Washington seizes on UN report to threaten Syria

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The Bush administration has seized upon the release of a United Nations report implicating senior Syrian and Lebanese officials in last February's assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister and billionaire businessman Rafik Hariri as a pretext for escalating its threats against Damascus.

Backed by Britain, its principal ally in the Iraq war and occupation, Washington is pressing for a meeting of the United Nations Security Council this week to consider imposing international sanctions against the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad.

The UN report cannot be "left lying on the table," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a joint BBC interview with her British counterpart, Foreign Minister Jack Straw. "This really has to be dealt with."

"The report indicates that people of a high level of this Syrian regime were implicated," declared Straw. "We also have evidence from the Mehlis report of false testimony being given by senior people in the regime. This is very serious."

The report, prepared by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, represents the interim findings of the UN-mandated investigation. Much of it consists of a description of the political situation in Lebanon in the period leading up to the assassination. The document makes clear that there does not yet exist sufficient evidence to charge anyone with Hariri's killing, and that a "presumption of innocence" applies to those supposedly implicated.

Calling the report "politically biased," the Syrian regime has vigorously denied the charge that top-level officials—including two members of President Assad's family—were involved, and that it deliberately misled the UN investigators.

"It is a political statement against Syria based on allegations by witnesses known for their hostility to Syria," declared information minister Mehdi Dakhlallah Friday in an interview with the Qatar-based television network, Al Jazeera.

At a Saturday news conference in Damascus, Syrian Foreign Minister Riyad Dawoodi also condemned the report as politically biased, based upon "presumptions and allegations," but "no proof."

"There's a presumption taken by the (UN) commission that the very presence of Syrian troops and the Syrian security organs in Lebanon is something which should imply so and so and so," he said. "You cannot put any weight on the idea (that) because you are present in Lebanon, everything happening in Lebanon ... should be done according to your knowledge and you know about it."

The foreign minister continued: "The report has a conclusion that this operation, the assassination of late Prime Minister Hariri, cannot be done without a means, a very sophisticated means which belongs to a highly equipped security organ. And you just look around you, who is very, very well equipped?"

While Dawoodi did not elaborate, the statement reflected suspicions within the region that the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, may have organized the assassination in order to destabilize both Lebanon and Syria and create the conditions for US military actions against the Damascus regime.

Just before the report's release, one of the principal witnesses for the commission's allegations against Syrian officials was arrested in Paris. The Lebanese government charges that he gave the UN panel false testimony.

Mohammad Zuheir al-Siddiq, a Syrian émigré residing in France, was detained on an international warrant and faces extradition to Lebanon. Siddiq was reportedly the principal source for claims that Syrian officials met to discuss the assassination. Damascus has charged the former soldier with fraud and desertion. He had lived since 1996 in Lebanon, where he was reportedly arrested for theft.

While United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has extended the UN investigation until December 15, neither Washington nor London appear willing to wait that long to demand conclusions and punitive action. The extraordinary tension whipped up by the Bush administration over what are the preliminary findings of an investigation commission leaves no doubt as to Washington's determination to exploit the issue.

In a revealing comment, the German prosecutor Mehlis told the German newsweekly *Stern*, "I never wanted to be compared with Hans Blix. But now I know how he must have felt." While not providing a shred of evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the UN's chief weapons inspector Blix produced a report accusing the Iraqi regime of failing to give sufficient cooperation. The report was seized upon by the US to promote its case for an unprovoked war.

In an article published Sunday, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* pointed to the way in which these new findings against Syria are being manipulated for similar political purposes:

"[W]hy was an incomplete interim report necessary?" *Haaretz* asked. "The answer lies in Washington and Beirut. Washington needs some sort of incriminating evidence against Syria to goad Damascus, regarded as abetting terror in Iraq, by means of the UN Security Council. The Syria Accountability Act, which allowed President George W. Bush to impose partial economic sanctions, is not harsh enough, according to the US administration. US trade with Syria is about $300 million a year, to Europe's more than $7 billion. Bush therefore needs European cooperation to get Syria's attention."

Beyond sanctions, there are mounting indications that the Bush administration is considering opening up a second front in its war of aggression in Iraq. In an article entitled "Plans: Next, War on Syria," *Newsweek* magazine reported earlier this month: "Deep in the Pentagon, admirals and generals are updating plans for possible US military action in Syria and Iran.... The Defense Department unit responsible for military planning for the two troublesome countries is 'busier than ever,' an administration official says."

There have been press reports of US attacks on Syria, some attributed to fighting in western Iraq spilling over the border and others to deliberate operations by American special forces units.

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Just days before the release of the UN panel's interim report, Secretary of State Rice appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to testify on US policy in the Middle East. Asked if the administration was preparing for military action against Syria, she replied, "I don't think the president ever takes any of his options off the table concerning anything to do with military force."

Pressed by Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island as to whether such action would not require a separate congressional resolution, Rice demurred, "I don't want to try and circumscribe presidential war powers. And I think you'll understand fully that the president retains those powers in the war on terrorism and in the war on Iraq."

Senator Christopher Dodd (Democrat-Connecticut) pressed further: "Is there a White House Syrian group, for instance, that's meeting? Are we planning some action in Syria that we ought to be aware of in this committee? Are we considering military action against Syria?"

Rice replied only, "I'm not going to get into what the president's options might be."

While the US military is already stretched to near the breaking point by the ongoing war in Iraq, the launching of a new military adventure in Syria cannot be ruled out. Facing an increasingly desperate political crisis in Washington, the Bush administration could well see another eruption of militarism as a way out.

There are clearly sharp divisions within the administration over what policy to pursue. The *Times of London* reported October 15 that US diplomats had proffered a deal to Damascus modeled on the arrangement worked out between the Bush administration and the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Syria would agree to cooperate fully with the UN probe—including turning over officials charged in the Hariri case—stop all activity in Lebanon and effectively seal its border with Iraq. In return, Washington would offer normalized relations.

According to several reports, however, the newspaper article was itself the product of a deliberate leak from elements within the administration who opposed any such deal and sought to sink it by making it public.

Among the most opposed to such a compromise is Washington's ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, who, as former under secretary of state for arms control and international security, attempted to make the case that Syria was developing "weapons of mass destruction" while maintaining close ties to "terrorist groups." Speaking in London October 14, Bolton declared that Syria "should be dealt with very seriously."

The Assad regime has taken repeated steps aimed at placating Washington. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Bashar Assad sent official condolences and provided information and assistance to US intelligence, including allowing suspects to be transported under the CIA's "rendition" program to be tortured in Syria.

While Damascus publicly opposed the Iraq invasion, as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council, Syria voted in 2001 for the resolution demanding that Baghdad allow the return of the UN weapons inspectors, and in 2003 for the measure authorizing UN cooperation with the US occupation in Iraqi reconstruction.

The policy represented a continuation of the cooperation offered by Bashar's father, President Hafiz al-Assad, who provided direct support for the US in the first Persian Gulf war.

Yet the predominant forces within the current US administration have rejected all concessions by Damascus as meaningless. They appear determined to press for regime change as part of a US strategy to impose its strategic dominance over the region.

Playing a major role in these calculations is the tight connection between US policy in the Middle East and that pursued by the right-wing Likud bloc in Israel. Among those who prepared the US war in Iraq were top officials who worked as Likud advisers. Among them were David Wurmser, Vice President Dick Cheney's advisor on the Middle East, Douglas Feith, the former undersecretary for policy at the US Defense Department, and Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board.

Together, these three drafted a 1996 document for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu titled "A Clean Break: a New Strategy for Securing the Realm," which advocated a policy of "rolling back Syria." This Likud policy has been largely adopted by Washington.

If the Bush administration decides to carry out limited military action—bombings, limited border attacks etc.—or a full-scale invasion and occupation, the consequences would prove catastrophic. While the Syrian military would no doubt collapse under such an attack, US forces would face another intractable war of resistance which would enjoy widespread support from the country's 18 million people and the broad masses throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

Moreover, there is no credible pro-American opposition in Syria. The Reform Party of Syria, backed by Washington and based in the US, is virtually unknown in the country itself. To the extent that the Assad regime faces any real opposition, it is from Islamic fundamentalists who support the insurgency in Iraq, or from sections of the military and intelligence forces that are supposedly implicated in the Hariri assassination.

While one can only speculate as to who was ultimately responsible for the murder of Hariri, a stench of hypocrisy surrounds the US-led campaign to use the killing to isolate and undermine the Syrian regime.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw declared: "The international community can show that it is standing up for justice. You simply cannot tolerate a situation where one state decides to deal with problems of another state by assassinating the other state's leaders."

Yet both Washington and London have tolerated Israel's use of assassination as a state policy in the region for many years. Just last month, the press reported that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon convened an emergency meeting of the Israeli cabinet which voted to resume its practice of "targeted assassinations." On the very night the UN report was released, an Israeli assassination squad sneaked into the West Bank village of Anabat and shot to death Raéd Ahmad Shehada, a local leader.

He was only the latest in a long line of victims of Israeli assassinations aimed against the Palestinian leadership, from the murder of Abu Jihad in Tunis in 1988 to the more recent killings of Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin in March 2004 and his successor, Dr. Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, barely one month later.

Needless to say, such killings invoke no calls for sanctions, much less threats of military action, from either Washington or London.

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