

President Suleiman pays a historic visit to the White House

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On September 25, the Saudi-owned newspaper Al-Hayat carried the following report: "Lebanese President Michel Suleiman moved on to Washington today after participating in the inauguration of the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly and conferring with UN Secretary General Ban Pak-Moon. President Suleiman explained to the international community the challenges which Lebanon is facing.

"He said in the speech he made at the General Assembly that Israel should comply with the implementation of Resolution 1701 with all its provisions and stop its dangerous threats to launch a new war on Lebanon. He added that Lebanon was committed to cooperation with the international court investigating the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafiq al-Hariri and with the competent UN bodies so as to reveal the truth and to continue the judicial process without politicizing the issue.

"President Suleiman asserted that terrorism with all its forms should be encountered and that civil peace should be protected. He also focused on the need to draw up a comprehensive national strategy to protect and defend Lebanon and pointed out that a national dialogue should be launched for this purpose. He explained that the national dialogue should be based on the sincere desire to consolidate national reconciliation and accord and the exercise of the authority of the State over all its territories. He also renewed his rejection of the settlement of the Palestinians in Lebanon and cited the reasons for this decision.

"President Suleiman also conferred with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu'allim. The president's media office quoted the Syrian foreign minister as saying that a statement would be issued after the Id al-Fitr Holiday in each of Beirut and Damascus on the diplomatic relations between the two countries.

"In Washington, a senior US official told Al-Hayat that US military aid to Lebanon will enter a new phase in the short run and that President Suleiman's visit to Washington today and his meeting with President George W. Bush will deal with this question. This will be followed by an official visit by a US delegation to Beirut in the upcoming weeks.

"US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern affairs David Hale said in a statement to the newspaper Al-Hayat that the visit of President Suleiman to the US capital and his meeting with Defence Secretary Robert Gates and congressmen of the two parties was a historic visit, all the more so because it was the first of its kind since the visit which the late President Amin al-Jumayyil made to Washington in the eighties of the last century. He added that the visit is an expression of Washington's commitment to assisting Lebanon rebuild its institutions, enforce UN resolutions, and protect its independence and sovereignty.

"Hale, who is in charge of the Lebanon Affairs at the US State Department, said that the meeting between President Bush and President Suleiman is expected to last 45 minutes and that it will be attended by Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. He added that the meeting will be an opportunity to exchange views on ways and means to support the State of Lebanon and the army and security forces to protect the people and the borders of Lebanon, to stop the smuggling of weapons and to combat terrorism.

"Hale, who visited Lebanon early last month together with US Assistant Defence Secretary name as published, discussed the US military aid to Lebanon. He commended President Suleiman who showed a great deal of leadership qualities in pushing Lebanon into the right direction and this was reflected in his actions and statements. He said that Washington respects him and views him as president of all the Lebanese, not only a leader of one single sect.

"In remarks on the US military aid to Lebanon, Hale said that negotiations were continuing for the purpose of reaching an agreement on a new package of aid. He said that there is a trend to enter a new phase pertaining to the kind of aid to the Lebanese army that can serve its purposes and to supply it with equipment that is more powerful and more effective.

"Nonetheless, Hale refused to enter into detail on the types of the equipment, but was content with saying that the US delegation in which he will participate alongside pentagon officials "will return soon to Lebanon in October to discuss this question."

"Hale welcomed the status and role of the Lebanese army, regarding it as an "institution with a special place in the heart of the Lebanese and that this institution has suffered a great deal from foreign intervention and bad weapons in the past. Today, the opportunity exists for changing this fait accompli. Hale said that US military aid to Lebanon since 2006 was

estimated at \$410 million, adding that "we want to move on to the next phase and supply Lebanon with equipment that are more effective and that meet its needs."

"Hale said that there is a great confidence in President Suleiman and the Lebanese military establishment and the two US Republican and Democratic parties will continue to aid and support the Lebanese military establishment.

President Suleiman is due to confer with congressmen of the two parties, some of whom are of a Lebanese origin. He will also make telephone contacts with the two presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain who are currently outside Washington.

"Hale, who served as US ambassador in Amman for five years before he became Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, said that "security is one of the great challenges which the State of Lebanon is encountering. He pointed out that Washington was understanding of the fact that the "spread of security and the training of the army and the security forces will take sometime." He said that he was optimistic that "Lebanese solutions" could be found in this connection, such as the agreement that was agreed on in Tripoli which was based on the inter-Lebanese dialogue which took into account the political and economic conditions of the country.

"Hale said that President Suleiman's visit, in which he is accompanied with Foreign Minister Fawzi Sallukh, is unrelated in terms of timing to the national dialogue in Lebanon, but is strictly a visit by President Suleiman to attend the meetings of the UN General Assembly. Hale, nonetheless, welcomed the Lebanese national dialogue and viewed it as a major element of the Doha Agreement.

"Asked about the US position towards Syria, the US official said that Washington shares Paris the same goals. However, as far as actions are concerned, the United States would like to see Syria carrying out its duties, not only towards Lebanon, but also towards Iraq, the Palestinian territories and human rights. He said that the US administration is focusing on the implementation of these demands, such as the demarcation of borders, the enforcement of UN resolutions, particularly Resolution No 1701, and the respect of Lebanese sovereignty." - Al-Hayat, United Kingdom