

The 'high-stake game in the Mideast'

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The decision by the pro-Syrian politicians in Lebanon to reject Omar Karameh's move to resign as prime minister after failing to convince the opposition to form a national unity government shows that they are not willing to accept realities.

The Syrian domination of Lebanon is in its final moments and the sooner Damascus and its allies in Beirut accept that, the better for the future of the embattled country, especially in the aftermath of the Feb. 14 killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Their manoeuvrings to retain power have little chance of success if the game is played on a level field, such as the intensity of pressure that is being applied at all levels and in all aspects by the US and Israel from behind the scenes. Obviously, the pro-Syrian

camp has realised that it stands little chance of assuming power through the ballot box if elections are held in May. Their only hope to remain in a position of influence is to have their own man in charge in the run-up to the elections. They know that if they let go now, the person who would take charge would belong to the alliance representing Hariri supporters, the Druze community led by Walid Jumblatt and the Maronites led by Patriarch Nasrallah Sleib.

The US and Israel are perhaps hoping to have a say in Lebanon's political future through their proxy forces while keeping out Syria. However, as Jumblatt affirmed on Friday, even the opposition camp knows well that Lebanon's ties with Syria are too deep-rooted to be dismantled in a hurry. If anything, as the Druze leader

pointed out, the security of the two countries is intertwined and destabilisation of Syria would mean destabilisation of Lebanon, and vice-versa.

Destabilisation is indeed what the US has in mind when it comes to Syria. In the days and weeks ahead, the American camp will play out its game, which will reach its climax after elections are held in Lebanon to produce what Washington hopes would be a pro-US regime. That remains to be seen, however. Also targeted for action is Hizbollah, which represents Lebanon's Shiite majority. The US and Israel want Hizbollah disarmed, and this would turn out to be the most critical task they would face in Lebanon. The US would be better advised to listen to Hizbollah leader

Musa Kellani

Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah's challenge to Washington that the United States cannot successfully try to disarm the militia without a really bloody nose.

It was no casual development that the leaders of Hamas and Hizbollah militant groups on Friday signed a statement declaring their armed resistance to Israel legitimate. It came after Hamas political chief Khaled Mishaal held a meeting with Sheikh Nasrallah in Beirut. A joint Hamas-Hizbollah statement said the two sides underlined the legitimacy of their resistance activities against Israel. Hamas stressed that the continuation of the current ceasefire in the Palestinian territories depended on an end to Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people and the

release of all prisoners.

No doubt, the US would try to exercise its option of applying UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for a full Syrian troops pullout from Lebanon, as well as the disarmament of militias such as Hizbollah and Palestinian groups. It is for this purpose that the US stayed away from demanding the resignation of Kofi Annan as UN secretary-general despite the implied criticism against him in the investigation report on the oil-for-food programme.

Many refuse to be taken by the assertion that the report exonerated Annan, because it was his responsibility as UN chief to ensure that the oil-for-food programme was run as clean as a whistle and prevent it being turned into the biggest fraud in the history of humani-

tarian aid. Let us not forget that Annan was the loudest proponent of not only continuing the programme but also expanding it. Surely, he should have known that such a vast programme would have serious loopholes that would give rise to corruption and he should have plugged it.

In the immediate Middle Eastern context, Washington would have been the first to demand Annan's head. That it opted to do otherwise clearly indicates that it is hoping to use its support for Annan as a key tool in shaping UN actions against Syria as it suits American interests. The US and Israel are playing a high-stake game in the Middle East and they will not be dissuaded by anyone, least of all by the pro-Syrians in Lebanon. They are among the first targets in the American list.