

The Minister

**CONFERENCE GIVEN BY HE. MINISTER JOSEPH SARKIS,  
AT THE WOODROW WILSON CENTER,  
WASHINGTON D.C., SEPT. 19, 2007.**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of the conference is to expose the current political and security situation in Lebanon, at the eve of the single most critical political event, the election of a new President of the Republic. I am a member of the present Government, headed by Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, as the Minister of Tourism, and representative of the Lebanese Forces party (LF) in said Government. The LF are part of the March 14 Coalition, also known as the Cedar Revolution. Ultimately, once common goals and mutual interests are put forth, strong bonds and concrete support must be secured, together with the implementation of a follow-up mechanism for continuum of activity.

**Executive summary**

- Introducing the LF under their true light.
- Exposing the prevailing situation in Lebanon (military and security, economy, political.)
- MARCH 8: expose as a tool in the hands of Damascus and Tehran. Corroborate with facts.
- Stressing on whole MARCH 14, but highlighting productive, leading, and critical role of LF.
- Exposing the importance of the upcoming election, its impact on the nation and region.
- Role of US, US support groups, and how that role can be implemented.
- Showcasing the LF as a necessary and reliable party, in order to forge long-lasting ties with influential decision making people and groups.
- Devise a working mechanism for continuum of activity.

**II. LEBANESE FORCES PARTY (LF): HISTORICAL**

**1. [1975-1988] The first years**

- a) The LF were a spontaneous popular response to the Palestinian and Syrian backed groups' military threat of hostile take over of Lebanon
- b) The LF were initially led by Bashir Gemayel, who was murdered by the Syrians after his election as President of the Republic in 1982
- c) Dr. Samir Geagea has led the LF through their fight and plight since the mid eighties, guiding and seeing them through vicious odds and violent discrimination, never waving their tenets, or faltering in their belief.

2. [1989-1990] Taef – the nation-first option

- a) When presented with a nationally acceptable way out of the civil war, and a new formula for peaceful coexistence, the Taef Accord, the LF, under Dr. Geagea's leadership, immediately and willingly accepted. They disbanded their militia, surrendered their weapons, and prepared to restructure accordingly.
- b) Their decision was in parallel to and in concert with that of the Maronite Patriarch, the entire international community, (Western and Arab nations) as well as the Vatican, who all also saw in it a way out of civil war mayhem.
- c) Hezbollah's position towards Taef back then was just as adamant as Aoun's. They will later succeed, through Syrian policy setting, to retain an "exclusive" status and thus negate Taef's application to their own militia, (disarmament) with the known consequences and aftermath.

3. [1991-1994] The transition years

- a) Major regional political environment (First Iraq war) led the US to give Syria much more leeway in Lebanon than it should have been entrusted with.
- b) Syria benefited from the international community's blind eye to implement its own version of the Lebanese state and the Taef Accord. Lebanon saw the onslaught of a 40,000 men strong and ruthless army and became hostage to Syrian security and intelligence services, which deeply permeated and controlled their Lebanese counterparts.
- c) All Lebanese parties and politicians were "asked" to participate. The LF is the ONLY major party which refused, despite the enticement to its leadership.
- d) For that, they were banned, their party license revoked, and all their assets confiscated. Followed a campaign of terror, assassinations, kidnapping, torture, and full discrimination from all aspects of life and society.
- e) For his refusal to cave in to Syrian coercion, and walk away from his nationalistic convictions, for his refusal to adopt the Syrian flawed version of Taef, despite financial and political enticement, Dr. Samir Geagea was thrown in jail, on fabricated charges, where he spent 11 years and three months in isolation under horrendous conditions.
- f) Throughout those eleven years, Dr. Geagea never showed a hint of weakness, or any temptation to compromise on his belief, and vision of a free, independent, and sovereign Lebanon. He instead willingly and stoically withstood his plight with steadfast resolve and belief.

4. [1994-2005] Violent discrimination

- a) In those dark years, the LF are subjected to a vicious and systematic campaign of terror at the hands of the Syrian occupiers and the collaborating Lebanese security and intelligence services.
- b) The LF survived, maintained and even increased its popular support, which was always key to its proper functioning.
- c) The LF still tried to focus on building a civic society, and promote democracy, freedom of choice, speech, practice, and human rights... only to see itself being dealt an even harsher hand.
- d) Despite its militant past, the LF never retaliated in kind, and chose to strictly adhere to its leader's undivided commitment to peace and rule of law, although said law was interpreted in a very flawed manner.
- e) As an example of the unwavering popular support in these dark years, when Mr. Joe Sarkis [yours truly] ran for the Beirut City Council, (the capital's) on behalf of a *banned* party, and for a mixed voter audience (Muslims and

Christians) he won the elections. This is pretty much like saying Jean Moulin (the famous French resistance fighter) won the Paris city council under Nazi occupation.

5. [2005 - ongoing] Freedom – for Samir Geagea and Lebanon, Cedars Revolution
  - a) The assassination of PM Rafic Hariri in February 2005 triggers a nation-wide protest movement against the Syrian occupiers. LF partisans are key players along their Sunni counterparts who have finally come to terms with the inherent danger in their concept of cohabitation with the invaders until better conditions, and finally adopt the LF's policy of standing by one's belief.
  - b) A Hezbollah-led demonstration in support for Syria on March 8 2005 brings scores of people, including massive numbers of Syrian and Palestinians nationals bussed in, to the center of the city. The opposition will from here on will be recognized as the MARCH 8 opposition.
  - c) The pro-governmental players, with the Christians led by the LF, retaliate spontaneously and organize a 1.3-1.5 Million person strong (literally a full third of the population) massive rally, on March 14 2005. The demonstrators' rallying cry was "Syria out!" That the LF in particular, and the Christians in general, would stand by the Sunni, and that the latter would adopt the LF's tough stance for freedom was probably the gravest Syrian miscalculation. (This was far from being their first assassinated personality) The ocean of flag-bearing demonstrators, as well as their rallying cry, will give the MARCH 14 Coalition a nickname, the CEDAR REVOLUTION.
  - d) The Syrians withdrew their military forces, end of April 2005, under Lebanese popular and international pressure.
  - e) The LF participate in the Parliamentary elections with their Cedar's Revolution allies, and secure seats in the Parliament as well as the new Government. They are part of the March 14 Coalition, which advocates a free, democratic, and sovereign nation.
  - f) Dr. Samir Geagea is released from prison. His release was delayed by pro-Syrian president Lahoud until after the parliamentary elections, unlike other "banned" leaders (Aoun) who secured an early and complicit comeback and thus a crucial head-start in politics in that crucial pre-election period.
  - g) The LF support ALL government decisions and actions, without any reservations or bickering. Their allies include the near-totality of the Druze, led by Walid Jumblat, and the vast majority of the Sunnis, led by Saad Hariri.
  - h) The Cedar Revolution goes on to this day, fighting for democracy, rule of law, and a strong nation. Although it has suffered the loss of many assassinated leaders, (with the rest under threat) it is rock solid in its cohesiveness and popular support, and has resisted many attempts by the March 8 opposition.

### III. POLITICAL SITUATION

1. Split in political ranks: March 8 vs. March 14
  - a) The March 8 opposition is composed of Hezbollah as the main player and support, resources and structure provider, with other minor clusters of different (than Shia) sects to provide "national" and trans-confessional credibility. These include Aoun and his severely depleted ranks, who were fully absorbed by Hezbollah on assumed promises for his openly coveted presidential ambitions.

- b) The March 14 movement is composed of all the main players in the Lebanese arena, with only the Shia being under-represented, as they fear Hezbollah's coercion. Most March 14 personalities are under threat of death, and many to this day have been killed, including journalists, politicians, and leaders.
2. Dividing issues/ national choices
- a) Lebanon's community have always faced-off on the "which Lebanon?" issue. It is a very saddening fact that the issue goes much deeper now, with March 14 and the international community asking March 8, "Lebanon. Yes or No?"
- b) While March 14 members are promoting democracy, reforms, freedom of practice, speech, women's right and the knowledge society, the March 8 movement is under the systematic control of an autocratic theocracy of Islamic extremists.
- c) It would be constructive to ponder on that question: opposition movements usually address the government's inadequate handling of social and economy issues. In Lebanon, the opposition's plan are the eradication of the nation as we know it. They don't oppose the *government*, they oppose the *NATION*.
3. March 8 agenda, allegiances, resources
- a) It is a self-admitted (and source of pride) fact that Hezbollah gets nation-sized amounts of cash, weaponry, technical and doctrinal support from Iran.
- b) It is also a fact that all of that support transits through Syria, who gets to impose its own rules on the behavior of Hezbollah.
- c) In the last two years, the opposition, led by Hezbollah, has systematically implemented Syria's every wish and demand, in terms of stalling the International Tribunal for the assassination of PM Rafic Hariri, negating and denying every UN resolutions, and, most importantly, has provided Syria with enough deniability for its ongoing terror campaign through a well marketed smear campaign.
- d) The March 8 opposition has resorted to violence on numerous occasions, forcibly blocking streets, rioting, squatting in the business district, and causing commotion, all under the banner of their open threat. "Our way or... Hell." (Actual term used.) The mentioned virulent speech can only be seen as setting the stage for future, more aggressive action.
- e) The true issue is not the national partnership they seek with March 14, but rather, allowing for a return to *Pax Syriana*.
4. March 14 agenda, allegiances, resources
- a) The March 14's aim is to model the nation's socio-political structure based on the principles of democracy, human rights, and free economy.
- b) The basis for that model is the Lebanese constitution, which was amended in Taef in 1989, providing a way out of the civil war.
- c) Although it is backed by a large and nation-wide popular support, the March 14 Coalition is in reality facing two staunch and terror-prone nations. This is why it needs the full and undivided support from its friends and allies in the modern and free world.
- d) The Government, presided by PM Seniora, bolstered with the Christian support through the LF and others, have achieved numerous milestones that were all set as stumbling blocks by the Syrian-backed opposition. These include:
1. The resounding success of the Paris III donor's conference.
  2. Coinciding with that, and as PM Seniora was busy in Paris III trying to save the nation from financial collapse, the LF, yet again, responded spontaneously to a putsch attempt by the March 8 opposition, and took

to the street in a hands-off confrontation, effectively stopping the opposition from overtaking the nation and its institutions.

3. The International Tribunal. (Despite March 8 resigning from Government, and going ahead with its Downtown squatting.)
4. Fighting and winning over terrorism. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have secured a total victory against the Syrian sourced Fateh el-Islam in Northern Lebanon, against all Syrian bets and calculations.
5. Peaceful demonstrations, as per the 2<sup>nd</sup> commemoration of the Hariri assassination, whereby the LF and the entire Cedar's Revolution allies led a huge demonstration which was performed under strict rules of conducts, contrasting deeply with the oppositions'.
6. Conducting peaceful and democratic partial elections, and, besides winning back its electorate from Aoun's, showing a clear sense of civic responsibilities and respect for law and democratic practices, unlike Aoun, who "ordered his militants to take to the streets."

#### **IV. MILITARY AND SECURITY SITUATIONS**

Present Government and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) mobilized in fighting terror

1. Before leaving Lebanon, Syria left scores of terror movements and armed factions, all situated in "no access" zones such as Palestinian camps, near border areas, or Hezbollah held territory. Syria has been engaged in providing them with uninterrupted logistical support, and commandeering them through terror operations, and full-fledged battles against the LAF and security forces.
2. Following last year's July war between Hezbollah and Israel, the army, building on UN resolution 1701 and Governmental resolve, was dispatched to the south of Lebanon for the first time in 30 years, restoring law and order to this part of the nation. The LAF are shouldered in their job by the enhanced UNIFIL forces. (up to 15,000 from 2,000, with more aggressive Rules of Engagement and equipment)
3. The UN resolution 1701, the enhanced UNIFIL, and the Army's deployment in the South are all a resounding success to our present government's continuous efforts, and the support it is getting from the international community.
4. The LAF, standing united in its resolve and responding without flinching (despite unpreparedness) to our present government's order to act against the Syrian bread and commanded Fath el-Islam (FI) radical militant is another success to both the heroic and united LAF and our present government who acted swiftly and decisively.
5. Syrian and opposition plans (massive rioting and squatting, covering the terror spree and misdirecting accusations) called for stretching the army and government to the point of collapse by triggering resource-intensive missions, a terror campaign, and outright battles.
6. The only opposition to the LAF acting against the FI militia were made openly by Hezbollah secretary general . The army's clear victory and the government's successful dealing with the extreme threat are a clear impediment to their plans. As a matter of fact, when, months before the Nahr Bared battle, FI militants were arrested and charged for a previous terror attack, the whole March 8 opposition stood in uproar and defense of the arrestees, despite the fact that they themselves acknowledged and admitted both perpetuating the attack and coming from Syria.

7. Our struggle is thus between our present government against illegal parties who can wear different faces although they share one goal, the annihilation of the Cedar's Revolution and all it stands for.
8. Speaking of which, Hezbollah has established no access zones in various areas of the nation, and has restored his arsenal and fighting potential to unprecedented levels, all under the umbrella of his *opposition* and *resistance* status and the blind eyes and willing minds of his political associates.
9. Our present government therefore needs the full commitment of its friends, as our staunch enemies will not let go, waiting that they are for better regional conditions, a change in governing politics amongst friendly nations, or, quite simply, their best weapon so far, endurance.
10. It would be constructive to consider the alternative resolution (or no resolution) of the FI issue.
  - a) FI militants crossed the border coming from Syria, first into a border camp for another Syrian sponsored militia, then, having been relabeled into a new organization, into the Nahr Bared Palestinian camp.
  - b) Their leader, Chaker el-Absi, a wanted person by both Jordan and the US, (for the slaying of a US diplomat in Jordan) was in Syrian jails for two years before being released (that is unheard of in Syria) and thrown into Lebanon, together with his group.
  - c) The pattern is clear. Within months, the nation would have been overwhelmed with reinforcements to Fath Islam, as well as the emergence of other similar groups within months, and a total collapse of peace and order would have ensued... again, Syrian plans, now as always.
  - d) Except that this time around, they would have certainly spread to the region. Quite interestingly, a threat Bashar El-Assad has recently publicly clamored.
  - e) Our government and the LAF have thus achieved a national and regional strategic victory against terror and forces of evil.
11. The US timely aid proved their commitment and support, and was instrumental in securing the army's victory against FI. The recent visit by CENTCOM admiral Vallon, as a representative of President Bush to reaffirm the US's commitment to Lebanon also contributed greatly into making that point.
12. More aid is needed
  - a) Much more is required in terms of supporting the LAF, the government, and putting an end to the Syrian-led take-over attempts by the opposition.
  - b) Our defense minister, Mr. Elias el-Murr, has recently made clear what the LAF's priorities and missions are:
    1. Defending South Lebanon from Israeli operations
    2. The application of UN resolution 1701
    3. Surveillance of the Lebanese-Syrian borders
    4. Surveillance of the Lebanese national waters
    5. Enforcing security and stability, as well as the Taef Accord.
  - c) The present Lebanese government and the LAF are thus fighting terrorism and terrorist states on behalf of the entire free world.
  - d) The LF are assuming a leading role within that government and their allies, and were instrumental in thwarting March 8 opposition attempts for power. (Such as in the mentioned January 23<sup>rd</sup> putsch)
  - e) March 14 Allies have recognized the leading role, for the second time, of the LF in upholding both their pledge for a free Lebanon, and their undivided commitment to act unselfishly for the nation.
13. Terror spree, assassinations, threats of terror

- a) We are a very close to witnessing a world's first: a terror campaign virulent enough and focused enough to cause major political changes by itself.
- b) Indeed, and whereas terror is never recognized as being enough to cause (by itself) political changes, the targeted murdering of March 14 leaders will soon deprive them of their... majority...
- c) As with any terror campaign, the victims are not just those who died, but the audience at large. In our case, March 14 leaders are being scared to death (pun intended) from fulfilling their political duties and obligations.

## V. ECONOMY SITUATION

- a) We can affirm that the economy hinges totally on the political situation.
- b) The Government, supported by the March 14 Coalition, has covered seemingly unsurpassable obstacles and achieved great success. A confidence and financial crisis (another Syrian low shot at the present government) have thus been narrowly avoided.
- c) The major achievements include the Paris III donor's conference, (7.6 B US\$). The Stockholm conference, (1.7B US\$) US direct pledges for 1 B US\$ plus another 300M US\$ from the private sector. The World Bank's constant support, not to mention the timely KSA and Kuwaiti 1.5 B US\$ which prevented a balance of payments crisis during the war, and the US's recent and equally timely military support.
- d) It is morbidly anecdotal to note that although March 8 actions are the very reason why we need this financial support, they are doing everything in their power to stop and disrupt every process.
- e) This in order to discredit and overthrow the Government, and...
- f) ... monopolize the source of foreign cash support, (Iran) as part of their continuum of socio-political agenda.
- g) The Government's economic reforms programs holds great promises in terms of reviving the economy, reducing fiscal imbalances, and improving overall economic efficiencies. It is however held hostage to the prevailing political deadlock.
- h) If the reforms are not implemented, most of Paris III pledges, as well as others, will not materialize.
- i) As an example of the March 8 impact on the economy, I can personally give you some numbers from my own ministry, the Ministry of Tourism:
  1. 2006 was expected to bring in 1.6M tourists, produce around 4.4 B US\$.
  2. The July war brought half the country back to the stone age
  3. And growth to a negative 4.5% from a predicted +5.5%
  4. This is the Divine Victory the March 8 opposition clamors for...
  5. and adds insult to injury by squatting in the middle of the business and tourism nerve center, forcibly causing a full disruption of the economy.
  6. Thousands of businesses have had to close down because of these actions, and tens of thousands have been left bankrupt or jobless.
  7. Of course, cash is awash from Iran, and March 8 supporters are not suffering from these actions.
- j) The Government is going ahead with full determination and resolve with its governmental duties, with 90% of destroyed infrastructure already repaired, and all payments to the injured, deceased, as well as financial compensations for loss of home or business near totally completed. (Practically ALL of the recipients are March 8 supporters.)

## VI. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

1. Scheduling, as per the constitution [Article 73 of the Lebanese Constitution]
  - a) The parliament must convene in order to elect a new president at least one month before, and no more than two months ahead of the current president's term conclusion, November 24.
  - b) Should the Parliament not be called to convene for one reason or another, then it is bindingly considered to be in convention on the tenth day before the current president's exit day, November 24.
  - c) The Parliament, when convening for electing a president, is considered to be an electoral body, not a parliamentary assembly in deliberation. It must immediately and without debate proceed to the election of a new president. [Article 75]
2. Constitutional bickering
  - a) We should start with the main issue: the March 8 opposition and the March 14 movement are in clear conflict in terms of interpreting the constitution. Although this would not be an abnormal situation in any democracy, the real problem, which reflects the direct Syrian interference, is that the Parliament, which is the normal place to discuss and resolve these issues (as opposed to the street) has been closed-off by the (March 8) speaker Nabih Berri.
  - b) Vote issues: the opposition is interpreting Article 49 in its own way, requesting the two-thirds majority for the first round, and again for *another* first round... Article 49 is clear about this issue. The *second* convening only requires the absolute majority, as in [half + one] of available voters. It would not be a *second* round had the first one not failed.
  - c) Attendance issues: The opposition is thus threatening with no participation, in order to deny the two-thirds requirements, and is extending this requirement to subsequent rounds, in clear contravention of Article 49.
  - d) When the constitution requires a compulsory two-thirds of votes it does so quite explicitly, as per Article 79.
  - e) MP's duties: In any democratic process, it is considered the MP's duty to come forth, attend, and voice his opinion, which is that of the people he represents, even if that is an empty ballot.
  - f) Rejection of democratic processes: failing to show-up is thus a clear breach to the democratic process of presidential elections.
3. Constitutional speculation
  - a) The March 8 current stance is as follows: if their own interpretation is not adopted, they will consider it a breach to the constitution, and will consider it their right to make a breach of their own.
  - b) The range of options open to them would then be only limited by their imagination, their appeal for mayhem... and the orders from Syria.
  - c) The new president will face major issues in the near future. Of particular interest to Syria and its March 8 pawns are the following:
    1. Staging the full comeback of Syria through the "back door."
    2. Disrupting the International Tribunal, which hangs as a Damocles sword above Syria's main government figures.
    3. Hezbollah's arsenal, as well as that of many other parties and terror cells, which constitute Syria's diplomacy and its joker card.
    4. Maintain the ability to use these militias at will, both internally and externally, as a matter of furthering their politics.



5. The request for Syria to recognize Lebanon as a free and independent nation, and allow for drawing the borders, exchanging diplomats, and implementing formal peer-to-peer relationships.
6. Stopping weapon, drugs, and money traffic from Syria towards its violence and terror players.

#### 4. Threats

- a) The opposition is confronting the Government with two options: their own “compromise” candidate, or chaos, vacuum, and hell, which, by the way, would be an ideal case scenario for Syria. (Bashar El Assad publicly promised so, whereas Aoun and Hezbollah speakers constantly threaten us with it)
- b) Confirmed reports are coming in everyday of the opposition parties conducting military maneuvers in Hezbollah camps near the Syrian borders. We expect direct military actions to accompany any future riots.
- c) The LF, in cooperation with the Government to which it belongs, cannot yield and submit to such threats of annihilation. It plans to go forth with the election, abiding by and in application of the constitution and legal practice.
- d) The LF and their March 14 allies have thus a clear stance: the elections WILL occur. On time, and as per the constitution. The political void Syria is betting on will not be allowed to materialize.
- e) There is no other alternative, lest we abandon the country to the Syrian, who are betting on this void, until regional conditions are more in their favor, and western heads of states/ foreign offices have either changed or grown weary.
- f) The March 14 Coalition will therefore go to the Parliament on election day, hoping that some of the opposition’s MP’s still have some decency and sense of national duty (perhaps suicidal tendencies too, much like themselves) left in them and will therefore attend.
- g) If the two-thirds proportion is not secured, the March 14 Coalition will settle for another convening, giving the opposition time to reconsider, then proceed with the constitutional [absolute majority +1] and elect a new president.

#### 5. Candidate(s)

- a) New president has to be fully endowed president, and not an interim, to pursue national and regional issues.
- b) These include security and defense matters such as securing the disputed (with Israel – a Hezbollah alibi for maintaining their arsenal) Chebaa farms, implementing the “7 points” agreement between the main opposition party, Hezbollah, and the government, as well as the outstanding UN resolutions, such as the 1701, the Taef Accord, and, last but not least, extending the rule of law over the whole territory.
- c) Also on the next president’s menu will be the implementation of economic and political reforms, both crucial to the nation’s future.
- d) The LF is thus pushing for a profile and a program, not a specific name.
- e) The LF do not have their “own” candidate, despite the fact that they are the prime interested party in this essential Christian first post.
- f) The LF will promote a common candidate with their March 14 allies.
- g) Since Taef, due to the Syrian occupation, the President was always a Syrian puppet who strictly abided by Syria’s agenda. This present election is a first.
- h) The LF and their March 14 allies are against amending the constitution for the next presidency, as some are hinting to, because the constitution is not to be amended and customized to cater for specific persons or needs.

i) Profile:

1. Personality: strong personality and strong resolve coupled with the ability to accommodate others are a must.
2. Ethical: no corruption priors, or compromises on national issues.
3. Political: Strict abidance to the national issues we already mentioned
4. Vision: ours, yours, and every free and democratic person's vision.

j) Program:

1. Rule of law: authority confined to the government and state institutions.
2. Strong Nation: weapons exclusively with legal military and security apparatuses.
3. Political reforms: the new electoral law, mainly.
4. Improving the economy: implementing reforms, following through on the international engagements.
5. Promoting democracy, the knowledge society, all human rights.
6. Promoting regional peace and prosperity.

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