

The Dangerously Incomplete Hariri Report

By [Robert Parry](#)

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A new United Nations report implicates the Syrian government in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, giving a lift to George W. Bush's demand for "regime change" in Damascus. But the investigation has many holes, including failure to follow up on a mysterious van connected to the Feb. 14 bombing.

The 54-page U.N. report concludes that the bomb that killed Hariri and 22 other people in Beirut was likely in a white Mitsubishi Canter Van that closed in on the convoy of cars carrying Hariri and his entourage before a suicide bomber detonated the powerful blast.

While the identity of the bomber remains a mystery, a Japanese forensic team matched 44 of 69 pieces of the van's wreckage to Canter parts manufactured by Mitsubishi Fuso Corp. and even identified the specific vehicle. The chain of possession for that van thus would seem to be a crucial lead in identifying the killers.

But on that central point, the U.N. investigation made little headway, devoting only a few paragraphs to how the van ended up in Beirut. On page 42, the U.N. report states that the Japanese forensic team reported that the van was traced back to Sagamihara City, Japan, where on Oct. 12, 2004, it was stolen.

The U.N. report contains no details about the Japanese investigation of the theft, nor does it indicate what Japanese police may have discovered about the identity of the thieves or how they may have shipped the van from a suburb of Tokyo to the Middle East in the four months before the Hariri attack.

Redoubled Efforts

Though the investigation of a vehicle theft may have attracted little Japanese police attention a year ago, the van's apparent role in a major act of international terrorism would seem to justify a redoubling of those efforts now.

At minimum, the U.N. investigators might have insisted on including details such as the name of the original owner, the circumstances surrounding the theft, and the identities of car-theft rings in the Sagamihara area. Plus, investigators could have checked on shipments of white Mitsubishi Canter Vans out of Japan to Middle East destinations.

Since the time frame between the reported theft and the bombing was less than four months, Japanese authorities could have at least narrowed down those possible shipments and Middle East customs services might have records of imported vehicles.

Instead, the U.N. investigation concentrated on far flimsier and more circumstantial pieces of evidence, such as phone records showing communications between various security

officials near the route of Hariri's trip.

In reaching its tentative conclusions fingering Syria, the U.N. probe also relies heavily on two witnesses of uncertain credibility who implicated Syrian security officials, although with accounts that are partially contradictory.

For instance, the two supposed witnesses differed on the fate of the Lebanese youth, Ahmad Abu Adass, who claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing in a videotape released to al-Jazeera television after the Hariri assassination.

According to that video, Hariri was slain by Islamic militants because of his work as "the agent of the infidels" and Abu Adass identified himself as the suicide bomber.

But the U.N. report used the supposed witnesses to dismiss the videotape as part of a disinformation campaign to deflect suspicion from Syria.

One witness - described in the U.N. report as "of Syrian origin but resident in Lebanon who claims to have worked for the Syrian intelligence services in Lebanon" - said Abu Adass "played no role in the crime except as a decoy," who was detained "in Syria and forced at gunpoint to record the videotape" before being killed.

Another alleged witness, Zuhir Ibn Mohamed Said Saddik, claimed he saw Abu Adass at a camp in Zabadani, Syria, where, Saddik said, the Mitsubishi van was filled with explosives. Saddik said Abu Adass planned to carry out the assassination but changed his mind and was then killed by Syrians who put his body in the vehicle carrying the bomb.

Dubious Witnesses

One of the problems with such "witnesses" is that they can be unreliable for a variety of reasons, including the possibility they are paid or otherwise induced to present false stories to help achieve a result favored by powerful political figures or countries.

The United States - and the New York Times - learned this lesson during the run-up to war in Iraq when Iraqi exile groups arranged for supposed witnesses to approach U.S. officials and journalists with information about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, claims that turned out to be fabricated.

(Similar questions are already being raised about the key Hariri-case witness Saddik. Der Spiegel, the German newsmagazine, reported that Saddik is a convicted swindler who was caught in lies by the U.N. investigative team. Der Spiegel also reported that the intermediary for Saddik's testimony was Syrian dissident Rifaat al-Assad, who opposes the regime of his nephew President Bashar Assad, and that Saddik apparently was paid for supplying his testimony. Saddik called his brother from Paris in late summer and declared, "I've become a millionaire," the brother said, according to Der Spiegel.)

This risk of investigators accepting questionable testimony from dubious sources is highest when the allegations are directed against countries or political leaders already held in disdain - as was the case with Iraq and is now the case with Syria. With almost everyone ready to believe the worst, few investigators or journalists are willing to endanger their reputations and careers by demanding a high level of proof. It's easier to go with the flow.

In the Hariri case, the chief U.N. investigator, German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, found himself under intense international pressure that some observers compared to the demands on U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix in early 2003.

Unable to find Iraqi WMD but facing U.S. insistence that the WMD was there, Blix tried to steer a middle course to avert a head-on confrontation with the Bush administration, which nevertheless brushed aside his muted objections and invaded Iraq in March 2003.

Similarly, the Bush administration has stepped up its rhetorical pressure on Syria, blaming the government of Bashar Assad for the infiltration of foreign jihadists into Iraq where they have attacked American troops. So, any additional negative attention on Syria would be helpful to Bush's anti-Syrian agenda.

After the U.N. report was released on Oct. 20, Bush immediately termed its allegations "very disturbing" and called for the U.N. to take action against Syria.

Yet, while Syria and its freewheeling intelligence services may remain prime suspects in the Hariri assassination, the bitter Iraq experience might justify at least the running down of obvious leads that could either strengthen or disprove the case, like the mystery of the white Mitsubishi Canter Van.

Investigators might get much closer to the truth if they could determine what happened to the van between the moment it disappeared off the streets of a Japanese city and reappeared almost four months later, rolling toward Rafiq Hariri's motorcade.

The blast not only rocked Lebanese politics. It may now give the Bush administration a new rationale for taking on another Arab adversary.

*Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, [Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq](#), can be ordered at www.secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at www.Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'**

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