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## As Syria exits Beirut, can a pro-Syrian president remain?

**Lahoud under pressure as Syria finished the first phase of its pullout Thursday.**

**By Nicholas Blanford** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor  
**BEIRUT** - Buoyed by Monday's massive anti-Syrian rally, which drew as many as 1 million flag-waving protesters, the Lebanese opposition has turned its attention squarely on Emile Lahoud, the pro-Syrian president of Lebanon.

As his Syrian backers leave Beirut in growing numbers, and he's unable to build a new government, the future for Mr. Lahoud looks increasingly shaky.

The opposition demands that Mr. Lahoud quit his office along with seven top security chiefs whom they blame for last month's murder of Rafik Hariri, a former prime minister.

Those calls are being supported by many independent political figures who say that only the departure of Lahoud and the security chiefs will spare this tiny Mediterranean nation from further political and economic turmoil.

**"Whatever happens, the political impasse continues unless Lahoud resigns," says Chibli Mallat, a professor of international law at Beirut's St. Joseph University and a democracy campaigner. "We are working to widen the message that the people gave on Monday. We won the battle of sovereignty now we need to win the battle of democracy."**

In an apparent response to the pressure, Brigadier General Jamil Sayyed, the powerful head of the General Security Directorate, and one of the seven security chiefs named by the opposition, announced Thursday that he and his colleagues would make themselves available for a judicial inquiry into Mr. Hariri's murder.

"All chiefs of the security organs are ready to stand trial because we don't have any secrets," General Sayyed told a news conference.

The political deadlock comes as a Lebanese Army officer confirmed Thursday that Syria has completed the first phase of a redeployment that will eventually see the withdrawal of all Syrian soldiers and military intelligence agents from Lebanon.

Syria first began redeploying its troops on March 8 after the Feb. 14 assassination of Hariri, whose death in a powerful explosion brought intense international pressure on Damascus to remove its 14,000 troops from Lebanon. It also sparked huge street demonstrations both for and against Syrian involvement.

The first part of the two-phase withdrawal involved the redeployment of the remaining Syrian forces in Beirut, in Tripoli in the north, and in the mountains above the capital to east of the Hammana-Mdeirej-Ain Dara line that runs along the mountain ridge separating the Lebanese coast from the Bekaa Valley.

According to the Lebanese Army officer, about 4,000 Syrian soldiers have returned to Syria. "There are now between 9,000 and 10,000 Syrian troops in the Bekaa," he says.

The duration of their stay in the Bekaa will be resolved at a meeting of senior Syrian and Lebanese Army officers scheduled for April 7. The

international community has demanded a full withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon before parliamentary elections which are due to be held before the end of May.

But the political paralysis has cast into doubt whether elections can be held at all.

Omar Karami, the Lebanese prime minister, began consultations with parliamentarians on Tuesday to form a new government, so far without success. Mr. Karami resigned from the premiership on Feb. 28 in the face of mass protests in the streets of Beirut. But he was reappointed by Lahoud two weeks later when no other alternative candidate for the premiership came forward.

Still, Karami has declared that he will resign again if he is unable to create a government of national unity which includes members of the opposition. But the opposition is refusing to negotiate with Karami until its list of seven demands are fulfilled. The main demands are an international investigation into Hariri's murder, the departure of all Syrian forces from Lebanon, and the dismissal of Adnan Adoum, the state prosecutor, along with the chiefs of six Lebanese intelligence and security services.

General Sayyed's stated readiness to appear along with his colleagues before a judge was interpreted by some opposition figures Thursday as preparation for the installation of a military government.

"Sayyed has no right to make such statements as head of the Sureté Générale [national police]. The violation of his duty as a state security official actually heralds a military coup with President Lahoud's blessing," said Walid Ido, a member of Hariri's parliamentary bloc.

General Sayyed is a close ally of Lahoud, who was commander of the Lebanese Army before being elected president in 1998.

Both sides have dug in their heels and show little sign of compromising. Some analysts say that although Lahoud appears determined to retain the presidency, his position is weakening. "I don't think his position is tenable," says Farid Khazen, professor of politics at the American University of Beirut. "I think we are reaching the stage where he will have to step down at some point."

One of the few voices charting a compromise course between the pro-Syrian loyalist and opposition camps is Salim Hoss, a veteran Lebanese politician and former prime minister. On Wednesday, Mr. Hoss joined opposition calls for the removal of the top security chiefs, but says he draws the line when it comes to the president. "I think this is carrying things too far," he says. "There is no way out except through a government of national unity with everyone included. Otherwise the impasse will continue and whoever fails to cooperate will be responsible."

But the opposition says it is too late to compromise with Lahoud and believes it has the support of the overwhelming public to push forward its demands. It is encouraged also by the support of the international community, particularly the Bush administration.

Indeed, one of the more bizarre outcomes of the crisis is the friendly cooperation between Walid Jumblatt, the leader of Lebanon's Druze community and the most outspoken opposition figure, and Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense.

In November 2003, the State Department revoked Mr. Jumblatt's diplomatic visa to visit the US after he called Mr. Wolfowitz a "virus" that needed to be destroyed and stated his regret that the deputy secretary of Defense had survived a rocket attack on his hotel while visiting Baghdad.

**Professor Mallat, who is acting as an intermediary between the two men to coordinate an effort to usher in a genuine democracy to Lebanon, says recent developments in Lebanon and the elections in Iraq spurred Jumblatt's change of heart.**

"Jumblatt recognizes that the Americans have a role in democracy in Lebanon and the Middle East," he says. "And although he disapproves, as I do, the way Iraq was handled initially, he realizes that now is the moment

where the convergence of America and democracy in Lebanon and the region is welcome."

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