



## Democracy & Security Conference Organized by PSSI's

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I come from Lebanon, a small - yet diverse - friendly, freedom loving, fond of life and prosperity country, with one problem - the wrong neighborhood. It is an honorable privilege that I am here today to tell a story. A story of transition, and what I have learned from it. It was late 2004, when few of us, a writer, an ad man, a member of the parliament and a couple of other concerned citizens were discussing what can be done to get rid of the Syrian army which had been occupying the country for 30 years. We thought we needed a triggering event; the upcoming elections seemed to be it. People in Lebanon have tried many times to rise up and challenge the Syrian tyrants, but failed. We thought we had to make it implicit that this time it was for real, we opted for Independence 05 – 05 meant a fixed date. On Feb 14, 2005, PM Hariri was assassinated. The public was outraged. It was a breaking point. We met that night and knew it was then or never. Spontaneity was incredible. At the same time, many other groups were meeting, without coordination. Each group took upon it a certain task, again uncoordinated. We did message and branding, others did logistics, some media relations and so on. Basically it took a gutsy banker, a courageous newspaper, an angry TV station, a relentless logistics team, a willing printer, and a group of young students who were ready to camp for weeks at the center of Beirut. The banker managed to provide an anonymous bank account – practically illegal. The account was soon filled with contributions ranging from 100 dollars to 10,000, all from the pockets of concerned citizens. Food for the camp, paper stock for the printers and so on. SMS played a key role. People would receive a message to participate in demonstrations and forward it on. You knew it was happening when you received it back - times over - from people you forgot you knew. When the army showed up at the demonstrations, by the orders of the tyrants still in power, the fix was easy. Kids, from past experience, knew what to do. They cheered the soldiers, kissed and hugged them and gave them flowers. What do you do when a lovely young girl offers you a flower? You can't shoot her. People on the streets were actually the soldiers' families – I recall an incident where an officer was yelling at a soldier for hugging an older man. "I told you not to talk to protestors," the officer shouted. "He's my dad" the soldier replied. People were gathering by the thousands, all wearing scarves in the announced color code of red and white, all wearing the Independence 05 brand, and all carrying one flag. The national flag. We couldn't distribute that many. People were making their own, some even sold them - nobody minded. Three weeks later, on March 14, over one million Lebanese took to the streets in a mass demonstration. Almost a third of the population - relatively the largest demonstration ever. It was an act of civility bar none. Not one push or shove, not one scrap of trash afterwards. All in red and white. People were so beautiful. They were wonderful.

Some 40 days later, the Syrian army was out. And for good. People had moved. People had prevailed. The same people of Lebanon have tried it before, but did not succeed, they stood up to the Syrian tyrants, with the same determination, the same tools, the same beauty, but failed. In 1989, for instance, some half a million took to the streets in Lebanon for the same cause. The international community was not interested and so was the media.

Meanwhile a similar event with much less in numbers in a much much bigger country was happening. It was Boris Yeltsin and his supporters in the Red Square. They succeeded. The leaders of the free world were paying attention and hence the media. It dawned on me, that for grassroots democracy to spread, the following simple elements should come to play:



1. People willing to stand up for their freedom. Trust me all people are. That is a given.
2. A triggering event. Tyrants will always provide you with one. So don't worry, that's another given.
3. Simple tools, such as a good message, SMS, little money, printers, etc. Easy fix too.
4. Most importantly, however, is the attention of the leaders of the free world. If they speak out in your support, such as what President Bush and others so fervently did for us, you got it.
5. Then you get the attention of the Media. Well, media, and notably that of the free world, and unless a number people are slaughtered, will cynically ignore you if important leaders do. I guess all I am trying to say, is that if free media will dispose a little of its cynicism and propel a little of duty to freedom and democracy, enormous progress can be achieved. People will prevail. And guess what. It is good ratings too. It is good business. But most importantly, it is the attention of the leaders of the free world that really matters. That attention is the decisive weapon in favor of freedom loving people. It is that attention, ideally empowered by dedication and enough time, that will make the world turn around.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During that great day on March 14, 2005 of the Cedar Revolution, the people had won. The country, in return, had lost many of its best people in addition to PM Hariri. We, that same group, had lost 2 out of 7 of us. Samir Kassir and later Gebran Tuéni were assassinated. A price, these heroes were obviously willing to pay. At the end, people are willing to pay the price of freedom dearly. All what the leaders of the free world need to pay is... attention.

Thank you.