

Crediting Bush for Growing Lebanese Demands for Freedom Misplaced

By Stephen Zunes | March 22, 2005

In a mirror image of those who blame everything wrong in the world on President George W. Bush, a surprising number of people are now giving him credit for the recent show of force by hundreds of thousands of Lebanese protestors demanding an end to Syria's overbearing influence in their country.

It is extremely doubtful that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has had anything to do with the inspirational "people power" demonstrations in the Lebanese capital of Beirut.

Many leading members of the Lebanese opposition—such as the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, whose assassination prompted the recent wave of anti-Syrian protests—were outspoken opponents of U.S. policy in the region, including the invasion of Iraq. Hariri's government chaired the emergency Arab League meeting in Cairo just prior to the March 2003 U.S. invasion in which the 22-member body expressed its "total rejection of the threat of aggression on Arab nations, in particular Iraq."

The recently completed Iraqi or Palestinian elections, which were repeatedly praised by the Bush administration, did not play much of a role either. Lebanon has held competitive elections for many years, though—like in Iraq and Palestine—they have taken place under a foreign military presence that strictly limits the elected government's ability to act independently. The newly elected Palestinian government is unable to exercise its administration in most of the West Bank, which is still under the control of Israeli occupation forces in violation of several UN Security Council resolutions—which call on Israel to withdraw from areas controlled by the Palestine Authority prior to September 2000.

In Iraq, six weeks after that country's election, violence and instability continue unabated and the new government—which is yet to be formed—has its power limited by a series of Transitional Administrative Laws and regulatory agencies imposed under the U.S. occupation. If the Iraqi election actually did influence recent events in Lebanon, it may be

for different reasons than the Bush administration would like to recognize: parties calling for an end of American domination of Iraq and for a withdrawal of American forces won an overwhelming majority of votes, perhaps inspiring Lebanese who want an end of Syrian domination of their country and for a withdrawal of Syrian forces.

If foreign influence did play a positive role, at least as much credit would belong to France—the former colonial power, which still exerts significant influence in the country—as well as to the United Nations, which last year passed a Security Council resolution calling on all foreign forces to leave Lebanon and will likely play a major role in overseeing an eventual Syrian withdrawal.

Instead, Washington's attempts to gain support for ridding Lebanon of Syrian domination may have been counter-productive. The pro-government forces became mobilized and the anti-government/anti-Syrian movement appeared to stall as soon as the United States started taking credit for it.

Just as the Bush administration was trumpeting its alleged role of inspiring demonstrations over previous weeks by tens of thousands of supporters of the Lebanese opposition, a counter-demonstration brought hundreds of thousands to the streets to denounce U.S. interference and show support for the pro-Syrian Lebanese government, and pro-Syrian prime minister Oman Karami, who had been dumped last month, was returned to power.

The pro-government rally was primarily organized by the Shiite Hizbullah party but was also supported by Amal (another Shiite party), as well as segments of the Sunni population loyal to Karami. Interestingly, Hizbullah's leaders have not openly called for the Syrians to remain,

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but have instead insisted that the withdrawal be carried out according to the guidelines of the Taif Accords (signed by the Syrian and Lebanese governments in 1989), and not as a result of foreign pressure.

Some observers believe that the protest—rather than being against a Syrian withdrawal—was meant more as a show of strength by Hizbullah and others to bargain for a place in a future Lebanese government. The connection the fundamentalist Lebanese Shiite movement has with the secular Syrian Baathist government has always been primarily an alliance of convenience.

Anti-Syrian sentiment has been growing in Lebanon for some time and has become increasingly widespread throughout the country's diverse religious and ethnic communities. The major problem has not been the presence of Syrian troops per se, which are far less visible and numerous than in previous years, but the effective control Syria wields through its secret police in Beirut, who effectively intimidate government officials into not challenging the wishes of Damascus. It has become less of an issue of ideology or ethnicity as one of nationalism. The *New York Times* and other news outlets noted that many of the protestors not only opposed Syrian intervention, but opposed French, Israeli, and American intervention as well.

At the same time, the presence of large numbers of affluent Maronite Christians at the earlier opposition rallies led many to dub the effort “the Gucci uprising” or “the BMW revolution.” Lebanese leftist Ghassam Makarem, in noting the high visibility at the anti-Syrian rallies of parties affiliated with the far right and various warlords, observed, “There is

absolutely no question that the Syrian presence in the country and their sponsorship of this ruling class should end. But there should also be no question that we cannot allow the genuine calls for peace and freedom to be hijacked by fascists and war criminals.”

The fact that the United States has supported a number of prominent Lebanese “fascists and war criminals” over the years has added to the backlash. The growing American calls for greater Lebanese sovereignty is viewed by most Lebanese as crass opportunism on the part of Washington, which for decades has undermined Lebanon's sovereignty.

The bottom line is that the complexity of Lebanese politics and the new dynamics on the ground in reaction to Hariri's killing precludes any premature claim of American credit for whatever positive developments have emerged in that war-ravaged country challenging the undue influence of Syria. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the widespread anti-American sentiment in Lebanon will change as long as U.S. demands that Lebanese sovereignty be respected appear to be limited only to situations where the violator of that sovereignty is not allied with the United States.

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