



**“The 2005 Syrian Disengagement From Lebanon”**

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Course: “Conflicts and Negotiations in the Middle  
East” Taught by Professor Jean-Pierre Filiu

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# CONFLICTS AND NEGOTIATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PROFESSOR JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

MID-TERM PAPER

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## The 2005 Syrian Disengagement From Lebanon

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LAST SUMMER, the Lebanese army launched an offensive against Daesh on its border with Syria. Although this can at first appear as the normal prerogative of a sovereign state on its territory, it would have been impossible for the Lebanese government to project its forces independently in the Beq'a Valley until the withdrawal of the Syrian army from its territory, in the spring of 2005. Before that, ever since 1976, when the creation of an Arab Deterrence Force had legitimized its presence in its small neighbor state, Syria had treated Lebanon somewhat like a colony of its own. Yet the swiftness of its withdrawal in 2005 surprised many observers. *What factors led to the Syrian disengagement from Lebanon at this precise moment?*

This essay argues that this foundational event in the history of post-civil war Lebanon is best explained by the convergence of French and American foreign policies which resulted from French President Jacques Chirac's special relationship with Lebanon, and the prevalent neoconservative atmosphere which came to dominate American thinking about the Middle East under the presidency of George W. Bush. The present analysis is based on a study of the secondary literature on the subject, on which it attempts to shine a new light through the examination of American State Department memoranda found on Wikileaks. Indeed, it seems that little research, if any at all, has been conducted on the subject using the valuable classified documents made available by this platform—a surprising fact in view of the number of leaked diplomatic cables related to this affair.

## The Franco-American Foreign Policy Convergence

### *Lebanon after the Civil War*

FOLLOWING THE TAEF AGREEMENT which put an official end to the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), Syria proceeded to tighten its grip over its smaller neighbor. This process developed along the 1990s, leading to the establishment of a Syro-Lebanese « security regime » in Lebanon. This new system reached a peak in 1998, with the election of Emile Lahoud, virtually a puppet in the hands of Damascus, as Lebanon's new President. The death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in 2000, and his replacement by his son Bashar, brought in a new generation of Syrian officials, qualified by David Hirst, long-time correspondent for *The Guardian* in Beirut, as « cruder than their elders ». Their grip on Lebanon was manifold, and Hirst estimates that it allowed them to exact approximately two billion dollars of spoils per year, contributing to the stability of their regime at home.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hirst *Beware of Small States. Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 297-98.

However, in May 2000, Israel—which had heretofore occupied the southern part of Lebanon—finally withdrew its forces, leaving Syria the only occupier in the country. This began to raise the question of Lebanese borders and sovereignty, threatening what Syria perceived as its legitimacy to remain as an occupying force.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some prominent Lebanese, mostly Maronites—like Archbishop Nasrallah Sfeir—and Druze—such as Walid Jumblat—but also some Sunnis more traditionally pro-Syrian—as Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri—started to unite their voices to call for Syria's withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Chirac Factor*

HARIRI, IN PARTICULAR, would be heard very clearly—especially in Paris. Since the fiasco of Suez in 1956, French influence in the Middle East had been progressively shrinking, and by the 1980s, Lebanon was virtually the only card left in its hand in the region.<sup>4</sup> Jacques Chirac, French President between 1995 and 2007, had understood that well. But more than astute strategic reasoning, it was his special relationship with Lebanese Premier Rafiq Hariri which directed his conduct of foreign policy in the Levant. Chirac often referred to Hariri as his « brother »,<sup>5</sup> indicating a feeling of personal proximity born during his own time as French Prime Minister, when the two men used to meet regularly in their free time. This friendship continued when Chirac was elected President and Hariri became Prime Minister, and Chirac continued his tradition of regular sojourns at his friend's house in Beirut, intercalated with private phone calls during which Chirac would often ask his advisors to leave the room—a habit not characteristic of his relations with other heads of state.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, in compliance with the sectarian divides of the time, Hariri had a rather positive attitude towards Syria, and he was even dubbed « Syria's foreign minister » by Walid Jumblat.<sup>7</sup> This attitude was in turn adopted by Chirac, who originally considered that France and Syria had to be on good terms for Lebanon to live in peace.<sup>8</sup> On Hariri's advice, after the diplomatic success of French Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette's shuttle diplomacy during operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, which established a good basis for Franco-Syrian cooperation, Chirac's government provided Damascus with military and financial support. After a brief divergence following Lahoud's arrival to power and his eviction of Hariri from government, the relations between France and Syria

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Picard, *Liban-Syrie, intimes étrangers* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2016), 269.

<sup>3</sup> Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 298.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Mitterrand et la Palestine* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Les Arabes, leur destin et le nôtre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 199.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Aeschmann, and Christophe Boltanski. *Chirac d'Arabie. Les mirages d'une politique française* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), 231-234.

<sup>7</sup> Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 299.

<sup>8</sup> Aeschmann, *Chirac d'Arabie*, 246.

improved again, with the advent of Bashar al-Assad and Hariri's return to Lebanese premiership in 2000.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Chirac's view of Syria remained filtered through the Lebanese lens, and he expected Damascus to show some gratitude for French support, potentially through a loosening of Bashar's grip on Lebanon. All he got was « snubs and discourtesy ».<sup>10</sup> Syrian ingratitude only got worse after the quick American victory in Iraq in 2003, which represented a serious setback for Assad's regime. He reacted by strengthening his control of Lebanon, and refused French proposals of institutional and administrative assistance, progressively alienating Chirac—who had himself gained in popularity across the Arab world following the stunt French opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Throughout 2003, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin started emphasizing the importance of Lebanese sovereignty in the eyes of France, and in November Chirac's diplomatic advisor, Gourdault-Montagne, personally went to Damascus to exhort Assad to « move with the world ». In an act of impudence, Syria went back on its promise of attributing a gas contract of over \$500 million to French company Total, offering it instead to British-Canadian-American consortium Occidental Petroleum Corp. Had he wanted to make an enemy of France, Assad could not have acted better; but, in due time, Chirac would get its revenge.<sup>11</sup>

### *Changing American Perspectives*

THROUGHOUT THE 1990s, Syria's baathist regime had enjoyed a sort of international immunity in its management of Lebanon, but the failure of the Geneva peace negotiations with Israel under the supervision of the Clinton administration in March 2000 put an end to this privilege.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, partly in reaction to the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the new administration of George W. Bush quickly set regime change in the Middle East as one of its priorities. In Damascus in May 2003 to promote this new principle, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was welcomed with Syrian threats. For Assad, any attempt to include Syria in the American regime change agenda would be met with a reopening of Lebanon's southern front through its proxy militia, Hizbollah.<sup>13</sup> Once again, Bashar demonstrated that he lacked his father's strategic finesse, by alienating the world's dominant power.

Notwithstanding attempts at redemption in front of the United States, Syria was subsequently accused by Washington of supporting Saddam Hussein's regime and of hiding Iraqi

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 251-54.

<sup>10</sup> Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 301.

<sup>11</sup> Aeschimann, *Chirac d'Arabie*, 358-61.

<sup>12</sup> Picard, *Liban-Syrie*, 268-69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). This brought the question of Lebanon's occupation back to the fore in American foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

The *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act* was a direct consequence of this reversal. Adopted by Congress in December 2003, it was implemented on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004. A product of neoconservative ideology with a touch of pro-Israeli sentiment, it imposed economic sanctions on Syria, stating:

« To end the embargo, Syria must halt its support for the various Palestinian factions that have maintained offices in Damascus and for the Lebanese Hizballah, withdraw its forces from Lebanon, seal its borders with Iraq, cease development of unconventional weapons, scrap its ballistic missiles, and enter into "unconditional" peace negotiations with Israel »<sup>15</sup>

Lebanese sovereignty was on its way to become one of Washington's top priorities in the Levant.

### *UNSC 1559: Reconciliation Across the Atlantic*

PARALLEL TO THESE DEVELOPMENTS, Franco-American relations had suffered a harsh setback. Following France's staunch opposition to the war in Iraq, U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice stressed that she wanted to « punish » Paris for its independent boldness, as French fries were renamed « freedom fries » in Congress restaurants.<sup>16</sup> However, the slow realization of the inexistence of Iraqi WMDs, along with the dreadful security issues in Iraq, the replacement of Dominique de Villepin by the less offensive Michel Barnier, and eventually the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, provided an opportunity for Franco-American rapprochement.<sup>17</sup>

As American-Syrian relations reached an impasse in the spring of 2004, Washington was in search of an ally with whom to oppose the Assad regime. At the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy Landings, on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004, the context was ripe for reconciliation, and the first steps of a new Franco-American cooperation were taken. Not surprisingly, Lebanon was to be the cornerstone of Franco-American pressure on Syria. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, Gourdault-Montagne visited Condoleezza Rice in Washington to present a project of resolution for the Security Council of the United Nations ordering Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. After learning of threats to Hariri's life, Chirac

<sup>14</sup> Anders Strindberg, « Syria under Pressure, » *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no.4 (Summer 2004): 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Sylvie Kauffmann, and Nathalie Nougayrède, « France - Etats-Unis : histoire d'un retournement, » *Le Monde*, April 5, 2006, [http://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2006/04/05/france-etats-unis-histoire-d-un-retournement\\_758328\\_3208.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2006/04/05/france-etats-unis-histoire-d-un-retournement_758328_3208.html).

<sup>17</sup> Frédéric Bozo, *La politique étrangère de la France depuis 1945* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 252-53; Kauffmann, « France - Etats-Unis. »

stepped up the diplomatic work, securing the abstention of Russia, China, Brazil, and Algeria. Thus, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, resolution 1559 was accepted by the Security Council with 9 in favor, and 6 abstentions.<sup>18</sup> While the resolution was cosigned by France and the United States, the two countries had different motivations in mind—Iraq, terrorism and WMDs for the United States, and Lebanese sovereignty for France—and France was its real engineer, who also defended it in Arab capitals.<sup>19</sup>

The resolution included three main parts reflecting respectively the interests of Rafiq Hariri, Paris, and Washington—the latter being itself directly influenced by Israeli interests. First, it called for a « free and fair electoral process in Lebanon’s upcoming presidential election ... devised without foreign interference or influence. » Then, it requested that « all remaining foreign forces ... withdraw from Lebanon. » Finally, it demanded the « extension of the control of the government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory » and « the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. »<sup>20</sup>

## The Syrian Withdrawal

### *A Bloody Valentine’s Day*

ASSAD WAS INFURIATED by UNSC 1559. Striking back, he decided to add three years to the six-year term of Lahoud, which was about to expire, in a blatant violation of the Lebanese constitution. He therefore needed to amend the latter, which required a two-thirds majority in Parliament.<sup>21</sup> This led Assad to put pressure on Hariri, whom he saw as the engineer of the resolution. On October 20, 2004, Hariri stepped down as Prime Minister, and started to prepare his comeback for the 2005 parliamentary elections.<sup>22</sup>

A leaked American diplomatic cable from Paris asserted that several weeks after his resignation, Hariri had lunch with Rustom Ghazale, chief of Syrian Military Intelligence in Lebanon. He took this opportunity to point out that the Syrian tutelage of his country had to end, to which Ghazale replied that Damascus was aware of that, and was thinking of possible ways to

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<sup>18</sup> The other countries abstaining were Pakistan and the Philippines. Aeschimann, *Chirac d’Arabie*, 362-65.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr Lebanon. The assassination of Rafik Hariri and its impact on the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 95; Aeschimann, *Chirac d’Arabie*, 364-65.

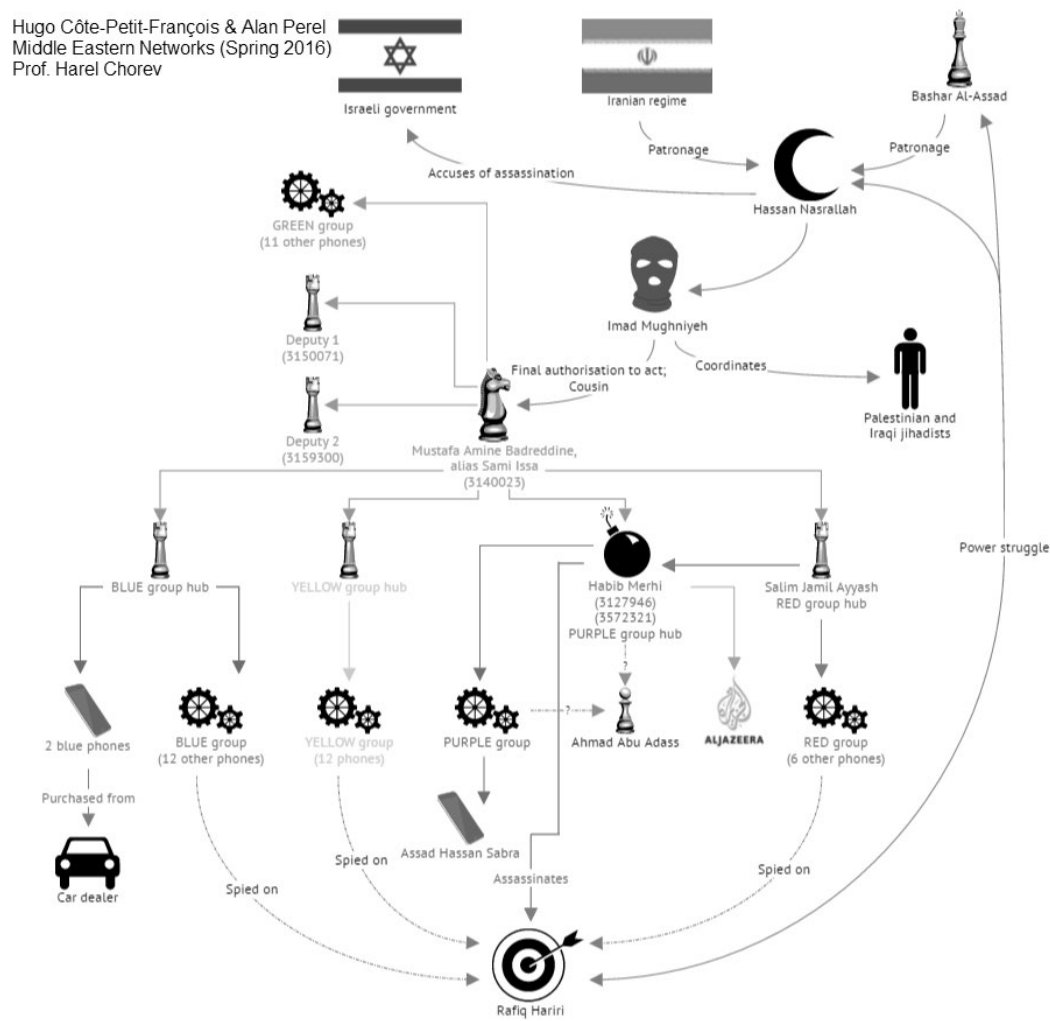
<sup>20</sup> Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 300-01.

<sup>22</sup> Aeschimann, *Chirac d’Arabie*, 366-67.

make its Lebanese policy evolve. During this period, Hariri was also more frequently seen at the Élysée.<sup>23</sup>

That year, Hariri never ran in the parliamentary elections. He was assassinated on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005, in a terrible explosion so powerful it made 21 other casualties.<sup>24</sup> Even though it was never proven that Syria was behind the assassination, this is the analysis Washington and Paris shared.<sup>25</sup> From the facts presented in a brilliant study of the assassination by Ronen Bergman in The New York Times Magazine ten years later, the following network can be drawn, which reveals Syria's indirect role in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri through its local proxy, Hizbollah.<sup>26</sup>



These conclusions were corroborated by the United Nations Mehlis Report, published in the fall of 2005, according to which there was « converging evidence pointing at the involvement of both

<sup>23</sup> Embassy Paris, “Elysee Middle East Advisor on UNIFIL Renewal, Lebanon-Syria Developments, Hisballah,” Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS248\_a, dated January 13, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS248\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS248_a.html).

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs. A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Kauffmann, « France - Etats-Unis. »

<sup>26</sup> Bergman, Ronen. « The Hezbollah Connection. » The New York Times Magazine, February 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/the-hezbollah-connection.html>.



Lebanese and Syrian officials in this terrorist act », and which stressed that it was « difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination could have been carried out without their knowledge. »<sup>27</sup> The report pointed in particular to the responsibility of the Syrian president and his brother-in-law.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever its implications in terms of international law, the assassination sparked a huge popular movement in Lebanon asking for Syria's withdrawal, often referred to as the *Independence Intifada*—or the *Cedar Revolution* for the American media. This in turn led to the polarization of Lebanese society between the pro-Syrian, predominantly Shiite and pro-Hizbollah, 8 March movement, and the anti-Syrian, mostly Christian, Druze, and Sunni, 14 March coalition, built on an alliance between Rafiq Hariri's son Saad, and Christian and Druze leaders.<sup>29</sup> This national polarization was replicated in international politics, with Iran backing the 8 March movement, and the United States, France, Israel and others supporting the 14 March coalition.

The same month, the pro-Syrian government in Beirut was forced to resign, and in April the Security Council asked for an international investigation into the murder of Rafiq Hariri.<sup>30</sup>

### *Pressure and Diplomacy*

HARIRI'S ASSASSINATION was one of the most dramatic shocks in the life of President Chirac. He became obsessed with the objective of punishing Assad, whom he held personally responsible.<sup>31</sup> Hence vengeance became the prime motivation of French foreign policy in the first months of 2005.

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, then Massachusetts Senator John Kerry met with French Minister of Foreign Affairs Michel Barnier. The two men talked of the good work done in cooperation on the Lebanese-Syrian case, and Barnier added that France and the U.S. should keep pressing for compliance with UNSC 1559, and work towards facilitating the upcoming Lebanese legislative elections.<sup>32</sup>

On February 10<sup>th</sup>, in a meeting with Vimont, the Minister of Foreign Affairs' Cabinet Director, the US asked for French support for potential sanctions against Syria. Vimont admitted

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<sup>27</sup> Security Council resolution 1636, *The rule of law at the national and international levels*, S/RES/1636 (31 October 2005), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/579/61/PDF/N0557961.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>28</sup> Picard, *Liban-Syrie*, 277.

<sup>29</sup> Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 305-312.

<sup>30</sup> « Moscow calls for Syria to leave Lebanon, » *The Guardian*, March 3, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/03/russia.syria>.

<sup>31</sup> Filiu, *Les Arabes*, 203-204.

<sup>32</sup> Embassy Paris, "French Foreign Minister Discusses Iraq, Iran Proliferation, and Middle East Peace Process With Codel Perry," Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS734\_a, dated February 4, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS734\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS734_a.html).

that even though the administration considered such sanctions to be an « irritant, » Chirac was in favor of putting pressure on Syria, and the ministry would have to follow suit in the end. This demonstrated once again the extent of Chirac's grip on the Lebanese dossier. He added that Chirac, unlike his American counterpart, was not particularly worried about Hizbollah, as long as the latter did not threaten French interests in Lebanon.<sup>33</sup> Thus even before February 14, France and the US were already determined to keep applying pressure on Syria, since the latter had yet to comply with UNSC 1559; yet no significant progress was made.

Following the assassination, the US promptly withdrew its ambassador in Syria, Margaret Scobey, who delivered a « stern note » to Damascus before leaving.<sup>34</sup> After discussions with the still embryonic March 14 leaders, American diplomats in Beirut reported to Washington that the Lebanese opposition wanted to see UNSC 1559 implemented, but that some, such as Amin Gemayel and Nassib Lahoud, feared that outright support for the resolution might divide the Lebanese people. These reservations pointed to Sunni and Shia suspicions regarding the UN resolution as a « Franco-American/Zionist tool » meant to facilitate Christian dominance over the country. Thus, they argued, Lebanon first needed to build a consensus on the Taef Agreement, seen as unanimously approved by the population, before pushing for the implementation of UNSC 1559 after a new government was stabilized. Additionally, they believed that a Syrian disengagement would force Hizbollah to become a mainstream political actor.<sup>35</sup>

In a vibrant speech in Brussels, President Bush then announced that he « put reform in the Middle East at the center of his vision for the transatlantic alliance, » calling for Assad to leave Lebanon and for free and fair elections to choose a new Lebanese parliament.<sup>36</sup>

In March, American diplomats in Paris noted a gap between France's tough line against Syria in private, and its more lukewarm public approach to the Syrian withdrawal before elections could be held in Lebanon. In their view, this divergence between public and private French diplomacy might have been linked to the alleged visit to Paris of former Syrian Military Intelligence Major-General Hassan Khalil, who would have given the French government information about French hostage in Iraq Florence Aubenas. They also linked this difference to France's fear of alienating the

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<sup>33</sup> Embassy Paris, « Review of Issues Raised in Secstate Meetings With French Government, » Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS879\_a, dated February 11, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS879\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS879_a.html).

<sup>34</sup> Carolynne Wheeler, « US pulls envoy from Syria after Beirut bombing, » *The Guardian*, February 16, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/16/syria.lebanon1>.

<sup>35</sup> Embassy Beirut, « Opposition a Roll: Force Cabinet to Quit, Get Syria to Biqa'a, » Wikileaks Cable: 05BEIRUT541\_a, dated February 22, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05BEIRUT541\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05BEIRUT541_a.html).

<sup>36</sup> Simon Jeffrey, « Bush calls for alliance to spread democracy, » *The Guardian*, February 21, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/21/eu.usa1>.

Shia community in Lebanon by taking too strong a stance against Syria.<sup>37</sup> Meeting with then American Ambassador to Paris Leach, former French Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine reminded him that, according to the French point of view, the survival of the Assad regime depended on its control of Lebanon. Any attempt at finding a fair and sustainable solution for Lebanon would therefore require « regime change in Syria, » but this would be very hard to achieve. If France pursued this policy, moreover, it would only be to defend Lebanese sovereignty, and not to support the American democracy doctrine in the Middle East.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these considerations, France and the United States gathered the support of a number of significant world powers in their calls for the implementation of UNSC 1559, most notably Germany, the European Union, and even Russia—although the latter repeated that it had abstained during the vote.<sup>39</sup> In the Middle East as well, the resolution got the support of many governments. Egypt and Saudi Arabia began putting pressure on Assad, and Israel put an end to its secret peace talks with Israel.<sup>40</sup> In fact, recent tensions with Hizbollah around Sheb'a, which had led Israel to retaliate on Syrian radar stations in Lebanon at least twice, made Israeli support for a Syrian withdrawal all the more enthusiastic.<sup>41</sup> Several governments also reaffirmed their commitment to encourage Syria to implement it, in particular Oman, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt.<sup>42</sup> In an early March meeting in Cairo, the Arab League, trying to contain the « political storm over Syria, » eventually urged Assad to « follow through on commitments to withdraw its troops. »<sup>43</sup>

Yet in the middle of March, United Nations envoy Terje Roed Larsen expressed worries that Syria might attempt to sow discord in Lebanon by reigniting communal divides, which could potentially be done by assassinating Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Assad had told Larsen that Syrian troops would be withdrawn from Lebanon within six months, and it appears that the envoy

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<sup>37</sup> Embassy Paris, “GOF Supports U.S. Line on Full, Immediate Syrian Withdrawal from Lebanon,” Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS1484\_a, dated March 7, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1484\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1484_a.html).

<sup>38</sup> Embassy Paris, “Former Foreign Minister Vedrine on Decisive Year for U.S. Policy,” Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS1667\_a, dated March 14, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1667\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1667_a.html).

<sup>39</sup> « Moscow calls for Syria to leave Lebanon; » Picard, *Liban-Syrie*, 270.

<sup>40</sup> Picard, *Liban-Syrie*, 270.

<sup>41</sup> Eyal Zisser, « The Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese Triangle: The Renewed Struggle over Lebanon, » *Israel Affairs* 15, no.4 (October 2009): 405-406.

<sup>42</sup> Embassy Muscat, “Oman Pressures SARG on Lebanon Withdrawal,” Wikileaks Cable: 05MUSCAT364\_a, dated March 2, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05MUSCAT364\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05MUSCAT364_a.html); Embassy Amman, “Demarche on Syrian Withdrawal from Lebanon: Jordan,” Wikileaks Cable: 05AMMAN1829\_a, dated March 6, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05AMMAN1829\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05AMMAN1829_a.html); Embassy Abu Dhabi, “UAE Response to Demarche - Syria Must Withdraw from Lebanon,” Wikileaks Cable: 05ABUDHABI1069\_a, dated March 7, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05ABUDHABI1069\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05ABUDHABI1069_a.html); Embassy Cairo, “Message on Keeping the Pressure on Syria: Egyptian Leadership Fully on Board, Conveys Message top UN SRSG Terje Larsen,” Wikileaks Cable: 05CAIRO2552\_a, dated April 3, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05CAIRO2552\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05CAIRO2552_a.html).

<sup>43</sup> « Moscow calls for Syria to leave Lebanon. »

convinced the French that it had to be done faster. France, however, stressed that it would not pursue the replacement of Bashar al-Assad, and voiced concerns that the Syrian withdrawal might allow a coup in Syria, to replace him with a more hardline leader. France also diverged with Washington in its approach to Hizbollah, by arguing that it would be difficult to dismantle the organization before it had time to become an integrated political player. One might suggest that this position reflected once again France's fear of alienating the Lebanese Shiites, a concern not shared by the U.S. partly because Lebanon was not so central to its presence in the Middle East as it was to France.<sup>44</sup>

A month later, Saudi crown prince Abdullah visited Paris, where his foreign minister Faisal met with members of the Lebanese opposition to the Syrian occupation. In discussions with President Chirac, the prince reaffirmed his support for a Syrian disengagement and the upcoming Lebanese elections, but voiced concerns regarding Syrian stability. Chirac repeated that French diplomacy, based on UNSC 1559, was not interested in regime change in Syria. Nonetheless, Abdullah expressed his apprehensions that a withdrawal would leave a strategic vacuum in Lebanon, likely to be filled by Israel. Interestingly, this approach closely resembled the very reasons invoked by Hizbollah to justify its refusal to disarm.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Withdrawal*

POPULAR PRESSURE IN LEBANON, coupled with a renewed Franco-American diplomatic effort, and the support garnered in favor of a Syrian withdrawal on the international stage, did not leave Assad much of a choice if he wanted to save his regime. In an address to the Syrian People's Assembly on March 5<sup>th</sup>, he announced that Syria would withdraw its troops from Lebanon, saving face by stressing that this decision was made independently in continuation of Syria's traditional policy regarding Lebanon, and that it was positive for both Lebanon and Syria.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of March, when the first United Nations report pointing to the responsibility of Syria in the Hariri assassination had been published, Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Farouk al-Shara officially announced in a letter to United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan that Syria would withdraw its troops from Lebanon before the parliamentary elections in May.<sup>47</sup> Thus, on

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<sup>44</sup> Embassy Paris, "French Officials on Larsen Visit, Lebanon Next Steps," Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS1765\_a, dated March 16, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1765\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS1765_a.html).

<sup>45</sup> Embassy Paris, "Saudi Crown Prince Visit Focuses on Lebanon, Close Ties with Chirac, But Concludes No New Contracts," Wikileaks Cable: 05PARIS2660\_a, dated April 19, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS2660\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS2660_a.html).

<sup>46</sup> Zisser, « The Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese Triangle, » 406.

<sup>47</sup> « La Syrie annonce son retrait du Liban avant les élections de mai, » *Le Monde*, March 30, 2005, [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2005/03/30/la-syrie-annonce-son-retrait-du-liban-avant-les-elections-de-mai\\_633027\\_3218.html?xtmc=la\\_syrie\\_annonce\\_son\\_retrait\\_du\\_liban\\_avant\\_les\\_elections\\_de\\_mai&xtcr=15](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2005/03/30/la-syrie-annonce-son-retrait-du-liban-avant-les-elections-de-mai_633027_3218.html?xtmc=la_syrie_annonce_son_retrait_du_liban_avant_les_elections_de_mai&xtcr=15).

April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the last Syrian troops in Lebanon—which initially represented about 14,000 men— withdrew across the border.<sup>48</sup> This disengagement was followed by that of most Syrian security officials still in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup> Though, UNSC 1559 had not been fully applied yet, as Lebanese sovereignty was not extended over the entire national territory.<sup>50</sup>

In June, a new Lebanese parliament was elected, dominated by the coalition led by Saad Hariri; the next month Fuad Siniora, a close friend of late Rafiq Hariri, assumed the premiership.<sup>51</sup> Yet this victory of the 14 March coalition was partly overcast by the other victorious party in the elections, Hizbollah, which became more powerful after the Syrian withdrawal and was included in the Siniora coalition government.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

THE SYRIAN DISENGAGEMENT FROM LEBANON was a direct consequence of the convergence of French and American interests in Lebanon and Syria. These objectives were derived from different overarching foreign policy principles—supporting Rafiq Hariri’s vision for Lebanon for France, and applying a neoconservative agenda to the Middle East for the United States—but both were strongly influenced by Bashar al-Assad’s pride and defying attitude. This Franco-American diplomacy expressed itself in two significant moments: The passing of UNSC 1559 in September 2004; and the pressure put on Syria after Hariri’s assassination in February 2005. In addition, on the French side, it was not fundamentally led by diplomats, but by Jacques Chirac himself, whose views on Lebanon—and, thus, on Syria—were predominantly inspired by his friend Rafiq.

The latter’s assassination proved to be the tipping point to get Syria out of Lebanon. Bashar al-Assad, who had been able to ignore UNSC 1559 until then, was now put under enormous pressure by the international community to complete the withdrawal. And yet, this did not prevent the assassination of eight other anti-Syrian figures in Lebanon in the two years that followed.<sup>53</sup> Neither did Syro-Lebanese relations become normalized immediately after the disengagement: before May 2006, five other resolutions were passed in the Security Council regarding this question, and diplomatic relations were not established between the two countries until 2008.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Blanford, *Killing Mr Lebanon*, 162.

<sup>50</sup> Corine Lesnes, « Liban : l'ONU doute de l'achèvement du retrait syrien, » *Le Monde*, April 27, 2005, [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2005/04/27/liban-l-onu-doute-de-l-achevement-du-retrait-syrien\\_643436\\_3218.html?xtmc=liban\\_l\\_onu\\_doute\\_de\\_l\\_achevement\\_du\\_retrait\\_syrien&xtr=1](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2005/04/27/liban-l-onu-doute-de-l-achevement-du-retrait-syrien_643436_3218.html?xtmc=liban_l_onu_doute_de_l_achevement_du_retrait_syrien&xtr=1).

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Picard, « Great Expectations, Limited Means: France and the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese War, » *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, September 2006, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3632>.

<sup>52</sup> Zisser, « The Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese Triangle, » 407.

<sup>53</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Picard, *Liban-Syrie*, 270-271.

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