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Syria seen regaining its influence in Lebanon

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When Syria's vice president recently boasted that his country is now stronger than ever in Lebanon, many Lebanese dismissed his words as wishful thinking. Months of political stalemate in Beirut may show how right he was.

Lebanon's pro-Western politicians have been unable to form a government since winning June elections, and many of them blame Damascus, saying it is using its allies in Lebanon — led by Hezbollah — to stymie negotiations and show that nothing can get done without its say-so.

The United States tried for the past four years to keep Syria out of Lebanon's politics and largely failed. Now the administration of President Barack Obama has sought to improve ties with Damascus, and Syria's allies and opponents here say that has given it a freer hand to exercise influence in its smaller neighbor.

The Obama administration's outreach has resulted in "the invigorating of Syria's role in the region, including Lebanon," said Wiam Wahhab, a pro-Syrian Lebanese politician.

Syria has "has influence in Lebanon as do Saudi Arabia, America and Iran. But by virtue of its geographical location, Syria has greater influence in Lebanon than other countries," Wahhab told The Associated Press.

The wrangling over the government is a sign of how deeply the fate of Lebanon is dependent on outside powers. While pro-Western politicians accuse Hezbollah and its allies of carrying

out the will of Damascus, they in turn are accused of taking orders from their strongest foreign supporters, the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Now hopes for a breakthrough center on Syrian President Bashar Assad and Saudi King Abdullah. The two met last week in Saudi Arabia. Lebanese papers reported Wednesday that they are expected to meet again in Damascus next week, raising expectations for an end to the impasse. Neither country has yet confirmed a second meeting.

Damascus is hungry for an end to its international and regional isolation and a recognition of its regional weight — particularly in Lebanon, which it has historically considered under its sphere of influence. The United States is trying to push it away from its alliance with Iran and its support for militants like Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas.

Washington had hoped since 2005 to break the hold of its regional rival Syria over Lebanon. Damascus directly dominated Lebanon for nearly 30 years, keeping about 35,000 troops on its soil. In 2005, mass protests and international pressure following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri forced Syria to withdraw its military from Lebanon, and anti-Syrian parties were swept to power in subsequent elections.

But Syria maintained its hand through the militant group Hezbollah, which is the strongest military force in the country and the main representative of its Shiite community, roughly a third of the population of 4 million.

Recent months have seen gains for Syria.

Lebanese Christian leader Gen. Michel Aoun, who fought Syrian troops in Lebanon two decades ago, made his first visit to Damascus in December, meeting with Assad. Aoun has been allied with Hezbollah since 2006, but he had kept some distance from Syria, so the visit marked a significant reconciliation with his former rival.

Also, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt — once a vehement critic of Syria who even called for Assad's overthrow — quit the Western-backed coalition on Aug. 2. He now calls for "distinctive relations" with Syria and says he's prepared to also visit Damascus.

Earlier this year, Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa boasted in a speech to the country's leadership that Damascus is stronger in Lebanon than it was when it maintained troops in the country.

Weeks later, his words seemed hollow when the coalition led by Hezbollah and Aoun failed to win June elections as many had expected. Instead, the voting maintained the slim parliamentary majority of the Saudi- and U.S.-backed bloc, led by Hariri's son, Saad Hariri.

But the stalemate since underlines how no one side is able to dominate Lebanon. Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri has been trying to bring Hezbollah and its allies into a unity government, but negotiations have stalled over who would receive which Cabinet positions.

In particular, Aoun demands that his son-in-law, Jibril Bassil, retain the telecommunications ministry, a sensitive post because of its security connections. Hariri's bloc has refused, but Hezbollah and its allies say they won't join his government unless Aoun is satisfied.

Syria's opponents blame Damascus for the impasse.

"After Syria imposed its domination over Lebanon for 30 years ... it is now trying to stage a political comeback to Lebanon through its allies," political analyst Emile Khoury wrote in An-Nahar, a leading Lebanese daily seen as anti-Syrian.

Sarkis Naoum, another An-Nahar analyst, said Lebanon will not be stable until "Syria has regained its full influence in Lebanon even without the return of its army."

Naoum said Syria wants to show Lebanese it is the only power that can prevent a renewal of "sectarian and factional fighting" in Lebanon.

So far, the political standoff has not deteriorated into violence, but there is a constant fear that it could. While Shiites largely back the Hezbollah-led bloc, Sunni Muslims mainly back Hariri, and Christians are divided between the two camps. In May 2008, fierce fighting erupted between Hezbollah and Hariri supporters, nearly tipping the country into a sectarian war.

Syria denies any role in the stalemate. But in its eyes, the politicking reflects a natural return by Lebanon to Damascus' influence. "Syria is now stronger in Lebanon because Lebanon must return to its normal relations with Syria, which were always distinguished," said Syrian analyst Imad Shueibi.