

US and Britain seek UN backing for action against Syria

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Events following the publication of the United Nations report on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri confirm that the investigation was never more than a pretext for aggressive US and British action against Syria.

While there remain sharp differences within the US administration and between the major powers, the thrust of US and British policy goes further than the economic sanctions it is initially proposing and towards military action against Damascus.

In an interview on October 25 with Al Arabiyeh television, President George W. Bush made scarcely veiled threats against Syria. "A military [option] is always the last choice of a president," he said. "Nobody wants there to be a confrontation. On the other hand, there must be serious pressure applied."

Bush set out a series of demands including the expulsion of Palestinian militant groups, that Syria prevents insurgents from crossing its border to fight in Iraq and that it stop "interfering" in Lebanon.

Washington and London are seeking to force through a resolution against Syria at the UN Security Council. Travelling to Canada from Mississippi, where she had been touring the disaster hit area with UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters that the world "must make very clear to the Syrians that this is a really serious matter and that their nonchalant attitude, their efforts to discredit the investigation ... are not the attitude of the international community."

Bush also tried to give the impression that there was international unanimity about the UN report. He spoke on Al Arabiyeh about "the demands of the free world."

The reality is that there is no agreement with France, Russia or China about the proposed resolution or on any future action against Syria. Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy has supported US efforts at the UN, but wants the resolution to only insist on Syrian cooperation with the ongoing investigation into Hariri's assassination. He argues that it is too soon to think of imposing sanctions on Syria and that further action must wait until the UN investigation is complete.

A French Foreign Ministry spokesman added, "We also have other partners and so it's not an exclusively French-American matter. We must also work with our other partners on this

question."

The response reflects France's earlier attitude to the question of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon. Then President Jacques Chirac repeatedly warned Bush that forcing Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon could lead to the destabilisation of President Bashar Al Assad. But ultimately France joined with the US in pressing Assad to withdraw troops.

French caution reflects a desire to preserve its own interests in the region, which date back to the break up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One. It has already suffered a setback in relation to Iraq and cannot allow the US to exclude it from Syria and Lebanon. The US is engaged in redrawing the map of the Middle East, and Paris may find that it cannot afford to stand aside and see its interests overridden by Washington's greater military might.

It is not yet clear whether the proposed resolution will be under Chapter Six or Seven of the UN Charter. Chapter Seven allows for measures up to and including military action, so that if the US deems Syria is not compliant with its demands it can claim authorization to invade.

Other major powers clearly fear that Washington intends to extend the war of aggression it began in Iraq and that they stand to lose out in the whole Middle East. Russia has a Security Council veto. Rice has telephoned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to urge him to back a UN resolution, but Russia's deputy ambassador said that they were waiting to see the text of the US resolution before they decided whether to support it or not.

China may also exercise its veto power. Chinese ambassador to the UN Guangya Wang said that a resolution was unnecessary because Syria has already shown that it is willing to cooperate with the UN investigation. He warned, "I think we have to be very careful with Chapter Seven. Chapter Seven is the dog that will bite, not just bark."

A failure to get their way at the UN is no guarantee against the US and Britain taking action against Syria. Their failure to get the second UN resolution legitimizing war against Iraq led instead to unilateral action taken on the pretext of the November 2002 resolution threatening merely "serious consequences" if Iraq failed to cooperate with UN weapons inspections

US Ambassador John Bolton has seized on the report into the assassination of Hariri, stating, “This report is obviously very significant. It finds probable cause to believe that the assassination could not have been undertaken without the knowledge of senior figures in Syrian intelligence.”

He went on, “It refers to a lack of cooperation by Syria with the investigation, which is diplo-speak for obstruction of justice. It is a very hard-hitting report.”

The UN report in reality offers only circumstantial evidence and imputed motive to support its conclusion that Syrian and Lebanese security services must have been responsible for the assassination of Hariri. According to the report, “it would be difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination plot could have been carried out without their knowledge.”

As with the preparations for hostilities against Iraq, most press coverage has again dutifully followed the line put out by Washington and London in interpreting the report as proof that Syria was responsible for the assassination of Hariri.

One of the few articles that challenged the factual basis of the report appeared in *Der Spiegel*. It pointed out that a crucial witness, Zuhir Ibn Mohamed Said Saddik, who claimed to have taken part in meetings with senior Syrian security officials to plan the assassination of Hariri, has since been revealed as a convicted criminal. Saddik has been convicted of fraud and embezzlement and, according to *Der Spiegel*, sources in the UN admit that Saddik lied to the investigation. His credibility is further undermined by the fact that he was introduced to the investigators by Rifaat al-Assad, an uncle of President Bashar al-Assad, who is an opponent of the regime.

Even supposing that the UN report did demonstrate that Syria was involved in the assassination, it would be the height of hypocrisy for the US and the UK to arrogate to themselves the right to enact justice in this matter. Both are defenders of the Israeli government, which has an official policy of assassinating its political opponents. Only this week Israeli troops killed a senior Islamic Jihad leader, Luay Saadi. Both have been responsible for countless crimes around the world. Their claim to a moral stance against Syria is refuted by their previous attempt to justify regime change in Iraq by lies and their well-known desire to install a friendly puppet government in Damascus.

There has been speculation that the US is backing away from military action and may offer Syria what has been termed the Libyan option, in which it complies with US demands and disarms itself. But Syria occupies an entirely different strategic position as the neighbour of Iraq and Iran, when compared with Libya. The US administration has worked consistently for regime change in Damascus. Vice President Dick Cheney’s daughter, who is deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near East, met with the US-based Reform Party of Syria (RPS) earlier this year. The party has recently opened an office in Damascus. In September, the US Congress voted an undeclared

amount of money to support Syrian opposition groups.

The fact that the RPS does not offer a credible alternative and that the most likely beneficiaries from the fall of the Baath regime of Bashar al-Assad would be Islamic fundamentalists makes France nervous, but may not deter Washington. A recent book, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial by Fire*, by Flynt Leverett, a former official at the CIA, the State Department and the National Security Council, gives some insight into US policy in relation to Syria. Launching his book, Leverett said, “I think that the administration has accepted an assessment of Syrian politics that, by forcing Syria out of Lebanon, this regime is not going to be able to recover from that blow and will start to unravel.”

Patrick Seale, author of a number of books on Syria, including *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, commented on Washington’s strategy of regime change in Lebanon in the *Daily Star*. He wrote, “The idea has taken root in some circles in Washington that there can be no victory in Iraq until Syria and Iran—seen as providing a ‘rear base’ for the insurgency—are brought to heel. As Washington seems reluctant to launch a military attack against Iran, a hard nut to crack, an alternative course is regime change in Syria. The neocons argue that a pro-American government in Damascus would result in the isolation, encirclement and neutralization of Iran.”

This thinking finds its echo in British ruling circles. A recent opinion piece in the *Daily Telegraph*, which is well connected in military circles, pointed out, “Many hard-bitten Foreign Office types argued that the intervention [in Iraq] would ‘destabilise’ the region.”

But, the article went on, “stability isn’t everything.”

The fact that the US and the UK military are bogged down in Iraq offers Syria no protection, particularly against a more limited aerial assault by the US along the lines of operations mounted in the past by Israel.



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