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A new order emerges in Lebanon

By Sami Moubayed
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DAMASCUS - Last week, one of America's top allies in Lebanon, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, caused a row when he made remarks - off the record - criticizing his allies in the pro-Western March 14 Coalition. Among other things, Jumblatt scoffed at his patron Saad al-Hariri, the head of the largest bloc in the Lebanese parliament, for having tried - and failed - to combat Hezbollah on the streets of **Beirut** last May.

Then, Hariri's armed men were round up and disarmed in a matter of minutes by the well-trained Hezbollah fighters. "We have seen the Sunnis in the field, huh!" he said, adding, "They didn't last for more than 15 minutes!" Jumblatt quickly apologized - but the damage was already done.

Shortly afterwards, when landing in Beirut, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not meet the Druze warlord - who had often played host to her predecessor Condoleezza Rice, and been received previously at the Oval Office by George W Bush.

Jumblatt is a symbol of a loud anti-Syrian and anti-Hezbollah stance in Lebanon. The fact that he has lost faith in his own allies - who have bankrolled him for years - and was snubbed by Clinton, are testimony to how much things have changed in Lebanon. This is the same man after all who called for regime change in Damascus, and betted on American and Israeli forces to disarm Hezbollah in 2006.

Jumblatt is a political animal, however, who knows how to get off a ship before it sinks. The US is simply no longer interested in battle, either with Damascus or with Hezbollah. On the contrary, it is trying to find common ground with the Syrians to solve a basket of problems in the region, like Iran's nuclear file, Palestinian reconciliation and the future of Hezbollah.

If March 14 continues to challenge **Syria**, it should not expect much support from the Barack Obama administration. That is why, according to some observers, Jumblatt might be toying with the idea of a u-turn - which from where the Syrians see it, is close to impossible, given

the aggressive stance he took against Damascus during the difficult years in Syrian-American relations.

Why would the US continue to support March 14 if it is cooperating fully with the Syrians? March 14 was useful, after all, during the war against Syria in 2005-2008 - mainly to punish the Syrians for having worked against US interests in [Iraq](#).

Jumblatt realizes that for all practical purposes, it's only a matter of time until the United States begins dialogue with two arch-enemies of the former Bush White House - Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah. Delaying his own rapprochement with Hezbollah would harm nobody but him.

During the recent Summit of the Americas, Obama said that he would respect the "legitimacy" of all democratically elected governments, even if the US "might not be happy" with the results of any elections. He added that the US "condemns any efforts at a violent overthrow of democratically elected governments, wherever it happens in the hemisphere". Talks with Hamas have already begun in Europe and it is only a matter of time until they are expanded to include Hezbollah.

Earlier this year, [Britain](#) announced that it would commence political dialogue with Hezbollah, much to the displeasure of March 14. In early April, British parliamentarians came to Damascus and met with Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal. Certain American political figures, like former president Jimmy Carter, also met with the Hamas chief in Syria last December.

According to a January 9 article in The Guardian, "sources close to the [Obama] transition team" will change course via Hamas, and "initiate low-level clandestine approaches". For that to be done, not only would there be a need for a change in US mentality - both in the media level, on the street and in American officialdom - but it would also require changing a 2006 Congressional law banning any kind of assistance to the Islamic group.

Recently, however, Paul Volker, a senior economic advisor to Obama, was among those who authored a letter calling for a more rational approach to dealing with Hamas. Martin Indyk, the former US ambassador to [Israel](#), who is close to Clinton, recently wrote that any peace deal without Hamas was destined to fail.

Additionally, former British prime minister Tony Blair in his capacity as international envoy for the Middle East warned of the dangers of continuing to ignore the Gaza Strip, which effectively is under the command of Hamas. He was quoted saying, "I think it is important to find a way to engage Hamas in dialogue."

Richard Hass, a diplomat under both president George H W Bush and George W Bush, who was earmarked to become Obama's Middle East envoy, also supports low-level contacts with Hamas. James A Baker, former secretary of state now based at the Baker Institute at Rice University in Houston, was quoted in Newsweek as saying that Obama must involve Hamas in any peace process in the Middle East. Baker said, "You cannot negotiate peace with only half the Palestinian polity at the table."

Richard W Murphy, a veteran American diplomat and former ambassador to Syria, added, "I don't think it will happen quickly but I think it is inevitable. Hamas is, in my opinion, a

legitimate representative of part of the Palestinian community."

Taking all of that into account, many raised questions about Clinton's weekend visit to Beirut ahead of parliamentary elections in June, which are expected to bring about a smashing victory for Hezbollah. Already, France has said that it will not boycott any Lebanese government, even if it is packed with members of the Islamic group.

With loud voices coming out of [Washington](#) calling for engagement with Hezbollah, Obama promising to respect any election, Britain taking the lead in dialogue with non-state players, and the Syrians back in the international arena, times are not good for leftovers of the Bush era in the Middle East.

Decision-makers around the world have reasoned that not talking to Hezbollah or Hamas will not make them disappear. On the contrary, it will only lead them to radicalize.

Looking back at the Hamas tenure in government, everybody realizes that the Bush administration missed a golden opportunity when the Palestinian group said that it was willing to accept a long-term truce with Israel, and abide by the borders of 1967. Israel couldn't get them to disarm by force, clearly demonstrated by the results of the December 2008 war on Gaza.

The United Nations couldn't disarm them, nor could Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat or the United States. The same applies to Hezbollah, which emerged victorious from the war of 2006. Obama, a practical leader by all accounts, realizes that if these groups are voted into power, it would be sheer hypocrisy not to deal with them and repeat what was committed by Bush.

Walid Jumblatt - and anti-Hamas figures in Palestine like President Mahmud Abbas - is among the first to fully grasp this new attitude in Washington.