

Executive Memorandum

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Squeeze Out Syria to Build a Free Lebanon

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The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14 provoked a strong Lebanese backlash against Syrian domination, long sustained by targeted killings and systematic intimidation. Massive public protests—the largest anti-government rallies ever staged in the Arab world—prompted the resignation of Lebanon’s pro-Syrian Prime Minister Omar Karami on February 28. Yet 10 days later, President Emile Lahoud slapped the Lebanese opposition in the face by reappointing Karami as prime minister.

The Bush Administration has correctly supported the Lebanese people against Syria and has pushed Syria to comply with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. Washington should maintain firm and relentless pressure on Syria to withdraw all of its military and intelligence forces, to halt its support of Iraqi insurgents, and to end its support of terrorism against Israel.

Assad’s Dinosaur Regime. The Assad regime is a repressive dictatorship, the only remaining Baathist regime after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and President Bashar Assad has played Syria’s weak hand of foreign policy cards clumsily. Although Syria has dominated Lebanon since 1976, when it intervened in the 1975–1990 Lebanese civil war, the Lebanese have grown increasingly resentful of the Syrian presence, especially since the withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon in 2000.

The Lebanese opposition is demanding a total Syrian withdrawal, an international inquiry into Hariri’s murder, and the ouster of seven top Lebanese security officials who work closely with Damascus. However, Syria’s Lebanese surrogates, President Lahoud and Prime Minister Karami, have ruled out an independent international investigation of Hariri’s assassination and continue to cling

to power in the face of rising popular opposition. The opposition, which controls about one-third of the seats in parliament, hopes to expand its numbers in the coming May elections but fears that Syria could tilt the election results if its troops and intelligence personnel do not leave before the elections.

On March 12, President Assad grudgingly pledged to withdraw from Lebanon in two phases, but Damascus has not publicly committed to a timetable for full withdrawal. Syria has reportedly withdrawn 4,000 to 6,000 troops, but approximately 10,000 remain in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. Syrian and Lebanese officials are scheduled to meet on April 7 to finalize a withdrawal timetable, but Syria has a poor record of ful-

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- The United States should lead an international effort to pressure Syria and Iran to withdraw all personnel from Lebanon, immediately and unconditionally, before the May elections.
 - Washington also should pressure Syria to stop supporting terrorism against Iraq, Israel, and the Palestinians.
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filling its diplomatic promises. Damascus has strong economic reasons to maintain its grip on Lebanon: Cross-border smuggling is a lucrative source of income, and more than 1 million Syrian workers are employed in Lebanon. Moreover, the Assad regime, dominated by Syria's Alawite minority, cannot afford to allow subversive democratic ideas to spread to its own hostage population.

Getting Serious with Syria. The United States has a long history of tense relations with Syria, a former ally of the Soviet Union and implacable enemy of Israel. The U.S. Department of State has included Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism ever since the list was created in 1979. Syria has a bloody record of supporting terrorism in Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, and (most recently) Iraq; it also gives sanctuary and support to Iraqi Baathists and facilitates the transit of Islamic militants to Iraq.

Following Syria's heavy-handed alteration of the Lebanese constitution to secure an extended term for President Lahoud, the United States and France pushed through Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon and the disarming of all Lebanese militias. While paying lip service to Resolution 1559, Damascus is dragging its feet on complying with it, preferring the terms of the 1989 Taif Accord, which gave Syria more latitude by allowing it to negotiate a timetable for final withdrawal with the Lebanese government.

To help build a free and independent Lebanon and discourage Syrian troublemaking there and in other countries, the Bush Administration should:

- **Maintain firm pressure on Syria and Iran to withdraw all forces from Lebanon before the Lebanese elections.** The United States should cooperate closely with France and other interested countries to pressure Syria and Iran, which has several hundred Revolutionary Guards and intelligence personnel deployed in Lebanon, to withdraw all personnel immediately and unconditionally. If Syria or Iran continues to stall, Washington should press its allies to impose economic sanctions and push for U.N. economic sanctions. Syria's Achilles' heel is its faltering economy, which has been damaged by decades of socialist economic pol-

icies. Although the United States has little economic leverage left with Damascus because of sanctions already in place, European or U.N. sanctions could impose heavy costs on Syria. To verify the withdrawal of Syrian and Iranian forces, the 2,000 U.N. peacekeeping troops in southern Lebanon should be redeployed to eastern Lebanon, and the Lebanese Army should move into the U.N. positions in the south to maintain law and order.

- **Help the Lebanese to build a free and democratic Lebanon.** Washington should continue to support Lebanon's democratic opposition and encourage other countries to follow suit. To ensure fair elections, it should seek to deploy international election monitors. After the elections and formation of a new government, the United States should support efforts to purge Lebanon's army, police, and other government bureaucracies of Syria's stooges. The United States should also insist that the pro-Iranian, Syrian-backed Hezbollah militia be disarmed, as required by Resolution 1559.
- **Compel the Assad regime to stop supporting terrorism.** The Bush Administration should patiently maintain maximum diplomatic, political, and economic pressure on Syria to stop supporting Hezbollah terrorists, Iraqi insurgents, and Palestinian terrorist groups. The Assad regime must understand that its lethal efforts to interfere in the internal affairs of its neighbors will backfire by provoking concerted international pressure against it.

Conclusion. Syria's Assad regime must be firmly pressured to halt interference in Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Israeli affairs. If it fails to do so, the Bush Administration should lead an international effort to impose higher economic, diplomatic, and political costs on Damascus.

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