

U.S. Faces Test As Mideast Allies Diverge on Syria

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Lebanon Keeps Pressure On Damascus, but Israel Explores Peace Overture

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WASHINGTON -- As the Bush administration strives to ward off another summer war in the Middle East, it is being forced to balance the potentially diverging interests of two of its most important allies in the region, Lebanon and Israel.

Both countries are locked in standoffs with Syria over its alleged role in arming and funding militias that threaten their borders and internal security. But Lebanese and Israeli leaders are exploring what may be conflicting strategies to counter the Syrian threat, U.S. and Middle Eastern officials say.

In recent months, Beirut, with Washington's support, has used diplomatic, military and legal means to directly challenge Syria's influence in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, however, is under growing pressure from his military and intelligence services to embrace recent peace overtures made by Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Any direct Israeli engagement with Damascus would require at least tacit U.S. support, Arab diplomats say. To date, the White House has worked to isolate President Assad internationally because of his government's support for militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and its alleged role in destabilizing Iraq and Lebanon.

Over the weekend, Israeli officials confirmed that Mr. Olmert's government has put out feelers to Mr. Assad, through third countries, about pursuing the peace track, but has yet to receive a positive response. "The problem is that the Syrians are not ready...to negotiate directly with Israel," Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres told reporters in Jerusalem yesterday. "They want to do it through the United States."

How Washington navigates the competing interests of its two allies with respect to Syria could have a major impact on its ability to prevent another major regional clash after last summer's war between Israel and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah.

"If the U.S. decides it's going to the mat to secure Lebanon, then this will have huge implications on the Syrian-Israeli front," says Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator who is now a scholar at the New America Foundation, a Washington think tank.

"If something blows up between Syria and Israel," he added, it will probably be tied to "events inside Lebanon."

Last summer, the White House was viewed as squarely backing Israel in its weeks-long attacks against Hezbollah, which included extensive bombing of southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut. This summer, Washington is viewed as tilting toward Lebanon and supporting its desire to pressure Damascus to stop exerting influence inside Lebanon.

"The Bush administration has to be firm on Lebanon," says Emile El-Hokayem, a Middle East expert at the Henry L. Stimson Center, another Washington think tank. It is seen as "its biggest success in the region," he says.

The Bush administration regards Lebanon as central to its effort to promote democracy in the Middle East. A pro-Western government swept to power there after the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri sparked protests that led to the end of Syria's long military occupation of Lebanon.

Even so, Washington is likely to continue to face troubles balancing its desire to support both Lebanon and Israel. U.S. lawmakers and independent policy groups such as the Iraq Study Group, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic Rep. Lee Hamilton, have pushed the White House to convene a regional peace conference that includes Syria and Iran to address broader Mideast issues. But while the U.S. has begun engaging in regional talks on Iraq, the discussions haven't turned toward Lebanon and Syria.

The U.S. also is engaged in a wider initiative with Arab countries to kick-start Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

U.S. diplomats fear that Damascus could demand that it regain some of its once-strong influence inside Lebanon in

return for helping assure peace with Israel.

Lebanon's security has been inextricably linked to Israel's over the past five decades. Palestinian militant groups targeting Israel had based themselves inside Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, leading to raids and invasions by Israel. More recently, Hezbollah has emerged as a military force on Israel's northern border, a situation that led to another invasion by Israel last summer.

Washington's views toward Beirut have also changed, especially after street protests there in 2005 forced Syria to withdraw its remaining forces from Lebanon. The Bush administration seized on the election of Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora months later as a symbol of what it described as a democratization wave sweeping the Middle East. After last summer's war, the White House made stabilizing the Lebanese government a cornerstone of its Middle East strategy.

This policy has increasingly placed the Bush administration on a collision course with Damascus. Late last month, the U.S. pushed through the United Nations Security Council an international tribunal to try suspects in Mr. Hariri's assassination. Damascus has denied any involvement in Mr. Hariri's murder, but has refused to cooperate with U.N. investigators.

In recent weeks, Lebanese and U.S. officials have alleged that Syria is backing Sunni and Palestinian militant groups inside Lebanon in a bid to undermine Mr. Siniora's government. Clashes between the Lebanese army and two militias, Fatah Islam and Jund al-Sham, near the cities of Tripoli and Sidon have left hundreds dead. Lebanese and U.S. officials say Syrian-backed militias have also infiltrated near to the Lebanese city of Kozhaya in the Bekaa Valley.

Syria denies it has been supporting the unrest. But the Bush administration is significantly increasing military aid to Lebanon's army to help it crush the militias, earmarking nearly \$250 million for that purpose this year, up from \$40 million last year. The U.S. and Lebanon are also in talks to find new ways to secure the porous Syrian-Lebanese border and prevent the infiltration of more militants and arms.

Mr. Assad's government has said any international-monitoring presence on its border would be viewed as a hostile act, a statement that raises the potential for an escalation of tensions.

The increasingly confrontational stance taken by President Bush and Lebanon toward Syria could have repercussions on Israel and the on-again, off-again Mideast peace talks. In recent weeks, U.S. and Israeli officials said they have detected a growing Syrian military presence along the disputed Golan Heights region, which Israel seized from Syria during the 1967 war.

These officials said they believe Damascus has significantly upgraded its military capabilities in recent months through the purchase of Russian and Iranian arms.

Israeli and U.S. officials are seeking to reconcile these seemingly aggressive activities with repeated overtures from Mr. Assad to engage in peace talks with Mr. Olmert's government. One theory is that Syria's leader's saber-rattling is intended to jump-start talks over the future of the Golan Heights. Another is that Syria is working with Iran to deter moves that aren't in their interests in Lebanon, and to discourage possible U.S. or Israeli strikes on Tehran's nuclear facilities.

A U.S.-Israeli strategic dialogue scheduled for later this month in Washington is expected to focus on Syria's peace overtures.

Mr. Olmert is expected to come under increasing pressure from elements inside the Israeli Defense Forces and Military Intelligence to engage Damascus in a peace dialogue to diminish the chances of another summer war. Israeli officials say the country needs to reduce the growing threats on its borders, including Hamas in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Hezbollah on its northern border and now Syria across the Golan Heights. Last summer's war failed to dismantle Hezbollah's military capabilities.

Many regional analysts express skepticism that any Israeli-Syrian peace talks would bear long-term dividends. For one, Syria is seen as having significantly less influence over Hezbollah and other militant groups fighting Israel than it did before its 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon, when Damascus in essence ran Beirut. Analysts argue also that Mr. Assad is unlikely to jeopardize his military alliance with Iran in a bid to achieve peace with Israel.

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