

US rejects Assad's concessions and steps up threats against Syria

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The Bush administration flatly rejected an offer by Syrian President Bashir Assad to carry out a limited withdrawal of Syrian forces in Lebanon, stepping up its campaign to isolate the Syrian regime and create the conditions for imperialist military intervention in both Arab countries.

Assad announced a phased withdrawal of Syrian troops to positions along the Lebanon-Syria border, to be conducted over the next several months. He was responding to a rising campaign of diplomatic and economic pressure triggered by the United States and France, and endorsed by Germany as well as the two principal patrons of Damascus, Russia and Saudi Arabia.

The response in Washington was harsh and negative. A White House spokeswoman condemned Assad's "half measures," declaring they were "not enough." Syria must withdraw all its military forces and intelligence agents "completely and immediately," she said.

In his Saturday radio address, taped Friday and broadcast two hours before Assad's withdrawal plan was unveiled, Bush preemptively rejected the offer. Citing the collaboration of France and the US, Bush said the world was "speaking with one voice to ensure that democracy and freedom are given a chance to flourish in Lebanon."

In language ominously reminiscent of the propaganda campaign before the US invasion of Iraq, Bush cited the UN Security Council resolution adopted last fall, which he said required that "all foreign forces be withdrawn, and that free and fair elections be conducted without foreign influence."

The Bush administration launched its campaign against the Syrian presence in Lebanon after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a one-time ally of the Syrian regime who was killed by a massive car bomb in Beirut February 14. Hariri broke with Assad last fall over his decision to push through an extension of the term in office of Lebanese President Emil Lahoud.

While the huge size and apparent technical sophistication of the car-bombing point to an intelligence service, rather than an underground terrorist group, as the likely perpetrator, the nationality of the intelligence service remains to be determined. The United States and Israel are at least as likely as Syria to have seen Hariri's death as conducive to their political purposes. Certainly the Bush administration has leaped at the opportunity provided by the assassination to unleash a long-planned effort to destabilize and remove the Syrian regime.

The next step in the US campaign against Syria appears to be the Arab League summit, to be held in Algeria March 22-23, where the Bush administration expects its principal Mideast stooges, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to increase the pressure for a pullout from Lebanon.

Looming on the horizon is a more forceful alternative: open military attack on Damascus. Syrian President Assad, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, said in response to a question about a possible US invasion, "Washington has imposed sanctions on us and isolated us in the past, but each time the circle hasn't closed around us. If, however, you ask me if I'm expecting an armed attack, well, I've seen it coming since the end of the war in Iraq."

The political atmosphere in Washington is typified by one of Bush's Texas political colleagues, Republican Congressman Sam Johnson, in remarks quoted recently in the Capitol Hill journal *Roll Call*. Johnson told a group of constituents at a church breakfast that he had been at the White House in a discussion with Bush which turned to the subject of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

As Johnson, a retired Air Force combat pilot, recounted the conversation, he told Bush, "Syria is the problem. Syria is where those weapons of mass destruction are, in my view. You know, I can fly an F-15, put two nukes on 'em and I'll make one pass. We won't have to worry about Syria anymore."

The most salient characteristic of the US campaign against Syria is its utter, brazen hypocrisy. In a manner that warrants comparison to the "big lie" tactics of Hitler and Goebbels, the US government accuses others of committing the very crimes of which it is itself guilty.

White House spokeswoman Erin Healy declared Saturday, "The world will hold the governments of Lebanon and Syria directly accountable for any intimidation, confrontation or violence directed against the people of Lebanon."

This from a government engaged in massive violence against the people of Iraq! As many as 100,000 Iraqis have been killed since the US invasion of the country in March of 2003. The US occupation has employed mass arrests, imprisonment without charge and torture as its *modus operandi* for suppressing Iraqi resistance. As for "intimidation," Bush administration officials and the US media have been openly discussing military action against Syria since US forces arrived on the Iraqi-Syrian border nearly two years ago.

In his Saturday radio address, Bush declared that “Syria has been an occupying force in Lebanon for nearly three decades.” He demanded immediate withdrawal of all Syrian forces in Lebanon, and an aide who briefed the American media elaborated on this demand. “Anything less—phased withdrawal, partial withdrawal, leaving the intelligence agents in place—is a violation” of the Security Council resolution, the aide said.

The United States, of course, occupies Iraq with 150,000 troops, ten times the number of Syrian forces in Lebanon. Similarly, Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip with thousands of troops since 1967—a decade longer than the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Israeli troops control most cities on the West Bank, but Syrian troops have been pulled out of Beirut and other Lebanese cities, concentrating in the Bekaa Valley, a potential invasion route by Israeli forces in the event of war with Syria.

In several public appearances last week, Bush stepped up the pressure on Syria by setting a deadline for withdrawal from Lebanon. All Syrian troops must be out before the scheduled parliamentary elections in May. One top White House aide told the press, “How fair an election can Lebanon hold if the troops are there to intimidate voters, people running for election, or people now in office?”

If such an election in Lebanon would be a travesty, what is one to say about the January 30 elections in Iraq, held under the gun sights of a vast American army of occupation, or the Palestinian election, where voters had to pass Israeli military checkpoints to cast their ballots? In Iraq, no candidates opposed to the occupation were permitted to run. In the Palestinian vote, the most popular candidate, jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti, was kept in prison to insure a clear field for the US- and Israeli-backed Mahmoud Abbas.

Perhaps the ultimate irony in the current crisis is that Syria is being targeted by American imperialism for an occupation which was originally sanctioned by Washington as a step to guarantee stability and suppress “terrorism” in Lebanon.

Syrian troops entered the county in 1976 at the request of the Lebanese government, dominated by right-wing Maronite Christians organized in the fascistic Phalangist party. The Maronite ruling elite faced a challenge from below, in a popular mobilization that united the Palestinian refugee population and the masses of Shiite poor, spearheaded by the PLO and the Shiite Amal militia.

The policy of the US and Israeli governments, both longtime allies of the Phalange, was to rely on Syria to suppress the popular movement and safeguard the Beirut regime. This took its bloodiest form in the 1976 massacre at the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp outside the Lebanese capital, when hundreds of Palestinians were slaughtered by Phalangist gunmen sent into the camp under the auspices of Syrian military units that had surrounded it.

Subsequently, in 1982, Ariel Sharon, then head of the Israeli military, became dissatisfied with the Syrian performance in suppressing the Palestinians and the Lebanese militias, by that time including the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Sharon sent the Israeli Defense Forces into Lebanon to do the job instead, as Syrian forces pulled back to avoid a confrontation.

At the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, Israeli troops played

the same role as the Syrians at Tel al-Zataar: they surrounded the camps and permitted Phalangist death squads to move in and slaughter at will. Sharon was ultimately found guilty of command responsibility for this atrocity by an Israeli investigating panel, and forced to step down as military chief.

In the two decades since, Syrian troops have continued to play the role of a stabilizing force on behalf of imperialist interests and the Lebanese ruling class—which included Rafik Hariri, reputedly the country’s richest man, with a billion-dollar fortune derived from the Saudi construction industry.

The conquest of Iraq has changed the political calculus in Washington, which now regards Syria as the next likely target for its policy of dominating the Middle East, and Lebanon as Syria’s weak spot, the area most susceptible to American and Israeli machinations. The current US campaign against Damascus has nothing do with sympathy for the plight of the Lebanese people under Syrian occupation, despite the crocodile tears since the assassination of Hariri.

The American media, of course, is incapable of either genuine historical analysis or a critical attitude to the imperialist foreign policy of Washington. One of the more insufferable expressions of its attitude came in an editorial in the *New York Times* March 4.

Hailing Syria’s isolation and the line-up of Saudi Arabia, Russia, Germany and France with the Bush administration, the *Times* denounced Syria’s policy of running Lebanon as “a profitable fief” and its “despicable tactics” of refusing to suppress the Hezbollah militia. “President Assad can no longer afford to ignore the world’s growing impatience,” the editors intoned.

The cynicism and lies that permeate US foreign policy are summed up in the headline chosen by the *Times*: “Lebanon for the Lebanese.” One can state with certainty that the goal of the Bush administration and the Sharon government is not Lebanon for the Lebanese, but Lebanon for the US and Israel, with perhaps a bone thrown to France as well.

Indeed, as the *Washington Post* reported March 5, the Bush administration is already discussing with France what kind of outside military force might supplant Syria in a post-withdrawal Lebanon, because “the United States fears the Lebanese army is not strong enough to exert and maintain control over the entire country, particularly since Hezbollah, or Party of God, controls much of southern Lebanon.”

The *Post* continued: “One option the United States is considering is how the UN force that has been deployed along Lebanon’s border with Israel since 1978 could be used to help fill the security void in the area dominated by Syria, according to US and European officials. By coincidence, UN Resolution 1583 renewed the force’s mandate in January, with language allowing the mission to be altered or expanded...”

Coincidence indeed! A new imperialist carve-up of Lebanon is already underway, even before any withdrawal of Syrian troops.



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