Unlike its incremental intervention in Lebanon throughout early 1976, Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon in late April 2005 was swift, unplanned and humiliating. On both occasions, Lebanese, regional and international factors overlapped to shape Syrian behavior. But whereas the 1976 intervention consolidated Syria’s position in the Arab-Israeli conflict and elicited implicit US gratitude and Israeli cooperation, the 2005 withdrawal undermined Syria’s regional security interests and left it besieged in the international arena.

Syria’s abrupt withdrawal under immense international and regional pressure caught even its closest Lebanese allies off guard. In less than a month, all Syrian regular army troops stationed in Lebanon since 1976 had been pulled back into Syrian territory. The power of the Syrian intelligence apparatus in Lebanon, once 5,000 strong, remains a matter of speculation among Lebanese and external actors, namely the United States, France and the United Nations.

The former Lebanese opposition, now partially empowered by parliamentary elections, insists that Syria’s intelligence personnel continue to operate in Lebanon, either directly or through their Lebanese proxies. They accuse Syria of direct or indirect responsibility for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and for other attacks on politicians and journalists. Decades of Syrian intelligence penetration of Lebanon’s military and security apparatus cannot be uprooted in a matter of months.

But the aura of omnipotence that once surrounded Syria’s position in Lebanon is gone.

The Geopolitical Imperative

Syria’s interests in Lebanon predate the 1976 intervention that culminated in the forceful entry of the Third Armored Division to rescue Christian militias from defeat at the hands of the Muslim National Movement and their Palestinian allies. Damascus has always considered Lebanon to be a sort of backyard bound to its eastern neighbor by “distinctive relations” (alaqat mumayyaza), a euphemism Damascus deploys to legitimize its interference in Lebanon’s domestic and foreign politics. Indeed, when Lebanon was offered independence in 1943, Syrian politicians foreswore their historical claims to those areas annexed by France in 1920 to create Greater Lebanon, but only with the proviso that independent
Lebanon would not constitute a beachhead (mustaqarr) or a corridor (mamarr) for Arab or foreign actors bent on destabilizing the Damascus regime. The 1943 Lebanese National Pact explicitly recognized this security tradeoff between the two states. Lebanon rarely honored it, however. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Beirut served as a center for conspiracy and subversion against Syria. After the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Lebanon entered into the orbit of a rejuvenated and expanded Eastern Front strategy proposed by Damascus in the wake of the conclusion of the first Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement (Sinai I) on January 18, 1974. The front aimed at protecting Syria from an Israeli outflanking maneuver through Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, Syria’s soft underbelly.

The Lebanese civil war that began in April 1975 broke out at a most inopportune time for Syria. By inaugurating a cold peace between Egypt and Israel, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy had shattered the two-front strategy built by Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad to regain the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in 1967. The steady collapse of Lebanon threatened to compromise Syria’s control over its immediate security environment. Despite opposition from large segments of the Syrian public and some regime insiders, Syria sent its troops into Lebanon to forestall a further deterioration of its security interests. In a remarkably revealing speech on July 20, 1976, Asad explained the rationale behind his decision. The Lebanese war confronted Syria with a number of equally objectionable possibilities, he said. Defeat of the Christian militias in Lebanon would invite Israeli intervention into Lebanon. This, in turn, was bound to expose Syria’s western flank to an Israeli attack, neutralizing the Eastern Front strategy, undermining Syria’s leverage in a comprehensive settlement and consequently exacerbating its regional isolation. A Christian defeat would also internationalize the conflict, a Syrian taboo, leading to the partition of Lebanon along sectarian lines, and the creation of a pro-Israel Christian state tied ideologically to the West along Syria’s western border. This would set in motion a chain of secessionist demands in the region based on ethnic and religious loyalties. A Christian defeat in Lebanon and the concomitant creation of a militant entity in the area south of the Beirut-Damascus highway, ruled by a National Movement-Palestinian coalition, was an equally appalling scenario. Allied to then radical Iraq and Libya, this entity could drag Syria into a premature and costly confrontation with Israel.

US Middle East diplomacy paved the way for Syria’s intervention in Lebanon, negotiating secretly the “red line agreement” between Syria and Israel. The agreement stipulated that no Syrian troops could be dispatched beyond a line running directly east from Sidon toward the eastern Bekaa region. It also stipulated that Syrian troops south of the Beirut-Damascus highway could not number more than a single brigade, that Syria could not deploy surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon, and that Syria could not use its air force against ground targets in Lebanon. Kissinger brokered the red line agreement to lure Syria into Lebanon, thereby neutralizing its opposition to his efforts aimed at ending the state of belligerency between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This he did by exaggerating Israel’s desire to intervene in Lebanon to save the Christian Lebanese from total...
defeat. Indeed, when the second Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement (Sinai II) was signed in Geneva on September 4, 1975, with the secret side letters exchanged between Egypt, Israel and the US neutralizing Cairo’s role in the Arab military equation, Syria was preoccupied in Lebanon.

With the Golan Heights Disengagement Agreement of May 31, 1974 calming the Syrian-Israeli border, and Egypt outside the Arab camp after Sinai II, Syria's intervention in Lebanon fit into Asad's grand strategy to dominate the remaining Arab actors involved directly in the Arab-Israeli conflict: the PLO, Jordan and Lebanon. When the Lebanese civil war broke out, and the PLO supported Kamal Jumblatt’s push for total victory over the Lebanese Christians, Damascus suspected that Yasser Arafat was using Lebanon to pressure Washington to resolve the Palestinian question. Control over the PLO would not only forestall Arafat’s unilateral plans, it would also strengthen the Syrian negotiating position in a comprehensive peace settlement. Henceforth Arafat’s efforts focused on resisting Syria’s hegemonic pressures in Lebanon.

Israel vs. Syria

The struggle for Lebanon defined the Syrian-Israeli regional confrontation throughout the 1980s. Anwar al-Sadat's trip to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977 hardened Syria’s desire to dominate Lebanon lest a domino effect set in motion similar unilateral initiatives. Any attempt to disentangle Lebanon’s civil war from Syria’s own objectives vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict was now impossible. The bloody confrontation with the Christian militias, starting in February 1978, and symbolized by the heavy bombardment of East Beirut’s densely populated Christian areas, was an early warning of Syria’s determination to obviate any attempt by Christian Lebanese leaders to seek closer ties with Israel, and hence allow Israel a foothold in Lebanon.

In March 1978, Israel established its security backyard, especially in the all-important Bekaa Valley. With the Golan Heights Disengagement Agreement of May 31, 1974 calming the Syrian-Israeli border, and Egypt outside the Arab camp after Sinai II, Syria’s intervention in Lebanon fit into Asad’s grand strategy to dominate the remaining Arab actors involved directly in the Arab-Israeli conflict: the PLO, Jordan and Lebanon. When the Lebanese civil war broke out, and the PLO supported Kamal Jumblatt’s push for total victory over the Lebanese Christians, Damascus suspected that Yasser Arafat was using Lebanon to pressure Washington to resolve the Palestinian question. Control over the PLO would not only forestall Arafat’s unilateral plans, it would also strengthen the Syrian negotiating position in a comprehensive peace settlement. Henceforth Arafat’s efforts focused on resisting Syria’s hegemonic pressures in Lebanon.

Israel established such a foothold—its “security zone” in the south—and kept it for 22 years despite the UN Security Council’s rapid passage of Resolution 425 calling for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory. Soon Syria found itself in a direct confrontation with Israel when, in response to Israel’s downing on April 28, 1981 of two Syrian helicopters ferrying supplies to paratroopers stationed in the mountains around the Christian city of Zahlé, Syria moved surface-to-air missiles into the Bekaa Valley in open violation of the red line agreement. US diplomacy, led by presidential envoy Philip Habib, defused the crisis—but not for long.

On June 6, 1982, on the pretext of retaliation following an assassination attempt on its ambassador to Britain, Israel launched a full-scale invasion of Lebanon to destroy PLO strongholds in south Lebanon and Beirut, neutralize the Syrian presence in Lebanon and, subsequently, install a pro-Israeli president, Bashir Gemayel. Israel planned that Gemayel would reestablish Maronite Christian hegemony over Lebanon and sign a bilateral peace agreement. Defeated in Lebanon, Damascus was sidelined temporarily as Washington, dismissive of Syria’s security concerns, sponsored negotiations between Lebanon and Israel. When direct Lebanese-Israeli negotiations to secure an Israeli withdrawal within the context of a security agreement between the two countries opened on December 28, 1982, Damascus smelled another Camp David in the making. When Amin Gemayel, with US encouragement and mediation, concluded a Lebanese-Israeli agreement on May 17, 1983 that all but ceded Lebanon’s security to Israel, the Syrian reaction was swift and surgical.

Damasus viewed the May 17 Agreement as an attempt to encircle Syria’s western flank with an Israeli security zone and satellite state. If left unchecked, it would rob Syria of the only asset it possessed in the confrontation with Israel.

By July 1983, Syria had gathered its Lebanese allies in a National Salvation Front. Henceforth, the fight to abrogate the May 17 Agreement commenced in earnest. In the ensuing battles, Syria rallied its Shi’a and Druze allies in Lebanon to defeat Gemayel, who was backed by Maronite militias, the Multinational Forces, the strongest battalions in the Lebanese Army and the firepower of US destroyers anchored off the Lebanese coast. It would be a classic war by proxy deploying a range of tactics, from urban warfare to suicide attacks against US targets. Less than a year later, Gemayel, defeated in West Beirut and in the mountains, and abandoned by Washington, capitulated to Syrian pressures. Asad refused to meet with Gemayel to discuss future political reforms in Lebanon, a prerequisite for the stabilization of the country, until the latter abrogated the May 17 Agreement, which Gemayel did on March 5, 1984. Earlier, on September 3, 1983, Israel had withdrawn from Beirut’s mountain environs in the Shouf to the Awali River in south Lebanon. Syrian-backed Fatah dissidents dislodged Arafat’s forces from the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli in late 1983. By the middle of 1984, then, Syria had reemerged as the main broker in Lebanon’s domestic politics, regaining substantial control over its security backyard, especially in the all-important Bekaa Valley. Israel’s attempt to drag Lebanon into a separate, bilateral peace had been foiled; Syria’s role in any effort to resolve the Lebanese war was reaffirmed.

With the May 17 Agreement abrogated, Syria moved systematically to consolidate its position in Lebanon. In 1985, Syria’s control over the strategic northern city of Tripoli was completed when Sunni Islamist groups concentrated in Bab al-Tabbana were smashed by pro-Syrian, mainly local Alawi, militias backed directly by Syrian forces. In the battle, pro-Iraqi Baathist groups in Tripoli also were eliminated. In February 1987, the Syrian army returned to West Beirut, from which it was ejected after the Israeli invasion, under the pretext of keeping the peace be-

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tween its warring allies: the Shi’a Amal movement and the Druze militia. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, the Palestinian camps in Beirut and south Lebanon fought running battles with Syria’s proxy Amal militia. Arafat’s influence in the camps had to be contained for Syria to deploy Lebanon effectively in the geopolitical contest with Israel.

By the middle of 1988, Syria’s attention turned to the upcoming presidential elections in Lebanon. Maronite opposition, however, blocked the election of Syria’s nominee, Michel Daher. With only 15 minutes left in his presidency, Gemayel appointed Gen. Michel Aoun, then commander of the Lebanese Army, prime minister of a caretaker cabinet. Championing the cause of liberating Lebanon from all foreign armies, Aoun launched a “war of liberation” against Syrian troops deployed in Lebanon on March 14, 1989. Aoun’s war played into the hands of Saddam Hussein, who, since signing a ceasefire with Iran in August 1988, had been calling upon Syria to end its “occupation” of Lebanon.\(^\text{13}\) This was Saddam’s way of punishing Asad for aligning with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Worse still, Syria’s Lebanon troubles compounded a growing regional isolation. Arafat was steering the PLO closer to negotiations with Washington. Renouncing its claim to the West Bank in 1988, Jordan joined Iraq, Egypt and North Yemen in the Arab Cooperation Council in February 1989. The Casablanca Arab summit of May 1989 underscored Syria’s weakened regional position. It was an emergency summit convened with the explicit purpose of finding an Arab solution to the Lebanese conflict, despite Asad’s insistence that Lebanon was Syria’s business and no one else’s.

**Washington’s Bandwagon**

Syria’s position in Lebanon was not undermined by the Arabization of the Lebanese conflict, however. The Ta’if Agreement of October 22, 1989, the fruit of a Saudi, US and Syrian agreement imposed on Lebanese deputies, confirmed Syria’s dominant role in Lebanon. While providing for the gradual elimination of confessionalism in Lebanon’s political system, Ta’if consecrated Syria’s role as the external balancer of power among the different Lebanese communities, an objective Damascus had pursued for many decades, and recognized that Lebanon and Syria are linked together by “distinctive relations.” Invoking the language of the 1943 National Pact, the accord stipulated: “Lebanon should never be made a source of threat to Syria’s security…. Consequently, Lebanon does not allow that it be made a corridor or a beachhead for any power or state or organization seeking to undermine its security or the security of Syria.” Ta’if committed Syria only
to “redeploy” its troops to the Bekaa Valley and its western approaches two years after “the political reforms [agreed upon at Ta’if] are adopted in a constitutional manner.”

While most Lebanese politicians interpreted the latter proviso to mean two years after the Ta’if reforms were incorporated into the new constitution, the Syrian regime offered its own very liberal legal interpretation: two years after confessionalism was eliminated. The future mission of Syrian troops in Lebanon was considered a bilateral issue to be determined by Syria and the future Lebanese government. Throughout the Ta’if deliberations, Christian deputies, suspicious of Syria’s intentions, requested a timetable for a Syrian withdrawal linked to the constitutional adoption of the proposed political reforms. Damascus refused to offer such a timetable, however. Saudi promises that Arab pressure would secure a Syrian withdrawal were for naught.

Be that as it may, Aoun rejected the Ta’if Agreement because it failed to specify a timetable for the Syrian withdrawal, and as long as he barricaded himself in the presidential palace, implementing it remained elusive. Then Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The US desire to include Syria in the coalition arrayed against Iraq intersected with Syria’s desire to deny Saddam the opportunity to emerge as the leader of the Arab world and threaten its geopolitical interests in Lebanon and beyond. By jumping on Washington’s bandwagon, Syria secured from the US a free hand in Lebanon, with quiet support from the Gulf states and Egypt. Washington also accepted the Syrian interpretation of Ta’if—constitutional reforms without Syrian withdrawal—which was the scenario Maronite politicians had warned against in the Ta’if conclave. This amounted to an implicit US acceptance of a Syrian custodianship over Lebanon. On October 13, 1990, Syrian troops, supported by Lebanese soldiers under the command of the pro-Ta’if government, attacked Aoun’s forces in East Beirut and dislodged him from the presidential palace. Syria’s relationship with Lebanon now entered a new phase.

Toward Total Control

From 1991 until April 26, 2005, Syria exercised near total control over Lebanon’s domestic and foreign politics. Indeed, during this period, Syria became at one and the same time the dominant domestic actor in Lebanon and the main external party overseeing the transition from war to peace. Control over Lebanon not only served the Syrian track of the Arab-Israeli negotiations launched in the October 1991 Madrid peace
The same study estimated the cost of fees paid by public and private companies to Syrian intelligence officers between 1976 and 2004 at around $5.4 billion, and total Lebanese losses as a result of the Syrian military and intelligence presence in Lebanon between 1976 and 2005 at $27 billion.

Most importantly, Lebanon served as an open market for hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers who flocked to Lebanon in the early 1990s during the reconstruction boom. The economic health of the Jazira and Hasaka regions depended on remittances sent by these workers to their families. Moreover, the Lebanese Ministry of Labor, always controlled by Syrian loyalists, turned a blind eye to Syrian workers not registered in its ledgers to avoid paying registration fees and taxes. Syrian domination of post-1990 Lebanon thus played “a pivotal role in shaping the distribution of power and wealth in the highest circles of the Syrian regime,” as Kassir noted. It created new opportunities for wealth production and investment outside Syria, allowed the regime to manage the informal economic sector, and enabled it to postpone introducing deeper economic liberalization measures with their inescapable effects on the regime’s social welfare commitments.

Syria’s domination of Lebanon proceeded along a number of parallel tracks. Legally, it was institutionalized through formal treaties between the two states. On May 22, 1991, the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination streamlined the security and foreign policy objectives of the two countries. Article 1 stated: “The two countries will work to achieve the highest levels of cooperation and coordination in all political and economic and security and cultural and scientific and other fields.” The treaty also provided a mechanism for the institutionalization of coordination between the two countries through bilateral executive, economic, foreign, and defense and security committees. Given the power disparity between the two states, the treaty amounted to the institutionalization of a Syrian overlordship in Lebanon, especially in the foreign policy and security fields. The latter objective was given legal status with the promulgation of a Defense and Security Agreement, signed by the defense and interior ministers of both countries on September 1, 1991. The agreement provided for comprehensive coordination and cooperation between the military, security and intelligence establishments of Lebanon and Syria. It was designed to streamline the security and defense establishments of the two countries in a pro-Syrian ideological orientation to ensure Syria’s domination over Lebanon’s military establishment and intelligence apparatus. With the Treaty of Brotherhood, it provided the political and security infrastructure for Syria’s hegemony over Lebanon.

Shelving Ta’if

Once the treaties were signed, the militias were demobilized—except for Hizballah—and political reforms were adopted into the constitution, Syria shelved Ta’if. Lebanese politicians were no longer allowed to mention in their speeches the need to complete the implementation of Ta’if because this implied Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. Lebanese political parties
The Syrian president selected, and renewed the tenure of, Lebanese presidents. Appointments to cabinet passed by Syria’s intelligence prefects in Lebanon: Lt. Gen. Ghazi Kan’an and, subsequently, Brig. Gen. Rustum Ghazali. Syrian intelligence officers also played a decisive role in the composition of electoral lists for parliamentary and municipal elections. Inter- and intra-confessional electoral alliances were imposed on unlikely confessional and ideological allies to ensure the election of pro-Syrian candidates and the defeat of opposition members.

By 1995, the Syrian order in Lebanon was in place, glued together by what opposition Lebanese politicians later labeled *al-nizam al-amni al-mushtarak*, or the mutual Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus controlling the country. The Bekaa Valley town of ‘Anjar, home to the headquarters of the Syrian intelligence apparatus, became the locus of decision-making in Lebanon and symbolic of Syrian control. The 1992 parliamentary elections created a new political elite loyal to Syria, ushering an era of depoliticized politics. The security-military apparatus was firmly controlled by Syria’s allies, Gen. Emile Lahoud, then commander of the army, and Brig. Gen. Jamil al-Sayyid, the deputy director of military intelligence. In 1998, Lahoud and Sayyid moved to the presidency and the directorship of the General Security, respectively. Under Lahoud and Sayyid, the creeping intelligence colonization of state institutions, economic cartels, the media, the courts, the universities and the professional associations reached its zenith. The law organizing punitive litigation was amended and passed on August 7, 2004, against the wishes of the majority of parliamentarians, ending the independence of the judiciary and giving the intelligence agencies free rein. In effect, the state was run by the security agencies, hiding behind a civilian institutional veneer.

Against this backdrop, on September 2, 2004, Washington and Paris pushed through UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling on “all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon” and mandating the “disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias” in the country.

opposed to Syria’s domination were emasculated: the Christian Phalange Party was overtaken from within, and its leadership recomposed of pro-Syrian cadres; the Lebanese Forces were banned and their leader Samir Geagea imprisoned, on charges of orchestrating the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Karami. The supporters of the exiled Michel Aoun were hounded. Trusted Lebanese lieutenants, but always under Syrian supervision, oversaw the reindoctrination of the Lebanese Army along pro-Syrian lines. The intelligence apparatus was restructured to serve Syria’s interests. Syrian intelligence officers penetrated every nook and cranny of Lebanese life, and had the final say in appointments in almost all public institutions.
The assassination of Hariri on February 14, 2005 set in motion a train of events ultimately leading to Syria’s hurried departure from Lebanon. US, French and Saudi pressure on Damascus was overwhelming and effective. Crown Prince ‘Abdallah refused to discuss Hariri’s assassination with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Sharaa, summoning Bashar to Riyadh instead. In their brief meeting on March 3, 2005, ‘Abdallah handed Bashar an ultimatum to withdraw the Syrian army and intelligence apparatus from Lebanon forthwith. Sy’s withdrawal caused much acrimony on both sides of the border. Many Syrian workers left Lebanon, and most Lebanese were happy to see them go, despite their economic utility. Syria’s political edifice in Lebanon collapsed swiftly, and a considerable number of its Lebanese backers disappeared from public life. Those who contested the May-June 2005 parliamentary elections were utterly defeated (except for Amal and Hizballah). Newspaper reports documenting the excesses of Syria’s security chiefs and their Lebanese partners confirmed views held by most Lebanese of the darker side of Syria’s absolute control over the past 15 years. In his famous speech on March 5, 2005 announcing the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Bashar acknowledged that mistakes were made. “We drowned in the details and rushed ahead in our relations with some Lebanese at the expense of others,” he stated.

In the same speech, Bashar summarized the new attitude of Damascus toward Lebanon: “Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon does not mean the absence of a Syrian role [in Lebanon]. This role is governed by many geographic and political and other factors. On the contrary, we [will be] more at liberty and more forthcoming in our dealings with Lebanon.” Syria’s continued interest in matters Lebanese was soon signaled by the closure of the long border with Lebanon as the first post-withdrawal cabinet was being formed in mid-July 2005. The message was not lost on Lebanese politicians: Damascus wanted assurances that the new cabinet would not assume a confrontational stance toward Syria. The July 28, 2005 ministerial manifesto of Fuad Siniora’s cabinet addressed the need to rebuild relations between the two countries, labeling them “distinctive in their strength, depth, transparency, equality and sincerity.” These may be reassuring words, yet they were said in a tone of confidence absent from previous manifestos. Past practices, more so than agreements, must be changed, though some sections of the Defense and Security Agreement require amendment to achieve parity between the two states. Vengeful actions on either side will deepen fresh wounds.

A new page in Syrian-Lebanese relations has indeed been turned. Both countries need time to accommodate themselves to the new reality. The sooner they do so, the better for them both.

Endnotes

1 The only exception is the battalion of Syrian troops posted in Dayr al-‘Ashar, a stretch along the Lebanon-Syrian border where the exact boundary has yet to be demarcated.
5 See Kissinger’s comments at the April 7, 1976 National Security Council meeting, recorded in Years of Renewal, pp. 1046, 1050.
6 Interview with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Damascus, March 14, 1999.
13 See, for example, Saddam’s speech of November 17, 1988, in FBIS-NE-88–223.
19 Al-Nabir, March 25, 2005.
20 Kassir, Dimuqratiyyat Suriya, p. 96.
21 Kassir, “Polity,” p. 103.
22 For the text of the treaty, see al-Safir, May 23, 1993.
23 For the declasified articles, see al-Nabir, September 7, 1993 and al-Safir, September 16, 1993.
24 See the speech by Marwan Hamadeh to the Lebanese Parliament in al-Nabir, March 1, 2005.
25 Interviews with Saudi journalists in Dubai and Beirut, April and June 2005. See also the Washington Post, March 4, 2005.
26 The only other exceptions involved candidates who ran in otherwise “safe” electoral districts, such as Nadir Sukkar in Baalbak-Hermel and A’id Hardan in the South.
27 See the text of Bashar’s speech in al-Hayat, March 6, 2005.
28 See the text of Siniora’s manifesto in al-Nabir, July 26, 2005.

The Day After

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