

How a murder investigation could snarl Mideast peace

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Sunday, 07 December 2008

Syria is the prime suspect in former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. But many say an international tribunal could cause it to turn away from engaging with the West and Israel.

BEIRUT, Lebanon - While his assassination sparked a political awakening in this country, the eventual findings into Rafik Hariri's murder investigation have the potential to undo progress on several fronts throughout the Middle East.

Syria stands at the nexus of many of the interconnected disputes throughout the region and in recent months has shown new willingness to talk with the West and engage in indirect peace talks with Israel.

But it is also the chief suspect in the death of Mr. Hariri, a powerful former Lebanese prime minister whose murder triggered an international outcry that forced Damascus to end its political control over its tiny neighbor.

Now suspicions are arising that a deal being is being concocted in which Syrian leaders could be spared prosecution in exchange for progress on peace with Israel, loosening its close ties to Iran, and an end to meddling in the affairs of neighboring Lebanon and Iraq.

"Many Syrians believe that a peace treaty with Israel would be concluded in exchange for guarantees from the West that top echelons of the regime would not be targeted in the tribunal," says Andrew Tabler, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of an upcoming book on Syria.

Last week, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon announced that a tribunal to judge the accused killers would begin operating in the Netherlands on March 1.

"The tribunal is the first among a growing list of foreign threats" that face Syria, says Mr. Tabler. Other than the UN probe, he cited the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigation into a suspected nuclear reactor in north east Syria bombed by Israel in 2007.

Syria says it has nothing to do with Hariri's death and the subsequent murders and attempted assassinations of other prominent Lebanese, some of them politicians and journalists critical of Syria.

In its latest progress report issued Tuesday, the UN commission investigating the Hariri assassination said it has uncovered new evidence that expands the list of suspects.

The current mandate of the UN commission runs out at the end of December, but it has asked for a two-month extension to cover the transition period leading to the launch of the tribunal.

Although the UN commission is playing down the chances of trials beginning soon, the probe's move to The Hague has heightened expectations that the investigation is drawing to a conclusion.

The investigation owes its existence chiefly to the US and France. Both countries helped push it through the UN in 2005, hoping that the threat of international justice would compel Syria to stop interfering in Iraq and Lebanon and drop its support for militant anti-Israel groups. In recent months, Syria has patched up its previously poor relations with France and received a visit last month from David Milliband, the British foreign secretary. In May, Syria and Israel announced that they had begun indirect peace talks brokered by Turkey, which if successful could alter the geopolitical map of the Middle East.

"The threat of the tribunal has had an influence in changing Syria's behavior in Lebanon and Iraq and in opening peace talks with Israel," says Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Endowment's Middle East Center in Beirut.

With Syria coming in from the cold, the UN investigation has gone from being a source of pressure on Damascus to a potential threat to Middle East stability if it concludes Syria was involved in Hariri's death and top officials are indicted.

The UN insists that the investigation is unstoppable and the truth behind Hariri's death will emerge.

In October 2005, four months after the UN probe was launched under the stewardship of Detlev Mehlis, a German prosecutor, the highly detailed first progress report heavily implicated top Syrian and Lebanese officials in the murder. Mr. Mehlis' two successors as chief investigators have adopted a more sober approach, issuing perfunctory reports that

are sparse on detail, to the irritation of Lebanese critics of Syria who feared the probe had lost momentum.

"There is a lot of suspicion that a deal is being worked out on the tribunal and what makes it even more suspicious is that the Syrians appear to be openly confident about the results of the investigation," says Ousama Safa, head of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

Certainly, Syria's view of the investigation has improved following the sensationalist original report, which was a "script for an Agatha Christie novel," says Sami Moubayed, a Syrian political analyst.

"The probe was politicized in a dramatic way under Detlev Mehlis," he says. "That is when the Syrians were worried because there was a feeling back then that even if Syria was innocent, it would be incriminated for the Hariri murder."

He added, "Based on what we have [seen] after Mehlis, the Syrians are not worried."

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