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The return of Lebanese-Syrian 'Brotherhood'

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Beyond recent military cooperation between Beirut and Damascus, a deeper realignment is in motion.

BEIRUT, Lebanon – One year ago this month, a courageous Lebanese judge delivered a truly extraordinary indictment. In a 44-page document, Justice Council Investigative Judge Alaa al-Khatib **named** two Syrian regime intelligence officers as the “planners and supervisors” of a twin car bomb attack that killed 50 civilians outside two mosques following Friday prayers in Lebanon’s northern city of Tripoli in August 2013.

The two men in question – Captain Muhammad Ali Ali of the notorious ‘Palestine Branch’, and a lesser operative named Nasser Jawban – were accused by the judge of directing and funding the operation; arranging for the two cars to be fitted with explosives inside Syria, and then sent to Lebanon to be detonated by a local cell of ground-level operatives (whom, the judge added, then themselves relocated to Syria). As well as issuing warrants for Ali’s and Jawban’s arrest, the judge called for uncovering all other “officers and security personnel within Syrian intelligence involved in the operation,” particularly the “high-ranking” individuals “responsible for giving [them] the orders.” The plain insinuation was that this was not a crime of which the regime’s upper echelons were innocent, just as the Assad henchman and National Security Bureau chief, Ali Mamluk, had previously been implicated by another Lebanese judge in the **bomb plot** foiled by Lebanese police in 2012 involving the pro-Damascus politician Michel Samaha.

In almost any other country on earth, official indictments such as these against a neighboring state would provoke a major crisis in bilateral relations. Ambassadors would be recalled. Sanctions would be proposed, and likely implemented. Condemnations from the political class would be swift, severe, and unanimous, and there might well be

voices in parliament calling for military repercussions – certainly, many a bellum has started over a lesser casus.

Instead, one year on from Judge Khatib's filing, all indications are that Lebanon is heading toward a restoration and normalization of relations with the regime its own judiciary deems responsible for terrorism in the homeland, and toward which it has officially taken a stance of neutrality since the so-called Baabda Declaration of June 2012. This incredible turn of events has, naturally enough, been the plan of Assad's backers in Lebanon from day one, though only now do they appear confident enough to push ahead with it in earnest.

Among the first steps in this direction came in July, when – so far from recalling its ambassador – Lebanon appointed an ambassador to Syria, Saad Zakhia, thus upgrading its level of diplomatic representation in Damascus from the chargée d'affaires post held by Farah Nabih Berri, daughter of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

The real opening act of the play, however, was the recent double-battle against jihadist militants in the remote highlands of Lebanon's northeastern border with Syria. This campaign dominated the Lebanese media, stirring no small controversy when it culminated last Monday in over 300 Islamic State fighters being awarded safe passage to Syria's Deir al-Zor province, despite their murder of nine Lebanese soldiers and policemen held hostage since 2014. (Many Iraqis, **including** Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi, were also less than delighted to learn that the head-loppers of whom they thought they were rid at last were suddenly being chauffeured back to their western doorstep. Latest reports **suggest** some of the ISIS fighters may already have found

their way into Anbar province.)

More pertinent to the present matter, however, is that the fighting was waged by a triumvirate alliance between the Lebanese army (LAF), Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime army, as acknowledged by Lebanese officials including Interior Minister Nuhad al-Mashnuq, who **spoke** of “coordination” between the Lebanese and Syrian armies during the first round of battle on the outskirts of the town of Arsal. In deference to American concerns – it being a rather embarrassing violation of US policy for a recipient of American military aid, such as the LAF, to cooperate with a terrorist-designated entity, such as Hezbollah, or a sanctioned army, such as Assad’s – an effort was made to paper over this inconvenient reality in the second phase of the campaign by having the LAF fight alone on the Lebanese side of the border, and Hezbollah and the regime handle matters on the Syrian side; a Talmudic solution of which Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made mockery in his speech of August 24, **saying**:

No one is behaving as if we are two [separate] frontlines. Now, in Lebanon, there are people behaving as if there is a frontline [on one side], and nothing over there [laughs], on the second side; there’s no fighting, no one is fighting, no one is being martyred. No. We are behaving as if our destiny is one, the frontline is one [...] and the battle is one.

Of course, what’s new here is not the coordination per se, which, as the interior minister truthfully said, has been “in place for a long time.” (One particularly chilling example,

alleged by lawyers of the family of the late war correspondent Marie Colvin, is the passing to the Syrian regime by Lebanese intelligence of information about foreign journalists entering Syria in 2012; information the lawyers argue assisted the regime in its killing of Colvin in Homs' besieged Baba Amr district.) The surprising thing is rather that it's being spoken about in the open, not just by Nasrallah – who, after all, has an interest in rehabilitating his ally – but also by ostensible opponents of Damascus, like the Saudi-friendly Mashnuq, who shrugs it off as if his government working with the accused murderers of its citizens (not to mention hundreds of thousands of Syrians) were a perfectly natural state of affairs.

With this bombshell – so to speak – successfully dropped to only negligible public outcry, the bid has since been raised from military coordination to formal and normalized contact at the political, economic, and all other levels. Two weeks after the interior minister's comments, three of his cabinet colleagues attended the first Damascus International Fair to be held since the start of Syria's conflict; a large occasion intended by the Assad regime to announce to the world a return to business as usual, literally as well as figuratively, in the capital of its rump state. Given the clear political and propagandistic dimensions to the event, there were conflicting messages out of Beirut as to whether its ministers were attending in an official capacity, with Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri insisting they were not, and the ministers themselves (all Assad allies) declaring they were. Once again, it was a distinction with little difference: the regime got its PR coup regardless, with the state-linked al-Watan newspaper **boasting** of the Lebanese delegation's arrival and the bright new chapter in bilateral relations it heralded.

Since then, the momentum has only compounded. There is renewed talk of **reopening** some or all of Lebanon's closed border crossings with Syria. Agriculture Minister Ghazi Zeaiter, who was one of the three visiting Damascus – where he and Industry Minister Hussein al-Hajj Hassan also met Syria's Prime Minister Imad Khamis – has **confirmed** further ministerial meetings in Damascus are scheduled in the near future. Zeaiter also notably **told** Hezbollah's al-Manar that broader bilateral “cooperation shall return in accordance with the shared history of the two brotherly countries,” echoing what al-Hajj Hassan **said** from Damascus – the word “brotherly” an unmistakable allusion to the notorious Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination **signed** in 1991 by Hafez al-Assad and Lebanon's then-President Elias Hrawi that gave official blessing to Syria's military occupation, and quasi-annexation, of Lebanon. (Sarcastic reference to ‘brotherly’ Syria has ever since been a black humor staple among anti-Assad Lebanese, who ironically were the only Lebanese to express genuinely fraternal, and sororal, sentiment for Syria's people when the regime began massacring them in 2011.) Not to be outdone by mere cabinet ministers, Hezbollah's Nasrallah then declared he was adding the Syrian army to his so-called “golden” troika of Lebanon's national guarantors (hitherto “the people, the [Lebanese] army, and the Resistance [i.e. Hezbollah]”), thereby not only suggesting the alliance between the LAF, Hezbollah, and Assad's forces should endure, but also reintroducing the evergreen prospect of a Syrian military say in Lebanese political affairs.

Why is all this happening now? A simple answer is that Hezbollah and co. believe it can. Developments in Syria have not gone favorably for what used to be known as

Lebanon's 'March 14' camp. Recent weeks have seen the Trump administration **pull** the plug on American arms supplies to Syria's rebels, in yet another concession to the Putin regime whose ambition of preserving Assad's rule is no longer meaningfully opposed by anyone in the international community. To the contrary, indeed, states including **Britain** and even **Saudi Arabia** are now telling the Syrian opposition to give up the struggle and change their minds about the dictator who gasses children. A spokesman for Jordan, which long hosted one of the two most important command centers supplying weapons and other assistance to opposition fighters, **said** two weeks ago that Jordanian-Syrian relations were henceforth "likely to take a positive course," by which he meant a course more amenable to Assad. Turkey, meanwhile, which housed the second of the two rebel command centers, lost interest in doing anything more than disrupting Kurdish statehood ambitions some time ago. The former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, who famously attended an anti-regime demonstration in Hama in 2011, **summed** the situation up bluntly in an interview last Monday: "Assad has won and he will stay."

Largely for these reasons, Hezbollah has not had life so good inside Lebanon for over a decade; enjoying the unquestioning fealty of President Michel Aoun, and the dependable acquiescence of Prime Minister Hariri (this despite the Party of God standing accused at The Hague of assassinating the man's own father). Adding further wind to their sails has been the unceasing incitement campaigns waged against Syrian refugees in Lebanon by such figures as Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil (the president's son-in-law), which have succeeded in wearing down public sympathy for the refugee population, and all anti-Assad Syrians by association. In July, the Maronite Patriarch

accused Syrian refugees of “snatching the daily bread from the mouth[s]” of the Lebanese people, borrowing the vocabulary Bassil and other demagogues have been spewing for years. Two days later, a **video** circulated online of a group of Lebanese men humiliating and then beating up a defenseless Syrian man in the street. Refugees now **speak** of staying indoors for fear of facing similar mob violence. Drunk with the xenophobia and sectarianism fed them by their leaders, a critical mass of the Lebanese population presently appears to be at odds with anti-regime Syrians, even when they themselves have little love for Assad or Hezbollah.

Quite apart from these political forces, however, are the formidable economic incentives pushing Lebanese leaders of all partisan persuasions toward an accommodation with Damascus. Now that the end, or at least the substantial abatement, of military hostilities in Syria is in sight for the first time, businesses around the world are climbing over each other in what has been **called** a “gold rush” for the reconstruction of Syria’s annihilated cities, towns, and infrastructure; a prize pool estimated by the World Bank to be worth at least \$200bn.

It happens that Lebanon’s prime minister owns a large construction company, named Saudi Oger. It further happens that low oil prices have left this company on the verge of bankruptcy; owing an estimated \$4bn to banks and **“billions more”** to unpaid contractors, suppliers, and employees. And it happens further still that the port of Tripoli, a traditional base of support for Hariri, is currently undergoing expansion in anticipation of the increased traffic that will accompany the rebuilding of Syria, particularly the city of Homs, which sits a stone’s throw from Lebanon’s

northeastern border. “Lebanon is in front of an opportunity that it needs to take very seriously,” **said** Raya al-Hassan, a Hariri ally and former finance minister now heading something called the Tripoli Special Economic Zone, in rather candid recent remarks to AP. “As soon as there is a political agreement to end the war, we will be among the first countries to play a role in reconstruction.”

If this is indeed Hariri’s gamble, it’s one that may backfire even just on the business merits. As Steven Heydemann detailed in an eye-opening **snapshot** last month of the current state of the reconstruction race, the vast majority of contracts signed thus far have gone to firms linked to Assad’s partners and patrons in Russia, Iran, and China. Noting that in his latest speech Assad showed as little interest in reconciliation as ever (calling the opposition “scum,” for example), Heydemann argued that, “For the Assad regime [...] reconstruction is not seen as a means for economic recovery and social repair, but as an opportunity for self-enrichment, a way to reward loyalists and punish opponents.” The winners in Lebanon, in other words, may not be the Hariris but the Hezbollahis, who have construction firms of their own – such as the cheerfully-named Jihad al-Binaa (“Jihad of Construction”).

Either way, whatever the outcome for Hariri’s balance sheet, it ought to go without saying that any further resuscitation of the corpse of the ‘Brotherhood’ epoch is liable to have terrible consequences for Syrians in Lebanon, and for the Lebanese themselves. Refugees already **say** they fear being forcibly returned to Syria – a violation of the non-refoulement principle of international law – and, given this has already occurred on a small scale, their anxieties are by no means unfounded. Those who remain in the

country do so at the mercy not only of marauding gangs of thugs, but of the increasingly heavy hand of the army and other security agencies (in a very rare acknowledgment of what is otherwise an open secret, LAF Commander Gen. Joseph Aoun **admitted** in July to Human Rights Watch that “some mistreatment” of Syrian detainees has occurred in the past, following the deaths of four Syrians in military custody). What safe haven Beirut still provides to anti-Assad dissidents – already much diminished since the days in 2012 and 2013 when the Free Syrian flag was ubiquitous at Martyrs Square rallies – would be sure to turn yet more precarious still. More broadly, the effects of even a partial return to the ambience of the Hrawi and Emile Lahoud eras on civil society; the freedoms of expression and the press; human rights; government accountability; corruption; and the personal safety of anyone critical of Damascus hardly bear thinking about. Even if there is reason to doubt things will go quite that far, no establishment founded on the present alliance between dictatorship, cynicism, opportunism, and sheer moral cowardice can bode well for any country. Syrians in Lebanon today are in trouble – but the Lebanese might be even more so.