

The Big Holes In the Mehlis Report

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The principal tool, in the ongoing campaign against Syria, is the so-called Mehlis Report, which was drafted by Detlev Mehlis, head of the UN commission mandated to investigate the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Its first report was released on Oct. 19, and a second is expected on Dec. 15.

The report states that “there is converging evidence pointing at both Lebanese and Syrian involvement in this terrorist act.” Referring to the Syrian intelligence presence in Lebanon for many years, and “Given the infiltration of Lebanese institutions and society by those Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services working in tandem, it would be difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination plot could have been carried out without their knowledge.” In conclusion: “It is the Commission’s conclusion that, after having interviewed witnesses and suspects in the Syrian Arab Republic, and establishing that many leads point directly towards Syrian security officials as being involved with the assassination, it is incumbent upon Syria to clarify a considerable part of the unresolved questions.”

Such security officials are named in the initial version of the report, which was later redacted. They are Lebanese security and intelligence officials, as well as leading Syrians; the latter include Maher Assad and Assef Shawkat, respectively the brother and brother-in-law of President Bashar al-Assad. Among the officials named are Gen. Hassan Khalil, former head of Syrian military intelligence; Rostum Ghazali, chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon; and Jamea Jamea, deputy of Ghazali and chief of Syrian military intelligence in Beirut. Among the Lebanese named are chiefs of various intelligence units: Gen. Mustafa Hamdan, commander of the presidential Guard Brigade; Gen. Raymond Azar, former head of military intelligence; Gen. Jamil al-Sayyed, head of the Lebanese Sécurité Générale; Gen. Ali al-Hajj, former head of intelligence; as well as former Member of Parliament Nasser Kandil. Several have since been arrested, and five (not yet named) are scheduled to be interrogated by Mehlis.

Fallacy of Composition

The report represents a fallacy of composition: It moves from the hypothesis, that Syria “must” be involved, given its position in Lebanon. A further assumption is that Hariri and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were in conflict regarding the latter’s intention to promote the extension of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud’s term in office, which Hariri report-

edly opposed. A meeting between the two in Damascus on Aug. 26, 2004 is cited; and two diametrically opposite reports on the meeting were provided by witnesses heard by the commission. The version provided by Hariri associates, that Assad had threatened Hariri, is taken as accurate.

Most damning is the fact that Mehlis based his accusations against Syria largely on the testimony provided by two witnesses who later were shown to have lied. One was Zuhir Ibn Mohamed Said Saddik, who claimed to be a former Syrian security official. His story was that the decision to kill Hariri had been made between July and December 2004, in a series of meetings in Lebanon in which he participated, along with four senior Lebanese officials and seven senior Syrian officials. Saddik signed a confession on Sept. 26, 2005, and was arrested Oct. 13. “The fact that Mr. Saddik implicates himself in the assassination, which ultimately led to his arrest, adds to his credibility,” the report concluded.

However, it was soon revealed that the purported Saddik was really a person named Safi; that he had never been a security officer, but rather a soldier, who had deserted; and, that he was wanted both in Syria and Lebanon for a number of crimes. He had reportedly risen from rags to riches, suddenly becoming the owner of several villas, and travelled to the United States.

A second witness, not named in the report, who also claimed to have worked for Syrian intelligence, testified that planning meetings for the assassination took place in Syria, and that he “had close contact with high ranked Syrian officers posted in Lebanon.” He named Azar, Hamdan, Ghazali, Kandil, and al-Hajj as active plotters.

On Nov. 28, this witness appeared at a press conference in Damascus, with a completely different story to tell. The man, Husam Taher Husam al-Kurdi, told the press that he had lied to Mehlis, and had been contacted by Hariri’s son, Saad, who had offered him millions, if he would testify against the Syrians. On Syrian TV, he said he had testified against the brother and brother-in-law of President Bashar al-Assad under duress.

On Nov. 28, the head of Syria’s own investigation demanded that Mehlis revise his report after al-Kurdi’s recantation. The Syrian government responded that “no party or individual with any ties to the Syrian government played a role in the heinous assassination of . . . Hariri.”

Where the truth lies is not easy to ascertain. Circles in Lebanon have cried foul, charging that both witnesses were the tools of a Syrian intelligence plot, to discredit the Mehlis Commission. Whatever the truth, it is clear that the Mehlis Report has been based largely on the testimony of two individuals who gave false testimony.

Most importantly, the Mehlis investigation ignores the existence of the “Clean Break” doctrine, a blueprint for regime change in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, which had been drafted by the neo-conservative group around Dick Cheney in 1996. If Mehlis has posed the question “Cui bono?” at all, he has supplied a simplistic answer.