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## The Ties that Unwind

By Andrew Tabler

AUGUST 2005

**DAMASCUS, Syria/BEIRUT, Lebanon** – Walk down a Levantine street these days and strike up a conversation with most anyone and you will get an earful of hate. As the international media focus their attention on the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Premier Rafik al Hariri, nationalist sentiments on both sides of the Anti-Lebanon Mountain Range (the Lebanon/Syrian border) are boiling. Anti-Syrian feeling is running higher than ever in Lebanon, especially following the arrest in late August of Lebanon's top security chiefs on charges of murder in Hariri's death. UN special investigator Devlet Mehlis is now pushing the inquiry toward Damascus, a move that, depending on the findings, could implicate the upper echelons of the Syrian regime in the assassination. Many Lebanese believe this scenario could lead to an international tribunal to pursue the case, and even possible UN sanctions against Damascus.

Syrians are increasingly venting their disdain for Lebanese as well. Everyday Syrians, most of whom mourned the death of Hariri last February, now say they feel increasingly that the Mehlis investigation in particular, and Syria's historical influence in Lebanon in general, are being used as weapons by the international community to further isolate the regime of President Bashar al Assad. Anonymous Syrian government officials describe the investigation itself as "a politicizing trap" designed to snare Syria.

The nationalist media campaigns following Hariri's assassination in February are more or less gone, but popular political backs seem to be up as never before. How did this happen? An extra Syrian "security measure," enforced along its borders with Lebanon in July and August just as the new Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora was forming his first "anti-Syrian" government, seems to have sparked the Levantine tendency for revenge politics. Fueling this smoldering fire, however, are a variety of fears surrounding Washington's seriousness in pursuing its policies of pressuring Syria and "constructive instability" in the Arab World. With the Mehlis report due to be released in October, the showdown over Hariri's assassination seems to be at hand.

### The blockade

Trips across the Lebanese-Syrian frontier are an easy process. Citizens of both countries need only fill out a small card and present their identity papers to immigration authorities. Traffic along the Beirut-Damascus road, one of the most heavily traveled routes in the Arab World, had become so brisk that the two countries agreed a few years ago to consolidate their respective immigration windows and customs points in jointly administered buildings on the east- and west-bound sides. It seemed the several-kilometer neutral zone — an area of the road directly on the border itself — was now a relic.

Consolidating immigration and customs was the latest sign of Lebanon and Syria's "special relationship" outlined in the Taif Agreement — the 1989 modification of the Lebanese Constitution implemented by Syria in which Muslims received greater governmental control. The move followed the introduction of a special telephone network in the mid-1990s that made calls to and from each coun-

try “national” calls, not requiring an international prefix. Special agreements had been concluded between Lebanon, Syria and Jordan that standardized paperwork for and eased the passage of automobiles as well. On a trip to Syria the morning of Hariri’s assassination, I remember sitting in a car outside the yet-to-be-opened “Lebanese” addition to the Syrian immigration building and thinking how border formalities and communications between the two countries increasingly resembled those between the US and Canada. Well, at least Syrian and Lebanon still did not share the same country code just yet.

With Hariri’s assassination, progress on “brotherly” projects stopped. The now-finished and freshly painted Lebanese addition to the Syrian immigration complex is closed and covered in a heavy layer of dust. In late June, residents of both countries crossing the frontier — most of whom listened intently to car radios to follow accusations and counter accusations between Beirut and Damascus over the murder’s investigation — were treated to a surprise spot inspection just beyond the Syrian customs house for all vehicles coming from and going to Lebanon.

I had gotten word of the increased security measures a few days earlier from a friend over a lunch in Damascus. As I exited Syrian customs *en route* to Beirut a few days later, I could see a row of cars lined up in front of me. Plain-clothed *mukhabarat* agents with automatic weapons searched cars one at a time, opening bags and inspecting their contents. One agent wore a New York Yankees baseball cap.

“What are they looking for?” I asked the driver.

“They say explosives. But I think they are just killing time,” the driver replied. “Coming *into* Syria they are much more strict. They are looking for everything.”

As the driver pointed to the incoming lane, I suddenly noticed a long line of trucks parked end to end. Agents searching cars in the incoming lane could be seen pulling anything “new” out of bags and questioning drivers on the content of the bags. It was only when we passed the checkpoint a few minutes later that I took in the full scale of security procedure. The line of trucks on the incoming lane extended for nearly two kilometers. Truck drivers were camped out in the shade under their trailers, sleeping, chatting and drinking tea. Their vehicles, with Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Gulf country number-plates — reminiscent of an Arab-Summit car park — told me in an instant that what I was witnessing was a blockade.

For the next two months, Syrian security slowly searched every truck going into Syria from Lebanon. The neutral zone was suddenly transformed into a parking lot. Two weeks into the crisis, trucks were lined up two abreast for almost two kilometers. Television news crews



*An added Syrian “security measure” in July and August along its borders with Lebanon seems to have stoked nationalist sentiments in Lebanon and Syria.*

descended on the crossing, and Lebanon’s newspapers erupted in fury, as the country’s “anti-Syrian” leaders took turns bashing Damascus for intimidating Lebanon. In the storm’s center was new Prime Minister Siniora, who was desperately trying to form a government from an anti-Syrian alliance that was as fragmented as Lebanon’s “confessional” political system, which allocates top political posts according to religious faith, or sect. While he opposed the security move, Siniora struck a careful and exculpatory line in addressing the blockade.

On the streets of Beirut, people were up in arms, especially in Christian East Beirut. Statements along the lines of “screw Syria” were common, and most advocated “going it alone.” Lebanon, they claimed, “didn’t need Syria anyway.”

“The [far-right, Christian] Lebanese Forces supporters are saying things like ‘Hey, you Syrian, what are you doing here’, said Fadi, a Maronite Christian handyman from the Syrian city of Der’a. “I have a Lebanese car, so they can’t tell I’m Syrian on the road, thank God. They can’t tell someone is Syrian just by looking at them.”

Such anti-Syrian sentiments come in sharp contrast to Siniora’s conciliatory actions as head of the new “anti-Syrian” government. How can this paradox be explained? Siniora is an economist by training, a financier by profession. As Hariri’s chief moneyman dating back to the 1980s, and as Minister of Finance in all the late premier’s cabinets, Siniora was essentially Lebanon’s economic maestro. His cautious response to the border crisis was largely attributed to the intricacies of forming a Lebanese government with input from the Maronite Christian presidency, now held by pro-Syria Emile Lahoud. In early August, Siniora, after forming a government, traveled to Damascus to meet President Assad to “solve” the border crisis. Both leaders agreed to implement an improved security regime along the Lebanese side of the

border. The crisis immediately lessened, but was not completely solved until August 31, when the extra Syrian security measure was lifted.

### Economic realities

What Siniora seemed also to remember was the old political dictum: When in a tight spot, worry only about things you can control. At the time of the blockade, the international investigation into Hariri's death was already in full swing, as the meticulous Mehlis questioned officials in Lebanon. His investigation was reportedly aided considerably by a defector, Col. Zouhari Safi, who worked with Syrian intelligence and claims the explosives to kill Hariri were purchased in Slovakia.

Siniora's careful political tone and line seemed to come in recognition of Lebanon's heavy reliance on Syria, as well as Lebanon's poor economic performance since the assassination, with economic growth in 2005 only estimated to reach 2%. In many ways, it is a story that many Lebanese prefer to overlook. In the first half of 2005, Syria was Lebanon's number-one export market, with exports totaling \$105.7 million, or 12% of all exports. Imports of Syrian goods over the same period totaled \$90.6 million, representing a mere 2% of all Lebanese imports and 5.8% of overall Syrian exports. Lebanon relies on Syria for oil products (43%), Mutton (15%), phosphates (8%), fruit and vegetables (6.4%), legumes (3.2%), milk and dairy (3%) and iron products (2.9%). Syria, in turn, relies on Lebanon for paper products (14%), cement (13%), aluminum (6%), marble (5%), sugar (3.2%), juice and water (3%), and alcohol (1.2%).

What would happen if economic relations were sev-



ered in the short-to-medium term? The above list indicates that each side could go it alone in terms of import sourcing. This would likely lead to an increase in prices on both sides, however. Syrian oil and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) exports to Lebanon are extremely competitive, due to low transport costs and Lebanon's ability to tap into Syria's subsidized prices on some products. Lebanon's paper industry, for example, is one of the region's best, and sourcing paper products elsewhere from Turkey and Egypt would likely lead to high prices on the Syrian market.

The economic fallout of severed ties would impact not only Syria's state-owned energy sector, as many Lebanese have speculated, but also Syria's rapidly growing private sector, which accounts for around 65% of Syria exports to Lebanon. To offset the losses of a Lebanese boycott, Syrian producers could find larger alternative markets in Turkey, with which Syria has just concluded a free-trade agreement. But as this agreement is phased in over a number of years, while customs on most products between Lebanon and Syria have been abolished, the reorientation of Syrian exports currently going to Lebanon would not be an easy process.

For Lebanon, however, the impact would be more substantial. Last year, Syria was Lebanon's third-largest export market (after Iraq and Switzerland), totaling some \$145 million, according to Lebanese Customs statistics. But reorienting Lebanese exports would likely be problematic, due to the country's higher relative production prices that are the result of the Lebanese Lira's current peg of LL1507 per US dollar. The peg is important, as it artificially inflates public-sector salaries and benefits in what is essentially a dollarized economy. Lebanese products are competitive on the Syrian market by virtue of the customs-free environment between the two countries, as well as low transport costs. Making up for the loss of the Syrian export market in the Arab Gulf, in the face of stiffer competition from global producers, as well as from other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt where multinationals have located production facilities over the last ten years, would be difficult at best.

Chances are, the Lebanese could not get their goods effectively to world markets without Syria. The fact that Damascus chose to heighten "security" restrictions on the Lebanese frontier at the same time that the new "anti-Syrian" government in Beirut was taking shape and the Mehlis investigation was shifting into high gear should not have come as a surprise. It is in the transit of goods that the Lebanese-Syrian economic relationship takes on a much different and largely geographic dimension. With a border to the north and east with Syria, a southern border with Israel that has been closed since 1948 (except during periods of Israeli occupation), and a western coastline facing the Mediterranean, Lebanon is completely dependent on Syria for exporting goods overland.

Coming to grips with Lebanon's overland transit is-

sue involves a good bit of number crunching. According to the Lebanese Ministry of Economy, overall Lebanese exports (including services) totaled \$2.5 billion in 2004. In terms of general trade (i.e. material goods excluding services and tourism) exports, Lebanese Customs figures total some \$1.747 billion. Of Lebanon's top-16 export markets, 10 are in the Middle East (\$1.339bn), including Iraq (\$255.5m), Syria (\$145.2), UAE (\$135.3), Turkey (\$127.3), Saudi Arabia (\$112.8), Kuwait (\$67.4), Jordan (\$62.8), Egypt (\$39.5), Qatar (\$30.3) and Iran (\$21).

How much of those goods traverse Syria? According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (which breaks down transit trade by country of origin and country of destination), Lebanese transit trade through Syria totaled around \$702 million in 2004, with \$347 million going to the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan, and \$355 million going to "other countries" (which include Iraq and Iran).

Combining Lebanese figures on exports to Syria (\$145.2 million) with Syrian figures on transit trade of Lebanese origin (\$702 million) means that around \$847 million (around 49%) of all Lebanese general trade (and 33% of overall trade) in 2004 involved goods crossing the Syrian frontier.

Then there is the growing business of transit of goods through Lebanon onward to the Arab World. According to Lebanese Customs figures (which are not broken down by country of origin or country of destination, making it difficult to determine directions in the flow of trade), transit of goods totaled a record \$355 million in 2004, up from a mere \$69 million in 2001 and \$185 million in 2003. The reason? Given that transit trade quadrupled starting in July 2003, it seems safe to assume that Lebanese shippers have tapped securely into supplying US-occupied Iraq. In the first six months of 2005, transit totaled around \$113 million.

### Sanctions busting and smuggling

Good figures on informal trade between Lebanon and Syria are difficult to come by, with estimates ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars per year. According to Syrian law, Syrian importers are required to import goods directly from their country of origin using Syrian air- and seaports. The only exception to this rule concerns the current US export ban (all goods with 10% US content, other than food and medicine) to Syria, which is a key element of the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) implemented by the US Congress with President Bush's approval in May 2004. Syrian companies seeking US components are allowed to purchase these goods in other markets. According to Syrian businessmen, Lebanon and Dubai rank as the top two sources for the "re-export" of US goods to Syria, given each country's higher standard of living and sophisticated markets. The range of re-exported goods to Syria is as wide as whatever is on offer in the re-export market, but Syrian businessmen say they

rely on Lebanon largely for high-tech components vital to computers and networking.

Until very recently, Lebanese and Syrians carried substantial quantities of goods across the frontier for "personal" use that were, in reality, black-market business trade. Syria's military and security presence in Lebanon had one powerful ancillary benefit: customs procedures on both sides of the border were extremely lax. After the coming to power of Bashar al Assad, historically tight customs procedures were relaxed, leading at first to the construction of several "superstores" in Chtaura, on the Lebanon side of the border where Syrians heading home could stop and purchase anything from food to high-tech goods. Business was so brisk over the last few years that Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, constructed a massive Duty Free in the neutral zone going into Syria, complete with a supermarket, electronic shop, pharmacy and even a Dunkin Doughnuts. The Duty-Free facility was constructed on the inbound side of the road to Damascus, running in the face of Duty-Free facilities throughout the world that aim at passengers *exiting* a country.

Exactly how much this trade was worth is unknown, but it was systematic enough that shopkeepers in Damascus openly admitted being supplied with various US goods that officially fall under Syria's import-restriction list. This process has become more difficult, however, as shortly after security procedures tightened on the Syrian frontier, Syrian customs reverted back to its old, pre-Bashar self. Today, passengers crossing into Syria are having difficulty bringing in bottles of Lebanese wine or, in some cases, even water. Syrian Duty-Free became something like a ghost town, a far cry from the bustling business witnessed there since its opening in 2003. And many consumer US-origin goods previously available in Syrian shops have disappeared.

In terms of overall informal trade, Syria is much more dependent on Lebanon's free market as a source of goods fueling Syria's growing appetite for globalized products. Customs regulations have changed, however, and products such as Coca Cola, Pepsi and even KFC are now available in Damascus via Syrian suppliers. Ready or not, the crisis over Hariri's assassination, and the associated blockade, could indeed be the first step toward cutting off Lebanon's traditional role as Syria's consumer window to the outside world.

Since its foundation in 1923, Lebanon has needed cheap, low-to-medium-skilled foreign labor. After the civil war's end in 1990, this demand increased, both to carry out the government's ongoing reconstruction plans, as well as to service private-sector businesses and individual homes. Since Syrians live right next door, and often have Lebanese family members, they remain Lebanon's best foreign labor source. Estimates of Syrian laborers in Lebanon vary between 400,000 to 1 million.

At the same time, the Lebanese state has not made it



*The once bustling Syrian Duty-Free Shop, owned by President Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, has been turned into a virtual ghost town.*

easy to introduce other foreign laborers to the country, due largely to Lebanon's lengthy and expensive residency and work-permit procedures, which (inclusive of insurance) total some \$1,800 per head per year. Such fees have increased in tandem with the Lebanese state's desperate attempt to deal with its debt problem.

Attempts to regulate Syrian labor in Lebanon have been spotty. Following Syria's post-assassination pullout from Lebanon on April 27, some Lebanese politicians said that Syrian laborers should be registered and given work permits. This sentiment was echoed by Syrian President Assad as well.

Little seems to have been done by the Lebanese thus far to regulate Syrian labor, due in no small part to Siniora's weeks-long battle to form a government in June and July. Somewhat ironically, Syria has taken its own steps to encourage Syrians to stay at home to work. In late August, the standard Syrian exit tax was increased from SP 200 (\$4) to SP 800 (\$16) per trip. No explanation was given for the move.

Far less attention has been paid to the role of Lebanese labor in Syria. According to the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, which regulates relations between the two countries, some 100,000 Lebanese currently work in Syria. This figure is widely believed to be inflated, however, even by some Syrian government officials with whom I have spoken.

Getting a handle on Lebanese labor in Syria is as difficult as forming good estimates on Syrian labor in Lebanon, since many Lebanese and Syrian families and households overlap. This being said, the utilization of Lebanese expertise was highlighted during a recent crackdown on "illegal" Lebanese labor in Syria. Beginning in July with the blockade, Syrian police showed up at the door of Syria's new private-sector banks, as well as the country's

two mobile-phone companies. All non-Syrians without work papers were duly taken to the Lebanese border and "dropped off."

According to a number of personal sources inside Syria's private sector banks, Lebanese play a vital role in the training of Syrians staffing the new banks. Syrians have little experience in banking, following 40 years of a state monopoly over finance. Implementing international bank-risk procedures has been a major challenge to the new banks, and deposits are piling up. Private bankers say that Lebanese are vital to training credit managers in several respects. First and foremost, risk procedures vary from bank to bank (called "credit culture"), and Syrian private banks with Lebanese involvement have to learn first-hand from their more experienced Lebanese counterparts just what to lend and under what circumstances. Second, of course, Lebanese have the Arabic-language skills necessary to best explain the institution's procedures.

In terms of finance, Lebanon and Syria have long been intertwined. While millions of dollars have been flowing into Syria's new private-sector banks following their opening in 2003 (some 40 years after their nationalization) Lebanon remains Syria's piggy bank, with estimates varying widely from hundreds of millions to billions of dollars in deposits. And since Lebanese banks are involved in the vast majority of Syria's private-banking ventures, the link between Lebanese and Syrian finance seems set to remain enmeshed for the foreseeable future.

In private conversations with bankers on both sides of the border, most say going it alone would be difficult for both economies. For example, Lebanese institutions known to have substantial Syrian deposits, including *Banque du Liban et d'Outre Mer* (BLOM), *Banque Européenne pour le Moyen-Orient* (BEMO), Bank Audi, and Bank Byblos, are heavily invested in Lebanese treasury bills, which offer high returns and keep the Lebanese state, whose debt of \$36 billion amounts to a staggering 185% of GDP, afloat. On the Syrian side, the regulatory environment for private banks is still restrictive, since the Syrian state tries to deal with substantial issues concerning interest rates, exchange rates, and the introduction of liquidity facilities. A majority of Syrian traders still use Letters of Credit from Lebanese banks to import goods. In the end, bankers say that separating the two systems — something that did not even happen during the Lebanon War — would be a very painful process, since Lebanon needs the funds and Syria's banking system still needs substantial overhaul to function properly.

### **Syrian sentiments**

More interesting, but slightly harder to read, were Syrian reactions to the blockade. Traditionally, everyday Syrians are by-and-large passive toward political developments — a legacy of the authoritarian rule of Hafez el Assad. An ancillary benefit of Bashar al Assad's "opening" of the country is that Syrians now

speak more candidly about political affairs.

Syria's military and security exit from Lebanon with its tail between its legs this year was a hard pill for Syrians to swallow. By and large, most Syrians were a bit ambivalent about the Syrian military's presence in Lebanon, and, rightfully so. They attributed it to the political arrangement between the US, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon over the implementation of the Taif Accord. Syria got to do the dirty work of enforcing Taif — actually working with Lebanese allies in military operations to disarm those who did not fall in line. Tens of thousands of Syrian soldiers lost their lives in Lebanon during the civil war, with some of the highest casualty rates coming at the war's conclusion.

At a departure ceremony held at Riyaq military base in the Lebanon's Bekaa Valley on April 27, Syrian and Lebanese military brass and political leaders read speeches praising Syria's role in stabilizing Lebanon. In many ways, the ceremony was surreal. Under a clear blue sky, in front of French-colonial-era buildings and monuments dedicated to those fallen in the Levant campaigns of World War II, squads of Lebanese and Syrian soldiers, dressed in green and red berets respectively, were assembled in formation. After every major stanza of a speech praising Syria, the Syria soldiers blurted out "*bi ruh, bi dem, nafdika ya Bashar*" ("in spirit, in blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for you, oh Bashar [al Assad]"). The Lebanese formations would respond with Lebanese slogans after positive points about Lebanon. When all was said and done, both formations marched out together to distinctive cadences for each army. The Syrian troops then piled on army transports that whisked them back to the motherland.

Elsewhere, however, it was not so cordial. Many monuments to Syria were defaced throughout Lebanon, including many statues of Hafez al Assad. Even the statue of Basil al Assad, Bashar's older brother who was killed in an automobile accident in the 1980s, was removed from the village of Chtaura on the Damascus Road, for fear of defacement. It was replaced by a Lebanese Army light-armor tank, which now supports Lebanese Army units manning the former Syrian checkpoints on the road.

At the same time, reports of Syria workers being attacked circulated throughout Lebanon, and in some cases, even being murdered. News of the attacks resonated throughout the Syrian community, causing many Syrians to head home.

"I was in Syria when Hariri was killed," said Fadi, the Maronite Christian Syrian handyman. "So I stayed in Syria for a week, since many of my colleagues returned to Syria for fear of being attacked or killed. I had to return a few days later, since I was missing all my work. It was hard, people were cold and angry toward us."

The exodus was so substantial that work on many

construction sites ground to a halt. Leaders of Lebanon's construction companies and builder associations were quoted in newspapers in the weeks after Hariri's murder, saying that Syrian labor could not be replaced anytime in the near future.

Syrian newspapers picked up on the attacks and killings as well, causing most Syrians to react defensively to accusations of Syrian involvement in Hariri's murder. But by and large, most Syrians I spoke to in the aftermath of the assassination sympathized to a certain extent with Lebanon's situation. "We were there for too long," said one young entrepreneur in early March. "We put ourselves in a situation where we were responsible for their security. Since it happened on our watch, we are somehow responsible."

After the waves of rallies and counter rallies between those demanding a Syrian pullout and those supporting Syria raged in February and March (AJT-1), which led to pro-Syrian rallies in Damascus (see AJT-2) and elsewhere, the situation calmed down, especially after Syria announced in March it would withdraw its forces from Lebanon. Syrians then watched as Lebanon's "anti-Syrian" alliance broke into pieces ahead of the elections in May (see AJT-3).

Most Syrians expressed no surprise about what appeared to be the shallow roots of Lebanon's Cedar Revolution.

"We know them like the back of our hands," said one shop owner. "They need to hate others to keep themselves together. Just look at them now. Its better we are out of there."

While the anti-Syrian bloc — an alliance of Hariri supporters, Walid Jumblatt's Druze Popular Socialist Party, and Samir Geagea's right-wing Christian-based Lebanese Forces — won the election, forming a government proved hard going. Saad Hariri, Rafik's son, was dubbed too inexperienced to navigate Lebanese politics just yet. Instead, the Hariri family looked to Fouad Siniora as the best man for the job. Problem was, Lebanon's multi-confessional system requires extensive negotiations over



*A statue of Basil al Assad at a checkpoint in Chtaura has been replaced by a Lebanese light-armored tank.*



*A final, and somewhat surreal, farewell ceremony at Riyaq military base in April. Syrian soldiers responded to speeches praising Syria's role in Lebanon with "bi ruh, bi dem, nafdika ya Bashar" ("in spirit, in blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for you, oh Bashar [al Assad])."*

what is essentially a cabinet filled by means of a quota system. Negotiations dragged on for weeks.

It was then, with Lebanese politics in disarray, that Assad put the blockade into place. As many Lebanese politicians lashed out at Damascus for the closure — most notably publisher (and now Metn region MP) Gibran Tueni in the pages of his daily newspaper, *An-Nahar* — Syrians from across the social spectrum often appeared almost smug.

"They think they are so independent, and don't need us or what anything to do with us," said one employee at a European Union project in Damascus. "And this Tueni, who the hell does he think he is? We are showing them now exactly who needs who."

In fact, most middle- and upper-class Syrians that used to weekend or vacation in Beirut had elected to stay home out of spite.

"I have a house in Hamra [West Beirut], but I don't use it any more," said the owner of a graphic design house. "We stay in Syria now. This Tueni guy is out of control. There are plenty of good, modern restaurants opening up [here], and even some nightclubs, like in Beirut. Why should I take my wife there anymore? In another month, they will lift the ban on textile imports, and then she will find the same fashions in Syria. I even closed my bank accounts in Lebanon and moved them to the new private-sector banks [in Syria]. Its time to go it alone."

Fears resulting from the post-assassination attacks

on Syrian workers in Lebanon have yet to dissipate as well.

"If I go to Verdun, how do I know something will not happen?," said the European-Union employee. "Someone might do something to me. My car has Syrian license plates, after all."

According to my conversations with Syrian workers, such fears might not be in keeping with reality, at least under current circumstances.

"It's better now than right after Hariri's assassination," said Rose, a housekeeper who has lived and worked in Lebanon for 60 years, and is one of the minority of Syrian workers who hold a residency permit. "They used to say things to me, but now there is not much. Maybe its because I have been here so long I speak mostly Lebanese dialect."

As I heard Tueni's name resonating throughout the Syrian capital, it reminded me of how much things had changed in Syria. *An-Nahar* is banned in Syria, and has not been available for decades. This time around, however, as Tueni's anti-Syrian rhetoric increased, Syria's media picked up on it in daily reports. As high-speed internet connections have spread throughout Syria, many middle and upper class Syrians now say they read *An-Nahar* on-line.

"The internet has changed the dynamics between Lebanon and Syria," said one accountant. "It used to be that only the government and very wealthy people knew what was going on outside Syria. Now it's different. The people are behind Assad now because the border restrictions emphasized security and got a bit of revenge. He made them feel proud again. Every time they insult Syria, Assad's position with the people gets stronger."

### Waiting for the verdict

Somehow, Tueni must have realized he has crossed a line with the Syrians. After featuring a number of reports that Syria had a "hit list" of Lebanese officials and notables it would kill in the near future, Tueni fled to Paris, where Saad Hariri has been living under tight security since shortly after the parliamentary elections. As the blockade dragged on, and the Mehlis investigation continued to cut closer to the bone, they were joined by the LF's Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt. After the arrest of Lebanese Internal Security Forces Major General Ali Hajj, the former head of military intelligence Brigadier



*Nationalist sentiments in Syria, high immediately after the April withdrawal from Lebanon, have returned in full force.*

General Raymond Azar, former head of the Presidential Guards Brigadier General Mustafa Hamdan, and the former head of Surété Générale Major General Jamil Sayyed on charges of murder and attempted murder, their discussions have now reportedly turned to who will replace Lebanese President Emile Lahoud should he be forced to resign. Apparently, Hariri and Jumblatt are working together to block Michel Aoun from taking the position in favor of a more “flexible” candidate. (See AJT-4)

Just whom the investigation will implicate in Syria remains anyone’s guess, but Mehlis’ questioning of Assad’s inner circle seems to indicate it could reach the top. As the probe continues, most Lebanese are worried the United States will cut a deal with Syria and leave Lebanon to hang out to dry. While many Christian Lebanese say they hope the probe brings Assad’s house down, some politically savvy Lebanese say they fear what not pushing Syrian accountability in Hariri’s murder will spell for the future.



*With the release of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea in July, the last of Lebanese militia commanders has been amnestied.*

“The United States has enough forces to make Syrian reply, and the Mehlis report is a Sword of Damocles hanging over Damascus’ head,” said Elie Fawaz, a Lebanese political observer. “If Washington cuts a deal with the Syrians, then they will think they will get away with anything, and they will not take future American threats seriously. Then the Syrians will be really dangerous in Lebanon and throughout the region. They can keep playing that dirty game forever.”

In Syria, people fear that the probe will go too far, leading to Iraq-type instability.

“I am afraid they want to divide Syria up,” said one Syrian consultant and writer. “We don’t want what happened in Iraq to happen here. That is why most Syrians are behind Assad now. They don’t love the government, but he is our leader, like it or not. In the end, we all believe in Syria.” □

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