Western powers accuse Iran and Syria of masterminding Lebanese general strike

Chris Marsden
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Lebanese opposition parties and the trade unions called a halt yesterday to a general strike that had resulted in violent clashes with supporters of the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

Three people were killed and 133 wounded in fighting in Lebanon on Tuesday, January 23, as hundreds of thousands of demonstrators answered a call by trade unions backed by Hezbollah and Amal, both Shia parties, and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

The media focused attention on sectarian aspects of the conflict—with crowds of mainly Shia oppositionists facing off against supporters of Siniora's government, which is composed of Sunni, Druze and Christian parties. Sharp tensions were apparent in the armed clashes, fistfights and stone-throwing that took place. But sole blame for this was routinely placed on Hezbollah, which was accused of acting as a proxy of Iran and Syria against a supposedly democratic government. Siniora told Japan's Kyodo News that Lebanon has "been paying the price of imposed decisions coming from outside countries, like Iran and Syria."

"The decisions made by the opposition in Lebanon are decisions coming from outside, like Iran and Syria," he reiterated.

"What is happening is a revolution and a coup attempt," Christian leader and former warlord Samir Geagea told Al Jazeera.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack made similar claims, declaring that "Lebanese factions allied with Syria are blocking roads, preventing people from reaching their jobs and schools, and obstructing the work of the security services.... These factions are trying to use violence, threats, and intimidation to impose their political will on Lebanon."

In reality, Hezbollah was almost alone in publicly opposing sectarian violence. Moreover, it has come to the head of what is in fact a mass popular social and political protest of mainly impoverished Shias against a pro-Western regime that has no real mandate to govern. The government has been kept in power with the assistance of thousands of European troops and is intent on implementing an economic programme that is plunging all of Lebanon's workers and peasants ever deeper into abject poverty.

Hezbollah, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement withdrew their combined total of six ministers from the government in November last year and are demanding that it step down and call fresh elections for a national unity government. On December 1, 800,000 protested in Beirut and a picket of government buildings in Beirut's commercial centre involving thousands has been maintained ever since.

The Siniora government has rejected all the demands placed on it and instead sought to impose austerity measures dictated by the Western powers. This in a country that having barely recovered from the impact of the 1975-1990 civil war was then largely destroyed by Israel's 34-day bombing campaign, ground invasion and blockade that began July 12 last year. Israeli aggression resulted in over a thousand casualties, the displacement of a million Lebanese and massive damage to roads, bridges, buildings, power stations and other vital infrastructure. Combined with economic dislocation, the United Nations estimated that the war cost Lebanon $15 billion.

Lebanon's public debt stands at a massive $41 billion.

An international donor's conference in August last year pledged a paltry $1.2 billion. But this was accompanied by the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that the Lebanese government reduces its international debts by raising taxes, cutting spending, and privatising state owned industries such as the electricity network, telecommunications and water. As well as the job losses this entails, there are also demands for greater labour market "flexibility" under conditions in which many workers still have no roofs over their heads.

The trade unions and the opposition parties rejected proposed tax increases, a rise in fuel prices and the planned privatizations and demanded wage increases for low-income employees.

Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, said on the eve of the strike that the opposition was not only facing the government, but an "international conspiracy against us. For the US is in charge of every detail of the government."

That same day, Hezbollah's leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah asked his followers to "avoid insults and sectarian slogans," adding that "if they kill 1,000 of us, we will not use our weapons against them."

The *Independent*'s veteran Middle East reporter Robert Fisk

described the protests as a "violent sectarian battleground." He noted that Sunni supporters of the government had held up pictures of Saddam Hussein in order to goad Shia oppositionists. He also acknowledged that "the Hezbollah's tens of thousands of fighters were by far the most disciplined men on the streets of Beirut."

"I walked three miles to the (airport) terminal, only to find the Hezbollah protecting both the airport and the Lebanese troops who were guarding it," he continued.

Opposing what he described as a simplistic claim that what is taking place is "an attempted coup d'état by the forces of Syria and Iran," Fisk wrote, "The Shias are the downtrodden, the poor, the dispossessed, those who have always been ignored by the dons and patriarchs of the Lebanese government—for in one sense this is also a social revolution—and on the other were the Sunni population so beloved of [assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik] Hariri and the Druze and the Christians still loyal to the Lebanese forces who were Israel's allies in 1982 and who massacred the Palestinians in the camps of Sabra and Chatila, as well as a majority of Lebanese innocents who voted Siniora's government into power."

The strike was called off as Siniora flew to a second international donor's conference in Paris that begins today (Thursday). Over 30 mainly Western and Arab donor countries as well as international institutions are in attendance. Siniora had described the strike as an attempt to sabotage the meeting, which he portrayed as Lebanon's best hope for survival.

It is nothing of the sort.

Analysts expect that an aid package of around $5 billion will be assembled. But only a fraction of this will be spent on reconstruction projects. Most will go towards servicing Lebanon's short-term debt and therefore back into the coffers of the imperialist governments and financial institutions, while leaving Lebanon's long-term debts to climb ever higher. The rest will go to paying the wages of the Lebanese army in order that it can suppress opposition in the Shia areas in the south of the country. And once again any money given will be made conditional on the government implementing the reforms demanded by the IMF and World Bank.

Speaking on Tuesday, France's President Jacques Chirac said that said the Paris conference was "urgent" because "there are things to pay: the Lebanese army that now, fortunately, occupies southern Lebanon needs to be paid; weapons must be bought; the full operation of Lebanon must be ensured."

Chirac also echoed the claims that the opposition to the Lebanese government was being engineered or at least exploited by Iran and Syria.

"I don't interfere in Lebanon's domestic affairs," said the leader of the country with the most foreign troops in Lebanon, "but there are those who take advantage of certain situations to create social problems."

"The international community wants Lebanon's neighbours to stop interfering in its affairs and treat it as an independent and sovereign country," he said.

The denunciations of Iranian and Syrian interference in Lebanon come amidst constant US provocations against Iran and a major military build-up in the Gulf.

Washington gave its full backing to Israel's bombing and subsequent invasion of Lebanon last year. The aim of both the US and Israel was to smash Hezbollah, possibly annex southern Lebanon and reduce the country to the effective status of a US protectorate. But this was conceived of as only an initial stage in a wider war drive aimed at regime change in Iran and Syria.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned that aim remains to be fulfilled, in part due to the failure of Israel's Lebanese offensive in the face of the massive resistance that was led by Hezbollah. And the same holds true for Israel—despite revelations last week that the governments of both Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert had sought a settlement with Syria in secret talks that continued into the first days of the July 2006 war even as the US was urging a direct attack on Damascus.

Israel has said it is "closely following" events in Lebanon and accused Hezbollah of serving the interests of Iran. The day before the Lebanese general strike began Israeli soldiers performed a combat exercise against troops dressed as Hezbollah fighters in a mock Arab village at a military base near Tzeelim, southern Israel.

The political crisis created by the setbacks Israel suffered in Lebanon last year led to last week's resignation of Lieutenant-General Dan Halutz as the armed forces chief of staff.

He was replaced on Monday by Gaby Ashkenazy, a veteran infantry commander who Olmert and Defence Minister Amir Peretz stated would successfully "implement the lessons of the Lebanon war."

The main criticism within Israeli ruling circles of Halutz, a former air force commander, was that he relied too heavily on an air campaign against Hezbollah and should have mounted a (better-planned) ground invasion much earlier.

Ashkenazy has acted as director of the Defence Ministry since he was passed over in favour of Halutz in 2005. But his combat experience includes serving as a deputy brigade commander in the 1982 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon and heading the elite Golani infantry brigade from 1994 to 1996, one of the most highly decorated infantry units in the Israeli Defence Forces. He also headed the army's northern command in the final years before Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2000.

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