

Petraeus' visit focuses on military assistance

Contributed by Simon Roughneen THE WASHINGTON TIMES
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BEIRUT — Gearing up to take over the U.S. Central Command for the Middle East in September, Gen. David H. Petraeus last week paid a surprise visit to Beirut to meet Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

The U.S. Embassy in Lebanon said the meetings "focused on the United States' assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, so it can maintain peace and stability, and safeguard the Lebanese people."

However, the stopover last week came just a day after the Lebanese government agreed on a new manifesto, claiming "the right of Lebanon, its people, its army and its resistance to liberate its land in the Shebaa Farms, Kfarshuba Hill and Ghajar," areas currently under Israeli control.

The "resistance" refers to Hezbollah, which in May received an effective veto in a new national unity government deal brokered in Doha, Qatar, after its fighters overran much of Beirut.

The Lebanese parliament on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved the new government, which gives Hezbollah and its allies 11 out of 30 seats in the Cabinet.

Hezbollah - listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S., Britain, Israel, Australia and the Netherlands - is also able to retain its arsenal under the national unity government - a blow to the credibility of the U.N. Security Council, which has ordered Lebanese militias disarmed.

The Iran-backed Shi'ite Hezbollah militia is advancing at the expense of the pro-Western March 14 coalition, a Sunni-led amalgam that includes Druze and some Christian allies.

Last week, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak told U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah "simply isn't working."

Toni Nissi, general coordinator of a private charity and advocacy group that calls for full implementation of U.N. resolutions on Lebanon, told The Washington Times that "March 14 has compromised with terror."

However, Alain Aoun, political officer for the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a key Christian partner of Hezbollah, told The Times that "our objectives are to preserve unity, and Hezbollah's arms should be dealt with as part of a process that addresses the reasons why those arms exist."

Mona Yacoubian, a Lebanon specialist at the United States Institute of Peace, said the manifesto is "a Lebanese-style compromise [and] clearly a sop to Hezbollah." It also asserts the government's authority on issues of national defense simply serves to help put the current unity Cabinet in place, she said.

However, Israel sees the uneasy Hezbollah-March 14 rapprochement as a threat.

Professor Barry Rubin directs the Global Research in International Affairs Center in Herzliya. He told The Washington Times that "in several important ways, including the non-enforcement of the U.N. resolutions, not restricting Hezbollah activity, claiming Shebaa farms, permitting attacks on Israel, Hezbollah policy seems to be Lebanese policy."

In 2007, the U.S. boosted military assistance to Lebanon to \$270 million, a fivefold jump that makes the country the second-highest per-capita recipient of such American aid.

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