

Bush to host Lebanon president September 25

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US President to hold wide-ranging talks on Middle East with Lebanon's Sleiman.

WASHINGTON - US President George W. Bush will host Lebanese President Michel Sleiman September 25 for wide-ranging talks on the Middle East, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said in a statement Friday.

"The president looks forward to discussing bilateral relations between the United States and Lebanon, US support for a sovereign and democratic Lebanon, and a range of regional issues," she said.

It will be their first meeting since Sleiman was elected in May.

The two leaders were expected to discuss the Middle East peace process as well as Syria, and Lebanese national unity talks scheduled for September 16.

The announcement of the visit came two days after the car bomb assassination Saleh Aridi, the first pro-Syrian political figure to die in an attack of this kind, in what was widely seen as an attempt to derail the unity talks.

The slaying of Aridi, whose party is allied with, was the latest in a string of car bomb attacks began in Lebanon in 2005, but some hinted at an Israeli involvement.

Israel's suspected involvement came months after senior Hezbollah commander Imad Mughnieh was assassinated in a car bombing in Damascus in February in an attack that was blamed on Tel Aviv. Although Israel officially denied responsibility, local media hailed the assassination and some even implicitly gave Tel Aviv credit for the murder.

Lebanon and Syria just last month announced their intention to open diplomatic ties for the first time since they both gained independence from France 60 years ago.

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