

Who was Rafik Hariri, and who was behind his assassination?

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Last Feb. 14, Hariri, the ex-prime minister of Lebanon (from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004) was assassinated in a strike inside Beirut.

The Lebanese opposition, supported by the United States and France, has casually blamed Syria for the crime and has demanded the withdrawal of Syria's 14,000 troops from Lebanon.

Did Syria have an interest in assassinating Hariri?

Are there other interests at play that are being hidden from us by official statements and the media's coverage of the crisis? Mohamed Hassan, Middle East specialist, answers these questions.

David Pestieau and Luc Van Cauwenberghe Interview Mohamed Hassan

Who was Hariri, and who could be behind this assassination?

Hariri is a businessman born into an ordinary poor family from Lebanon. In the 1960s, he emigrated to Saudi Arabia where he became a very rich man. He returned to Lebanon where he twice became prime minister. He has always had good relations with Syria and all the nationalist forces of Lebanon. But the fact that he used the state apparatus to enrich himself personally even more, especially in the field of real estate, well he also had his enemies.

Hariri became prime minister after the accords signed in Taef (a city in Saudi Arabia) in 1989 that put an end to the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990). The presence of Syrian troops had been accepted at the time as a stabilizing factor. All the nationalist forces supported the presence of Syrian troops. We mustn't forget that Israel still occupied the south of Lebanon. Even the United States, Saudi Arabia and France accepted the Syrian presence then. At that time, there was no question of speaking of "Syrian colonization" as certain elements are doing now. After the country was stabilized, the Syrian troops were supposed to leave, but there was no time limit fixed in the Taef accords.

But if Israel withdrew from South Lebanon in 2000, why then did the Syrian troops remain?

In 2000, with the departure of Israel, a new situation emerged. The Islamic movement Hezbollah controlled the south of Lebanon. The Christian Phalangists, some of them had left

for Israel, they were being marginalized. In that situation, Syria played the role of a mediator. Without Syria's presence, acts of revenge directed against the Phalangists could have been carried out. Moreover, the nationalists supported the presence of Syrian troops to protect the Palestinian refugee camps. One recalls 1982, when under the watchful eye of Sharon, the Phalangists carried out massacres directed against the Palestinians.

Was Syria behind the Hariri assassination?

The United States... But, to focus on this issue we need to take an overall view of the Middle East. The United States has a very serious problem in Iraq. They have not succeeded in stabilizing the country. They organized an election there, but it was not followed with something concrete for the population. Now, the government is only held afloat with the support of the U.S. army. The attempt to set up an Iraqi army has gotten nowhere. As time goes on, the resistance has become better organized. Nearly 30 cities have been liberated. The U.S. Army in practice has no access, it does not control the local authorities in these cities. Confronted with their inability to control the situation, they point their finger at Syria and at Iran. The Iraqi minister of defense of the pro-U.S. Allawi government has thus accused the two countries explicitly. The well known Qatar TV channel, Al-Jazeera, presented last Feb. 24 a video playback of Iraqi TV that attempted to prove that many Iraqi resistance fighters were trained by the Syrian secret services. Then, just a few months ago, the CIA affirmed that the majority of the terrorists came from Saudi Arabia. In other words, the U.S. is preparing "the foot to fit into the boot" and not "the boot to fit the foot."

Why are they accusing on Syria?

Syria concluded an alliance with Iran. It is not simply a tactical alliance but more like a strategic alliance. Iran is a rich country, which is on the verge of entering the Group of Shanghai that includes China and Russia... Iran signed a quite large contract amounting to \$170 billion for the delivery of oil to China. India and Japan have also concluded important contracts with Iran. The U.S. would like to chase everybody out of the Middle East, [including the Europeans] but these other powers are also involved [in the oil business].

In attacking Syria, the U.S. pressured that country to break its alliance with Iran and end its support of Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance. But the Syrian government didn't panic and maintained its policies. It even concluded an alliance with Iran. The two countries support Hezbollah in South-Lebanon, which chased Israel out in 2000 and which continues to put pressure on Israel to evacuate the last piece of Lebanese territory it continues to occupy. The weakening of Syria, the last Arab country to maintain an independent nationalist policy, would contribute to reinforcing the Arab governments which collaborate with the U.S., like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

What forces in Lebanon now support the withdrawal of Syria?

There are the Phalangists, the Christian militias who are still supported by Israel. Then the feudal families with Chamael, Wallid Jumblatt and others that want to regain their old privileges.

On the other hand, with the demographic changes, 50 percent of the Lebanese population is now Shiite. Well, the political organizations representing the Shiite community, the Hezbollah and Amal, are pro-Syrian. Other components like the bourgeois of Christian origin are aware that they can no longer have any influence. Finally, on a regional level, the

comprador regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt support the withdrawal as do the political forces linked to Egypt in Lebanon.

Should we fear a military intervention against Syria?

A military intervention would only be a last recourse, preceded by a long period of pressure and of interventions of all sorts. But the sanctions and pressures constitute a form of warfare.

Faced with an impasse in Iraq, the U.S. is looking for enemies outside that country. As they did during the Vietnam war, when they bombed Cambodia and Laos. They could also today bomb Syria and Iran. Because the resistance in Iraq increases support among the nationalists in Syria and Iran and stops the comprador bourgeoisie from developing. But if they decide to bomb Syria or Iran that will only reinforce anti-U.S. nationalist sentiment throughout the Arab World.

Arab nationalism: what is the historical background?

In 1952, the Arab nationalist Nasser seized power in Egypt. In 1956, France, Great Britain and Israel attacked Egypt. It was the Suez war, which finished in a catastrophe for the aggressors. The United States took advantage of the catastrophe to weaken the influence of France and Great Britain in the region. The nationalist governments of Syria and Egypt then concluded an alliance to create the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. U.S. imperialism established the Baghdad Pact against the UAR. What was involved was an alliance supported by the comprador bourgeoisies of Iraq, Jordan, Iran and Lebanon. But the Iraqi revolution in 1958 gave the final blow to the Baghdad Pact. In the same year, the United States sent its troops to the Middle East for the first time, to Lebanon. Great Britain did the same in Jordan. It was a question of preventing at all costs the spread of the Iraqi revolution. But they did not manage to wall up the pan-Arab nationalist movement, whose goal was true independence. Nationalism continued to develop in Yemen, in Algeria, and in Palestine.

At the time, Lebanon (roughly the same size and population as Connecticut), three times smaller than Belgium, is characterized by confessionalism (government power is divided on religious lines: Christian Maronites, Sunnites, Shiites, Druze...). There is a shaky balance between the various religious minorities, which are headed by feudal leaders. But during the 1950s, the Arab National liberation movement developed and made alliances with the Palestinians. A great number of Palestinian refugees driven out by Israel wound up in Lebanon. This development led to a weakening of the feudal forces and a position of relative neutrality of Lebanon between the nationalist countries on the one hand and the pro-US comprador countries on the other. The underlying situation was likely to shift [leading to a reinforcement of nationalism], which led to the intervention of the United States in 1958.

Today, the situation is reversed. Nationalist Iraq has been destroyed, but there is an anti-imperialist resistance there, which is developing. Egypt has become "a comprador regime" that collaborates thoroughly with the United States and Israel. [Note: a comprador bourgeoisie constitutes a capitalist class whose interests are closely tied to the imperialist system. For example, the Saudi bourgeoisie, which invested most of its wealth in the West.]

These "comprador bourgeoisies" control the State in all the Arab countries except Syria. If the regime in Syria is weakened, capitulates or is overthrown, it will be a defeat for the Arab nationalist movement. Hezbollah will be weakened or will disappear and that will support

the emergence of a bourgeois comprador Palestinian leadership [which has already happened in the wake of the death of Arafat], ready to collaborate with Israel while also giving in to its various demands. The United States could then more easily impose its influence in the entire and Israel would be integrated in the region while also imposing its solution on the Palestinians, deprived of external support.

This scenario, ideal for the United States, is more than dubious. Resistance in Iraq continues to develop. Syria holds firm and has made an alliance with Iran. And popular conscientiousness and anti-Americanism in the Arab countries are stronger than ever, even if the level of organization of the people in revolutionary organizations is weak.

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