

U.S. Administration's Lebanon Ploy Is Blowing Up In Its Face

by Nancy Spannaus

On March 8, at the very moment that President Bush was delivering a speech at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., praising the Lebanese opposition as yet-another “democratic force on the march,” between 500,000 and 1 million Lebanese were turning out in Beirut for an anti-American, pro-Syrian rally, called by the head of Hezbollah. That rally dwarfed, by orders of magnitude, any rally of the so-called anti-Syrian opposition, which suddenly surfaced on the streets of Beirut, following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri last month.

This snapshot of “forces on the ground” dramatizes the fact that the Bush Administration’s embrace of the neo-con “Clean Break” for “reshaping” the Middle East, is blowing up in its face. Bush’s demand for “democracy” in Lebanon, as in Iraq, is bringing forward a mobilization of precisely those political forces which the Administration wanted to ostracize or destroy, and even the local collaborators with the U.S. plan are becoming nervous. The danger remains that the Cheneyacs who are running the Administration, will respond with a flight-forward response, that endangers not only Southwest Asia, but the world. The Bush Administration continues to insist on its own deadline for Syrian forces to leave Lebanon, or face unspecified consequences.

A Real Mass Mobilization

President Bush’s Jacobin/populist rhetoric, which dominated his Second Inaugural Address on Jan. 20, and has been a cornerstone of every Administration foreign policy pronouncement since, came across as political suicide, following the Hezbollah mass demonstration, which involved nearly one-third of the entire Lebanese population. The demonstrators may have mixed feelings about the Syrian occupation, which was initially aimed at stabilizing a country torn apart

by civil war, but they share, with the anti-Syrian opposition, a firm agreement that no outside interference is acceptable—whether it be American, French, or Israeli.

In an interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN on March 9, former Defense Intelligence (DIA) Chief for the Near East, Col. Patrick Lang (U.S. Army-ret.) warned that the Franco-American interference could trigger a new civil conflict in Lebanon down the road, and advised President Bush to tone down his rhetoric.

The March 8 demonstration, called by Hezbollah leader Sheikh Nasrullah, attracted people from all over the country, who came in cars and buses. It was a “show of force,” which “will finish the whole thing,” said one Lebanese political source, referring to the crisis that had erupted following the Feb. 14 murder of Hariri. The show of force is important to demonstrate to the region and the world, that the opposition which has been very vocal and financially backed by the United States, does not represent the majority of the country by any means. A demonstration by the opposition in Beirut a day earlier had gathered 100-150,000, according to eyewitnesses.

“Thank you, Syria’s Assad,” a large banner said. “No to foreign interference,” another said. “Beirut is free, America out,” protesters chanted. Nasrallah had urged demonstrators to carry only Lebanese, not party, flags. This, according to a Beirut source, is the absolutely unique, new feature of the political process in Lebanon, as usually each party, religious sect, or ethnic group carries its own flag. Pictures of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese President Emile Lahoud were also carried. Set up by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard in 1982, Hezbollah is the only Lebanese faction to remain armed.

“This is an historic day in the history of Lebanon, a day

that will found the future of Lebanon,” Hezbollah’s media director Muhammad Afif told Al-Jazeera. “This huge crowd is gathered under the title of rejecting Resolution 1559, as many Lebanese people, including some opposition elements, reject this resolution.”

Significantly, he added: “This demonstration does not come against the opposition protest in al-Shuhada [Martyrs] Square. We respect all Lebanese opinions, as they are democratic expressions. Lebanon is a democratic and free country. Everyone wants to express their opinions,” he said. In fact, Nasrallah, in calling the demonstration, had invited the opposition—all Lebanese—to participate. The turn-out, the Beirut source said, shows that “Hezbollah is not alone.” So it appears that the process triggered by the Hariri assassination, may indeed move in a very different direction, than that designed by the U.S. neo-con faction fuelling the opposition!

National Unity Sought

The national unity which was evident in the March 8 demonstration was carried forward in negotiations which immediately followed. President Lahoud met with Members of Parliament the next day, to discuss who should be appointed the next prime minister, and was met by a decision that he should reappoint former Prime Minister Omar Karami, who had resigned only nine days before, following outside pressure. The Parliament decision is binding on the President.

Even before the mass demonstration, a process of political discussion between previously hostile forces had begun. Involved were Christian opposition Qornet Shehwan Gathering member Samir Franjeh and representatives of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), along with Hezbollah, the Shi’ite “Party of God.” Franjeh gave an interview to the Lebanese English-language paper *The Daily Star* which was printed March 8, in which he laid out his perspective.

“The future of the resistance, its relations with the state authority and how to handle the UN Security Council Resolution 1559 are among other issues of disagreement. But we can solve them through peaceful discussions.”

Speaking of the March 7 meeting between him and PSP member Wael Abu Faour, and Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Franjeh said: “In this meeting, we reasserted our common interest in preserving civil peace and dismissing violence, resorting only to democratic means in expressing and solving our differences and disputes.” He went on: “The change is urgent and cannot be delayed. We discussed with Nasrallah how we should build a new state from scratch.”

In the interview, Franjeh said that President Assad’s announced withdrawal of troops was a positive sign which opened the way to free internal dialogue with genuine Lebanese political parties. Franjeh added, “Although short of setting a timetable for the troops’ withdrawal, for the first time Assad declared his willingness to quit Lebanon.”

However, Franjeh criticized Assad for insinuating that the opposition wanted a deal with Israel, and that the opposi-

tion were agents of foreign powers following an American-made model in Ukraine or Georgia. Franjeh rejected this notion. “The Lebanese model is home-made and we are proud that the young students have surpassed their leadership, showing the whole world what people can achieve if they persist in their struggle,” he said.

Franjeh said the mistakes committed by the Syrian intelligence agencies were also damaging. He hailed efforts to enhance reconciliation and coexistence among different factions, most notably the meeting between the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir and Jumblatt in August 2001.

“Instead of encouraging these efforts, the pro-Syrian police regime started to arrest the people involved and throw them in jail,” he said. In an effort to solve the country’s deadlock, the Christian leaders initiated their opposition movement in Qornet Shehwan. “We acknowledge that Muslims and Christians must share living equally in Lebanon and make their final homeland, free of any foreign domination or intervention,” Franjeh said.

Will the Agreements Hold?

The Syrian government, aware of being the “Clean Break” crosshairs, has responded to the recent Lebanese (and U.S.-French) demands by moving toward withdrawal. A March 7 meeting between President al-Assad and Lebanon’s Syria-backed President Lahoud worked out a two-phase plan for Syrian troop pullout. The first phase, Syrian pull-back to Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, in the east of the country, has already begun. The second phase will be the meeting of a joint military commission to agree on a schedule for further pullback.

On March 7, Syria also expelled from Damascus, the leaders of two Palestinian movements, who had been charged by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with having been involved in the recent suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

On March 10 the State Department briefer denied a rumor, published in the *New York Times*, that the United States might back off its demands that Hezbollah be disarmed—a non-starter in the region.

But a Lebanese Christian, speaking with *EIR* on March 10, expressed hope that provocations and escalation could be avoided. “The leaders of the opposition are now saying to the U.S., don’t use Lebanon as a place to fight Syria. If you have a bone of contention with Syria, it is your bone, don’t use Lebanon to fight your battles. You may use your influence to ask the Syrians to leave, like France, Germany, Russia and some countries in our region have. That is all right. But if you want to disarm Hezbollah, we won’t discuss this with you. It will divide our country. We can take care of the dialogue ourselves. If we have sovereignty, then Hezbollah will become a fully legitimate force in the army and the government. . . .

“We are, of course, worried every day that some provocation will break up this unity, but leaders of all religions and sects are bending over backwards to prevent such a thing from happening. We are hoping for a new Peace of Westphalia.”