

Bush administration endorses anti-Palestinian, anti-Syrian offensive in Lebanon

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The Lebanese government of Fuad Siniora is threatening to send the army into the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el Bared to crush the terrorist Fatah al Islam group. Such a move threatens a loss of innocent civilian lives that would dwarf the dozens that have been killed already during the five-day siege of the camp, north of Tripoli.

The shelling of Nahr el Bared has had a devastating impact on the 30,000 to 40,000 residents, forcing 15,000 to 20,000 to seek refuge in the neighbouring refugee camp at Bedawi. Those who remain, deprived of water, electricity and short of food, include many aged and infirm residents.

The Bush administration shares responsibility with the Lebanese government for what amounts to collective punishment of the Palestinians, which echoes in microcosm last year's devastation of Lebanon by Israel—wrought on the flimsy pretext of the seizure of two its soldiers by Hezbollah fighters.

Washington stands four-square behind Siniora's actions. The White House has accepted and regurgitated the claims made by the Lebanese government that Fatah al Islam is sponsored by Syria. The aim once again is to ratchet up tensions in the Middle East in order to pursue the Bush administration's long-term aim of securing its own hegemony over the region and its oil resources.

The Lebanese government insists that Syria has sponsored bus bombings, bank robberies and attacks on Lebanese troops by Fatah al Islam in a campaign of destabilisation. The objective, it claims, is to deflect attention from the United Nations investigation into the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, which Syrian officials are accused of organising.

Linking Syria with the terrorist group, White House spokesman Tony Snow said in a statement that the Bush administration "will not tolerate attempts by Syria, terrorist groups or any others to delay or derail Lebanon's efforts to solidify its sovereignty or to seek justice in the Hariri case."

Lebanon's offensive is presumed to deal with an organisation of 150-200 fighters, including Saudis, Syrians, Yemenis and Moroccans, with no popular support in the Palestinian camps. Some residents of the camp put the group's numbers at fewer than 50. The actual balance of forces involved is indicated by reports of Fatah al Islam militants attempting to flee the camp in inflatable dinghies being sunk by the Lebanese navy.

Yet, the massively disproportionate assault on the camp has been unconditionally endorsed by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. “The Siniora government is fighting against a very tough extremist foe,” Rice said. “But Lebanon is doing the right thing to try to protect its population, to assert its sovereignty and so we are very supportive of the Siniora government and what it is trying to do.”

Lebanon has used the police action against this tiny group to ask the US for \$280 million in military assistance to help put down what it grandiosely calls an “uprising.” State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the request for funds, \$220 million of which would go to the Lebanese Armed Forces and another \$60 million to security forces, was being considered by Washington. The US gave \$40 million in military aid to Lebanon last year and an additional \$5 million so far this year.

The United Nations Security Council on Wednesday echoed the US position, reiterating member states’ “unequivocal condemnation of any attempt to destabilise Lebanon” and underlining “their readiness to continue to act in support of the legitimate and democratically elected government of Lebanon.”

Many informed Middle East commentators have argued that the emergence of Fatah al Islam is in reality an example of “blowback”—similar to the growth of Al Qaeda as a result of US sponsorship of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan.

There is in fact no evidence linking Fatah al Islam to Syria. The group is Sunni and shares the Salafist (sometimes referred to as Wahabbist after its founder) ideology of Al Qaeda, which provides the ideological basis for the regime in Saudi Arabia.

The argument for Syrian involvement is that Fatah al Islam emerged from a split with Fatah Intifada in 2006, a group supported by Syria as a counterweight to the secular Fatah organisation, which played a part in driving Yasser Arafat out of Tripoli in 1983. But there is no reason for Syria to back such a group, when it supports the much more substantial Shiite Hezbollah. In addition, the group’s founder, Shaker al-Absi, spent three years in a Syrian prison before being released last year.

The European Union foreign policy envoy, Javier Solana, was unconvinced by the Lebanese argument, stating after a meeting with Siniora in Beirut on Tuesday that he had seen no evidence of Syrian involvement. “I am hoping very much for calm,” he said.

Robert Fisk of the *Independent* was also sceptical. In a May 21 article, he asks, “Was it really a Syrian plot, as Fouad Siniora’s government suggested?” He draws attention to the claims by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* that Saad Hariri, son of the former prime minister, “was indirectly helping to funnel Saudi money” to Fatah al Islam.

Expanding on his article in the *New Yorker* in an interview on CNN International’s “Your World Today,” Hersh himself again insisted that Fatah al Islam was being funded by the Saudis. “What I was writing about was sort of a private agreement that was made between the White House, we’re talking about Richard—Dick—Cheney and Elliott Abrams, one of the key aides in the White House, with Bandar [Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi national security adviser]. And the idea was to get support, covert support from the Saudis, to support various hard-line jihadists, Sunni groups, particularly in Lebanon, who would be seen in case of an actual confrontation with Hezbollah—the Shia group in the southern Lebanon—would be seen as an asset....”

He noted: "The American role is very simple. Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, has been very articulate about it. We're in the business now of supporting the Sunnis anywhere we can against the Shia, against the Shia in Iran, against the Shia in Lebanon, that is [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrullah. Civil war. We're in a business of creating in some places, Lebanon in particular, a sectarian violence.... There is a supreme overwhelming fear of Hezbollah and we do not want Hezbollah to play an active role in the government in Lebanon and that's been our policy...."

A similar position is taken by Professor Charles Harb, of the American University of Beirut, in an op-ed piece in the May 24 *Guardian*. He, however, stresses that Fatah al Islam's main backers include forces within the Lebanese government.

Noting that the impoverished Sunni city of Tripoli "became fertile territory for the proselytising of Salafist and radical Sunni groups," he insists that this alone is not enough to explain their "rapid empowerment" in recent years: "Political cover was needed—and was provided by pro-government forces. In the 2005 national parliamentary elections, Saad al Hariri, the son of slain prime minister Rafik Hariri, appealed to Sunni sentiment to woo northern voters. Significant efforts were made to bring the Sunnis of Tripoli and Akkar under his wing and away from the area's traditional leaders. Fulfilling an electoral pledge, the new parliament pardoned jailed Sunni militants involved in violence in December 2000."

Harb continues, "The invasion of Iraq has inflamed the Sunni-Shia divide and is changing the dynamics of the Middle East. Fear of Shia influence in Arab affairs has prompted many Sunni leaders to warn of a 'Shia crescent' stretching from Iran, through Iraq, to south Lebanon. Several reports have highlighted efforts by Saudi officials to strengthen Sunni groups, including radical ones, to face the Shia renaissance across the region."

However, it is entirely possible that something more than "blowback" is at work in Lebanon.

At the very least, Washington's positive response to Lebanon's offensive shows that Siniora acted only after having been given a green light to do so by the Bush administration. It should be noted that the Lebanese media has been filled with denunciations of the Fatah al-Islam for weeks, indicating that an attack was in preparation for some time. But if the reports of extensive relations between Sunni militants, the US and Siniora governments are true, the conflict with Fatah al Islam could have been deliberately encouraged in order to justify what is now underway:

- * A brutal attack on the Palestinian refugee camps that takes the form of collective punishment and coincides with a major Israeli military offensive against Hamas in Gaza.
- * The ratcheting up of propaganda against Syria, which is second only to Iran as the favoured target of the Washington neoconservatives. Syria is also being blamed for the bombings carried out by Fatah al Islam and the three bombs that have exploded while the shelling of Nahr el Bared has been ongoing.
- * A major build-up of Lebanon's armed forces, facilitated by money from the US that can then be used against Hezbollah.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation dominated by Fatah and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh both agreed to Lebanon entering the camps, ending a four-decade agreement that they stay out. A PLO representative in Lebanon stated, "We have declared

that the country is for Lebanon and sovereignty is for Lebanon, and whatever Lebanon decides or considers its higher interests, we support it." PLO executive committee member Zakariyya Al-Agha described Fatah al Islam as "an intruding organisation, which based itself in Nahr al Bared to involve the refugees in the heinous terrorist actions in Lebanon."

Haniyeh also supported "maintaining the sovereignty of Lebanon and upholding its security."

But both organisations are sitting on a powder keg. The camp's residents have stated they were deliberately targeted by the army, and there have been angry demonstrations in many of the 12 camps where more than 215,000 of the 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live. Fatah has warned that the continued shelling of the camp could provoke an uprising across Lebanon. An all-out assault would have even more incendiary consequences. Sultan Abul Aynayn of the PLO in Lebanon has stated, "No Palestinian, or Palestinian faction in Lebanon will accept seeing the Palestinian people slaughtered in a collective punishment as is happening in Nahr el Bared."

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