March 20, 2005
ENCOUNTER

The Survivor

By MICHAEL YOUNG

t 12:55 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 14, Walid Jumblatt heard a loud explosion that he mistook for a sonic boom. As the truth became known, he rushed to the American University Hospital. The head of security there took him aside and mentioned that the apparent target of the blast, the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, had still not been brought in. Realizing the implications, Jumblatt informed Hariri's eldest son, Bahaa, "The news is bad." He repeated the phrase at Hariri's home, as the family anxiously awaited information. "The news is bad."

That was characteristic of Jumblatt, the paramount leader of Lebanon's Druse community: displaying concern for the fate of a friend and ally but also the blunt realism of someone who has seen many die. The cycle started when his own father, Kamal, was killed in 1977; it is widely believed the Syrian regime targeted Kamal for having challenged the entry of its army into Lebanon. As a reminder, Jumblatt still has in his office the ID card his father carried that day, a bullet hole piercing the photograph of his face.

The 56-year-old Jumblatt is now a main figure in a Lebanese opposition demanding the end to Syria's hegemony over Lebanon and a departure of its soldiers from the country. "Shortly before Hariri was killed, we wondered which of us would be next," Jumblatt told me in his mountain palace at Mukhtara, where he spends his time these days in the safety of his Druse brethren. "He was." Jumblatt's children are now in Paris. "If they try something," he says of the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services, "there's no point in getting us all."

In just a few weeks, a combination of peaceful demonstrations and outside pressure led Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, to announce that his army would begin a withdrawal toward the Syrian-Lebanese border. Much remains unresolved, however, and even as he thanked demonstrators, Jumblatt remained cautious, warning that hostility toward Syria should be avoided. "We must cut a deal with Syria; those who went after Hariri won't leave Lebanon so easily," he admitted.

Jumblatt is a paradox wrapped in contradictions, but he is not an enigma. Since inheriting the Druse mantle from his father, he has consistently focused on preserving his 200,000-strong minority and his authority over it. The Druse, who are spread between Lebanon, Syria and Israel, are the 11th-century offshoot of the Fatimid Ismaili sect of Egypt, itself an offshoot of the Sevener branch of Shiite Islam. The Druse are a "closed" community: no one can convert to their esoteric religion, and in theory at least, no one can leave it either. In Lebanon, they are mostly concentrated in mountain districts east and southeast of Beirut. Jumblatt has virtual complete control over them, as well as sway over Syria's estimated 300,000 Druse. He is also not without influence over Israel's community. (He toes the Arab line on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but he also insists that bridges must be built toward Israeli liberals. "Not all Jews are Sharonists," he recently told an interviewer.)

Jumblatt sees himself as "a tribal chieftain" and is often described as the prototypical political *zaim* -- an Arabic word for those traditional, almost feudal, communal-political leaders tied to their supporters in a patron-client relationship involving reciprocal loyalties and duties. The zaim functions both high and low: on the day I visited Jumblatt, he blended talk of regional politics with an investigation of the heating in one of his palace rooms and instructions on how to park the cars of parliamentarians he was seeing that afternoon. While he can be an autocratic father to

the Druse, he has also guided them successfully throughout Lebanon's wartime and postwar periods -- someone mandated to make the tough decisions and bear the burden of responsibility for them.
Samir Kassir, a columnist and historian of Lebanon's civil war, describes Jumblatt as a "real conservative in his desire to preserve his sectarian sanctuary in the Druse community, whose fate obsesses him."
That is one reason he reached a modus vivendi with Syria after his father's death and what makes his current defiance of Damascus intriguing. In truth, his efforts began in 2000, following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. With Israel gone, Jumblatt saw an opening to question Syria's military presence. He retreated after 9/11, however; amid rising expectations of war in Iraq, he understood that Syria would brook no dissent in an increasingly volatile region.
Why take such risks today? After all, Jumblatt benefited handsomely from the postwar system. His answer is both too convenient and probably true: "Not a single Jumblatt died in his bed, my father would say. We like to be free. Maybe it's genetic. It took years to confront the Syrian presence. My father was more courageous."
Jumblatt has often preserved his community's freedom vis-a-vis Syria by knowing when to bend. During Lebanon's conflict, he also imposed his freedom in more disturbing ways. In September 1983, Jumblatt presided over the brutal sectarian cleansing of Christians from the mountains, a result of months of tension between his forces and the Christian militia. Thousands were killed, some 150,000 were displaced and dozens of villages were razed. Jumblatt now accepts blame for that dark time, and in a characteristically Lebanese compromise, once the conflict ended in 1990, he was given the task of returning the Christians to their villages. In August 2001, he and the Maronite Christian patriarch sealed a historic reconciliation, even if Druse and Maronites rarely mingle. Most Christians vote for politicians affiliated with Jumblatt, and he knows his staying power means not alienating those voters.
On that front Jumblatt is secure today: his turn against Syria is popular among Christians, who understand that he has decisively broken with the Damascus regime.
Chibli Mallat, a law professor and a friend of Jumblatt's for almost three decades, highlights his flair for grand changes: "Jumblatt has a sense of the spirit of the time in Middle Eastern history and tries to be ahead of it, weaving his leadership into it. He's been wrong on occasion, but he's usually been right."
A case in which Jumblatt admitted to me that he was wrong involved Paul Wolfowitz, the United States deputy secretary of defense. In October 2003, he publicly regretted that Wolfowitz had not been killed in a rocket attack while in Baghdad, referring to him as a "virus." This led to a revocation of Jumblatt's U.S. visa. Recently, however, Jumblatt told the Washington Post columnist David Ignatius that the success of the Iraqi elections represented "the start of a new Arab world." When I asked whether he was ready to apologize to Wolfowitz, Jumblatt answered, laughing, "Yes; I already have." American officials, well aware of the Druse leader's mercurial nature, never severed contacts with him, and Wolfowitz himself recently saluted Jumblatt's "courage" on Lebanese television. For Jumblatt, extremism in the service of self-interest is no vice.
Jumblatt is a strange mix of ruthlessness and sentiment, political calculation and loyalty, hardness and bookishness, radicalism and conservatism. His office mirrors a mind in counterpoint. A pistol rests on his desk near copies of The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books. On the walls are a banner with Lenin's effigy and a painting showing a World War II battle scene, a gift from the former Soviet Union (Jumblatt had strong ties with Moscow and leads Lebanon's Progressive Socialist

Party). These signs of nostalgia for the U.S.S.R. are offset by a model motorcycle, reminiscent of Jumblatt's youth as a playboy, autographed photos of the supermodel Claudia Schiffer and the rousing account he gives of the time he had to sit through the torment of a four-hour speech by Leonid Brezhnev "to hear just one line about the Middle East."

And then there is the fact that one of Jumblatt's favorite cities is New York. He has said, with typical calculating wittiness, "I would have preferred to be a garbage man in that city than a zaim in Lebanon."

Asked whether it is true that he once with wicked humor offered the conservative Maronite Christian patriarch a copy of Eduardo Galeano's leftist critique of the industrialized world, "Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World," Jumblatt answered yes and brought out two books he was currently reading. Both were utterly unexpected in that barren intellectual vale populated by most Lebanese politicians: "At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities," by Jean Amery, and "The New Meaning of Treason," by Rebecca West. He added that he is a great admirer of Robert D. Kaplan, whose hardheaded pessimism has so often been anathema to Jumblatt's left-wing soul mates in the West. Jumblatt is forever complicating his secular, leftist image.

Jumblatt's pragmatic ecumenism is common among Lebanese, which helps to explain why followers of Lebanon's once-hostile militias have been demonstrating together against Syria since Hariri's murder. Perhaps it is one reason that Christians have forgiven Jumblatt for what he did to them, even if they do not forget; another is that the Lebanese system of communal compromise is propped up by amnesia, necessary since few emerged from the civil war looking good. A third is that Walid Jumblatt, given his experience, versatility and influence, is perhaps the only national leader the opposition still has.

Toward the end of a lunch he was giving, Jumblatt ordered first one and then a second glass of liqueur. He was very tired, he said; the alcohol apparently was to help him nap. Friends say Jumblatt's nights are sleepless. Walking an eternal tightrope does that to you.

Michael Young is opinion editor of The Daily Star newspaper in Lebanon and a contributing editor at Reason magazine in the United States.

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company | Home | Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | RSS | Help | Back to Top