3

Coping with Asad: Lebanese Prime Ministers’ Strategies

Taku Osoegawa

This article deals with Lebanese–Syrian relations during the period when the international isolation of Syria increased following the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq War. Although it is true that the international hostility towards Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has been attributed to his various domestic and foreign policies, the Western antagonism has been especially aggravated by his policies towards Hizbullah’s armament, the international tribunal and investigation of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and the Syrian uprising that started in March 2011. Consequently, Asad paid much attention to international diplomacy over these issues; however, at the same time, he kept a sharp eye on the actions and attitudes taken by the Lebanese government towards these three issues. This is not only because they have constituted main concerns among Lebanese politicians and indeed destabilised the country, but also because top Lebanese leaders have sometimes defied Damascus over them, which has further damaged Syria’s regional and international position. Against this background, this study primarily examines how Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Fouad al-Siniora, Sa’d al-Hariri, and Najib Miqati\textsuperscript{272} coped with the Asad regime over the issues of Hizbullah’s arms, the Hariri investigation and trial, and the Syrian uprising. Because the presidency was weakened, neutral or sometimes left unfilled, prime ministers were the closest approximations in the Lebanese case of foreign policy decision-maker.

Among the five main sections followed by a conclusion, the first section examines a theoretical framework explaining the Lebanese–Syrian relations, while the second section provides a short historical background on the relations of the two countries. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections, the Lebanese prime ministers’ policies with regard to the three sensitive matters for Damascus are discussed respectively.

\textsuperscript{272} The reason why among top Lebanese governmental leaders these prime ministers are figure in focus is owing to the increased power of Lebanon’s premiership as a result of the 1990 amendment of the Lebanese constitution.
Theoretical Explanation of Lebanese–Syrian Relations

Arguably, ‘[a] state’s formation and its power position in the international arena are decisive in shaping its external relations’ (Osoegawa 2013: 6). Regarding the case of Lebanon, its state formation has not been unitary, and non-governmental actors in the state, mostly sectarian-based, have been generally powerful enough to threaten the government and still maintain strong transnational ties with more powerful states (including Syria). This situation seems to deny the validity of studying the Lebanese government and its foreign policy, because external powers have penetrated into Lebanon and wielded considerable influence inside the country through domestic actors.

However, as this author elsewhere (2013) contends, Lebanon is not a simple puppet of Syria, and it is appropriate to talk about Lebanese policy towards Syria, although it is necessary to recognise the reservation that Lebanon’s menu of policy choice in relation to the Syrian regional middle power has been rather limited. Since Syria has managed to maintain trans-state relations with non-governmental actors in Lebanon, which have been, in most cases, opposed to the Lebanese government, its top leaders have had to simultaneously counter both external threats in terms of Lebanon’s disadvantageous power balance vis-à-vis Syria and internal threats from these Syrian-supported Lebanese non-governmental actors, the most important of which has been Hizbullah. Consequently, the theory of ‘omnialignment’ advocated by Harknett and Vandenberg (1997) could explain the Lebanese–Syrian relations, because their theory maintains that interrelated external and internal threats generally occur when externally powerful states support internal opposition groups, which should force states’ leaders to face and deal with multiple and various kinds of threats at once.

Harknett and Vandenberg (1997: 124–128) propose four strategies taken by a state’s leadership to cope with interrelated external and internal threats, i.e. ‘double balance’, ‘balance–bandwagon’, ‘bandwagon–balance’, and ‘double bandwagon’, and deducing from their work it could be said that Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Siniora, Sa’d al-Hariri, and Miqati had the following strategies for Lebanon in relation to Syria. First, the Lebanese could resist, by relying on Western, Saudi, and/or Israeli power, the Asad regime in order to contain Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors.

---

273 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) refers to Syria as one of the regional middle powers and defines the concept as states which are key players in their region, but which are treated as middle powers globally.

274 Osoegawa (2013) terms Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)’s ‘omnialignment’ theory ‘complex realism’, because their theory is a modified or ‘complex’ version of realism.
Second, they could resist, with the help of Western, Saudi, and/or Israeli power, the Syrian regime as a perceived greater threat, while appeasing Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors as a perceived less immediate threat (‘balance–bandwagon’). Third, they could appease the Syrian regime as a perceived less immediate threat, while resisting Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors as a perceived greater threat (‘bandwagon–balance’). Fourth, they could appease the Syrian regime in order to get support from Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors (‘double bandwagon’).

Because Syria has been internationally isolated in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, it is reasonable to presume that Lebanese Prime Ministers would largely balance against Damascus, especially in the form of the ‘double balance’ strategy. In reality, they more often did not balance against the Asad regime and indeed bandwagoned with it, and indeed, ‘double bandwagoning’, was frequently undertaken by the Lebanese side in coping with the Syrian regime.

**Historical Background of Lebanese–Syrian Relations**

Following the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in April 1975, Syria’s deep involvement in Lebanon started and the latter country was put under the former country’s hegemony until April 2005. During the civil war, while Syria occasionally sparked sectarian fighting for its own benefit, it also tried to contain the conflict so as not to give its main enemy, i.e. Israel, any cause for intervention in Lebanon, with Damascus viewing Lebanon as its ‘soft underbelly’ through which Israel could readily attack it from the West. Although Syrian hegemony was sometimes challenged by Israel, Syria continued to exert a dominant influence on Lebanese soil and finally played an important role in terminating the civil war in October 1990.

As a result, Syrian hegemony in Lebanon was firmly established and later, with the conclusion of the Lebanese–Syrian Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination in May 1991, ‘legally’ consolidated. While the Ta’if Agreement, which was reached under the auspices of the Arab League in October 1989 to establish a new political order in Lebanon, had already ‘formalise[d] Lebanon’s “special” relations with Syria’ (Norton 1991: 461), the 1991 treaty ‘clearly favoured Syria and placed Lebanon in a rather disadvantageous position’ (Osoegawa 2013: 116). This is largely owing to the fact that, unlike the Ta’if Agreement, the treaty did not specify the duration and size of the Syrian army’s redeployment in Lebanon and made it possible for Damascus to continually postpone redeployment (Thompson 2002: 82).
Given the dominant Syrian dominant in Lebanon, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who occupied the premiership for a total of 10 years from 1992 to 2004, generally took into consideration Syria’s political, economic, and/or military preferences and bandwagoned with Damascus in order to gain support of the Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors, such as Hizbullah, for his ambitious economic recovery programme for Lebanon, i.e. ‘Horizon 2000’. However, Hariri occasionally balanced against the Asad regime by either attempting to negotiate a security arrangement directly with the Israeli government during the 1990s or aligning himself more closely with the Western powers after 2003. As for the Israeli aspect, Hariri stated in February 1993 Lebanon’s readiness to sign an agreement (although he denied the possibility of concluding a peace treaty) with Israel that would guarantee the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 425, i.e. the withdrawal of the Israeli army from southern Lebanon (Norton 1997: 10). Later, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proposed the so-called ‘Lebanon first’ option in July 1996, which promoted the Israeli–Lebanese peace tracks ahead of the Israeli–Syrian peace tracks, Hariri took an ambiguous attitude and did not explicitly reject the Israeli proposal (Osoegawa 2013: 141–142).

On the other hand, after Western, in particular US, hostility towards Syria was heightened in the wake of its objection to the US military action against Iraq in 2003, Hariri exploited this change in the international dynamics of the Middle East. Amidst the unfavourable international wind for Damascus, Hariri worked with US President George W. Bush and French President Jacques Chirac to pass an anti-Syrian UN Security Council Resolution No. 1559. ‘The resolution, passed on 2 September 2004, called for Syria to halt its interference in Lebanon’s internal affairs and fully withdraw from the country and for Hizbullah and Palestinian groups in Lebanon to disarm’ (Osoegawa 2013: 104).

**Lebanese Policies on Hizbullah’s Weapons**

Before exploring the Lebanese–Syrian relations over the issue of Hizbullah’s armament, the strategic importance of the Shi’a organisation for the Asad regime must be briefly discussed. With Syrian hegemony in Lebanon consolidating after the end of the civil war in 1990, the Syrian regime began to disarm local militias in Lebanon. However, Damascus permitted Hizbullah to maintain a military presence in southern Lebanon.

---

275 The Syrian objection to the Iraq War was largely due to its concern that US success in Iraq would lead the world hegemon to choose Syria as the next target.
because the Israeli-backed South Lebanese Army (SLA), as well as the Israeli army, was still active in the region. In return, ‘Hizbullah was required to coordinate its military activities to serve Syria’s regional policy, especially towards Israel’ (Osoegawa 2013: 111).

From 1992 to 1996, when the Labour government in Israel seriously negotiated with the Asad regime over a peace agreement, the Syrian side largely restricted Hizbullah’s military activities (Zisser 2001: 146–147). However, when the Israeli Likud cabinet led by Prime Minister Netanyahu from 1996 to 1999 pushed Damascus aside by advocating the ‘Lebanon first’ option, it is probable that the Syrians encouraged Hizbullah’s attacks against the Israeli army and the SLA to put pressure on the Israelis. This is supported by the fact that the mounting deaths of Israeli military personnel stationed in southern Lebanon greatly influenced the perceptions of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who assumed Israel’s premiership in May 1999, and had insisted on the army’s early departure from southern Lebanon during his election campaign.

While the Israeli army’s unilateral withdrawal from the south in May 2000 threatened Hizbullah’s raison d’être, the Asad regime still needed a surrogate force to put pressure on the Israeli army to evacuate from the Golan Heights. Finally, the Syrian and Lebanese authorities raised the pretext that the so-called ‘Shabaa Farms’, located in the Israeli–Lebanese–Syrian border area, remained Israeli-occupied Lebanese territory, despite the Israeli and international recognition of the area as part of the Golan Heights. This made it possible for Hizbullah to remain armed and for Damascus to potentially use the organisation’s weapons to bargain over the Israeli army’s withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The Syrian regime has never pressured Hizbullah to disarm; however there were some Lebanese and international calls for the organisation to do so.

Despite the strategic importance for Syria of Hizbullah’s arms, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri did not have much sympathy for its military activities and attempted to restrain them in order to acquire international aid and investment necessary for his ‘Horizon 2000’. Hariri thought Hizbullah’s armed resistance against Israel had the potential to hurt his economic recovery programme, and in February 2001 Hizbullah indeed launched military operations one day after he had given assurances of Lebanon’s suitable investment climate to international businessmen in Paris (Blanford 2001: 9). When the Bush administration applied more pressure on ‘terrorist organisations’ after the 11 September attacks and added Hizbullah to its ‘terrorist list’ in early October (Middle East International 26 October 2001: 19), it might have been anticipated that Hariri would assume a hostile attitude towards Hizbullah. Although Hariri contributed to the passage
of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, according to Blanford (2006: 104), he did so mainly to put pressure on the Syrian regime not to extend the term of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, with whom he had an unfriendly relationship, and ‘could not publicly support the resolution because of the clauses demanding the disarming of Hizbullah and a full Syrian withdrawal’. Consequently, it is possible to say that while Hariri’s relations with Damascus further worsened over the proposed extension of Lahoud’s presidential mandate, Hariri did not intend to strip Syria of one of its important strategic assets vis-à-vis Israel, i.e. Hizbullah’s weapons.

How can Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)’s ‘omnialignment’ theory explain Hariri’s behaviour towards the Asad regime? Although it is true that Hariri aligned himself with Western governments to contain Syrian-backed Lahoud, a manifestation of a ‘double balance’, his balancing against Damascus was temporary. Indeed, from August to September 2004 Hariri’s cabinet and parliamentary bloc finally agreed to the amendment of the Lebanese constitution, which made it possible for Lahoud to serve another three-year presidential term (The Daily Star 30 August 2004; The Daily Star 4 September 2004). Hariri’s avoidance of all-out confrontation with the Syrian regime over Hizbullah’s arms and this last instance of ‘cooperation’ with the Syrian regime over the extension of Lahoud’s term meant that he still relied on Damascus to regulate these pro-Syrian actors, i.e. Hizbullah and Lahoud, hence was pursuing a strategy of ‘double bandwagon’.

After the 30-year Syrian hegemony in Lebanon ended in 2005, successive Lebanese cabinets continued to formally recognise the legitimate right of Hizbullah’s armed resistance against Israel in their policy statements. Prime Ministers Siniora, Sa’d al-Hariri, and Miqati, of whom the former two were leaders in the anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, may have anticipated that taking into consideration Hizbollah’s strategic importance for Syria could also have lead to the pro-Syrian March 8 Coalition’s cooperation in future policies. Indeed, all the three Lebanese cabinets included ministers from the Hizbullah-led March 8 Coalition. The composition of the Siniora, Hariri, and Miqati cabinet led them to align themselves with Damascus over the arms issue in order to gain backing from the March 8 Coalition, and thus their policy amounted to ‘double

---

276 After Hariri returned to the premiership in 2000 following the parliamentary elections during the summer, he had to consider Lahoud’s preferences when he formed his fourth and fifth cabinets. Furthermore, Hariri’s efforts to privatise Lebanon’s telecommunication and electricity sectors were blocked by the president himself and his close allies in the Hariri cabinets.

277 It is widely believed that the Asad regime pressured Lebanese politicians to support the amendment. For one of the descriptions of the regime’s intimidation, see Harris (2006: 298–299).
bandwagoning’. However, at the same time Siniora indeed attempted to strip Hizbullah of the legitimacy of armed resistance.

First of all, it is important to recognise that the first Siniora cabinet (July 2005–July 2008) had strong regional and international support, especially from the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia, which indeed provided a variety of economic and financial assistance to Lebanon. ‘In return for supporting the Siniora government, the international community, and in particular the United States, expected the Lebanese government to initiate steps leading to the disarmament of Hizbullah’ (Najem 2012: 121). Accordingly, Siniora launched this course of action in July 2006 and again in May 2008 in particular-- attempted ‘double balancing’.

In the case of July 2006, immediately after the Hizbullah–Israeli Conflict started, Siniora revealed his cabinet’s intention to disarm Hizbullah by reaffirming Lebanon’s international commitment to expand the government’s authority to all of its territory (The Daily Star 14 July 2006). Since the conflict was triggered by Hizbullah (whose fighters entered Israeli territory to kidnap two Israeli soldiers), Lebanese, regional, and international criticism against the resistance organisation mounted during the initial period of the conflict. While Siniora endeavoured to exploit this unfavourable situation surrounding Hizbullah with the aim of achieving its disarmament, Israel’s continuous indiscriminate attacks on Lebanese infrastructure aroused harsh worldwide condemnation against Israel and boosted Hizbullah’s popularity inside and outside Lebanon (Khatib 2014: 83–97). Because the widespread admiration for the Hizbullah made it impossible for Siniora to stand against the organisation, his disarmament proposal ended in failure, which was, needless to say, in Asad’s favour. Finally, although UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (which brought the conflict to an end) called for Hizbullah’s disarmament, the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south on the basis of the resolution was indeed realised, but in cooperation with, not against, Hizbullah which, although evacuating the immediate border area, still kept its arms (Barak 2009: 195).

Regarding the May 2008 case, ‘the Siniora cabinet called for steps aiming to close down Hizbullah’s secret, independent telecommunications network, which had been important for the organisation conduct intelligence and military operations beyond the control of the Lebanese government’ (Osoegawa 2013: 168). Hizbullah reacted with a ‘declaration of war’ against the cabinet (The Daily Star 9 May 2008), and members belonging to the resistance organisation and other political parties in the March 8 Coalition began to attack properties relating to the March 14 Coalition. Although more than 100 Lebanese were killed during the one-week conflict, and although many
Syria Studies

Lebanese feared the revival of a ‘civil war’ amidst the worst situation in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990 (Najem 2012: 81), it seems that the Asad regime did not pressure Hizbullah to restrain its hostile activities in Lebanon. Finally, the cabinet decision to close down the telecommunications network, along with its decision to dismiss the head of security at Beirut’s Rafiq al-Hariri International Airport because of his close, ‘improper’ relations with the March 8 Coalition, was revoked (The Daily Star 12 May 2008).

On the other hand, recognising that the weakness of the Lebanese army had justified Hizbullah’s arms possession, Siniora had a strong motive to strengthen the army. As one of the ways to support the pro-Western Siniora cabinet, US military aid to Lebanon was resumed in 2006 after a 10-year hiatus, and the total amount reached $410 million in 2008 (Schenker 2009: 227). Although this US assistance was essential in the 2007 battle of the Lebanese army against the Fatah al-Islam, i.e. a radical Sunni Islamist group affiliated with al-Qa‘ida, its aid was confined to light weapons because of US fear that its provision of heavy weapons to the Lebanese army could lead to Hizbullah’s possession of these arms. Thus, while Hizbullah was not threatened by US military support of the Lebanese army, Siniora’s ‘double balance’ strategy—aligning himself with Washington in order to contain the Syrian-backed Hizbullah—inevitably worsened Lebanese–Syrian relations and had no noticable success.

Lebanese Attitudes towards the Hariri Investigation and Tribunal

After the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, the International Independent Investigation Commission (IIIC) was established in April 2005 according to UN Security Council Resolution 1595, which defined ‘the assassination as a terrorist crime and called for a comprehensive inquiry to identify Hariri’s murderers’ (Harris 2006: 304). As a leading figure in the pro-Western, anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, and as a close associate when Hariri was alive, Prime Minister Siniora continued to cooperate with the Western-backed IIIC, which initially pointed its finger at the Asad regime for the Hariri assassination.278 In fact, Siniora permitted the Lebanese authorities, at the recommendation of the IIIC, to detain four top figures of the Lebanese security apparatus for involvement in the murder of Hariri in late August 2005. They were Major General Jamil al-Sayyid, former head of Sureté Générale; Major General ‘Ali al-Hajj, former director general of the Internal Security Forces;

278 Damascus has categorically denied the allegation until today.
Brigadier General Raymond ‘Azar, former director general of military intelligence; and Brigadier General Mustafa Hamdan, commander of Lebanon’s Presidential Guard, all of whom played a key security role under Syrian hegemony in Lebanon until 2005 (The Daily Star 31 August 2005; Harris 2006: 309; Harris 2009: 68).

Although Siniora frequently declared that Lebanon had a right to know the truth about Hariri’s assassination and consequently stressed the necessity for supporting the IIIC’s activities, it seems impossible to neglect his intention to use the international investigation as a political tool. Regarding this point, Siniora might have calculated that the IIIC’s negative perception of the Asad regime further isolated and weakened Syria, which would, in effect, adversely affect the power of its Lebanese allies (Siniora’s domestic rivals), i.e. the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular. In defying Damascus and cooperating with Western governments, the Siniora cabinet continued, with the aim of containing these pro-Syrian actors, to ask the Security Council to extend the IIIC mandate at its periodic expirations, in what amounted to a strategy of ‘double balancing’ in Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)’s ‘omnialignment’ theory.

Furthermore, and against the objections of the pro-Syrian March 8 Coalition, the Siniora cabinet asked the UN to form an international tribunal to try those accused of the Hariri assassination on 12 December 2005 (Michel 2014: 14), and later voted for the UN draft stipulating the establishment of what has become the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) on 13 November 2006 (The Daily Star 14 November 2006). Accordingly, the STL was approved by UN Security Council Resolution 1757 on 30 May 2007 and finally started its work on 1 March 2009 (Tabbrah 2014: 40–42).

Damascus did not oppose the idea of establishing an international investigation and an international tribunal, and President Asad indeed expressed Syria’s intention to accept ‘non-biased’ judgement of the STL (L’ Orient Le Jour 11/12 December 2010). However, the fact that Western initiative in the UN Security Council largely contributed to the establishment of the IIIC and STL Damascus came to see both of them as Western political tools to put pressure on the regime. Despite Syrian hostility, Prime Minister Sa’d al-Hariri—the successor of Siniora and a son of Rafiq—strongly defended the legitimacy of the STL and supported its activities, yet initially also maintained good relations with Asad. They indeed met three times from December 2009 to May 2010 and reportedly agreed upon coordination in regional matters (The Daily Star 1 June 2010). Furthermore,

---

279 The four generals were released in late April 2009 because of insufficient evidence; The Daily Star 30 April 2009.
on 6 September 2010, Hariri publicly admitted it was a mistake to blame the assassination of his father on the Syrian regime (*The Daily Star* 7 September 2010).

Hariri’s alignment with Asad from December 2009 to September 2010 could be theoretically explained by the strategy of ‘double bandwagon’ in ‘omnialignment’ theory. It became widely believed in and outside Lebanon that the STL’s upcoming indictment would accuse Hizbullah members of involvement in the assassination, so it is probable that Hariri calculated that aligning himself with Damascus would lead to Hizbullah’s cooperation with the STL. In addition, the fact that the March 8 Coalition had 10 ministers in his 30-member cabinet (*L’ Orient Le Jour* 10 November 2009) might have led Hariri to expect that good relations with Asad could gain the coalition’s support for his cabinet’s operation.

However, the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular continued to take a hostile view of the STL. Hasan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbullah, stated on 9 August 2010 that the tribunal was politicised and part of an Israeli plot against the resistance organisation (*Al-Safir* 10 August 2010). Later, in the early morning of 18 January 2011, Hizbullah members organised a political demonstration showing its adamant rejection of the STL, which caused a panic among a portion of the Lebanese.

Since Damascus did not pressure Hizbullah to change its stance and insisted that Lebanon should terminate its cooperation with the STL, Hariri strengthened his ties with US President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and frequently visited these states from November 2010 to January 2011. In line with the strategy of ‘double balancing’, Hariri aligned himself with the US and French authorities to contain Hizbullah, which consistently asked him not to support the STL. Finally, Hariri’s balancing against the Syrian regime led to the collapse of his cabinet on 12 January, which was triggered by the resignation of 10 ministers from the March 8 Coalition and one minister loyal to Lebanese President Michel Sulayman (*The Daily Star* 13 January 2011; *L’ Orient Le Jour* 13 January 2011).

Prime Minister Miqati—the successor of Hariri—did not express clear support for the STL in the policy statement of his second cabinet, which angered Hariri who demanded that Miqati fully cooperate with the tribunal (*The Daily Star* 1 July 2011). As deduced from the strategy of ‘double bandwagon’, Miqati allied himself with Damascus over the STL to gain support from the March 8 Coalition, which had 18 ministers in the 30-

---

280 On 30 June 2011, the STL issued its indictment and arrest warrants against four Hizbullah members; *The Daily Star* 1 July 2011.
member cabinet (*The Daily Star* 14 June 2011; *L’Orient Le Jour* 14 June 2011). Since the Western authorities regarded him as a man strongly affiliated with Hizbullah, it was almost impossible for Miqati to choose a policy of working together with Washington or Paris to contain the March 8 Coalition (a strategy of ‘double balance’). However, it is important to note that as a ‘neutral’ figure who formed his first cabinet in April 2005 to supervise the upcoming parliamentary elections amidst fierce antagonism between the March 8 and 14 Coalitions, Miqati took a middle ground: he did not disturb the STL’s activities and quietly continued to pay Lebanon’s share of the annual funding for the tribunal.

**Lebanese ‘Dissociation Policy’ toward the Syrian Uprising**

Prime Minister Miqati officially declared Lebanon’s ‘dissociation policy’ regarding the Syrian uprising, and as Hokayem (2013: 134) pointed out, ‘[d]issociation received the much-needed acquiescence of key Western and Arab states, as there was consensus on the unique exposure of Lebanon, the structural weakness of the state, and the need to contain the regional spillover of the Syrian crisis.’

However, because Lebanon is a country not only bordering Syria but also having deep-rooted interstate and transnational relations with the country, in practice it has been impossible for the Lebanese to maintain an attitude of ‘dissociation’ towards the Syrian uprising. Indeed, the March 8 Coalition has supported the Asad regime, and Hizbullah has sent its fighters to Syria to help the regime, which especially contributed to its recovery of two strategic points, i.e. Qusair and Yabroud. On the other hand, the March 14 Coalition has supported opposition forces in Syria, and the Future Movement has sent money and weapons to the opposition. This support provided by the Future Movement has inevitably worsened the relationship between Sa’ad al-Hariri and President Asad.

---

281 However, Miqati has been a prominent international businessman and seems to have had no close relationship with the resistance organisation. Reporting the 2009 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, where the fierce election campaign between the March 8 and 14 Coalitions took place, Lebanese newspapers described him as ‘independent’. See *The Daily Star* 9 June 2009; and *L’Orient Le Jour* 9 June 2009.

282 Unlike the case of Hizbullah, the reality of the support given by the Future Movement to the Syrian opposition is still not clear. However, it was reported in April 2011 that Jamal Jarrah, an MP from the Future Movement, was involved in financing and arming anti-Asad forces, although he dismissed the allegation (*The Daily Star* 14 April 2011). Later, in December 2012, Oqab Saqr—an MP from the Future Movement—was accused of providing arms and ammunition to Syrian rebels, and although the movement initially defended his involvement in these activities, he later denied it. For details, see *The Daily Star* 5 December 2012 and 7 December 2012.
Damascus has consequently taken hostile attitudes towards the Future Movement and indeed issued arrest warrants for Hariri and Oqab Saqr, an MP from the movement, on 11 December 2012 (*The Daily Star* 12 December 2012), after which Hariri called Asad a ‘monster’ (*The Daily Star* 13 December 2012).

Amidst this domestic polarisation, how did Miqati deal with the Syrian uprising under the name of the dissociation policy? First of all, there is no doubt that the equally divided public opinion in Lebanon between ‘pro-Asad’ and ‘anti-Asad’ supporters, the politically ‘neutral’ stance of Miqati, and the economic interdependency existing between Lebanon and Syria shaped his official stance of dissociation. On the other hand, in reality, because the majority of the Miqati cabinet were ministers affiliated with the March 8 Coalition, in order to keep its support, Miqati did not want to provoke the Asad regime, which could be seen as a strategy of ‘double bandwagoning.’ Consequently, although the March 14 Coalition increasingly labelled Miqati’s dissociation policy as ‘pro-Asad’, it did not actively seek to remove him especially since the international community, including the USA and France, supported his stance in the name of Lebanon’s domestic stability.

On the diplomatic scene, ‘Lebanon, which served as a member of the [UN Security Council] until late 2011, abstained and dissociated itself from UN statements criticiz[ing] the Syrian government, and followed a similar approach at the Arab League’ (Hokayem 2013: 133–134). In early August 2011, Lebanon decided to dissociate itself from a council statement condemning violence in Syria, although the other 14 member states approved the statement (*The Daily Star* 5 August 2011). Later, in October 2011 when the US and European Union coordinated efforts to pass a UN Security Council resolution warning that Syria could face sanctions if the regime did not stop its crackdown on the opposition and this was blocked by Russia and China, Lebanon and three other member states abstained (*The Daily Star* 5 October 2011). Furthermore, on 12 November, Lebanon voted against the Arab League’s decision to suspend Syria’s membership and impose political and economic sanctions on the country (*The Daily Star* 14 November 2011; *L’Orient Le Jour* 14 November 2011).

Because these policies were directed by pro-Syrian Foreign Minister ‘Adnan Mansur, leading figures in the March 14 Coalition such as Hariri bluntly criticised Mansur as a mouthpiece for the Asad regime. Furthermore, on 6 March 2013, Mansur ‘called for the reinstatement of Syria’s membership in the Arab League at a ministerial meeting of the organ[i]sation in Cairo’ (*The Daily Star* 7 March 2013). In spite of

---

283 Mansur is a veteran Shi’a diplomat supported by the pro-Syrian Amal Movement. For details on his career, see *The Daily Star* 14 June 2011; *L’Orient Le Jour* 14 June 2011; and *As-Safir* 14 June 2011.
Mansur’s clear violation of Miqati’s dissociation policy, and although he later urged ministers to uphold the policy (The Daily Star 14 March 2013), he did not seem to try to dismiss Mansur, who continued to retain the ministerial post until the cabinet resignation in March 2013.

On the domestic arena, a succession of the cross-border military operations conducted by the Syrian army not only damaged properties but also hurt and killed people on the Lebanese side of the border. However, Miqati initially tolerated the incursions of the Syrian army into Lebanese territory and hesitated to boost the presence of the Lebanese army on the border. Since Lebanon had not recognised the legitimacy of the anti-Asad Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Coalition,284 it seems that Miqati accepted, even though indirectly, Asad’s insistence that the Syrian military operations on Lebanese soil were aimed at ‘terrorists’. Indeed, the Syrian army captured militant Islamists having bases inside Lebanon, which was, because their presence was also a headache, beneficial for Lebanon. Consequently, it seems certain that the common interest existing between Lebanon and Syria to contain these Islamists prompted Miqati to acquiesce to the Syrian incursions into Lebanese territory. Furthermore, Miqati’s tacit understanding of the Syrian operations seemed to boost Hizbullah’s backing for him, since the resistance organisation not only supported the Asad regime but also battled against the anti-Asad Islamists.

However, the increasing number of Lebanese casualties in the border area led Miqati to boost the presence of the army and accept further US military assistance.285 By doing so, Miqati aimed to secure the border and deal with sectarian violence in Lebanon encouraged by the Syrian uprising.286 Furthermore, in September 2012, Miqati—along with President Sulayman—began to complain to Damascus about the Syrian army’s operations on Lebanese soil and the resulting violation of its sovereignty (The Daily Star 4 September 2012). Nevertheless, Miqati neither took provocative action against Syria such as appealing to the UN Security Council nor seemed to have any intention to use US

284 Most Arab and Western states recognised the Syrian National Council as ‘a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change’ at the ‘Friends of Syria’ conference in Tunis on 24 February 2012; The Daily Star 27 February 2012. After it was revealed that the Syrian National Council had not functioned as anticipated, these states contributed to another umbrella opposition body, i.e. the Syrian National Coalition, which was established on 11 November; The Independent 12 November 2012.

285 It was reported that the total amount of US military assistance to the Lebanese army during the latter part of 2012 reached more than $140 million and the assistance included helicopters, armoured vehicles, and guns. For details, see The Daily Star 22 December 2012; and The Daily Star 8 January 2013.

286 Especially in Tripoli, gunmen from the anti-Asad Sunnis and those from the pro-Asad ‘Alawis continued to exchange fire from May 2012 to April 2014.
involvement to contain Hizbullah. Thus, it is possible to say that over issues relating to the Syrian uprising, Miqati abstained from balancing against Syria or its Lebanese allies. The reason why he avoided open confrontation with Damascus can be primarily explained by the identification of his ‘partners’ in the cabinet, i.e. the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular, with the Syrian regime.

**Conclusion**

Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Siniora, Sa‘d al-Hariri, and Najib Miqati all had to deal with the three issues which were pivotal to the survival of the Asad regime and the success of its strategies, i.e. Hizbullah’s weapons, the IIIC and STL activities, and the Syrian uprising. With important exceptions, their policies were largely shaped by the anticipation that aligning themselves with Damascus would ensure support from or ward off the hostility of the pro-Syrian Lebanese actors, notably Hizbullah.

However, Rafiq al-Hariri temporarily balanced against the Syrians by playing an important role in the passage of Resolution 1559 with the aim of containing President Lahoud. Later, as leading figures in the anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, Siniora (in particular from July 2005 to July 2008) and Sa‘d al-Hariri (in particular from November 2010 to January 2011) took provocative policies against the Asad regime. Their main aim was to use closer relations with Washington and Paris to contain the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular. Thus, the hostile policies of the three prime ministers towards the Syrian regime could be explained by the strategy of ‘double balance’ in ‘omnialignment’ theory. In the long run, Siniora’s balancing contributed to the deterioration of Lebanese–Syrian relations during his reign and proved in the end to be unsustainable. Prime Ministers after his tenure therefore returned to strategies of bandwagoning. This reflects the relative weakness of Lebanon as a foreign policy actor for whom balancing was only a viable option when they could exploit strong external support against Syria.
Bibliography

[Books and Articles]


[Periodicals]

The Daily Star (Beirut)

The Independent (London)

Middle East International (London)

L’Orient Le Jour (Beirut)

As-Safir (Beirut)