

Christian protesters return to Beirut square

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Editorial Note

The terms “pro-Syrian” or “Syrian and Iranian-backed” are being emphasized by the media in an attempt to discredit the legitimate protests regarding the unconstitutional nature of the Siniora government.

In contrast, the media rarely acknowledges in its phraseology, the fact that the Future Movement and the Siniora government are “pro-U.S.” or “French, British, and American-backed”. These terms would seem most appropriate.

While the Reuters article below emphasises the usual Syria and Iran connections, it nonetheless highlights the Christian involvement in the demonstrations against the Lebanese government.

More generally the mainstream media has described the demonstrations as being a Shia Muslim initiative, when in fact all sectors of Lebanese society have joined hands in demanding the resignation of the government. .

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Lebanese Christian Mona Mehanna protested on March 14 last year to end Syria’s hegemony in Lebanon. This year she is on the streets again, protesting with a group that enjoys Syrian support.

Contradictory? Mehanna and her supporters say not.

The Free Patriotic Movement headed by the soldier-turned-politician Michel Aoun had joined protests last year to demand Syria end its 29-year military presence after former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri was assassinated.

Many Lebanese blamed Damascus for the killing. Syria denies the allegations.

“We went down to the streets during the Cedar Revolution because we wanted to evict Syria out of Lebanon,” Mehanna, 48, said as she joined the week-old mass protests led by pro-Syrian Hezbollah to topple the Western-backed government.

“Now I’m out here because I want a government that respects its people.”

Aoun was given a hero’s welcome when he returned from self-imposed exile after Syrian forces pulled out last year. But he got the cold shoulder from anti-Syrian politicians despite

winning 21 seats in parliamentary elections.

His former allies excluded him from their electoral alliances, which meant no representation for him in cabinet. Aoun joined an unlikely partner — Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah — which is Syrian and Iranian backed, prompting critics to question whether Aoun was changing his platform.

Aoun's supporters insist there is no change.

"We are here because we want proportionate representation in this country and to change this government because they are gripping onto power," said Rabih Abdo, 33, a party organizer.

"We are not with Syria and Iran, these countries have no relation to us. As Aoun's party, we would not accept it should the Syrians come back here, if they do, we'll be the first people to stand against them," he said.

PORTRAITS DEFACED

The schism between Maronite Christians allied with the anti-Syrian majority coalition and Aoun's followers has since widened and taken an ugly turn.

Aoun's portraits in a Christian district of Beirut were defaced and anti-Aoun slogans were commonplace at last month's funeral of slain anti-Syrian minister Pierre Gemayel.

Aoun's supporters have turned out in force in central Beirut, occupying almost an entire square in orange tents, the party's color, joining Hezbollah in demands for a national unity government in which they have more representation.

They say Syria no longer interferes in Lebanon's affairs, and there is no harm in having ties with the country as long as it does not re-enter Lebanon.

"Of course we are still against any Syrian military presence in Lebanon. When we came down on March 14 we wanted Syria to leave and its army left," said Bashir Salameh, 18. "Now we have internal demands that have nothing to do with Syria."

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