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LEBANON AFTER THE MURDER OF HARIRI

Eyal Zisser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

At the last meeting between Rafiq al-Hariri and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in August 2004, Asad asked Hariri to support the Syrian demand to extend the term of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud for another three years. Later on, Hariri related that Asad had even threatened that if he and his friends did not support this demand, Damascus would break their wrists and that he had accompanied the threat with a movement of his hand that left no doubt as to his seriousness.

A few months after receiving this threat, Hariri died in a mysterious car-bombing. But while most of the clues to this bombing point to Damascus, it is difficult to believe that the Syrians actually carried out the liquidation of Hariri. True, Syria had every reason to want him out of the way. In recent months, he had kept a low profile and allowed Walid Junblatt, the leader of the Druze in Lebanon, to carry the banner of Lebanese opposition to Syria. Nevertheless, Hariri enjoyed virtually unlimited personal resources, broad popularity in Lebanon, and very good ties with the Saudi royal family, the President of France, and even the American administration. He was therefore able to play a central role behind the scenes in crafting the American-French axis that, in September 2004, produced UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon and even established a mechanism for UN monitoring of developments in order to ensure that Lebanon remain a focus of international attention. For these reasons, Hariri was seen as the biggest Lebanese bone in Syria's throat.

In previous years, the Syrians had no compunctions about liquidating anyone seen as a threat to their standing in Lebanon. Their most prominent victims were Bashir Jumayel, the elected President, in September 1982, and Kamal Junblatt, the former Druze leader (and father of Walid), in March 1977. Those

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assassinations were carried out by Syrian agents and were intended to derail any opposition to their presence in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, the Syrian regime has recently come under massive pressure from the United States, not only because of its presence in Lebanon, but also because of its support both of anti-American elements in Iraq and of Hizbullah and Palestinian terrorists groups trying to sabotage any efforts to stabilize Israeli-Palestinian relations. As a result, Syria has tried to lower its own profile and has taken steps, even if only cosmetic, to deflect American (and French) wrath.

In such circumstances, the liquidation of Hariri is counter-productive for Syria, since it focuses suspicion on Damascus while reviving international interest in the Lebanon question. Moreover, any destabilization of Lebanon can have an adverse impact on Syrian political and economic interests, and perhaps even on stability in Syria itself. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility, albeit unlikely, that Hariri's assassination was carried out by some Syrian intelligence agency acting on its own or by Hizbullah. In any case, it is official Syria that will pay the price.

For the killing of Hariri provoked unprecedented reaction, both in Lebanon and abroad. Rather than hunker down, the Lebanese opposition stepped up its denunciations of Syria and its local Lebanese allies. The most prominent opposition spokesman has been Walid Junblatt, who didn't hesitate to put the blame for the killing squarely on Syria and its "collaborationist regime" in Beirut. Junblatt and his colleagues have demanded the withdrawal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon and even endorsed the idea of a foreign protection force. Their campaign has drawn widespread support from various sectors of the Lebanese population – Maronites, Sunnis, and Druze -- who are fed up with the Syrian presence and now want to exploit the murder of Hariri in order to get the Syrians out of their country.

This domestic protest has been encouraged by international reaction to Hariri's killing. Although the United States was careful not to charge Syria with direct responsibility, it made its attitude known by quickly recalling its ambassador in Damascus "for consultations." French President Jacques Chirac came to Beirut on a condolence visit to the Hariri family but pointedly refrained from meeting any senior government officials. The US and France together initiated a demand by the Security Council to bring the killers to justice and the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, announced the dispatch of an independent team to investigate the circumstances of the assassination.

But despite these reactions, it is still too early to declare the end of Syrian control in Lebanon. True, the combination of popular protest and growing international pressure confronts Syria with an unprecedented challenge. And the Syrian regime is finding it difficult to comprehend the dimensions of the challenge, much less deploy properly to meet it. Nevertheless, it will be very

difficult for the opposition leaders to muster enough power to bring about a fundamental change in the ties binding Lebanon to Syria. For one thing, many of these individuals are acting out of personal motives: they collaborated with Syria in the past and are liable to do so again in the future if their calculus of interest changes. For another, the Shi'ites, who make up about 40% of the population and are largest single confessional group in Lebanon, have refrained from joining the oppositionist cause. That is particularly true of Hizbullah, which fears that if the Syrians leave, it will become the next target of American and French pressure. Without Shi'ite support, a Lebanese intifada, no matter how popular among other sectors, will not have much chance of success.

This means that the future of Lebanon does not depend so much on the Lebanese themselves but rather on the actions of others, including the French and especially the Americans. If those others act with a determination that doesn't rule out the possible use of force, they have the capability to bring about the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. But if they content themselves with diplomatic condemnations, no matter how vigorous, Syria is much less likely to surrender to their dictates.

Finally, whatever the implications for Lebanon, Hariri's death has brought Syria's relations with the United States and with France to the lowest point in recent memory and it highlights, once again, the weakness both of Syria as a country and of Bashar as a leader.

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