

Syria, Lebanon Plan Diplomatic Relations

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PARIS -- France's president affirmed Saturday that Syria and Lebanon will open embassies in each other's countries. However, Syria's leader was more cautious.

Syria and Lebanon have not had diplomatic relations since 2005, when former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed. Syria's critics accuse Damascus of having a role in the slaying, a charge Syria denies.

The countries have not had full-fledged embassies in each other's countries since Lebanon became independent in 1943 and Syria in 1945. Syria dominated Lebanon for nearly three decades before the outcry over Mr. Hariri's 2005 slaying forced it to withdraw its troops from the neighboring country.

Syrian President Bashar Assad said last month that establishing diplomatic ties with Lebanon would be possible if a national unity Cabinet were formed in Beirut.

Such a government, including members of Syria's ally Hezbollah, was formed Friday after weeks of haggling. French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with Mr. Assad and with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, who said he wanted an exchange of ambassadors with Syria.

At a joint news conference later, Mr. Sarkozy affirmed that the establishment of embassies in Beirut and Damascus was in the works.

"It's historic. … Naturally, there are a certain number of legal questions to be resolved on the Syrian side … that explain delays on the road to realization," Mr. Sarkozy said. He did not suggest a time frame.

However, Mr. Assad seemed a bit more reticent on how quickly the plan might advance. He said he and the Lebanese president discussed the issue but still need to define the steps to take.

The Lebanese president arrived at the presidential Elysee Palace with an optimistic tone. "We want an exchange of ambassadors and diplomatic relations with Syria," he said before a separate meeting with Mr. Sarkozy. He told reporters not to speak of normalizing ties between Lebanon and Syria because "they are completely normal."

Mr. Sarkozy, who wants to create a consequential role for Europe, and France, in the process toward Middle East peace, said he would visit Damascus in September but did not set a date. Mr. Sarkozy's meeting with Mr. Assad was the first such high-level French-Syrian meeting in years. Ties between Paris and Damascus soured over the assassination of Mr. Hariri, who was close to French leaders.

The leaders all met on the eve of a summit bringing together heads of state or government from 43 nations in Europe and around the Mediterranean rim. Mr. Sarkozy sees the initiative, the Union for the Mediterranean, as a way of seeding peace in an often hostile region.

Syrian-Israeli Relations Discussed

Meanwhile, Mr. Assad urged France and the U.S. to contribute to efforts toward Syrian-Israeli peace talks, but suggested little progress was likely before the U.S. elects a new leader.

"In all frankness, this (U.S.) administration is not interested in the peace process. We will not debate this question before the arrival of a new American administration" following November's presidential elections, Mr. Assad said.

Mr. Assad's comments threw cold water on speculation about a possible one-on-one meeting between him and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert at the summit.

Syria and Israel have been conducting indirect talks via Turkish mediators recently in what is seen as a long-awaited sign of progress in relations.

"As soon as the conditions are present, we will pass to the next step: direct negotiations," Mr. Assad said Saturday.

"We would like France to participate alongside the United States," he added, saying that Europe should play a greater

role in peace efforts. Mr. Sarkozy said Paris is ready to play any role necessary "when the parties are ready."

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