

Will Lebanon and Syria Resist Regime Change?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

“We don’t want American freedom!” This is the slogan on a poster (with a tank and a missile), sported by a young girl in a headscarf, participating in one of the daily demonstrations in Beirut, Lebanon.

This picture, carried on many Middle Eastern websites, points up one paradox of the current Lebanese crisis: Although the entire mobilization against the government of Omar Karameh, who resigned on Feb. 28, has been steered from the United States, as part of the 1996 “Clean Break” doctrine to balkanize the region, there are currents among the opposition who decidedly do not want to play the role of American puppets. These layers are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the U.S. neo-cons, who have precipitated the crisis, are committed *not* to Lebanon’s freedom and sovereignty, but to a scenario for the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the unleashing of chaos throughout the region.

Which way the crisis will evolve cannot be predicted at this point. Karameh decided to present his resignation, not because the opposition had enough votes to bring him down in a no-confidence vote—they did not—but because he preferred to prevent a possible insurrection, or even coup d’état. His resignation threw the responsibility for the crisis onto the opposition. The fact that President Lahoud accepted the resignation, and then asked Karameh to stay on as a caretaker for awhile, may indicate that the move was pre-planned, and with Syrian acquiescence. The fact that opposition calls for the resignation also of Lahoud, have been rejected by Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, indicates that the Maronite leader is unwilling to comply with the scenario as dictated by the neo-cons. The Patriarch is to visit the White House March 16.

The ‘Revolution’ Run from Washington

What is clear, is that the neo-con junta in Washington is pursuing its aims, and is escalating tensions daily. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice issued new attacks against Syria, in an ABC interview, in which she blamed Syria for the bombing attacks in Tel Aviv on Feb. 25. “There is firm evidence,” Rice asserted, “that Palestinian Islamic Jihad, sitting in Damascus, not only knew about the attacks, but was involved in the planning. And so the Syrians have a lot to answer for. . . . We don’t know the degree of Syrian involvement, but certainly what is happening on the territory of Syria, in and around Damascus, is clearly threatening to the different kind of Middle East we are trying to grow.” It is relevant that her “firm evidence” came from Israel.

President Bush followed up with a demand that Syria immediately pull its troops out of Lebanon.

On the ground, it was U.S. Deputy Under-secretary of State David Satterfield, who coordinated with elements of the opposition. Both Satterfield and Paul Wolfowitz (in a TV interview) blatantly interfered in the affairs of the country. Wolfowitz called for “the people” to take their destiny in their own hands. Lebanese sources report that Satterfield met with opposition leaders, especially Walid Jumblatt, and parliamentarians, inside the U.S. Embassy. Reportedly, large amounts of money flowed into the hands of these elements.

Syrian Moves to Find a Solution

Syrian President al-Assad made clear in interviews to *La Repubblica* and *Time* magazine, that he understood perfectly well what the aim of the Lebanese operation was. He said that he knew immediately after the Iraq war, that his country would be next. “Iraq was only the first phase of a comprehen-

sive U.S. plan for the region, and they are now waiting for Syria, and Iran's turn to come," he said. "Everything is pre-planned, and under the current conditions in the region anything can happen."

Al-Assad also said he would comply with the U.N. resolution 1559 calling for troop withdrawal, adding that it would occur "within months." He stated two factors in the timing: the security of Lebanon, and the security of Syria's borders. "In 1982," he said, "the Israeli forces had proceeded up to a very short distance from Damascus, but at any rate, the withdrawal of our forces technically can be wrapped up by the end of this year. Yet, due to strategic concerns, their full withdrawal would take place only after we gain reliable security guarantees."

Clearly, as Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov also pointed out on March 3, an abrupt withdrawal could lead to destabilization. "We have to make sure that this withdrawal does not violate the very fragile balance which we still have in Lebanon."

Al-Assad has been actively seeking support from Arab partners, to defuse the crisis. Consultations took place between his Foreign and Prime Ministers and Jordan and Egypt, and he personally met with Persian Gulf leaders, including the Saudis. An Arab League biannual session in Cairo on March 3, also addressed the crisis, although neither the Syrian nor the Lebanese Foreign Ministers were able to be present.

It is to be expected that a gradual, progressive withdrawal will take place. As of this writing, the Lebanese opposition identified with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, has issued a series of conditions for its participation in a future government. These include troop withdrawal, the resignation of Syrian security officials in Lebanon, and the resignation of the public prosecutor and the top six security and intelligence officials of Lebanon. Once Lebanese President Lahoud has set a date, consultations will take place, also with the parliamentarians representing the opposition, on the nomination of a new Prime Minister.

Who's Who in the U.S. Lebanon Lobby

The "comprehensive U.S. plan for the region," which President al-Assad referred to, was drafted in 1996, and known as "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm." The "realm" referred to Israel's hegemonic ambitions. That document, which outlined the overthrow of the governments of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, was presented by its U.S. authors to then Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, on July 8, 1996. Two days later, Netanyahu presented the plan as his policy to a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

The authors of the document overlap largely with the members of the Golden Circle, the "official core supporters" of the U.S. Committee for a Free Lebanon (USCFL), which is the main neo-con lobby on Lebanon in the United States.

The USCFL has circulated petitions entitled, "Regime Change for Syria," and "Freedom for Lebanon," calling for kicking the Syrians out and overthrowing the regime in Damascus.

Among the Golden Circle members are Ziad K. Abdelnour, Elliot Abrams, Angelo Codevilla, Paola Dobriansky, Douglas Feith, Frank Gaffney, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Michael Ledeen, Naji Najjar, Richard Perle, Daniel Pipes, Paul Wolfowitz, and David Wurmser. Feith, Perle, Wolfowitz, and Wurmser were authors of "Clean Break." Abrams is known to be the point man inside the Bush Administration for the partitioning of Syria into two states, a Christian and a Muslim one. Codevilla and Perle have been actively involved in trying to secure the release of Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard.

Naji Najjar is a particularly interesting individual, whose profile typifies the interconnections of this "Lebanon" lobby with the more unsavory elements in the world of secret services, including those of Israel. Najjar is a leading figure in the "Government of Lebanon in Exile," which has its headquarters at 59 King George Street, in Jerusalem. He is also the executive director of the Lebanese Foundation for Peace. In 2002, Najjar wrote an article denouncing the Belgian government for permitting an investigation into charges of war crimes lodged against Ariel Sharon (now Israeli Prime Minister), for his role in the massacres of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon, in 1982. Elie Hobeika, a former Lebanese Christian militia leader, was scheduled to testify against Sharon, but was assassinated, presumably by Israeli networks. (The USCFL had targeted Hobeika as a "Syrian agent" on its website.)

In May 2003, Najjar issued an open letter to President Bush, entitled "How to Win the War and Lose the Peace," in which he argued, "A regime change in Lebanon and Syria will strengthen a pro-U.S. Government in Iraq as the whole region will stabilize under a new, friendly, regional U.S.-led order."

After the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Najjar issued another letter, in which he stated: "We urge the U.S. State Department to stop the nonsensical 'diplomatic pressure' of UN Resolution 1559 on Syria and authorize the use of force against Hezbollah," whom he blamed for the murder. "Israel should have a green light," he wrote, "along with its Lebanese allies, to operate militarily in Lebanon, strike Hezbollah, and reverse the balance of terror in that country. Hezbollah should be subjected to devastating military blows designed to destroy it as a meaningful fighting force. . . . Today, we are requesting military aid from Israel and an American green light to implement this policy and put an end, once and for all, to the threat of terrorism emerging from Lebanon."

The "Lebanese allies" of Israel refer to the former South Lebanon Army, an Israeli proxy force, with whom Najjar is reportedly connected.