

## Appointment in Damascus

Contributed by Michael Young, Dailystar Editor  
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You have to hand it Michel Aoun; he knows how to provoke. Only days after Jamil as-Sayyed, the former head of the General Security directorate, asked Syria's judiciary to bring in for questioning several Lebanese politicians, judicial officials and journalists whom he accused of slandering him, Aoun headed up to Damascus for a photo op with Bashar al-Assad. Better still, he was delivered on Assad's private airplane.

The photograph itself was interesting: Assad shaking Aoun's hand, gripping his elbow with overstated conviviality, on the esplanade outside the presidential palace built for the Syrians by Rafik al-Hariri in the 1980s; and Aoun, staring straight ahead with inexpressive mien, caught, mid-shutter, between stupefaction and a tentative smile.

The rest of the Aoun visit was filler. Assad had gotten what he wanted. Proof positive that he can divide the Lebanese by playing their politicians off against each other; proof, too, that a major Christian representative will readily ignore the Sayyed incident, a ploy designed to ensure that Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, when he ascends to Damascus, will do so with the added humiliation of knowing that Syria's judiciary is taking Sayyed's side on the matter of his father's assassination. And proof, lastly, that the frequent visit with Bashar al-Assad is again a necessary passage for Lebanese leaders, when there were those who thought (how naively) that that sort of thing was over after the Independence Intifada of 2005.

It would be unfair to blame Aoun alone for this. Saad al-Hariri, too, realizes that his Damascus visit is inevitable, now that Saudi Arabia and Syria have reconciled. He, apparently, informed Sleiman Franjeh Wednesday that he would arrive with several of those individuals whom Sayyed named in his legal case, his way of obliging the Syrian regime to clarify their status beforehand. But Hariri will still have to shake the hand of the Syrian president, whose regime is the only serious culprit in Rafik al-Hariri's murder, and he may well do so in the palace his father built.

Then there is Walid Jumblatt. Talk that Jumblatt would be the first to visit Syria was idle. No doubt the Druze leader would have liked to be first, but he also knew this was never likely. "Too much has passed between me and Syria," he often says. On many an occasion Syrian spokespersons, official and unofficial, have indicated that the Assad regime would, henceforth, deal with Taymour Jumblatt, who returned to Lebanon last summer. For Walid, the eventual handover to his son requires, above all, reconciliation with Damascus, because Taymour could not long last against Syria, and because Syria contains a significant number of Druze whose support the Jumblatts must count upon.

Two Christian politicians, Amin Gemayel and Michel al-Murr, also revealed some time ago that they would make their way to Damascus, padding this eventuality with a bodyguard of explanations and provisos that they may or may not respect. Both men have good reasons to plan a Damascus junket, not least the fact that they have sons who are physically vulnerable and politically ambitious. Here we have the two sides of Syrian leverage in Lebanon: intimidation and the ability to promote or demote.

There was a time when Syria's intelligence officers stationed in Lebanon used the appointment as an instrument of power. If you were a politician, or just someone meriting Syrian attentions, you might be urged by an intermediary to make an informal call on Ghazi Kanaan or his successor, Ruston Ghazali, in Aanjar. There you could be kept waiting, quite as informally, for several hours, until all self-esteem evaporated. The more experienced would wait at Hannouch's on the Damascus road, asking to be summoned once Kanaan or Ghazali was ready to receive them.

Then there was the appointment in Damascus. The late Hafez al-Assad ran Lebanon like a baronial province, where selected subordinates, civilian and military, would each run their Lebanese politicians as they saw fit, while parallel lines of authority ran down from Damascus to Beirut, Assad the ultimate arbiter, using everyone against everyone. To visit Damascus was fairly easy, but to be granted an audience with the president was altogether different — an occasion for him to send a strong message, advance a politician or issue a threat or reprimand.

No doubt we shall soon have to decipher more regularly the subtleties of the unwritten code of Syrian appointments. Observers will watch to see whether politicians drive or fly up to Damascus; whether they attend a lunch or earn no more than coffee and a glass of water; whether they meet with Bashar in person or are passed off to a high-level or mid-level nonentity, or, worse, are asked to deal through the Syrian ambassador to Lebanon, the invisible man whose presence is detectable only by the displacement of air occurring when he slides by.

The road to Damascus from Beirut is open; but the real story is that the road from Damascus to Beirut is also open, and is being widened. It was the road taken by tanks and car-bombs. Now it will be backed up with far more dangerous contraptions: craven Lebanese politicians.

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