

ICWA LETTERS

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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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MIDDLE EAST**

Andrew Tabler is an Institute Fellow based in Damascus and Beirut studying Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

October 23, 2005

Dear Peter:

Hope you are well. Attached is an Op-Ed piece I have written dealing with the October 21st release of Detlev Mehlis' report of his investigation into the death of Former Lebanese Premier Rafik al-Hariri. If I were a magazine or newspaper correspondent based in Syria and Lebanon, this is what I would have written.

Many questions surround the investigation, which is expected to continue until the end of the year. As Mehlis tries to get to the bottom of this Levantine mystery, I believe one question remains central to Washington's policy vis-à-vis Syria: Is Bashar al Assad fully in control of Syria?

The idea behind this piece has been on my mind for years, but only fully surfaced when a confidential but widely distributed version of the Mehlis report was leaked to me via a friend on October 21. While at first glance it looked like a simple soft copy of the report, a flick of the tracking function in Microsoft Word to "final showing markup" showed something else. There in the margins were the document's final edits. A little navigation of the program showed that UN Special Representative Terje Roed-Larsen and the United Nations Office in Vienna (UNOV) had apparently made the changes. The corrections were made only a few hours before the report's release.

Also to my surprise, there in paragraph 96 were the deleted names of Bashar's brother, Maher al Assad, his brother-in-law and head of Military Intelligence (MI) Asef Shawkat, former MI chief Hassan Khalil, former political-security chief Bahjat Sulieman, and Lebanon's former *Sûreté Générale* head, Jamil al Sayyid.

As I spent the morning on the phone with friends, trying to help them see the tracked changes as well, it suddenly came to me what a subtle game this had all become. Make no mistake about it: Washington is now trying to crack the Assad regime wide open.

I do not think this is going to go as smoothly as the White House might think. Syria has the resources and experience to wait it out. But at the same time, a part of me doesn't blame George W. Bush for pursuing the Assad regime in this way. After all, how can you deal with a president if it's unclear he is in charge? Why even bother?

I will send you a copy of the report as well. I know from your editing of my reports that you can navigate the tracking yourself!

Best regards,
Andrew

How to deal with Syria: Find out who is in charge

United Nations investigator Detlev Mehlis' implication of "senior Lebanese and Syrian officials" in the Valentine's-Day Beirut assassination of former Lebanese Premier Rafik al Hariri has already set off a firestorm of debate on how to pressure Damascus to comply with the ongoing investigation. As all eyes turn toward Syrian President Bashar al Assad and what he will

do next, it is imperative that Washington not miss an opportunity to determine who is worth dealing with in Damascus.

For nearly five years, I have worked as a journalist and researcher in Syria covering the country's so-called reform process. Over dinners with diplomats and other foreign visitors both in Beirut

and Damascus, one question arises more frequently every year: Is Bashar al Assad truly in control of Syria?

CNN's Christiane Amanpur even asked Assad the question himself last week. Assad's answer was, "You cannot be a dictator and not be in control." Or can you? Since Bashar came to power in July 2000, everything from the slow pace of reform to Damascus' reticence to pull its troops out of Lebanon has been blamed on Assad's weakness vis-à-vis the "old guard" — regime members who remain from the 30-year rule of Bashar's father, Hafez. When this belief affected relations with the United States — most notably Washington's demands that Damascus block insurgents from entering neighboring Iraq — the United States changed its Syria policy from one of "constructive engagement" to "constructive instability." This has included increased sanctions, public threats and even reported cross-border skirmishes along the Iraqi-Syrian frontier. And most notably, there has been a conspicuous lack of incentives for good behavior.

Then out of the blue last week, with the Mehlis report looming, a high-ranking U.S. official confirmed rumors that Washington has offered Damascus a deal to get it off the hook in Lebanon for its accused involvement in Hariri's assassination in exchange for halting its alleged support for the Iraqi insurgency, ending all interference in Lebanese affairs and cutting off support for Hizbollah and Palestinian groups that reject any rapprochement with Israel. Damascus has reportedly turned down the offer.

It is perhaps understandable that such a proposal went nowhere, since it is unclear that there is anyone in Syria with enough authority to in effect rewrite its foreign policy of the last 30 years. The widely distributed version of the Mehlis report, if accurate, indicates just how fragmented this regime might actually be. The possibility that the president's brother and brother-in-law took it upon themselves to organize the assassination of a Middle Eastern statesman shows that, at the very least, Syria might be ruled by committee.

We need to find out if someone on

this committee is in a position to negotiate with the United States, even as the sanctions process rumbles forward. Sanctions by themselves could be disastrous, creating chaos when the last thing America needs is chaos in another Middle Eastern country. Multilateral pressure will only increase nationalist sentiments and regime paranoia that will hamstring an already troubled reform process. Damascus' reform program is heavily assisted, if not sustained, by UN and European Union projects. Increased multilateral pressure on the regime could politicize Syria's already limited reform space, grinding progress to a halt. Such a situation needs to be avoided at all costs. Syria's high population growth rate of 2.85 percent per year, combined with pitifully low labor and capital-productivity, means that current unemployment levels of 11-20% would increase rapidly — something that could serve to fuel Islamic radicalism in Syria and the region.

So now, instead of simply using the Hariri investigation to push Damascus to the brink through sanctions and watch the country sink into the abyss, Washington should give Assad a chance to prove he is in charge of Syria. It could offer him a carrot to go along with the sanctions stick. Allowing the reopening of the oil pipeline between the Iraqi city of Kirkuk and the Syrian Mediterranean port of Baniyas — to see if Assad can keep it operating without acts of sabotage — would be a good first step in determining the degree to which he controls Syria and if the old-guard veil is truly lifting. This would also help Washington's troubles in exporting Iraqi oil and give Assad and the Syrian people a material incentive to stabilize its neighbor. And, perhaps most importantly, this would open the door to a peaceful solution to what is looming as the next big crisis for the US in the region.

There are some signs that Assad could be in a position to make good on such a deal. Following the Hariri assassination in February, it appears that Assad has been consolidating power. Several high-ranking officials were "retired" during the Ba'ath Party conference in June and Interior Minister Ghazi Kanan, a possible rival to Assad, died

last week in what officials are calling a suicide.

At least for now, America needs someone inside the Assad regime with whom it can deal. But the Assad regime does not necessarily need us. The regime has plenty of experience surviving sieges, however chaotic. Damascus has been under US sanctions since 1979, and has plenty of practice sneaking around them. It also has about \$18 billion in cash reserves, the equivalent of about three years' worth of current imports. Syria's Ba'athists are masters of the waiting game: Even if Bashar can't outwit or outplay George W. Bush, history shows an Assad can outlast two-term American presidents. □

Dear Reader: An edited version of this article was accepted by the International Herald Tribune on Oct. 27, 2005.

— PBM

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator:
Brent Jacobson
Administrative and Publications
Manager:
Ellen Kozak

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