

The March to War: USS Cole gives the war jitters to Lebanon

Three US Warships arrive off Lebanese coast

By [Global Research](#)

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A U.S. decision to dispatch three warships, including the USS Cole, to the coast of Lebanon to “show support for regional stability” is causing jitters within the country that such an overt show of foreign military strength is likely to exacerbate its political crisis.

Pentagon officials announced that the guided-missile destroyer USS Cole left Malta for Lebanon on Tuesday, because of “concern about the situation in Lebanon,” which is suffering the worst political crisis since the end of its 1975-1990 civil war.

The politically-divided Lebanese see the move as a show of force intended to threaten Syria and Iran, the backers of the Hezbollah-led opposition that Washington accuses of obstructing the election of a president, a post that has been vacant since pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud’s term expired in November.

While Hezbollah slammed the U.S. deployment as “military intervention” to support the anti-Syrian ruling majority and the government, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora on Friday indicated he had not sought American help, and particularly not through a show of military force.

Speaking to Arab ambassadors in Beirut, Siniora said in televised remarks that no warships were currently in Lebanese territorial waters, and that his government did “not ask anyone to send warships.”

Earlier, Siniora summoned U.S. charge d’affaires Michele Sison to clarify the presence of the USS Cole, a government source told AFP news agency. “Mrs. Sison assured him that the warship was in international waters and had been dispatched to guarantee regional stability,” the unidentified source said.

In an attempt to dispel opposition fears that the U.S.-backed ruling camp would welcome U.S. military support, Siniora implied that U.S. destroyers near Lebanon constituted a violation of the country’s sovereignty.

“We reiterate our commitment to defend the independence and sovereignty of Lebanon, which will not become a field for settling regional conflicts,” he said.

Independent Lebanese analysts in Beirut told the Middle East Times the government had no choice but to denounce the presence of U.S. destroyers, which the Pentagon said would “not be visible” from Lebanon’s coast.

The U.S. show of force might be intended to back up the ruling majority by flexing its muscles at Syria and Iran, the analysts said, but warned it could do more harm than good; and probably would only verify opposition accusations that their political adversaries were “America’s dogs,” as one analyst put it.

Political analyst George Alam told the Middle East Times that the destroyers were sent to pressure the opposition into electing a president in the parliamentary vote set for March 11. But, he predicted the opposition would not submit to this kind of pressure and that the vote was fated to be postponed for the 16th time.

Lebanon’s Shiite Hezbollah organization retorted that it was not afraid of U.S. military threats, whatever the reason – to frighten the opposition into retracting their demand for veto power in a new government or to weaken their resistance against Israel.

Alam said the presence of the destroyers off the coast of Lebanon in the East Mediterranean Sea – particularly the USS Cole, which suffered an al-Qaida attack in the Yemeni port of Aden that killed 17 American sailors in 2000 – could easily ignite internal Lebanese fighting, which could potentially escalate into a confrontation with Syria and Iran.

The U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael Mullen, confirmed that the decision was to show American “engagement” in the region, but he said it was not “absolutely tied” to the Lebanese presidential vote.

“To say it is absolutely tied would be incorrect, although certainly we are aware elections are due there at some point in time,” Mullen said, adding that a presence in the region was important, but that the United States was not sending signals to any one country.

“That’s a very important part of the world and stability there [in the region] is an important outcome for us,” he said.

But many in this part of the world insist that an engaged U.S. military presence in a highly-volatile part of the region divided into armed pro- and anti-American forces would have a destabilizing effect, citing Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion and occupation in 2003.

Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah sees the U.S. show of force as “proof that the American administration has failed to impose its policies and hegemony on our region.”

Lebanese retired general and military analyst, Elias Hanna, suggested to the Middle East Times that the U.S. move may be nothing more than “power projection in the larger regional struggle” between the Iran-Syria alliance and the United States, and not a preparation to strike at Hezbollah or Lebanon.

Other commentators concur that the United States would not target Hezbollah or other opposition targets, if only to avoid repeating its “past mistakes” of the 1980s when it deployed the “New Jersey” warship and U.S. Marines to Lebanon.

The result was that the United States in 1982 was compelled to pull out its troops after 241 Marines were killed in a suicide attack on their base near Beirut’s international airport.

Hezbollah’s Fadlallah recalled that blow saying that U.S. Marines and destroyer battleships failed back then to support one Lebanese party against another. And many Lebanese are hoping the Americans will have learned their lesson and will keep their warships well away

so as not to push Lebanon over the brink.

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