



Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage
& Commemoration Center (IICC)

November 5, 2008

Syria's historic decision to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon and an analysis of its implications



President Bashar Assad announcing Decree No. 358, which establishes diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon (Syrian TV, October 14).

Overview

1. On October 14, 2008, Syrian president Bashar Assad issued **Decree No 358**, ordering the establishment of diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon, and the opening of a Syrian embassy in Lebanon (Syrian News Agency, October 14, 2008). The announcement of the decree was preceded by the joint agreement of the presidents of Syria and Lebanon, Bashar Assad and Michel Suleiman, during Suleiman's visit to Damascus on August 13, 2008. After the visit, Lebanon issued Decree No. 268, for setting up a Lebanese embassy in Syria (September 13, 2008).
2. The day after the Syrian decree, Lebanese foreign minister Fawzi Salukh arrived in Syria for a visit. He met with Bashar Assad and the Syrian foreign minister, Walid Mualllem. On the morning of October 15 the two ministers signed a joint announcement to the effect that diplomatic relations would be established. They said that Syria and Lebanon desired to strengthen the "excellent brotherly relations between two sister countries [sic]," based on mutual respect for the sovereignty and independence of each. In answer to a reporter's question, the Syrian foreign minister said that an ambassador to Syria would be appointed before the end of 2008 (Syrian and Lebanon news agencies, October 15, 2008).



Lebanese foreign minister Fawzi Salukh: "We are pleased to announce...the establishment of diplomatic relations between two sister countries." (Syrian TV).



The foreign ministers of Syria and Lebanon sign the documents establishing of diplomatic relations (Syrian News Agency).

Reactions to the Announcement

3. In Lebanon there was support from both Syria's supporters and opponents. In some instances the support was accompanied by the expectation of further steps to improve the charged relations between the two countries, such as defining their mutual border. While Syria's detractors sometimes seemed suspicious (probably because of the awareness that Syria would not stop interfering in

internal Lebanese affairs), Syrian supporters were relatively restrained and not excessively enthusiastic. The United States, France, Egypt and the UN Secretary General all congratulated the Syrian decision. The Egyptian foreign minister made a point of mentioning that the issue of the border demarcation necessitated a solution, while an American spokesman expressed hope that Syria would respect Lebanon's security and sovereignty.

4. The main reactions to the announcement were the following:

i) **Lebanese prime minister Fuad Siniora** described the establishment of diplomatic relations as "a historic step" on the way to Lebanon's independence, sovereignty and freedom to make its own decisions. He said it was a basic step toward strengthening relations between Syria and Lebanon based on mutual respect (Al-Safir, October 15, 2008).



Bashar Assad and Fawzi Salukh, Lebanon's foreign minister (Syrian News Agency).

ii) **Sa'ad Hariri**, leader of the Lebanese opposition to Syria (the March 14 Forces), described the decision as "a fundamental achievement for Lebanon" (Al-Mustaqbal, October 16). **Walid Jumblatt**, anti-Syrian Druze leader, was more reserved. He described it as "a positive development" in line with the March 14 Forces demands for "balanced, healthy relations with Syria." However, he added that "We are waiting for additional developments, for example defining the borders, including those of the Shebaa Farms, so that we can reach genuine, healthy relations with Syria" (Al-Safir, October 15, 2008).¹

iii) **Hezbollah**, Syria's most prominent supporter in Lebanon, also lauded the decree but without excessive enthusiasm. **Sheikh Naim Qassem**, deputy secretary general of Hezbollah, called for relations between the countries to be strengthened, to the benefit of both sides (Syrian Arab News Agency, October 14). **Muhammad Fneish**, a senior member of Hezbollah

¹ Since they achieved independence Lebanon and Syria have not settled their border disputes, including the border along the slopes of Mt. Hermon (the Shebaa Farms). In response to calls from Lebanese leaders to demarcate the border between Lebanon and Syria, the Syrian representative to the UN, **Bashar al-Ja'afari** said that the issue was bilateral and connected to the sovereignty of both states, necessitating the agreement of the Syrian and Lebanese governments. He added that "the real reason for the failure of defining the border is the continued Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights, the Shebaa Farms and the northern area of the village of Ghajar (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, October 31, 2008).

and Lebanon's labor minister, said that exchanging embassies was an important step in founding good relations between the two countries, adding that Lebanon needed close relations with Syria in every area (Syrian Arab News Agency, October 20).

iv) **Walid Mualllem**, Syrian foreign minister, told a press conference that Syria's intentions for Lebanon were brotherly. He added that the recent terrorist events in Damascus and Tripoli proved that the two nations were exposed to the same threat. "What we are doing serves both Syrian and Lebanese security," he said (Al-Safir, October 16). In our assessment, he was aiming his remarks at **radical Islamic terrorism**, which both regimes regard as a threat, and show the urgent need to deal with it, as it sometimes leaks into Syria from Lebanese territory (which does not prevent the Syrian regime from supporting it. Al-Qaeda groups use Syria as a base from which to launch attacks against American forces in Iraq).

v) **Ahmed Abu Ghat**, Egyptian foreign minister, praised the announcement, calling the establishing of diplomatic relations "a step in the right direction." He added that it was important to use it as a foundation for other measures which would support relations between the two countries, also mentioning the issue of **demarcating their borders**, as demanded by Lebanon (Middle East News Agency, October 16).

vi) The **United States, France and the UN secretary general** also praised the decision. A French foreign ministry spokesman said that it would contribute to regional stability. "European sources" told an Israeli correspondent from Haaretz that the Syrian announcement was part of the commitments Syria took upon itself last summer to end its international isolation (Yoav Stern, Haaretz, October 15). The **UN secretary general** applauded the Syrian step, calling it historic. **David Welch**, Assistant US Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, said that in the past Syria's relations with Lebanon had been a source of trouble, and called for Syria to respect Lebanon's security and sovereignty (interview with Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, October 23, 2008).

Historical Background and Implications

5. While the charged relations between Syria and Lebanon **are far from resolved**, Syria's agreement to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon is an **important, historic move**. It is **Syria's first formal recognition of Lebanon's independence and sovereignty** since both countries received independence in the 1940s. It shows a **fundamental change in Syria's policy toward Lebanon**. Since the Independent State of the Greater Lebanon was established by French mandate (September 1, 1920), Syrian nationalists have refused to recognize its independence, regarding it as an artificial, illegitimate entity, created by the "imperialists" (See the Appendix for more background.) In our assessment, the current change has the following significance:

i) **In internal Syrian affairs**, this historic move, which was preceded by Syria's withdrawing its troops in 2005 after more than 30 years of occupation, demonstrates that in the proper strategic circumstances, president **Assad is ready to make basic changes** –even under pressure – in the policies of his father, Hafez al-Assad. The changes effected by Assad in Lebanon, the fruit of **exigencies and difficulties**, and not of Syrian political initiative, were the end of Syria's direct military involvement and **at the same time, at a deeper level**, the abandoning of an ideology which took shape at the beginning of the 20th century.

ii) **In internal Lebanese affairs**, Syria's ideology and modus operandi were adapted by president Bashar Assad to the present era. However, **Syria's basic interests in Lebanon**, its readiness to promote those interests through **the use of force**, and the way it regards Lebanon as its back yard have not, in our assessment, undergone a fundamental change. **The Syrians will continue making attempts to maintain their influence in internal Lebanese politics**, although direct intervention has been replaced by the now-familiar proxy method to secure their interests. Syria's main lever in Lebanon is **Hezbollah**, even though the organization's first and basic loyalty is to **Iran**. That deepens Syrian dependence on Hezbollah and at the same time makes Hezbollah more important in internal Lebanese affairs, since it enjoys the massive support of both Iran and Syria.

The Importance and Centrality of Hassan Nasrallah in Syrian Perception



Needlepoint picture distributed in Damascus bearing the pictures of Hassan Nasrallah and Syrian president Bashar Assad.² Another needlepoint picture shows Hassan Nasrallah and high-ranking figures in the Syrian regime. In the center are Hafez Assad and his son Bashar. To their left are Assef Shawqat and Maher Assad, with Hassan Nasrallah to the right. At the bottom an inscription reads, "A nation whose heads are lions will never kneel."

² The original needlepoint is in the possession of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.



Hezbollah as a strategic partner: Pictures of Syrian president Bashar Assad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah waved by women during a demonstration in Damascus.



A Syrian artist working in Damascus paints Assad and Nasrallah (From : <http://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/swissinfo.html?siteSect=43&sid=6916568&ty=st>).

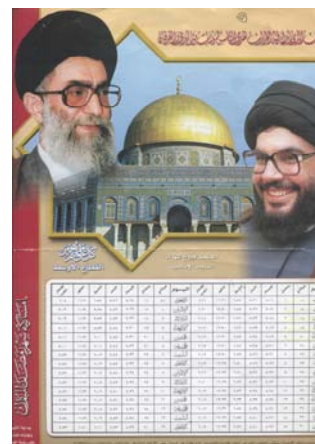


The Assads, father and son, and Hassan Nasrallah. The inscription reads "Men who made promises and kept them" (From <http://www.ma7haba.com/vb/member.php?u=25>, April 16, 2008).

The Iranian Regime, a Source of Religious and Political Authority for Hezbollah



Posters with pictures of Ali Khamenei and the leader of the Islamic revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini, found at Hezbollah bases in south Lebanon during the second Lebanon war. Iranian indoctrination material was also found, proof of Hezbollah's export of revolutionary Iranian ideology to Lebanon.



Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (right) and Iranian leader Ali Khamenei on either side of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem on a Ramadan fast calendar. It was seized in the village of Kafr Kila (near the Israeli border) during the second Lebanon war on August 7, 2006. Hezbollah regards "supreme Iranian leader" Khamenei as a source of religious and political authority.

iii) **In regional affairs**, the withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon and Syrian recognition of Lebanese independence and sovereignty **weaken** Syria's dominance over Lebanon with a parallel **increase** in **Iranian** influence. In Lebanon, which is the only example of the successful export of the Iranian Islamic revolution, Iran enjoys supremacy over Hezbollah and within the Shi'ite community. It is exploited by Iran for massive military, political and financial support of Hezbollah, enabling it to construct a broad military infrastructure and an arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets. Hezbollah's military strength poses a constant threat to Israel and can be used to exhaust it, according to Iranian considerations. It is also used to promote Iran's influence in internal Lebanese affairs. Thus the exclusive "Syrian Order," which characterized the era of Hafez Assad and Bashar Assad's first years, **has changed into an "Iranian-Syrian Order" (to a great extent because of Hezbollah)**. That marks a **conspicuous success for the Iranian strategy of seeking regional hegemony**.

iv) **In the international arena**, Syria can be expected to try to leverage its readiness for diplomatic relations with Lebanon to improve the regime's image, representing Bashar Assad as a positive regional factor and a strong leader capable of keeping his promises (especially in the eyes of **France**, and the **United States** after the presidential election). That will serve Damascus's interests by helping it break out of its isolation and relieving the pressures on the regime caused by the Syrians' subversive activities in Lebanon. It can also be expected that by improving its image with regard to Lebanon, the Syrian regime will try to make points in the

conflict with Israel, especially with the United States in the era of its new president, Barack Obama.

6. **The historic changes in Syrian policy regarding Lebanon** were not part of a pre-planned, long-range strategy but were rather **a function of Syrian weakness and the result of the internal and external pressures**. They are the result of dramatic developments in Syria, the Middle East and the world: Hafez Assad, who ruled Syria with an iron fist, died, relieving Lebanon of its fear of the Syrian regime. In addition, following the September attacks, Syria was designated by the United States as part of the **axis of evil**, and an America-French effort was also made to isolate Syria and undermine its grip on Lebanon. The IDF pullout from the security zone in south Lebanon and its deployment along the international border removed the “justification” for a Syrian military presence in Lebanon. All of the above increased the strength of the Lebanese opposition to the Syrian Order and an anti-Syrian Sunni Muslim-Christian-Druze coalition was formed which had not existed and would not have been possible during the reign of Hafez Assad.

7. The events weakening the Syrian Order came to a head when Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated and Syria was accused (and is still accused) of having been behind it (the elimination of Syrian opponents in Lebanon has always been the preferred modus operandi of all Syrian regimes). The assassination led to the establishment of an opposition movement called the March 14 Forces, and to unprecedented popular protests in Beirut, which in the end led to the withdrawal of Syria’s military forces from Lebanon in a snap decision made by Bashar Assad (his father, Hafez, faced much harder situations but avoided making hasty decisions). As a result, **Lebanon’s political map changed and the regime of the Taif Accord ended**. Although Syria restored some of its influence in Lebanon after the second Lebanon war (2006), especially through Hezbollah’s power and prestige, Bashar Assad made another fundamental change in Syria’s Lebanese policy, manifested by his agreement to establish diplomatic relations.

8. For a short historical analysis of Syrian policy toward Lebanon, see the Appendix.

Exporting Iranian Ideology to Lebanon



A selection of publications found in villages in south Lebanon during the second Lebanon war. They celebrate the ideology and deeds of the leaders of the Islamic revolution in Iran, especially the “supreme leader,” Ali Khamenei. Not only Hezbollah fighters are indoctrinated with radical Shi’ite Muslim Iranian ideas, but also Shi’ite communities in Lebanon, which are greatly influenced by the Iranian regime.

Appendix

A Short Historical Analysis of Syrian Policy in Lebanon ³

Historical Background

9. The political arrangements reached in the Middle East after the First World War (1918-1923) divided the Ottoman Empire into separate political units and prevented the establishment of a united Arab state in the spirit of national Syrian demands. France, which received the mandate for Syria and Lebanon, sought to found and reinforce an independent Lebanese entity based on Mt. Lebanon, which had enjoyed autonomy in the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire. The French had traditionally been in favor among the Maronite Christians, upon whom the autonomous Mt. Lebanon had been based, and had had political and cultural ties with them since the days of the Crusades.⁴

10. For that reason, and because France wanted to weaken Syria, France responded to the Maronite request and on September 1, 1920, established the **State of Greater Lebanon**. The new state of Lebanon, declared by French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud, included the autonomous region of Mt. Lebanon with the addition of the Muslim regions of Beirut, northern Tripoli, Sidon, the south and the Bekaa Valley. The Maronites regarded the establishment of Greater Lebanon as a dream come true, the climax of a centuries-old struggle for independence and natural borders.⁵

11. The Syrian nationalists, on the other hand, and a considerable proportion of the newly-annexed Muslim population, **refused from the very beginning to accept the existence of an independent Lebanon**, which they regarded as the product of "Western imperialism," viewing their separation from Syria as arbitrary and unjust. That view was expressed in 1985 by **Dr. George Jabour**, advisor to Hafez Assad and director of the Syrian Research Bureau in the presidential palace

³ For a historical analysis of Syria's Lebanese policy, see Reuven Avi-Ran (Erlich), *The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon since 1975*, Westview Press, Inc., Boulder Colorado, 1991.

⁴ During the Crusades the Maronites collaborated with the Crusaders and created ties with the Vatican and Christian Europe. Their search for a European ally became more focused since the 16th century. The Maronite patriarch appealed to Louis XIV, who granted his patronage to the Maronites and their church. From then, France remained their protector until the end of the Second World War, when its influence weakened and world hegemony was inherited by the United States.

⁵ The territory annexed dramatically changed the nature of Lebanon's population, adding a large Muslim population which supported Syria. That development has been the source of Lebanon's ills and political weakness from the time it received independence in 1943 to the present day.

in Damascus, who said: "Syria and Lebanon, and moreover all of greater Syria (**Bilad al-Sham**⁶), were one region and to a certain extent still are...Without a doubt the two countries are one, and with them Jordan and Palestine..." (Al-Siyad, Beirut, June 26, 1985).

12. Under the French mandate (1920-1943) Syrian nationalists refrained from turning the Lebanese problem into a point of contention with France because they did not want to hurt the struggle for Syrian independence and because they assumed that in any event, Syrian and Lebanese independence would annul the "artificial borders" between them and reunite them in a natural process. That did not happen. However, the Syrian refusal to recognize Lebanon as an independent, sovereign state, Syria's expansionist aspirations regarding Lebanon and its objections in principle to the "imperialists'" artificial borders demarcated after the First World War -- all remained rooted in the consciousness and political agenda of the Syrian regimes, including that of Hafez Assad.

13. The Syrian perception of Lebanon was manifested in many ways: Syria included Lebanon in the maps of Syria printed in the 1940s and 50s, and Syria did not recognize the Syrian-Lebanese border as an international one between two sovereign states and avoided demarcating it. In addition, until recently Syria steadfastly refused to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. The official Syrian reason was that they were unnecessary because the two countries had such close relations that there was no need to exchange ambassadors. Needless to say, the claim was untrue: since Lebanon received independence, its relations with Syria have been marked by endless friction, disputes and Syria's continual interference in internal Lebanese affairs. The roles of embassies as a way of solving bilateral problems was filled by an institute called the Supreme Syrian-Lebanese Council, although in many instances bilateral issues were dealt with by Syrian dictates and not through the regular diplomatic channels usual between two sovereign states.⁷

14. Syria's aspirations to turn Lebanon into a protectorate are not only ideological but also the result of a complex of vital **Syrian interests**. The main aspects are **security-linked** – to prevent the Lebanese subversion of the Syrian regime;⁸ **political** – regarding the control of Lebanon as a way of improving Syria's status with Israel, the Arab world and the international community; **military** – preventing Lebanon from being used by Israel to outflank Syria in the Golan Heights and at the same time, to exploit Lebanon **to exert pressure on Israel through the terrorist organizations sponsored by Syria**, while the Golan Heights have been quiet since the war in 1973; and

⁶ **Bilad al-Sham**, that is, "the land of the north," refers to the area north of the Arabian peninsula. Under the Omayyads (661-750 AD) it was a separate territorial political unit, and part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War. The term Bilad al-Sham and the old name "Syria" (Hellenistic in origin) received new political significance from a handful of young Christians in Beirut and Damascus, the first members who generated the nationalist Arab movement, during the second half of the 19th century. Today the area includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel.

⁷ With the establishment of embassies the existence of the Supreme Council would appear to be superfluous. However, the Syrians **do not seem to be in a hurry to dissolve it**. After the joint declaration of the institution of diplomatic relations the Syrian foreign minister told the press that the issue of the Supreme Council "will be determined according to agreements between the two countries, and in that respect the Council still exists" (Lebanese News Agency, October 15). On another occasion Walid al-Mualem said that "there is no contradiction between [having both] the Supreme Syrian-Lebanese Council and embassies" (Al-Nashra News Agency, Lebanon, November 2, 2008).

⁸ Security has always been Syria's **main interest**, as noted by Walid Mualem regarding the joint security threats when diplomatic relations were established.

economic – promoting a variety of economic interests common to Syria and Lebanon (water sources, Syrian workers in Lebanon, commerce, etc.).⁹

Syrian Policy under Hafez Assad

15. During its first 30 years of independence, Syria, because of its internal weakness and the traditional Lebanese regime's ability to survive, found it difficult to realize the aforementioned interests. However, during the first half of the 1970s, after Hafez Assad assumed control, Syria's policy toward Lebanon changed. It began direct intervention in internal Lebanese affairs with large military and political investments, until at the end of a long, difficult process, it forced Lebanon to accept the Syrian Order and to suppress opposition, especially from within the Christian camp, some of which had close relations with Israel.

16. For Hafez Assad, Lebanon was the western part of Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham). He always stressed the special ideological and political links between Lebanon and Syria to justify Syria's massive direct military intervention. A telling statement to that effect was made in a speech he gave on July 20, 1976, at the height of the Lebanese civil war, to justify the Syrian invasion of Lebanon. He said, "**Historically, Syria and Lebanon are one country and one people...**For that reason they have mutual interests and genuine joint relations...and that makes for genuine common security..." (Radio Damascus, July 20, 1976).

17. The Lebanese civil war, which began in 1975 and collapsed the traditional Lebanese regime, and the war of 1973, gave Syria the strategic opportunity for a military – and in time political – takeover of Lebanon. The erosion of Israel's deterrent power after the 1973 war, the collapse of the Lebanese regime during the civil war and the American trauma of the Vietnam war removed three brakes that had kept Syria from taking over Lebanon: Israeli deterrence, the viability of the Lebanese regime and Western sponsorship. Syria exploited the strategic window of opportunity and in the middle of the 1970s the Lebanese issue was moved to the top of the national priority list, replacing the conflict with Israel to secure the return of the Golan Heights. During the last year of the civil war Syrian intervention was indirect, but beginning in 1976 Syria began **direct involvement** in Lebanese affairs, operating massive military forces and investing great political efforts.

18. During the last 25 years of the 20th century the **Syrian Order** took form in a long, twisting process, fraught with failure. It had **four main stages**:

i) **1976-1982: The Syria invasion of Lebanon during the civil war.** The Syrian army overcame the leftist militias and the Palestinians (traditionally Syrian allies, but bitter opponents during the civil war), and was later drawn into military confrontations with the Christian camp. Eventually the Syrian army took over most of Lebanon, but did not deploy its forces in the south, which remained under the control of the PLO, which constructed its military infrastructure under the umbrella of an indirect understanding between Syria and

⁹ For further information see Avi-Ran, *Syrian Involvement*, pp. 6-15.

Israel. (As part of the understanding a red line was drawn, running eastward from Sidon to the village of Khouné. South of the line the deployment and activity of the Syrian army were forbidden.) In the period before the first Lebanon war, the Syrian regime failed to stabilize its control and turn its military achievements into political capital, and it became clear to Syria, as it later became clear to Israel, that **it was easier to swallow Lebanon than to digest it**.

ii) **1982-1985: Confronting Israel during the first Lebanon war:** At the beginning of the war, Syria, which suffered from both military weakness and political isolation, was dragged into direct confrontation with the IDF in the Bekaa Valley where it lost on the battlefield. However, although the Syrian army in Lebanon suffered a blow but had not been defeated. Following that, because of its military weakness, Syria avoided a direct confrontation with the IDF and adopted a **policy of using proxies** to wage a terrorist-guerilla war. As part of that policy, Syria permitted the deployment of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Bekaa Valley and the establishment of Hezbollah. Syria supported Hezbollah and Amal's terrorist-guerilla attacks and used its allies in Lebanon to sabotage the Israeli-Lebanese agreement reached under American aegis (the May 17 Agreement). Syria's policies were successful and eventually led to the IDF's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 1985, without a political agreement's having been achieved.

iii) **1985-1999: Lebanon becomes a Syrian protectorate after the first Lebanon war.** Syria exploited the political vacuum after the unilateral IDF withdrawal, the consolidation of the security zone and the end of Israeli intervention in internal Lebanese policies. The Syrian army overcame General Michel Aoun's army and anti-Syrian Christian camp, conquered the autonomous Christian enclave in Mt. Lebanon established during the civil war, disbanded the Lebanese militias (with the exception of Hezbollah), and killed or exiled the Christian leaders (Michel Aoun, then head of the anti-Syrian opposition and today a Hezbollah ally, was exiled to France). Israel, for its part, was forced to withdraw the IDF from the security zone (May 2000), the result of Hezbollah terrorist attacks and the Israeli public's objection to continued intervention in Lebanon.

iv) **1991-2005: The height of the Syrian Order, based on the Taif Accord of 1989.** The Taif Accord legitimized Syria's control over Lebanon and determined the institution of the "special relationship" between Syria and Lebanon (unequal relations in which Syria forced its positions on Lebanon). The Taif Regime ended the long civil war and the rival sectarian militias, **with the exception of Hezbollah**, lost their power. Syrian proxies were appointed as Lebanese president and prime minister, Syria took control of the Lebanese army and security services, and Lebanon was bound to Syria with various cooperation and defense

agreements which seriously damaged its sovereignty and freedom of action.¹⁰ Thus Hafez Assad's regime solidified its total control over Lebanon and exploited it for the political, defense and economic benefits it could bring.

Changes in Syria's Lebanese Policy under Bashar Assad

19. The Syrian Order in Lebanon (the Taif Regime) gradually eroded between 2000 and 2005 because of the dramatic changes which occurred in Syria, Lebanon and the entire region: the **death of Hafez Assad**, who had controlled Lebanon with an iron fist, and the succession of Bashar Assad relieved much of Lebanon's fear of the Syrian regime, which was perceived to have lost its deterrent power. On the international front, after September 11, 2001 Syria was designated as belonging to the **axis of evil**, and American-French diplomatic efforts to isolate Syria and undermine its grip on Lebanon increased. The May 2000 withdrawal of the IDF from the security zone also contributed to an awakening of anti-Syrian sentiment. The result was that in Lebanon the opponents of the Syrian Order grew stronger within the Christian camp and among Sunnis, and Syria's influence was weakened not only among its opponents and but also among its supporters.

20. The processes which eroded the Syrian Order came to a head with the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, blame for which was laid at Syria's doorstep. The assassination led to the establishment of the March 14 Forces opposition movement, to unprecedented popular demonstrations in Beirut and to the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon (after more than 30 years). As a result, Lebanon's internal political map shifted and **in effect the Syrian Order ended**. Syria's agreement to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon was another sign of the fundamental changes in Syrian policies in Lebanon.

21. The most important factor of the end of the Syrian Order is the loss of Syria's exclusive influence on Lebanese politics. Hezbollah, however, toward which Hafez Assad adopted a policy of caution, became, with Iranian-Syrian support, **an organization with the military capabilities of a semi-national state**. Those capabilities, based on an arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets, **pose a constant threat to Israel** and at the same time **support Hezbollah's (and Iran's) status** in internal Lebanese politics (demonstrated by the Doha Agreement on May 20, 2008, which gave Hezbollah the ability to veto Lebanese government decisions). **The decline in Syrian influence in Lebanon came at the same time as the rise of Iranian influence, both through the presence of Hezbollah and the political, economic and demographic rise in the status of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon.**

¹⁰ According to the **Taif Accord of October 22, 1989**, "special relations existed between Syria and Lebanon by virtue of their historical closeness and common strategic interests. The Syrians exploited the definition to bind Lebanon to the May 1991 "Lebanon-Syria Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination," and in a joint defense agreement (July 1989). Those agreements enable Syria to intervene in internal Lebanese affairs whenever it pleases, even after Syria and Lebanon exchange ambassadors. After the announcement of the establishment of diplomatic relations, Nassri Khouri, the secretary general of the Supreme Syrian-Lebanese Council said that the Council would monitor the implementation of the agreements and the treatment of ongoing matters between the two countries. The Cooperation and Taif agreements, he said, the joint Syrian-Lebanese institutions were manifestations of the exclusiveness of the relations between the two countries (Syrian News Agency, October 19, 2008). That is, Syria has still not internalized the nature of the embassies and diplomatic relations...

22. **In summation**, under Bashar Assad, Syria is ready to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon, and thus to agree to give up an important ideological position held for a long time. About three and a half years previously, with the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese soil, there was a basic shift in its policy and modus operandi within Lebanon. However, **Syria's vital interests in Lebanon have not changed**, nor has the Syrian regime's desire to promote those interests even by using brutal force, and Syria still has great influence within Lebanon, while the new situation has led to the loss of the precedence and exclusiveness it had under Hafez Assad. The Syrian Order has been changed into an Iranian-Syrian Order, which in its larger regional context can be seen as a success in Iran's striving for hegemony.