

## Boxed in by Washington, Assad May Resort to Border Violence

Contributed by DebkaFile  
Thursday, 26 February 2009

Washington and Jerusalem are bracing for a flareup on the Syrian and Lebanese borders with Israel as the international tribunal for prosecuting the Rafiq Hariri assassins prepares to start sittings next Sunday, March 1. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has engineered a delay in full court hearings by insisting on tight security measures being put in place. But Syrian president Bashar Assad will have to accept the failure of his best efforts to stymie the tribunal or persuade the Barack Obama administration to help remove this cloud hovering over his regime.

DEBKAFfile's military sources report that Israel's armed forces, the four Syrian divisions arrayed along Lebanese and Israeli borders, the Lebanese army, the United Nations peace force and Hizballah are all in a high state of suspense for trouble. On the surface, hectic US diplomatic activity presages a thaw in relations with Damascus. But when it comes down to brass tacks, Barack Obama is not letting the Syrian president off the hook on longstanding bones of contention. Syria's ambassador to the US Imad Mustafa was invited Thursday Feb. 26, for talks with Jeffrey Feltman, acting assistant secretary of state for the Middle East and former ambassador to Damascus, which Mustafa represented as "an overture in Syrian-American relations." But the US official was instructed to voice US concerns over the key differences between the two governments, such as "Syria's support for terrorist groups and organizations, Syria's acquisition of nuclear and nonconventional weaponry, its interference in Lebanon and worsening human rights situation," said the state department. This month, three separate US Congressional delegations visited Syria, including a team headed by former US presidential candidate John Kerry, head of the Senate's powerful foreign relations committee. Sen. Kerry announced Saturday, Feb. 21, that Washington would soon appoint an ambassador in Damascus to replace the envoy withdrawn after the Feb. 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in a car bombing generally blamed on Syria. But Kerry also informed Assad that Washington would not lift a finger to delay the Hague tribunal's hearings. He also warned that Obama is determined to guard Lebanese sovereignty. This warning as interpreted in Damascus, according to our sources, as due notice that the US would not stand idly by if Syria retaliated for the tribunal's deliberations by direct or indirect action against Lebanon. For four years, Assad labored hard to prevent the Hariri case coming to court because its list of witnesses is topped by high-ranking Syrian officers and officials implicated in the plotting and execution of the Lebanese politician's murder. The former UN investigator of the crime, Detlev Mehlis told the al Hayat newspaper in an interview Wednesday, Feb. 25: "We found converging evidence that Lebanese and Syrian members of the security apparatus were involved in the assassination. We identified as suspects the four generals who were arrested on my suggestion by the Lebanese authorities. Together with the Lebanese we identified a few additional suspects allegedly involved in preparing the assassination." The chief Syrian suspect he was referring to is Gen. Asaf Shawqat, head of Syrian military intelligence at the time of the murder, who is married to the Assad's sister and is still a power in the land. It is taken for granted that Shawqat would not have acted without Assad's complicity. The witnesses turned over to - or summoned by - the court are in a position to implicate them both. Therefore the Hague trial is the gravest peril that the Assad regime has ever faced. The four Lebanese generals referred to by Mehlis are: former head of Lebanese General Security service Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Sayyad, former Lebanese police commander Maj. Gen. Ali Hajj, former director of Lebanese military intelligence Brig. Gen. Raymond Azar and ex-commander of the Lebanon's Republican Guard, Gen. Mustafa Hamadan. This foursome represents a ticking time bomb under the Assad regime if they are allowed to present their evidence before the Hariri tribunal in The Hague &ndash; with more to come. The Syrian president is not expected to surrender to his fate without a fight, especially since the messages he has received from Washington add up to an ultimatum to mend his ways and cut loose from his ties with Tehran. Syria's borders with Lebanon and Israel have heated up in anticipation of the worst. <http://www.debka.com/article.php?aid=1378>