

Syria's Response to the Mehlis Report

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The long-awaited report by the international commission investigating the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri was released on October 21. Overseen by UN chief investigator Detlev Mehlis, the report concluded, "Given the infiltration of Lebanese institutions and society by the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services working in tandem, it would be difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination plot could have been carried out without their knowledge." The dynamics engendered by the report, coupled with the political atmosphere of gloom pervading Syria, confront the Bashar al-Asad regime with a bitter choice: accept international demands or go down the self-destructive path of continuing with its old political mindset and flawed one party rule.

Initial Reactions: Poor Prospects for Cooperation

The reaction in Lebanon to the report was reflected in the swiftness with which demonstrators descended on Martyrs' Square, next to the tomb of Hariri, to call for the resignation of presidents of Lebanon and Syria, Emile Lahoud and Asad. Significantly, the pro-Syrian Shiite parties Hizballah and Amal have refrained so far from commenting on the report. International reactions were no less compelling. President George W. Bush called the report "very disturbing" and asked his secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, to "respond accordingly." British foreign minister Jack Straw told reporters, "The international community must demand accountability from Damascus." In fact, according to U.S. and UN officials, the Security Council is expected to meet early next week to consider resolutions imposing additional sanctions against Syria.

Alternatively, the reaction of Syrian authorities was one of indignation, shock, and anger against what they considered a "flagrant" politicization of the report. The Syrian ambassador to Washington, Imad Mustafa, stressed that the report is "full of political rumors, gossip, and hearsay." It is possible that an internal denial of guilt -- a Syrian belief that Syria is in the right -- underlies this reaction. This initial Syrian reaction does not auger well for the future of Syrian relations with its neighbors or the international community, and most importantly for internal stability.

Were he so minded, Asad could immediately undertake several actions to mitigate the concerns of the international community, as well as prevent the possibility of internal chaos, and thus emerge as a significant Arab reformer. To follow this course, Asad could implement the following reforms:

- * Remove from office and arrest all those implicated in the murder and make good on his statements that he would deliver any Syrian suspect to justice.
- * Sever all links with terrorist organizations in both Syria and Lebanon.
- * Dismantle and pull out all remnants of Syria's intelligence network in Lebanon.
- * Make a sustained effort to monitor the Iraq-Syria and Lebanon-Syria borders, thereby preventing the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq and weapons and extremist Palestinians into Lebanon.
- * Open up the political system to the majority Arab Sunnis and ethnic and religious minorities, centralizing power in the hands of his own Alawi clan. One first step could be appointing Sunnis to head the interior ministry, military intelligence, and general intelligence, which were traditionally headed by Sunnis before Asad's changes.

Security Council Action

While the reform path would be best for the Asad regime, for Syria, and for the region, the UN Security Council must consider the likelihood that Syria will not cooperate. Were that to happen, the most appropriate response would be the introduction of innovative sanctions pressuring regime officials without afflicting unwarranted harm on ordinary Syrians. On October 22, Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated prime minister, supported the creation of an international tribunal to prosecute Syrian suspects. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt echoed that call the following day. This seems appropriate; Damascus would most likely try to undermine the judicial process in any Lebanese court trying the suspects.

At the same time, thought should be given to how the Security Council could lend protection to Syria's civil society

movement and opposition, which have intensified their criticism of the regime. On October 16, the Damascus Declaration calling for moving Syria from a dictatorship to a democracy was issued by diverse and heretofore quarrelsome Syrian opposition groups including the National Democratic Gathering, the Democratic Kurdish Alliance, the Committee for Reviving Civil Society, the Democratic Kurdish Front, the Future Party, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian exiles, and imprisoned parliamentarian Riad Seif. The Declaration stated, "The undersigned believe that the process of change has begun and further delay is unacceptable when one takes into consideration what the country is suffering through. . . . We call on our Baathist people and our brothers in all parts of the Syrian society to participate without hesitation, because the change we are seeking is only feared by the corrupt and by criminals."

In addition, the Security Council should create a mechanism for freezing the assets of senior officials implicated in the murder and restricting their movement worldwide if Syria refuses to cooperate. The list of who could be affected is suggested by the names of top Syrian and Lebanese officials included in the draft Mehlis report, which was inadvertently hidden in the computer file of the final report circulated to journalists. That draft cites a witness that those who "decided to assassinate Hariri" included Maher al-Asad, Bashar's brother and strongman of the Republican Guard; Asef Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law and head of military intelligence; intelligence chiefs Hasan Khalil and Bahjat Suleiman; Jamil al-Sayyed, former head of Lebanon's Surete Generale; and Mustafa Hamdan, former head of Lebanon's presidential guard.

A More Ominous Syrian Response?

Recent moves by the Asad regime suggest that Damascus will take its policy in an ominous direction. Beirut recently shuddered at the specter of Palestinians fomenting trouble in Lebanon at the instigation of Damascus. Syria had allegedly smuggled weapons to the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and allowed extreme Palestinians to enter Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps illegally. Even Ahmad Jibril, head of the PFLP-GC, defiantly resisted Lebanese and international calls to surrender his weapons. This violation of Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon, is expected to be the focus of a report that Terje Roed-Larsen, the UN envoy to the Middle East, is due to file in the coming days.

Even more seriously, reports are circulating in Damascus that the Syrian regime has begun arming Alawi groups and militias in preparation for possible clashes with other communities or opposition groups. Apparently, the Syrian regime is digging in its heels to face domestic and international pressure. Bashar al-Asad seems to be in a double bind: He has fallen a prey to his own incompetence and the gross blunders of his security apparatus while at the same time he has failed to change either the political mindset of his regime or its repressive practices.

The Asad regime would be committing suicide by arming and militarizing its Alawi clan. This would mobilize the opposition and other communities and create an atmosphere conducive to chaos. An isolated incident could trigger widespread sectarian conflict. In the event of any domestic violence, it would be difficult for senior army and security figures to stand idly by. They could easily be politicized just as their predecessors were in the post-independence era. The suicide of interior minister Ghazi Kanaan, reported on October 12, was widely suspected to be an assassination designed to eliminate a potential contender for power. An atmosphere of gloom has overtaken Damascus. The threat of coup d'etat or civil strife has never been higher since Bashar's father, Hafiz al-Asad, took power in 1970.

The survival of the Syrian regime depends on opening its political system to share power and satisfying international demands and concerns. Otherwise, Damascus would set itself on a self-destructive path. So far, it seems that Bashar al-Asad is choosing the second option.

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