Washington and its allies work to destabilise Lebanon

Part one

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The media is presenting the sectarian kidnappings and violence in Lebanon as an all but inevitable "spill-over" from the civil war in Syria. This is a cynical attempt to conceal what is, in fact, a concerted campaign by the United States and its regional allies to eliminate the Shi'ite Hezbollah movement, which is backed by Syria and Iran, as a political and military force in Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and, above all, the US and Israel are using jihadists, salafists and other religious extremists to fashion a sectarian Sunni movement to defeat Hezbollah, which the US has designated a foreign terrorist group, and its political allies in the March 8 Alliance. In so doing, they are deliberately stoking the flames of a wider regional war along Sunni-Shi'ite lines.

Their aim in Lebanon is to replace the current government, led by Sunni billionaire Najib Mikati and supported by Hezbollah and the March 8 Alliance, with an explicitly pro-Washington regime. But with almost every layer of Lebanese society, even those associated with the Washington camp, having long had close commercial and family links to Syria, it is impossible to consider Lebanon in isolation from its larger neighbour.

US policy in Lebanon is driven by its broader strategy of toppling the Assad regime in Syria, the ultimate target being Iran. But cutting Hezbollah off from its sponsors would also provide a useful boost for the pro-Washington forces in the March 14 Alliance of former premier Saad Hariri, whose popular support has plummeted.

The discovery of significant oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, which require for their exploitation an extensive network of underwater and surface pipelines to distribute both to Europe and Asia, has reinforced the US and Israel's determination to ensure that the entire Mediterranean become a NATO lake. Not only does that require Lebanon to be aligned unequivocally with Washington, it also entails the removal of Russia's naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus.

The tiny country of Lebanon, with a population of just 4 million people, has never had any real political independence. It was carved out by Britain and France, along with what are today Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Syria, from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire after the Ottomans' defeat in World War I. Along with Syria, it was ruled by France until 1943.

Since then, Lebanon has been used by the imperialists and rival regional powers as a proxy battleground for influence in the region. Not a single political event in Lebanon can be understood as a purely domestic issue.

The various powers whipped up conflicts between Lebanon's numerous Christian and Muslim sects, and between the Lebanese and Palestinians who fled or were driven out of their homeland by Israel in 1948 and 1967, to further their own agendas. Jobs were and still are often restricted, implicitly or explicitly, to a particular sect.

As an impoverished state, Lebanon has provided few public services, and the situation has latterly been made worse by the adoption of free market policies. As a result, access to essential services, education, health and housing is dependent upon faith-based and commercial provision, which exacerbates divisions.

But the key dividing line is class, not religious affiliation, despite the confusion deliberately generated by the division of Lebanon for electoral purposes into 18 officially recognised sects.

Between 1975 and 1989, the country was torn apart by a bitter civil war both between and within the various sects and communities, which constantly changed alliances as their external backers, including Israel and Syria, fought for dominance. It has hovered on the brink of sectarian warfare ever since. From 1982 to 2000, Lebanon was partially occupied by Israel, until driven out by Hezbollah.

Hezbollah arose in reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the subsequent US attempt to bolster the Israeli-supported Phalange regime by deploying a "peacekeeping

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force" to Beirut. Hezbollah was responsible for the 1983 bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, which led to a humiliating US retreat from the war-torn country and Hezbollah's designation by the US as a foreign terrorist group.

The bourgeois Islamist movement is a political relation of the Iranian Shi'ites who took power after the 1979 Iranian revolution. It is a politically and socially conservative force, deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class. But it was able to gain credibility among the impoverished Shi'ites due to the failure of the secular Amal party to defend their interests as well as its own social welfare activities and its more militant stance toward Israel. It won all 12 seats it contested in the 1992 elections.

Washington granted Syria tutelage over Lebanon in return for its support in the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. However, the US relationship with Damascus, which is close to Russia and aligned with the anti-Israeli "resistance front" of Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, was always uneasy if not overtly hostile.

During the 1990s, Washington and Riyadh supported Rafiq Hariri, the billionaire owner of a construction company based in Saudi Arabia, and his Future Movement as a bulwark against Hezbollah. When Hariri was killed in a massive explosion in February 2005, Washington pointed the finger of blame at Syria, forced the Assad regime to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, and brought Lebanon firmly within the US orbit.

The Bush administration sought and got support for a United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to determine the identity of Hariri's killers, even though he held no state position at the time.

In July 2006, the US gave the green light to Israel to wage an all-out war to eradicate Hezbollah. That six-week operation 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, but failed to achieve its political objective.

State Department cables subsequently released by Wikileaks revealed what was widely believed at the time—that the ruling pro-US March 14 Alliance discussed with the US the preparations for a military attack by Israel against Hezbollah.

The Lebanese government had supported the plan put forward by Saudi Arabia for an intervention by Arab forces against Hezbollah, with air cover and other support from Washington. Although Washington opposed this, it did provide intelligence reports on Hezbollah and even asked the Israeli government to extend the war to Syria.

Subsequent cables revealed the manoeuvres going on behind the scenes of the STL. When Washington sought to bring Damascus in from the cold in order to isolate Iran, the STL and Saad Hariri, Rafiq Hariri's son, reversed themselves, saying they no longer believed that Syria was involved.

Four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals were released after spending four years in jail without ever being charged, although this was done only after the 2009 elections so as not to lend support to Hezbollah. Hariri subsequently admitted that they had been framed on false evidence.

Instead, the STL blamed rogue elements in Hezbollah, an accusation Hezbollah denied, creating acute political tensions in Lebanon.

When the pro-Washington government of Fouad Seniora deliberately provoked a conflict with Hezbollah that left more than 38 people dead and tried to close down Hezbollah's telecoms systems in May 2008, Hezbollah surrounded Beirut's international airport and took control of West Beirut in a show of strength against the government.

While it handed over control to the Lebanese army, which had stood aside, reluctant to get involved, it was clear that Hezbollah had become the most powerful force in the land and that the government had little popular support.

While Syria and Saudi Arabia negotiated a truce and a power-sharing agreement, there was no question that this was a huge blow to Washington and its allies in the region. The US refused to give Tel Aviv the go-ahead for a deal with Syria that would see the return of the Golan Heights captured by Israel in the 1967 war, even though this would have isolated Tehran. Washington scuppered the deal by inflaming tensions with its announcement that in September 2007 Israel had bombed not Syrian military facilities, as was commonly believed, but a nuclear reactor.

To be continued

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