

Lebanon May Break Without U.S. Support: Hariri

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Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections were the subject of a sobering meeting at the White House on Thursday, where the son of slain Lebanon Prime minister Rafic Hariri told President Bush and his top advisors that his country was facing a potential crack-up unless the United States threw its weight behind the pro-democracy movement.

Saad Hariri, who stepped into his father's shoes after a deadly car-bomb blew up his armor plated Mercedes in Beirut in February 2005, has become a key leader of the grass roots Cedars Revolution that forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon after a 29-year occupation.

But two years later the Syrians are back, working through local Lebanese proxies in tandem with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Their goal is to derail the October 23rd election as a first step to imposing their own candidate for the presidency, U.S. and Lebanese sources said.

"The result could be two governments," warned Eblan Farris, a spokesman for the Cedars Revolution in Washington, DC.

The Bush administration is taking the threat of Syrian and Iranian intervention in the Lebanese election "very, very seriously," a senior administration official told Newsmax after the meeting with Hariri.

"If this whole thing comes crashing down, it would be a real blow to this administration, especially since we've had a couple of years to do things right,"

There was a real possibility, the official added, that failure to elect a president — which he called "a train wreck" — could plunge Lebanon again into civil war.

Hariri and other leaders of the Cedars Revolution are sounding out the Bush administration to see how far they will go to prevent that train wreck from happening, sources close to the Lebanese leader told Newsmax.

If the U.S. is willing to provide political, diplomatic, and possibly military help, then Lebanon's leaders are willing to stand up to the Syrians and the Iranians, the sources said.

But if the U.S. pays just lip service to the Lebanese, then Hariri and his colleagues would be likely to see some sort of compromise to keep their country from coming apart at the seams.

Hariri also met on Thursday with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who assured him that the United States would continue to work with him and other elected leaders to guarantee Lebanon's sovereignty.

"We are committed to continuing those efforts with Lebanon's friends — and they are many," a State Department official told Newsmax.

Thursday's high-level meetings with Hariri were "an obvious demonstration of strong U.S. support for the government of Lebanon against those who would work against Lebanese sovereignty — specifically, Iran and Syria," the U.S. diplomat added.

Walid Jumblatt, a prominent Druse leader whose father was assassinated by the Syrians nearly thirty years ago, will meet with President Bush and Secretary of State Rice next week, officials said.

Jumblatt, Hariri, and Christian leader Samir Gagea, held consultations by phone with Saudi foreign minister Saud bin Faisal on Wednesday, to explore a possible compromise that would be acceptable to the pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian parties, Lebanese sources told Newsmax.

"They are afraid that the country will break up," a source close to the two leaders said.

Under Lebanon's sectarian constitution, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the parliament speaker a Shiite Muslim, and the prime minister a Sunni.

Parliament is scheduled to convene on October 23rd to elect a president, but many Members fear assassination and have said they will stay away.

Prime Minister Fuad Seniora, a moderate Sunni Muslim who has received political support from the United States, hasn't left his office for the past year for fear of assassination.

Several members of parliament have holed up with him in makeshift quarters in the prime minister's palace in downtown Beirut out of similar concerns.

Last month, another anti-Syrian member of parliament, Antoine Ghanem, was murdered in a car bomb when he returned to Beirut after an extended absence.

Lebanon's traditional sectarian and political alliances shifted dramatically following the Hariri assassination in February 2005, where more than one million Lebanese — nearly one-third of the population — took to the streets to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

This grass-roots movement became known as the Cedars Revolution, after Lebanon's national symbol.

In response to the Lebanese popular movement, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1559, which called for Syria to withdraw its occupation troops and established an international commission of inquiry to investigate the murder.

The Commission has zeroed in on senior Syrian intelligence officials, but is also believed to be investigating pro-Syrian Lebanese security officials for complicity in the assassination plot.

Toward the end of last summer's war between Hezbollah and Israel, which Newsmax covered on the ground from northern Israel, the Security Council also passed resolution 1701, which called for the disarmament of Hezbollah, established a UN-patrolled buffer zone in south Lebanon, and demanded that Syria seal its borders to prevent arms deliveries from reaching Hezbollah.

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad told the BBC earlier this week that it would be "impossible" for him to seal the border with Lebanon.

Hezbollah and their allies are seeking to impose a president who will ignore both resolutions and the International commission of inquiry, essentially undoing the gains of the Cedars Revolution.

Iran continues to maintain an estimated 2,500 Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and to train and equip Hezbollah.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has boasted that his group now had 30,000 rockets similar to those fired against Israel last summer.

Further complicating Lebanon's domestic political situation is the position of Christian leader Michel Aoun.

Gen. Aoun, who fought the Syrians while serving as Interim Prime Minister in 1989, was sent into exile in France for ten years in an agreement brokered by the administration of George H.W. Bush.

But since returning to Lebanon, he has dropped his earlier hostility to Syria and has formed a political alliance with Hezbollah.

Gen. Aoun is widely seen as Hezbollah's choice for the presidency. His position has split the normally united Christian community, which accounts for approximately 35% of Lebanon's population.

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