

## Lebanon Drama Adds Act With Leader's Trip to Syria

Contributed by ROBERT F. WORTH NYTimes  
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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 and his allies admit 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."

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