



## **On The Way to Lebanese Sovereignty - “The Cedar Revolution” The Lebanese Information Center - March 4, 2005**

The assassination of Ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri on February 14<sup>th</sup> has led to major (and probably unpredicted by those who committed the crime) Teutonic shift in the political scene in Lebanon. The roots of this shift have been present since the Syrian complete dominance over Lebanon in 1990, but it was mostly exclusive to Christian leaders and the silent majority.

Over the last decade, the Syrians have created a ruling class that held a tight control over most Lebanese establishments including judiciary, security, administrative, economy and through arbitrary fabrications of electoral law, imposed a majority in the Parliament. This class of collaborating officials and public “leaders” are all under the tight control and direct supervision of one supreme master, the Chief of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon presiding in the true seat of power in Anjar.

In 2001, the opposition to the Syrian rule expressed itself in more public forum that resulted in the brutal beating and jailing of demonstrators. It then extended to include the closing of opposing TV stations and the forced alteration of a key criminal law that enables the prosecution of anyone who speaks against Syria.

Despite many rumors to the contrary there is no disagreement among the Syrian Ba’ath leadership on the absolute necessity of the continued occupation and indeed the ultimate goal of annexing Lebanon to greater Syria. The so called old and new guards, ideologists and pragmatists in Syria all have a list of vested interest in the small neighbor.

The Syrian ideologists have regarded the creation of Lebanon as a historic mistake enforced by western conspiracy through the Sikes-Picot agreement. The Ba’ath ideology itself, as was the case in Iraq, is founded on correcting this “mistake” and follows an ultimate goal of an Arab unity. The annexation of Lebanon has always been considered by the Syrian regime as the stepping stone for such a plan.

Politically, the common belief is that the control of Lebanon enables the Syrian regime to play a regional super power role. The ability to undermine any peace initiative and to have a dual voice in international forums has always been a key component of Syrian political strategy.

Economically, Lebanon is the primary market for Syrian agricultural and textile goods. Through one-sided treaties, Syrian producers have the ability to flood the market while creating disadvantageous conditions for Lebanese counterparts who are unable to export to Syrian markets or even enjoy the same conditions in their own market. The same treaties and official blessing have

allowed Syrian cheap labor to flood the Lebanese market, in some estimates close to a million Syrians work today in Lebanon. It is not by accident that in the last ten years the Lebanese Labor secretary has always been chosen from either the Lebanese branch of the Syrian Ba'ath Party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

Financially, much of Syria's hard currency is received through Lebanon. Besides the huge amount of illegal deals that many in the Syrian regime and intelligence services are involved in and have been enriched from it, the regime itself has become financially dependent on the ability to pump billions of dollars from Lebanon. It is a common knowledge that a big part of the \$40 billion dollars in Lebanon's public debt has made its way to Syria's treasury and to the pockets of Ba'ath officials.

Indeed, there is no dispute among the Syrian Ba'ath Party. The loss of control of Lebanon, in their view, is the end of the Syrian regime. It is inconceivable to Bashar or any one else around him, to envision any scenario in which they would be able to maintain power in Syria without the Lebanese benefits. Since their mere survival is at stake, all measures are permissible in order to eliminate any clear danger that threatens their absolute hold. An added advantage to Assad is that he inherited a wealth of measures taken by his father in the past which have led to indisputable successes.

### *Was Hariri a threat to Syria?*

After the brutal treatment of the Opposition in 2001 and the events of 9/11, many leaders who had previously allied themselves with Syria have begun examining their stand. The US determination to spread democracy in the Middle East and the resolve of President Bush have given hope to many that change is possible. The deterioration of the Lebanese economy through corruption under Syrian tutelage and the degradation of many institutions by the constant micromanagement of Syrian intelligence have led to a general feeling of disgust among those Lebanese leaders who were trying to build a modern and strong state. Chief among those leaders were Rafic Hariri, the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir and Walid Jumblatt. The disgust turned into anger when Bashar decided to extend the term limit of President Lahoud. To make matters worse the manner in which the decision was communicated to Lebanese leaders, including Hariri, was coupled with threats and coercion that shut off any room for dispute and gravely insulted any sense of sovereignty left in the heart of the Lebanese.

With his immense political, international and financial power, Hariri saw a way to implement a dramatic change in the way Lebanon was being ruled by Syria. Even though, he was far from being alone in the opposition scene, no one else had the resources necessary to tip the balance of power in favor of the opposition. As a defacto leader of the Lebanese Sunnis and with the ability to sweep many areas through any form of election law imposed by the Syrians, Hariri became the critical element in the formula. If he were to stand by Syria, the opposition had no hope of winning any kind of majority in the upcoming spring election. His possible stand with the opposition, on the other hand, assured them success and eventual loosening of the Syrian grip over Lebanon. The Syrians had no doubts about where Hariri stood; they had already blamed him for advocating UNSC Resolution 1559, and considered his influence to be a grave threat. They no longer could rely on his total and unconditional allegiance to Syria. With Syrian influence already at risk by the rising voice of opposition in Lebanon, and the coming tide of democracy in the region, the Ba'ath regime considered the Hariri factor a serious threat to the Syrian regime's stability and survival.

The assassination of Hariri resolved for the Syrians the imbalance in the Lebanese formula. Even though the immediate aftermath of the assassination might not be considered by an independent observer to have benefited Syria, it is not hard to imagine that the risk associated with an imminent Hariri election victory, had surely been considered in the view of the Syrian leadership to far outweigh any possible damage as a consequence of such elimination. Additionally, the considerable Intelligence Services authority and power under Syria's control in Lebanon, does not necessarily result in "intelligent" decisions, a case in point is the Lahoud extension. History will tell if the assassination was a catastrophic blunder by the Syrians, but it is already evident to many that the Machiavellistic calculation ability of the late Hafez Assad was not inherited by the son.

Faced with the overwhelming and peaceful revolt of the people in Lebanon, the international outcry against the brutal assassination and the demand for the complete and immediate withdrawal of all Syrian forces, the Syrian regime still considers itself able to maneuver out of the current situation with minimal losses. Handicapped by the filtration of information that typically occurs in totalitarian regimes and the one sided arguments delivered by an orchestra of yes-men, all evidences indicate that the Syrians have a high level of confidence in their ability to ignore international will. In an interview with the Italian *La Repubblica* on February 28th, Bashar stated "they (meaning the Americans) will discover sooner or later that we are the key to the solution in Iraq and to the Arab Israeli conflict...they will be soon coming to knock on our doors" Violent acts in the same week in Iraq and Israel "coincidentally" were ordered to highlight his argument.

A common analysis in the Syrian ruling circles is to compare today's situation again to the climate in 1982. At that time, Syria was surrounded by a hostile Saddam Hussein, unfriendly Jordan, a dispute with Turkey, an Israeli invasion in Lebanon and political and military unrest in Syrian cities. Syria was also getting pressured by the international community for its active role in terrorist activities around the globe. In 1982, Bashir Gemayel the young President-Elect of Lebanon forced the Syrians to face what seemed to be an imminent loss of their control over Lebanon. His assassination in September of that year enabled the Syrians to set in motion a series of events that ultimately resulted in their overall dominance. Through cruel and effective means and by playing many of his cards brilliantly, Hafez Assad was able to turn the table and within two years he assured himself a bigger role in the region and solidified his regime.

Today, and regardless of what appears to be an overwhelming tide against the Syrians, it is the strong belief of many in the regime that the Syrians will be able to absorb the pressure and indeed prevail to become stronger as they did in 1982. Another strong belief is the fact that Syria by its firm stand against the US and other western powers is solidifying its influence among the Arab masses and hence gaining further leadership role as the flag bearer of Arab nationalism. The obvious futility of such views especially after the consequences of Saddam Hussein's identical convictions is somehow still lost on Syrian leadership. Such ignorance is not only dangerous but catastrophic to a fragile region going through the first meaningful transition since World War II.

Whatever the risks are, the Syrian Ba'ath leadership is proceeding with the same tactics that granted them success back in 1982. Among those being implemented or considered are:

- Further elimination of opposition leaders and perhaps loyalist figures to cause a national rift and intimidation.
- Void peace overtures that waste time and lead to no where.

- Holding back on any withdrawal until they receive guarantees for resuming direct peace talks with Israel.
- Attempts to make a deal with the US by accepting some of the demands in lieu of freeing their hand in Lebanon.
- Handing some elements of the Iraqi regime or implementing better control of the Syrian-Iraqi border in order to prompt better cooperation by some officials in the US.
- Coordinating with other Arab leaders to ease the pressure on Syria by a smokescreen of Arab initiatives.
- Strengthening relationships with other nations that have vested interest in gaining more influence in the Middle East, such as Iran, Russia and China.
- Support a higher degree of violent acts in Iraq to deepen the need for Syria's support in combating the insurgency.
- Undermining the fragile truce in Israel by prompting more terrorists acts directed against the Israeli population.
- Encouraging Hezbollah to direct terror acts in Israel and/or to cause border clashes.
- Sacrificing the Lebanese cabinets or even President Lahoud to absorb public pressure and replace them with candidates with the same allegiance to its role.
- Change of key Syrian officials involved in the Lebanese file, including heads of intelligence services and key officials to shift the blame to "renegade" elements.
- A series of redeployment that nets little and maintains all the Security Intelligence Services in Lebanon.
- Rearming small bands of trouble makers (including Palestinians) in Lebanon to disturb the peace and create conditions that enforce the claim of Lebanon's instability.
- Forcing Lebanese leaders to publicly dispute notions of unity and spread threat of civil war.
- Use the controlled Lebanese judicial system to prosecute opposition leaders and their supporters.
- Create a constitutional void in Lebanon by halting any process to replace the resigned government.
- Induce elements of the Lebanese army to clash with the peaceful demonstrators to rein public sentiment and promote national division.
- Commit an aggression act against Israel, that prompts the Israeli to respond and automatically allowing Syria to take advantage of a sympathetic Arab public opinion and Emergency laws.

The bottom line is that the Syrian regime will try every card at its disposal instead of accepting a complete withdrawal from Lebanon, a move that they perceive as fatal to their existence. Their confidence and wide array of their options should not be underestimated. The Syrians are so entrenched in Lebanon, that even a military strike against their forces that might result in military withdrawal would still leave much of their Intelligence and collaborators apparatus intact.

## ***What could be done?***

The Lebanese public and popular opposition has benefited from the US forward-strategy of freedom in the Middle East. By committing themselves against many odds upon Hariri's assassination and by unifying their ranks under the flag of democracy and freedom, Lebanon has become the latest stage in our drive for democratizing the region. Indeed the ingredients were always rich in that land. Lebanon, as evident in current events, has enjoyed one of the most vigorous spirits of freedom in the Middle East. The current struggle is a test for us today as well as the Lebanese. Are we able to support and strengthen this spirit in order for the momentum to continue? Failure to do so will surely result in a complete failure of President Bush strategy of freedom and democracy. Failure will surely give much boost to the other totalitarian regimes and the forces that are adamant on fighting what we stand for.

Our support can take shape in many venues:

### ***Diplomatic:***

1. Continued public insistence on an immediate and complete withdrawal of all Syrian troops and Intelligence apparatus.
2. Pressuring the Saudis and Egyptians to exert pressure of their own on the Syrians rather than be disillusioned by their rhetoric.
3. Require public Arab condemnation of Syria's policy in Lebanon and work for a declaration by the Arab summit asking the Syrians to comply with 1559.
4. Maintain coordination with France and other European countries to intensify diplomatic pressure on the Syrians.
5. Pass a new UN resolution with a clear demand for a complete and immediate Syrian withdrawal.
6. Shutting out the Syrian overtures for peace until the US demands are met.
7. Further reduce the US embassy personnel in Damascus and prompting allies to do the same.
8. Supporting the Lebanese opposition through international forums in the US and allied nations to recognize their struggle and leadership.
9. Disarming all militias, Lebanese and non-Lebanese, and protecting the safety of the Lebanese people through the use of multinational forces, if needed.
10. Organizing a national conference under American-French or UN patronage to achieve the true national reconciliation which never took place after the end of the Lebanese war, and to ensure the fair participation of all Lebanese political movements and parties.
11. Relentless demand for a thorough investigation in the Hariri's assassination preferably by a U.N. team.

### ***Economical:***

1. Take further measures as stated in the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act to eliminate any economical transaction with Damascus.
2. Prohibit any financial transaction with anyone in Lebanon who actively supports the Syrian

occupation.

3. Indefinitely suspend the participation of Syria in the European Economic partnership.
4. Work with Jordan, Iraq and other Arab countries to reduce the amount of transferable goods among those states and Syria.
5. Financially support any institution actively involved in promoting our values in Lebanon and working to end the occupation. Including those with presence in the US and Syrian groups opposing to the regime.

***Other:***

1. Active involvement of our intelligence services in evaluating the status of the Syrian regime and in support of those who oppose it.
2. Permitting our armed forces to pursue Iraqi insurgent elements inside the Syrian border.
3. Increased financial and academic support to Lebanese academic institutions especially Christian and pro western universities and schools.
4. Concentrate the utilization of the US public relations effort in the Middle East on promoting democracy in Lebanon.
5. Never rule out the use of force against the Syrians.

Today, Lebanon represents a wonderful opportunity for the United States to effectively support what our President has preached. By their heroic and unified stand, the freedom loving people of Lebanon have proven the strength of our argument for democracy. We have the moral obligation not to let them down.

In a region where millions of oppressed people are watching and taking note from the unfolding events in Beirut, our commitment to our declared principles is being tested. The beauty of the Cedar Revolution is that it does not require the blood of our troops to succeed, only our resolve and support.

