

## Lebanon PM on 1st Syria visit since father's death

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Hariri Ends Visit to Damascus, Vows to Rebuild Ties with Syria

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Prime Minister Saad Hariri ended a visit to Damascus Sunday, saying he was determined to renew ties with Syria to the "benefit of both countries."

Hariri arrived at Beirut airport on a private plane Sunday afternoon.

It was his first trip to Damascus since the 2005 assassination of his father, ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri -- a killing that he and his allies in Beirut blamed on Syria.

Regional commentators, including Hizbullah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, have hailed the visit as an ice-breaker and step toward healing decades of turbulent ties between the two neighbors.

"We want privileged, sincere and honest relations ... in the interest of both countries and both peoples," the 39-year-old Hariri told a news conference in Damascus at the end of the landmark two-day visit.

"We want to build ties with Syria based on positive points," he added, describing his visit during which he had three rounds of private talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a "historic."

Syria dominated its tiny neighbor for nearly three decades until April 2005 when it pulled out its troops from Lebanon under international and regional pressure, two months after the assassination of Rafik Hariri.

The two neighbors established diplomatic ties for the first time last year, with Syria opening an embassy in Beirut, while Lebanon opened its mission in Damascus in March.

Hariri said his unity government, which includes members of the Hizbullah-led coalition, wanted to take measures with Damascus to develop these ties.

Assad is also "very attached to sincere relations based on common understanding" between the two countries and spoke "positively" of problems that still need to be resolved, Hariri said.

Foremost is a plan to demarcate the porous border between the two neighbors, he said.

Hariri, whose March 14 coalition clinched victory in a general election over the Hizbullah-led alliance in June, said Saudi Arabia "played an important role" in paving the way for his visit to Syria.

But Hariri stressed that he did not discuss with Assad a U.N.-led inquiry into his father's murder nor the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that has been set up to try the suspected killers.

"The tribunal is doing its work and this is what everybody wishes," he said at the news conference held at the Lebanese embassy in Damascus.

A U.N. inquiry said it had evidence that Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services at the time were linked to the killing, but no charges have been brought.

Earlier this month, a Syrian court asked 25 prominent Lebanese, including individuals close to Saad Hariri, to appear for questioning over the murder.

Hariri and his allies have in the past blamed Syria for the murder and for a string of subsequent political assassinations in Lebanon. Damascus has denied any involvement.

Commentators and ordinary Syrians, meanwhile, hailed Hariri's visit to Syria.

Nasrallah said late Saturday that the visit helped make the "atmosphere comfortable" between the two countries, his office said in a statement.

Also on Saturday, Syrian presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban told reporters: "There is no doubt that the ice has been broken between the two sides."

For Khaled Amayri, a former Syrian soldier who served in Lebanon told AFP: "Hariri's visit is a sign of the depth of relations between Syria and Lebanon that go a long way back."

Syria's official Al-Baath newspaper, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath Party, said in a front-page headline on Sunday: "Three positive, honest, friendly hours ... break the ice and end the negative phase of the past."

Samir Musalma, editor-in-chief of the government newspaper Tishrin, agreed. "The past phase has been painful ... but that does not mean we cannot move on," Musalma told AFP.(Naharnet-AFP)

Beirut, 20 Dec 09, 16:10

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Jumblat: I Won't Comment on Hariri's Damascus Visit

Druze leader Walid Jumblat said he will not comment on a visit to Syria by Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

He said Hariri can go to Syria to discuss controversial and non-controversial issues.

The issue of political assassinations, however, is in the hands of the international tribunal, Jumblat said in remarks published Sunday.

"Lebanon's stability is key to regional stability," Jumblat believed, adding that Syria and Saudi Arabia want independence for Lebanon.

Beirut, 20 Dec 09, 15:53

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Hariri from Damascus: We Want Special Lebanese-Syrian Ties Based on Honesty

Prime Minister Saad Hariri said following talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad on Sunday that Beirut wants special relations with Damascus based on honesty and openness.

"We want special relations with Syria &hellip; based on honesty and openness," Hariri told reporters at the Lebanese embassy in Damascus after a new round of talks with Assad on Sunday.

Assad was keen on having honest ties based on mutual understanding, Hariri said at the end of his talks in Damascus. The meetings focused on what is in the interest of Lebanon and Syria and their peoples, the premier said.

"We want to build a better future between the two countries, a future that benefits both countries' peoples," Hariri said. "Serious steps taken by us and President Assad will be interpreted in several fields."

There should be stronger economic and trade relations between the two countries and improved ties between state institutions, the premier added.

Asked if he had discussed with Assad about Syrian court requests to question Lebanese officials, Hariri said: "We didn't discuss about the issue. I believe this issue should be solved by involved agencies."

A Lebanese source told Voice of Lebanon radio that the Hariri-Assad meeting stressed the "personal nature" of the visit. The two men didn't discuss the court requests, the source confirmed.

Lebanon wants the Golan heights to return to Syria and Damascus wants all Lebanese territories occupied by Israel to return to Lebanon, according to Hariri.

Asked about what message he would deliver to the March 14 forces following his visit to Syria, Hariri reiterated that he was the prime minister of all of Lebanon and his objective was to improve relations with Syria.

Hariri returned to Beirut following his press conference.

Arab diplomatic sources had told pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that Hariri carried with him to Damascus a program based on "openness and reconciliation."

The sources added that the premier seeks to set up "transparent relations" between the two countries.

Hariri had also told pan-Arab daily al-Hayat before his visit to Damascus that "there was mutual willingness to overcome the past and look to the future." The PM stressed that he "spontaneously" decided to visit Damascus when he accepted to form the government.

Syria "is the closest state to Lebanon and its only neighbor," Hariri told al-Hayat.

Sources told An Nahar that Lebanon's fundamental demands were met before Hariri's visit to Damascus. They included the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, recognition of Lebanon's sovereignty by opening embassies in the two countries and keeping the issue of ex-Premier Rafik Hariri's assassination away from the relations between Lebanon and Syria.

The sources added that there are still pending issues such as demarcation of the border, finding a solution to Palestinian arms outside refugee camps and the issue of Lebanese missing in Syria.

On Saturday, Assad gave Hariri a warm welcome at the capital's Tishrin palace.

They stressed the need to set up "privileged and strategic ties" between the two countries to overcome years of tensions, officials said.

The meeting helped "dispel the past (differences)," Syrian presidential adviser Buthaina Shaaban told reporters after the talks. "There is no doubt that the ice has been broken between the two sides," she said.

Shaaban also noted that Syria "broke with protocol" by inviting Hariri to stay at the Tishrin guest palace which is usually reserved for visiting monarchs and heads of state.

The two leaders discussed plans to mark their porous common border as well as "the challenges facing the two countries due to Israel's occupation of Arab land," Shaaban added.

Syria's state-run SANA news agency said Assad and Hariri discussed how to "bolster bilateral cooperation" and "ways of surmounting the negative effects which marred" ties in the past.

It quoted Hariri as saying his government was determined "to establish real and strategic ties with Syria," while Assad spoke of the need to promote "privileged and strategic ties between the two countries."(Naharnet-AFP)

Beirut, 20 Dec 09, 07:36

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Hizbullah: Hariri's Visit Helps Avoid Sunni-Shiite Strife

Hizbullah leadership sources have said that Premier Saad Hariri's visit to Damascus was "important and historic" adding it would help "avoid any "Shiite-Sunni strife."

The sources told An Nahar newspaper in remarks published Sunday that the party was relieved at the visit because "it would reflect positively" on Lebanon and produce "stability."

They said the party was keeping a close watch on the trip which would also "normalize ties" between the two countries and "consolidate national unity."

Beirut, 20 Dec 09, 08:26

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Gemayel: I was Among the 1st Supporters of Hariri's Visit to Syria but the Wound is Deep

Phalange party leader Amin Gemayel described Premier Saad Hariri's visit to Damascus as "natural" saying it was part of efforts to normalize ties with Syria despite the "deep wound."

Gemayel told An Nahar daily in remarks published on Sunday that he was among the first to support Hariri's visit to Syria to solve all the lingering problems between the two countries.

"The wound is deep and it takes a lot of effort and a big sacrifice to heal it" in order to achieve what's best for the nation, the former president said.

He added, however, that the Assad-Hariri meeting won't produce any results if all Lebanese didn't join hands to improve ties between the two countries.

Hariri loyalist and former lawmaker Mustafa Alloush also said the visit by Hariri was "very difficult on the personal level" and involves "great sacrifice."

"But as prime minister of Lebanon, it is quite normal to have such a visit. ... It is necessary and there is a need to settle all aspects of the relationship," Alloush told The Associated Press.

He said the visit did not mean some in Lebanon had dropped their belief that Syria was responsible for the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

"But this matter is up to the international tribunal now; it is no longer a personal issue," Alloush said.(Naharnet-AP)

Beirut, 20 Dec 09, 08:14

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Houry: Hariri's Visit to Syria Gateway to New Stage

Al Mustaqbal bloc's MP Ammar Houry on Saturday considered the visit of PM Saad Hariri to Damascus as "a visit for the premier of Lebanon's government to a brotherly country which will be followed by a series of visits to other brotherly countries."

Houry told LBC TV network that the visit will take place in a "state-to-state" manner.

"It is a step forward in the positive direction," added Houry.

On the other hand, Houry said that the talks which will tackle improving the relations between the two countries do not have a specific set agenda.

He added that up till now, the details about the accompanying delegation have not been announced.

Beirut, 19 Dec 09, 11:21

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Hariri in Damascus for Talks with Assad

Prime Minister Saad Hariri arrived in Damascus on Saturday to meet with Syrian President Bashar Assad for the first time ever since both leaders rose to power.

Hariri was met on arrival by Syria's minister for presidential affairs, Mansour Azzam, and the Lebanese Ambassador to Damascus Michel al-Khoury -- Beirut's first ever envoy to the Syrian capital.

Hariri then headed to Teshrin Palace to hold his first talks with Assad.

Syria's state-run news agency SANA said the visit would last two days.

The Emirati al-Khaleej daily quoted well-informed sources as describing the visit as "a reconciliation visit."

The newspaper stressed that "the full details of the visit are of pure Saudi 'direction,'" adding that "Abdul Aziz Bin Abdullah, son of the Saudi king, is the one who took charge of the preparations."

Hariri was expected to visit Damascus last Sunday, but the visit was postponed due to the many questions raised by countries sponsoring the reconciliation efforts about the reason of Syrian warrants against a number of Lebanese officials.

After years of tense ties over the murder of his father, ex-premier Rafiq, Hariri told parliament this month he was interested in forging "brotherly ties" with Damascus.

The 39-year-old premier has had tense ties with Syria ever since the massive Beirut bombing in February 2005 that killed his father and 22 others, pointing his finger at Damascus at the time.

The Hariri murder was widely blamed on Syria, which withdrew its troops from Lebanon in April 2005 after a 29-year military presence.

Damascus has consistently denied involvement.

In December, a Syrian court asked 25 Lebanese figures, including the police chief, top prosecutor and figures from the Hariri camp, to appear for questioning over the Hariri murder.

Beirut, 19 Dec 09, 15:10

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**Suleiman Extends Condolences to Assad in Damascus**

President Michel Suleiman arrived in Damascus Friday to offer his condolences to Syrian President Bashar Assad over the death of his younger brother, Majd.

An official source told AFP Suleiman will discuss political developments with Assad.

He said Suleiman will take the opportunity of the visit to inform his Syrian counterpart about the outcome of his talks with U.S officials.

Beirut, 18 Dec 09, 13:49

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**Syrian Warrants Have No Effect on Damascus Visit, Hariri**

Prime Minister Saad Hariri said that the issue of Syrian warrants against a number of Lebanese officials "does not exist for me."

"Nations do not build reciprocal relations in that way," Hariri said in an interview with MTV network in parallel with Copenhagen's climate summit.

He considered the Syrian warrants against several Lebanese political, security and judicial officials as "a mistake," given that "it was not right for a Lebanese citizen to file a lawsuit against his fellow citizens abroad."

However, Hariri hoped for better Lebanese-Syrian relations "built upon honesty and mutual interest of the two countries."

Hariri was referring to the warrants issued by Syria over a lawsuit filed by Maj. Gen. Jamil Sayyed.

Media reports on Thursday said Syria has separated the issue of warrants from Hariri's visit to Damascus.

Sources close to Hariri told daily As-Safir there was "no longer any justification for the postponement of the premier's visit to Damascus."

Meanwhile, OTV said Hariri tried to postpone his trip pending a settlement to the warrants' issue.

It said Hariri has asked Saudi's and Turkey's mediation in this respect.

Syria was reportedly seeking an exit strategy from the warrants' crisis.

Pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat, citing Lebanese sources following up Hariri's Damascus visit, said Wednesday that the trip is likely to take place on Sunday.

Ad-Diyar newspaper, for its part, said Hariri-Assad meeting was scheduled for last Sunday, 3 p.m. and was postponed due to the death of Assad's younger brother, Majd.

It said details of the visit were being worked out by Saudi King's son and that it has nothing to do with warrants issued by Syria against a number of Lebanese officials over a lawsuit filed by former head of Lebanese General Security Jamil Sayyed.

On the other hand, Hariri met with a number of delegations' presidents in parallel with his participation in Copenhagen's U.N. climate change summit.

Hariri visited the residence place of Turkish President Abdullah Gul where they held a meeting over the latest developments in Lebanon and the region, and the means of strengthening relations between the two countries.

The prime minister also received at the Bella Center conference venue Kuwait's PM Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah and his deputy Sheikh Mohammad Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah. The meeting tackled the Arab situations and bilateral ties.

Furthermore, Hariri received a visit from Saudi Petroleum and Mineral Resources Minister Ali al-Nuaimi.

Hariri called in Lebanon's speech before the conference to unite the global efforts of fighting climate change, revealing a series of measures to be taken by Lebanon to thwart its effects.

He pledged to increase the usage of renewable energy in Lebanon to 12 percent by the year 2020.

Lebanon's prime minister urged the developed nations to unify their efforts in helping the developing nations to cope with climate change. He stressed that world nations should leave a less damaged planet for the coming generations.

Beirut, 17 Dec 09, 21:36

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Hariri says honesty will sustain Lebanese-Syrian relationship  
December 20, 2009

At the end of his two-day trip to Syria, Prime Minister Saad Hariri held a press conference at the Lebanese embassy in Damascus on Sunday to offer details on his talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Hariri said he visited Syria as PM of the Lebanese cabinet rather than as a political party leader, adding that Lebanon's Ministerial Statement calls for friendly relations with Damascus.

According to the PM, honesty is the most important criteria for Lebanon and Syria to maintain a serious and brotherly relationship. "Syria and Lebanon will not benefit from negative perceptions," he added.

Hariri said that despite a previous phase of tension, he is seeking a state-to-state relationship with Syria. He also said his talks with Assad were based on mutual interests that could benefit both countries, with such things as economic and

trade ties.

“Lebanon should learn from past experience and look positively toward the future in an effort to open new horizons for both countries,” the PM said.

He also said his visit to Damascus is one of many ongoing visits that aim to reunite Arab states and unify Arab positions on regional challenges and in facing Israel’s obstinacy.

Hariri credited Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz with initiating a new phase in Arab relations during the Kuwait Summit, which happened early this year.

The PM also said it is important for Syria to recover the occupied Golan Heights and that the issue of the occupied Ghajar village is an internal Lebanese affair.

Hariri touched on the issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon saying that Assad previously said it was in the hands of the international community, adding “I have said so as well, and we all want the truth.”

According to Hariri, the subject of the Syrian extradition notices issued against Lebanese public figures was not addressed during the meeting, however, “serious steps will be taken to interpret the friendly relations.”

Hariri ended his press conference by thanking Assad and the Syrian people for welcoming him to the country. “Hopefully relations will be on good terms, and the sky is blue,” he said.

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 Jumblatt to comment on Hariri’s Damascus visit on Monday  
 December 20, 2009

Al-Manar television reported on Sunday that Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt will comment on Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s visit to Damascus in his weekly article in Al-Anbaa newspaper to be published on Monday.

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<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=133712>

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 Jumblatt: Hariri’s visit to Syria is to establish good bilateral relations  
 December 20, 2009

During a meeting with Iklem Al-Kharoub residents in Chouf on Sunday, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt said “Prime Minister Saad Hariri went to Damascus to establish good state-to-state relations between Lebanon and Syria,” adding that the PSP will help Hariri in his mission, and in line with the Taif Accord.

Jumblatt said all parties are waiting for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)’s verdict and called for not making “prejudgments,” saying, “In the past, we made a political judgment, however today, all Lebanese parties have agreed to wait for the STL’s investigation.”

Following German magazine Der Spiegel’s report –which claimed that Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigators believe Hezbollah is linked to the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri– Jumblatt said all parties want to be sure the international judiciary’s verdict is not part of “a game to sabotage Lebanon.”

According to him, Hariri is entitled to visit Syria to discuss both “consensus and controversial issues,” and he and Hariri made it clear that the STL will handle the case of security assassinations that took place in Lebanon.

Jumblatt touched on the issue of arming the Lebanese Armed Forces, criticizing “states that want to develop the army” –a reference to the US –since they do not give Lebanon “quality weapons,” but rather provide its security services with “some tanks, jeeps and trainings.”

“We live in a vicious cycle until regional circumstances favor integrating Hezbollah’s military and security system into the Lebanese military,” Jumlatt said, adding, “Until then, we must wait and continue dialogue.”

The PSP leader also said no one “cancelled” the discussion of the National Defense Strategy, which he said, will be addressed during National Dialogue. He voiced regret that the Ministerial Statement mentioned the human, rather than civil rights of Palestinians.

He also called for speeding up the construction of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, which was destroyed during clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Fatah al-Islam militant group in 2007.

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Marouni says Lebanese-Syrian Higher Council should be abolished  
December 20, 2009

In an interview with OTV television on Sunday, Kataeb bloc MP Elie Marouni said that Lebanon cannot continue a tense relationship with Damascus, adding that “rebuilding the relationship with Syria begins by abolishing the Lebanese-Syrian Higher Council.”

The minister also said that the Kataeb has full confidence in Prime Minister Saad Hariri who, he said, will find a solution to Lebanese-Syrian issues, adding that it would have been better if Syria’s prime minister had visited Lebanon to congratulate Hariri [on forming a new government].

Marouni added that Hariri’s visit to Syria is the first step toward “breaking the ice” between the two countries.

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Hariri would visit any country for Lebanon’s sake, says Majdalani  
December 20, 2009

In an interview with Future News television on Sunday, Lebanon First bloc MP Atef Majdalani said that Prime Minister Saad Hariri is still part of the March 14 alliance after his trip to Damascus this weekend, and Majdalani wants President Bashar al-Assad to know - as former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri believed - that Syria cannot govern Lebanon.

The minister said Hariri would visit any country for Lebanon’s sake, and added that the country’s sovereignty and stability is what matters most.

Majdalani also said that Hariri’s trip strengthens Lebanese-Syrian relations and, more broadly, Arab relations.

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<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=133655>

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Hariri says father’s sacrifice inspires own  
December 20, 2009

“My father became a martyr for Lebanon’s sake, it is not difficult for his son to act for Lebanon’s sake,” Prime Minister Saad Hariri told Al-Hayat newspaper in an article published on Sunday.

Hariri said his visit to Syria this weekend is from one Arab state to another, trying to enhance Arab relations in a region that is facing some tense times.

He said the effort to build a new phase is already evident at the ambassadorial level, with embassies established in both

Damascus and Beirut.

The PM added that progress also started at the Kuwait Summit in January under the initiative of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Bin Abdel Aziz. Hariri said Saudi Arabia is playing a crucial role in decreasing regional Arab conflict and is following up on Lebanon and Syria's latest attempts to strengthen relations.

The prime minister said Turkey will also play a role in the Lebanese-Syrian rapprochement.

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Assad, Hariri talk bilateral relations over breakfast  
December 20, 2009

According to a statement issued by Prime Minister Saad Hariri's media office, the prime minister and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad started a third round of talks over breakfast Sunday morning in Damascus.

Meantime, AFP is reporting that a source from the Lebanese delegation in Syria called Hariri's visit courageous, and said that the trip does not compromise Lebanon's principles.

According to AFP, the source said the talks are tackling issues like border demarcation, Lebanese people who have gone missing in years past, and ways of establishing an official relationship between the two countries.

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Hariri, Assad agree to strengthen Lebanese-Syrian cooperation  
December 19, 2009

Following their meeting in Damascus on Saturday, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued a joint statement saying that they agreed to strengthen cooperation between Lebanon and Syria.

Hariri said that he assured Assad that the Lebanese government is looking forward to making "real and strategic" relations with Syria that would benefit the interests of the people of both their countries.

He said that "special relations between Lebanon and Syria strengthen the countries' positions and contribute to the protection of Lebanon in the face of Israeli threats."

Assad said that Syria is keen on maintaining "the best" relations with Lebanon to guarantee the common interests of the Lebanese and Syrian people, adding that "Syria will make efforts to serve unity in Lebanon and the country's security and stability."

The statement also said that Assad and Hariri discussed the latest regional and international developments.

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Hariri meets with Assad in Damascus  
December 19, 2009

Prime Minister Saad Hariri met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Saturday afternoon in the Teshrin Palace to discuss enhancing bilateral relations between the two countries after arriving in Damascus International Airport earlier in the day, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported.

Following the Hariri, Assad meeting, Advisor to the Syrian President Bouthaina Shaaban issued a statement to the press saying that "the mood [of the meeting] was honest and positive" and added that the two leaders discussed

Lebanese-Syrian border demarcation and "agreed to take measures concerning the matter."

SANA also reported that Hariri's visit in Damascus would last two days and added that Assad would hold a dinner in honor of Hariri on Saturday night.

Hariri's trip follows President Michel Sleiman's Friday visit to Damascus and is Hariri's first trip to Syria since the 2005 assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The prime minister's trip has been a hot topic in the press, following reports that Hariri would make the trip after the cabinet gave its vote of confidence, which happened on December 11th.

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Shaaban calls Hariri, Assad meeting "honest and positive"  
December 19, 2009

Following the Saturday meeting in Damascus between Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Advisor to the Syrian President Bouthaina Shaaban issued a statement to the press saying that "the mood [of the meeting] was honest and positive" and added that the two leaders discussed Lebanese-Syrian border demarcation and "agreed to take measures concerning the matter."

"Hariri and Assad both want to put an end to past tensions and build relations that serve the interests of the Lebanese and Syrian people," the statement added.

She said that Hariri and Assad discussed the regional situation and the challenges facing their two countries, adding that the two agreed on the importance of Arab solidarity and the need for their countries to cooperate on both the regional and international levels.

Shaaban added that "there will be future visits made by high-ranking Lebanese officials to Syria to enhance the two countries' relations."

She also said that a second meeting would be held between Hariri and Assad on Sunday.

Shaaban added that Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottari would make a similar reciprocal visit to Lebanon aiming to enhance relations between the two countries, however she did not specify a time frame for Ottari's visit.

She also said that the Lebanese-Syrian Higher Council would contribute to the strengthening of Lebanese-Syrian relations.

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Sleiman visits Assad to offer condolences, discusses US trip  
December 18, 2009

President Michel Sleiman headed to Syria on Friday for a brief visit to offer Syrian President Bashar al-Assad condolences for the death of his youngest brother, Majd, who died last Saturday. The two men also discussed the outcome of Sleiman's three-day trip to Washington earlier this week, during which he met with US President Barack Obama.

According to the Syrian news agency, both Assad and Sleiman called for improving bilateral relations on all levels.

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<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=133366>

## President al-Assad Continues Talks with Lebanese Premier Sunday, Al-Hariri: Talks Excellent and Positive Dec 20, 2009

Damascus, (SANA)\_ President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday morning held a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri at his residence.

President al-Assad and al-Hariri saw the visit as a starting point to restore cooperation between the governments of Syria and Lebanon, calling for following up on what has been discussed by the parties concerned with the aim to raise relations up to the level of expectations of the people of both countries.

Both sides agreed that the institutions and ministries in both countries directly coordinate and communicate to remove all obstacles to the cooperation on all levels.

Later, Premier al-Hariri described as excellent his talks with President Bashar al-Assad, saying they were very positive regarding the relations between the two countries.

In a press conference held at the Lebanese Embassy in Damascus, al-Hariri added that President al-Assad was very keen that the relationship between the two countries be friendly and honest.

He said the talks were built on the basis of achieving the interests of both countries and people.

The Lebanese premier added "We positively touched upon all the topics&hellip;President al-Assad was very positive in dealing with all the issues of interest for the Lebanese people and the Syrian-Lebanese relationship."

"We want to open new horizons between our countries and to handle all problems calmly and unprovocatively."

Al-Hariri went on saying "We want to have good relations with Syria based on openness and honesty. We agreed on practical steps on the ground for the interests of both countries."

"We in Lebanon are keen on the return of the occupied Syrian Golan and we know that Syria is also keen that all Lebanese territories occupied by Israel are restored. There will be future talks regarding this issue," he added.

Al-Hariri stressed that talks with President al-Assad focused on expanding economic and trade cooperation and improving the relations between institutions and ministries in all fields.

Al-Hariri added " President al-Assad was keen on making the Lebanese government a government of national unity on the basis that we are going to unite all the allies and others ."

"Now we all participate in the government and every minister in this government represents all the Lebanese as the Primer represents them."

As for what he is going to convey to his allies after meeting President al-Assad, al-Hariri said "I came to Syria as the Lebanese Premier not as a Premier of certain political Lebanese party; therefore, all the friends whether the politicians or members of the Lebanese government are keen on building friendly relations between the two countries and people ."

"We mentioned that in the ministerial statement and we endorsed it at the Lebanese Parliament on the basis of which we gave our confidence; therefore, we discussed many issues of interest for the Lebanese people and I might have dealt with these issues in different way."

He pointed out that media sometimes deals with issues in a way that might further complicate them instead of solving them.

He went on saying "We agreed on many issues about which Dr. Buthaina Shaaban talked yesterday such as borders demarcation."

"The most important thing is that nobody came here to score a point against the other &hellip;We want to build close and true ties, so if any one wants to consider that certain team has scored a point against the other, we in this case wouldn't have achieved anything for building relations&hellip;If we are honest, we must build these relations on clear bases, taking into consideration the interest of both countries and people."

On his visit to Syria, al-Hariri said the warm welcome he received indicated that there are rapidly developed relations built in the interest of both countries, expressing desire for consolidating these relations in the future.

On Saudi Arabia role in the rapprochement between Syria and Lebanon, al-Hariri said "You know that this meeting or

visit came in the framework of many reconciliation meetings among the Arab countries &hellip;There will be more reconciliations in the future for closing the ranks of the Arabs and facing the Israeli challenges, particularly with regard to the Palestinian issue and Israel rejection of withdrawal from the Lebanese lands and the occupied Syrian Golan."

Saudi Arabia played an essential role. We have already had new vision based on future reconciliation, he added.

On reports of Israel's willingness to withdraw from al-Ghajar town, al-Hariri said "it is a Lebanese internal affair and it will be raised at the Lebanese cabinet's meeting to make a decision."

As for the international tribunal, talks with President al-Assad won't refer to this issue since it is in the charge of international community, he said.

On the issue of lawsuits submitted by Syrian judiciary, al-Hariri said that this issue is being discussed by the parties concerned in both countries.

"Steps of Border demarcation between Syria and Lebanon were also discussed," he added.

The Lebanese premier described his visit as historical since "it lays foundations for new cooperation to serve the interests of both countries and people."

R. Al.Jazaeri /H. Said /Zahra/ Mazen

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/12/20/262107.htm>

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Shaaban: The 3-hour meeting between President al-Assad and al-Hariri was Frank, positive and friendly, with focus on future relations  
Dec 20, 2009

Damascus, SANA\_ Presidential Political and Media Advisor described as "frank, positive and cordial" Saturday talks between President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, adding that this would reflect positively on the Arab situation.

"The three-hour talks between President al-Assad and al-Hariri discussed all topics related to the Syrian-Lebanese relations with emphasis on the future relations between the two countries and activating the institutions. Talks were held in frank, positive and cordial atmosphere," Dr. Buthaina Shaaban told reporters at Tishreen Presidential Palace following the talks.

She added that al-Hariri's current visit "will be followed by future visits by officials and technicians to lay the foundation for activating the institutional relations between the two countries in the interest of the two brotherly peoples."

"The discussions also dealt with the Arab situation, the challenges facing Syria and Lebanon due to the Israeli occupation of Arab territories, the importance of coordination between Syria, Lebanon and the Arab countries as well as the Arab solidarity to close the Arab ranks and restore the legitimate rights." Dr. Shaaban said.

The Presidential Political and Media Advisor noted that coordination between Syria and Lebanon focused on the Arab, regional and international arenas.

She added that "all issues were discussed with transparency&hellip;There is intention to continue with this positive direction and develop executive plans to upgrade the mutual relations to meet the aspiration of people in both countries."

She said that Arab mutual work will highly benefit from this particular relationship, and would be positively reflected on other Arab relations.

Answering a question on the significance of President al-Assad's reception of al-Hariri in Tishreen Palace, and whether this meeting is meant to break the ice, Shaaban said that there is no doubt that the meeting between the two sides has managed to thaw the ice.

"The reception of al-Hariri in Tishreen Palace&hellip; and his residence in is a breaking of the protocol&hellip;this indicates special warmth and cordiality," she stressed. The Presidential Political and Media Advisor added that, "the agenda is to continue with this frank, serious and constructive dialogue to cover all the topics today evening and tomorrow."

Answering a question on the demarcation of borders between the two countries, Shaaban said that this topic was

discussed like others with steps to be taken in the proper time and way.

She added that the visits between the two countries will be rapid and mutual, focusing on the institutional ties between Syrian and Lebanese ministries and institutions.

On the performance of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council in the coming period, Shaaban indicated that this council will contribute to enhance relations between both countries and enrich them.

Regarding the contribution of President al-Assad and Premier al-Hariri current meetings to remove past negative aspects, Shaaban said that these negative had become in the past, adding that President al-Assad and Premier al-Hariri's willingness to establish this positive and constructive relationship-- and their recognition that it is in the interest of both countries and people---would guarantee that such things would not recur.

I.Al Kazhali/ R.Milhem/ Ghossoun. Zahra

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/12/20/262083.htm>

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President al-Assad, al-Hariri Agree on Opening New Prospects to Enhance Cooperation between Syria and Lebanon in all fields  
Dec 20, 2009

Damascus, (SANA) &ndash; President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri agreed on Saturday to open new prospects that enhance cooperation between Syria and Lebanon in all fields, reflecting fraternal relations between the Syrian and Lebanese people and their common history.

President al-Assad, meeting Premier al-Hariri in Tishreen Presidential palace, stressed that Syria has always been interested in establishing best relations with Lebanon based on Damascus conviction and principled stances that consider the relations between Syria and Lebanon as close and strategic.

The President emphasized that Syrian-Lebanese ties protect the common interests of the two countries' people and the Arab people in general, underscoring that security and stability of Lebanon is Syria's security and stability and vice versa.

President al-Assad also underlined that Syria will spare no effort to further boost up the relations between the two countries and enhance Lebanon's unity, security and stability.

Premier al-Hariri said his government is looking for establishing real and strategic relations with Syria in the interest of the brotherly people of the two countries.

He added that good and close relations between Syria and Lebanon boost their stances and strength, and contribute to protecting Lebanon, Arabism and the unity of the Arabs in the face of the continuous Israeli policies of violation of Arab rights.

President al-Assad and Premier al-Hariri reviewed the positive developments in Lebanon and Syria and the history of both countries' relations in addition to how to bypass the negative effects that stained these relations at some point in the past.

The talks also touched upon the latest developments in the Arab and international arenas as well as exchanging points of view on issues of common interest.

Later, President al-Assad gave a banquet in honor of Premier al-Hariri attended by a number of senior state officials.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister al-Hariri began a two-day visit to Syria.

I. Al Kazhali/ R. Milhem/Ghossoun / A.F. ZAHRA

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/12/20/262080.htm>

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President al-Assad Receives Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri  
Dec 19, 2009

Damascus, (SANA) &ndash; President Bashar al-Assad received on Saturday afternoon Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri at Tishreen Presidential Palace in Damascus.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister al-Hariri began a two-day visit to Syria.

H. Sabbagh

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/12/19/262042.htm>

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Presidents al-Assad and Sleiman.. Boosting cooperation and continuing consultation and coordination on all levels  
Dec 18, 2009

Damascus, (SANA)-President Bashar al-Assad on Friday discussed with President Michel Sleiman of Lebanon the bilateral relations between Syria and Lebanon and the situation on the Arab and regional arenas as well as the outcomes of President Sleiman's visit to the United States of America.

Presidents al-Assad and Sleiman underlined determination to proceed in boosting cooperation between Syria and Lebanon and continue coordination and consultation on all levels to embody depth of relations connecting the brotherly people of both countries.

President al-Assad reiterated support to the efforts exerted to boost the positive atmospheres prevailing in Lebanon and the Syrian-Lebanese relations, foremost are the efforts of Lebanese President Sleiman.

Later, President al-Assad held a luncheon in honor of President Sleiman attended by Vice-President Farouk al-Shara, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Political and Media Advisor Buthaina Shaaban and State Minister for Presidential Affairs Mansour Azzam.

President al-Assad met President Sleiman on November 12, where they discussed issues of common concern and emphasized the continued upgrading of cooperation between the two countries.

Mazen Eyon./Ghossoun

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/12/18/261867.htm>

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Lebanese PM Calls for Renewed Relations with Syria

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri concluded two days of intensive meetings with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a bid to improve relations heavily damaged by the assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005.

Edward Yeranian | Cairo 20 December 2009

The visit was symbolic to both countries, since no Lebanese Prime Minister has visited Damascus since the slaying of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Relations between the two countries went into a deep freeze that year, after the younger Hariri accused Syria of the crime.

The faces of both leaders appeared somewhat tense, despite what seemed like a genuine effort to put a thaw to long frosty relations. The Lebanese Prime Minister was also invited to spend the night at the presidential palace, in a sign of recognition that the elder Hariri had helped to build it, and had once enjoyed cordial relations with Damascus.

Prime Minister Hariri told a press conference, however, that he was visiting Syria as the head of a Lebanese national unity government and not for personal or partisan reasons.

He went on to stress that his lengthy discussions with President Assad demonstrate that both he and the Syrian president were doing their best to improve ties between Syria and Lebanon.

He says that four hours of meetings, yesterday, and breakfast, today, demonstrate that there is a relationship which is being built in the interest of both countries and (with an eye) towards the future. He conceded that talks were frank and honest, but stressed that both sides were learning from the past, and working to build for the future.

When asked about the thorny issue that has long plagued Lebanese-Syrian relations, Hariri noted that the United

Nations international tribunal that is investigating the assassination of his father, is "no longer a personal issue, but is now the purview of the international community."

Mr. Hariri did not, however, travel to Syria with key members of his cabinet, in another reminder of the lingering conflict between members of his March 14th coalition and Damascus and its Lebanese allies. Prime Minister Hariri also did not make the two-hour drive from Beirut to Damascus, but flew in with just a few aides.

Syrian President Bashar Assad's top media and political advisor, Boutheina Shaaban admitted that relations between Lebanon and Syria had gone through tremendous turmoil in recent years, but stressed that things were on the mend.

She says that the guarantee (that the past conflict doesn't recur) is the will of both President Assad and Prime Minister Hariri to build a positive and constructive relationship, because they each understand that such a relationship is in the mutual interest of both countries and peoples.

Syrian government TV also placed great emphasis on the effort to mend relations between both countries, speaking with many Lebanese about what they thought of the visit.

Lebanese Member of Parliament Mohammed Fneich of the pro-Syrian Hezbollah told supporters that he and his party were pleased by the bid to mend relations.

He says that this visit expresses the desire to turn the page on old (conflicts) and open a new page of cooperation. Lebanon he says cannot live without Syria, nor can Syria live without Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia, whose relations with Syria were also been strained after the slaying of the elder Mr. Hariri, has played a major role in reconciling Damascus with its smaller neighbor. Prime Minister Hariri noted that King Abdallah had pushed for a "global Arab reconciliation" and that his visit was part of that effort.

<http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/asia/east/Syrian-Lebanese-Leaders-Hold-Groundbreaking-Talks-79754467.html>

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 Lebanon, Syria Wrap Up Landmark Meeting  
 BY NADA RAAD IN BEIRUT and CHIP CUMMINS IN DUBAI  
 DECEMBER 20, 2009, 10:31 A.M. ET.

Lebanon's premier ended a two-day visit to Damascus on Sunday, a landmark trip that appeared to ease political and personal tensions between Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose father's assassination many blame on Damascus, and Syrian officials.

The visit comes more than a month after Mr. Hariri reached a political compromise to form a new government with the country's opposition, led by Hezbollah, the Shiite political and militant group backed by Iran and Syria.

Syrian President Bashar Assad greeted Mr. Hariri warmly at the presidential palace at the start of the visit, announced by Mr. Hariri's office just hours before he left Beirut on Saturday. The two men then met alone for three hours.

More AFP/Getty Images Syrian President Bashar Assad greeted Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri upon his arrival for a meeting in Damascus.

Syria's official news agency quoted Mr. Assad's presidential adviser saying the two leaders' exchange was "honest, positive and friendly." They dined that night and met a final time on Sunday. At a press conference at the Lebanese embassy in Damascus, Mr. Hariri said he expected improved economic and trade ties with Syria after the trip.

Damascus has strongly denied any complicity in the 2005 attack that killed Mr. Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Syria was forced to end its long-running military occupation of Lebanon after a popular outpouring of anti-Syria sentiment following Mr. Hariri's death.

A United Nations-backed tribunal has been set up to investigate the attack and prosecute those accused. So far, the tribunal hasn't charged anyone. Mr. Hariri stressed the visit wasn't personal but made in his capacity as prime minister of Lebanon.

He said the two leaders didn't discuss the tribunal during the trip. But, Mr. Hariri said, "President Assad had agreed the issue now was in the hands of the international community. We all want to learn the truth."

The younger Mr. Hariri took up leadership of his father's political movement, one closely aligned with Saudi Arabia and supported by the U.S. and several Western powers. In June parliamentary elections, he successfully beat back a political

challenge from a slate of opposition candidates led by Hezbollah.

Tensions, meanwhile, between Damascus and Mr. Hariri, and his Saudi and Western backers, have been easing for more than a year. Mr. Assad backed a peace deal between political factions in Beirut that ended a violent uprising by Hezbollah in May 2008. Shortly after, he entered into indirect peace talks with Israel, though they ended unsuccessfully earlier this year after Israel's military operation against Gaza.

U.S. President Barack Obama made outreach to Damascus a key pillar of his campaign. Earlier this year, Washington said it would ease some economic restrictions—without lifting any sanctions—and would reinstate an American ambassador to Syria. Western officials hope that by wooing Syria, they might move Mr. Assad further from Iran's orbit.

As for Mr. Hariri, 39 years old, it was always uncertain how far he would be willing to go personally to try to patch up differences with Mr. Assad, considering the allegation against Syria related to his father's death.

Mr. Hariri's visit could be a way of thanking Damascus for its support of the new government, said Nawaf Kabbara, a political science professor at Balamand University in Beirut.

"Syria did its job facilitating the formation of a cabinet in Beirut," Mr. Kabbara said. "It is the government's turn now to thank Syria."

The weekend trip was made easier by warming ties between Mideast rivals Syria and Saudi Arabia, Mr. Hariri's chief regional sponsor. Mr. Assad hosted Saudi King Abdullah recently during a rare state visit.

[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126131614056999135.html?mod=WSJ\\_hpp\\_sections\\_world#printMode](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126131614056999135.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_sections_world#printMode)

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Hariri sees new page in Lebanon ties with Syria

By Marwan Makdessi

Reuters

Sunday, December 20, 2009; 7:28 AM

DAMASCUS (Reuters) - Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri said on Sunday he agreed with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on practical steps to open up "new horizons" in ties between the two Arab neighbors.

Hariri was speaking at the end of a two-day visit to Syria that marked the end to nearly five years of animosity between Damascus and the broad political alliance led by Hariri.

"We want to open new horizons between the two countries," Hariri told a news conference at the Lebanese embassy in Damascus.

He said his three rounds of "excellent" talks with the Syrian leader were frank and based on clarity.

"There will be serious steps from our side and on the part of President Bashar al-Assad to translate this cordial and serious relationship into steps on the ground in several fields," Hariri said, without giving details.

A senior Syrian official, Buthaina Shaaban, had described the talks as constructive, cordial and transparent. Assad had extended a warm welcome to Hariri upon his arrival in the Syrian capital on Saturday.

Hariri said the talks did not cover the 2005 assassination of his father, statesman Rafik al-Hariri, but that Assad had agreed the issue now was in the hands of a special court set up in The Hague to indict and punish the killers.

## TENSIONS

Lebanon's ties with Syria hit rock bottom after Hariri's "March 14" alliance accused Syria of assassinating Rafik al-Hariri, in February 2005. They also blamed Damascus for attacking and killing other politicians and journalists.

Syria denies the allegations. The special court has yet to indict anyone for the killing.

Outrage in Lebanon over the assassination and international pressure forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in April 2005, ending three decades of military presence in its smaller neighbor.

Lebanese analysts say an improvement of ties with Damascus would bridge a political divide in Beirut, easing sectarian tensions and providing Hariri with the necessary clout to push through long-delayed economic and other reforms.

Saad al-Hariri's coalition has often clashed in the past with Syria's allies in Lebanon, led by the powerful Iranian-backed group Hezbollah, and the political crisis has threatened to plunge Lebanon into a new civil war.

Rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which backs Hariri, earlier this year eased tension and allowed Hariri, who won a parliamentary election in June, to form a unity government that included Hezbollah and other Damascus allies.

Hezbollah, which fought a war against Israel in 2006, is the only armed group in Lebanon. It is considered a terrorist group by Washington but Hariri's government has said it is a legitimate force whose aim is to end Israeli occupation of some Lebanese territory.

Lebanon and Syria exchanged embassies over the past year for the first time since both countries gained independence in the 1940s.

Thorny issues between the two countries include demarcation of borders, the fate of hundreds of Lebanese missing since the 1975-1990 civil war, and the military presence of Syrian-backed Palestinian militant groups outside refugee camps in Lebanon.

(Writing by Nadim Ladki; editing by Alison Williams)

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/20/AR2009122000575\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/20/AR2009122000575_pf.html)

Lebanese premier pays emotional visit to Syria: Lebanon's prime minister, who has blamed neighboring Syria for the truck-bomb assassination of his father, visited Damascus for the first time since the 2005 killing. Despite the unresolved issue of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's death, Saad Hariri's visit potentially opens the way for a new era in the two countries' relations, which have been turbulent for decades.

Appeals filed in U.S.-Brazilian custody case: A U.S. man has filed appeals with the Brazilian Supreme Court to regain custody of his 9-year-old son after a five-year legal fight. Meanwhile, the Brazilian family members with whom David Goldman is locked in battle have invited him to join them and his son, Sean, for the holidays while the court decides whom it will favor, according to news media in Rio de Janeiro.

-- From news services

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121902165\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121902165_pf.html)

Lebanon's Hariri holds first talks in Syria

By Marwan Makdessi

Reuters

Saturday, December 19, 2009; 11:11 AM

DAMASCUS (Reuters) - Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Saturday for talks to end nearly five years of animosity between Damascus and a broad political alliance led by Hariri.

Assad warmly welcomed the prime minister at the entrance of the presidential palace in Damascus after Hariri, a billionaire businessman, flew in to the Syrian capital on his private jet.

Lebanese political sources expect the two leaders to agree on opening a new page in their personal relationship and on strengthening cooperation between their governments to guarantee Lebanon's stability.

"At the end of the day, Syria is the nearest country to us. God willing this visit will bring stability and security to Lebanon," Bahia al-Hariri, a member of the Lebanese parliament and the premier's aunt, said in Lebanon.

Hariri's "March 14" alliance has accused Syria of assassinating his politician father, Rafik al-Hariri, in February 2005. They also blamed Damascus for attacking and killing other politicians and journalists.

Syria denies the allegations. A special court based in The Hague has yet to indict anyone for the Hariri killing.

Outrage in Lebanon over the assassination and international pressure forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon

in April 2005, ending three decades of military presence in its smaller neighbor.

Saad al-Hariri's coalition has often clashed in the past with Syria's allies in Lebanon, led by the powerful Iranian-backed group Hezbollah, and the political crisis has threatened to plunge Lebanon into a new civil war.

Rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which backs Hariri, earlier this year eased tension and allowed Hariri, who won a parliamentary election in June, to form a unity government that includes Hezbollah and other Damascus allies.

Hezbollah, which fought a bloody war against Israel in 2006, is the only armed group in Lebanon. It is considered a terrorist group by Washington but Hariri's government has said it is a legitimate force whose aim was to end Israeli occupation of some Lebanese territory.

Hariri, accompanied by only one senior aide, will spend the night in the Syrian capital and hold further talks with senior officials before returning to Beirut on Sunday.

(Writing by Nadim Ladki; editing by Matthew Jones)

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121900599\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121900599_pf.html)

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Lebanon PM on 1st Syria visit since father's death

By ALBERT AJI

The Associated Press

Saturday, December 19, 2009; 3:01 PM

DAMASCUS, Syria -- Lebanon's prime minister, who has blamed neighboring Syria for the assassination of his father, visited Damascus Saturday for the first time since the 2005 killing - a trip that a close associate said was extremely difficult for him to make.

Despite the unresolved issue of his father's slaying in a massive truck bombing in Beirut, Lebanese Premier Saad Hariri's visit potentially opens the way for a new era in the two countries' relations, which have been characterized by upheaval and suspicion for decades.

The 39-year-old Hariri has appealed for relations with Syria based on "clarity and honesty." He was greeted warmly by Syrian President Bashar Assad upon his arrival at the presidential palace at the start of his two-day visit, and Lebanese media said he would attend a dinner banquet hosted by Assad.

Assad adviser Buthaina Shaaban told reporters their talks were "frank" and "succeeded in overcoming difficulties that marred relations in the past five years."

"The guarantee to that is the will of both President Assad and Hariri to build a positive and constructive relationship," she said.

Hariri said in a statement his government was looking forward to establishing "real and strategic relations with Syria."

Syria directly dominated Lebanon for nearly 30 years and kept tens of thousands of troops on its soil. After the killing of Hariri's father, Rafik, Syria came under intense pressure from its opponents in Lebanon, who staged massive protests, and from the West, forcing it to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

Syria repeatedly denied involvement in the assassination and a series of other political slayings and bombings that followed, but Hariri and his supporters continued to implicate Syria in the killing. Anti-Syrian parties were swept to power in 2005 elections in Lebanon.

The visit by Hariri was "very difficult on the personal level" and involves "great sacrifice," said Hariri loyalist and former lawmaker Mustafa Alloush.

"But as prime minister of Lebanon, it is quite normal to have such a visit. ... It is necessary and there is a need to settle all aspects of the relationship," Alloush told The Associated Press.

He said the visit did not mean some in Lebanon had dropped their belief that Syria was responsible for the killing of Rafik Hariri, who also served as prime minister.

"But this matter is up to the international tribunal now; it is no longer a personal issue," Alloush said.

A U.N.-backed tribunal has been set up to prosecute the assassins, but no suspects have been charged.

Syria has sought recently to improve its relations with the West, largely through its actions in Lebanon. Assad backed a peace deal between rival political factions in Lebanon that ended sectarian violence in May 2008.

Last year, Syria established formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon and set up an embassy in Lebanon for the first time since the countries' independence from France in the 1940s.

Syria still maintains influence in Lebanon through its backing of the militant group Hezbollah.

Hariri and his pro-Western political allies are in an uneasy power-sharing government with a Hezbollah-led grouping.

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Associated Press Writer Zeina Karam contributed to this report from Beirut.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121900871\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/19/AR2009121900871_pf.html)

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 Hariri calls for opening 'new horizons' with Syria  
 Premier holds 'excellent' talks with Assad in Damascus  
 Monday, December 21, 2009

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri called on Sunday for a renewal of ties with Syria to the benefit of both states at the end of a fence-mending visit to Damascus. "We want to open new horizons between the two countries," Hariri told a news conference at the Lebanese Embassy in Damascus. He said his three rounds of "excellent" talks with the Syrian leader were frank and based on clarity.

"We tackled all issues positively and I only saw positivity from President Assad side concerning all issues that matter to the Lebanese and the relation between both countries," Hariri said.

Hariri was speaking at the end of a two-day visit to Syria that marked the end to nearly five years of animosity between Damascus and the March 14 alliance he heads. Hariri arrived in Beirut Sunday night ahead of the Cabinet's first meeting on Monday after gaining the vote of confidence.

Assad had extended a warm welcome to Hariri upon his arrival in the Syrian capital on Saturday. "There will be serious steps from our side and on the part of President Bashar Assad to translate this cordial and serious relationship into steps on the ground in several fields," Hariri said, without giving details.

It was Hariri's first trip to Damascus since the 2005 assassination of his father, ex-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a killing that he along with political leaders of the parliamentary majority blamed on Syria.

Regional commentators and several Lebanese political leaders have hailed the visit as an ice-breaker and step toward healing decades of turbulent ties between the two neighbors.

Lebanese analysts say an improvement of ties with Damascus would bridge a political divide in Beirut, easing sectarian tensions and providing Hariri with the necessary clout to push through long-delayed economic and other reforms.

"We want privileged, sincere and honest relations ... in the interest of both countries and both peoples," Hariri said.

"We want to build ties with Syria based on positive points," he added.

Syria dominated Lebanon for nearly three decades until April 2005 when it pulled out its troops from Lebanon under international and regional pressure, two months after the assassination of Former Premier Rafik Hariri.

The two neighbors established diplomatic ties for the first time last year, with Syria opening an embassy in Beirut, while Lebanon opened its mission in Damascus in March.

Hariri said his unity government, which includes members of the opposition, including Hizbullah, a close ally to Syria, wanted to take measures with Damascus to develop these ties.

Assad is also "very attached to sincere relations based on common understanding" between the two

countries and spoke "positively" of problems that still need to be resolved, Hariri said.

"Foremost is a plan to demarcate the porous border between the two neighbors," he said.

Other than the demarcation of borders, thorny issues between the two countries include the fate of hundreds of Lebanese missing since the 1975-1990 Civil War, and the military presence of

Syrian-backed Palestinian militant groups outside refugee camps in Lebanon.

Hariri added that Saudi Arabia had "played an important role" in paving the way for his visit to Syria.

Rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia earlier this year eased tension in Lebanon and allowed Hariri to form a unity government.

The Lebanese premier stressed that the visit was a continuation to Arab reconciliations which Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz started in order to unite the Arab states' positions.

But Hariri stressed that he did not discuss with Assad a UN-led inquiry into his father's murder nor the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that has been set up to try the suspected killers.

"The tribunal is doing its work and this is what everybody wishes," he said.

Earlier this month, a Syrian court asked 25 prominent Lebanese, including individuals close to Hariri, to appear for questioning after former Lebanese General Security head Jamil al-Sayed filed a lawsuit against those individuals for giving false testimonies to the STL.

Lebanon's ties with Syria hit rock bottom after Hariri's "March 14" alliance accused Syria of assassinating Rafik Hariri in February 2005. They also blamed Damascus for attacking and killing other politicians and journalists. Damascus has denied any involvement.

Asked about the influence of the visit on the March 14 alliance, Hariri said he made the trip to Damascus as head of the Lebanese Cabinet rather than the leader of a political party.

"We are keen in the government along with all political parties in Lebanon to build friendly Lebanese-Syria ties," he said.

Hizbullah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said late Saturday that the visit helped make the "atmosphere comfortable" between the two countries, his office said in a statement.

Also on Saturday, Syrian presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban told reporters: "There is no doubt that the ice has been broken between the two sides." Shaaban also described the talks as constructive, cordial and transparent.

Commentators and ordinary Syrians, meanwhile, hailed Hariri's visit to Syria.

Syria's official Al-Baath newspaper said in a front-page headline on Sunday: "Three positive, honest, friendly hours ... break the ice and end the negative phase of the past."

Samir Musalma, editor-in-chief of the government newspaper Tishrin, agreed.

"The past phase has been painful ... but that does not mean we cannot move on," Musalma told AFP. — Agencies, with The Daily Star

[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=2&article\\_id=109969](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=109969)

Lebanese politicians voice support for Hariri's trip to Syria

Jumblatt refuses to comment on visit

By Elias Sakr

Daily Star staff

Monday, December 21, 2009

BEIRUT: Lebanese political figures voiced support over the weekend for Prime Minister Saad Hariri's weekend visit to Syria while underscoring that the trip had paved the way for improved cooperation between both countries.

Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt said Sunday he would not comment on Hariri's visit to Syria, but added that the series of assassinations which hit Lebanese figures including former Premier Rafik Hariri would be left for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to uncover.

Jumblatt said that earlier accusations of Syria's involvement in the assassinations were political judgments.

However, all political parties agreed to succumb to the judgment of the STL provided that the judgment of the international court is not a part of a game between nations to "destroy" Lebanon, he said.

The PSP leader stressed that Lebanon's stability was based on regional stability, which is based on the relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia.

"King Abdullah's visit to Syria led to the formation of a national unity Cabinet and eased the atmosphere in the country," Jumblatt said.

Jumblatt was one of the most vocal figures among the March 14 alliance who had accused Syria of being involved in the former premier's assassination and had verbally attacked Assad in the media.

However, the PSP leader moved toward a centrist position following the June 7 elections after which he announced his withdrawal from the March 14 alliance and reinitiated contact with Syria's closest ally in Lebanon, Hizbullah.

Jumblatt has said recently on several occasions that he would visit Syria only after Hariri's trip.

Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said late Saturday that the visit helped make the "atmosphere comfortable" between the two countries, his office said in a statement.

Separately, Minister of State for Administrative Development MP Mohammad Fneish praised Hariri's visit to Syria saying it indicated the start of turning the page over the negative past period and the establishment of new basis for cooperation in the future.

"The relation between both countries as well as among the Lebanese is a necessity for both Syria and Lebanon," Fneish said.

"We hope that this new page is governed by cooperation and honesty away from provocations by some Lebanese voices," he added.

Also, Liberation and Development bloc MP Qassem Hashem said Hariri's visit to Syria was the beginning of the restitution of the fraternal track in Lebanese-Syrian bilateral ties, which he said should be based on strategic and decisive relations given the shared interest between both countries.

"The importance of the visit is that it followed four years of tensions in political stances which surpassed the limits and conventions and was dealt with aggressively on a political side and the issue was not in the benefit of Lebanon and the Lebanese," Hashem said.

Meanwhile, Phalange Party head Amin Gemayel said Hariri's visit had been expected in order to normalize ties with Syria despite the circumstances that governed bilateral ties in the past period.

"We were supportive of the premier's visit to Damascus from the beginning since it is the first step toward solving all disputed issues which accumulated through the years," Gemayel said in remarks published by the daily An-Nahar on Sunday.

The Phalange Party leader added that Hariri's visit would not be fruitful on the domestic level unless all parties cooperated to invest it locally.

"If President Assad and Premier Hariri wanted the visit to take a personal aspect; maybe they are right in order to facilitate future official discussions to solve disputed issues," Gemayel said.

For its part, the Lebanese Forces, which has also strongly criticized Syria's role in Lebanon, made no comment on Hariri's visit to Damascus.

[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=2&article\\_id=109967](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=109967)

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 Franjieh Hails Hariri's 'Bold' Move to Visit Damascus

Marada movement leader Suleiman Franjeh has described Prime Minister Saad Hariri's visit to Damascus as "courageous."

"The visit (to Damascus) four years after (his father's assassination) is a bold decision in Lebanon's interest," Franjeh told al-Jadeed television on Sunday night.

The MP denied that Hariri and Assad discussed ex-Premier Rafik Hariri's murder adding that the PM's visit wasn't aimed at handing over an "innocence deed" to the Syrian president because the latter "doesn't need it and the international tribunal would make the investigation into the case."

About a possible visit to Damascus by Druze leader Walid Jumblat, Franjeh said the trip would be made without setting a date for it. "Syria doesn't object to the visit," he added.

Beirut, 21 Dec 09, 10:31

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/0/164EDF0AE7D4FF05C2257693002E2189?OpenDocument>

December 21, 2009

NEWS ANALYSIS

Lebanon Drama Adds Act With Leader's Trip to Syria

By ROBERT F. WORTH

BEIRUT, Lebanon — In any other part of the world, a new prime minister's visit to a neighboring country would be a fairly routine event. But Prime Minister Saad Hariri's trip to Syria over the weekend has been treated here as a kind of Lebanese national drama, the subject of almost endless commentary in newspapers and television shows.

It is not that anything really happened. Mr. Hariri and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria exchanged some thoroughly forgettable diplomatic banter and posed for photographs.

Instead, the trip epitomized a national story with anguished, almost operatic dimensions: a young leader forced to shake hands with the man who he believes killed his father. And it served as a reminder of this region's deep attachment to political symbolism.

For many Lebanese, the visit was a measure of Syria's renewed influence over Lebanon after years of bitterness and struggle since the Syrian military's withdrawal in 2005. That withdrawal came after Mr. Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was killed in a car bombing that many here believe to have been ordered by Syria.

The withdrawal was a blow to Syrian prestige, and afterward Saad Hariri seemed to have the entire Western world at his back as he built a movement for greater Lebanese independence and pushed for an international tribunal to try his father's killers.

But since then, the United States and the West have chosen to engage with Syria, not isolate it. And Saudi Arabia, which has long backed Mr. Hariri and competed with Syria for influence here, reconciled with the Syrians earlier this year, leaving them a freer hand to guide politics in Lebanon as they once did.

All this has been known for months, but it was still tremendously important for Mr. Hariri to actually cross the mountains — in his first visit since before his father's killing — and pay his respects in Damascus.

"The image of Syrian soldiers retreating was a huge blow to them," said Elias Muhanna, a political analyst and the author of the Lebanese blog Qifa Nabki. "So the image of Hariri coming over the mountains means they've come full circle. It demonstrates to all the power centers in Damascus that Bashar has restored Syria's position of strength vis-à-vis Lebanon."

The visit also has vivid historical echoes for many Lebanese. In 1977, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt visited Damascus just weeks after his own father was killed in an attack that is believed to have been arranged by Syria. Like Mr. Hariri, he had little choice: he had to reconcile with Syria if he wanted to continue playing a political role.

"The stability of Lebanon always depends on its environment, and basically this environment is Syria," Mr. Jumblatt said in an interview on Sunday. "For the sake of Lebanese stability, we have got to put aside personal animosity."

It is difficult to say exactly what Mr. Hariri's visit portends in terms of Lebanese-Syrian relations. By one measure, he has already achieved his most important goals: the Syrian Army is gone, and no one expects it to return. The two countries restored diplomatic relations this year. The international tribunal that was formed in 2005 under United Nations auspices to try the elder Hariri's killers continues its work here and in the Netherlands, where it is based. It could still indict high-ranking Syrians, although most analysts say that seems less likely than it did four years ago.

But most agree that Syria will once again have a powerful, undisputed voice here on issues ranging from cabinet positions to the militant Shiite movement Hezbollah, which Syria supports. The influence is not likely to be as crude as it was during the 1990s, when Syrian officers strutted through Beirut and were accused of raking profits from Lebanese industries. To some here, that is improvement enough. To others, Mr. Hariri's trip across the mountains was a tragic concession.

"Whether Saad Hariri admits it or not, it was a severe setback to everything that happened starting in 2005," said Michael Young, a Lebanese columnist who has long been critical of Syria's role here. "I think he did it reluctantly, but he never had a choice."

[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)

December 20, 2009  
Lebanon Talks With Syria to Bolster Ties  
By REUTERS

DAMASCUS, Syria (Reuters) — Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri of Lebanon arrived here on Saturday for landmark talks with President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in an attempt to open a fresh chapter in the countries' long-troubled relationship.

Lebanese officials said they expected that the two leaders would work on a broad statement or agreement to show strengthening cooperation between the countries and to assert the importance of guaranteeing Lebanon's stability.

Mr. Hariri's March 14 political coalition accused Syria of being behind the assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, in February 2005. After that killing, Lebanese outrage and international pressure forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in April 2005, ending three decades of military domination of its smaller neighbor.

Syria denies the allegations, and a special investigative court based in The Hague has yet to indict anyone for the Hariri killing.

Saad al-Hariri's coalition has often clashed in the past with Syria's allies in Lebanon, led by the powerful Iranian-backed group Hezbollah, and the political crisis has threatened to plunge the country back into sectarian violence.

Steps toward reconciliation between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which backs Mr. Hariri, earlier this year eased political tensions within Lebanon. That allowed Mr. Hariri, who won parliamentary elections in June, to form a unity government that includes Hezbollah and other political allies of Syria.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/20/world/middleeast/20lebanon.html?pagewanted=print>

FACTBOX-Who is Saad al-Hariri?  
19 Dec 2009 10:37:55 GMT  
Source: Reuters

Dec 19 (Reuters) - Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri visits Damascus on Saturday and holds talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad which are expected to put an end to nearly five years of animosity between the two men. Here are some key facts:

**\* HARIRI BECOMES PRIME MINISTER:**

-- After the assassination of his father, Rafik al-Hariri, on Feb. 14, 2005, by a car bomb in Beirut, Saad was selected by his family to follow in Hariri senior's political footsteps.  
-- Initially hesitant to enter politics, he soon took charge of his father's political party, the Future Movement. A powerful Sunni bloc, the Future Movement was the largest contingent within the "March 14" coalition (named in commemoration of the day in 2005 when huge anti-Syrian protests took place in Beirut), which opposed Syrian influence in Lebanon's affairs.

- Although the coalition won a clear majority in the 2005 parliamentary election, Hariri did not consider himself politically mature enough to serve as prime minister. He backed Fouad Siniora, a former finance minister and close ally of his father's, for the position.
- Over the next four years, Hariri worked to forge and refine his own political identity and he led his "March 14" alliance to a second election victory on June 7 this year.
- Hariri then spent more than four months brokering a deal with the opposition and last month formed a new unity government that included two ministers from the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

\* BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS:

- Saad al-Hariri was born in April 1970 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He completed his education in France and Saudi Arabia.
- After receiving a degree in international business from Georgetown University (1992) in the United States, Hariri worked at Saudi Oger, a large Saudi Arabia-based firm owned by his father, where he oversaw construction work and served as a maintenance contractor for the Saudi royal palaces.
- He became general manager in 1996, extended the business into telecommunications and helped to orchestrate Saudi Oger's acquisition of Turk Telekom. The deal, completed in 2006, was at the time the largest private business deal in Turkey's history.

Sources: Reuters/www.britannica.com (Writing by David Cutler, London Editorial Reference Unit; editing by Andrew Dobbie)

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE5BI02H.htm>

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FACTBOX-Lebanon's Hariri heads for Damascus

19 Dec 2009 10:33:58 GMT

Source: Reuters

Dec 19 (Reuters) - Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri visits Damascus on Saturday for talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad expected to turn the page on nearly five years of animosity between the two leaders.

Here are key facts on Syria's relations with its smaller neighbour since its troops first entered Lebanon in 1976:

\* THE CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON:

- In May/June 1976, 6,000 Syrian troops entered Lebanon to save Christian militias from defeat by Muslim and leftist fighters and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Months later, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt set up a 30,000-strong Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) to restore peace. The mainly-Syrian ADF deployed across Lebanon, except for the south because of Israeli opposition.

\* ISRAEL INVADES LEBANON:

- Israel launched a full-scale invasion in 1982, forcing Syrian troops to withdraw to the Bekaa Valley, seizing Beirut and helping to install its Christian allies in power. Lebanon signed a U.S.-brokered peace agreement with Israel in 1983 in the face of Syrian opposition.
- Pro-Syrian Muslim militias seized West Beirut in Feb. 1984, the army split and President Amin Gemayel abrogated the peace accord with Israel two months later under Syrian pressure. Syrian forces returned, however, to Beirut in 1987 to end inter-Muslim fighting.
- In 1988, parliament failed to elect a successor to Gemayel, who appointed fiercely anti-Syrian Christian army commander General Michel Aoun to head a military cabinet. For the next two years, Aoun's forces battled the Lebanese Forces militia for control of the Christian enclave, while also fighting the Syrians.
- In August 1990, parliament enacted the Taif Accord, which became Lebanon's new constitution. Syrian forces finally overran Aoun's forces in October 1990.

\* RAFIK AL-HARIRI:

- Lebanon held its first postwar election in Oct. 1992 and Rafik al-Hariri, a Sunni Muslim billionaire, became prime minister.
- He quit in 1998, losing a power struggle with Syrian-backed President Emile Lahoud, but returned after winning elections in 2000. Israel ended its 22-year occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000, increasing pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops. Syrian troops left most of the Beirut area in June 2001, ending decades of military presence.

\* SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL:

- In Sept. 2004, parliament amended the constitution to extend Lahoud's term by three years under intense Syrian pressure and despite widespread opposition. Several ministers resigned, including Hariri a month later. Previously Christian-led opposition to Syria's presence had become more widespread. A U.N. resolution was passed demanding Syria pull its troops out of Lebanon and stop meddling in its politics. Hariri was killed by a bomb in Beirut on Feb. 14, 2005.
- Assad announced just weeks later on March 5, 2005 that Syria would start pulling its troops out of Lebanon and the withdrawal was completed on April 26. Later in the year, U.N. investigators said high-ranking Syrian officials and their

Lebanese allies were involved in Hariri's killing, in a report to the U.N. Security Council. Syria has denied it.

\* WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW:

-- Syria still wields influence through its local allies, mainly the Shi'ite Hezbollah and Amal factions, and intelligence networks. Saad al-Hariri, who spent more than four months brokering a deal with the opposition, last month formed a new unity government that has included two ministers from Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

-- Damascus has also established diplomatic relations with Beirut for the first time since the countries' independence. (Writing by David Cutler, London Editorial Reference Unit; editing by Andrew Dobbie)

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE5BI02C.htm>

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