

# US increases pressure on Lebanon amid growing instability

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United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield has insisted that Lebanon's general election, scheduled for May, must go ahead so as to create a "different political environment."

Satterfield made his comments last week during his second visit to Lebanon since the assassination in February of ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri. Satterfield met the Maronite Christian Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir and other prominent opposition figures who are demanding Syrian withdrawal from the country. His announcement was apparently calculated to stop the pro-Syrian prime minister-designate Omar Karami from delaying elections that it is assumed will favour opposition candidates.

The US move is the latest in a campaign designed to destabilise the existing political setup in Lebanon and Syria and impose a "democracy" that is compliant with Washington's interests in the region. Syria has already pulled out 4,000 troops from Lebanon and withdrawn its intelligence agents from Beirut, but the US has said that the remaining 10,000 or so Syrian troops that have moved back to the eastern Bekaa Valley must be completely withdrawn before the May elections.

Its demands come amid a growing crisis in Lebanon, with tensions rising after three bomb attacks in predominantly Christian areas of Beirut in the past eight days. At least 17 people have been injured and several killed in the blasts.

Opposition politicians have accused Syria of being behind these atrocities, but nobody has claimed responsibility, and they may not even be linked to the Hariri assassination. Nonetheless, the US is using the bombings to threaten Syria. Satterfield warned, "There may be those parties and governments who are interested in promoting violence and instability. They will be held directly accountable for their actions."

The notion that Syria would benefit from such bombings is highly questionable given the mounting pressure on the weak regime in Damascus. But the eagerness of the Bush administration to seize on the explosions to intensify its pressure on Damascus and forces within Lebanon opposed

to the US-backed opposition emphasises the recklessness of US policy, which could easily plunge Lebanon into another civil war.

The United Nations investigation into the Hariri bombing has criticised the Lebanese official inquiry. The UN has accused both Lebanon's security services and Syrian military intelligence of failing to provide security at the time, and has called for an international inquiry.

Given the current stance by the US and the Western powers towards Syria, such an inquiry could hardly be impartial. There is no doubt it would proceed from the assumption that Syria was responsible, when, in fact, other governments, such as the US and Israel, had much to gain from an assassination that could be attributed to Syria and used to break up the political settlement within Lebanon that was forged at the end of the civil war 15 years ago.

Little reported in the Western media are the growing number of attacks on Syrian workers in Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were employed in the country, mainly in the construction industry. As many as 30 have been murdered in the last month, and thousands have been forced to leave as a chauvinistic climate against Syrians has been whipped up.

Lebanon's political opposition has so far refused take part in the "national unity" government that Karami is attempting to form. Karami resigned following last month's anti-Syrian protests, only to return two weeks later, but so far he has been unable to cobble together an interim government, without which it is constitutionally impossible to call an election. The opposition is demanding key ministerial positions and a majority in the cabinet.

It is not even clear which voting system will be used in the May poll, as the new election legislation put forward in January of this year has yet to be ratified.

Lebanon's voting system relies on the setting of boundaries by the outgoing government, so that each constituency is dominated by a religious grouping. Candidates are chosen on the basis of religious affiliation and clan groupings within religions, rather than on the basis

of policies. Questions of poverty and unemployment that affect a large majority of the population will not be discussed, let alone voted on in the election.

Whilst pressure from the US may force the pro-Syrian factions, including Hezbollah and allied Shiite parties, to accept a system that is more favourable to the opposition, it will still mean the Shiites, who form a majority of the population and also its poorest sections, will be drastically underrepresented. In the 2000 elections, the Shiite parties, Hezbollah and Amal, took a mere 27 seats in the 120-seat parliament.

Hezbollah's mobilisation of between 500,000 and a million people on the streets of Beirut on March 8 against the US intervention in Lebanon underlines their political weight in the country. Their military success in forcing Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000, after 22 years of occupation, gives them widespread support.

The fact that Israel, with its far superior military might, remains a threat to the Lebanese people—it still occupies the Shebaa Farms area that is claimed by Lebanon—is cited by Hezbollah as justification for retaining its militia. Without the Syrian army and with Hezbollah disarmed, the tiny Lebanese military would present no opposition to Israel. In large part for this reason, the Bush administration is insisting on a “democracy” that proscribes Hezbollah as a “terrorist organisation” unless it totally disarms.

The “different political environment” that the US demands in Lebanon is not only a matter of disarming Hezbollah and stepping up pressure on Syria, as well as Hezbollah's other base of support, Iran, it is also a matter of gaining control of the Lebanese economy, a key financial centre in the Middle East with connections throughout the Arab world.

Last year, the Lebanese economy grew at a rate of 5 percent, based on its earnings in finance and tourism. But the country has been increasingly criticised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for its huge public debt, estimated at \$33 billion.

At the so-called Paris II conference in 2002, Hariri, who was then Lebanon's prime minister, secured \$3 billion in credit from France and the Gulf states towards paying off the country's deficit, which had built up in the 1990s following the civil war. In return for the loan, Lebanon was supposed to introduce what local IMF officials described as “vigorous and painful reforms,” including massive job cuts in the public sector and privatisation in key areas, such as telecommunications.

Hariri and other politicians were willing to bring in the privatisation measures, but were blocked by Syria. The Middle East Intelligence Bulletin (August/September 2003) complained that investors faced a “lack of government transparency and reliable contract enforcement.” And

whereas “Hariri, a billionaire construction magnate with strong connections to Saudi and European investors, would stand to gain more from privatisation (both politically and financially),” the pro-Syrian factions and the military-intelligence elite “have sought to obstruct privatisation at every turn,” the bulletin stated.

Very few social statistics for the Lebanese population are available, but it is well known that the rapid expansion of the economy has already thrown up a huge divide between a narrow layer of rich, mainly based in Beirut, and impoverished masses elsewhere.

Some 300,000 people, nearly 10 percent of the population—mainly the young and most educated—have left Lebanon over the last ten years. Official unemployment is estimated at around 10 percent, but economists calculate the rate to be as high as 20-25 percent, with 30-35 percent unemployment among young people.

Studies carried out in 1996 showed about one third of Lebanese living below the poverty line. The government tried to discredit the 1996 figures and has blocked further studies, but economist Antoine Haddad, who carried out one of the 1996 studies, told the *An Nahar* newspaper last year, “Major social suffering has accumulated over the past seven years. It includes unemployment, lower educational levels, reduced health coverage, lower quality of services in rural and suburban areas, lower incomes, higher family budget deficits, the housing problem, etc.”

Even this limited data makes clear what IMF-directed measures would mean in terms of job losses and cuts in public education, health and welfare for the majority of the Lebanese population. But there is no public discussion of the opposition's economic policies and their support for “free market” measures. Opposition politicians merely claim that Syria, heavily dependent on the Lebanese economy, is milking it to the tune of billions of dollars each year.

The opposition leaders have gained support, primarily among better-off layers, in part because of anger against the Syrian regime, whose intelligence services have dominated public life in Lebanon. There can be no doubt, however, that the enthusiasm shown in the US administration for the “Cedar Revolution” has nothing to do with its professed desire for democratisation of the country, and everything to do with ensuring the swift imposition of the “vigorous and painful reforms” long demanded by the IMF and the many US corporations with interests in the region.



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