops redeployments in early 2000, ostensibly contrasting this achievement with the old guard's political matchmaking and manipulations in Lebanon prior to this date. See transcript of Bashar's speech in the *Daily Star*, 7 March 2005.

<sup>235</sup> See Reinoud Leenders, "Public Means to Private Ends: State Building and Power in Post-War Lebanon", in Eberhard Kienle (ed), *Politics From Above, Politics From Below: The Middle East in the Age of Economic Reform* (London, 2003).

was perceived by the Syrian President as essential to consolidate his position in Lebanon and, by implication, at home. "For Bashar, it was above all a punch delivered in a domestic battle".<sup>236</sup>

The contradictions and weaknesses of Syria's Lebanon policy in the recent period thus arguably reflect contradictions and infighting at home. The goal may have been to strengthen Bashar's hand in Lebanon and, therefore, in Syria. But the result was to isolate Syria further, weaken Bashar on the regional and wider international scenes and replace an experienced -- albeit corrupt and overbearing -- set of Syrians who were responsible for the Lebanon file with one that was all that and inexperienced too. Less adept at playing the game of Lebanese politics, Bashar's inner circle committed uncharacteristic mistakes as a result of which it alienated important segments of Lebanon's political elite.<sup>237</sup> Again, the decision to extend Lahoud's mandate -- which several veteran Syrian officials such as Vice President Khaddam as well as influential Lebanese politicians close to Syria, such as Hizbollah leader Nasrallah, are said to have opposed -- stands as the starkest example.<sup>238</sup>

Taking the argument a degree further, some observers have concluded that Bashar is not in control of the regime and that coherent policy-making -- whether on domestic reform or foreign policy -- is one obvious casualty. "Different people run state institutions as if these were their private farms. One clique controls the economy, another the intelligence services, a third the military. No one can develop a coherent policy for the regime".<sup>239</sup> Proponents of this view point to a list of confusing and contradictory signals -- such as presidential pardons for political prisoners that are not fully implemented by the security forces<sup>240</sup> or the failure

to set a date for the Baath Party Congress that has been announced as imminent since late 2003.<sup>241</sup> Bashar himself has told foreign visitors that his hands have been tied by members of the so-called old guard intent on blocking his reformist tendencies and hindering the flow of information on issues such as the nature of Syrian assistance to Iraqi insurgents.<sup>242</sup> Others disagree, convinced that Bashar both fears the impact of domestic reform and is a hardline ideologue on foreign policy, using the excuse of insufficient control to justify his own immobility. "There is no old-guard/young-guard split, and if there is one, then Bashar simply is the youngest member of the old guard".<sup>243</sup>

As tensions in Lebanon and with the international community have intensified, so too has speculation concerning how these will affect Syrian politics. Cornered and under pressure, having lost financial and material lifelines first from the Gulf, then from illicit Iraqi trade and now, presumably, from Lebanon, the seemingly fragmented regime may close ranks, putting differences aside, the better to resist outside pressure and any sign (as yet unseen) of domestic upheaval.

Alternatively, the regime might in desperation seek a way out of its predicament. Seeking to signal a clean break from the past and negotiate a new relationship with the West and the U.S. in particular, elements of it might try to extend their rule through a political face-lift, with either Bashar replacing some of those around him or, alternatively, those around him getting rid of Bashar.<sup>244</sup>

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December 2004. Also, the regime for the first time acknowledged that it held "political prisoners", *As-Safir*, 8 December 2005. Nevertheless, some of the prisoners who were on the list of those to be released remain behind bars. Crisis Group interview with Haythem al-Maleh, Syrian human rights activist and lawyer, Damascus, 3 February 2005.

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<sup>236</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian government adviser, Damascus, 3 February 2005.

<sup>237</sup> These include the abusive treatment and harsh campaign against Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community. Under Hafez al-Asad, Syria had managed to accommodate Jumblatt and more or less keep him on its side, even though Damascus was widely suspected of having killed his father; his son's regime, by contrast, turned him into a sworn enemy. Crisis Group interview with Lebanese analyst, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>238</sup> According to several Lebanese sources, Nasrallah -- whom the Syrian President is known to admire and respect -- advised Bashar not to extend Lahoud's mandate. Crisis Group interviews, March 2005.

<sup>239</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian activist, Damascus, 3 February 2005. On the notion of the "privatisation" of Syrian foreign policy, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria Under Bashar (I)*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>240</sup> Bashar first announced these amnesties in November 2000. The latest pardon for political prisoners was issued in

<sup>241</sup> "There are so many issues to discuss but even the [Baath party] Regional Command doesn't know when the Congress is going to take place. There should have been preparations being made by now but nothing is happening. No one knows what is going to happen." Crisis Group interview with Baath member in Damascus, 5 February 2005. According to recent press reports, the Congress is scheduled to take place in early June 2005. It last convened in 2000. *Al-Hayat*, 29 March 2005.

<sup>242</sup> Crisis Group interviews with U.S., French and Arab officials, November 2004-February 2005. As an example of Bashar's questionable control, observers cite an incident in which, after Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa announced that Bashar had given him a commitment about Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, Syrian officials promptly denied it. That denial was in turn retracted after Moussa protested. Crisis Group interview with Arab League official, March 2005.

<sup>243</sup> Crisis Group interview with Arab official, March 2005.

<sup>244</sup> Names that are sometimes mentioned include Maher al-Assad, Bashar's younger brother, in charge of the Republican

This could be coupled with an acknowledgment of responsibility for past mistakes and the promise of significant changes in domestic and/or foreign policy.<sup>245</sup> There are some hints of renewed reform impetus. Bashar reportedly has banned the arrest of any Syrian citizen by the country's myriad security and intelligence agencies without prior notification of the civilian general prosecutor;<sup>246</sup> overtures also have been made to the Muslim Brotherhood, and political exiles reportedly will be granted passports allowing them to return.<sup>247</sup> There have been signs of appeasement on the Kurdish front as well. On 31 March 2005, over 300 Kurds detained since the riots in Hasakeh and other northern towns a year earlier were released,<sup>248</sup> and Syria announced (once again) the naturalisation of stateless Kurds.<sup>249</sup> However encouraging, more will be needed to demonstrate that a page is being turned.

In interviews with Crisis Group, Syrian activists expressed differing views as to the prospects for opposition politics. Some emphasised the possible spillover effect of popular demonstrations in Lebanon which, they claimed, Syrians viewed with some envy -- tainted, admittedly, by resentment at the at times abusive anti-Syrian sentiments of the Lebanese opposition.<sup>250</sup> They also saw an opportunity in the international community's heightened interest. "With the world watching, the regime will think twice before resorting to the repressive, bloody methods of the past to suppress opposition activism. We should take advantage of that and seek to heighten our activities".<sup>251</sup> Others were less sanguine, deploring the debilitated state of the Syrian opposition, and doubting that it could have an impact on politics in the near term.<sup>252</sup>

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Guards; Ghazi Kanaan, the current interior minister and former head of military intelligence in Lebanon; Assef Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law, who has had tense relations with Maher and, to a lesser degree, Bashar; and Bahjat Suleiman, head of one of the more important divisions of the intelligence services.

<sup>245</sup> Under this scenario, the regime would replicate the Libyan model, acknowledge responsibility for the Hariri assassination and arrest its alleged perpetrators.

<sup>246</sup> See *Al-Bayan*, 27 March 2005.

<sup>247</sup> See the remarks by Riyad Ni'san, Syria's ambassador in the United Arab Emirates, in *An-Nahar*, 30 March 2005.

<sup>248</sup> Agence France-Presse, 31 March 2005.

<sup>249</sup> Agence France-Presse, 4 April 2005.

<sup>250</sup> "When Syrians are watching the pictures of Lebanese demonstrating in Martyr Square, they dream that this would happen in Syria too", Crisis group interview with Syrian opposition activist, Damascus, 6 March 2005. In early March, when Arab satellite networks broadcast live footage of the demonstrations in Beirut, Syrians were glued to television sets in Damascus cafes and restaurants.

<sup>251</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian activist, March 2005.

<sup>252</sup> "If the demonstrations in Beirut showed us anything it was that the Syrian opposition would never be able to get so

The different ideological outlook of most Syrian opposition groups -- less inclined to capitalise on foreign pressures or indeed overtly hostile to them -- is another complicating factor against a mobilisation of the opposition in Syria prompted by events in Lebanon.<sup>253</sup>

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many in the streets. The regime doesn't have to fear an internal revolt here like in Lebanon", Crisis group interview with Syrian opposition activist, Damascus, 6 March 2005.

<sup>253</sup> "The opposition can't capitalise on outside pressures. They have the same xenophobic attitude as the regime. At the end of the day, they share the same ideological background", *ibid.* Aversion to foreign pressures was also illustrated by the negative reactions among opposition groups within Syria to consultations between the U.S. State Department and the exiled Syrian leader of the Syrian Reform Party, Farid al-Ghadri, in March 2005. See the comments made by Syrian opposition activist Michel Kilo and the opposition National Democratic Gathering cited in *An-Nahar*, 30 March 2005.

#### IV. OPPORTUNITIES, DILEMMAS, AND RISKS

It is not too long ago that worry was focused on what might happen to Lebanon after a Syrian withdrawal -- not on what was happening to it with Syria present. U.S., European, Arab and even Israeli officials conjured up dangerous scenarios deriving from a non-voluntary departure, from renewed, sectarian-inspired civil strife in the country through escalated Hizbollah attacks on Israel to violence by Lebanon-based Palestinian refugees. In the event of violence, moreover, it was assumed that sombre memories of the fate of U.S. and French members of a multinational force dispatched to Lebanon in the 1980s and numerous instances of hostage-taking would greatly reduce the likelihood of third party intervention. Generally speaking, the assessment was that whatever benefit would accrue from Syria's withdrawal -- in particular to the Lebanese -- was not worth the risks. That view was still being voiced until very recently, for example by a senior Israeli official and former U.S. diplomat.<sup>254</sup> From an American perspective, the case was all the stronger given that other Syrian policies -- on Iraq and Palestinian militant groups in particular -- were believed to be of far greater strategic import.<sup>255</sup>

Many of the core assumptions behind this appraisal either have been debunked or no longer resonate in the U.S. or France. Under sustained international pressure and with its survival now at stake, the Syrian regime is believed by many to be a paper tiger, with neither the capacity nor the recklessness to destabilise the region.<sup>256</sup>

Likewise, it is now judged that Hizbollah -- with or without direct Syrian patronage -- would be taking a foolhardy risk by attacking Israel at a time when much of the world is paying attention, and its regional allies are under stress. Mass demonstrations in Lebanon that transcended sectarian lines and the generally cool-headed opposition approach also have strengthened the conviction that the political class has matured, and no one has an interest in rekindling the civil war. This applies in particular to Hizbollah, whose painstaking gains of the past two decades would be in jeopardy should Lebanon again erupt in sectarian strife and whose mantra of maintaining national unity in the face of foreign threats would be irreparably damaged were it to turn its weapons against fellow citizens.<sup>257</sup> Finally, Lebanon's army has proved more capable than many anticipated, winning praise from the opposition for behaving all at once "neutrally, professionally and firmly".<sup>258</sup>

Many of the threats that previously had been much spoken of appear to have been exaggerated as a means of perpetuating the status quo, and there are indeed reasons for relative confidence in the situation. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume away all hazards. The attack on Hamadeh,<sup>259</sup> the killing of Hariri and the car bombs targeting Christian neighbourhoods on 18, 22, 26 March, and 1 April demonstrate persistent dangers,<sup>260</sup> various parties -- both Syrian and Lebanese -- have no interest in seeing things go smoothly; the presence of armed Lebanese and Palestinians and still extant confessional tensions, as well as the unresolved question of sectarian power allocation present a volatile mix. In the words of a Lebanese official, "rationally, no one may want a descent in to civil war. But too many

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<sup>254</sup> In November 2004, the head of Israel's National Security Council, Giora Eiland, explained: "Israel has no real interest in a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, which could threaten Lebanese stability and afford Hizbollah greater freedom of operation to escalate the conflict on Israel's northern border", *Ha'aretz*, 1 December 2004. In March 2005 he added in a rare interview that with Syria gone, Iran might increase its leverage over Hizbollah and radicalise the movement, Israel Channel 10 television, 2 March 2005. After Hariri's assassination, Flynt Leverett, a former official at the U.S. National Security Council, asked "does the administration feel confident about containing Hezbollah without on-the ground Syrian management and with the group's sole external guide an increasingly hard-line Iran?" *The New York Times*, 2 March 2005.

<sup>255</sup> "Why are we meddling in Lebanese affairs? How do they matter to us? We are playing with fire when far more important issues are at stake", Crisis Group interview with former U.S. official, Washington, February 2005. On this, Leverett writes: "the United States should use the issue [of Lebanon] to leverage improved Syrian behavior on issues that arguably matter more to American interests in the region", op. cit.

<sup>256</sup> Crisis Group interview with U.S. and French officials, March 2005. An adviser to a Lebanese opposition member of

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parliament concurred: "Syrian resources in Lebanon are getting scarcer by the day. They don't have a constituency in the streets at their disposal. Moreover, there is now intense international focus on what is happening in Lebanon. After Hariri's assassination, we don't have to prove that the Syrians are responsible. They would only be hurting themselves if they resorted to violence", Crisis Group interview, 4 March 2005.

<sup>257</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese analysts, March 2005.

<sup>258</sup> Crisis Group interview with Progressive Socialist Party Politburo member, Beirut, 4 March 2005. "The army has shown itself to be the only credible institution left in this country". Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> See fn. 90 above.

<sup>260</sup> The first bomb caused injuries and damage, but no deaths. Many Lebanese opposition members immediately blamed the attack on Syrian intelligence agents. See *An-Nahar*, 19 March 2005. The second attack resulted in two deaths. The third and fourth bombs caused injuries and damage. Many suspect Lebanese security or intelligence forces to be involved. "These were tests, in order to see what the resolve is like both domestically and internationally", Crisis Group interview with member of the opposition, Beirut, 3 April 2005.

parties have conflicting interests, and too many see some advantage to instability -- Syrians to take the pressure off their backs; Israelis to press the issue of Hizbollah's disarmament; not to mention those Lebanese who fear a loss of power and resources".<sup>261</sup> And although the army has proved more capable than feared, at the end of the day it is recruited from and reflects Lebanese society. Should the latter erupt into sectarian conflict, so too might its military.

## A. VIOLENCE AND INSTABILITY

Over the past several months, Damascus and its Lebanese allies have repeatedly warned of the chaos and sectarian strife that would follow a Syrian withdrawal, emphasising that its presence guaranteed Lebanon's stability. The opposition took this as a veiled threat, in line with the time-honoured practice of simultaneously playing arsonist and fire brigade in Lebanese matters.<sup>262</sup> "This is Syria's traditional game: create a problem and then present yourself as the only solution".<sup>263</sup>

Although most Lebanese interviewed by Crisis Group questioned whether Syria retained the necessary support from major armed Lebanese groups or Syrian-Lebanese security agencies to carry out violence against them,<sup>264</sup> they did not rule out the possibility of a so-called East Timor scenario in which militias and gunmen, either angered by their loss of status and power or manipulated by Damascus to stir up sectarian strife -- or both -- unleash a campaign of violence and intimidation.<sup>265</sup> The Syrian regime, sensing growing international pressure, could opt for a scorched earth strategy; that such a course might well accelerate its own downfall certainly would be a consideration, but perhaps not decisive if it felt that was what the U.S. and others intended in any event. "Syria has a long tradition of remote-control, long-distance attacks. Especially if the regime feels it is the next target for the U.S., it will do what it can to divert tension and attention to Lebanon. People often target Syria; Lebanon more often pays the price".<sup>266</sup>

<sup>261</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>262</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese opposition members, Beirut, February-March 2005.

<sup>263</sup> Crisis Group interview with opposition member, March 2005.

<sup>264</sup> Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese opposition members and journalists, Beirut, February-March 2005.

<sup>265</sup> Crisis Group interview with a leader of the Qurnet Shehwan, Beirut, 4 March 2005. Although Hizbollah stands out as an exception to the post-Taef disarmament of militias and although it certainly is the best armed group, many others appear to have simply put their weapons to the side, Crisis Group interview with U.S. official, Washington, April 2005.

<sup>266</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese official, March 2005.

Particularly in light of this, persistent (albeit uncorroborated) reports of continued activity by Syrian security and intelligence agents are of major concern.<sup>267</sup>

The March car bombs in Christian neighbourhoods appeared to many as warning shots of what could happen after Syria withdraws.<sup>268</sup> "We are not far away from a major blast taking the lives of, say, 100 people", a member of the opposition says.<sup>269</sup> Moreover, sporadic shootings against unarmed opposition members have been noted, with blame focusing -- justifiably or not -- on members of Amal.<sup>270</sup> Syria's first major redeployments in the second week of March coincided with uncorroborated rumours of it distributing weapons to small political groupings and major Palestinian factions in refugee camps.<sup>271</sup> Unidentified gunmen circled around the residence of the Sunni Mufti, Rashid Qabbani, just prior to a visit by U.S. envoy David Satterfield.<sup>272</sup>

An alternative scenario builds on the supposed fragmentation of the Syrian regime and the possibility that rogue elements of its security or intelligence apparatus might act on their own -- either exporting domestic battles to Lebanese soil or retaliating for their lost status and income.<sup>273</sup> Proponents of this view speculate that,

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<sup>267</sup> "Some of our contacts are telling us that they are replacing operatives to avoid recognition by locals, setting up shop in private apartments and increasingly merging with Lebanese security and intelligence agencies", Crisis Group interview with leader of the opposition, Beirut, 3 April 2005. See also *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2005.

<sup>268</sup> Crisis Group interviews with opposition members, March 2005.

<sup>269</sup> Crisis Group interview with member of the opposition, Beirut, 3 April 2005.

<sup>270</sup> On 5 March 2005, gunmen carrying Amal flags entered Christian Beirut's Sassine square and fired in the air. The next day an Amal supporter shot an opposition activist in the leg in Martyr Square.

<sup>271</sup> One of the groups rumoured to have received arms is the Murabitun, a small and largely defunct Sunni grouping with strong pro-Syrian leanings. Crisis Group interviews with Lebanese opposition members, Beirut, March 2005. Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, a Fatah leader from the Palestinian refugee camp of Rashidiyyeh (near Tyre), recently met with Syrian leaders in Damascus. This was the first time he had left the camp since a Lebanese court sentenced him to death in absentia in October 1999 for illegal possession of weapons and leading an armed group. His visit fueled speculation that the Syrian regime intended to provide Abu al-Aynayn with arms, a charge immediately denied by the Palestinian militant. *Al-Hayat*, 14 February 2005. In November 2004, Abu al-Aynayn denied having visited Damascus after reports surfaced to that effect. See *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 28 November 2004.

<sup>272</sup> See Agence France-Presse, 1 March 2005.

<sup>273</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese and Syrian opposition members, Beirut and Damascus, February-March 2005.

given Syria's proliferating centres of power, such rogue elements may in fact have killed Hariri without President Bashar's knowledge, let alone his consent.<sup>274</sup> Should the regime further disintegrate in the face of international pressure, its own internal confrontations, or domestic discontent, the ensuing chaos almost certainly would spill over into Lebanon.

Hizbollah's future is another cause for concern. While debates no doubt will continue as to its capacity and willingness to become a pure political party, disarmament will not come easily nor, if it is attempted any time soon, without a fight. Hizbollah has insisted it will not use its weapons against fellow Lebanese,<sup>275</sup> but that may change if it feels threatened. In the words of a spokesperson, "if anyone comes to disarm us we will eat them. We will go mad. But in any event, the Lebanese army will be the last to try to disarm us. 70 per cent of the army is Muslim and 70 per cent of these Muslims are Shiites".<sup>276</sup> Opposition members warily watched recent signs of a Hizbollah rapprochement with Hamas and Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine -- General Command, two other militant groups with an armed presence in Lebanon.<sup>277</sup> As seen, Hizbollah's leadership is convinced that, after Syria's withdrawal, its fate is the next to be decided, and regardless of guarantees, it doubts the opposition's ability once in power to withstand U.S. pressure. According to a Lebanese official:

Disarmament is not on Hizbollah's agenda, in spite of whatever moderate signals it may convey. If it feels threatened, if it feels the U.S. is coming after it, it will provoke instability, either directly or by voicing Shiite demands for a greater and fairer share of the political pie. The scenario is not hard to imagine -- Shiites assert their power;

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<sup>274</sup> A Western official declined to rule this out, adding, "I am not sure which spells more trouble for Bashar. If he was behind it, his international troubles have only just begun. And if he was not, his domestic troubles are far greater than we thought". Crisis Group interview, Paris, March 2005.

<sup>275</sup> Hizbollah's weapons "were never used in the sectarian game, but were only directed against the Israeli enemy [and] will not be used domestically", Na'im Qasem, Hizbollah's deputy secretary general, in *An-Nahar*, 1 April 2005.

<sup>276</sup> Crisis Group interview with Hussein Nabulsi, Hizbollah spokesperson, Beirut, 1 April 2005.

<sup>277</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 April 2005. Speaking at a joint ceremony commemorating the assassination of Hamas leader Ahmad Yassin, Nasrallah said: "The only option left for them [the U.S.] is that they come themselves to disarm the resistance and the [Palestinian refugee] camps in Lebanon...I wish they would come, I wish they would come". The ceremony was attended by Hamas leader Khaled Mishaal and PFLP leader Ahmad Jibril. See the *Daily Star*, 1 April 2005.

Maronites feel threatened and react -- and it leads straight to sectarian confrontation.<sup>278</sup>

In short, and in the words of a Lebanese analyst, "the question of Hizbollah must be decided through an inclusive political dialogue or it will break out in violence".<sup>279</sup>

Analysts also point to another possibility, that of a security vacuum in Southern Lebanon should Hizbollah leave or assume a passive role in regard to radical and armed Palestinian groups who, out of conviction or serving the purposes of others, may yet carry out attacks against Israel.<sup>280</sup>

In the longer run, and once Syria has withdrawn, the complex and incendiary question of Lebanon's confessional balance of power may be revisited, with unpredictable consequences. Imperfect as it may be, the Taef equation -- of which Syria's role implicitly was a part -- provided a measure of stability; while it called for the de-confessionalisation of Lebanon's system, that part of the accord never has been implemented. Shiites, feeling more vulnerable in the aftermath of a withdrawal or alarmed over possible disarmament schemes for Hizbollah, may well challenge Taef's iniquitous power distribution, which gives them a parliamentary representation (27 out of 128) equal to that of Sunnis but less than Maronites (34) despite their relative demographic superiority.<sup>281</sup> Already, there have been grumblings over both that allocation and the 21 year-old voting age minimum, seen as detrimental to the younger Shiite population.<sup>282</sup> For Maronites in particular, the re-opening

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<sup>278</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>279</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>280</sup> Crisis Group interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 4 March 2005. Such a scenario would not be without precedent. On several occasions, so-called rogue Palestinian factions carried out attacks on the Blue Line. See Crisis Group Report, *Old Games, New Rules*, op. cit., p. 9. "Hizbollah appeared to be saying, if you don't like us to be around, we won't be able to control the situation here either", Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Beirut, February 2005.

<sup>281</sup> Sunnis are 26.5 per cent of the registered electorate, Shiites, 26.2 per cent, and Maronites 22.1 per cent. Lebanese Interior Ministry, April 2005. Parliament's 128 seats are distributed as follows: 64 for Muslims (27 Sunni, 27 Shiite, 2 Alawi and 8 Druze) and 64 for Christians (34 Maronite, 14 Greek Orthodox, 8 Greek Catholic, 6 Armenian, 1 Protestant and 1 "other").

<sup>282</sup> The January 2005 electoral bill submitted by the Karameh government maintained the voting age at 21, presumably to placate the Maronite community. Shiite parliamentarians failed to pass an amendment lowering it to eighteen, a reasonable age regardless of sectarian considerations. Crisis Group's own calculations based on figures provided by the Interior Ministry suggest that out of 227,624 Lebanese between the ages of eighteen and twenty, some 72,720 (32

of the sectarian Pandora's box could be a rude awakening and an unintended consequence of their drive to push Syria out. As a U.S. official acknowledges, "Lebanon after Syria will still have all the problems of Lebanon: it is not really a nation, less even than Iraq. Syria has to go. But without Syria, life will still be very, very messy".<sup>283</sup>

## B. INSTITUTIONAL GRIDLOCK

The potential for violence should not be viewed in isolation from the current institutional crisis, resolution of which requires the rapid formation of a new government, adoption of a new electoral law by 30 April 2005, and the holding of elections before the current Parliament's term expires on 31 May. This is and remains the loyalists' and Syria's trump card, for absent these steps, Lebanon could find itself without elections, parliament or government, and with either Lahoud as a contested president or, should he resign, no president at all.<sup>284</sup> In Karameh's words, "Unless we meet these deadlines [a new government and electoral law] by 30 April, there will be no elections. Instead, there will be a vacuum. There will be no government and no parliament capable of legislating in the absence of a government. It won't be able to even extend its own mandate".<sup>285</sup> Such a comprehensive institutional vacuum would provide fertile ground for instability, allow Damascus and its allies to blame the opposition for the crisis, and open the way for continued Syrian interference.<sup>286</sup> A Lebanese journalist expressed his fears to Crisis Group:

I am afraid of a power vacuum or a military government in a few months if there are no

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per cent) are Shiites, 73,438 (32.2 percent) Sunnis, and only 42,362 (18.6 per cent) Maronites. Based on these figures, Sunni political leaders should be equally interested in lowering the voting age. For the ministry's statistics broken down per *qadha*, see *Al-Balad*, 26 January 2005.

<sup>283</sup> Crisis Group interview with U.S. official, Washington, March 2005.

<sup>284</sup> If Lahoud were to resign and opposition parliamentarians refuse to participate in elections for his successor, Article 62 of the Constitution mandates that the Council of Ministers "provisionally" assume his powers. However, there is no constitutional provision governing what would happen if the government is only a caretaker cabinet.

<sup>285</sup> *An-Nahar*, 11 March 2005. Such a scenario would, in strictly legal terms at least, be reminiscent of the constitutional crisis that occurred in 1988 when Parliament failed to elect a new president before Amin Gemayel's term had expired. At that time the crisis caused yet another round of violent clashes.

<sup>286</sup> Karameh was quoted as saying that the only alternative to a "national unity government" would be "total collapse, God forbid", *As-Safir*, 11 March 2005. He also said he would take his time to form a new government, "and I see a long wait". *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 11 March 2005.

elections. Lahoud will say he doesn't have a choice, and it would be good for Syria, allowing them to show that without them Lebanon is in a mess."<sup>287</sup>

Members of the pro-Lahoud camp make no secret that this is their calculation and that, in their estimation, the outcome of the current battle, therefore, is far from decided.<sup>288</sup> A pro-Syrian member of Parliament assessed that calls for the President's resignation would not reach critical mass because of intra-opposition tensions and because that step would pave the way for the election of another loyalist president by the current parliament.<sup>289</sup> Others speculated that were a new government to be formed, the confrontation would shift to the electoral law: if the government presented a proposal deemed unfair by the opposition, the latter's parliamentarians would face the dilemma of either supporting the law despite its flaws, or blocking it, despite the fact that without it elections will not take place.<sup>290</sup>

Recent suggestions by Ayn at-Tineh loyalists that elections be held on the basis of *muhafaza* voting districts (as Taef provides) and proportional representation are another costly delaying tactic -- their implementation would require a time-consuming redrawing of the administrative divisions and concomitant readjustment of voting lists.<sup>291</sup> Loyalists

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<sup>287</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 March 2005.

<sup>288</sup> Crisis Group interview with senior member of Lahoud's camp, Beirut, 9 March 2005.

<sup>289</sup> "If Lahoud resigns, you will get [current pro-Syrian Interior Minister] Sulayman Franjeh. Is that what the opposition wants?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 9 March 2005. As seen, Patriarch Sfeir is said to oppose Lahoud's resignation now, viewing this as a potential blow to the Maronite community. In the post-Taef political system, "the Maronites decide such matters, not a Druze leader who has become the main symbol of the opposition". *Ibid*.

<sup>290</sup> By law, the bill would need a two-thirds majority to pass, thus requiring twenty votes more than those provided by the loyalists. Speculation to the contrary notwithstanding, the government cannot hold elections without a parliamentary vote by resorting to the 2000 law because the latter stipulates that it is valid "for one time only". Crisis Group interview with leader of the Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 1 April 2005.

<sup>291</sup> The proposal presents the opposition with a quandary: it can insist on timely elections based on the *qadha* and thus effectively contradict a stipulation of Taef to which they claim to adhere, or face a significant electoral delay. By advocating proportional representation, loyalists were throwing in yet another obstacle, as such a system would take a very long time to work out and likely would deeply divide the opposition, which would have to settle on the order of its candidates. Crisis Group interview with Lebanese analyst, April 2005. The opposition groups responded in conflicting ways, with some rejecting the proposal as a foil to delay elections and others stating conditional acceptance. Jumblatt proposed to accept the *Muhafaza* as the universal and sole principle for

would, of course, benefit from a persistent institutional deadlock that delayed elections liable to boost opposition representation significantly.<sup>292</sup> Finally, the longer the stalemate lasts, the more likely opposition divisions -- including between Maronites and Muslims and between hard-line Aounists and more moderate figures -- will come to the fore. In the words of a Lebanese analyst, "our days of national unity are a rare occurrence -- they come in times of euphoria and in times of mourning".<sup>293</sup> Fearful of such a scenario, opposition members have made clear their priority is to hold elections on time, not to achieve their preferred electoral law. "We want to hold elections as soon as possible, regardless of the law"<sup>294</sup> -- which, by implication, means preserving the *qadha* system given the time it would take to redraw *muhafaza* districts, and rejecting proportional representation, given the time-consuming complications such a change would entail. For their part, loyalists are hoping either to delay the elections or to extract guarantees as to their future political role -- and, therefore, as to Syria's -- in exchange for avoiding a prolonged institutional crisis.

The threat of paralysis helps explain the opposition's vacillating and divergent stances.<sup>295</sup> While initially firm in its insistence that all its demands -- sacking Lebanon's security and intelligence chiefs and holding an international inquiry into Hariri's assassination -- be met before it would take part in consultations on a new government, it gradually softened its tone. Likewise, the call for President Lahoud's resignation became more muted, including from its once chief proponent, Jumblatt.<sup>296</sup> For the opposition, the priority is, as it should be, getting to elections more or less on

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drawing voting districts, but not proportional representation. He said that a ninth should be added to the existing eight *muhafazat* by splitting the one in Mount Lebanon, which would allow Christians to be more able to elect their own representatives. See *As-Safir*, 6 April 2005.

<sup>292</sup> Crisis Group interview with pro-Syrian member of parliament, Beirut, 9 March 2005.

<sup>293</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>294</sup> Crisis Group interview with Walid Fakhr ad-Din, Politburo member of Democratic Left Movement, Beirut, 8 April 2005.

<sup>295</sup> An opposition member explained, the loyalists "are trying to delay forming a new government in order to cause an institutional crisis. This is the alternative to their other track: to create havoc in the streets and fuel sectarian emotions", Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2005.

<sup>296</sup> Jumblatt explained that the priority was to hold elections, for which a government was needed. "Later, after we win the elections, there will be a new government. I will then advise President Lahoud to step down, and then there will be a new regime, a new president and a new government". Associated Press, 21 March 2005.

time (by end of May or shortly thereafter) and to a new, representative government in their wake.<sup>297</sup>

Finding a way out of this imbroglio has been made all the more difficult by the absence of a trusted third-party mediator. While the Arab League could build on the Taef precedent and offer its services, the opposition harbours doubts about its impartiality or staying power.<sup>298</sup> The recent Arab Summit's stand -- or lack thereof -- on the Lebanese crisis hardly inspires much confidence in its ability to play an active and helpful role in solving it.<sup>299</sup> An active U.S. role presents high risks; numerous Lebanese journalists and observers -- including many who cannot be suspected of sympathy for the loyalists -- express misgivings about repeated visits by U.S. envoy Satterfield and other forms of intervention by Washington.<sup>300</sup> At a minimum, by injecting broader considerations into the mix (such as Hizbollah's future, Lebanon's future relations with Israel, or regime change in Syria), a visible U.S. role risks complicating the immediate task at hand, namely the election of a legitimate and representative Lebanese government.<sup>301</sup> That leaves the UN and EU as actors with both the capacity and leverage to play a mediating role, oversee Syria's withdrawal, and facilitate free and fair elections in Lebanon.

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<sup>297</sup> Crisis Group interview with a member of the opposition, Beirut, 1 April 2005.

<sup>298</sup> By the late 1980s, the Arab League had formed an Arab Tripartite High Commission to broker and oversee a peace agreement between Lebanon's warring factions; this resulted in the 1989 Taef Accords. In response to concerns among Lebanese members of Parliament regarding creeping Syrian domination, the Commission pledged to act as a "moral guarantor" of Lebanon's sovereignty in light of its "special relations" with Syria. The Commission disintegrated due to sharp divisions in the Arab League over the first Gulf War. See Communiqué du Haut Comité Tripartite Arabe, 24 October 1989, in: *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, 4<sup>th</sup> trimestre 1989, 1<sup>st</sup> trimestre 1990, no. 16-17, pp. 129-133.

<sup>299</sup> The Arab Summit, held on 23 March 2005, issued a final communiqué supporting Syria against the U.S. Syria Accountability Act. It made no mention of the political situation in Lebanon or Syrian withdrawals. See the *Daily Star*, 24 March 2005.

<sup>300</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, March-April 2005. The U.S. has been deeply involved in efforts to shape the opposition's position on the elections and its relations to the 'Ayn at-Tineh bloc. Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Beirut, 8 April 2005.

<sup>301</sup> Hizbollah seized on U.S. suggestions that events in Lebanon formed part of a wave of democratic advances in the region, arguing that the U.S. was seeking to do what "Israel alone failed" and "create a Greater Middle East" under its control. Na'im Qasem, "What do they want from Lebanon?", *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 March 2005.



## V. FIRST THINGS FIRST: GETTING AN ELECTED, REPRESENTATIVE, SOVEREIGN LEBANESE GOVERNMENT

Events in Lebanon have opened up a wide array of possibilities, from weakening the regime in Damascus, to dealing with Hizbollah and reshaping Lebanon's relations with Israel. Yet, pursuit of any of these goals would come at the detriment of what must remain the core objectives: holding elections on time, managing a peaceful transition, and avoiding renewed violence. Insulating events in Lebanon from that broader agenda, therefore, should be foremost on the minds of its own actors and members of the international community alike. With this guiding principle in mind, a series of policy prescriptions follow:

**For Lebanon's political actors.** Habituated to reacting to outside pressures and demands, Lebanon's political class has grown unaccustomed to making its own decisions. Successfully navigating the current crisis, however, will require achieving a broad, internal consensus without significant help from -- indeed, more likely than not despite interference by -- outsiders. To accommodate various Lebanese constituencies, agreement should be reached on the following immediate sequence of steps:

- establishment of a new, short-term government, whose mandate is to pass an electoral law and organise free and fair elections;
- suspension of intelligence chiefs pending outcome of the UN investigation into Hariri's assassination;
- swift adoption of an electoral law based on the *qadha* district and, in the case of Beirut, the 1960 law;
- announcement of elections by the end of May 2005 or, if absolutely necessary, after a short delay and official invitation to the international community to send observers sufficiently ahead of polling. This last point is critical, as irregularities often occur prior to election day;
- full withdrawal of the Syrian military and intelligence presence by the end of April 2005, to be verified by the UN;
- the conduct of free and fair elections, monitored by international observers; and
- formation of a new government.

Only once such a government is in place should broader questions -- the future of Hizbollah, Lebanon's stance toward the Shab'a farms, measures toward de-confessionalisation, and redrawing the governorate

boundaries -- be addressed. That said, and to ensure a peaceful transition, some assurances on these matters will be required upfront from the opposition: first, that Hizbollah's status will only be resolved through national dialogue and consensus; secondly, that Lebanon will take Syrian concerns into account while shaping its policies toward Israel; thirdly, that Lebanon and Syria will enjoy close relations between equal sovereigns, and fourthly, that Taef will remain the basis for Lebanon's political arrangements. This last point is important because any precipitous re-opening of that bargain runs the risk of triggering internal strife and inviting outside intervention with various constituencies appealing to Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France or the U.S.

At the time such issues are addressed and with an eye to convincing Hizbollah that "there exist non-threatening scenarios regarding its future role as an armed resistance group", the following principles could serve as a basis:<sup>302</sup>

- agreement by Hizbollah to respect the Blue Line defined by the UN as separating Israel and Lebanon and not to attack Israeli targets, including in Shab'a;
- gradual integration of Hizbollah into the Lebanese army, initially as an autonomous unit; this would entail Hizbollah's respect for decisions reached by the Lebanese government. Nassib Lahoud, the parliamentarian, suggested an arrangement under which Lebanon would keep "Hizbollah's infrastructure and its weapons as a strategic reserve and a bargaining card prior to reaching a final settlement with Israel. Hizbollah shouldn't keep its previous status but it should be held accountable to a sovereign Lebanese government and be guided by a global strategy agreed upon by a democratic government";<sup>303</sup>
- relocation of Hizbollah's rockets further north;<sup>304</sup> and
- deployment of the Lebanese army to the Israeli border.<sup>305</sup>

<sup>302</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview with diplomat, 1 April 2005.

<sup>303</sup> Crisis Group interview with Antoine Haddad, adviser to Nassib Lahoud, Beirut, 8 December 2004.

<sup>304</sup> In January 2005, some diplomats suggested that Hizbollah fighters and weapons relocate some twenty to 30 kilometres north in exchange for a positive Israeli response to Syrian overtures to resume talks. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, January 2005. An opposition member who raised this idea with Hizbollah reported that it dismissed it as a "Zionist conspiracy". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 April 2005.

<sup>305</sup> On these suggestions, see Nicholas Blanford, MERIP, 23 March 2005.

Under this scenario, full disarmament would be tied to broader regional changes on the Arab-Israeli front, such as Syrian/Israeli and Lebanese/Israeli peace deals.

**For the United Nations.** The UN has two principal tasks, implementation of Resolution 1559 and investigation of Hariri's assassination. In both cases, it will need to act firmly and thoroughly while avoiding steps liable to provoke violent reactions.<sup>306</sup> As for 1559, now that it has obtained a Syrian commitment to full withdrawal by the end of April 2005, it will need to monitor and verify the withdrawal, ensuring in particular that Damascus does not rely on proxies or new intelligence operatives.<sup>307</sup> At the same time, the UN should adopt a far more deliberate approach to the second part of the resolution, Hizbollah's disarmament, making clear that it remains above all an intra-Lebanese issue to which it is prepared to lend its services. In particular, it should avoid commenting on this question prior to Lebanon's elections and the formation of a new government.

It is important that the investigation be thorough and independent. Once it has been concluded, the Security Council should insist on the prosecution of any persons found to be responsible; should the Council conclude that such a trial is impossible in a national court, consideration should be given to assigning jurisdiction to an international tribunal.

Finally, given the multiplicity of UN activities and envoys dealing with Lebanon, some form of streamlining and better definition of roles would be advisable. Responsibility for monitoring elections, for example, remains unclear.

**For the U.S. government.** The key for Washington is to avoid the temptation of over-reach, and in particular to refrain from complicating the immediate question of Lebanon's transition to a freely elected government with far more explosive regional matters, such as disarming Hizbollah or seeking regime change in Syria. The U.S. should adopt a discreet posture, steering clear from direct intervention in Lebanon's affairs and supporting understandings reached by its political actors, such as the sequence described above. As much as possible, it should anchor its policy in broad multilateral agreement,

in particular through the Security Council and in coordination with France.

In the aftermath of a verified Syrian withdrawal and free and fair Lebanese elections, the U.S. should consider testing the Baathist regime's intentions by offering a blueprint for improved relations in the event of modified Syrian behaviour on Iraq and the peace process. In this context, Washington would signal its willingness to assist in renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations should Damascus genuinely change its regional policies. At the appropriate time, the U.S. also should consider stating that, should such a change occur and negotiations resume, it would expect an Israeli-Syrian agreement ultimately to entail Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights, together with adequate security arrangements and the establishment of normal, peaceful relations between the two states. A member of the Syrian opposition suggested that it would be strengthened by such a statement, which would make clear to the Syrian public that the regime's current policies stand in the way of regaining the Golan.<sup>308</sup>

Undoubtedly, this is not the current mood in Washington; as one administration official put it, "we are just waiting for one more Syrian miscalculation to come down on them hard";<sup>309</sup> others suggest simply that the U.S. should do nothing to prolong the life of a regime believed to be on the brink of collapse. Nevertheless, there is reason to explore whether the Syrian regime, reeling from international pressure and eager to survive, might alter its stance if offered the prospect of improved bilateral relations and a reinvigorated peace process. Moreover, engagement with Syria and progress on Israeli-Syrian negotiations is the surest and safest way to resolve the question of Hizbollah definitively. To pursue an alternative approach -- all sticks and no carrots -- would be to risk desperate measures by a desperate regime.<sup>310</sup>

**For the Syrian government.** Potentially only a misstep away from a showdown with the U.S., the regime in Damascus has every incentive to cooperate fully with the UN on its withdrawal from Lebanon; that means refraining from re-inserting numerous intelligence operatives or

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<sup>306</sup> Terje Roed-Larsen has effectively "conveyed messages of moderation and urged flexibility on all sides in order to avoid an institutional crisis". His role has been constrained because neither he nor his staff is based in Lebanon. "To do so now would be too late and be difficult for [UN internal] bureaucratic reasons", Crisis Group telephone interview with diplomat, 1 April 2005.

<sup>307</sup> Verifying the withdrawal of intelligence operatives will be particularly daunting. The UN currently lacks the manpower and capability for such on-the-ground verification. Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Beirut, 7 April 2005.

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<sup>308</sup> He also argued that, by removing suspicion the U.S. is intent on advancing an Israeli regional agenda, such a statement would improve Washington's image in Syria and therefore facilitate its efforts to promote democracy. Crisis Group interview, March 2005.

<sup>309</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2005.

<sup>310</sup> A Lebanese opposition member, concerned about suggestions the U.S. would seek to destabilise the Syrian regime, noted that "if the regime has its back against the wall, it will fight back in Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, April 2005. Again, views among opposition members are far from uniform on this point.

relying on Lebanese proxies for the same end. It also means avoiding any steps likely to reignite violence in Lebanon. Withdrawal will come at a heavy price for a regime that has become accustomed to rely on Lebanon as an economic, social, and strategic asset. But the costs of its presence now outweigh the benefits; besides, Syria retains an array of legitimate means to maintain significant influence, such as commercial and trade links to the Arab hinterland, electricity supply, and shared water rights. What it needs to forsake is its military, security and intelligence interference. To that end, it should agree to establishment of normal diplomatic relations, with embassies in both capitals -- a step it so far has resisted. At the same time, it should release all remaining imprisoned Lebanese nationals.<sup>311</sup>

In the longer run, and to try to extract itself from its current position, the regime should consider a series of diplomatic and domestic steps:

- as part of a comprehensive discussion with the U.S., stronger efforts to stabilise the situation in Iraq by preventing Iraqis and others from using Syrian territory to foment attacks in that country, as well as to police the border and prevent any Palestinian operatives in Syria from organising attacks against Israel;
- reaching out to the Israeli public. Reacting to Crisis Group's advice in this regard, several Syrian officials explained that President Bashar's peace offer speaks for itself. "The ball is now in their court", said a minister.<sup>312</sup> A former adviser pointed out that "negotiation theory teaches that one should never start with making concessions; Arafat began by giving in to Israeli demands from the first day of the Oslo Process and look at the Palestinians now".<sup>313</sup> Some Syrian officials dismissed the relevance of such measures altogether: "Our gestures won't have any effect. They just want us to relinquish our rights, and we will never do that".<sup>314</sup>

While such arguments are understandable, they fail to take account of the role of Israeli public opinion. Rather than repeatedly and vainly trying to persuade the Israeli government of its goodwill by reiterating its willingness to talk, Damascus should change its target and aim for the Israeli

people with more visible signals, such as inviting an Israeli media outlet to interview a senior official, providing information on Israeli soldiers missing in action, returning the remains of Eli Cohen,<sup>315</sup> or inviting public figures to Syria.<sup>316</sup> At a minimum, Syria should stop convening the Bureau of the Arab Boycott against Israel which, in any event, has very limited effect,<sup>317</sup> and undertake de-mining efforts or at least refrain from laying new mines near the Golan armistice line.<sup>318</sup>

- clarifying its position on the Shab'a farms. Damascus has publicly endorsed Beirut's position that the farms are Lebanese; still, it continues to maintain some ambiguity. Syria should clarify this issue, for example through an official document containing evidence and/or a Syrian-Lebanese agreement on Shab'a's status addressed to the Security Council.<sup>319</sup> Should Syria formally state that the Shab'a farms are Lebanese, this might pave the way for a deal -- suggested by some members of the Lebanese opposition -- pursuant to which Israel would withdraw from Shab'a provided Hizbollah ceased all attacks, turned over its rockets to the Lebanese army, redeployed twenty to 30 kilometres north, while Lebanon's army moved to the border.<sup>320</sup>
- lifting the state of emergency, legalising opposition political parties, convening a national conference

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<sup>315</sup> When asked about Eli Cohen's remains, an Israeli foreign affairs official told Crisis Group that "this would be very important for Israel", and "if there was to be progress on this, it would have a great effect on the Israeli public". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2004.

<sup>316</sup> Responding to this latter suggestion -- and specifically to the idea of inviting former Israeli negotiator Uri Sagui -- a senior Syrian official said: "This is not a bad idea. Personally I have nothing against it provided there are good intentions from all sides", Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2004.

<sup>317</sup> Its most recent meeting held in December 2004 in Damascus was devoted to discussing "the Israeli infiltration of the Iraqi market" and updating a blacklist of international companies trading with Israel, *As-Safir*, 7 December 2004.

<sup>318</sup> Syrian troops recently began replacing old mines, explaining that "we are still at war". UNDOF claims not to possess maps of Israeli or Syrian mines in the Golan. Crisis Group interview with UNDOF official, Camp Fawar, near Quneitra, 2 December 2004.

<sup>319</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview with diplomat, 1 April 2005.

<sup>320</sup> Whether a withdrawal from Shab'a would remove Hizbollah's last remaining justification for armed struggle and force it to accelerate its political conversion is a controversial question. Israel, which has not withdrawn from Shab'a on the grounds that it is Syrian, is likely at a minimum to demand clear and verifiable assurances that a withdrawal would have a positive impact of the kind described.

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<sup>311</sup> According to the Lebanese human rights organisation Solida, Syria still holds around 200 Lebanese nationals, <http://www.syrian-jail.com/doc/detainees/>.

<sup>312</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 December 2004.

<sup>313</sup> Crisis Group interview with Imad Shuebi, Damascus, 28 October 2004.

<sup>314</sup> Crisis Group interview with Syrian Minister for Emigrants Affairs Buthaina Shabaan, Damascus, 6 December 2004.

of parties, opposition figures and activists to discuss national reconciliation and steps to move toward pluralistic elections, issuing a general amnesty for political prisoners and allowing the return of exiled opposition members who have not engaged in violence;<sup>321</sup> and

- placing all security and intelligence agencies under a National Security Council staffed by civilians.<sup>322</sup>

**For the European Union.** Mediation of an intra-Lebanese accord and mechanism for elections as well as monitoring of such elections would represent a logical extension of the Euro-Lebanese Association Agreement, which established a continuous "political dialogue" on "democratic principles and fundamental human rights".<sup>323</sup> The EU should press the Lebanese government to issue an early invitation for an observer mission; experience teaches that the best missions are those that are on the ground sufficiently in advance of election day and whose work is facilitated by the authorities. Observers should pay particular attention to potential activity by Syrian intelligence operatives or proxies, thereby contributing to the verification of the implementation of Resolution 1559.<sup>324</sup> Likewise, the EU should stand ready to dispatch observers to an eventual trial of those suspected of involvement in Hariri's assassination. More broadly, the EU should use its economic leverage to urge Lebanese cooperation -- including that of the 'Ayn at-Tineh loyalist bloc -- on holding timely, free, and fair elections.<sup>325</sup>

As a means of pressing Syria neither to interfere with the transition to a new elected government nor instigate violence by its proxies, the EU should continue holding off formalisation of its Association Agreement with Damascus -- initialled in September 2004 but not yet signed and ratified -- until it has fully withdrawn, and free and fair elections have been held in Lebanon.<sup>326</sup> That said, should such elections occur, the EU should not opt for long-term delay. Negotiations over the agreement have resulted in inclusion of useful human rights, non-proliferation and anti-terrorism clauses. Likewise, implementation of the agreement would bolster Syrian reformers and loosen the grip of monopolists and their allies in the regime who sought to thwart its conclusion.<sup>327</sup>

The EU should also resume a dialogue with Hizbollah to try to steer it toward a constructive role in Lebanon and, in the longer term, toward an exclusively political identity. In that context, the EU should resist U.S. and Israeli pressure to include it on its terrorism list barring information that it currently is involved in such activity. Finally, once a newly elected government is in place, the EU should begin working on a Paris III Conference to show its support and help handle Lebanon's large public debt.<sup>328</sup>

**For the Israeli government.** After initial missteps -- including particularly maladroit statements by Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom praising the opposition and calling for Syria's immediate withdrawal<sup>329</sup> -- and

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<sup>321</sup> Bashar has announced several such amnesties since coming to power in July 2000. Syria is believed to still hold hundreds of political prisoners (a figure some claim would exceed 1,000 if non-violent Islamists detained as *Jihadis* were included). The Syrian ambassador to the U.S. has stated that all remaining political prisoners will be released prior to June 2005, CNN, 23 March 2005.

<sup>322</sup> Interestingly, this idea was backed by Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani after it was suggested by Ayman Abd al-Nur, a reformist Baath Party member. Crisis Group interview with Ayman Abd al-Nur, Damascus, 6 March 2005. Turkmani raised the idea in his book, *al-Amm al-Qawmi fi al-Qurn al-Wahid wa al-Ashrin* (Damascus, 2005). See also BBC (Arabic), 25 January 2005. The National Security Council would complement recent efforts made by Interior Minister Ghazi Kanaan to reform the Political Security Agency (*Amm as-Siyasi*) and place it firmly under ministerial control.

<sup>323</sup> These principles "guide [the] internal policy and constitute an essential element of [the Euro-Lebanese Association] agreement", Association Agreement with Lebanon (Article 2).

<sup>324</sup> A European diplomat argued that election observers would be well-placed to note any continuing activity by Syrian intelligence agents as they would be in direct and daily contact with locals. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 April 2005.

<sup>325</sup> Lebanon's economic and financial predicament has been considerably worsened by the current crisis. Most EU projects in Lebanon are already on hold due to the government's lack

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of cooperation. The possibility of a financial collapse --the state treasury no longer being able to pay out salaries to public employees -- cannot be ruled out. EU officials have indicated that if this happened, the EU would not come to Lebanon's rescue unless progress had been made toward holding free and fair elections. Crisis Group interview with European diplomat, Beirut, 7 April 2005.

<sup>326</sup> The EU's representative in Syria said: "I don't see how we could consider signature earlier than [the] fulfillment of these two conditions: full, verifiable withdrawal of troops and intelligence services and the issue of what we really see on the ground, free transparent elections or not", Reuters, 4 April 2005.

<sup>327</sup> Crisis Group interview with former senior EU official, Washington, April 2005 and with former Syrian negotiator on the Association Agreement, March 2005.

<sup>328</sup> Paris I refers to a meeting held in February 2001 between Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and French President Jacques Chirac, which turned into a loosely arranged donors conference attended by a number of other countries: Hariri returned to Lebanon with promises of \$500 million in financial aid. Paris II was held in November 2002, when eighteen countries and eight financial institutions gathered in Paris to discuss means of relieving Lebanon's soaring public debt problem: Lebanon managed to secure around \$4.4 billion in loans, for which support Hariri pledged to privatise utilities and cut government spending by 9 per cent. See fn. 68 above.

<sup>329</sup> Shalom described the anti-Syrian protests in Lebanon as "a

following a private U.S. rebuke, Israel has adopted a far more constructive, low-profile stance. As a member of Lebanon's opposition stated, "almost anything Israel will do will hurt us. It should stay as far away from us and from Lebanon as possible. This is not nor should it be perceived as an Israeli affair".<sup>330</sup> This also means refraining from any military action, including intrusion into Lebanon's airspace and territorial waters in violation of Security Council Resolution 425,<sup>331</sup> and from pressing for a separate agreement with a newly elected Lebanese government in the absence of progress toward peace with Syria.<sup>332</sup>

Once an elected Lebanese government is in place, Israel should be open to a possible deal involving its withdrawal from Shab'a along the lines described above, that is, in the context of an arrangement that both significantly mitigates Hizbollah's military threat and increases domestic and international pressure on the organisation to assume an exclusively political role. At an appropriate time, it also should seriously test President Bashar's oft-repeated willingness to resume negotiations.

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most important development. It's something we have been hoping for". He added there was "a real wish by the Lebanese people to free themselves from Syrian occupation." Israeli Army Radio, 2 March 2005.

<sup>330</sup> Crisis Group interview, April 2005.

<sup>331</sup> UNIFIL recently noted "increased Israeli violations by air that fall outside the pattern". While Israeli incursions of Lebanese airspace usually occur roughly two or three times a week, the number jumped to twenty during the last week of March and early April 2005. These generally are by unmanned drones. According to UNIFIL, this increase was not matched by similar heightened activity by Hizbollah, which has remained quiet, at least since Hariri's assassination. Crisis Group telephone interview with UNIFIL officer in Naqura, 5 April 2005.

<sup>332</sup> While expressing understanding for the need to adopt a low profile, an Israeli official made clear: "we are constantly aware of the problems and the threats emanating from Hizbollah, and given our calculations of our national interests, we keep all options open. Sometimes it is good to show restraint and prevent conflict, some times it is bad. But we are aware of the international community's interests and do not want to get in the way". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, March 2005. He also expressed misgivings about Europe's inclination to postpone the question of Hizbollah's disarmament indefinitely. "Hizbollah enjoys hearing this, and it continues to act as it they always has. At the end of the day, democracies look for compromise, and this serves the radicals. You cannot have half-disarmament; what does it mean, guns but no bullets? It is ridiculous. Hizbollah is patient, and it believes it will prevail. It will continue to play both hands, the game of Jihad and the game of politics. As we say in Israel, they will attend both weddings", *ibid.*



