

Aoun's goal

Contributed by From the Economist Intelligence Unit ViewsWire
Tuesday, 09 December 2008

The curious political position of Lebanon's Christians

Michel Aoun, the self-proclaimed political leader of Lebanon's Christians, has been accorded a welcome befitting royalty during a five-day visit to Syria. The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, whose father ordered his air force to bomb Mr Aoun out of the Lebanese presidential palace in October 1990, lent one of the handful of serviceable planes in the Syrian Arab Airlines fleet to fly the Lebanese politician to Damascus, and was on hand to welcome him on his arrival on December 3rd.

Mr Aoun has been happy to use the visit to bolster his credentials as a statesman creating a new basis for Syrian-Lebanese relations—he modestly compared his meeting with Mr Assad to that of Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer in 1958. Mr Assad has his eye on the Lebanese parliamentary elections, pinning his hopes on Mr Aoun to play his part in breaking the current majority held by the March 14th bloc, led by Saad al-Hariri. However, Mr Aoun runs the risk of being seen to be too close to Assad, while the Syrian leader, in lavishing such attention on a party leader, could be viewed as undermining the position of the Lebanese president, Michel Suleiman, as well as interfering in another country's electoral process.

Comeback

Mr Aoun formed his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in 2005 after his return from exile in France, where he had been granted asylum after his ouster by Syrian forces 15 years previously. He had first come to prominence in the 1980s as commander of the Lebanese army and as a fierce opponent of the Syrian military presence in the country. (He assumed the role of acting president during the power vacuum that followed the end of Amin Gemayel's term in 1988.)

After Syrian troops left in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, a former prime minister and the architect of Lebanon's post-war reconstruction, in February 2005, Mr Aoun put himself forward as a reforming politician, challenging the structures that Mr Hariri had established as part of a Saudi-brokered post-war settlement. Mr Aoun collaborated closely with Hizbullah, the dominant Shia political force in Lebanon, in the 2005 election, and his list, comprising the FPM and some Christian allies, won 21 of the 128 seats, giving him a solid platform in parliament. He has since strengthened his ties to Hizbullah through drawing up proposals for the eventual integration of the group's weapons into the state's armed forces, an initiative that in practice helped to legitimise Hizbullah's military arm as he also recognised the central role that the group played in resisting Israel.

Mr Assad has been happy to bask in the reflected glory of Mr Aoun, both as a champion of the Lebanese resistance and as a popular Christian leader. During his visit to Syria, Mr Aoun visited a number of churches and monasteries (as well as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus), thereby underlining the point that Syria cherishes its own Christian minorities and is a model of religious tolerance.

Pay-off

The welcome provided by Mr Assad to Mr Aoun (and to other recent Lebanese visitors to Damascus, including the army commander, General Jean Qahwaji) has been in stark contrast to his approach to March 14th, a Sunni Muslim-dominated bloc, including Christian rivals to Mr Aoun and the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt. Mr Assad has accused Mr Hariri's Future Movement of complicity in terrorist attacks within Syria, and the Syrian media has maintained a torrent of hostile comment towards Saudi Arabia, Mr Hariri's strongest regional ally.

Mr Assad decided in October to approve the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time, a move that was heartily applauded by France, which has adopted a markedly more friendly policy towards Syria since Nicolas Sarkozy became president. However, several highly sensitive issues in the two countries' relations remain to be resolved, notably the demarcation and securing of the border, logistical supplies from Syria and Iran to Hizbullah and the international tribunal that has been set up to try those suspected of involvement in Mr Hariri's assassination and in a series of subsequent political killings.

It is clear that Mr Assad would be much more comfortable addressing these issues with a Lebanese government in which his local allies held the balance of power. That is why he is devoting so much effort to cultivating these allies and in seeking to undermine March 14th.

http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12753507&fsrc=rss