

Syrian conflict destabilizes Lebanon

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Lebanon's defense minister met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran on Sunday for talks focusing on the escalating conflict in Syria. The official Iranian news agency reported that Ahmadinejad told Defense Minister Fayeze Ghosn to "resist the plots" of "domination-seeking powers" who were working to remove the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The Lebanese minister reportedly replied, "Lebanon will never forget that Iran stood by us in times of great difficulty." Ghosn also met with Iran's defense minister, General Ahmad Vahidi, who stated that Tehran would work to strengthen the Lebanese armed forces.

The campaign by the Obama administration for regime change in Syria is part of the deepening confrontation between US imperialism and its main target in the region, Iran. The removal of the Assad government and the imposition of a regime led by the US-backed Syrian "rebels," largely drawn from Sunni Islamist groups, would further isolate Tehran, both politically and militarily.

For its part, Iran seeks to strengthen its ties to Lebanon, and in particular to the Hezbollah movement based there, as a counterweight to US and Israeli threats.

The Lebanese government, headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, has refused to sign on to the US-led campaign to destabilize the Assad regime. Mikati, a telecommunications billionaire, is a Sunni politician with ties to Damascus, whose appointment as prime minister in 2011 was backed by the March 8 Movement, comprised of a number of parties, including the Shiite Hezbollah movement, the Maronite Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and the Druze Christian-based Progressive Socialist Party.

Apart from Tehran, Beirut is the only remaining Middle Eastern capital that has not enlisted in the US-

led campaign to oust Assad. Resisting heavy pressure from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf sheikdoms, last week the Lebanese ambassador to the United Nations voted in the UN General Assembly against a Saudi-initiated resolution condemning the Syrian government.

On Saturday, Lebanese Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour rejected calls from other Middle Eastern countries to extend diplomatic recognition to the opposition Syrian National Council. "Even if the Arab League recognizes it, we will not recognize the so-called Syrian National Council," Mansour said in an interview with *Russia Today*.

Appealing to Moscow and Beijing to continue their backing for the Assad regime, Mansour told the Russian news channel that the government in Damascus retained broad domestic support. "So long as there is wisdom in the world and great powers in the world seeking to retain balance on the ground then there is no fear [of regime change] in Syria," the Lebanese foreign minister added, in a reference to the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a US-backed resolution condemning Syria at the United Nations Security Council.

However, there are signs that the coalition government in Beirut is fracturing under the growing threat of war in Syria. One Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party, broke ranks with the government last week to speak out in support of providing arms to the Syrian opposition. Jumblatt also joined a large anti-Syrian demonstration in Beirut last week.

Another leading Druze figure in the government, Democratic Party leader Talal Arslan, rejected Jumblatt's statement in support of arming the Syrian "rebels." Speaking to a Lebanese television station linked to Hezbollah, Arslan said that anti-Assad forces had exaggerated the scale of killings by the Syrian army, and that Lebanese support should not be given to

opposition militants in Syria.

Last week's anti-Assad protest in Beirut was organized by the Lebanese opposition March 14 Movement. The opposition is headed by Saad Hariri, the son of assassinated former prime minister Rafik Hariri. The opposition coalition includes several parties representing Lebanon's religious and ethnic minorities, including Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians and Armenians.

The US and Saudi Arabia had supported Rafik Hariri and his Sunni-based Future Movement as a bulwark against Hezbollah, as well as Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon. When the elder Hariri was killed in a car bomb attack in 2005, blamed by Washington on Syrian agents, the US and the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf sponsored Lebanon's so-called Cedar Revolution, which broke out one month following the assassination.

Modeled on the Western-backed "color revolutions" in the former USSR, the protests in Lebanon were viewed by Washington as a means to weaken the influence of Damascus, Tehran, and Hezbollah in the country.

Though the "Cedar Revolution" led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Damascus remains a powerful political force in Lebanese politics, while Hezbollah emerged in 2011 as the leading political bloc in the country's parliament.

Regime change in Damascus would allow Washington to complete the task it began in Lebanon with the 2005 "Cedar Revolution": cutting Hezbollah off from its sponsor in Damascus, which has been the conduit for Iranian support to the Shiite-based movement. This blow to Hezbollah would be a coup for the US-backed forces around Saad Hariri. It would also weaken the ability of Hezbollah to resist another assault by Israel like that in 2006.

Tensions between Hariri's opposition March 14 Alliance and the governing March 8 Alliance are high, with the escalating conflict in Syria threatening to reanimate the unresolved sectarian disputes in Lebanon. There have already been clashes in the Lebanese city of Tripoli between Sunnis sympathetic to the "rebel" Islamist fighters in Syria and local Alawite Muslims, who belong to the same sect as Assad and many of his top officials.

Thousands of Syrians have fled into Lebanon to

escape the fighting in the city of Homs. The UN has recorded over 6,500 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, though local organizations suggest that the real figure is much higher. Many of the Syrian refugees have fled to Tripoli, where they have received support from relatives and Sunni political and social organizations. There are reports that Tripoli has become an unofficial base for anti-Assad militants, who can prepare and rearm themselves in Lebanon before crossing the poorly guarded border back into Syria.

The March 14 opposition is demanding that the Lebanese government set up official refugee camps near Tripoli, on the model of those established near the Syrian borders of Turkey and Jordan. These countries, both closely allied to Washington, are at the forefront of the efforts to destabilize and oust the Assad regime. Supposed refugee bases, especially in Turkey, have turned into training camps for foreign-armed Syrian opposition groups, including the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army.



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