

Syria's Useful Idiots

Contributed by Administrator
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BEIRUT, Lebanon -- On Wednesday, the United Nations Security Council voted to set up a tribunal that will try suspects in the February 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Syria is the leading suspect in the case, so the establishment of the tribunal serves as a step toward creating a stable Lebanon. It also poses a clarifying question to the United States: What will engaging Syria mean for building a liberal future for Lebanon?

At the moment, it is clear that Syria hasn't stopped meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs. The Security Council only created its tribunal after efforts to establish a similar tribunal within Lebanon were stymied by Syrian allies. Indeed, to understand what is at stake in the Lebanese crisis today, flip through the report released last April by the U.N. commission investigating the Hariri assassination.

The commission, led by Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, now assumes that Hariri's assassination was tied to his political activities, particularly his preparations for the summer 2005 legislative elections. This sets up a key passage in the report: "[A] working hypothesis is that the initial decision to kill Hariri was taken before the later attempts at rapprochement got underway and most likely before early January 2005. This leads to a possible situation in the last weeks before his murder in which two tracks, not necessarily linked, were running in parallel. On one track, Hariri was engaged in rapprochement initiatives and on the other, preparations for his assassination were underway."

For anyone who followed Lebanese politics at the time, this deceptively anodyne passage says a lot. Hariri was hoping to score a victory against Syria and its Lebanese allies during the elections, after Syria had extended the mandate of his bitter rival, President Emile Lahoud. The Syrians felt that such a victory would jeopardize their position in Lebanon and, although there was mediation to patch up Hariri's differences with the Syrians, the plot to eliminate him continued. It is plain from Mr. Brammertz's phrasing that those who were planning the former prime minister's elimination are the same ones with whom the intermediaries were trying to reconcile him.

Mr. Brammertz is building a case that, from the information provided to date, can only point the finger at Syria and its Lebanese supplicants. The Hariri tribunal, now that it has been formally established, poses an existential threat to the Syrian regime, and it is in Lebanon that the Syrians have and will continue to hit back to save themselves.

The outbreak of violence in northern Lebanon between the Lebanese army and a group calling itself Fatah al-Islam is the latest stage in such an endeavor. In a BBC interview last week, Prime Minister Fuad Siniora openly linked Fatah al-Islam to Syrian intelligence. The group has claimed to be an al Qaeda affiliate, but observers in Lebanon, including Palestinian sources usually critical of the Siniora government, qualify this, saying that Fatah al-Islam is acting on Syria's behalf. The daily Al-Hayat has reported that the group's weapons come from caches belonging to Palestinian organizations under Syrian control, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and Fatah al-Intifada, from which Fatah al-Islam allegedly broke off.

Meanwhile, a more subtle battle is taking place over interpretation of what is happening in Lebanon. This is especially important because there are those in Washington who still insist that something can be gained from dealing with Syria. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi thought so in April when she visited Damascus, did the Gertrude Bell tour of the Hamadiyyeh souq, and capped it all with a visit to President Bashar Assad, all for precisely nothing in return.

The Iraq Study Group also thought Syria could be a useful partner in Iraq, even as all the signs suggest that Damascus has little real influence there and is sowing dissension to compensate. That's why understanding what is going on in Lebanon is vital for a sense of what can be gained from Syria elsewhere. Yet something is amiss when the most obvious truths are those the pundits won't consider.

For example, what did the former CIA agent Robert Baer mean in Time magazine, when he wrote that the Lebanese government should "know better" than to believe that Fatah al-Islam is a Syrian creation, because "at the end of the day Fatah Islam is the Syrian regime's mortal enemy"? Mr. Baer's point was that a Lebanese civil war might undermine Syrian stability, but also that Sunni Islamists oppose the minority Alawite Syrian regime. He reminded us that "the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood used northern Lebanon as a rear base to seize the Syrian city of Hama in 1982."

It is Mr. Baer who should know better. Syria has fueled a sectarian war in neighboring Iraq by funneling Sunni al Qaeda fighters into the country, without worrying about what this might mean for its own stability. Syria's vulnerabilities have not prevented it from hosting Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. And

Syria's anxieties notwithstanding, throughout its years in Lebanon it developed ties with many Sunni Islamist groups and recently welcomed to Damascus a prominent Lebanese Islamist it has co-opted, Fathi Yakan.

The point is that Syria will have no qualms about provoking sectarian discord in Lebanon to ward away the menace of the Hariri tribunal.

And what are we to make of the journalist Seymour Hersh, now considered an authority on Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups on the basis of a flawed article he wrote for the New Yorker last March? In that article, and in a recent CNN interview, he indirectly suggested that Fatah al-Islam had received weapons not from Syria but from the Siniora government.

The only source Mr. Hersh cited in his article for the Fatah al-Islam story was Alistair Crooke, a former MI6 agent who co-directs Conflicts Forum, an institution advocating dialogue with Islamist movements. Mr. Crooke did not have direct knowledge of what he was claiming, as he "was told" that weapons and money were offered to the group, "presumably to take on Hezbollah."

Mr. Hersh is wading into very muddy waters with very simple ideas. The relationship of the Lebanese government and the Hariri camp with Sunni Islamists is byzantine, but there is no evidence to date that the government or the Hariris had any strategy to use al Qaeda against Hezbollah. In fact most Lebanese Sunni Islamists are not linked to al Qaeda. And Mr. Hersh has provided no proof that Fatah al-Islam received government assistance. Still, the Syrian regime's media has repeatedly used Mr. Hersh's charges to discredit the Lebanese government.

Then there are those with little patience for Lebanese independence. Arguing that Syria is worth more to the U.S. than Lebanon, they advocate Washington's ceding Lebanon to Syria as a price for constructive dialogue. For example, Flynt Leverett, a former National Security Council staffer now at the New America Foundation, recently told National Public Radio, where he appears regularly, that the Bush administration had "romanticized" the 2005 "Cedar Revolution." This was his way of implying that the latter was worth discarding. For Mr. Leverett and others, a Lebanon free of Syria is inherently unstable, even as they disregard Syrian responsibility for that instability.

In a March 2005 op-ed in the New York Times, as Lebanese took to the streets demanding a Syrian pullout, Mr. Leverett urged the U.S. to abandon efforts to establish a "pro-Western government" in Beirut. Instead, he proposed that "the most promising (if gradual) course for promoting reform in Syria is to engage and empower [President] Assad, not to isolate and overthrow him."

This makes for restorative reading today, as Mr. Assad's regime pursues its destabilization of Lebanon, Iraq and Palestinian areas, ignores domestic reform and continues to detain thousands of political opponents in its prisons.

There is nothing wrong with keeping an open mind on Syria. However, an "open mind" can be shorthand for blindness or bad faith. Given the evidence, it makes no sense to dismiss Syrian involvement in the Lebanese crisis, or to blame the crisis on an al Qaeda affiliate allegedly financed by the Lebanese government. Nor does it make sense to assume that Lebanon is a burden that the U.S. should jettison in favor of a stabilizing Syria, considering the fact that al Qaeda materialized from across the Syrian border. We're asked to believe that a group, said to be financed by the Siniora government, picked a fight with that very government, and somehow innocently did so just as the U.N. prepared to establish a tribunal the Syrians fear.

When Syria is systematically exporting instability throughout the region, you have to wonder whether its regime can be a credible partner to the U.S.

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