

Syria in the Dock

Report by Kirsten Maas and Heiko Wimmen

With the assassination of MP and publisher Jibrán Tuéini on December 13, 2005; political violence in Lebanon has come to a new head. Many Lebanese again accuse Syria, since Tuéini himself as well as his newspaper *An-Nahar* were among the most vocal opponents of Syrian military and political presence and influence in Lebanon. At the same time, the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) established according to [Security Council Resolution 1595](#) and led until December 15, 2005 by the German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis listed high Syrian officials as suspects in the conspiracy for the assassination of prior Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri; an accusation supported by recent public statements of the former Syrian vice president Abdelhalim Khaddam. A serious confrontation between Syria and the International Community appears more and more likely, potentially leading to sanctions and further isolation of the country. Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition has stepped up its efforts to establish a shared and democratic platform, and is prodding the regime to defuse the crisis by engaging in serious reforms.

The Investigation

Already with the arrest and later indictment of the four heads of the most important security apparatuses in Lebanon in late August, all of which were considered loyal to Syria, it became clear that the investigation was focusing on Lebanese suspects considered part of the pro-Syrian camp. Furthermore, non-official versions of the [first investigation report](#) (commonly referred to as “the Mehlis Report” after the name of the chief investigator) implicated high Syrian officials such as the head of the Syrian security apparatus in Lebanon Rustom Ghazaleh; the brother in law of the Syrian President Asef Shawqat and the President’s brother Maher Al-Assad. The report concluded that Syrian cooperation would be essential for a successful investigation and

sharply criticized Damascus' reluctant responses to any such request. As a result, [UNSC-resolution 1636](#) mandated "full and unconditional" Syrian cooperation and invested UNIIIC vis-à-vis Syria with the same authorities it has vis-à-vis Lebanon according to resolution 1595. Conflict arose subsequently concerning the location where several high Syrian officials would be questioned, in spite of the provision spelled out in UNSCR 1636 that "the Commission shall have the authority to determine the location and modalities for interview of Syrian officials and individuals". After weeks of diplomatic haggling and procedural maneuvering, it was finally agreed that five high Syrian security officials (out of six summoned, the sixth reportedly being Asef Shawqat) should be questioned at UN offices in Vienna.

The [second Mehlis-report](#) submitted on December 10, 2005 sees a "steady pattern of converging circumstantial evidence" pointing to Hariri's conflict with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, practically a Syrian appointee, and the struggle over the extension of Lahoud's term in the fall of 2004 as the central motif for the crime. When asked about documents and files related to almost thirty years of Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Syrian officials interviewed in Vienna claimed that all relevant documents had been burned during the withdrawal in April and its aftermath. At the same time, the Syrian regime and pro-Syrian media worked to discredit the work of the commission and, according to the first Mehlis report, intentionally misled the investigation in more than one case. Through its defensive reactions, reluctant cooperation and persistent attacks on the first report, which actually refrained from directly blaming Syria, the Syrian government may well have convinced the international audience that the investigation is heading in the right direction and that the perpetrators may indeed be found among close associates of the regime.

"He didn't have the smoking gun, he didn't have a lot of evidence, but from the way they (Syria) behave and from other little bits and pieces of evidence here and there, it is clear they've got something to hide." (Scott Lasensky interviewed by the Council on Foreign Relations; <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9420/lasensky.html>)

Accordingly, [UNSC-resolution 1644](#) extended the mandate of the investigation for an additional six months. In addition to the publicized intend of the new head of UNIIIC, the Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, to investigate all assassinations since the fall of 2004; it appears likely that the work of UNIIIC will continue well into the year 2006. The suggestion, pushed in particular by the Hariri-camp, to establish an international court to try those found to be suspects in the crimes, continues to divide and paralyze the Lebanese government, as all ministers representing the Shia

community (seen as Syria's main remaining ally in Lebanon) are currently boycotting cabinet sessions over the issue. Sectarian tension, already on a high tide, seems likely to increase in the near future.

On December 30, the former Syrian Vice President Abdelhalim Khaddam dropped a bombshell in an appearance on the Dubai-base satellite network *Al-Arabiyya*, attacking the Syrian record in Lebanon and confirming the long-standing accusation that the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri had been threatened by President Bashar Al-Assad into supporting the extension of President Lahoud's term. After being expelled from the ruling Baath party and declared a "traitor" by the Syrian parliament within a matter of days, Khaddam stepped up his attack, accused Bashar Al-Assad directly of ordering the assassination, and called upon the Syrian people to rally around the opposition in order to bring down the regime and restore democracy (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4586972.stm) – a turn that drew scorn from many Arab observers, who recalled his role as a loyal lieutenant to Bashar Al-Assad's father Hafez and his involvement in large-scale corruption for more than three decades.

(Rami Khoury in *The Daily Star*; 01/12/2006;

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=10&article_ID=21370&categ_id=5)

As a result of these new accusations, UNIIC – who interrogated Khaddam in his home in Paris – now demands to interrogate Syria's President himself.

Bashar Al-Assad, for his part, appeared to be unimpressed by these developments and denounced UNIIC in a speech delivered to Syrian lawyers on January 21, 2005 as biased against Syria, "a condemnation committee, not an investigation committee" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4635146.stm). Statements reasserting that Syria's cooperation would be limited by respect for national sovereignty seem to indicate that Assad is unlikely to testify to the commission as requested, citing his immunity as an acting head of state.

A Cornered Regime

Official reactions from Damascus as well as from its Lebanese allies operate along three main lines of argumentation: Through local and regional, mainly Arab-language media outlets sympathetic to Syria and/or an Arab-nationalist discourse, attempts are launched to discredit the professional standards and the results of the UNIIC commission. Particular attention has been paid to the role of chief investigator Detlev Mehlis during the investigation of the La Belle bombing, insinuating secret ties

to the CIA. In a dramatic turn of events, one of the major witnesses quoted in the first report, a former Syrian intelligence operative by the name of Housam T. Housam, surfaced in Damascus and gave several press conferences on Syrian state television in which he retracted his prior confessions, claiming that he had been tortured and bribed by investigators and the Hariri-camp into implicating high Syrian officials. According to the second Mehlis-report, credible information suggests that close relatives of Housam living in Syria were arrested and threatened to put pressure on the witness himself. Furthermore, Housam was identified on several photographs taken on site immediately after the assassination of the former leader of the Communist Party Georges Hawwi, apparently monitoring the gathering crowd. Despite all of this and the obvious lack of coherence in Housam's statements, Syrians and pro-Syrian Lebanese felt reassured, and continue to maintain (as did the Syrian government in official statements) that the first Mehlis-report has been largely invalidated.

“Discrediting Mehlis has become Syria's raison d'être, and this is the biggest flaw in its behavior; by now, it really hardly matters whether hard proof of a Syrian contribution to Rafiq Hariri's murder is found, since Syrian non-cooperation is in itself easily punishable.” (Rime Allaf, *bitterlemons* 41(3); 11/17/2005)

A second line of argumentation, catering mainly to the nationalist current within Arab public opinion and hence liable to put pressure on other Arab regimes to oppose sanctions against Syria, reads the investigation as part of a long-term strategy aimed at restructuring the region according to American and hence Israeli interests, with the marginalization or even change of the Syrian regime as a main step towards that end. Accordingly, at the time of the first Mehlis-report, information was floated whereby members of the Syrian opposition met with Israeli representatives as well as with the Syrian exile politician Farid Ghadry (at times portrayed as the “Syrian Ahmad Chalabi”, see <http://slate.msn.com/id/2113160/?nav=navoa>) to plot the overthrow of the Syrian government (*As-Safir*, 10/31/2005). In the same mold, the founder of the *Democratic Liberal Gathering* Kamal Labwani, one of the activists of the so-called “Spring of Damascus” of 2001, was arrested after returning from the United States for allegedly “damaging the national image”.

The third argument seems to be aimed primarily at considerations of US-American and European *realpolitik* and fears of further regional instability among neighboring countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia by attempting to depict the current Syrian leadership as the sole guarantee for stability. According to this proposition, democratization would almost certainly bring Islamist forces to power and may also trigger ethnic and religious violence.

“If they don't want to deal with the government of Bashar al-Asad, the alternatives will be al-Qaeda, Jihadists and the Islamists generally” according to the former foreign policy counselor of President Assad Imad Shueibi ([ICG Middle East Report 39](#), 04/12/2005). Credible information suggests that in particular Saudi Arabia has been using its leverage over the Hariri camp to ease political pressure on Damascus and is using its financial resources to support the Syrian public relations efforts. Shortly after the publication of the Khaddam-Interview and a subsequent meeting between Bashar Al-Assad, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the Saudi ruler Abdallah bin Abdelaziz, Saudi-controlled media such as the *Al-Hayat* and *Sharq Al-Awsat* newspapers as well as regional media such as the Dubai-based *Al-Arabiyya* satellite station (among whose investors are many Saudi citizens) dropped already announced further interviews with the exile (*The Daily Star*, 01/13/06; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4601654.stm). *Al-Arabiyya* even cancelled an interview with the Lebanese politician and prominent anti-Syrian figure Walid Jumblat (who recently called on the US to topple the Syrian regime) quoting “technical reasons”. It remains open to speculation to what extent these Saudi moves express genuine concern about a new Iraq in the making, or intend to show the Syrian regime that Riyadh wields the power to turn the heat on and off at will.

In an address to students at the University of Damascus on November 10, 2005 Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad elaborated in particular on the “US-American plot” and the “stability” arguments, predicting that regardless to what extent Syria would cooperate with the investigation, it will still be accused of non-cooperation, and will be presented with “the choice between being killed or committing suicide”. In a swipe reminiscent of the rhetoric of former Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein, Assad vowed not to balk at the confrontation:

“Suicide means that the enemy does not only deprive you of the dignity of self-defense, but also of the chance to inflict harm on him or even to defeat him.”

In a clear reference to the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq and policy concepts that suggest “constructive instability” as an avenue to achieve change in the region (see Robert Satloff: “Assessing the Bush Administration’s Policy of ‘Constructive Instability’”; <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2278>), Assad depicted the region as “presented with the choice between resistance and chaos” and warned that if chaos were to break loose, it would soon engulf the whole region. Scathing attacks were directed against Lebanon, “an open field for all plots hatched against Syria” according to Assad, who described the Lebanese prime minister Fuad Siniora as “a servant of a servant”, i.e. as a puppet of Rafik El-Hariri’s son Saad, with

the latter being portrayed as a puppet of the Saudis and the US. A few days later, the Syrian official daily *Tishreen* followed this lead and called on “the Lebanese people to take to the streets and bring down the government” when protests arose about high fuel prices in mountainous areas of Lebanon hit by an unusually early onset of winter.

The Syrian public relation effort was further augmented by an array of propaganda measures clearly catering for local consumption, such as purportedly “spontaneous” mass demonstrations in support of the regime, and reached a level of cynicism remarkable even by Syrian standards when news reports were published about a hunger strike organized by political prisoners to protest the international pressure against Syria.

The Syrian Opposition Speaks Out

Contrary to the regime’s representation, the Syrian opposition places the blame for the international crisis squarely in the court of the government. The so-called “[Damascus Declaration](#)”, a document drawn up and published by a number of secular opposition figures and organizations and Kurdish groups on October 10, 2005 and subsequently endorsed by the exiled leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, calls the situation “*a result of the policies pursued by the regime, policies that have brought the country to a situation that calls for concern for its national safety and the fate of its people.*” A comprehensive suggestion for defusing the crisis was proposed by Riyad Turk (http://www.hayyabina.org/Polyglotte/turk_initiative.htm), a prominent opposition figure and long-term political prisoner, who shares suspicions that the reluctant cooperation of the Syrian government with the investigation points to an involvement in the assassination. According to Turk, the current crisis is to a large extent the result of failed leadership, and in order to “*avoid the same fate that the Iraqi people faced when Saddam Hussein insisted to defy the international community*”; a restructuring of the regime would be required. Accordingly, Bashar Al-Assad should resign from the presidency, the speaker of the house should assume his responsibilities in accordance with the constitution, and a government of national unity should be formed that would encompass all political camps and organization, including the Baath party. Such a government would then prepare elections for an assembly that would work out a new constitution designed to transform Syria into a functioning democracy.

Turk’s propositions elaborate a line of argumentation that has been followed by many opposition figures over the past years in order to sidestep the objection, repeated

ad nauseam by representatives of the regime, whereby opposition or reform demands are liable to weaken national unity and hence undermine the “historical struggle” waged against Israel and US-American designs on the region. According to the opposition, it is on the contrary repression, totalitarianism and corruption which are destroying national unity, while democracy and reform will allow the population to rally around a leadership they perceive as legitimate. Leftist intellectuals such as the Paris-based Syrian sociologist Burhan Ghalyoun take this argument one step further and maintain that the US and Europe are actually unlikely to support regime change and a transition to democracy in Syria:

“They believe that, at least for the time being, a Baath regime that is weak and compliant is a better option than change with unknown consequences. And the unknown consequences they fear are not civil war or confessional conflict, but rather, loss of American, European and in particular Israeli control should Syria return to democracy and pluralism. If the Syrian people were to become re-politicized and elect a truly representative parliament, then it would become much more difficult to achieve international decisions that pave the way to hegemony, and Israel will be obliged to return to the negotiations over the Golan Heights.”

(*aljazeera.net*, 11/10/2005; <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/B365C1CE-1F5A-4A6D-97C2-856D5BFCB358.htm#1>)

Inside the Damascus Black Box

Analysts are puzzled about the decisions and strategies that led Syria from limited cooperation (such as sharing of intelligence on Al-Qaeda after 9/11) to a full-blown confrontation with the US (in particular over the alleged support for Iraqi insurgents) and the international community (in particular over Lebanon and the UNIIIC). The International Crisis Group sees the reason in two policy approaches that have proved incompatible over time: while the US are demanding a definite and decisive change of Syrian foreign policy, Syria is still working according to a strategy of clear quid-pro-quo: limited concessions against clearly defined rewards.

„This resulted in a dangerous dialogue of the deaf: Syrian half-measures in response to U.S demands convinced Washington that Damascus was not serious [...] by cooperating only under duress, it validated U.S. belief that pressure, not engagement - sticks, not carrots - was the key to further movement [...] the absence of reciprocal U.S. steps persuaded Damascus that Washington was seeking at best to humiliate, at worse to change its regime“ ([ICG Middle East Report 39](#), 04/12/2005)

Thus, hardliners within the regime could have argued that any concessions – for example in Lebanon – would only weaken Syria’s position in a confrontation over live and death (of the regime) without yielding any reward – “why give in if they want to take us out” (ICG, *ibid*). Digging in and playing for time until US-American resolve wears thin, the strategy so successfully applied by Assad’s father Hafez, might have looked like a more promising option. But even most Arab observers express doubt whether Bashar Al-Assad is mastering the risky game of maneuvering on the brink as well as his father did.

“Many people would have disagreed with the policies of his father, the late Hafez Al-Assad, but they would not hesitate to concede that he was a master of the art of diplomacy and political realism.... His son however, has only succeeded in putting himself in major trouble of his own making, and at a time when he certainly had less risky options.” (Mustapha Kamal al-Sayyid in *bitterlemons* 41(3); 11/17/2005)

An alternative interpretation reads the erratic course of Syrian foreign policy as a result of an *internal* struggle between a faction around the President and his immediate family circle and the power structure inherited from his father, spearheaded by the recent renegade Abdelhalim Khaddam. According to these narratives, in the year 2000 an alliance formed between Khaddam, the then-powerful head of the Syrian secret services in Lebanon Ghazi Kenaan, the Syrian chief of staff Hikmat Shehabi and Rafik Al-Hariri attempted to sideline the Assad family and to prevent Bashar from succeeding his ailing father. After failing in this attempt, the two camps engaged in a long drawn-out battle jockeying for power and positions within the Syrian state and party apparatus (mirrored in Lebanon by the conflict between Rafik El-Hariri and President Emile Lahoud), in which the Assad-camp finally prevailed - hence Khaddam's self-imposed exile after the Baath-congress in June and the suicide of Ghazi Kenaan in October 2005. Throughout this struggle, both factions took hazardous stances in both Lebanon and Iraq in a bid to shore up their position on the home front, and both foreign policy files changed hands several times.

“In this reading of events, Bashar’s burning of Franco-Syrian relations was only collateral damage in his effort to unseat Hariri – and ultimately Khaddam. In fact, he placed Syria’s foreign policy in the back seat as he tried to steer the affairs of the state in such a way as to consolidate his hold on power in Damascus. He sacrificed good relations with his neighbors and with the great powers in order to get his hands firmly on the steering wheel and shove aside the old-guard.”

(Joshua Landis on *SyriaComment.com*, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/01/khaddam-damns-bashar-al-asad.htm>).

See also: USIPeace Briefing: “Syria and Political Change”; http://www.usip.org/newsmedia/releases/2005/1212_syria.html)

As a result of the opaque nature of the Syrian political system, neither of these narratives can be confirmed with a sufficient degree of certainty, and some of them may well be fabrications floated by the players themselves in order to exculpate themselves or implicate others. It appears clear, however, that despite initial rhetoric hinting at reform, the power base of the regime has narrowed since Bashar's succession to power, and is more and more restricted to the immediate Assad family and its entourage.

“Bashar was faced with the choice of either relying on the old guard and becoming captive to it, or relying on his family circle and becoming hostage to it. He chose not to choose and ended up under dual control. Hafez's successor is not Bashar alone. It is the Assad extended family and an entourage of ambitious or greedy individuals. [...] After he called on senior Syrian experts from the World Bank and the Diaspora to initiate the process, it soon became clear that no serious economic changes could be engaged without affecting the private interests of powerful individuals, and the process came to a halt.” (Bassma Kodmani, *bitterlemons* 41(3); 11.17/2005)

According to such analysis, the process of economic transformation inaugurated already in the mid 1990s has resulted in the proliferation of private monopolies in crucial economic sectors, which came into existence and are protected by personal connections to the top echelon of the political elite. According to the Syrian-Lebanese political scientist Bassam Haddad, who interviewed a large number of Syrian economic actors involved in this transformation for his detailed study of the transformation process of the late 1990s, these networks have not only stifled and stunted the emergence of a market economy and self-sustained growth, but are now also blocking any serious attempts to transparency, democracy or an implementation of the rule of law. According to Haddad, one of the crucial questions to answer when judging the prospects for reform in Syria would be:

“Has the state elite gone far enough into private business to secure for itself a socio-economic and political status without direct state backing or control? Are the ties that bind the social carriers of private and public wealth solid enough to produce an alliance (or perhaps a party) under a different political system?” (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2004/08/bassam-haddad-on-reform.htm>).

For Haddad and many other observers, the answer to this and related questions seems to be still “not yet”.

The Syrian Opposition as the Big Unknown

Over the past five years, the Syrian opposition has spoken out on a number of occasions, both by collective declarations as well as through countless individual publications in Lebanese and Arab media outlets. Still, significant doubts remain to what extent these positions and activities can reach the public beyond a very circumscribed circle of politically active intellectuals. Syrian interlocutors who reject the regime and are sympathetic to the objectives of the opposition criticize its discourse as abstract and inappropriate to inspire the broader population. Often, the lack of a charismatic leader is pointed out as a central weakness of this opposition, and the former independent MP and industrialist Riyad Seif, who was only recently released after serving more than four years out of a five-year prison term for sedition, is mentioned as a potential candidate to perform such a role. Many Syrians believe that the reasons for his prolonged imprisonment (while other activists were released significantly earlier) lie in the persistent attacks he and other (likewise only recently released) opposition figures waged on institutionalized corruption and the control key figures of the regime wield over whole sectors of the economy. They point out that the former dean of the department of economy at Damascus University Aref Dalilah, who reportedly compiled extensive data about abuse and embezzlement of public funds, remains behind bars despite his poor health and conclude that the regime seems to fear public disaffection with its dismal economic record more than anything else, and that any opposition seriously striving to rally a broader public should be working in that direction.

On the other hand, many assessments of the Syrian opposition see Islamist forces, in particular the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, as the only organization or current with a potential mass appeal. Accordingly, such assessments expect (or warn) that democratization may empower Islamist forces to the point of a takeover. Warnings are also sounded against potentially violent ethnic and religious conflicts (in particular retribution against the Alawi minority) should political Islam make a return into the Syrian arena. The exiled leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, however, has renounced political violence years ago, works actively to cooperate with the whole spectrum of opposition organizations and supports the contents of the Damascus declaration without reservation, including passages as the following:

“Islam - which is the religion and ideology of the majority, with its lofty intentions, higher values, and tolerant canon law -- is the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people. Our Arab civilization has been formed within the framework of its ideas, values, and ethics and in interaction with the other national historic cultures in our society, through moderation, tolerance, and mutual interaction, free of fanaticism, violence, and exclusion, while having great concern for the respect of the beliefs, culture, and special characteristics of others, whatever their religious, confessional, and intellectual affiliations, and openness to new and contemporary cultures.” (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>)

Hence, even secular intellectuals consider warnings against the Islamist peril exaggerated and a transparent maneuver by the regime:

“The Islamist menace is less of a fact and more of a pretext, exploited with great skill by the regime to perpetuate the status quo and legitimize the engrained repression in Syria. Doubtlessly, political Islam is part of the political and social landscape in Syria, but throughout its history, it never had the potential to assume power – except for the 1980s, when armed conflict erupted between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime. Ever since the political situation has changed completely and the Syrian opposition, there included the Muslim Brotherhood, have dissociated themselves from political violence, and work today for peaceful, gradual change.” (Mohamad Ali Atassi, *Molhaq An-Nahar*, 08/23/2005)

Ways out of the Gridlock

Many Syrians are deeply concerned about a prolonged period of instability should US foreign policy switch from the current strategy apparently aimed at “behavior change” to a more aggressive approach aiming at “regime change”. The situation in neighboring Iraq serves to underline the perils of transformation processes initiated from the outside and thus strengthens – contrary to the intended “democratic domino effect” – the position of the authoritarian Syrian regime internally.

The chaos in neighboring Iraq, rather than inspiring an opposition movement, has enhanced the regime’s „negative legitimacy“ by leading the Syrian public to overvalue order, even when it is enforced harshly.” (Bassam Haddad; <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2004/08/bassam-haddad-on-reform.htm>).

Even the principle of democracy governance itself seems to be discredited by the “practical example the United States has set through the “democracy” it established

in Iraq” (Syrian opposition writer Fayez Sara in *As-Safir*, 12/05/2005), as the religious and ethnic discontents of the neighbouring country look disquietingly familiar to Syrian eyes.

The extent to which such pessimism has taken hold of larger parts of the population becomes apparent in the constant pressure on the Syrian currency, which has lost close to 15% of its exchange value during the last quarter of 2005 as people are stocking up hard currency in expectation of economic sanctions.

It remains unclear to what extent concessions, and what concessions exactly, would be required from the regime to get off the hook or to achieve a normalization of its relations with the United States along the lines of the Libyan case (see Alain Gresh, *Le Monde Diplomatique* 09/12/2005). More than once, rumors about some sort of “deal” supposedly being cut between Washington and Damascus through Saudi and Egyptian mediation were circulated in the regional media, but were not substantiated by subsequent events. Partly, the uncertainty about what is actually demanded and where such demands would stop might be one reason for Syrian intransigence. However, as long as the US continues to work within the multilateral framework of the United Nations, and with disaffection about foreign involvement on the rise in the US-American public, economic sanctions are probably the worst possible scenario the Assad regime would have to face. Even these seem easily avoidable if Syria cooperates to a sufficient degree with the international investigation, and if the regime, following the Libyan example, resolves to sacrifice those found to be directly involved in the crime – unless, of course, it was indeed the president himself who ordered the assassination.

Hence, assessments whereby foreign pressure as manifested in UNSC resolution 1636 will work to “*threaten Assad’s hold on power*” (former assistant secretary of state Martin Indyk in an interview with the *Council on Foreign Relations*, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9124/indyk.html?breadcrumb=default>) seem overly optimistic. It appears much more likely that, on the external level, the Assad-regime will be able to wait out the crisis without a significant challenge and may attempt to avert sanctions through token concessions and backroom diplomacy, in particular through Russian and Saudi mediation. Judging by the Iraqi experience, even if sanctions were to be applied, they seem unlikely to exert sufficient pressure to bring down the regime, and may on the contrary be exploited to blame economic misery on outside adversaries. Furthermore, and despite some rumors about growing dissent within the political elite, the immediate power center built around the Assad family (including, in addition to the president himself, his brother Maher, his sister Bushra and her husband

Asef Shawqat, referred to by some Syrians as the “gang of four”) still appears to be firmly in charge and capable of crushing any competitors within the political system.

Apart from such “palace revolution” scenarios or a military coup (deemed unlikely by most observers), it is hard to think of any political or social actors likely to initiate genuine change. While the Sunni business elite may espouse economic reform and a dressing down of the ubiquitous and largely parasitic security apparatuses, many of its prominent members are profiting from political protection and privileged market access and stand to lose in any confrontation. The recent release of several high-profile political prisoners and non-specific promises of further internal reform in Bashar Al-Assad’s most recent speech (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4635146.stm), attributed by some to the final demise of the “old guard” as expressed by Khaddam’s public defection and Ghazi Kenaan’s suicide in October, seem to indicate that the regime may attempt a strategy of token concessions on the internal front as well. The Syrian opposition, on the other hand, and despite its attempts to unify its agenda and approach, still appears marginal and unlikely to reach a populace rendered depoliticized and apathetic by poverty and by five decades of often brutal authoritarian rule.