

Targeting Syria

3-05 News
Over the last few weeks we have seen the emergence of People Power in Lebanon with apparently all shades of opinion and religious affiliation uniting together to oppose the presence of Syrian forces in their country, in the wake of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the country's former prime minister and the architect of Lebanon's revival after the civil war. The resentment towards Syria came to the fore because it is widely assumed that Syria was responsible for the murder of the Lebanese leader. The murder and the subsequent Lebanese protest as well as the international condemnation of this act provided the US and Israel with a *raison d'être* for turning the heat on Syria and so vociferous demands have since come forth from both these states for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

Well, if Syria did have a hand in the Hariri murder it was a suicidal move because Syria would have known what would follow in terms of its enemies being provided with the ideal opportunity to move against it. And given that Syria was already under fire from the US and Israel, why would it choose to commit political suicide? So, what is important to recall at this stage are developments in the region before and after Hariri's murder. The US, with Egyptian cooperation, had managed to arrange the Abbas-Sharon Summit in Egypt and set the Palestinians on a path of reconciliation and compromise with Israel's hard line approach to a weak Palestinian state on the Bantu model. Having brought the Palestinians in line, there still remained the problem of an independent Syria which was seen as a strong supporter of Hizbullah and an ally of Iran.

Both Israel and the US had been threatening Syria with grave consequences if it did not fall in line. In fact, the neoconservative pressure on Syria has been gathering momentum over the years and an important text in this regard, entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm", had been drafted by Benjamin Netanyahu and signed by the likes of Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser, who later joined the Bush team. This paper rejected the idea of "land for peace" and instead advocated "weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria". But no substantive pretext could be found for actual military action against Syria.

It is in this context that we need to view the Hariri murder and the subsequent suicide attack in Tel Aviv. Syria was held responsible for both and since then we have seen the stridency heighten in the anti-Syria campaign led by the US and Israel. Condoleezza Rice accused Syria of standing in the way of



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Lebanese, Iraqi and Palestinian aspirations. As Ms Rice declared rather imperiously, "We are starting to see a picture of a Syria that really is a blockage to a different kind of Middle East." (BBC, March 2, 2005) In an interview with ABC News, around the same time, Rice declared that "There is evidence that Islamic Jihad, headquartered in Syria, was in fact involved with the planning of those attacks in Tel Aviv." Both these incidents have provided Israel and the US with opportunity to rationalize a swift surgical strike against Syria.

That is why the Syrian decision to withdraw its troops in Lebanon to the Bekaa valley and along the Lebanese-Syrian border with an eventual complete withdrawal is not being accepted by the US and Israel. Of course, the groundswell of a new nationalism in Lebanon has added force to the Israeli-US demands for the complete removal of what is being termed a "Syrian occupation force". Now, while the new spirit of democracy and People Power is a wonderful development for the region, to have Israel and the US take such a strong position on the presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon and demand an end to this Syrian "occupation" has a certain duality and absurdity given that Israel still continues to be an illegal occupying force in Palestine, aided and abetted in this occupation by successive US Administrations. Now if a Syrian military presence is so reprehensible to the US, it should view all Occupying forces with the same distaste - including the Israeli occupation of Palestine and, closer to us, the Indian occupation of Jammu and Kashmir. But we have not heard even a whimper from the US on this count.

Of course, the Lebanese protests on the continuing presence of Syrian forces adds weight to the US demands but the Palestinians have been protesting for decades against Israeli occupation with no such demand being voiced by the US. And, of course, given that the US is itself an Occupation power now in Iraq - with many Iraqis protesting this occupation - it hardly seems appropriate to threaten Syria over the presence of its forces in Lebanon. This is not to justify occupation by any external military force, but the US-Israeli stance smacks of opportunism.

Which brings one back to the murder of Hariri - the man behind Lebanon's recovery from a bloody civil war. Yes, Hariri had had a falling out

with Syria because of excessive Syrian meddling in Lebanese affairs and the effort by Syria to alter the Lebanese constitution and seek an extension in President Lahoud's term was the last straw for Hariri who resigned in protest. But following the resignation, some analysts felt Syria had realized its mistake and that this is what had led to the sacking of General Hassan Khalil, the head of Syrian military intelligence, by President Bashar al-Assad. Also, according to Patrick Seale, in a column written for The Guardian (23 February, 2005), a few days before his murder, Hariri had held a meeting with Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister, Walid Muallim and Hariri was believed to have been attempting to mediate between Syria and the Lebanese opposition. So why would Syria choose this moment in time to murder Hariri? It has not displayed a suicidal bent.

But others like Israel had plenty of reasons and one should recall that Israel has a fairly successful track record on target killings throughout the Middle East. After all, Israel has sought to weaken Syria strategically and destroy its alliance with Iran so as to be able to destroy Hizbullah. And, Hizbullah inflicted a defeat on Israel when it forced Israeli forces to withdraw from Southern Lebanon after 22 years of occupation. For the US also, after Iraq and with the death of Arafat, Syria was the only Arab state to stand its ground alongside Iran. The continuing presence of Hafez al-Assad's Old Guard around the present Syrian leader is what the US and Israel seek to target so that they can then bring about some form of a more compliant Syrian leadership. This is all part of the regime change agenda for the Broader Middle East.

That is why the US is unhappy about the pragmatic response of the Syrian leadership to the people's intifada in Lebanon in the form of a commitment for immediate withdrawal of troops from the centre of the country to the Bekaa Valley and along the Lebanon-Syria border and a gradual overall withdrawal. Such a move makes legitimizing a strike against Syria more difficult and the Israelis have lost too much time to claim retaliation for the Tel Aviv suicide attack which they chose to lay at Syria's doorstep. In the new environment of preemption and regime change, the covert approach to destabilise the enemy from within has become ever more dangerous and lethal. Therefore there is a need for regimes in the Muslim World to build and sustain strong domestic roots of support because the stakes in the new power configurations are extremely high for Muslim states and civil societies.