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Top Syrian Officials Suspected In Hariri Murder Linked to Fraud

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UNITED NATIONS - A Lebanese fugitive who was arrested last week in Brazil, Rena Koleilat, transferred funds she had seized from a bank that collapsed in mid-2003 to top Syrian officials, according to investigators in New York. Some of the same Syrian officials have been mentioned by U.N. investigators in connection with the assassination of a former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri.

Ms. Koleilat, who is wanted in a pending civil case in New York, is a former banker at the center of a \$300 million Lebanese embezzlement scandal relating to the mid-2003 collapse of the Al-Madina Bank. She is wanted for questioning by the U.N. Hariri investigators and her case could bring down some of Syria's top officials.

Ms. Koleilat, 39, was arrested last Wednesday in Sao Paulo after allegedly attempting to bribe Brazilian officials to buy her freedom.

British officials were contacted by the fugitive Lebanese banker and a foreign ministry spokesman in London, Pasquale LaManno, confirmed yesterday that her British passport is authentic.

A New York private investigation firm that has traced Ms. Koleilat's movements for several years, Fortress Global Investigations and Security, has been able to document illicit money transactions between her and some of the Syrian officials cited by U.N. investigators in relation to the Hariri case. Fortress Global's president, Robert Seiden, told The New York Sun yesterday that Ms. Koleilat had well-established relations with Syrian military intelligence chief Rustom Ghazali, who was Damascus's point man in Lebanon until the Hariri murder. Former U.N. investigator Detlev Mehlis accused Mr. Ghazali of tapping Hariri's phone and issuing threats against him prior to the assassination.

In his December report, Mr. Mehlis highlighted the role of Al-Madina Bank in the Hariri investigation, writing that his commission had followed threads leading to the bank, including links to Lebanese and Syrian officials as well as to Hariri. He did not specify those links.



But according to the Fortress Global investigation, Ms. Koleilat issued several Master Card credit cards to Mr. Ghazali's brothers, who illegally made multiple maximum daily withdrawals amounting to \$941,013.30 from December 16, 2002, to January 15, 2003. One brother, Mohamad Ghazali, had two credit cards under different names.

It is not clear whether General Ghazali used one of these cards, according to a Fortress Global report, parts of which were made available to the Sun.

In addition, Ms. Koleilat transferred \$100,015 through an intermediary, Lebanese currency exchanger Hamieh Ihab Abdelrahman, into a bank account controlled by Syria's deputy prime minister and minister of defense, Mostapha Tlass.

And in another connection to the Hariri murder, Ms. Koleilat reportedly turned over the possession of a \$2.5 million apartment in the Ahlam section of Beirut to Waell Abed Razik Ameir, a close friend of Kalid Kaddour, office manager of Lieutenant Colonel Maher al-Assad.

The colonel, brother of Syria's President Assad, was cited by Mr. Mehlis as a possible suspect in the Hariri assassination, but his name was later deleted from the official version of the December report.

Ms. Koleilat is wanted in Lebanon for embezzlement. After her disappearance, Fortress Global was retained by one of Al-Madina's principal owners, Adnan abu-Ayash. In November 2004, a civil action was filed in New York on his behalf against Ms. Koleilat and others involved in the embezzlement. Relying on banking transactions in America, the civil case is based on the racketeering act known as RICO.

All the defendants mentioned in the complaint were served, except one, Mr. abu-Ayash's attorney, David Liston of the law firm Hughes, Hubbard, and Reed, told the Sun yesterday. Ms. Koleilat, who was the principal defendant, was the only one Mr. Liston was unable to locate. One of the Lebanese defendants, Rene Maawad, responded to the charges, asking Judge Lynch to dismiss the case, according to Mr. Liston. The judge refused and the case is still pending.