

America's "Big Stick"™ Off the Lebanese Coast

Contributed by W. Thomas Smith, Jr.
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USS Cole — the guided-missile destroyer attacked by al Qaeda in the port of Aden (Yemen) in 2000 — has been back in the fight since 2002. And last Tuesday, the now-famous warship set a new course from Malta to the Lebanese coast where she will be stationed just over the horizon, unseen, but within easy striking distance. Cole — along with two support ships — soon will be joined (or relieved of her watch) by a six-vessel U.S. Navy expeditionary strike group: the centerpiece of which is the amphibious assault ship USS Nassau, capable of landing some 1,900 Marines. The strike group includes a couple of destroyers, a cruiser, and an attack submarine.

HEZBOLLAH RANTING

Hezbollah, the Shia terrorist group based in Lebanon, is furious. Friday's headline in the group's newspaper, Al Akhbar, reads: "America repeats the adventure of '82" — a reference to the American deployment to Lebanon that ended soon after 241 American Marines, sailors, and soldiers were killed in the U.S. Marine barracks bombing by Hezbollah in October 1983. (Also, notice how anyone opposed to U.S. military operations refers to those operations as "adventures.")

Today, despite the fact that Hezbollah (as a political entity) is the only party in Lebanon that fields a fully standing terrorist army (not the legitimate Lebanese Army) funded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hezbollah's parliamentarians have called the U.S. deployment "an American threat against Lebanon," "military meddling," and an "attempt to attach Lebanon to a joint Israeli-American scheme for the region." What they've failed to mention is that Hezbollah has clashed with the legitimate army and police in recent weeks. They have threatened "open war" with Israel. They have threatened competing parliamentarians. They have assassinated Lebanese leaders and provided operational support for assassins operating in Lebanon. They continue to call for the "death" of America. And Lebanon has been unable to elect a president in multiple attempts over the past several months, due primarily to the overt threat of Hezbollah.

THE ADMIRAL'S SIGNALS

Of course, the American Naval presence is a measure of "big stick diplomacy" in the region. But U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says the only signals the warships are sending are "that we're engaged and we are going to be in the vicinity, and that's a very important part of the world." "that we're engaged and we are going to be in the vicinity, and that's a very, very important part of the world."

Not denouncing, but distancing himself from the developments, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said Friday, "We did not request any warships from any party." What he did request was "clarification" from the U.S. ambassador.

Members of Lebanon's pro-democracy movement — both in Lebanon and among the global Lebanese Diaspora — welcome the "show of force";

In fact, Dr. Walid Phares, director of the Future of Terrorism Project for the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, was calling for a similar strike force (a carrier strike group in fact) back in November 2007 when he told me for a piece in National Review Online:

"Deploying an aircraft carrier strike group into the eastern Mediterranean could balance the weight of the Iranian Pasdaran and their missiles deployed in Lebanon, so that Tehran and Damascus aren't the only powers present in that small country."

Today, Phares tells me:

"The U.S. Navy maintains a permanent presence in the eastern Mediterranean, so the USS Cole is not breaking any existing regional balance of power. It is simply reaffirming it. Deploying this warship off the coast of Lebanon certainly has multiple dimensions. First, it is symbolic as the ship that was attacked by al Qaeda in 2000, thus being deployed close to terrorist bases sends a significant message. But more practically I see the Cole's mission — and perhaps other ships joining her — as a positioning of American assets to face the enormous Iranian assets deployed in Lebanon, including the missiles."

According to Phares, the U.S. considered stationing a Naval force off the coast of Lebanon, last year. But the Lebanese Government and Lebanese Army commander, Gen. Michel Sleiman, requested a postponement of such an American

force until after the Lebanese presidential elections.

WHY THE BIG STICK NOW?

Phares says:

“Since the elections have been blocked by Hezbollah indefinitely – and as the flow of weapons from Iran continued – today’s deployment of the Cole is very normal in pure strategic terms. Of course, the forces of the axis – Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah – don’t want to see any international or Western force deployed in their area of operation and hegemony. The U.S. Navy has always maintained a presence in the region, but Iran’s strategic assets are increasing dramatically [the money and weapons are reaching critical mass]. From that perspective, this is a message from Washington – and ultimately from NATO – to Tehran and its allies not to upset the stability of the region. In local terms, the U.S. is warning Iran and Syria not to launch an offensive against the Lebanese Government and the UNIFIL [United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon]. That’s the bottom line.”

OTHER NAVAL FORCES

Lebanon maintains a very small navy composed primarily of a few patrol boats, and a small but very tough corps of Naval commandos, which technically falls under the organizational control of Lebanese special operations forces.

UNIFIL also operates the Maritime Task Force (MTF), which is responsible for assisting the Lebanese Navy with coastal defense and preventing seaborne arms smuggling operations. The MTF has been commanded by German Navy participants of UNIFIL since October 2006: just after the Israeli-Hezbollah war, and the first time German Naval forces have been stationed in the Middle East since World War II.

SPEAKING SOFTLY

On Saturday, command of the MTF was transferred to Italian Naval forces. During the change-of-command ceremony, Italian Maj. Gen. Claudio Graziano, commander of UNIFIL, was reportedly asked about the American Naval force steaming close to Lebanese waters. “I cannot comment on this,” Graziano responded, adding that such operations had nothing to do with the MTF.

Publicly, Adm. Mullen has said that the three-ship deployment (and the probable addition of the six ships packed with enough guided missiles, jump-jets, attack helicopters, and Marine riflemen to send every blustering Hezbollah commander breaking and running for the Syrian border) should not be seen as “threatening or in response to events in any single country.”

Mullen is speaking “softly,” as Pres. Theodore Roosevelt would have said. And, yes, he is carrying “a big stick.”

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