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THE WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN FORCES FROM LEBANON

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Last week, the governments of Syria and Lebanon announced that Syrian forces in Lebanon would be redeployed outside of Lebanese population centers and that Damascus even intends to pull about half of its troops completely out of Lebanon. Syrian sources stressed that these steps are in keeping with the 1989 Taef Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war. But they also admitted that they are a signal to the international community, and especially the United States, that Syria is responsive to voices from Washington demanding Syrian respect for Lebanese sovereignty and the withdrawal of Syrian forces. This show of Syrian compliance, however, should not be taken at face value. For years, Syria has been constantly redeploying its forces and reducing the number posted in Lebanon, to the point where there are now only about 10,000 troops left of the 20,000 who were there in 2000. But even after this latest reduction in force takes place, Syria will remain the ultimate overlord of Lebanon. After all, Lebanon's rehabilitation has essentially left the Syrian army without a role there. It is Syria's intelligence and security agencies, along with its clique of Lebanese collaborators, who preserve its absolute domination.

The latest announcement is therefore little more than a public relations exercise whose purpose is

to ease the growing international pressure on Syria to withdraw its forces and restore Lebanese sovereignty. But Syria will not and cannot respond to that demand. Syrian presence in Lebanon is, first and foremost, an economic imperative. After all, Syria earns hundreds of millions of dollars every month, primarily from the remittances of hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers who have flooded the Lebanese labor market but also from the involvement of senior Syrian officials in the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and other goods. Moreover, Syrian presence and control confer significant military-security and political benefits. And since domination of Lebanon is the regime's sole foreign policy achievement, conceding that would be a mortal blow to the image and self-esteem of Syria and of the Ba'th regime that rules it.

Still, Syria had to do something to defuse the crisis sparked by its decision to prolong the term of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Syria's yes-man in Beirut, who has already been in office for six years. In early September, intense Syrian pressure prompted the Lebanese Parliament to amend the constitution so that Lahoud could stay on for another three years. This action was taken immediately after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1559, though it actually ignores and even defies it. Passed by

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an impressive majority of 9 in favor, 6 abstaining, the Resolution calls for respect for Lebanon's sovereignty and constitution, the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and the dismantling of Lebanese and foreign militias -- an obvious reference to Hizbullah. While the final Resolution was a watered-down version of the original draft -- it refrained, for example, from mentioning Syria by name -- the American and French sponsors nevertheless made it perfectly clear whom they had in mind.

But though Syria was able to overcome the limited opposition in Lebanon to its constitutional coup, its international "success" was far less unequivocal. By reappointing its puppet in Beirut rather than appointing a new one, Syria managed to do what no one else has done since the war in Iraq -- bring France and the United States together. True, the draft resolution proposed by those two powers was eventually diluted, but not as the result of any Syrian diplomatic initiatives. The changes were actually adopted in response to Russian and Chinese concerns that such a forceful resolution could serve as a precedent for criticism of their own policies. And in the end, even Algeria refused to oppose the Resolution, preferring instead to abstain.

On the face of things, at least, Bashar al-Assad "got away" with his gambit in Lebanon, just as he rode out reactions to his support for Hizbullah and his policy *vis-à-vis* Iraq. But the cumulative effect of all these episodes may eventually prove to be more than the current system can bear. After all, Assad's behavior during the war in Iraq damaged his relations with the United States, and his refusal to stop supporting terrorism has resulted in American sanctions. The reappointment of Lahoud in Lebanon has now produced a Security Council Resolution that could have further repercussions, since it calls on the UN Secretary General to submit a follow-on report in early October.

True, the US is not particularly determined right now to push a confrontation with Syria. President Bush has adopted a forceful stance in the past, but he is currently preoccupied with his election campaign and has left day-to-day management of foreign policy to the State Department, which traditionally prefers a softer line on Syria, based on dialogue accompanied by mild threats. Besides, the major priority on the American foreign policy agenda is Iraq, and Syrian help on that can be paid for in Lebanese coin. As a result, when Assistant Secretary of State William Burns visited Damascus in mid-September, he did repeat American demands that Syria stop supporting Hizbullah and Palestinian terrorist organizations, withdraw its forces from Lebanon, and help stabilize the situation in Iraq. But the only Syrian commitment he received was a promise to act more vigorously against Arab and other Muslim terrorists traveling to Iraq via Syria, a promise seemingly fulfilled by the creation of a joint Syrian-American-Iraqi security committee to monitor the situation on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Moreover, Syria has undoubtedly noticed that US Secretary of State Colin Powell agreed to meet his Syrian counterpart during the annual convocation of the UN General Assembly, even though the French Foreign Minister was too busy to do that.

But American equivocation may well be a passing phenomenon. After November, and especially if George W. Bush is reelected, American pressure could easily be revived. It is therefore not surprising that the Syrian media are practically unrestrained in their endorsement of John Kerry.

In any event, Syria is not about to terminate its presence in Lebanon -- or its backing for Hizbullah. And since there seems to be no Lebanese element prepared to resist Syrian hegemony, only irresistible western pressure or a major domestic crisis can bring about a real Syrian withdrawal.