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Gemayel Assassination Underscores Lebanon's Need for U.S. Support in Struggle Against Syria

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The assassination of Lebanese Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel has shaken Lebanon's elected government at a critical moment of deepening political crisis. Gemayel strongly supported the 2005 Cedar Revolution that swept away a Syrian occupation force that had exploited Lebanon as a colony and convenient surrogate battlefield for three decades. His murder is a major psychological blow to the embattled government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, which has struggled to consolidate Lebanon's independence from Syria.

The assassination came shortly before a crucial cabinet vote on the approval of an international tribunal to indict and try the Syrian-sponsored suspects in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Syria appears to be pulling out all the stops to block that tribunal, which is expected to implicate high-ranking Syrian officials. Despite the growing atmosphere of intimidation, Lebanon's cabinet did approve the international tribunal on November 25. Syria's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, is now threatening to organize street demonstrations to bring down the government.

Syria has a long history of political assassinations in Lebanon, which it seeks to retain as a dependent satellite. In addition to Gemayel and Hariri, Syria is believed to be responsible for the assassinations of scores of other anti-Syrian leaders, including Gemayel's uncle, President-elect Bachir Gemayel, before he assumed office in 1982, journalist Samir Kassir, and respected parliamentary leader and publisher Gibran Tuani.

Although uniformed Syrian soldiers were forced out of Lebanon last year, Syria still maintains a potent network of agents throughout Lebanon and enjoys a close working relationship with the Iranian-inspired Hezbollah terrorist group, which has established a political stranglehold on Lebanon's single biggest sectarian group, the Shia. Hezbollah's political party and other Syrian allies have pulled out of Lebanon's government and are seeking to bring it down before it can further undermine Syria's influence over Lebanon.

In addition to fomenting sectarian tension between Lebanese factions and Palestinians and Israelis, Syria's Assad dictatorship also supports the bloody insurgency in Iraq. Assad's Baathist regime has given sanctuary to and cooperated with the exiled remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime, which control a large portion of the insurgents inside Iraq. The Assad regime also allows radical Islamic movements to funnel men, money, and weapons to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating in Iraq.

The Assad regime has serially ignited sectarian violence to undermine its adversaries in Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq. It should

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be penalized, not rewarded, for these hostile actions. Yet some now call for the Assad dictatorship to be given more of a say in the future of Iraq, which is also struggling to defeat Syrian-supported thugs. Syria is very much part of the problem in Iraq, not a helpful part of the solution. The Assad regime would prefer to facilitate the “Lebanonization” of Iraq, rather than tolerate the survival of a pro-American democratic regime that could further undermine the legitimacy of its Baathist ideology.

The United States should give strong diplomatic, political, economic, and moral support to Lebanon in its continued struggle for independence against Syria. Washington should push for a full investigation of the assassination of Pierre Gemayel as well

as former Prime Minister Hariri. The Assad regime cannot be allowed to continue its campaign of murderous intimidation with impunity. Moreover, the Bush Administration should rule out giving Syria any added influence in Iraq, which already has suffered greatly from Syria’s harmful influence. The Assad regime should be isolated and punished for its bloody interference in its neighbors’ internal affairs, not given a better opportunity to do so.

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