

The Countdown for Bashar al-Asad and Lebanon

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On September 25, 2005, Lebanese journalist May Chidiac nearly lost her life in yet another car bomb attack on prominent Lebanese figures who are critical of Syria. Led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, the international commission charged with investigating the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri is expected to issue a report on its findings to the UN Security Council on October 21. Many Lebanese fear that during the countdown to the report, which reportedly may implicate senior Syrian officials in Hariri's assassination, Syria and its allies in Lebanon might try to destabilize the country in an act of retribution against the Lebanese opposition and the "ungrateful" country.

Lebanese Fears

The assassination attempt against Chidiac took place following her interview with the journalist Sarkis Naoum about what Naoum calls the "black cloud" hanging over Lebanon. In 2005, Hariri, journalist Samir Kassir, and communist ideologue George Hawi have been assassinated, and Lebanon's telecommunications and defense ministers, Marwan Hamadeh and Elias Murr, narrowly survived assassination attempts.

At the end of September, fearing that Lebanon would slip into chaos, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora called for assistance from Washington and Paris. Agents from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have arrived in Lebanon and have begun their investigation into the assassination attempt on Chidiac. In fact, Siniora's government is interested in Paris and Washington's expertise in how to restructure the security apparatus and to remove from it the many pro-Syrian officials. The recent assassinations might conceivably have been planned and carried out by these officials and their underlings.

Even if the security apparatus is restructured, Syria will continue to have important instruments of influence in Lebanon. Hizballah serves Syria more strategically -- especially with regard to Israel -- than tactically; Hizballah has not been particularly involved in Syria's control over Lebanese politics outside of the areas Hizballah dominates. Syria's two most useful proxies have been:

* The Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Syrian authorities have greatly supported Ahmad Jibril, the head of PFLP-GC, who owes them his political survival. As Lebanon recently took security precautionary measures to prevent armed Palestinians from infiltrating into Lebanon from Syria, Jibril instructed his officials in refugee camps in Lebanon "to be on full alert for mobilization at any moment." Underlying his position is an attempt to intensify the already tense relations between the Lebanese government and the Palestinian refugees, who have come under increasing pressure to disarm in light of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called on all militias to disarm. The Lebanese government has already increased the number of checkpoints at the entrance of Palestinian refugee camps.

* The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). Apart from being ideologically pro-Syrian, the SSNP has identified with Syria's regional politics vis-à-vis Israel and the United States. Significantly, it supported Syrian occupation of Lebanon. The SSNP has recently elected a new, staunchly pro-Syrian president, Assem Qanso, who has vociferously defended Damascus. At the same time, in a move designed to support Syria, the SSNP issued a statement suggesting that there is another "real reason behind having an international probe into Hariri's murder."

It is safe to argue that these two groups are fomenting trouble in Lebanon as a way to enhance Syrian leverage by destabilizing Beirut and undermining the potential force of the investigation. It is not inconceivable that these two groups have had a hand in the recent assassinations.

Mehlis and Syria

Mehlis's investigation appears to be making progress. In the last week of September, Lebanese security officials mounted a series of raids and arrested a number of suspects, including employees in mobile phone companies. According to security sources, charges will be pressed against them for altering data in company records about eight mobile phones suspected of being used during the assassination. A month earlier, Lebanese police arrested four senior pro-Syrian security officials, who were charged with the Hariri murder.

Mehlis may also gain important information from Murr, a traditional ally of Syria and son-in law of Emile Lahoud, Lebanon's president. After the attack on Chidiak, Murr accused Rustom Ghazaleh, Syria's former chief of intelligence in Lebanon, of the foiled assassination attempt against him in July 2005. This was the first allegation from a traditional Syrian ally that Syria was attempting assassinations in Lebanon. Murr's charge lends credence to reports that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad threatened Hariri; Peter Fitzgerald, head of the UN fact finding mission that first looked into the Hariri assassination, reported that Asad told Hariri he "would rather break Lebanon over the heads of Hariri and [Druze leader Walid] Jonblatt than see his power in Lebanon broken."

Mehlis recently visited Syria, where he is said to have interviewed thirteen senior Syrian officials, including interior minister Ghazi Kanaan, Ghazaleh, deputy foreign minister Walid Muallem, brig. gen. Mohammad Khallouf, and brig. gen. Jama Jama. It is not certain whether Mehlis interviewed Maher al-Asad, the president's brother and the strongman of the Republican Guard, or the president's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, head of military intelligence; rumors have circulated about the possible involvement of both in the Hariri assassination. To gain access to those he saw, Mehlis had to make significant concessions. He only interviewed the officials as witnesses, not suspects. He allowed Syrian officials and lawyers to sit in on the interviews, thereby preventing unscripted questions and answers. The interviewees all testified along the same lines, denying any Syrian involvement.

Damascus has repeatedly denied all accusations and put on a show of confidence following Mehlis's departure. Apparently, the Syrians still maintain some hope that the assassination cannot be traced to them because they usually operate by proxy. However, Mehlis might outmaneuver the Syrians by arguing that the Syrian security apparatus was involved in the assassination, and that the chiefs of the security organizations therefore bear responsibility. His questions are said to have centered on the scope and extent of Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs and on the nature and dynamics of the Syrian-Lebanese intelligence relationship. It appears he wants to tie the Lebanese security network overseen by Syria to the testimonies of some Syrians cooperating with his investigation, reportedly including Syrian maj. Muhammad Safi, who worked for former head of military intelligence gen. Hasan al-Khalil; and Syrian army deserter Muhammad Zohair al-Sadiq, who carried out logistical preparations for the assassination. Mehlis may also have information from the detained Lebanese security chiefs that implicate Syrian security services.

Mehlis not only could implicate the whole security apparatus, but also the top echelons of the Syrian regime. Some observers question how Asad could survive such an indictment. Most importantly, for the first time, according to a prominent Arab figure, the ruling Alawi clan is asking the question, What next? Some Alawis are even speaking publicly about the high level of incompetence plaguing Asad's inner circle. Though the regime has a slim chance of being overthrown by the opposition, if senior figures including Asad's brother and brother-in-law are implicated in the Mehlis report, Asad's removal by his own clan cannot be dismissed. Some observers believe that Asad is so engrossed in protecting his close relatives that he is endangering himself.

The Way forward for Asad

Asad would do well to take preemptive measures before the release of Mehlis report by dismissing and arresting those associated with murdering Hariri and other Lebanese figures. At the same time, he could raise Syria's image in Lebanon by severing the relationship between his security apparatus and their agents in Lebanon. He still has a chance to set his country on a path of reform. However, there is little reason to expect he will make use of this opportunity.

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