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"SYRIA AFTER MEHLIS: HOW THE LEBANESE PRIME MINISTER'S ASSASSINATION WILL AFFECT U.S. - SYRIAN RELATIONS"

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A G E N D A

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

We're delighted to have you all here for this policy briefing on "Syria After the Mehlis Report." I think you are probably all familiar with the Mehlis report, the report of the United Nations Chief Investigator, into the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which implicated high-level Syrian and Lebanese officials.

It's important I think to point out before we start this discussion that the Mehlis Report is an interim report, and itself--there was no particular conclusions about who was responsible for the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and 22 other civilians. But it does serve the basis for the extension of Mehlis' term and demand likely to come from the Security Council next Monday, when all the Security Council Foreign Ministers meet for a full and complete Syrian cooperation, which Mehlis reported has not so far been forthcoming in his investigation.

To discuss the implications of this today, we are very glad to have first of all, on my right, Ammar Abdulhamid, who is at the moment a Visiting Fellow at the Saban Center at Brookings--very well known, and I'm sure known to many of you as an expert on the dynamics, internal dynamics in Syria and a courageous advocate of reform, political reform, and human rights in Syria, his country.

He's also becoming a blogger of repute, and I'll let him give you his website in that context.

And then after Ammar speaks, we have our own Flynt Leverett, a Senior Fellow here at the Saban Center at Brookings, and a former high-level Administration official, who's held a number of high positions dealing with the Middle East. His last was as Senior Director at the

National Security Council in the Near East Division.

And Flynt, since he's come to the Saban Center, is, of course, the author of the best selling "Inheriting Syria," which is available at the bookstore outside, and who's been featured on the Daily Show, and I think provides a very useful background for the discussion we're going to have today.

So without further ado, Ammar, we'll be glad to hear from you.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Thank you very much, Martin, for this kind introduction. It's really a pleasure to be back here at Brookings for the second time after my last time here. It was a period of interrogation and a travel ban for a while, and I got to have a tour de force of the Syrian interrogation centers. I'm not sure what's going to happen after this time, but you have my full permission to ask for an independent autopsy.

[Laughter.]

MR. ABDULHAMID: Just to give a brief background, I think it's necessary as before we actually plunge into Syria after the Mehlis Report, let's remember that the crisis from which the Syrian regime is suffering really is an internal crisis par excellence that was exported outwards in due course of time.

And the crisis really began in 1970, to be specific, when President Hafez al-Asad came to power, because, as he came to power, he also brought with him the issue of communal identities to the fore of Syrian politics, being an Alawi himself and a member of a minority sect in Syria.

And that situation really--the Syrian majority population, represented by a small faction called the Muslim Brotherhood could not really accept that situation. It came to a head in various confrontations, culminating in the massacre in the city of Hama in 1982. And after that, the-since the regime ended up being victorious, the power base of the regime remained very

closely affiliated not simply with the Alawi minority at least at the nucleus of it, but also with the Asad clan within that community. And the health of Hafez Asad, which was always failing, basically it seems to have made the issue of succession of paramount importance.

And, hence, because the basis of support was so narrow, the choices were very limited. And we ended up at one point having Bashar as the heir apparent to his father.

Now, in the climate of the post-Cold War era, this kind of a transition required some kind of a legitimation process. It's really needed to be accepted as well by the international community. It would not have been something that the international community could overlook. So in a sense, Bashar came with two mandates, because the Jacques Chirac had at one point sort of legitimated the process, met with Bashar and gave him the stature he needed, and he seemed to have sort of lobbied for him behind the scenes, the international community accepted that de facto transition from father to son.

And this is I think what Bashar and many people in the regime really failed to understand is that they were indebted to the international community. By choosing Bashar, by accepting that transition of power, the international community also had certain expectations from Bashar. And the expectations are actually, from their perspective, very reasonable--to reinvent the regime, to modernize its image, its operations, to bring it into the fold of nations that were, if let's not say democratizing, but at least knowing how to play the game of pluralism and how to pay lip service at least to these kinds of issues and developments that had became very paramount after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And this is one of the failures that--in the area where President Bashar has actually been a disappointment to a lot of people, because he didn't know how to play that game. He didn't even probably understand that this was his mandate from the international community.

On the Syrian street level, in fact, this was also his mandate. As soon as Bashar came to power, there were a lot of people asking for eventually a coup from the top and de-Baathification from the top. They were, in fact, asking for a new corrective movement.

And once again, Bashar turned his back on these kinds of movements very early on, and then the period known as the Damascus spring.

So once again here, we see a failure to understand where the mandate was simply because the internal logic of the regime was about the status quo. Bashar's mandate from the people around him was to maintain the status quo, to maintain the balance of power, within the regime that modus operandi that has been established by his father, because it was established and it was paid for by a lot of blood and a lot of mayhem that took place in the '80s.

And community identity was paramount in this kind of arrangement.

So Bashar had two different, therefore, kind of expectations; one demanding complete change, the other one demanding complete adherence to the status quo. And that's the essence of his dilemma from the very beginning. And I think every time he had to face a major policy decision, he always you can say erred on the side of the internal dynamics and the internal logic of the regime. And he chose the status quo.

A person who's in power to choose the status quo now is being asked to by the Mehlis Report--if you look at the political context of the report, because the report, in fact, ended up naming names, despite this whole discussion about the deletion of names and so on. But in the final analysis we know now. There are the very pillars of the regime that are being named. And, in a sense, Bashar is once again being asked to directly or indirectly to reinvent the regime, to get rid of Old Guard and New Guard to produce a new way of doing things in Syria, because that's really the only way he can "cooperate" with the investigation.

The only reasonable way he can do so is to give up on these people around him.

So once again, this clash of logics, internal and external, this clash of expectations has taken place, and the focal point seems to be Bashar and whether he is going to be able to live up to any of these expectations.

If the recent five years have been any indication he is going to stick by the current sort of structure. He's going to stick by the people around him, because he is empowered by them to begin with. And he seems to be part of that system that he has always been asked to dismantle one way or another.

So, the situation of communal identity really is at the heart of the crisis. It's a Sunni-Alawi divide par excellence basically. A lot of people are saying we really want to see change, and a major change as such. But at the same time, what we are really afraid of if the regime collapses, and because we don't see an alternative in the opposition forces, we are afraid of an Iraqi-style scenario; or if the Americans invade it or of the U.N. Security imposed sanctions on Syria that sooner or later we're going to see an Iraqi situation.

And the reason the Syrian people are thinking along these lines is because they know in their heart of hearts, Syria is as equally sectarian as Iraq. We always hate to say this word. You always like to speak as Syrian people about the tolerance that we've had and about how wonderful mosaic work we are, but in their heart of hearts it's all about sectarian calculations, especially when it comes down to power considerations.

So this is basically the problem that's being faced at this stage, and this is the situation that's at the heart of it. The expectations of the Syrian people are for regime change from the top, peacefully, non-violently. The fears of the Syrian people are for reenactment of the Iraqi scenario one way or another or for a total collapse of law and order in Syria.

For this reason, you see these demonstrations in the streets, which are denouncing the Mehlis Report, because, as I said, the Mehlis Report in a sense crystallized the moment, crystallized the issue. It named the names. It's sort of like this divine name Yahweh has been named, you know. You know, these people are the ones who need to be changed.

And the holy of the holies has been defiled somehow, and now you need to stand in its defense, because it's not simply the regime. It's the country's future that's on the line here.

So even though these kinds of demonstrations, Baath demonstrations, have always been government sponsored and so on, but the emotions that you see really are genuine. People are concerned. People are afraid. And because of the inability in the last five years for the opposition to present a viable alternative to make a real show of force, a credible show, on the street, the Syrian people don't have a lot of faith in the opposition. In fact, every time right now one of the people, especially those who are responsible for the Damascus Declaration, come out and issue a word of criticism in the regime, there are quite a few voices who say, this is not the time to criticize. You don't want to hear that.

This is a time to rally around the President and around the country.

This is fear speaking, by the way, more than actual hope that this is a viable regime, more than a defense of the regime. This is a defense of the country and the two things are getting mixed for a lot of people in Syria.

And the regime is going to play on that for as much as possible because this is one way of getting some kind of solidarity behind him.

Taking all this under consideration, one of the important things that's happened recently, just before the Mehlis Report came to power and probably is destined to play an important role now in the aftermath, is the Damascus Declaration, because this is for the first time a group of

credible opposition groups in Syria, including an Islamist group, including known dissidents, including secularists, of course, coming together and making a joint statement, not asking the President for reform, as they used to do in the last five years. Not saying oh, Mr. President, please get rid of these people and open up the system, whatever.

But they're actually saying this is a salvation effort. They're actually saying the regime is not viable. They're actually saying that we need to do something we, in terms of the opposition, in order to salvage the country from the miscalculations of the regime and from any potential foreign threat to the country.

So this is a very important move, and in many ways unprecedented. And the fact that it rallies so many people.

Now, there is a lot of really criticism of the Damascus Declaration, because, from a secular perspective, because it gives concessions to Islam; from an Arab perspective because it gives concessions to Kurds. So some Arab nationalists are not satisfied with it. Some secularists are not satisfied with it, but the reality is--and even though, yes, there is need--perhaps room for improvement in its rhetoric and its overall vision, it does signify a major step forward because opposition groups might be now trying to provide an alternative to the Syrian regime in a peaceful, non-violent manner. And an alternative does not necessarily mean that they are going to overthrow the regime at this stage, or try to completely, you know, call for some kind of a revolution against it. They don't have it in them, but they are at least trying to say--and the current structure of the regime is not acceptable. We need to appeal to the Syrian people directly to try to do something to empower ourselves and to show that we can actually--that Syria is capable of producing alternative forms of leadership; and that this is not Iraq in a sense. The civil society is not completely decimated. We don't need only, you know, the United States or

France or whoever to come and impose a government on us in the aftermath of invasion that is something credible. There is something viable in the Syrian civil society scene that can provide the alternatives and that needs to be considered.

So it's a sign of life after so many years of decay and after so many years of stagnation and after so many years of death frankly on the civil society scene.

And it does put the question to a head: What would the international community do? Should it support this kind of movement? Or will by support of this movement actually be giving it the kiss of death?

I think the movement is a legitimate one and needs to be treated as such by the international community.

However, the basic support that this movement really needs is from the Syrian people. They need to present their message. They need to get the Syrian people on their side.

They need to say--they need to explain themselves. They need to justify why it's the right thing to do to oppose the regime right now from inside Syria, and why opposition is not a lack of patriotism, but actually is an act of patriotism at this stage.

This is what the opposition needs to do. But in order to do so, they need to go beyond declarations. They need to go to tactics. They need to know how to play the media game correctly.

They need to be able to present figures, credible figureheads, because also our faceless opposition is not an opposition that can inspire anything.

So this is a challenge for the opposition.

The challenge for the regime in my opinion, let's not even discuss it, because it's been asked to commit auto suicide. I mean it's completely unworkable and no one is going to work

and sit down and say the center regime is viable anymore. Bashar has not proven to be a credible leader.

He has not been able to deliver anything, so he himself has a credibility problem. There are question marks over the very pillars of the regime in involvement in an act of assassination, and frankly if the regime has any option, I would say if there is any--when I was being interrogated, let's put it this way, I was always asked well, are you a patriot. Definitely. You are not--you cannot be a patriot, and I've always actually reversed the situation. I said, well, my patriotism is not of the essence. Who am I? What can I do? I'm a word peddler in the final analysis. You are the decision maker. Your patriotism is on the line every day. So show me your patriotism. This is the time to show an act of patriotism, because the best thing they can for the country, especially if they're innocent, by the way, is to actually leave, to resign, to submit to the investigation and let the Syrian people elect a new system.

It's not going to happen. But this will be the patriotic thing to do.

So with this, I think--and with this sort of a call on the Syrian regime to just resign power, which is completely idealistic, I say thank you.

[Applause.]

MR. INDYK: Thank you, Ammar. Let's go to the other side to the question of how the United States might deal with this evolving situation. Flynt.

MR. LEVERETT: Thank you, Martin.

Thanks to everybody for coming out today. I am going to focus my remarks on U.S. policy, but before I do, I wanted to say just a couple of things on my own part about the internal situation.

Ammar is my very good friend and, in many ways, one of my heroes. But I want to

throw out an alternative scenario, in which Bashar might actually in the end be prepared to give up whomever he needs to give up in order to get past this episode.

At this point in Syria, I think it's pretty clear that the three most powerful individuals in the governing structure are the President, Bashar al-Asad, Asif Shawkat, the President's brother in-law, the Director of Syrian Military Intelligence, and Maher al-Asad, the President's younger brother.

I understand Ammar's argument about the regime not being able to commit suicide. In many ways, in the near term, you could argue that Shawqat and Maher al-Asad are very important to the President because if you look at the positions that they occupy, if they are hanging with Bashar at least in the near term, it is going to be very difficult for anyone else in the power structure to mount a successful coup against Bashar. It doesn't mean someone might not try, but I think it will be very difficult to succeed if Bashar has Syrian military intelligence and the Republican Guard effectively on his side.

But at the same time, I think it's important to note that both of these figures, Asif Shawkat and Maher al-Asad, are also very problematic for Bashar in terms of his consolidating his position and in terms of what I think his long-term agenda for Syria might be.

Shawqat is an extremely ambitious man, an extremely driven man. Keep in mind this is the guy who when Hafez el-Asad was at the height of his powers eloped with the dictator's daughter, over the dictator's objections. You know, this is a guy who is not easily cowed. Bushra, Bashar's sister, Asif Shawkat's wife, is by many accounts perhaps the most politically astute and ambitious of the Asad children. If she had been a son rather than a daughter, I think there's a very good chance she would be President of Syria today, not Bashar. But she has to pursue her ambitions to the extent that they are there through her husband. Together, they are a

real power couple in Damascus, and I think they are a long-term problem for Bashar.

Maher also is a problem, perhaps because of ambition, but other than ambition, he's a problem simply because of the kind of person he is--a real thug. Someone, a very astute Western diplomat in Damascus who has met Maher, described him to me, referring to their older brother Basil, the first Asad son, who was killed in 1994, he said, Maher has all of Basil's appetites, but none of Basil's qualities.

And Maher is also potentially a long-term problem for Bashar, and I'd at least like to throw out an alternative scenario in which in the end, Bashar solves his long-term problems, and is in the end, when all of this is played out the last man standing.

I have sometimes toyed with in the book and elsewhere an analogy of the Asad family to the Corleone family of the Godfather. Hafez el-Asad is the patriarch Don Corleone figure. Basil is the older son, Santino, who was supposed to be the heir, but was killed in a situation involving a car as a result of his own impetuousness. And then the real question in Syrian politics today is which son has inherited the leadership of the family. Is Bashar, with all of his education and soft talk about reform, is he a Michael Corleone figure who can in the end emerge as a real godfather? Or has the hapless Fredo taken over the family?

MR. INDYK: Shall we put it to a vote?

MR. LEVERETT: I think we are going to get something pretty close to a scientific determination of this question as the Mehlis investigation plays out. I just want to raise at least the possibility that Bashar might actually use this as an opportunity, but we will see.

On to U.S. policy. I think that the U.S. has both a tactical problem and a strategic problem moving forward from where we are today.

The tactical problem is getting what the United States wants out of the U.N. Security

Council. There is a draft resolution on the table reflecting strong inputs from the United Kingdom and France as well as the United States. I think that, to some degree, Great Britain and France have worked very hard to move the Administration back from a kind of maximalist position going into the Security Council debate on this issue. I think that the influence of Great Britain and France can be felt both on a number of fronts--the willingness of the Administration to put off a ministerial level meeting until next week, the willingness of the Administration to back off on much of the laundry list of complaints about Syrian behaviors on other issues than the Mehlis Report, the willingness to consider focused sanctions on particular individuals that are named by Mehlis. But you see parts of the Administration's original agenda still present in the draft, such as bringing Syria up under Chapter VII--a very clear threat of general economic sanctions on the country--if the Syrian leadership doesn't cooperate with the investigation. And I think that's going to create some very interesting and problematic dynamics within the Security Council.

You already have Russia and China, two permanent members of the Council, staking out public positions very clearly against the imposition of sanctions on Syria. You have Algeria, in fact, the Arab League representative on the Council right now, raising questions about this, and we've just had the Arab League declare the imposition of sanctions on Syria while the investigation is still ongoing to be illegitimate, which I think will make it harder for the Administration to flip Algeria.

Brazil also seems to be taking a fairly legalistic position on this question of imposing sanctions on a country when the investigation is still ongoing.

I think that the real core of the problem, though, is going to be Russia and China. And they're going to be a number of reasons why these two countries will be reluctant to let sanctions

be imposed on Syria. We can get into those reasons in the discussion, if you like.

I think at least in the near-term if the Administration is going to get a resolution out of the Council that really does call very strongly for Syrian cooperation with the investigation, it is probably going to have to end up dropping the threat of Chapter VII sanctions in the resolution, and I think it may also have to back off on language that, while Mehlis is going to report again in December, that in the meantime, we could still take more action on this. We could still impose sanctions, say, before Mehlis reports again.

I think the Administration is probably going to have to give on that part of the resolution if you were going to get a resolution out of the Council next week.

But even if we can manage these tactical problems in the Council, I think that there is still a strategic problem that the U.S., and, to some extent, its European partners, Britain and France, have not yet resolved, and that is, you know, just what is it that we want out of Security Council action in this situation?

My own reading of the Administration's view is that at this point what the Administration wants is to see sanctions imposed on Syria that would lead to one of two outcomes, either Syria's effective surrender on a whole range of issues where we have problems with Syrian policies and behaviors, not just the Mehlis investigation, but Lebanon more broadly, Iraq, Syrian ties to Palestinian terrorist groups and so on. And if the sanctions don't produce a Syrian surrender, and actually lead to the collapse of the regime, I think the Administration is perfectly happy to take that as an outcome.

And I think, though, it's important to step back and ask if this is really the most effective way to be pursuing U.S. interests in this part of the Middle East right now.

If you--I was thinking about this--one of the first books I ever read about Syria, even

before I read Patrick Seale's wonderful biography of Hafez al-Asad, I read an earlier book by Patrick Seale called the "Struggle for Syria." It's essentially a history of Syria from independence up until the coming of the Asad regime. And it's this masterful account of the way in which various regional players and players outside the region competed to establish influence over Syria.

And for Patrick Seale the struggle for Syria was really in many ways the most important struggle to shape the larger strategic environment of the Middle East. Syria has I think that kind of importance in our strategic calculations or should have because of where it is and the unique place that it occupies in Arab historical memory. It is a very important place. It may have been a viable strategy to impose multilateral sanctions on Colonel Qadhafi's Libya and wait the better part of a decade for the Libyans to come around. I think multilateral sanctions had a very positive effect on the changes in Libyan behavior that we've seen since late 1990.

I don't think that the United States, as a strategic matter, can wait years with policy for this part of the region effectively in a vacuum while we see what the impact of sanctions will be.

Patrick Seale didn't write a book about the struggle for Libya. Syria is much, much closer to the heart of the matter in terms of the strategic balance in the region, and I think we can't have a vacuum in our policy while we wait to see what happens if sanctions get imposed.

I also remain very, very skeptical that regime change in Syria is going to produce very edifying outcomes. For all of the positive aspects of the Damascus Declaration that Ammar pointed out, the fact remains that the Damascus Declaration was essentially drafted and engineered by the Muslim Brotherhood.

If this regime in Syria implodes, if it disappears, the dominant political force in Syrian society will be Sunni Islamists. And these are Sunni Islamists I would argue with an agenda on

many domestic issues and on foreign policy issues that will be even more problematic for U.S. interests in the region than the historical agenda of the Asad regime.

And so as tough as it is to contemplate this under the present circumstances and with what the Mehlis investigation has uncovered so far, I would still argue that the best way for the United States to pursue its interests in Syria with regard to Iraq, with regard to the Arab-Israeli arena, with regard to the whole range of its interests in the Middle East on which Syria has an impact, the best way for the United States to pursue and protect those interests is going to be if we can help Bashar find a way out of this situation. And, in that regard, we better hope that it's Michael Corleone that has taken over the family and not Fredo. Thank you.

[Applause.]

MR. INDYK: Thank you. We'll go to questions now, but just before I want to just say a couple of words in response to Flynt's very interesting and provocative analysis about the Libya case, because he I think makes an interesting argument, which I don't happen to agree with. I think that Syria was not Libya when Patrick Seale wrote his first book. It wasn't even Libya when he wrote his second book, but it sure is becoming Libya now. In fact, one could argue it's even less important than Libya, because Libya, at least for the Europeans, had oil. Syria doesn't have a military capability that would enable it to go to war, which was one of the reasons why we considered it had strategic weight during the Cold War, during the Kissinger era, and even during the Clinton era.

Syria has an ability to cause problems in Lebanon, but Lebanon is not a vital strategic interest of the United States. It's important in terms of the President's democracy agenda, but not much beyond that I think. And, yes, Syria has the ability to create problems for us in terms of support for the insurgency in Iraq, but I suspect that that's somewhat exaggerated. I think

you'd probably agree with me on that, and it can be--hopefully, it can be dealt with.

So I think that we can today contemplate a situation in which Syria, by its own decision, isolates itself, and we can live with that kind of isolation without our interests or those of our allies, save perhaps Lebanon being seriously affected by a situation in which Syria, by its own choice, by the choice of the regime, ends up under U.N. sanction and essentially subjected to the kind of isolation which it has already managed to put itself in that situation already.

So that would be my response. You may want to respond quickly.

MR. LEVERETT: Yeah. I would just ask and what is the consequence, though, if we have under the impact of sanctions, we do have an implosion of this regime and we have instability, violence, along ethnic and sectarian lines, those lines being ones that will very easily feed into ongoing chaos and violence in Iraq, that could inflame the Kurdish issue in ways that become problematic for other regional states. You know, at a time when the Administration says that its first priority in the region is getting Iraq right, I don't know that putting sanctions on Syria is really going to contribute to that outcome.

MR. INDYK: Do you want to--

MR. ABDULHAMID: I just wanted to chip in on these two points in fact. The main scenario that seems to be advocated by, or, you know, postulated by Flynt is that of Bashar playing against Maher and Asif Shawkat, basically. That's basically it. He'd get rid of the problem, including these two figures in the establishment, let's put it this way. I'm not going to say whether this is feasible or not feasible. It's always very difficult to predict these kinds of things, but this is a very tall order, though. And you're saying that the United States as government should have a vested interest in convincing Bashar to tend against his family members and the regime. Do you really want to get that personally involved in the dynamics of

the Syrian politics?

And this is not going to resolve in the final analysis the real crisis that the regime has, which is a sectarian crisis. What is this going to do? Are we going to simply say okay because we need to avoid the Islamists, we are going to put up with the continuation of sectarian dictatorship under Bashar and some new other figures? This will be better suited for the interests of the United States. How can you square that off with the Iraq's record of democratization that the Bush Administration has committed itself to, if they are going to put up with a mere change in the nature of the--not even in the nature, but a mere change in some of figures involved in the current dictatorial arrangement that we have.

MR. INDYK: Okay. Let's go to questions. So please wait for the microphone and please make sure to identify yourselves.

George, first.

MR. HISHMEH: George Hishmeh from Gulf News. I have, if I may, two short questions.

The first is, aren't you surprised, Mr. Leverett, that only the investigation of this prosecutor has been published? This is something I understand is not done. I mean we're all waiting to see what Fitzpatrick is going to say about the CIA leak.

The other thing is I would Mr. Ammar to give us his ideas on this infiltration of people from Syria to Iraq. Syrians keep saying we've tried to approach the Americans. Let's work together on this, and the Americans aren't doing anything. And also the significance of these small--what I believe are small Palestinian groups in Syria. How significant are they in the Palestinian-Israeli problem? Thank you.

MR. LEVERETT: The short answer for me is no I'm not particular surprised that the

report was published. I mean I think all along the plan was to publish--I mean this was an investigating commission that was going to report to the Security Council, and, once that happened, the report was going to be made public. It doesn't surprise me at all that this report was published.

MR. INDYK: I'd just say in addition to that, the report was published for two purposes: one to get the extension of Mehlis' investigation, to get a mandate for doing so; and two, to get the Security Council behind his demand for Syrian cooperation, without which he's not going to be able to conclude his investigation.

So it was calculated for that purpose. This is not an indictment. It is an interim report.

MR. HISHMEH: [Off mike.] [Inaudible.]

MR. LEVERETT: But he's not functioning--

MR. INDYK: He did publish his findings.

MR. LEVERETT: --he's not functioning primarily as a prosecutor. He's functioning as the head of a U.N. investigation commission.

MR. INDYK: Ammar?

MR. ABDULHAMID: Now, with regard to your question is that the--it's a bit complex the Syrian-Iraqi border. Indeed, at the beginning of the U.S. invasion, and this is one of the major blunders that Bashar has committed, he allowed for the borders to be open. He called for an Arab--national Arab resistance against the invaders. He allowed for volunteers to be recruited openly in mosques, in universities, in schools, and to be bused even from beside the American Embassy to Iraq.

So that is recorded. I mean this is documented. This is something that I witnessed, too, with my own eyes basically--how the recruitment process took part. And this was one of the

major policy blunders that Bashar has committed. And he committed it publicly. He said so in Al-Safir newspaper at the time. I mean the statements are there, and it's well documented.

To back away from that policy after it has been enacted took a while, but he did back away eventually, and he tried to reverse the policy, and indeed he was sincere in trying to reverse the policy. But the problem is what people don't understand is that on the local level, especially along the borders with Iraq, there have always been ties. And I think the Arab tribes and the Assyrian community and the Kurdish community are more related to Iraq than they have ever been related to Syria. And there was a certain dynamics over there, especially under the Oil-for-Food Program. There was a lot of influx of goods from Iraq. There was lot of influx of cash from Iraq into these areas that have been traditionally neglected by the Syrian central authorities.

So the Syrian central authority was not present in the day-to-day life in these regions. And the livelihood of these people was severely affected when the oil flow from Iraq stopped, when trade activity with Iraq stopped in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion.

So the new goods that can be now traded and smuggled were mujahideen, you know. So--in the local community, there is a complete lack of cooperation with the central authorities on this, despite the fact that right now, the central authorities do realize that this is a dangerous course of action. But in order for them to be present and to really cut down on this kind of activities, they cannot simply say stop it. They cannot simply put a couple of people in prison. They really need to come up with an entire socioeconomic package and a political package--administrative package for how these regions are going to be part of Syria and at the same time the local particularities have to be respected. They need to consider what sorts of relationships that are going to exist between the local Arab communities, the local Kurdish community, and the local Assyrian community. It's going to require the kind of socioeconomic and political

engineering that the regime has no aptitude for at this stage.

And but they do realize that this is a problem because one of the major things that--promises that have been made just a few weeks ago by Deputy Prime Minister Abdallah Dardari, who is really the de factor Prime Minister at this stage, was actually to promise I think around 125 million euros in aid development to these regions. They do realize that there is a problem, and that this is the way to solve it, and that the only way you can actually impose central controls again on this region and draw them back into the Syrian sphere we can say from that sort of de facto autonomy that they're having is a socioeconomic package. But they are not going all the way. They are not introducing the political package as well, and the issue of the stateless Kurds has not been addressed. The issue of Arab-Kurdish relations in that region has not been addressed, and the entire thing demands only a vague promise. And the government has been also notorious in giving out promises over the last couple of years and not acting up on them, especially with regard to this region.

So, as for the Palestinian groups, well, they have always been cards in Syria's hands. They have been used at one point by Hafez Asad in the peace process and negotiations with Israel. And now, they seem to be used as way of punishing the Lebanese, because some Palestinian factions are smuggling weapons to the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, and sort of some plans to punish the Lebanese or to create problems for the Lebanese in the post Syrian withdrawal period.

So it's--they are being used, frankly, still, and apparently this is the ultimate fate of the Palestinians outside their area is to be used in local politics by this leader or that leader. And this is part of their continuing tragedy.

MR. INDYK: Yes, please?

MR. AL-BARAZI: My name is Tammam al-Barazi, a Syrian journalist. You know a lot of Syrians I talk to are afraid of the deal, what they call the deal. Even the Times of London published like a blueprint of it. I mean they are afraid that this regime will be--his life will be extended; you know, that the oppression will continue because certain American interests maybe the regime can, you know, supply to it.

Secondly, you know about the Islamists. I don't understand what agendas. I mean do you think that Daawa Party, which was an ally of Hizballah and now the Prime Minister of Iraq is Daawa Party, and they try to assassinate emir of Kuwait, you know, in 1985. They didn't have an agenda? But I think most of the Islamists I don't know compare the Daawa Party to the Muslim Brotherhood.

MR. LEVERETT: If you want to hold up the present state of Iraqi politics as a successful case of regime change, you can't. I think at the very least the jury is still out on whether the Iraqi experiment has worked out or not, and if that's really something--if that's a model that we think we can and should replicate in a place like Syria.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Can I just venture one thing here and just say I don't think there is even the slightest chance in hell that the Bush Administration can sit down and make a deal with the current regime.

There is an ideological break basically. Well, let's put it this way: The regime had its chance when Powell went to Syria, and you can talk to Powell now. You can ask him. He feels basically--what's the kind word to use--screwed--

[Laughter.]

MR. ABDULHAMID: --basically by President Bashar, and I think this created a credibility gap that complicated the issue because there are already a lot of people in the Bush

Administration who had the ideological animosity towards dealing anyway with the Baath regime, people who think in the mentalities of the '80s, people who make references to what happened in 1982 in Lebanon, and many of the people right now in the Administration have been there, you know, at that time.

So and they come from that school and they come from that type of leadership. So these kinds of dynamics that exist right now and the ideological predilections of the Bush Administration, there is no way--forget about the deal. This is just Arab press talking and British press talking and tabloid stuff. There is no deal.

MR. INDYK: Robin?

MS. WRIGHT: Robin Wright, the Washington Post. I have a separate question for either of you. One of the things I think all of us are curious about, Ammar, is who are the alternative leaders from the Brotherhood, from the civil society who may emerge? We knew who they were in Iraq. They're less familiar Syria.

And to Flynt, one of the scenarios we haven't talked about is the traditional role Syria has played in the region and that is as spoiler. There are number of Arab articles that talk about what kind of havoc Asad or his allies within Syria can wreak, whether it's Islamic Jihad carrying out more terrorist attacks, trouble in Lebanon, more bombings, I mean just to divert the attention and force everyone, as in the past, to look elsewhere from the issue on the table.

MR. ABDULHAMID: You ask the question that I'm also looking for an answer to. That's my question to the opposition. I mean who are your leaders, basically. I mean I know some of these people individually. I've met them in Syria, and I have high regards for them. But as public figures, you know, to play the political process, to be able to actually appeal to the Syrian people, they cannot play that role. They are good theorizers. They're good in playing a

technocratic assistance role, but they cannot be the figureheads of a movement or the spokespeople of a movement.

And the Syrian opposition has failed to understand that its basic challenge is to modernize its operations and to be able to get into the media age, to produce leaders that can actually look good on TV; that can actually address the Syrian--the concerns of the Syrian people in a very clear, concise manner, studied phrases, and sort of tackling key issues in sort of a very direct manner and not simply always fall into this kind of discourse that goes on and on and on, and finally the only thing that people can deduce is that these people want to replace the Bashar regime so they can be in power and they can be the dictators. They have not been able to do anything to break that kind of an impression.

And so my question is I also--I'm also looking for them. And I hope that the people at the Damascus Declaration can expand first of all their sphere of contacts within Syria and outside Syria and that they can actually be able to produce these credible leaders.

MR. INDYK: Let me just press you on this. Let's run through a number of other characters and maybe you make some quick comments on them. I just can think of Rifaat Asad, Hafez al-Asad's brother. The former chief of staff of the army, Hikmat Shehabi. Perhaps other who still survived in the Alawi regime, and is there an Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood--

MR. ABDULHAMID: [Inaudible.] –basically. Oh, boy.

Rifaat has I think influence over 100 people in Syria. So he can really speak for 100 people in the Alawi community in that, and he can be their democratic elected leader.

Hikmat Shehabi, he doesn't figure anywhere. I think he'll have one vote. He'll cast it himself in a democratic election.

[Laughter.]

MR. ABDULHAMID: Sadr al-Din Bayanouni if he's going to play--

MR. INDYK: Tell us who he is?

MR. ABDULHAMID: He's the head of the Muslim Brotherhood. If he is even going to approach politics and nominates himself, he is going to destroy the entire sort of Damascus Declaration coalition, because that's exactly the point. You cannot have the head of the Muslim Brotherhood running for political office. You can have candidates endorsed by the Muslim Brotherhood. That's a different story. And we don't know these candidates. I'm saying basically--my simple message is: There are a lot of people out there who can make candidates, who can endorse candidates, but they cannot themselves make good candidates. And this is what the opposition really has to understand.

So far, they have not produced the candidates, but they have made something good. This is the--the Damascus Declaration, despite my billion objections and my fears basically as a secularist vis-à-vis any kind of promises given to us by Islamists, you know, on democracy and whatever, whatever, whatever, but the reality on the ground says that indeed, as Flynt noted, they are a powerful presence. We cannot ignore them. I cannot speak for democracy and say let's ignore people who will probably have a certain majority in a free parliamentary election. I cannot do that, so one way or another, we have to find formulas for cooperation, and I think the time to do so is now--not wait for them until they get to power. Get clear concessions on specific issues now.

I always say it's all about Christians, women, and beer basically. It's not--it's about how they are going to really deal, what sort of guarantees they are going to give to minorities, where are they going to stand on certain key women's issues like the veil, the educational system, the employment, the judiciary processes and so on; and in the final analysis, also, privacy laws. I

want to go ahead to a bar in downtown Damascus and have a beer anytime I want to and with whomever I want to. And I don't want anyone to come and tell me, well, you can compromise on this issue. No, I'm not. I'm not going to compromise. I'm entitled to drink my Sam Adams anywhere in Syria.

[Laughter.]

MR. INDYK: Flynt?

MR. LEVERETT: Robin's question about scenarios for Syrian troublemaking. I mean I--you alluded to a couple of the scenarios. You know, in theory they could perhaps play the Hizballah card in Lebanon. And I don't--they could play it directly in the way they have traditionally played it, but I think more likely they would play it indirectly in ways that would, say, thwart any effort by the international community under the rubric of implementing 1559 to pursue Hizballah's disarmament.

They could--I guess in theory they could allow even more people and material to flow across the border into Iraq. They could have Hizballah turn up its support for Palestinian terrorist activity, particularly in the West Bank after Gaza disengagement.

So I'm actually--I have to say I'm less concerned about scenarios for direct and deliberate troublemaking by Syria in the event of sanctions than I am about the possibility of this regime starting to unravel, and I think Ammar touched on something which is an important point. I mean he's concerned that if this regime were to collapse, were to start to unravel, that you could very well see a breakdown of law and order in Syria. I mean in essence I think what that is saying is that at this point in Syria's political evolution this regime and the state are one in the same thing.

And we have already been through in our--we have not come out of it by a long shot, we

are going through in Iraq an experience of what can happen when, in the name of regime change, you also destroy the basic sinews of a state apparatus with a society that is as divided and fractious as Iraqi society is.

I would argue that Syrian society is as least as complicated in that sense as Iraqi society, and if we pursue a course that leads to the collapse of this regime, the Syrian state is effectively going to collapse with it. And given Syria's location, right next door to Iraq, with a Sunni Arab majority that has all kinds of ties to Sunni Arabs inside Iraq, I think that is a potentially very dangerous situation. Do we really want to create that kind of unstable environment on Israel's northern border? You know, what is the strategic objective that is being--that's being served here.

MR. INDYK: Okay. Let's take one from this side. Al Ahram.

MR. DAWOUD: Thanks Ambassador, and Khaled Dawoud from al-Ahram newspaper. I just wanted to ask actually--I mean Ammar referred to the issue of communal politics, but, of course, I can't claim to be an expert as you are from about Syria, but I've been there several times, and I think that the regime maybe there has managed to expand its power base. You know, you can't stay in power for 40 or 50 years by simply being Alawite all the time, so how much successful they are in this respect.

And on the second point, I mean the--not this Administration but previous ones managed to reach a deal with Qadhafi. And I think that the amount of contradictions between the American regime or American Administrations and Qadhafi is even more than what exists with Syria, and they had a longer relation with Syria, so it's not Arab conspiratorial talk, but why isn't it impossible to reach some sort of a deal with the Syria like they did with his father before? Thank you.

MR. ABDULHAMID: The answer to the first question is correct. Hafez al-Asad was capable--Hafez al-Asad was capable of creating that cross sectarian coalition where the Alawi controlled the army security apparatuses, but the politics, the economics was really people participated in the decision making process from everywhere.

So Hafez al-Asad was capable of doing that. It does not matter he satisfied everybody in the Sunni--on the grassroots level, he satisfied nobody. The Sunnis were still very suspicious vis-à-vis the Alawis. The Alawis were very suspicious the Sunnis. But on the top level, Hafez Asad managed to create a broad coalition you can say.

Bashar couldn't maintain that coalition. Right now we have, as Flynt noted, Maher, Asif, Bashar, Hassan Khalil, Bahjat Sulayman, Rami Makhlouf, at least the economic side. So we're having a very sort of a shrinking system or group, a governing elite, a junta, whatever word you want to use. So that was where Bashar was not skillful. This is also one of his blunders. He was not able to maintain that coalition, and in fact, at the time when he was actually--he needed to expand it, and reengineer it and so on. So he wasn't able to do that.

The second part of the question, it hinges upon the fact that Bashar, from the point of view of the Bush Administration, did not come up as a trustworthy character, as a man of his word. It's as simple at that. He had it at one point a chance, an opportunity to impress the Bush Administration, and he had the time when there was security cooperation between the two sides, but everything collapsed when he assumed that very bellicose attitude vis-à-vis the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and when he failed to live up to certain promises that he made to Secretary of State, then Secretary of State Powell.

So from that moment on, a crisis of confidence developed, and nothing has been done in the interim, from then until this moment to remedy that. And I doubt very much that frankly at

this stage anyone in the Bush Administration is willing to have a backdoor deal with Bashar for these reasons.

MR. INDYK: Just to add to that just a couple of points is that it started with Powell, but Bashar had another opportunity after 1559 and an American military delegation--

MR. ABDULHAMID: Exactly.

MR. INDYK: --with Secretary of State Bill Burns went to Damascus to talk about the insurgency issue, and again I think that compounded the fact that that didn't produce anything serious, compounded the sense of unreliability.

Ironically, Qadhafi managed to convince us of his reliability. I know that that sounds hard to believe in such a mercurial leader and perhaps this is grist for Flynt's hypothesis that he'll turn out to be Michael rather than Fredo. But in Qadhafi's case, he--we basically leveled a whole series of requirements on him, particularly that started with getting out of the terrorism business. And he fulfilled all of those requirements without anything in return. There was no package deal. It was simply unilateral concessions on his part for the benefit of getting to talk to us. That's what happened in the first two years of the dialogue with Qadhafi, which established his reliability, and reliability is important not just because of our American interests vis-à-vis Iraq, but it's also important domestically here, politically. We could not get into bed with Qadhafi without being able to show that he had done all these things to give us the political cover.

And the same thing would go. The United States cannot back off the kinds of demands it's made, which are important to the United States for domestic, simply political reasons here unless they can show that it produces results. Let's go over here, please.

MR. GLOCK: Hi. My name is Jason Gluck.

My question is if the great fear of immediate regime change is an Islamist fundamentalist government, do you think that is a permanent political reality or as much a function of the fact that, as Ammar points out, there are no political viable alternatives at this time?

And, if the latter, can you recommend certain policies, stratagems on the part of the U.S. or international community that could help pave the way so that Syria could one day support a sustainable more secular democracy? Thank you.

MR. LEVERETT: No. Actually, I can't recommend any policies toward that end. I think that is an extremely high-risk undertaking with not really very good prospects of a successful outcome. I think that, you know, the limitations of the opposition in Syria are what they are. And I think there's very little that the United States can do from outside to change fundamentally those realities, certainly not in the near term.

And that's why I am extremely skeptical about the wisdom of pursuing a policy line that could well ultimately result in the collapse of this regime. If we are going to get political change in Syria, there needs to be a soft landing. And I don't think regime implosion is going to give us that soft landing.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Just one quick note here is that once again, it's the absence of leaders basically. I mean if Syria would opt for a conservative secular figure rather than an Islamist figure, and had this figure been around. At one point, Riad Sayf, who was an MP, who is now in prison, presented himself as a viable alternative. Perhaps he can be--and he is one of the people who signed from prison, by the way, his name on the Damascus Declaration. Now this is one potential leader. He has the credibility of having gone to prison. He has the credibility of having challenged the regime during the Bashar era in a very sort of brave manner, an open manner; raised the question of corruption, which a lot of people wanted to be raised

anyway. So he has some credentials, and I think he's a Sunni as well, so that adds to it.

But at the same time, you really need, I said, it's Christians or let's say Alawis, in fact, even--women and beer. So you really need to make an arrangement for the Alawis. You really need to articulate very clearly and appease Alawis fear, and so far I haven't really--it's not enough to say we respect minority rights and citizenship issues. You need to say what sort of a package deal you have for the future of Syria that will appease the various communities in Syria, especially the Alawis. At one point, I suggested a bicameral parliament, where the upper house is made up of fixed representation from the different regions in Syria, and, as such, it will be really controlled by the minority groups in Syria and that this upper house will be where key issues are reviewed vis-à-vis foreign policy and the secular character of the state and the military and running the military. So in this way, the minorities will be assured that a de facto Islamization is not going to take place and that their rights will be protected because they are playing sort of a disproportionate role in the decision making process.

This is one arrangement. You need to tackle it on this level, not simply general declarations. You need to suggest specific arrangements, and if you've managed to cross that divide of mistrust between the various communities in Syria, you're half way towards having a peaceful regime change.

MR. INDYK: Janine?

MS. CAREY: Janine Carey with Bloomberg News.

Flynt, are you suggesting that the Administration is pursuing regime change indirectly through the U.N. Security Council or are they just saying okay if that happens great? Is it more deliberate on their part do you think? Do they feel the consequences that you feel? Are they as worried about it?

And secondly, if we could talk a little bit about Iran. The Administration seems obsessed with Syria right now. Martin, you said that you think that it's exaggerated the amount of Syrian facilitation along the Iraqi border, and do you feel like that they're playing down perhaps what's happening in Iran because they don't know how to solve that problem?

MR. LEVERETT: In terms of the Administration's posture on regime change, I describe the Administration's posture at least since the beginning of the second term as seeking regime change in Syria on the cheap.

I think that's still a largely apt description. The Administration has been--has certainly been aware of the arguments that--I'm certainly not the only one who makes them about the downside risks of regime implosion in Syria.

I know that they have been engaged in a somewhat systematic search for alternatives. They have asked foreign governments for advice on alternatives. They have asked experts outside of the government for advice on alternatives. I assume they're asking experts inside the government on alternatives. And my sense is that the answers that have come back have not been very edifying. They continue to ask the questions, but it does seem finally to be registering that there are some downside risks here, and there are not really obvious strategies or ways of managing them.

I think that--I mean even the posture that you described they decided to go, you know, let's see if we can compel, in effect, a Syrian surrender by imposing sanctions on them, and if we get regime change as a result of that, if the regime collapses, well, you know, that's fine. I don't really consider that a fundamental strategic reconsideration. You know, if you think there are these serious downside risks to regime change and you don't really have a strategy for managing them or you don't really have alternatives to the current power structure in place, why are you

prepared to welcome regime implosion? I never grasped that strategic logic.

MS. CAREY: And the question about Iran versus Syria and the infiltration of foreign fighters?

MR. LEVERETT: I guess you--yeah, you could--I don't know. I don't have any special insight on this, but I mean you could make an argument that because Iran is so hard, in a way pushing the envelope on Syria is easier. Syria is a little bit lower hanging fruit than Iran is right now. And that may be part of the dynamic. I don't know.

MR. INDYK: Last question.

MR. RAUSCH: Thanks. Jonathan Rausch of National Journal and Brookings.

For Ambassador Indyk, what do you think the Administration is playing for in Syria? Is it regime change? Behavior change or sanctions as an end in themselves? And what do you think they should be playing for? Thank you.

MR. INDYK: Well, I didn't ask Jonathan to ask the last question so he'd ask it of me. So maybe we'll have another question. I'll answer quickly. The short answer is I don't really know. I think Flynt has described the process quite well as far as I know. I think that the idea of actively engaging in a process of undermining this regime is something which the Administration has backed away from because of the fear that it would compound the development of sectarian warfare in Iraq to have a breakdown in Syria next door and sectarian warfare there as well. Then you could really have some serious problems for the whole Iraq exercise.

So, you know, that's I think where they are. As to where they go from here, you know, the problem, as we discovered in the Clinton Administration is that sometimes in the Middle East, there isn't a solution. Sometimes there are only questions, and I think that the discussion

today has kind of highlighted that; that there isn't a good alternative to a bad regime. And that is just the situation that exists.

On the other hand, there was a murder, an assassination of Lebanon and 22 other people, and that process is on a kind of fast track in terms of this German prosecutor who's determined to find out what the truth is, and he's getting to the truth. And it's leading, it seems, to the highest levels of the Syrian government; and that the mainstays of the Syrian regime.

We don't have a choice. The U.S. government doesn't have a choice about whether it's going to support Mehlis' investigation. You know, a crime was committed here. And the Syrian regime, if it is guilty, will be brought to account; should be brought to account. And, you know, there are going to be unintended consequences of that process.

But that process is proceeding. And I don't think that any of us up here would disagree with the need for that process to reach its conclusion.

The last question.

MR. MAHJI: Zeray Mahji from the Syrian News Agency.

You've talked about everybody, but not the Israeli element and how much it's playing a big role in preventing probably any kind of rapprochement between the Syrian regime, as you call it, and the American Administration. It is very well known that the Israeli friends in this town are playing roles either at the Congress or among the neocons, and what could Syria do more than offering the peace agreement with the Israelis based on the international resolutions, and also to--I mean do you think that the Administration played fair role in helping Bashar Asad to implement the agenda for reforms and to go ahead with the help of other politicians and parties in Syria to implement those reforms with the help of Europeans and some Americans?

MR. ABDULHAMID: This is a great opportunity, in fact, right now to go very clearly

and say that the Syrian people should really forget about this conspiracy theory against them.

The reality is okay, people, there are states' interests and there are always conflicts between states, but the reality is the Syrian regime created this crisis for itself.

Even Israelis right now are debating and they are standing against any attempt to remove the regime. Right now, in Israeli newspapers, there are dozens of articles, people say don't remove the Syrian regime. It's better to have a weak Syrian regime than to have an implosion or an Islamist regime. So, in fact, the Israelis are defending the regime at this stage, because they prefer to have Bashar in control and have the situation as is.

So there is no Israeli conspiracy against us at this stage. There could be in the future. There might have been in the past, but believe me in this situation, it's purely a product of our making. The problem that we are in is because of miscalculations by the regime.

Now, did the U.S. do anything to help Bashar Asad reform or implement his reforms? What are his reforms? We never heard a single articulation of a vision by Bashar Asad since he came to power. We don't have an agenda of reform. We don't have a timetable. We don't have specific promises. We don't have anything. So who's going to help him and on what basis? He says there is a problem with the administrative structure. The French promised to help that. But that's not enough. He says well, we need to work on economic issues and I don't have a magic wand. Fine. But it does not mean that you don't present the particular program. A President in order to reform effectively needs to present a program to the people and then he can go ahead and--to Paris and to Washington and to the U.N. and ask for help on these specific reform programs. The President didn't do that. And that's why no one can help a person who doesn't know where he needs help.

So that has been our problem from the very beginning with President Bashar. And also

let me just by way of just concluding since I am through you addressing potentially, if this is going to be published anywhere in Syria, the Syrian people saying it's time for us to actually stop blaming the outside world for our problems. It will be great for us to admit that we have erred several times in the last few years, and our leaders have not been really up to snuff or up to the bar in terms of our expectations, up to our standards and up to our expectations, and that it's time for a change.

Bashar could lead that change. It will be great if he can produce that, but it's time for a change because delay in producing these changes has deepened our crisis. Five years ago, Bashar could have met some simple gestures and we could have really been very happy with them. Now, he's really being asked to remove specific people, and this is very difficult thing to do. But he put himself in that condition by being very recalcitrant and by really not having enough guts to do what he needed to do five years ago.

MR. MAHJI: People have been--

MR. INDYK: Thank you. I'm afraid we're past time, so we can't pursue this. You can do it privately if you like. I want to say two things. First of all, the Samuel Adams Beer Company was not a sponsor of this event.

[Laughter.]

MR. INDYK: And secondly to thank Ammar and Flynt for what I think, what I found was a fascinating discussion. I hope you did, too. Thank you very much for coming.

[Applause.]

[END OF RECORDED SEGMENT.]