

PolicyWatch #1660

Hizballah's Coalition Partner Meets President Obama

By [David Schenker](#)

May 21, 2010

On Monday, Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri will visit Washington for a meeting with President Obama. In announcing the meeting, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs called it "a symbol of the close and historic relationship between Lebanon and the United States." Indeed, between 2005 and 2009, bilateral ties were never closer or more consequential, with the Cedar Revolution ending nearly three decades of Syrian suzerainty in the country. Over the past year, however, Hariri has had to govern in coalition with Hizballah. The Iranian-Syrian backed Shiite militia will be the elephant in the Oval Office during Monday's meeting.

Prior to becoming prime minister, Hariri was a frequent visitor to the Bush White House as head of Lebanon's ruling March 14 coalition. This will be his first visit as premier, his first meeting with Obama, and his first trip to the White House since last year's seeming reversal of the Cedar Revolution. Although Syria no longer has troops stationed across the border, President Bashar al-Asad's allies in Lebanon have retrenched in recent months and once again wield preponderant political influence. Meanwhile, the March 14 coalition has been dramatically weakened by attrition and defections at home and abroad that have led the movement to moderate its pro-Western stance and embrace -- at least rhetorically -- Hizballah's "resistance" doctrine. In light of these developments, it is unclear what Washington's agenda will be for the Hariri meeting.

Background

On June 7, 2009, Lebanese voters returned the pro-Western March 14 coalition to power. Despite winning 71 of 128 seats in parliament, however, Hariri and the coalition were unable to come to terms with the Hizballah-led "March 8" opposition and form a government. After five months of negotiations, Hariri finally acceded to Hizballah and Syria's demand for a national unity government, giving the Shiite militia one-third-plus-one cabinet seats (a "blocking third") and effective veto power over major government initiatives. He also agreed to incorporate language in the Ministerial Statement -- the policy template for his incoming administration -- that legitimized Hizballah's weapons.

Hariri's concessions appear to have been driven by Saudi Arabia. Riyadh hoped that by extracting conciliatory gestures from its allies in Beirut, it could repair relations with Damascus, which had deteriorated following the 2005 assassination of Saad's father, former Lebanese premier (and dual Saudi-Lebanese national) Rafiq Hariri. Accordingly, the government-formation deal included one other gesture of appeasement: a prime ministerial visit to Damascus. For Saad Hariri, the prospect of traveling to Syria to meet Asad -- the man suspected of ordering his father's death -- was a loathsome proposition. Nevertheless, on December 19, 2009, a month after he formed a new government, Prime Minister Hariri met with Asad in Syria.

Rapprochement with Hizballah and Syria

Hariri's Damascus trip effectively ended his coalition's anti-Syrian disposition. It also opened the floodgates for March 14-affiliated politicians long estranged from the Asad regime to make the pilgrimage themselves -- most prominently the influential Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Defense Minister Elias Murr. For Jumblatt, a particularly vociferous critic of the Asad regime between 2005 and 2009, the invitation was contingent on

him first making a public apology. After doing so (on al-Jazeera television), Jumblatt traveled to Damascus, met with Asad, and "agreed that we leave behind a tense chapter in bilateral relations and start anew, seeking to preserve and support the resistance [i.e., Hizballah]."

Indeed, the coalition's overt hostility toward Hizballah has dissipated as well. Since the June 2009 elections, both Hariri and Jumblatt have met with the militia's leader Hassan Nasrallah in an effort to defuse tensions, which spiked when the international investigation into the Hariri assassination began to focus on alleged Shiite (i.e., Hizballah) involvement. Although Hariri has refused to comment on such allegations, Jumblatt -- whether motivated by concerns for Lebanon's stability or a desire to protect his new friends -- publicly maintains that Hizballah was not involved.

Perhaps the most significant benefit that the rapprochement has conferred on Hizballah has been the official legitimization of its "resistance" ideology and its weapons. Despite being strong-armed into Ministerial Statement clauses approving the group's armed status, the March 14 coalition -- along with the United Nations -- still viewed its weapons as illegitimate. Today, however, senior March 14 officials routinely articulate their acceptance of Hizballah's autonomous militia and arsenal. On March 22, for example, Defense Minister Murr told Hizballah's al-Manar Television that "the Resistance's weapons guarantee deterrence against the [Israeli] enemy."

Targeting the Relationship with Washington

Given the current power dynamics in Beirut, a less overtly pro-Western line from Lebanon's ruling party is to be expected. But some of the government's recent rhetoric seems gratuitous. For example, in April 21 remarks to the Italian daily *La Stampa*, Prime Minister Hariri derided Israel's claims that Syria transferred Scud missiles to Hizballah, comparing the accusations to faulty U.S. prewar intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

More problematic for Washington, however, are the increasing signs of Syrian influence in Lebanon that may eventually affect the direction of Beirut's policies. Just as Syrian officials routinely visit Tehran prior to meetings with U.S. officials, for example, Hariri stopped off in Damascus for consultations with Asad en route to Washington. Similarly, Syria recently assigned Deputy Vice President for Security Affairs Muhammad Nasif as a liaison to Walid Jumblatt -- a particularly audacious appointment given that the U.S. Treasury Department designated Nasif in November 2007 for "furthering the Syrian regime's efforts to undermine Lebanese democracy."

In another notable development, Hizballah has begun targeting Washington's agreement with the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, particularly the standard end-use clause that prohibits the transfer of U.S. equipment to terrorist organizations. During an April interview on al-Manar, Nasrallah called the agreement "insulting" and criticized it for applying a U.S.-defined terrorist label to Hizballah. This controversy may constitute Hizballah's initial salvo against Washington's burgeoning defense cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Conclusion

The change in fortune for America's pro-Western allies in Beirut raises questions about the future of U.S.-Lebanese ties. During the country's civil war and Syrian occupation, Washington maintained a distant if cordial relationship with Beirut. This dynamic was epitomized by meager U.S. defense support to the LAF, which from 1975 to 2005 averaged some \$500,000 per year. Since the Cedar Revolution and the end of the Syrian occupation, however, U.S. support has increased exponentially. In the past five years alone, Washington committed nearly \$500 million to the LAF, in addition to the \$770 million pledge to Beirut made during the 2006 Paris III Conference to rebuild postwar Lebanon.

Yet maintaining financial support at current levels will prove increasingly difficult if the Lebanese

government no longer appears committed to UN Security Council resolutions (e.g., 1701 and 1559) that call for disarming militias such as Hizballah and ending foreign (i.e., Syrian) meddling in Lebanon. Although no one is under the illusion that the government is capable of taking positive steps on these fronts, Beirut should at least be expected to avoid making statements that undermine these important resolutions. In this regard, statements by Murr and President Michel Suleiman in support of Hizballah's armed status are particularly problematic.

Lebanon remains important to U.S. interests. In addition to being a key battleground between pro-Western moderates and advocates of the Syrian/Iranian resistance model, Lebanon is current chairman of the UN Security Council and may therefore play a central role in the process of sanctioning Iran for its nuclear endeavors. (Hariri is slated to address the UN in New York after his Monday meeting in Washington.)

Given the constraints on Hariri, the Obama administration is likely to ask little of him on Monday. But a discussion of Lebanon's stance on Iran sanctions -- with an eye toward convincing Beirut to, at minimum, abstain during the UN vote -- would be beneficial. Notwithstanding comments this week by President Obama's chief counterterrorism advisor John Brennan suggesting Washington's affinity for "moderate elements" within Hizballah, the administration should also encourage Hariri to downplay his coalition's recent enthusiasm for the resistance. Although such rhetoric may be intended to insulate the prime minister from Hizballah attacks at home, it shakes confidence in Washington and undermines UN resolutions that are critical to Lebanon's future as an independent, democratic state.

David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the [Program on Arab Politics](#) at The Washington Institute.

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