

Lebanese leaders warn of betrayal as Biden makes lightning visit

Contributed by Damien McElroy in Beirut, The Telegraph
Saturday, 23 May 2009

Leaders of Lebanon's pro-western government have accused Britain and America of "appeasement" of Hizbollah as the radical Muslim movement prepares to seize power.

Joe Biden, the US vice-president, who became the highest ranking American visitor to Lebanon in 20 years yesterday, was careful to not rule out continued American aid, including military assistance, to a Hizbollah-led government. "We will evaluate the shape of our assistance programs based on the shape of the new government," he said.

"I do not come here to back any particular party or any particular person. I come here to back certain principles."

Hizbollah has undergone a rehabilitation from the outright condemnation it faced four years ago after it refused to abandon its arms and links to terrorism.

Britain has resumed direct contact with its officials and Europe is expected to deal with its government as a normal state.

Walid Jumblatt, the veteran leader of the country's Druse population and pillar of the March 14 ruling coalition, said that Hizbollah's defiance of international law was being overlooked by governments seeking closer ties with its patrons, Iran and Syria.

"The West is prevented from doing anything for us by its need to enhance its negotiations," he said. "Iran has Hizbollah's strength to parade. It can show that it has reached all the way through to the Mediterranean and that with Hizbollah and Hamas, it's a player in Palestine.

"The Lebanese state is too weak to stand by itself and therefore the appeasement of Hizbollah means people are afraid – they are choosing to make an accommodation with Iranian regional power."

President Barack Obama extended the hand of friendship to Iran and Syria in January. British officials met a Hizbollah official in March and a Hizbollah MP was allowed to address a meeting in London.

Lebanon's 2005 "cedar revolution" after the assassination of the former prime minister Rafik Hariri was a symbol of President George W Bush's campaign for democratic reform across the Middle East. Hizbollah's defeat in the subsequent election was celebrated as a boon for democracy. But projections that it will form a majority after next month's general election have seen a rush to bring the party in from the cold.

A British diplomat said the decision to talk to Hizbollah was taken even though the Secret Intelligence Service reported it was implicated in three terrorist incidents in the past year.

The Foreign Office also believes that Hizbollah was involved in holding five British men kidnapped in Iraq two years ago.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/lebanon/5369762/Lebanese-leaders-warn-of-betrayal-as-Biden-makes-lightning-visit.html>