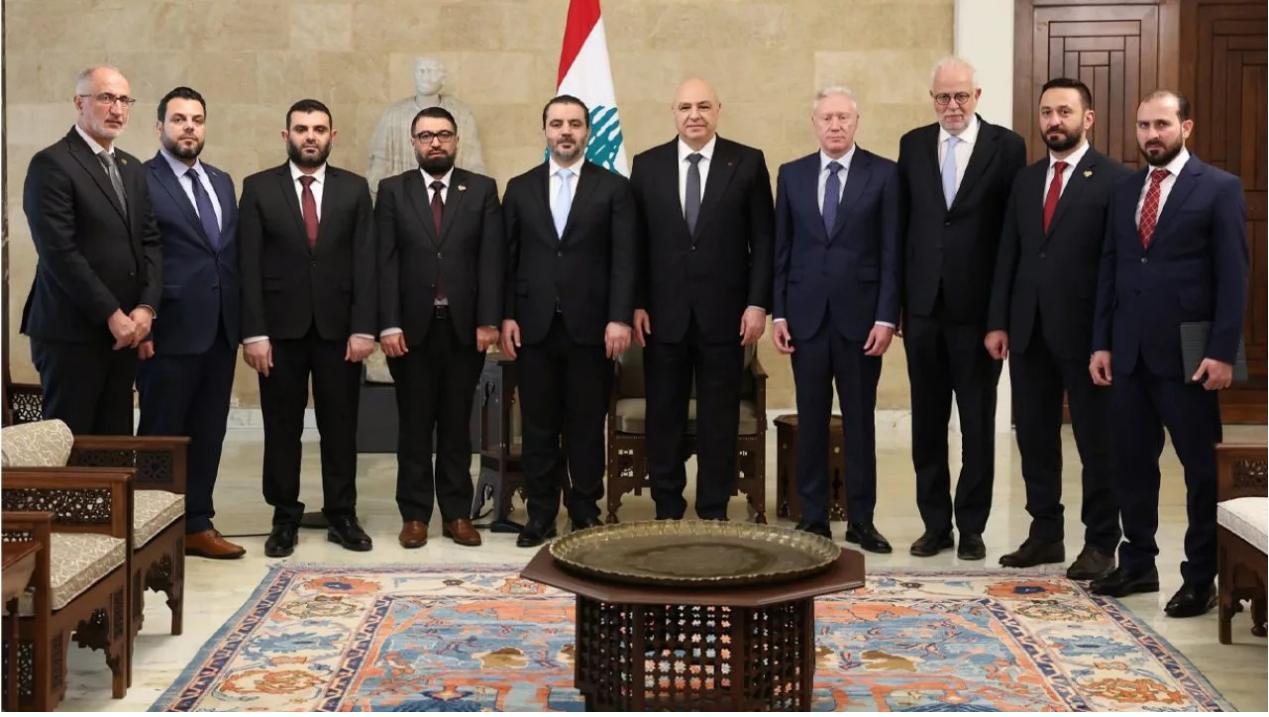


Syrian-Lebanese Relations: A Heavy Legacy and a Bid to Rebuild Trust



The history of Syrian-Lebanese relations since the emergence of the two states in their modern forms has been marked by dramatic fluctuations between rupture and cooperation, harmony and discord, intervention and dominance.

Never truly stable, the relationship has long been shaped by deep geographical and historical proximity, alongside starkly conflicting political interests. Damascus and Beirut have remained caught in a cycle of instability, dictated by shifting regional dynamics and the balance of power within each country.

From Guardianship to Entanglement

Following independence, the two countries experienced an unsettled relationship, which took a decisive turn in the mid-1970s. With the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, the Syrian army entered Lebanon under the nominal auspices of an Arab League mandate, as part of the so-called Arab Deterrent Force. However, this intervention soon morphed into direct tutelage under President Hafez al-Assad.

During this era, Damascus consolidated its grip over Lebanon's political and security apparatus, employing intelligence officers in a quasi-mandatory role.

Lebanon became a de facto Syrian sphere of influence, serving as a strategic arena through which Assad managed relations with Iran, Arab states, and even

Western powers until the Syrian military withdrawal in 2005 following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The regime in Damascus was widely accused of collaborating with Lebanese allies in orchestrating the killing, seen as retribution for Hariri's efforts to alter the terms of the bilateral relationship.

Hezbollah and Shifting Power Dynamics

With Bashar al-Assad's rise to power, the relationship transformed—from Syria's total dominance over Lebanon to Lebanon's deep involvement in Syrian affairs, chiefly through Hezbollah. Widely viewed as Iran's proxy in Lebanon, the party has wielded increasing influence over the national agenda.

Hezbollah's overt military engagement in Syria following the 2011 uprising further deepened divisions between the two peoples. The party's role in combat and its harsh treatment of Syrian refugees including abductions and killings have fueled a climate of hostility. Many Syrians were labeled as opponents of the group merely for disagreeing with its stance on the war.

A Burdened Inheritance in a Post-Assad Syria

With the fall of the Assad regime and the advent of a new Syrian government, Damascus inherited a tangled and sensitive relationship with Beirut. Key issues remain unresolved despite shifting political landscapes, including the fate of detainees and missing persons, frozen Syrian assets in Lebanese banks, and the antagonism of Lebanese political factions most notably Hezbollah and some Iran-aligned Shiite forces toward the new government in Syria.

Restoring Syrian-Lebanese relations demands mutual transparency and genuine trust-building based on equal footing. This includes addressing pressing humanitarian, economic, and sovereignty-related concerns. Chief among them is the need for formal border demarcation an essential step for ensuring stability and a clear mechanism to resolve the fate of refugees and detainees.

Journalist and detainee rights advocate Moayyad Askeef notes: "Lebanon has been actively seeking information about Lebanese citizens disappeared in Syria over past decades, including details related to political assassinations such as that of Kamal Jumblatt. There were earlier Syrian overtures to resolve that case as a condition for cooperation, but that conditionality has now been dropped thanks to Syria's positive response."

He adds, "There is a visible effort by the Syrian government to fully cooperate with Lebanon, especially on the issue of Syrian refugees. The matter is now a question of timing and infrastructure preparing the areas of return and organizing the process, which I believe is imminent."

Beyond rhetoric, Syrian behavior signals a new intent to build balanced and cordial relations with Lebanon, breaking from past decades of dominance and coercion.

Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently pursuing the resolution of the issue of Syrian detainees in Lebanon, particularly those detained over their involvement in the Syrian uprising. Broader negotiations on prisoner exchanges are underway, covering criminal and political detainees.

For those arrested due to their political views or hailing from Hezbollah-controlled border areas, efforts are being made to secure their release recognizing that they were targeted because of past political affiliations. Hopes remain high that they will soon regain their freedom.

The Road Ahead for Damascus and Beirut

Despite a fraught history and accumulated crises, the future still holds the potential for a new chapter built on mutual interests and respect. Should both governments choose to transcend historical rifts and treat the past as a lesson in mismanaging neighboring relations, the Levant may witness genuine cooperation that safeguards both nations' sovereignty and serves their people's shared interests.

But perpetuating mutual suspicion and proxy influence risks trapping Syria and Lebanon in a perpetual tug-of-war.

Lebanese affairs expert and journalist Alia Mansour told Noon Post, "What I've consistently heard from both Syrian and Lebanese officials is that there is genuine political will to forge the best possible relationship between the two countries—based on sovereignty, independence, and mutual stability." She emphasized that the term "political will" was repeated often in these meetings.

Mansour elaborated: "This is the first real opportunity in the history of both countries for a relationship rooted in mutual respect and shared interests. The wounds of the past remain deep on both sides of the border, but serious work is now underway to address them.

Border demarcation, a contentious issue dating back to independence, is being tackled with Saudi Arabia recently hosting a meeting between the two countries' defense ministers. But border control is the most immediate and mutual priority."

She added, "Lebanon is obligated to secure its borders following its ceasefire agreement with Israel and due to regional and international commitments especially regarding Hezbollah's arms and the Captagon trade. Syria too must secure its borders, aware that any attempt by Iran or its affiliates to destabilize

Syria would likely come through the Lebanese frontier particularly since Hezbollah has lost other smuggling routes.”

Mansour also noted that the fate of Syrian detainees in Lebanese prisons is now the Syrian state’s top priority. “Progress is already underway, even if gradually, and any future political or economic cooperation hinges on resolving the border and detainee issues.”

She further pointed out the lingering files of assassinations orchestrated by the Assad regime in Lebanon and the disappeared Lebanese nationals in Syrian custody. These remain thorny but pressing issues for Beirut.

Political analyst Darwish Khalifa weighed in: “The past five decades have seen major upheavals in Syrian-Lebanese relations starting with the Syrian army’s 1976 intervention during the civil war, followed by Hezbollah’s rise and its influence over national decision-making.

The party, backed by Iran, later joined Assad in suppressing the Syrian uprising. Today, with the fall of the previous regime, both sides are working to reestablish ties grounded in mutual respect and non-interference.”

Khalifa described the recent October 10 visit by Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani to Beirut as taking place “at a critical political and economic moment requiring prudent diplomacy and realistic frameworks.”

He emphasized the importance of creating permanent joint committees to methodically address unresolved issues, rebuild trust, and initiate a new phase of cooperation on an equal footing breaking with the pre-2005 model of domination.

“This visit reflects a mutual desire to turn the page amid a changing regional landscape and growing humanitarian pressures,” he said. “Among the political, economic, and security challenges, there is hope that this step signals a path toward reconciliation and a return to normal relations built on common interests and historical ties.”

Toward Balanced and Respectful Ties

Resetting Syrian-Lebanese relations demands new tools and principles chief among them the elimination of all forms of dependency and domination. Syria’s recent decision to suspend the work of the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council communicated via Lebanon’s Foreign Ministry and the Syrian Embassy is a pivotal step in redefining the relationship on a more equal and respectful basis. The Council had long symbolized Damascus’s political grip on Lebanon.

On whether restoring ties would come at the expense of political factions inside Lebanon, Darwish Khalifa remarked: “I believe restoring relations requires

patience and a gradual confidence-building process starting with resolving the detainee issue, then border demarcation, and eventually the matter of Syrian assets and depositor funds in Lebanese banks.

Without this, relations between the two countries will remain confined to diplomatic formalities, far from the era of influence peddling under the Assad regime.”

He concluded, “The region is going through a turbulent phase. It is essential to separate security concerns from other matters such as refugee repatriation. Progress toward stability will require effective steps, including joint border commissions under Arab and international oversight.

Only by avoiding entanglement with domestic political factions can both countries sustain a respectful bilateral relationship.”

In sum, despite the weight of a troubled past, a renewed Syrian-Lebanese relationship remains within reach if both sides commit to ending the legacy of conflict, exploitation, and hegemony.

The future may yet offer the promise of an equitable partnership that meets the aspirations of two closely linked peoples in one of the most complex corners of the Middle East.