

Lebanon government gave covert support for Israeli attack on Hezbollah

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A classified cable from the US embassy in Beirut has revealed how Lebanon's ruling March 14 alliance discussed with the US its preparations for a military attack by Israel against its rival Hezbollah. This and other secret cables released by WikiLeaks are destabilising already tense political relations in Lebanon.

According to the dispatch in March 2008, Elias Murr, Lebanon's defence minister,

attempted to use the US to pass on information to Israel. He told US diplomats how in the event of a military attack by Israel on Lebanon, Israel should avoid damaging Lebanese infrastructure in order to stop public opinion turning against the March 14 Alliance, as had happened when Israel invaded Lebanon in the 2006 war.

In that six week operation, Israel killed more than 1,200 people, injured many more, damaged or destroyed tens of thousands of homes, and devastated much of the country's infrastructure. Israel, he warned, should also not touch the Blue Line or the UNSCR 1701 areas, the border region in southern Lebanon patrolled by UNIFIL, so as to keep Hezbollah out of these areas.

If Israel were to bomb areas under Hezbollah control, Murr made clear that the Lebanese armed forces would not intervene. He said in the course of a two and a half hour meeting over lunch, "If Israel has to bomb all of these places in the Shiite areas as a matter of operational concern, that is Hezbollah's problem."

Murr is reported to have said that the Lebanese army would not get involved in the next war and that the army's objective was to survive a three week war "completely intact" so as to be able to "take over once Hezbollah's militia has been destroyed". He said, "I do not want thousands of our soldiers to die for no reason".

The US embassy concluded that Murr "seems intent on ensuring the army stays out of the way so what Hezbollah bears the full weight of an Israeli offensive."

Under conditions where the Lebanese government was widely seen as complicit with Israel in the 2006 war, this confirms that any future war would also entail active

collusion. Murr, who is close to president and former army chief General Michel Suleiman, said that he had met with Suleiman, who was at that time still the commander of the Lebanese army and not yet the president. Murr told him to stand down the army "when Israel comes" and said that he would provide Suleiman with political cover for his inaction.

This politically damaging revelation means that Suleiman can no longer be seen as a "consensual" president.

Murr's aide denied that he had made the comments, saying the report was "out of context and inaccurate." In fact, the discussion took place after the pro-US March 14 Alliance had been working for months towards an open conflict with the Hezbollah-led March 8 Alliance, in collaboration with the US and Israel, both of which had made clear their intention to resume hostilities against Hezbollah and had threatened Syria and Iran.

In May 2008, the March 14 Alliance provoked a military confrontation at Beirut airport with Hezbollah by declaring its telephone network "illegal and unconstitutional" and a threat to state security. Seeing this as a declaration of war, Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah sent his militia out onto the streets.

But the army refused to implement the government's measures against Hezbollah and in the few days that armed conflict raged, the government's supporters were routed and it was forced to back down. Nasrallah for his part, anxious to avoid a pretext for the US or Israel to intervene, handed back control of West Beirut to the army.

Since then, there has been an uneasy truce and, after a Saudi brokered deal, Suleiman was elected president. Following elections, Hezbollah has been incorporated into a coalition government with the March 14 Alliance.

Another cable from the US embassy in Riyadh provides confirmation of what was widely believed at the time, that Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, had sought Washington's support for an intervention by Arab forces. They would "create and maintain order in and around Beirut", protect the pro-Washington government "under the cover of the UN", and reverse Hezbollah's takeover of West

Beirut, which Prince Saud called “the first step in a process that would lead to the overthrow of the government and to an Iranian takeover of Lebanon”.

Prince Saud said that the then Lebanese prime minister, Fouad Senior, backed the idea, and he asked Washington and NATO to provide air and naval cover as well as transport and logistical support. He argued that a Hezbollah victory, alongside “Iranian actions in Iraq and on the Palestinian front would be a disaster for the US and the entire region”.

While the US declined, citing concerns about the feasibility of the project, it did take action against Hezbollah. Another cable revealed that the US secretly flew reconnaissance flights over Hezbollah-controlled areas and installations in 2008 from British overseas bases, collecting intelligence which it passed on to third party governments, including Lebanon.

Other cables revealed that British officials complained about the unauthorised use of British airbases, fearing that such missions would implicate Britain in potential legal or human rights abuses. One Foreign Office official, John Hillman, said, “Even the [US] State Department’s own human rights report had documented cases of torture and arbitrary arrest by the Lebanese armed forces.”

He urged the US to ensure the welfare of prisoners in Lebanon “if there were any risk that detainees captured with the help of Cedar Sweep intel could be tortured”.

Another cable revealed that this would cut across Britain’s own interests in the region. It said that Britain “‘desperately needs’ [Cyprus] for its own intelligence gathering and operations and was committed to keeping them available to the US (and France)”.

In another cable, Richard LeBaron, Washington’s charges d’affaires in London, insisted that human rights concerns should not be allowed to get in the way of counter-terrorism operations. He called Britain’s demands “not only burdensome but unrealistic” and demanded “high-level approaches” to call Britain to heel, saying, “Excessive conditions such as described above will hinder, if not obstruct, our co-operative counter-terrorism efforts.”

Britain duly backed down.

Other cables have revealed the manoeuvres going on behind the scenes of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, which is being used by Washington to secure its own interests in the region.

In line with Washington’s attempt to isolate Tehran and bring Damascus in from the cold, the STL and Hariri’s son and current prime minister, Saad Hariri, have switched tack, saying that they no longer believe that Syria was involved, a claim that never had any real evidence to support it. The

STL is now believed to be pointing the finger at Hezbollah, creating acute political tensions in Lebanon.

At one point in 2006, then prosecutor Serge Brammertz complained that the French were withholding their cooperation and that even Syria had been more cooperative than some European Union countries. Both Brammertz and his successor Daniel Bellemare voiced their concerns that the detention of four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals violated international law, although they acknowledged that the timing of their release was sensitive and could lend support to Hezbollah in the run up to the 2009 elections. They were finally released in 2009, after four years in jail, without being charged.

Another cable from Bellemare in October 2008 called for additional assistance from the US, which is a major funder of the STL. He requested that Washington provide the STL with two analysts whose salaries, along with others, would be paid for by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation. He was reported as saying, “You are the key player. If the US doesn’t help me, who will?”

This and other secret cables were published in the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar*, which is aligned with Hezbollah and was given copies of the documents by WikiLeaks. These are just some of the 4,000 documents on Lebanon expected to be released by WikiLeaks. *Al-Akhbar*’s web site was closed for days, apparently in punishment for publishing the cables.

The US and its junior partner Israel are revealed as actively promoting strife and civil war in pursuit of their own geo-strategic objectives, in a country that saw a 15-year civil war from 1975 to 1999 and has hovered on the brink ever since the murder of Hariri and his entourage in 2005.



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