

Lebanese regime approves US-backed tribunal directed against Syria

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The Lebanese cabinet voted Saturday to approve the establishment of an international tribunal to try suspects in the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The action sets the stage for a further confrontation between the United Nations Security Council and the Syrian government of President Bashar al Assad, the main target of the tribunal.

The decision was the cabinet's first major action since the assassination Tuesday of Pierre Gemayel, the industry minister and member of the Phalange Party. It came by unanimous vote, following last week's walkout by six cabinet ministers allied with Syria, five of them members of Hezbollah and Amal, the two major Shiite parties.

Hezbollah immediately denounced the cabinet vote as unconstitutional, on the grounds that it was taken without Shiite participation in violation of normal procedures, which require participation of representatives of the three major confessional groups—Christian, Sunni and Shiite.

The cabinet vote does not have legal effect unless ratified by the Syrian-backed president, Emil Lahoud, who denounced the action as unconstitutional. If Lahoud refuses to sign off on the decision the resolution will be referred to the parliament, whose speaker, Nabih Berri of the Shiite Amal Party, is also expected to oppose it.

The main purpose of the cabinet action is to show support for the campaign spearheaded by the United States and France to isolate Syria and target it for diplomatic and economic sanctions, as well as possible military attack. Its main impact within Lebanon will be to further inflame sectarian tensions, pitting the Christian-Sunni majority in parliament against the Shiites, the largest population group in the country.

Officials of Hezbollah said they would observe the

seven-day official mourning period for Gemayel before proceeding with a previously planned series of mass demonstrations to demand greater political representation for Shiite parties. Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah called for the protests last week, but the demonstrations were postponed after Gemayel was gunned down on a street in northern Beirut.

Nasrallah on Saturday telephoned Gemayel's father, former Lebanese President Amin Gemayel, to offer his condolences. According to press reports, the two men spoke directly and Nasrallah referred to the death of his own son, killed in a confrontation with Israeli troops more than a decade ago. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* noted, "The conversation was significant in that it was the first time Hezbollah has expressed sympathy for the pain and loss felt by their political rivals in Lebanon."

The Gemayel murder cleared the way for rapid UN Security Council approval of the tribunal, which had been delayed by opposition from Russia, which has veto power, and Qatar, the lone Arab state holding Security Council membership this year. The assassination came only hours before a 6 pm Tuesday deadline for Security Council members to file objections to the resolution backing the tribunal, which will hold sessions outside Lebanon—probably in Cyprus—and will have a majority of non-Lebanese prosecutors and judges.

US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton said the killing of Maronite Christian politician Pierre Gemayel raised the possibility of Syrian involvement. He said the United States would seek to add Gemayel to the list of those whose alleged killers are to be prosecuted by the tribunal. The list now includes Hariri and 14 other Lebanese who died at the hands of assassins or their bombs.

Russia and Qatar had cited the conflict between

President Lahoud and the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Fuad Siniora as the basis for their opposition to UN sanction for the tribunal, but ultimately agreed to allow the Lebanese government to settle the constitutional dispute.

According to a growing number of media reports, there is widespread belief in the Middle East that the US government, Israel or their operatives are responsible for the Gemayal killing, as part of Washington's anti-Syrian campaign.

The British newspaper the *Guardian* reported Friday, "The other main theory accuses the US or its allies in Lebanon of killing Gemayel to stop the opposition, led by Hezbollah, from bringing down the government and curtailing US influence. It also suggests an attempt to isolate Syria once again, just as the West wants to re-engage Damascus over possible help in Iraq."

Amal Saad Ghorayeb of the US-funded Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut told the *Guardian*, "The killing of Gemayel gave the embattled government a bit of breathing space and reinvigorated the pro-government forces' withering anti-Syrian cause, which has been primarily fuelled by the assassination of its leaders."

The American mass media, however, continues to present a one-sided account of the Gemayel assassination, accepting it as a given that Syria is responsible and seeking to use the killing to further the Bush administration campaign against the Assad regime.

One particularly flagrant example of the propaganda role of the US press came in Friday's column in the *Washington Post* by David Ignatius, one of the newspaper's main commentators on foreign affairs. Under the headline, "The Politics of Murder," Ignatius declared, "A disease is eating away at the Middle East. It afflicts the Syrians, the Iraqis, the Lebanese, even the Israelis. It is the idea that the only political determinant in the Arab world is raw force—the power of physical intimidation. It is politics as assassination."

In the upside-down world depicted by Ignatius, Arabs "are destroying themselves, literally and figuratively, with the politics of assassination," and it is up to the supposedly enlightened countries, above all the United States, to rescue the region from itself.

One would not guess, reading this screed, that the Bush administration is by far the world's number one

state killer of human beings, with a recent Johns Hopkins study placing the Iraqi death toll resulting from the US invasion and occupation at an estimated 655,000—far higher than the estimated death tolls in Bosnia or Darfur, which the US and other Western powers have declared examples of genocide.

The *Post* columnist goes on to observe, "The Middle East needs the rule of law," a rule which presumably applies only to Arabs, not to Israel—a serial violator of international law—or to the United States, which has elevated preventive war, the crime for which the Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg, to a doctrine of state.

The Bush administration is the world's premier practitioner of "the politics of murder," with the assistance of editorial apologists like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the rest of the corporate-controlled American media.



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