

Biden in Lebanon Warns Hezbollah

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Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Saniora, received U.S. Vice President Joe Biden at the Government House in Beirut, Lebanon, Friday, May 22, 2009. Biden reinforced U.S. support for Lebanon's government Friday ahead of key parliamentary elections that could see the pro-Western faction ousted by Iranian-backed Hezbollah and its allies. (Hussein Malla, AP / May 22, 2009)

BEIRUT - Vice President Joe Biden said Friday that future U.S. aid to Lebanon depends on the outcome of upcoming elections, a warning aimed at Iranian-backed Hezbollah as it tries to oust the pro-Western faction that dominates government.

Confident its alliance will win, Hezbollah criticized Biden's visit as a U.S. attempt to influence the June 7 vote and held a mass rally to show its popular support.

Biden is the highest-level U.S. official to visit Lebanon in more than 25 years and the attention shows American concern that the vote could shift power firmly into the hands of Hezbollah. U.S. officials have said before they will review aid to Lebanon depending on the composition of the next government, apparently meaning military aid.

"The election of leaders committed to the rule of law and economic reform opens the door to lasting growth and prosperity as it will here in Lebanon," Biden said. The U.S. "will evaluate the shape of our assistance programs based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates."

The U.S. considers Hezbollah a terrorist group and Biden's one-day visit was clearly timed to bolster the Western-leaning faction led by Prime Minister Fuad Saniora ahead of the vote. He expressed strong support for the government.

"I assure you we stand with you to guarantee a sovereign, secure Lebanon, with strong institutions," he said after the meeting with President Michel Suleiman.

With the election about two weeks away, Lebanon is in the throes of an increasingly abrasive campaign that has split voters into two main camps. One made up mainly of Sunnis favors close ties to America, France and moderate Sunni Arab countries while the other is dominated by Shiites and backed by U.S. foes Iran and Syria.

Biden said the U.S. did not want to interfere in the elections and tried to steer clear of the political divisions by meeting the neutral president, Saniora and Hezbollah-allied parliament speaker Nabih Berri.

But he signaled a tilt toward America's allies when he met behind closed doors with leaders of Saniora's faction at a private residence. A similar meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during the monthlong Hezbollah war with Israel in 2006 was broadcast on TV and drew months of sharp condemnation from Hezbollah.

Biden said the Lebanese stand to benefit from Arab-Israeli peace and called for the isolation of opponents of the process.

"Lebanon has suffered terribly from war and we have a real opportunity now ... for peace," he said after talks with the president. "So I urge those who think about standing with the spoilers of peace not to miss this opportunity to walk away from the spoilers."

Biden's visit caps a transformation in American policy toward Lebanon. It began four years ago after more than two decades of steering clear of the country long viewed as a quagmire. Pro-Iranian militants targeted Americans with bombings and kidnappings in the 1980s during the civil war and more than 250 Americans were killed. That led to a 12-year U.S. ban on citizens traveling to the country that was lifted in 1997.

But by stepping into Lebanon's political fray, the United States risks deepening the rift between rival factions. If it does not win, an embittered Hezbollah could take a harder line against its opponents.

While the vice president was still in Beirut, Hezbollah flexed its muscle by holding a mass rally in the southern city of Nabatiyeh to mark the 2000 departure of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon. Tens of thousands of flag-waving

supporters listened to leader Hassan Nasrallah's video address on a giant TV screen. He spoke from his hiding place in south Beirut.

Hezbollah said the visits by Biden and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton a month ago raised "strong suspicion and amounted to a clear and detailed interference in Lebanon's affairs."

The militant group, which is highly critical of U.S. Mideast policy and has a strong anti-Israel agenda, is looking to strengthen its political hold beyond the veto power it currently has in the government. The Shiite group has only 14 seats in the 128-seat parliament, but got the veto power after a show of force a year ago when its gunmen overran Sunni neighborhoods in Beirut. Hezbollah and its allies have a total of 58 seats, while the Western-backed majority holds 70.

The coalition dominated by the heavily armed Hezbollah stands a good chance of winning, which could increase the influence of its sponsors Iran and Syria in the region. Israel and U.S. Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are concerned about the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East, especially through the militant groups Tehran backs such as Hezbollah and Hamas in Gaza.

The U.S. has provided Lebanon with more than a billion dollars in assistance since 2006, including \$410 million to the military and the police. At the airport before leaving, Biden said the United States was "committed to meeting your army's needs." He reviewed a display of the military hardware the U.S. has provided to Lebanon including a tank, a helicopter and an armored carrier.

Lebanon is still trying to chart its own direction four years after Syria pulled its army out of the country and ended nearly three decades of domination. The withdrawal came in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 in a bombing that his supporters blamed on Syria. Damascus denied the accusations, but mass protests in Lebanon and U.S.-led international pressure forced Syria out of Lebanon.

U.S. support for Lebanon shot up after the Hariri assassination under the former Bush administration, which had isolated Syria.

But the Obama administration has shifted policy, reaching out for a dialogue with Syria and Iran. Those moves have alarmed America's allies in Lebanon, prompting recent reassurances from U.S. officials that they will not sell out Lebanon in any dialogue with Syria.

The last U.S. vice president to visit Lebanon was George H.W. Bush under President Ronald Reagan. He came in October 1983, days after a massive suicide truck bombing destroyed the U.S. Marine base at Beirut airport and killed more than 240.

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