

The Dangerous Implications of the Hariri Assassination and the U.S. Response

By Stephen Zunes | February 25, 2005

The broader implications of the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was seen by many as the embodiment of the Lebanese people's efforts to rebuild their country in the aftermath of its 15-year civil war, are yet to unfold. A Sunni Muslim, Hariri reached out to all of Lebanon's ethnic and religious communities in an effort to unite the country after decades of violence waged by heavily armed militias and foreign invaders.

The assassination took place against the backdrop of a growing political crisis in Lebanon. This began in September 2004, when Syria successfully pressured the Lebanese parliament, in an act of dubious constitutionality, to extend the term of the unpopular pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, a move roundly condemned by the international community.

Washington was particularly virulent in its criticism, which can only be considered ironic, given that the United States attempted a similar maneuver back in 1958 to extend the term of the pro-American president Camille Chamoun. The result was a popular uprising suppressed only when President Dwight Eisenhower sent in U.S. Marines.

Hariri had his critics, particularly among the country's poor majority whose situation deteriorated under the former prime minister's adoption of a number of controversial neo-liberal economic policies. A multi-billionaire businessman prior to becoming prime minister, there were widespread charges of corruption in the awarding of contracts, many of which went to a company largely owned by Hariri himself. A number of treasured historic buildings relatively undamaged from war were demolished to make room for grandiose construction projects.

The size and sophistication of the explosion which killed Hariri, his bodyguards, and several bystanders have led many to speculate that foreign intelligence units may have been involved. Initial speculation has focused on the Syrians, who had previously worked

closely with Hariri as prime minister. That relationship was broken by the Syrians' successful effort to extend the term of President Lahoud, with whom Hariri had frequently clashed as prime minister. As a result, Hariri was poised to lead an anti-Syrian front in the upcoming parliamentary elections in May.

Hariri made lots of other enemies as well, however, including rival Lebanese groups, the Israeli government, Islamic extremists, and powerful financiers with interests in his multi-billion dollar reconstruction efforts. A previously-unknown group calling itself "Victory and Jihad in Syria and Lebanon" claimed responsibility for the attack, citing Hariri's close ties to the repressive Saudi monarchy. As of this writing, there is no confirmation that they were responsible for the blast or if such a group even exists.

While Syria remains the primary suspect, no evidence has been presented to support the charge. Damascus has publicly condemned the killings and denied responsibility. Syria's regime, while certainly ruthless enough to do such a thing, is usually not so brazen. They would have little to gain from uniting the Lebanese opposition against them or for provoking the United States and other Western nations to further isolate their government.



The United States, however, has indirectly implicated Syria in the attack and has withdrawn its ambassador from Damascus.

Syria's Role in Lebanon

Syrian forces first entered Lebanon in 1976 at the invitation of the Lebanese president as the primary component of an international peacekeeping force authorized by the Arab League to try to end Lebanon's civil war. The United States quietly supported the Syrian intervention as a means of blocking the likely victory by the leftist Lebanese National Movement and its Palestinian allies. As the civil war continued in varying manifestations in subsequent years, the Syrians would often play one faction off against another in an effort to maintain their influence. Despite this, they were unable to defend the country from the U.S.-backed Israeli invasion in 1982, the installation of the Phalangist leader Amin Gemayel as president, and the U.S. military intervention to help prop up Gemayel's rightist government against a popular uprising. Finally, in late 1990, Syrian forces helped the Lebanese oust the unpopular interim Prime Minister General Michel Aoun, which proved instrumental in ending the 15-year civil war. (Given that General Aoun's primary outside supporter was Iraq's Saddam Hussein, the United States quietly backed this Syrian action as well.)

The end of the civil war did not result in the end of the Syrian role in Lebanon, however. Most Lebanese at this point resent the ongoing presence of Syrian troops and Syria's overbearing influence on their government.

The Bush administration, Congressional leaders of both parties, and prominent media commentators

have increasingly made reference to "the Syrian occupation of Lebanon." Strictly speaking, however, this is not an occupation in the legal sense of the word, such as in the case of the Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara or Israel's occupation of Syria's Golan region and much of the Palestinian Gaza Strip and West Bank (including East Jerusalem), all of which are recognized by the United Nations and international legal authorities as non-self-governing territories. Lebanon has experienced direct foreign military occupation, however: from 1978 to 2000, Israel

occupied a large section of southern Lebanon and— from June 1982 through May 1984—much of central Lebanon as well, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Lebanese civilians.

A more accurate analogy to the current Syrian role would be that of the Soviets in the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe during much of the Cold War, in which these nations were effectively client states. They were allowed to maintain their independence and distinct national institutions yet were denied their right to pursue an autonomous course in their foreign and domestic policies.

Currently, Syria has only 14,000 troops in Lebanon, mostly in the Bekaa Valley in the eastern part of the country, a substantial reduction from the 40,000 Syrian troops present in earlier years. This does not mean that calls for an immediate withdrawal of Syrian forces and an end to Syrian interference in Lebanon's political affairs are not morally and legally justified. However, the use of the term "occupation" by American political leaders is an exaggeration and may be designed in part to divert attention from the continuing U.S. military, diplomatic, and financial support of the real ongoing military occupations by Israel and Morocco.

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In September of last year, the United States—along with France and Great Britain—sponsored a resolution before the UN Security Council which, among other things, called upon “all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon.” UN Security Council resolution 1559 was adopted with six abstentions and no negative votes and builds upon UN Security Council resolution 520, adopted in 1982, which similarly calls for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

The Bush administration, with widespread bipartisan Congressional support, has cited Syria’s ongoing violation of these resolutions in placing sanctions upon Syria. Ironically, however, no such pressure was placed upon Israel for violating UNSC resolution 520 and nine other resolutions (the first being adopted in 1978) calling on Israel to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. In fact, during the Clinton administration, the U.S. openly called on Israel to *not* unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon as required, even as public opinion polls in Israel showed that a sizable majority of Israelis supported an end to the Israeli occupation, during which hundreds of Israeli soldiers were killed.

Today, many of the most outspoken supporters of a strict enforcement of UNSC resolution 1159—such as Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer of California—were also among the most prominent opponents of enforcing similar resolutions when they were directed at Israel. In short, both Republicans and Democrats agree that Lebanese sovereignty and international law must be defended only if the government challenging these principles is not a U.S. ally.

(Israel was finally forced out of Lebanon in May 2000 as a result of attacks by the militant Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah. Four months later, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip began. Militant Palestinians claim they were inspired by the fact that

Israel ended its 22-year occupation not because of the U.S.-led peace process and not because of the United Nations—which was blocked by the United States from enforcing its resolutions—but because of armed struggle by radical Islamists. Though, for a number of reasons, such tactics are unlikely to succeed in the occupied Palestinian territories, the support of extremist Islamist groups and their use of violence by large sectors of the Palestinian population under Israeli occupation can for the most part be attributed to the United States refusing to support an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon through diplomatic means.)

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What Next?

Whether or not the Syrians played a role in Hariri’s assassination, his death will likely escalate pressure by the Lebanese to challenge Syria’s domination of their government. Once centered primarily in the country’s Maronite Christian community, anti-Syrian sentiment is growing among Lebanese from across the ethnic and ideological spectrum. Ultimately, the country’s fate will be determined by the Lebanese themselves. If the United States presses the issue too strongly, however, it risks hardening Syria’s position and allowing Damascus to defend its ongoing domination of Lebanon behind anti-imperialist rhetoric.

While there are many areas in which the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad should indeed be challenged, such as its overbearing influence in Lebanon and its poor human rights record, there is a genuine fear that increased U.S. efforts to isolate the regime and the concomitant threats of military action against Syria will undermine the efforts of Lebanese and Syrians demanding change.

One major problem is that most charges against the Syrian government by the Bush administration and

the Congressional leadership of both parties are rife with hyperbole and double standards.

For example, the United States has demanded that Syria eliminate its long-range and medium-range missiles, while not insisting that pro-Western neighbors like Turkey and Israel—with far more numerous and sophisticated missiles on their territory—similarly disarm. The United States has also insisted that Syria unilaterally eliminate its chemical weapons stockpiles, while not making similar demands on U.S. allies Israel and Egypt—which have far larger chemical weapons stockpiles—to do the same. The United States has demanded an end to political repression and for free and fair elections in Syria while not making similar demands of even more repressive and autocratic regimes in allied countries like Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

Contrary to U.S. charges that Syria is a major state supporter of international terrorism, Syria is at most a very minor player. The U.S. State Department has noted how Syria has played a critical role in efforts to combat al-Qaida and that the Syrian government has not been linked to any acts of international terrorism for nearly twenty years. The radical Palestinian Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad have political offices in Damascus, as they do in a number of Arab capitals, but they are not allowed to conduct any military activities. A number of left-wing Palestinian factions also maintain offices in Syria, but these groups are now largely defunct and have not engaged in terrorist operations for many years.

Much has been made of Syrian support for the radical Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah. However, not only has Syrian support for the group been quite minimal in recent years, the group is now a legally

recognized Lebanese political party and serves in the Lebanese parliament. During the past decade, its militia have largely restricted their use of violence to Israeli occupation forces in southern Lebanon and in disputed border regions of Israeli-occupied Syria, not against civilians, thereby raising serious questions as to whether it can actually still be legally considered a terrorist group.

Currently, the Bush administration has expressed its dismay at Russia's decision to sell Syria anti-aircraft missiles, claiming that it raises questions in regard to President Vladimir Putin's commitment against terrorism. The administration has been unable to

explain, however, how selling defensive weapons to an internationally-recognized government aids terrorists.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Congressional leaders have also accused Syria of threatening the Arab-Israeli peace process. However, Syria has pledged to provide Israel with internationally-enforced security guarantees and full diplomatic relations in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from Syrian territory seized in the

1967 war, in concordance with UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, long recognized as the basis for peace. They have also called for a renewal of peace talks with Israel, which came very close to a permanent peace agreement in early 2000. However, the right-wing U.S.-backed Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has refused to resume negotiations and pledges it will never withdraw from the Golan, thereby raising questions as to whether it is really Syria that is primarily at fault.

Another questionable anti-Syrian charge is in regard to their alleged support of Saddam Hussein and ongoing support of anti-American insurgents in Iraq. In reality, though both ruled by the Baath Party, Syria

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had broken diplomatic relations with Baghdad back in the 1970s and was the home of a number of anti-Saddam exile groups. Syria and Iraq backed rival factions in Lebanon's civil war. Syria was the only country to side with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and contributed troops to the U.S.-led Operation Desert Shield in reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Syria, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2002, supported the U.S.-backed resolution 1441 demanding Iraqi cooperation with UN inspectors or else face "severe consequences." The Syrian government has substantially beefed up security along its borders with Iraq and U.S. military officials have acknowledged that relatively few foreign fighters have actually entered Iraq via Syria. Most critically, there is no reason that Syria would want the insurgents to succeed, given that the primary insurgent groups are either supporters of the old anti-Syrian regime in Baghdad or are Islamist extremists similar to those who seriously challenged the Syrian government in 1982 before being brutally suppressed. Given that Assad's regime is dominated by Syria's Alawite minority, which have much closer ties to Iraq's Shiites than with Sunnis who dominate the Arab and Islamic world, and that the Shiite-dominated slate which won the recent Iraqi elections share their skepticism about the U.S. role in the Middle East, they would have every reason to want to see the newly-elected Iraqi government succeed so U.S. troops could leave.

Despite the highly-questionable assertions which form the basis of the Bush administration's antipathy toward Syria, there have essentially been no serious challenges to the Bush administration's policy on Capitol Hill. Indeed, Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid have strongly defended President George W. Bush's policies toward Iraq and Lebanon and helped

push through strict sanctions against Syria based upon these same exaggerations and double standards. (See my article "The Syria Accountability Act and the Triumph of Hegemony," October 27, 2003, at <http://www.fpif.org/papers/syriaact2003.html>) During the 2004 election campaign, Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee, criticized President Bush for not being anti-Syrian enough.

Among the few dissenters is Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who expressed his concern to Secretary of State Rice during recent hearings on Capitol Hill that the tough talk against Syria was remarkably similar

to what was heard in regard to Iraq a few years earlier. One of only eight members of Congress to vote against the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act in the fall of 2003, he warned his fellow Senators that the language was broad enough that the administration might later claim it authorized military action against Syria.

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As long as the vast majority of Democrats are afraid to appear "soft" toward the Syrian dictatorship and as long as so few progressive voices are willing to challenge the Democrats, President Bush appears to have few obstacles in his way should he once again choose to lead the country to war.

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