

Mossad, the CIA and Lebanon

# The assassination of Rafiq Hariri: who benefited?

By Bill Van Auken  
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The US media has responded predictably to the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, echoing the bellicose threats of the Bush administration against Syria and amplifying unsubstantiated charges that the regime in Damascus was the author of the killing.

Leading the pack was the *Washington Post*, which editorialized on Wednesday that “The despicable murder of Mr. Hariri benefits no one outside the rogue regime in Damascus—and the world should respond accordingly.”

The editorial acknowledged that the “crudeness of the killing and the denials by the government of Bashar Assad will cause some to wonder whether it has been framed for a crime it may have desired but did not commit.” But the *Post* hastened to assure its readers that the assassination was “the panicked act of a cornered tyrant,” terrified by the forced march to democracy which Washington has supposedly initiated in the Middle East with the recent elections in Iraq and the Palestinian territories.

“Crude” is the appropriate designation for the *Post*’s arguments, which amount to nothing more than war propaganda. The newspaper’s charges are both unsupported and nonsensical. Their transparent purpose—much like the stories about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction”—is to promote the policy of aggression which the Bush administration is pursuing in the Middle East.

The *Post*’s brief against Damascus is based on the well-known detective’s maxim: to discover who committed a crime, ask the question, “Who benefits?” Washington’s newspaper of record asks the question in order to supply its predetermined answer: “the rogue regime in Damascus.”

But precisely how has Syria benefited from the murder? Its immediate concrete consequences are mass demonstrations organized by anti-Syrian political forces in Lebanon demanding that Damascus withdraw its troops from the country, a ratcheting up of Washington’s threats of anti-Syrian military aggression, and the prospect of Lebanon descending into civil war.

That the assassination of Hariri would produce such consequences—all of them extremely threatening to the Syrian government of Bashar Assad—was hardly unforeseeable. Whatever else may be said about the Baathist regime in Damascus, it is committed to its own survival and its leaders are not insane.

What of the acknowledged doubt—summarily dismissed by the *Post*—that the Syrian regime is being “framed” for a crime it did not commit? Curiously, the newspaper gives no indication of who might be responsible for such a frame-up. Here, however, the question of “who benefits” is definitely worth pursuing.

The powers that most clearly stood to advance their strategic aims by having Hariri assassinated and blaming the crime on Syria are the US and Israel. Among those who play the game of speculating who organized the

car bombing in Beirut, the smart money is undoubtedly on Washington and Tel Aviv.

Under pressure from Washington, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1559 last September, demanding that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon. This political fact sheds light on the decision of the White House, before the blood on Beirut’s streets had dried on Monday, to issue a statement blaming Damascus. This entirely unsupported charge was followed by instructions to Washington’s ambassador to slap the Syrian regime with a *demarche* and leave the country.

In the midst of Washington’s provocative moves against Syria, for which the killing of Hariri supposedly provided justification, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared, with consummate cynicism, that the US was making no presumptions as to the authors of the crime. “We’re not laying blame,” she said, “It has to be investigated.”

The US media went beyond adopting an uncritical attitude to the US response, treating the bellicose statements of the Bush administration as though they constituted, in and of themselves, some kind of proof of Syrian culpability. “US Seems Sure of the Hand of Syria,” read the headline in the *New York Times*. NBC’s Middle East correspondent wrote that the recall of the US ambassador represented “the first indication that the US knows something about Syrian involvement in the assassination attempt.”

It indicated nothing of the kind. Rather, it suggested that Washington was prepared in advance to seize upon Hariri’s death as a pretext for escalating its threats against Damascus.

The Bush administration has in place extensive plans for military action against Syria. Unable to crush the resistance in Iraq—and unwilling to acknowledge that it is a manifestation of popular hostility to the US occupation—the Pentagon has long accused the Syrian regime of harboring a “command-and-control” center of Iraqi Baathists that is supposedly masterminding the attacks on US forces. The logic of the US colonial venture in Iraq, far from Bush’s fanciful talk of burgeoning democracy throughout the Middle East, leads to new wars of conquest against any and all regimes that fail to collaborate with Washington.

Various Middle East “security” experts have been quoted in the media describing Syria as “low-hanging fruit” in Washington’s military pursuit of hegemony in the region. The regime is viewed as isolated and vulnerable.

Washington also hopes to use the assassination to pursue French support for US strategic aims in the Middle East. France, the former colonial power in Lebanon, has its own fish to fry, and joined the US in supporting the UN resolution demanding a Syrian troop withdrawal. Secretary of State Rice urged closer collaboration in her visit to Paris earlier this month, calling for an end to the divisions provoked by the US war in Iraq.

The maneuvers against Syria manifest as well the unprecedented coordination of US and Israeli policy in the region. Damascus is a primary target because it has provided sanctuary to Palestinian groups that have opposed Israel, including the Islamist organization Hamas. It has also failed to curb the growing influence of the Lebanese Shiite movement, Hezbollah, which forced Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon after 20 years of occupation. It is hoped in both Washington and Tel Aviv that either forcing Syrian troops out of Lebanon or carrying out “regime change” in Damascus will undermine Hezbollah’s position and open the door for renewed Israeli control on both sides of its northern border.

Tel Aviv calculates that the expulsion of Syria from Lebanon or the toppling of the Baathist regime in Damascus could bring to power a Lebanese government more amenable to Israeli demands. In particular, both want Lebanon to grant citizenship to the estimated 400,000 Palestinian refugees inside that country, a move that would effectively abrogate their right—never recognized by Israel—to return to the homes from which they were expelled in the course of the creation and expansion of the Zionist state.

The timing of the assassination, barely a week after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas announced their truce in Egypt, is noteworthy. It is quite possible that any limited concessions the Israeli regime may agree to make as part of the “peace process” with the Palestinians will be repaid by Washington giving the green light for Israeli provocations and military actions against Syria.

The killing of Hariri has set the stage for the implementation of plans for US aggression against Syria that have long been nurtured by a group within the US administration that is closely tied to Israel and the right-wing Likud bloc, in particular. Prominent among them is David Wurmser, Vice President Dick Cheney’s adviser on the Middle East. Wurmser played a leading role in the creation of a Pentagon intelligence unit that sought to fabricate a case for linking the Iraqi regime with Al Qaeda in the months leading up to the US invasion.

In 1996, Wurmser co-authored a report drafted for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” It called for a repudiation of the “land for peace” formula that had served as the basis for Middle East peace negotiations, in favor of a plan to “roll back” regional adversaries. It advocated the overthrow of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and recommended Israeli strikes against “Syrian targets in Lebanon” and within Syria itself.

The co-authors of the report included Douglas Feith, the current undersecretary for policy at the US Defense Department, and Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board.

In 2000, Wurmser helped draft a document entitled “Ending Syria’s Occupation of Lebanon: the US Role?” It called for a confrontation with the regime in Damascus, which it accused of developing “weapons of mass destruction.” Among those signing the document were Feith and Perle, as well as Elliott Abrams, Bush’s chief advisor on the Middle East, who was recently appointed deputy national security advisor.

This document urged the use of US military force, claiming that the 1991 Persian Gulf War had proven that Washington “can act to defend its interests and principles without the specter of huge casualties.” It continued: “But this opportunity may not wait, for as weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities spread, the risks of such action will rapidly grow. If there is to be decisive action, it will have to be sooner rather than later.”

If one asks the question, “Who benefits?” the answer is clear. The destabilization of Lebanon, the mobilization of the US-backed opposition to the pro-Syrian government in Beirut, and the vilification of Damascus all serve to advance US and Israeli strategic plans long in the making.

It is not just a question of motive, however. Israel has a long history of

utilizing assassination as an instrument of state policy. The Israeli regime has not infrequently carried out acts of terror and blamed them on its enemies.

Among the more infamous examples was the so-called Lavon Affair, in which the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad organized a covert network inside Egypt which launched a series of bombing attacks in 1953. The targets included US diplomatic facilities, and the attackers left behind phony evidence implicating anti-American Arabs. The aim was to disrupt US ties to Egypt.

In its long history of assassinations of Palestinian leaders, many of them carried out in Beirut, the Israeli regime has routinely attempted to implicate rival Palestinian factions.

Car bomb killings in Beirut are a regular part of Mossad’s repertoire. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Israelis invaded Lebanon, such bombings were a fact of daily life, and many of them were attributed to Israel.

Among the more recent killings is that of Elie Hobeika, an ex-Lebanese cabinet minister and former Christian warlord, in January 2002. He was killed along with three bodyguards by a remote-controlled car bomb on a Beirut street. Hobeika, who participated in the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in 1982, had announced just days earlier that he was prepared to testify on the role played by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the killings.

Last June, a Lebanese magistrate indicted five Arabs who were said to be working for Mossad in connection with a plot to assassinate Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. At least one of the defendants testified that Mossad had organized the Hobeika assassination.

In May 2002, Mossad carried out the assassination of Mohammed Jihad Jibril, the son of Ahmed Jibril, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer commented cynically at the time, “Not everything that blows up in Beirut has a connection with the State of Israel.”

In August 2003, Ali Hassan Saleh, a leader of Hezbollah, was assassinated in Beirut. Israel denied any knowledge of the killing, but it was seen throughout Lebanon as a Mossad operation.

Since 2002, Mossad has been headed by Meir Dagan, who formerly commanded the Israeli occupation zone in Lebanon. Sharon reportedly gave Dagan a mandate to revive the traditional methods of Mossad, including assassinations abroad.

Washington has itself revived the methods of “murder incorporated” that were historically associated with the CIA, boasting of assassinations of alleged Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen and elsewhere.

While the *Washington Post* and other US media outlets echo the White House in denouncing Syria as a “rogue regime” guilty of the Hariri assassination, the two governments responsible for the great bulk of the killing and political murders in the Middle East are Israel and the United States.

In contrast to the jingoist propaganda of the American press, it is worth noting the editorial comment published Wednesday by the *Daily Star*, the Beirut English-language daily, dealing with the broader political implications of the assassination.

“The fact that within just hours of the murder five distinct parties were singled out as possible culprits—Israel, Syria, Lebanese regime partisans, mafia-style gangs, and anti-Saudi, anti-US Islamist terrorists—also points to the wider dilemma that disfigures Lebanese and Arab political culture in general: the resort to murderous and destabilizing violence as a chronic option for those who vie for power,” the newspaper stated. It continued, “That madness has now been even more deeply institutionalized and anchored in the modern history of the region due to the impact of the American-British invasion of Iraq and the new wave of violence it has spurred.”

The murder of Rafiq Hariri constitutes a brutal warning that the US war in Iraq is only the beginning of a far broader campaign of military

aggression aimed at crushing resistance to US and Israeli domination.  
This escalating militarism is creating the conditions for a conflagration  
throughout the region.

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