

As Bush tells Lebanese “we are with you”

Massive rally in Beirut rejects US intervention

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A demonstration organized by the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement brought a crowd estimated at between 500,000 and 1 million people into the streets of Beirut Tuesday to oppose US intervention in Lebanon and denounce Washington’s mounting threats against Syria.

The crowd, drawn predominantly from the Shiite population, Lebanon’s largest and historically most oppressed, chanted “Death to America,” “Death to Israel” and “Beirut is free, America out.” Protesters carried placards reading “America is the source of terrorism,” and “All our disasters come from America.” One bore a photo of Bush and the words, “Lebanon isn’t your playground.” Others expressed support for Syria.

The massive demonstration unfolded just before George W. Bush delivered a speech on the “war on terror” at the US National Defense University. Rhetoric and reality could not have been more starkly at odds as Bush extolled the virtues of “freedom” and “democracy”—empty words that appeared close to 40 times in his speech—while making pointed threats against Syria, apparently the next target for US intervention.

“The Lebanese people have the right to determine their future, free from domination by a foreign power,” Bush declared, demanding the immediate withdrawal of all Syrian troops from Lebanon. “All the world is witnessing your great movement of conscience,” he said of the Lebanese. “Lebanon’s future is in your hands.”

No one in the American corporate press dared expose the irony of Bush proclaiming to the Lebanese that Washington is “on your side,” just as hundreds of thousands of them were in the streets telling the US president to keep out of their country.

While Tuesday’s demonstration in Beirut was 10 times as large as anything the US-backed Lebanese opposition has mounted in demanding Syria’s withdrawal, it is a safe bet that it—and subsequent rallies of a similar political character—will receive less than one tenth the coverage in the US media.

The hostility toward Bush’s attempt to dress up another American intervention in democratic rhetoric is well founded. US imperialism has a long record in Lebanon and bears principal responsibility both for the oppression of the Lebanese masses and for the hundreds of thousands killed or maimed during the country’s 15-year-long civil war.

In July 1958, the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched the Sixth Fleet to Lebanon and landed 10,000 US Marines there to prop up the government of right-wing President Camille Chamoun on the pretext that he was under attack from “international communism.”

In reality, Chamoun was facing an internal revolt after the CIA helped him fix an election and suppress the opposition. Washington was intent on maintaining Lebanon as a Western client state and on using military force to quell the spread of radical Arab nationalism. The US military action was directly precipitated by the overthrow of the pro-US monarchy by nationalist officers in neighboring Iraq.

One of the most thorough studies of the intervention concluded that its underlying purpose was “to assure access to petroleum resources, the

construction of bases, the acquisition of air transit rights, and the more general consensus on commercial expansion in the region” (“United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945-1958,” Irene Gendzier.) Little has changed in terms of Washington’s real aims.

The US intervention served to bolster a regime that functioned largely as a police state, defending the interests of the Christian financial elite while suppressing the growing Muslim population and its demand for democratic majority rule.

Civil war broke out in 1975 between the fascistic Christian Phalangists, backed by Israel, and the Lebanese left, representing the impoverished Muslim majority, in alliance with the Palestinians. Turning its attention again to Lebanon, Washington first provided political support for an intervention by Syria, which sent in its army at the behest of Lebanon’s Maronite Christian president, Suleiman Franjjeih and the rightists, who were on the brink of defeat.

While sections of the Lebanese left had illusions that the Syrian Baathist regime would support them, these were soon dashed. The Syrian military was used to prevent a victory for the revolt in Lebanon, which the regime of Hafez al-Assad feared would radicalize the entire region, threatening its own survival.

US support for Israel’s invasion

In 1982, then-US secretary of state Alexander Haig gave the US a green light for an Israeli invasion that was to claim tens of thousands of Lebanese lives. The Zionist regime turned its full fire power against the crowded slums of West Beirut and initiated an occupation and fighting in southern Lebanon that would continue for another 18 years. Not a few of those demonstrating on Tuesday have relatives who were killed, wounded or imprisoned at the hands of the US-backed Israeli military.

In October 1982, the US again sent Marines into Lebanon, this time to consolidate the results of the Israeli invasion—the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from the country and the installation of a right-wing regime under Phalangist leader Amin Gemayel.

Effectively siding with one faction in the civil war, Washington provoked the anger of the country’s oppressed Muslims. US forces responded to attacks by attacking Shiite villages from the air and sea, killing hundreds. In retaliation, Shiite forces staged a suicide bombing attack that claimed the lives of 241 Marines. US forces remained in Lebanon for another four months. During this period, the 16-inch guns of the battleship USS New Jersey were repeatedly used in retaliatory shelling of Druze and Shiite positions.

Washington is fully implicated in Syria’s current military presence in Lebanon as well. Bush’s father agreed to Syria’s role in 1989-1990, both to assure continued stability in the country and as a reward for the Hafez

al-Assad regime's support for the first US Persian Gulf War against Iraq.

Of course the "great movement of conscience" that Bush hailed on Tuesday was not that of the Shiite oppressed who took to the streets that day to oppose another US intervention. Rather, he was praising the earlier anti-Syrian demonstrations organized in the wake of the February 14 assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon.

US media reports on Lebanon suggest that the population as a whole has risen in revolt against Syria, blaming it and its Lebanese allies for the assassination. This is just one more distortion. In fact, opinions are strongly divided along sectarian lines, and there is widespread belief in Lebanon that Israel and/or the US were responsible for the killing.

According to a poll released March 7 by Zogby International, about half of the country's Maronite Christians think either Syrian or Lebanese officials were involved in the killing. Among Shiites polled, on the other hand, 70 percent said that either the US or Israel were responsible. Among the Lebanese population as a whole, 45 percent said the US and Israel benefited from the slaying, while 11 said it benefited Syria.

Significantly, less than half of the Maronites polled believed that Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon offered a solution to the country's crisis, while the percentage was considerably lower among other sections of the population.

Editorial and headline writers and the hacks at the television news outlets have no time for such contradictions. They have outdone themselves in glorifying the anti-Syrian protests as the "Cedar revolution," "Beirut spring," and "people power."

As the *New York Times* acknowledged on Wednesday, however, in Lebanon itself the so-called Cedar Revolution has become known as the "BMW revolution" because of the well-heeled character of the protesters in Martyrs' Square. Announcements of these gatherings are reportedly transmitted via cell-phone text-messaging, drawing the sons and daughters of Lebanon's ruling elite out of the discos and into the street.

Not coincidentally, one of the principal leaders of this "people's" protest is Dory Chamoun, the son of Camille Chamoun, the president whom Eisenhower sent US Marines to rescue from his own people nearly half a century ago. During the civil war of 1975-76, the elder Chamoun was among the Christian leaders who pleaded with Syria to intervene in Lebanon to save them from the Palestinians and the Lebanese left, and then sought Israeli support for the same purpose.

Dory, who is regularly quoted as a leading "democrat," had a brother, Dany, who was the commander of the Chamouns' Tiger militia. The Tigers were responsible for the 1975 massacre of 2,000 Palestinian men, women and children—with Syrian aid—after they surrendered at the Tel al-Za'atar refugee camp. In 1982, the militia's members joined in the Israeli-organized slaughter of refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps. This is the fascist pedigree of the US-backed champions of freedom in Lebanon.

The hundreds of thousands who demonstrated Tuesday presented a stark contrast to the trendy protesters led by Chamoun and other Maronite rightists. They were drawn overwhelmingly from the country's Shiite working class and poor. Absent were the colorful scarves, designer sunglasses and fashionable clothing that have so fascinated the American media as symbols of the "new Middle East."

Lebanon's social polarization

Since the civil war, social polarization in Lebanon has only intensified. The much celebrated rebuilding of the country has yielded new fortunes for those like the Chamouns, while deepening the poverty of the majority. The unemployment rate has been estimated as high as 20 percent. Close to one third of the country lives in poverty, eking out an existence on less

than \$600 a month. The Lebanese government has fully embraced free market policies that have cut the top tax rate to just 10 percent and dismantled much of the public sector while drastically restricting trade unions.

The US media has echoed the Bush administration's absurd claim that the January 30 vote in US-occupied Iraq inspired the Lebanese people to join a crusade for democracy that is supposedly sweeping the Middle East.

What Lebanon, with an elected government and a functioning parliament, had to learn from a vote held under a state of siege and that has left the US military in complete control of the country is never explained. The only "example" offered by Iraq is that of the colonial subjugation of a country by means of brute military force.

Neither Washington nor those seeking Syria's ouster are motivated by some love of "freedom" and "democracy."

That the Bush administration has no interest in promoting democracy in Lebanon is clear. Its current machinations are part of a long and ignoble record of supporting every antidemocratic force in the country in order to further its own strategic interest in the region. Its attitude toward Hezbollah is indicative. The party currently has a bloc of 12 members in parliament and is expected to register significant gains in the next election. As the rally in Beirut demonstrated, it enjoys mass support among Lebanon's Shiite plurality. Yet, because of its opposition to US and Israeli policy in the region, Washington continues to insist that it is a terrorist organization that must be suppressed.

For the most part, the anti-Syrian demonstrations are led by people who are committed to defending the privileges of a small financial elite. They champion a social inequality that is incompatible with any genuine democracy. And they see removing Syria, disarming Hezbollah and drawing in the US as a means of strengthening their position at the expense of the country's majority.

In Lebanon, bitter social and political divisions persist that barely 15 years ago were still being fought out in a civil war. To further its aim of a new Pax Americana leaving the US in undisputed control of the Middle East and its oil wealth, the Bush administration is seeking to overturn the agreement that ended that civil war and impose its own fiat by means of United Nations Resolution 1559, a measure that has never been approved by either the Lebanese people or its representatives.

"Lebanon is not Ukraine," Hezbollah leader Nasrallah told the crowd Tuesday, referring to the US-backed "Orange Revolution" of last December which succeeded in replacing one clique of wealthy industrial oligarchs and ex-bureaucrats with another, more closely aligned with the West.

The warning was clear. The attempt by Washington to turn Lebanon into a pro-US, pro-Israeli satellite has immense internal social implications and carries with it the threat of plunging the country into a civil war that could engulf the entire region.



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