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A last-minute plea to Bashar Assad

By Chibli Mallat

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This is the last day, it seems, to make a plea for reason from Syrian President Bashar Assad and Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. This comes from a person who has learned to appreciate the difficulty of implementing the rule of law in the Middle East.

The only argument put forward to undermine the most important democratic Lebanese offering to the Arab world - the peaceful alternation of power - was one of expediency and, implicitly, of so-called Syrian "higher national interest." This argument is flawed: The draft UN resolution seeking to change Syrian behavior in Lebanon, as the text stood on Thursday, will put the Syrian and Lebanese regimes on a collision course with the international community - and with a Security Council whose Resolution 425 Beirut and Damascus used over a period of 22 years to demand the liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation.

A new resolution may also provoke unprecedented damage to the future of Lebanese-Syrian relations. Those who wish to see the two countries violently split apart, as almost happened in the worst days of the Israeli invasion of 1982, will welcome the UN decision, which calls for a withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and free and fair elections. While it is true that no decent leader in the world, including the Lebanese and Syrian presidents, would contest the principles of Lebanese sovereignty and democracy, with Syria put on notice to implement these forthwith we could enter a struggle that may tear the fabric of Lebanese society. This, in turn, may undermine any hope of gradual, nonviolent reform within Syria and increase the country's regional and international isolation. Given the "regime change" in Iraq last year, at least some Arab countries will stand openly against Syrian policy in Lebanon.

Even more gravely, the UN resolution may lead to a situation where Lebanon's religious communities enter into conflict one with the other. The deliberate effort to ignore the consensus built around Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir - who has adhered to a position supporting both Lebanese sovereignty and democracy, but also cordial relations between Lebanon and Syria - will give way to extremism coming from the worst fringes of Lebanese society, and will be fueled by a logic of international intervention.

However, Lahoud and Assad should also know that the argument put forward by Lebanon's Foreign Ministry, namely that the outside world has no business interfering in Lebanese-Syrian affairs, is erroneous in its reading of international law. Syria's presence in Lebanon and Israel's invasion were always, by their very nature, subject to international scrutiny. When, as has happened in the past two weeks, coercion was so manifestly exercised by Damascus against the will of the Lebanese people and their leaders, it was not only the right, but also the duty, of the international community to intercede.

Worst, Syria's and Lebanon's discounting of the UN resolution would only increase outside pressure. This may eventually lead to calls for the UN's demands to be implemented through sanctions or, even, military means.

That is not necessary. Whatever is said officially in Lebanon in favor of an extended Lahoud mandate, whether by Foreign Minister Jean Obeid (who, everyone knows, is eager to be president), Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Speaker Nabih Berri, Deputy Speaker Elie Firzli, or others, is simply not an expression of their personal convictions, or that of their followers. It is a grave error to spite the

unique unanimity the Lebanese have developed in favor of changing their president, irrespective of the quality of the holder of the position. By ignoring this, however, Lahoud may see his name blackened when this period of Lebanon's history is eventually written about.

Decent Lebanese democrats, who wish to avoid more blood being shed in the Middle East, can help devise an alternative resolution if Lebanon's constitutional process is reinstated. Bashar Assad must change direction and persuade Lahoud, at this strategically key moment for Syria and Lebanon, to stop his unconstitutional, undemocratic bid for an extended mandate.

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