

# The fight for Lebanon's freedom

Contributed by Farid Ghadry and Sami El-Khoury, March 14, 2008  
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Today, Lebanon begins the third year after a historic demonstration mourning the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the populist former prime minister who has been credited with rebuilding Lebanon after 15 years of civil war. The Lebanese people have yet to see justice come to those responsible for his killing three years after more than one million Lebanese (that is one-third the country's population) took to the streets of Beirut to protest his cold-blooded murder.

The peace march on March 14, 2005, dubbed the Cedar Revolution, gave birth to the "March 14" group, an amalgamation of all the political organizations opposed to Syria's presence on Lebanese soil and who hold the majority of seats in the parliament. Since that momentous date, many Lebanese and Syrians alike believe that "March 14" has virtually squandered almost all the opportunities afforded to them by the international community. In fact, four different U.N. resolutions later, U.S. support of the Lebanese army, and a war in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah that clipped Hezbollah's wings, the group has yet to take advantage of these opportunities through bold actions.

After the expected but sudden departure from Baabda of Lebanese turncoat President Emile Lahoud, President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly encouraged "March 14" to elect a new Lebanese president because the group held majority seats in the parliament; one that can meet anywhere since its speaker, Nabih Berri, another Syrian operative, refused to convene it. The leadership of "March 14," to the dismay of many Lebanese Americans, who have worked hard for U.S. help, refused to exercise its constitutional right to ignore Hezbollah and Syria and elect a new president for Lebanon.

"March 14," from the start, took on a conciliatory tone with Hezbollah, yielding to many of its demands under the auspices of consensus-building and avoiding confrontation. That was by far their biggest blunder. With the exception of Samir Geagea, the vocal Christian leader, the organization has been unable to develop a cohesive strategy against Hezbollah terror. As an example, some in the leadership excluded other potent anti-Hezbollah players from their inner circle, which relieved them of greater options. One such Lebanese politician is Ahmad al-Assaad, a maverick Shi'ite with a notable history in Lebanese politics who was, and still is, willing to play spoiler to Hezbollah's grand schemes. Mr. Assaad visited Washington lately and his message was powerful enough to get the attention of many in the Bush administration.

But unlike Mr. Assaad's message of logic, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who also visited Washington several times in the past year, could not resist the occasion to shore up privately and publicly the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) and the former vice president of Syria, Abdul Halim Khaddam, a much-disliked figure inside Syria, at the behest of a scheme concocted in Saudi Arabia by Bandar Bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States. For those who are privy to Syrian President Bashar Assad's own spin in Washington know well that he projects the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as a scarecrow by telling Western policy-makers that "If not me, it will be the SMB, Syria's Hamas." For Mr. Jumblatt not to be aware of Mr. Assad's strategy in Washington is inexcusable, and for him to support a movement that is not only unacceptable in Syria and unwelcome in Washington but also promotes Mr. Assad's own agenda is downright irresponsible.

During his last address at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mr. Jumblatt finally got it right and refrained from his overt support of the hard-core Islamists by calling for the United States to back the "credible opposition," which many have come to interpret, and rightly so, as support for the Damascus Declaration opposition inside Syria. All is not lost, but unless "March 14" gets serious about Hezbollah by openly confronting the terrorist organization through such bold steps as striking a separate peace with Israel before Mr. Assad does at the expense of Lebanon, the movement will continue to struggle against an enemy that is far more effective because of its terror-laden tactics.

The United States has sent plenty of signals lately to the group that it is up to them to control their destiny. Should the organization fail to take the necessary steps to protect Lebanon from Hezbollah, eventually, even the United States may simply just abandon the group for its lack of resolve in favor of other rising Lebanese politicians with marketability and credibility such as Ahmad al-Assaad.

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