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LEBANON

Dissecting the Beau Rivage turnaround

By Michael Young

Did Walid Jumblatt really need to drop his political bomb last Sunday at the Beau Rivage Hotel, Rustom Ghazaleh's former headquarters, in a neighborhood once exemplifying Syrian hegemony? What Jumblatt failed to do quietly in the June parliamentary elections – position himself as arch triangulator and manipulator of the balance in Lebanon's political system – he did with a crashing of dishes over the weekend. Jumblatt's former allies are angry, rightly so, but the real question is how all this will affect Lebanon's sovereignty.

For now, Jumblatt's move is primarily directed at shaping the formation of the government. While this appears to have been thrown momentarily into disarray, the reality is that it will be very difficult for Saad Hariri to either withdraw from the running or negotiate a new Cabinet formula. On Monday, Jumblatt seemed to make that very point when he remarked that he thought his declaration of independence would not change the current Cabinet distribution of 15-10-5. This means that Jumblatt, even though he is no longer of March 14 and has said he would vote with President Michel Sleiman, may yet receive a share of March 14 seats. Jumblatt wants three ministers. In other words, depending on how he leans when it comes to government voting, he will play more significant a role in setting the agenda than if he faithfully toes the March 14 line.

For starters, he now has leverage to bring in ministers of his choice. Jumblatt never swallowed that in the current government he was forced to give up on Nehme Tohme, the Greek Catholic parliamentarian from the Chouf. Tohme, who heads the Al-Mabani contracting company, plays a major role in Jumblatt's services network. However, it is also important for the Druze leader to name a Christian minister, since he presides over a multi-sectarian region and parliamentary bloc. One of Jumblatt's first demands of Hariri is likely to be that Tohme get a services ministry.

However, beyond the vicissitudes of patronage politics, Jumblatt has a more complicated thought in mind, one we are entitled to question. By playing the balance in the government and Parliament, from the March 14 quota no less, the Druze leader is striving for an axial role in political life. He wants to be uncircumventable in major political arrangements. Jumblatt remembers that it was the Syrians who greatly enhanced his political stature for three decades, well beyond what the Druze community could have expected. With the Syrians gone, Jumblatt wants to avoid marginalization in a country defined largely by Sunnis and Shiites.

Jumblatt was one of those most responsible for pushing the Syrians out of Lebanon. However, he did so because the Syrian system had changed by 2005. Instead of strengthening the traditional political leaders, the regime of Bashar Assad, through Emile Lahoud and his acolytes, sought to demote them. The extension of Lahoud's mandate and Rafik Hariri's assassination went two steps too far. Now Jumblatt is laying the groundwork for a new relationship with Syria. By leaving March 14 and positioning himself between Lebanon's different political forces, which also means positioning himself between the regional forces shaping Lebanese affairs, Jumblatt believes he will have more margin to maneuver with respect to Damascus. He will try to sell to the Syrians, as he did on Sunday, and as he is likely to do in shaping a Cabinet statement the Syrians are happy with; in turn he hopes again to become a prize Syrian interlocutor in Lebanon.

Is this worrisome? It certainly is, because Damascus is politically weak today and Jumblatt's exertions may well give Assad the latitude he seeks to strengthen himself once again in Lebanon. In fact the fear is that for the Druze leader to maintain a leg up on his domestic partners, he may have to actively work toward facilitating some sort of Syrian restoration – not what it was before 2005, but a system where he can play all sides against each other in order to keep his head above the waves. The problem is that if Jumblatt believes a Syrian return is inevitable, and therefore prepares to gain from this situation, he may actually help advance the return when such a project is not, otherwise, guaranteed success.

Some will argue that Walid Jumblatt can afford to play a mediation role with Syria because the Assad regime has displayed such crying incompetence in Lebanon in recent years, and its partisans are so feeble politically. There is a great deal of truth there. However, the venture is very risky. If one of the most prominent leaders of the emancipation movement of 2005 is so willing to gamble with Lebanon's sovereignty when it comes to Syria, this will only encourage those defending that sovereignty internationally to argue that the Lebanese are simply not worth the effort. Why should Washington or Paris say no to Syria, which following its Lebanon withdrawal never stopped fighting to regain a dominant role in Beirut, when Lebanese politicians are now saying yes?

Jumblatt cannot drift far from the Saudi line on Lebanon. He can defend his opening to Damascus as part of a broader effort, one that includes Saudi Arabia and the US, to break Syria off from Iran. However, Jumblatt must be careful not to undermine Hariri, still the biggest Saudi game in town. He knows this, which is why the Druze leader, once he consolidates his balancing role, will likely reconcile with Hariri in one way or another. Jumblatt sees no benefit in joining the opposition; this would render him politically irrelevant and lose him the funding that allows him to sustain an extensive services network that is the core of his power.

Among the more worrisome aspect of Walid Jumblatt's turnaround is how it will affect his relations with the Christians. His effort this week to remind everyone of the Druze-Christian reconciliation in the mountain was a sign of his sensitivity to the issue. One of Jumblatt's motives for his statement on Sunday was his fear that some Christian leaders might make it to Damascus before he does. Yet the Sunnis feel that Jumblatt has betrayed them on Syria's

behalf; Christians wonder why he remains so hostile to them. What does the future hold for the Druze without those two communities? No wonder Jumblatt's coreligionists are uneasy.

*Michael Young is opinion editor of **THE DAILY STAR**.*

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