

US engineers provocation following assassination in Lebanon

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The provocative steps taken by the American government following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri are an ominous indication that Washington is preparing for a military intervention in Syria and Lebanon.

It is not yet known who is behind the assassination of Hariri, who was killed along with at least 11 others in an explosion in Beirut. What can be said for certain is that the US government has seized on the killing as a pretext for advancing its own interests in the region.

Washington's belligerent response began only hours after the killing. At a noon press conference on Monday, White House spokesman Scott McClellan warned that the US would consult with members of the United Nations Security Council "about measures that can be taken to punish those responsible for this terrorist attack, to end the use of violence and intimidation against the Lebanese people, and to restore Lebanon's independence, sovereignty and democracy by freeing it from foreign occupation."

By foreign occupation, McClellan was referring to the 15,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon. Later, McClellan was more specific, declaring that the Lebanese people must be "free from Syrian occupation."

The American media by Monday evening was full of unfounded speculation that Syria was responsible for the attack, along with discussion about the possible retribution that would be meted out by the American government.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* published an article under the headline, "US Seems Sure of the Hand of Syria, Hinting at Penalties," by Seven Weisman. The article acknowledged that "Mr. McClellan and other administration spokesman said they had no concrete evidence of Syria's involvement in the killing of Mr. Hariri." Nevertheless, it quoted an unnamed senior State Department official as declaring, "We're going to turn up the heat on Syria, that's for sure.... Syria has, by negligence or design, allowed Lebanon to become destabilized."

On Tuesday afternoon, the day after the assassination, the US State Department announced that it was recalling the

American ambassador to Syria, Margaret Scobey, for "urgent consultations." Scobey issued a protest to the Syrian government expressing the US government's "deep concern" and "profound outrage" over the killing.

The American response is striking in its speed and extreme bellicosity. Hardly before the wreckage was cleared from the streets, the American government was making inflammatory threats regarding the killing. It has warned of further economic sanctions and a UN Security Council resolution against Syria's occupation of Lebanon, which could then be used as a rationale for military actions.

Washington has justified pointing the finger at Syria because over the past several months Hariri has moved closer to the anti-Syrian opposition in Lebanon, joining a call for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country before elections that are expected in April. Hariri resigned his position as prime minister four months ago, after coming into conflict with the Syrian-backed president, Emile Lahud.

Officials in the Syrian Baathist government have vehemently denied that the country was involved and denounced the killing as a "terrorist act." They have suggested that Al Qaeda may be responsible for the attack because of Hariri's well-known ties to the Saudi monarchy.

While in the past the US has been quick to link Al Qaeda to any terrorist attack, now the government has not stopped to even consider that possibility. In the course of his career as a politician in the Levant, Hariri no doubt acquired many enemies, any one of whom could be behind his assassination. The Syrian government is among the *least likely* sources of the attack. It has little to gain from the assassination, which will only strengthen the Lebanese opposition and provide a pretext for the United States to intervene in the area, something Syria has been desperately seeking to avoid.

No one in the US media bothers to raise questions about the line so quickly set down by Washington.

If the response of the American government seems extraordinarily well prepared, this is because it has long been searching for excuses to ratchet up pressure on Syria.

There are many signs that the Bush administration is planning on extending its war for control of the entire Middle East. After invading both Afghanistan and Iraq, the US has now set its sights on other countries, particularly Iran and Syria.

Of the two, Syria is perhaps the more tempting target. The *New York Times* article by Weisman said as much when it noted, “Western diplomats have sometimes suggested that Syria is ‘low-hanging fruit’ in the campaign against terrorists: a nation that could be punished by further isolation and sanctions because its economy is in poor shape. Iran, by contrast, is awash in oil revenues, and the difficulties of mounting an international campaign against it are becoming increasingly obvious as Europeans call for engagement with Iran rather than confrontation.”

A US invasion of Iran is still a very real possibility; however, it also poses enormous problems. In addition to opposition from Europe, an attack on Iran would also generate enormous outrage amongst the Shiite population in Iraq, undermining the deal that the US is seeking to arrange with the Shiite clergy in the wake of the elections. Iran is a predominantly Shiite Muslim country.

On the other hand, Europe, and particularly France, has displayed a greater willingness to participate with Washington in taking a hard line against Syria. The United States and France co-sponsored a UN Security Resolution passed in September 2004 condemning the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. France has long-standing interests in the region, where it was once the principal colonial power.

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France has echoed the US in responding to the assassination of Hariri. President Jacques Chirac, who had close ties with Hariri, called for an international investigation and said that Hariri—a multibillionaire construction magnate—represented “the indefatigable will of independence, freedom and democracy” for Lebanon. On Tuesday, France joined with the United States in voting for another Security Council resolution that again condemned Syria’s occupation of Lebanon and called for an investigation of the killing.

The US has a long history of intervention in Lebanon, including in 1958 under the Eisenhower administration and in 1982 under Reagan. However, since the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1990, Syria has dominated the country and has maintained a constant military presence.

Ending Syrian control of Lebanon, as part of an effort to foment regime change in Syria itself, is something long desired by neo-conservatives in Washington, who are closely aligned with Israel. In 1996, future Bush administration officials Richard Perle and Douglas Feith

joined with others in the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies in drafting a document for the Israeli government that, in addition to advocating the removal of Saddam Hussein, called for “weakening, containing and even rolling back Syria.”

The move against Syria and its control of Lebanon is part of an attempt to strengthen American and Israeli control in the region. This includes the deal that has been worked out between the Sharon government in Israel and the new PLO leader, Mahmoud Abbas, who has vowed to crack down on Palestinian resistance, including Syrian-backed groups such as Hamas.

The Bush administration, with the support of the Democratic Party, has been steadily escalating its rhetoric against Syria since the end of the initial invasion of Iraq in April 2003. At the time, Secretary of State Colin Powell claimed that top Iraqi leaders had fled to Syria, where they were being given refuge. He threatened diplomatic and economic sanctions against the country. Bush also made unfounded statements that Syria possessed chemical weapons.

In November 2003, the US Congress passed the bipartisan Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which threatened a series of sanctions. In May 2004, Bush implemented these sanctions, cutting off all exports to the country other than food and medicine, on the absurd grounds that Syria posed “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and the economy of the United States.”

In early January 2005, shortly before the inauguration of the second Bush administration, the US threatened Syria with further sanctions on the grounds that Syria was aiding the resistance in Iraq to the American occupation. Richard Armitage, the deputy secretary of state, traveled to Syria with threats against the country for allegedly providing a haven to former leaders of the Hussein regime, who are supposedly helping to finance the resistance.

During her confirmation hearings for secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice included Syria among the “outposts of tyranny” that the United States was determined to confront.



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