

Lebanon Baloney, Sliced Thin

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Global Research, April 02, 2005

[Antiwar.com](#) 2 April 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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On Tuesday, March 29, Syria informed the U.N. that it would withdraw all of its troops from Lebanon before that country holds elections later this spring. The neo-Jacobins are celebrating Syria's eviction from Lebanon as another great victory for democracy and the Rights of Man. But given what the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon is likely to mean, they are slicing the baloney a bit thin. It is too easy to see through it. As Washington now conveniently forgets, America and the rest of the world welcomed the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon. Why? Because they came to put an end to Lebanon's 15-year civil war, which raged from 1975 to 1990. Now, the departure of those same troops has an excellent chance of reigniting that civil war. Already, three bombs have gone off in Christian neighborhoods. The democratic forces Washington is supporting are Christian-led; with the expulsion of Syria, they see a chance to re-establish Christian domination of Lebanese politics. Hezbollah will be willing to fight to prevent that from happening. As usual, the neocons are smoking in the powder magazine.

Here is where they have cut the Lebanon baloney too thin. The likelihood of a renewed Lebanese civil war is sufficiently great that no one can overlook it including the neocons themselves. They are ignorant of the world, but not that ignorant. So the key question becomes this: why would the neocons and the Bush administration they dominate want a renewed Lebanese civil war?

I suspect the answer is to be sought less in Washington than in Tel Aviv. The most effective of the non-state enemies Israel now faces is Hezbollah. Hezbollah drove Israel out of Lebanon. While it remains comparatively weak in the West Bank and Gaza, where Hamas has the lead, it is striving to build up its influence there. From Israel's perspective, what better way could there be to diminish Hezbollah's power than to embroil it in a new civil war in Lebanon?

The well-orchestrated demands for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon appeared across the board, in Lebanon and internationally, immediately after the car bomb assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. Syria has been blamed for the assassination. But if we ask who benefited from it, the answer is Israel, not Syria. Could the whole thing have been a Mossad operation? The choreography of the anti-Syrian reaction, including Washington immediately jumping on board, suggests it could.

A renewed Lebanese civil war in turn fits into a larger Likud strategy, a strategy that leading Washington neocons helped draft. In essence, that strategy calls for destabilizing every existing Middle Eastern regime, on the grounds that Israel would then dominate the region as the only remaining stable country. The neocons camouflage the call for destabilization by dressing it up as democracy and freedom, but even they know that democracy in the Middle

East is about as likely as old Bessie, teets flailing, jumping over the moon. Plus, if any Moslem country in the region did hold a genuinely free election, Osama bin Laden would win it.

The irony here is that destabilizing existing Middle Eastern governments will not improve Israel's security. Quite the contrary, it will greatly benefit the non-state entities such as Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda that are Israel's and America's far more dangerous opponents (if Lebanon does return to civil war, Hezbollah will win it). Those organizations do not seek to take over states, but to replace the state with a new caliphate that would unite all Moslems. Their immediate enemies are precisely the authoritarian governments in Syria and elsewhere that Israel and Washington are now trying to push over the brink. Destabilization is a win-win pact with the devil, an alliance of schlemiels and schlimazels in which both Israel and the U.S. are schlimazels, but we are the schlimazel's schlimazel.

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