

The Syrian Gambit Unravels

When the main witnesses recant, you don't have a case

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Global Research, December 12, 2005

[Antiwar.com](#) 12 December 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The effort to demonize Syria and, in effect, [Saddamize](#) its ruler, [Bashar al-Assad](#), has run up against a brick wall: the [recantation](#) of the prime witness, who says he was bribed, intimidated, and tortured into going along with [the narrative](#) being sold by [UN prosecutor Mehlis](#) – that Syrian intelligence pulled off [the Feb. 14 assassination](#) of Lebanese entrepreneur and politician [Rafik Hariri](#) in Beirut. The *New York Times* [reports](#):

“Hussam Taher Hussam, said he had been held in Lebanon by supporters of Saad Hariri, the son of the former prime minister, and subjected to torture and drug injections to force him to testify. Saad Hariri, he said, offered him \$1.3 million if he would lie about senior Syrian officials. ...

“He said Mr. Hariri and his associates had asked him to tell investigators that he had seen a truck used in the assassination at a Syrian military camp, and to present false evidence implicating Maher Assad, the younger brother of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, and Asef Shawkat, the president’s brother-in-law, in the killing in February.”

Hussam’s statement on Syrian television was well-received in Syria, where his references to the vagaries of [Alawite minority rule](#) and other details gave it added credibility. Naturally, Syria’s enemies rejected this new testimony, just as they had hailed Hussam’s previous statements as [proof positive](#) of Syria’s perfidy. What they didn’t – couldn’t – acknowledge was that their chief witness is effectively discredited, and [he isn’t the only one](#). As the various threads of the “Syria did it” scenario unravel, the whole conspiracy theory is coming apart like a badly made sweater.

In the Mehlis report – or at least the “preliminary” and highly speculative [document](#) released last month – Hussam was the [“masked” witness](#) whose identity supposedly could not be revealed because his life was in danger from the Syrian authorities. His “evidence” was [the key link](#) in tying the highest echelons of the Syrian regime to Hariri’s assassination. That he has now [shown up](#) on Syrian television – looking presentable, sounding articulate, and showing no signs of having been intimidated or even having a single hair on his head ruffled – has the anti-Syria crowd looking pretty silly. Even worse for them, however, is the news that yet another prominent figure in the narrative woven by Mehlis, Muhammad Zuhayr al-Sadiq, has also been discredited.

According to an [article](#) in *Le Figaro*, a French right-of-center daily associated with the party of Jacques Chirac, the CIA described al-Sadiq as a “fabulist.” French intelligence was all too aware of the witness’ unreliability but ignored the CIA’s skepticism due to political pressure from on high. Mehlis himself didn’t believe Sadiq, at least in the beginning, and, according

to *Le Figaro's* reporter, the UN's chief investigator used Sadiq's testimony as a "bluff" to enable the detention of the four Lebanese generals in hopes that they would incriminate themselves. The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* gives us [even more reason](#) to question Sadiq's testimony: [they report](#) that he was introduced to Mehlis by [Rifaat al-Assad](#), brother of the late President Hafez al-Assad, who [hopes](#) to inherit the Syrian presidency if and when the Americans invade.

One mysterious reference in the *Le Figaro* story: a "member of the entourage of Saad Hariri" is cited as saying that Sadiq was used to convey information that came from "elsewhere." *Der Spiegel* also [reported](#) Sadiq told his brother in Damascus that "[I've become a millionaire](#)" as a result of his testimony – with the money coming, presumably, from that same "elsewhere."

As for Mehlis, he is apparently so sick and tired of this endless probe that he's [retiring from the scene](#) having undergone a surprising transformation: he's no longer the stern, no-nonsense Teutonic prosecutor, a Germanic version of [Patrick J. Fitzgerald](#), but shamefaced and subdued in the face of this massive debunking of his "preliminary" report. What a comedown!

That report had been a [major bludgeon](#) for the Bush administration and their newfound allies, [the French](#), to hit Syria over the head with [in the UN Security Council](#), and it served the same purpose [on the home front](#): yet more evidence that it was high time for the imposition of sanctions and a little "[regime change](#)" in Damascus. The discrediting of Hussam and Sadiq has deprived the War Party of this particular weapon, but they aren't giving up: UN Ambassador John Bolton is demanding that the Mehlis investigation be [continued](#), even without Mehlis.

The [official end date](#) of the UN investigation into Hariri's assassination is Dec. 15, but you can be sure that Bolton and the rest of the [get-Syria](#) crowd will try to ensure that its life span is extended. They are determined to gin up another war, and they don't care how [transparently](#) false the pretext is: these people have raised lying into a [sophisticated art form](#), of which the Mehlis propaganda blitz is just the beginning. They don't care how far-fetched the indictments of their targets appear, nor how often they are debunked: what they're counting on is the residue left by "news" stories trumpeting "evidence" that Syria killed Hariri and is wreaking havoc in Lebanon. The debunking takes place on the back pages, while the initial charges were given front-page headlines.

This is how the propaganda assault works: keep flinging dirt in the hope that at least some of it will stick. If your "evidence" turns out to be false, and your "witnesses" start recanting, then don't backpedal – instead, invent new charges. Attack, attack, *attack!*

The utter absurdity of UN Security Council [resolution 1363](#) – which calls on Syria to cooperate fully with an international commission investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri or face possible "further action" – can be easily seen if we imagine that the UN had taken a similar interest in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Picture Lyndon Baines Johnson and top members of the U.S. government being called in by a United Nations "prosecutor" for questioning. It's interesting that the same American "conservatives" who [waste no opportunity](#) to show their disdain for the UN and would have risen in armed revolt if the UN had intervened in the Kennedy affair, are now [upholding the UN's authority](#) to "investigate" the murder of Hariri and pin it on Syria.

Syria is now girding for the imposition of economic [sanctions](#) and trying to head off the campaign to destabilize the country on two fronts: by [restarting talks](#) with Israel, and by [cooperating](#) with the request to permit Syrian officials to be questioned in the Hariri investigation. I have the funny feeling, however, that this is not going to do them a lot of good, as far as their enemies in the West are concerned. As [we have seen](#) in the case of Iraq, when the U.S. wants to [manufacture](#) a case for war, it can be done pretty easily: Congress is [not likely](#) to ask inconvenient questions until it's too late, and the American people can hardly be expected to keep up with arcane doings in faraway Lebanon, the scene of the intrigue and obscure religious-ethnic rivalries that could spark another Mideast war. Acting pretty much without either congressional or public scrutiny, this administration thinks it can get away with anything when it comes to Syria – and in that, they are probably right.

The scenario laid out by the War Party is this: pin the murder of Hariri on Syria, concoct phony “evidence” that high Syrian officials – including members of President Assad’s immediate family – were involved, and set up an “international tribunal” under the jurisdiction of the UN, which will then demand that Syria surrender the accused – or else. U.S. troops are waiting just across the Syrian-Iraqi [border](#), ready for the command to cross in full force – or perhaps as part of a scouting expedition in hot pursuit of “terrorists,” who will then be set upon by Syrian troops in a Middle Eastern remake of the [Tonkin Gulf incident](#).

Coming soon to a theater of war near Iraq...

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