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LEAVING LEBANON?

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On June 10th of this year, Syria and Lebanon marked the first anniversary of the death of Hafez al-Asad. A few days later, Syrian forces began to withdraw from Lebanon. The connection between these two events is not coincidental. Asad's death and even more so the sense that his son and heir, Bashar, is not able to fill his father's shoes, led directly to the upsurge in demands by Lebanese that Syria leave their country. It is that sentiment, especially in the Christian-Maronite camp, that Bashar is trying to appease with the highly publicized withdrawal of some Syrian forces.

Lebanese and others quickly interpreted Bashar's action as a sign of weakness. After all, rather than attacking those who dared challenge Syria's presence, not to speak of its hegemony, in Lebanon, Bashar yielded to the challenge posed by this vocal opposition. Of course, other factors contributed to his decision, including the desire to ensure both the success of his first official visit to France at the end of June and the expected election of Syria to the United Nations Security Council.

Bashar's action does not signify that the Syrians are losing their control of Lebanon or their ability to suppress those who challenge it. Opposition to Syria may be deeply entrenched in

Lebanon, especially in the hard core of the Christian-Maronite camp around Archbishop Sfeir, but it is far too weak to bring about the expulsion of the Syrians. The latter still enjoy the support of most Lebanese Muslims, especially of forces like Amal and Hizbullah, as well as of many Christians who view Syria as the guarantor of the political and economic stability that Lebanon has enjoyed in recent years.

Moreover, the redeployment or withdrawal of some Syrian forces is hardly unprecedented. That has happened before, most recently several months ago. On each occasion, it turned out that a well-publicized withdrawal was really a public relations measure that did not substantially change the reality on the ground. This time, part of the Syrian force has been withdrawn from Beirut (though many troops are still there), but slightly to the east, in the Bekaa Valley, about 15,000 Syrian soldiers remain.

It is also the case that after a presence of 25 years, Syria no longer needs to maintain tens of thousands of troops in Lebanon in order to ensure its control. Lebanon is now inextricably tied to Syria, and it is the loyalty of elements in the Lebanese political system, rather than the presence of Syrian soldiers in the streets of Beirut, that guarantees Lebanese government



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compliance with Syrian preferences. Bashar may therefore have concluded that he can afford to put an end to the friction with the local population caused when Syrian soldiers direct traffic, check drivers' licenses, and slip into their pockets the protection money and transit fees they habitually extorted from Lebanese civilians. Indeed, Bashar himself admitted in a newspaper interview that if foreign forces had been present for 25 years in the streets of Damascus, Damascenes, too, would have developed a certain antagonism to them.

Along with the desire to pacify those Lebanese calling for the departure of Syria from their country, the fear of a clash with Israel may also have contributed to the decision to redeploy. That, after all, is what Syria did in the summer of 1996, following the election victory of Benjamin Netanyahu, when commando forces were withdrawn from Lebanon and stationed closer to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights. If that is indeed the case, then the recent redeployment is a defensive step, intended to reduce the exposure of Syrians in Lebanon to attacks by the Israel Air Force. On balance, however, it seems that the Israeli dimension this time is less important in the overall Syrian calculus.

In sum, the Syrian redeployment out of Lebanon does not foreshadow the end of Syrian presence and control in Lebanon, or even the beginning of the end. And if Bashar hoped that he could, with this action, put an end to the pressure to eliminate Syrian hegemony, then he may well have made a long-term miscalculation. For the fact remains that many in Lebanon interpret his action as a sign of weakness, and this may actually intensify the opposition to Syria's control rather than pacify it.

One clear indicator of such a trend is the adherence of Walid Junblatt, the leader of the Lebanese Druze, to the camp demanding Syria's

departure from Lebanon. Walid's father, Kamal, was murdered by Syrian agents in March 1977 because he had opposed the entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon early on in the civil war. Walid quickly drew the appropriate lesson at that time and rushed off to Damascus to swear allegiance to Hafez al-Asad. For many years, Junblatt faithfully supported the Syrian position. But last summer, he crossed the line and added his voice to those calling for Syria to leave Lebanon. The reason is fairly clear. Following the death of Hafez al-Asad, Junblatt could challenge Syria because he came to believe that the new President would refrain from resorting to the same methods against Syria's adversaries in Lebanon that his father had employed. And the fact that the Syrians continued to treat him with respect and handled him with kid gloves even after he publicly came out against them proves that Junblatt calculated correctly.

In any case, even if the Syrian redeployment/withdrawal provides Bashar with some short-term advantages, it implies a longer-term danger, since it demonstrates that he is unable to measure up to his father's standards. And it is precisely that danger that threatens the greatest and most enduring of Hafez al-Asad's achievements – the Syrian domination of Lebanon.

Indeed, less than a week after Syrian forces left Beirut, Bashar's nakedness was fully exposed. Following a Hizbullah attack on an Israeli outpost on Mount Dov, the IAF struck a Syrian radar position in the Beka'. But Syria did not respond. Instead, Hizbullah launched several more attacks and declared, in an almost patronizing tone, that it was now Hizbullah who were defending Syria, rather than the other way around. The entire episode provides further evidence that the key to stability in Lebanon remains in the hands of a driver still unsure of his way.