

Better Syrian-Lebanese Ties Beckon?

Lebanese premier's visit may help to overcome distrust between the two countries. The recent visit of Lebanon's prime minister, Saad Hariri, to Syria could herald an improvement in ties between the two nations after almost five years of political wrangling, analysts say.

The symbolism of the trip was particularly significant since Hariri had repeatedly accused Damascus of being responsible for the killing of his father, former premier Rafik Hariri, in February 2005.

Hariri, who met the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad on December 20, described his visit to Damascus as "historic".

"We want privileged, sincere and honest relationships [with Syria]," the prime minister said in a press conference in the Syrian capital at the end of his two-day trip, which came shortly after his newly-formed government won a vote of confidence in parliament.

Analysts said that by visiting Damascus, Hariri was acknowledging a belief common in Lebanon that the country needed to maintain good relations with its larger neighbour to guarantee internal stability.

"Syria is the key to stability and security in Lebanon," said a Damascus-based political analyst, who spoke on condition of anonymity. He added that the Lebanese had realised in the past five years that their country couldn't "live in peace while showing hostility towards Syria".

Many in Lebanon believe that the Syrian regime was behind a string of political assassinations and car bombs that shook the country between 2005 and 2008. Damascus denies any involvement in these attacks.

Nonetheless, Syria possesses leverage over Lebanon because it maintains strong ties with powerful political parties there, mainly the Shia militant group, Hezbollah, which is also backed by Iran.

When in May 2008, Lebanon was in a political deadlock that exploded briefly in street violence, threatening to drag the country into civil strife, many commentators said that Syria's intervention helped restore stability in the country.

Syrian newspapers described the visit of Hariri as a step towards reconciliation.

The official state newspaper, Tishreen, said in an editorial following the trip that "political realism" is the driving force behind Arab relations today.

The daily added that the visit was "important and should have a positive impact in the interest of both countries".

In Lebanon, however, people were divided over the diplomatic mission.

Some fear that it opens the way for Syria to interfere in Lebanese affairs once more. Others say that there will be no return to the troubles of the past since the two countries have not only exchanged diplomatic representatives but there's no longer a Syrian military presence in the country.

Rafik Hariri's killing in a powerful car bomb in central Beirut, which was widely blamed on Syria, led to a huge outcry against Damascus, culminating with the withdrawal of Syrian troops who'd been in Lebanon for 30 years.

In subsequent years, Saad Hariri and his allies built their political platform around anti-Syrian policies. With the support of western powers, a United Nations probe and then an international tribunal were established to look into the assassination of Hariri senior.

It remains to be seen what the conclusions of the tribunal would be - the process could take years.

Some observers say that the two countries would benefit, especially economically, from better relations.

Hamidi al-Abdallah, an analyst at Damascus' Orient Centre for International Studies, said that bilateral economic ties would grow in an environment of political dialogue.

He said that in recent years Lebanese private banks have opened branches in Syria and that trade has increased between the two countries.

Hariri's allies described the Damascus trip as "difficult" but necessary for the future of the country.

Lebanese legislator Elie Marouni, member of the Christian Phalange party allied with Hariri's Future Movement, said that Hariri made a "courageous move" that served the country's interest.

He added, in a recent interview with Lebanese TV, that Hariri had no choice but to talk to the Syrians.

The visit of Hariri to Damascus also reflects a major shift in the West's attitudes towards Syria. Since 2008, Paris, then Washington, have initiated dialogue with the Syrians, putting an end to a phase of international isolation of Damascus.

Even Saudi Arabia, the main regional backer of Hariri, has softened its tone towards Syria and is believed to have encouraged its Lebanese protégé to end the acrimonious bickering with the Syrian regime for the sake of Lebanon's stability.

The Damascus-based political analyst said that the visit of the Lebanese premier was a natural step,

following the rapprochement between the Saudis and the Syrians.

He added that Saudi Arabia was trying to court Damascus, a predominantly Sunni country, to curb the growing influence of Iran in Lebanon, Iraq and other parts of the region.

Ziad Haidar, a Damascus-based political writer, said that the change in regional politics, especially western powers' overtures towards Syria, had forced Hariri to adopt a policy of realpolitik vis a vis Damascus.

Location: Syria

Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraq

Iran

Focus: Syria

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