

# DEATH AND DEMONSTRATIONS IN BEIRUT, AND THE FUTURE OF LEBANON

4 December 2006

On Tuesday 21st November the Lebanese Minister of Industry, Pierre Gemayel, was assassinated by unknown assailants in a brazen daylight attack. This incident was the latest in a string of targeted killings against leading anti-Syrian figures. Against a backdrop of Hezbollah's bullish threat to topple the Siniora government, the timing and implications of the killing have thrown Lebanon into an uncertain and potentially violent situation.

The assassination has polarised already fractious opinion and raised fears that civil war is once again looming over Lebanon. Yet despite the crisis and division, a civil war is far from certain for the foreseeable future, although an increase in sporadic street level violence and disorder is expected. The government is in a precarious position and Hezbollah appears to have little choice but to continue its push for greater political power in government and is likely to continue as an agent of instability. With both sides of the divide fielding huge turnouts in public demonstrations, Hezbollah is unlikely to resort to arms, but the pressure on the Prime Minister and the President to resign from the respective opposing sides will remain high. Anti-government forces are now camped outside the government buildings in Beirut and have stated that they will remain in place until the democratically elected government falls. The Prime Minister is likely to hold firm for now until the international tribunal investigating the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri is up and running. Tensions will continue until either a resolution can be found, or a compromise unity government is formed that is likely to be divided, weak, and permits the creeping interest of Syria and Iran.

## The Assassination of Pierre Gemayel

On Tuesday 21st November Lebanese Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel was assassinated in his predominantly Christian constituency of Jdeideh shortly after he left a church service.

Like most anti-Syrian politicians, Gemayel travelled low-profile and frequently changed cars and varied his routes, often with a second support car nearby. Despite these measures however, at around 1535 hours a van pulled in front of his silver Kia sedan, causing it to crash. A Honda CRV then rammed the vehicle from behind, trapping it and stunning the occupants. A hit-squad of three gunmen then surrounded the car and at least one, armed with a silenced automatic weapon, discharged approximately 30 rounds through the driver's side window. Witnesses reportedly believed that the incident had been a road accident at first and were not aware that there had been a shooting. The killers fled in a third vehicle, believed to be another 4x4. Gemayel sustained eight bullet wounds through his head and body, and died as his wounded bodyguard took him to hospital.

At around the same time, an apparently simultaneous assassination attempt targeted the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Michel Pharaon, when his office in the Ashrafieh neighbourhood came under gunfire from men in a white Suzuki car that quickly fled the scene. Pharaon is a Greek-Catholic Christian MP from the bloc of

anti-Syrian parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri.

It is unclear whether these attacks were linked. The first was clearly a well-planned and executed operation, the second appears to have been less so. What is also interesting is that previous assassination attempts blamed on Syria in recent years have consistently featured explosives in their modus operandi and often been clumsy in their destructiveness, whereas this killing was a more precise and professional small arms attack.



Gemayel was an outspoken critic of Syria and Hezbollah, but also a divisive figure in the Christian political scene in Lebanon, and becomes the fifth politician to be assassinated among a total of 16 violent attacks in two years against anti-Syrian public figures. The identities of those behind the attack on Gemayel remain unknown,

yet many are convinced that Syria was complicit in his killing and some sources strongly believe that the killing was carried out by a rival pro-Syrian Christian faction. The leader of the anti-Syrian collation Saad Hariri voiced this common sentiment: "The Cedar Revolution is under attack...Today one of our main believers in a free democratic Lebanon has been killed. We believe the hand of Syria is all over [this]."

### A Counter-Cedar Revolution?

The timing of the attack is probably more significant than the identities of those behind it, which may never be known. At the time of the killing, Lebanon was already in the throes of an ongoing political crisis.



Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah  
Leader of Hezbollah

The attack occurred on the same day that the UN Security Council gave its support to the establishment of a special tribunal to try those allegedly responsible for last year's assassination of then Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (the father of Saad) in a massive truck bombing in Beirut. This tribunal is opposed by pro-Syrian forces, not least because the UN has already implicated Syria, explicitly stating that the complex plot against Hariri could not have occurred without the approval of top-ranked Syrian security officials and with the aid of Lebanese counter-parts. The international tribunal has the potential to be hugely damaging to the Syrian government and its Lebanese proxies.

Two weeks before the killing, Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, and Michel Aoun, head of the pro-Syrian Free Patriotic Movement, demanded that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora

grant them a third of the seats in cabinet which would bring with it a veto on cabinet decisions, including a veto over the UN tribunal. Siniora refused and five Hezbollah ministers and a pro-Syrian Christian minister resigned from the cabinet. The March 8 pro-Syrian alliance then threatened to topple the government, claiming it is unrepresentative and therefore unconstitutional, by taking to the streets on Thursday 23rd November. In solidarity, the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud argued the government should step down because the constitution requires all sects to be represented in the cabinet.

Siniora, who is backed by the United States, France and anti-Syrian factions, refused to resign and the government was left in a position where should three more ministers depart then it would fall. Had the assassination attempt on Pharaon also been successful, this would therefore have reduced the figure to a critical one minister. Some believe, as US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton claimed, that the killings were part of an attempted coup d'état to place Syrian interests back in the heart of governmental decision making through Hezbollah and a new "National Unity Government".

Yet, if the assassination was indeed part of a coup plot orchestrated by Syria or pro-Syrian forces, it may yet to prove counter-productive to Syrian interests. The funeral of Mr Gemayel in Beirut on Friday was attended by between 500,000-800,000 people and became a demonstration of defiance against Syria and Hezbollah that gave a much needed renewed vigour to the beleaguered March 14 coalition, which forms the majority in parliament and the Government. Hezbollah and key pro-Syrian figures, such as Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, were conspicuously absent from the funeral which attracted eminent figures from across the Arab world.

Syria and Hezbollah have denied and condemned the killing of Gemayel, and on the day of the funeral in what may be a troubling prelude of things to come, Hezbollah supporters also took to the streets of Beirut expressing anger at the accusations, blocking roads and setting tyres on fire. Attempting to calm the situation, Nasrallah ordered his supporters off the streets and postponed the planned demonstrations and civil disobedience until after the official mourning period was over to Friday 1st December. Then, on the Friday hundreds of thousands of pro-Syrian dem-

onstrators from Hezbollah, Druze and Christian factions gathered on the streets of Beirut calling for the resignation of Siniora and his "corrupt" government, arguing that it failed to support Hezbollah during the war with Lebanon. The pro-Syrian camp sees the government as a puppet for western interests that greased its way to power through corruption. Hezbollah's deputy chief Sheikh Naim Kassem said before the protests that the campaign will continue until Siniora's cabinet falls, although by Monday 4th December the number of demonstrators had dropped considerably. Nevertheless, tensions on the streets have risen and there have been some violent but swiftly contained clashes.

Nasrallah is attempting to navigate a narrow and dangerous path between exacerbating civil tensions that may combust into war, and using the destabilising force of civil disorder to impose his will upon the government in a counter-Cedar Revolution.

### Civil War in 2007

With such acts of violence polarising Lebanese society, the question of whether Lebanon may backslide into a civil war is one that is being widely asked, with many predicting war in a matter of months. Yet despite such tensions and growing polarity feeding into a dangerously confrontational dynamic, a civil war is less than certain for the foreseeable future. Tensions and frustrations are expected to be expressed on the streets over coming weeks if the politicians on all sides find themselves unable to negotiate, but organised inter-communal armed violence is far off and possible low-level outbreaks of violence and cycles of revenge are more likely to be contained and condemned than encouraged.

The scars of the 1975-1990 civil war that engulfed Lebanon are still deeply felt and local sources have remarked upon how impressive and unusual the widespread resistance currently is to internal conflict, although people's resilience is being sorely eroded by brazen acts such as targeted killings. Certainly the pattern of polarisation that is a prerequisite for civil war is extant, but even if this troubling trend persists this alone is not sufficient critical mass for a repeat of the last civil war to break out.

One of the reasons for this is that the clear majority of Lebanese politicians on all sides of the

religious, ethnic and confessional spectrums do not see any meaningful profit from a full-blown civil conflict. It should be borne in mind that many of the elected politicians are also former rival warlords: Christian Maronite leader General Michel Aoun, Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and Muslim Shi'a Speaker and head of the Amal movement Nabih Berry have all been foes. And yet despite this, they all openly agree that returning to violence would serve no-one's interest and would be catastrophic for Lebanon.



Pro-Syrian demonstration

This resistance to war provocations and cycles of vengeance that defined the escalation of the previous civil war is clear to see: former President Amine Gemayel and father of the assassinated Minister Pierre Gemayel called for prayer at Gemayel's emotional funeral and clearly rejected any act of revenge. Even Nasrallah has insisted that any toppling of the government, including through massive street demonstrations, should be peaceful and not endanger civil stability although Hezbollah have been coy about precisely how they intend to achieve that.

Another reason why sliding back into civil war remains unlikely at this time is that the religious factor, that defined the warring parties previously, is not yet potent enough to motivate wide-scale violence. Undoubtedly, Lebanese society is religiously polarised, however the current political schism is essentially between pro-Syrians and anti-Syrians, and thus does not clearly reflect a religious division but a separate political division that undermines the religious dynamic of a potential conflict.

To illustrate this point: The ostensibly anti-Syrian ruling majority is mainly constituted by a

Sunni Arab bloc headed by Saad Hariri. This Sunni bloc is allied to the Druze headed by Walid Jumblat, and the head of the Christian Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea. Conversely, the pro-Syrian forces are headed by the Shi'a Hezbollah and the Shi'a Amal movement, alongside Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun and other Druze and Christian factions. Thus the Christians are divided and a conflict between Christians and Muslims sparked by alleged Syrian meddling is an unconvincing scenario for the foreseeable future, although in-fighting between Christians may be possible. Some Lebanese sources believe that the most likely form of a religiously based conflict in Lebanon will in fact be as a result of sectarian tensions engendered from Iraq between the Shi'a and Sunnis and put into the current Lebanese context of a power-struggle.

Furthermore, despite the provocations and recourses to political violence by whoever is responsible for the latest killing, the current political trends of "Pro-Syrianism" and "Anti-Syrianism" are simply not ideologies that have enough power to motivate Lebanese civilians to take up arms and fight each other at this time, even if shadowy and powerful interest groups believe this may serve their interests.

Finally, buoyed by its recent successes against the IDF in the recent war with Israel and its subsequent popular appeal across the region, Hezbollah has been insistent that its armed militia is there to defend Lebanon against Israel, and does not exist to fight against fellow Lebanese. Intelligence indicates that Hezbollah has been busy re-arming itself in the south, and even if it were willing to take up arms against its compatriots, it would not only undermine its popular legitimacy, it would also leave itself dangerously vulnerable to possible Israeli efforts to stymie its bid for power. Indeed, if the assassination were a coup attempt by Hezbollah, then it would suggest that Hezbollah would rather take power by undermining the constitution, than through armed insurrection. Further, Hizbollah is the only armed force in Lebanon of any potency and it would take a significant amount of time for any rivals to become armed and organised to actually wage a civil war.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah is the agent of the instability in Lebanon and much rests on its next move. Hezbollah is suffering an existential crisis: its *raison d'être* of resistance to Israel is being

undermined, and with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 calling for it to disarm, this means Nasrallah must make a decision. Hezbollah appears to have little choice but force its will and reinvent itself as a moral political force and bulwark against western neo-imperialism, lest it becomes politically illegitimate.

As provoking Israel once again would be unwise until it is sufficiently rearmed, it seems unlikely therefore that Hezbollah will yield in its push for greater political power in Government. Future crises are thus certain; the questions are what form these will take, and to what extent foreign influence will contain or exacerbate the forces that threaten Lebanese state and society.

### Foreign Powers

The timing of the killing of Pierre Gemayel was also significant in a wider context: that of foreign interests and instability in the wider region. Indeed, much of the polarity has been caused by foreign influences: the pro-Syrians argue that the Lebanese government is a puppet of the West, and the anti-Syrians say their rivals want to instate Syrian and Iranian tutelage over the country.

The attack also occurred on the same day that Syria formally re-established diplomatic relations with Iraq after 25 years, against the recently emerging context of the US taking a more realist approach to its relations with Syria in furtherance of its goals in Iraq. The US and British position in the region is that stability in Iraq and their interests in the region require the "positive contribution" of Syria and Iran. Both countries have an interest in seeing a stable Iraq on their borders, but both countries clearly see opportunities blossoming out of the failure of US foreign policy in the region: failures for which they can claim a fair measure of responsibility.

The US and British support for the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah lost them significant political capital across the region, and the ongoing crisis in the Palestinian territories continues to fan a profound sense of injustice that Iran deftly capitalises upon. Iranian power projection has been felt in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, while the policies of support towards Hamas and Hezbollah, and the issue of Iraqi border security remain key leverage points for

Syria. It is perhaps of no coincidence that King Hussein of Jordan warned recently of the threat of three civil wars erupting in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon.

Yet Iran and Syria, much like Hezbollah and Amal, are unlikely bedfellows, and US and British strategy appears to be one of dividing the two. The Iranian nuclear crisis is unlikely to be resolved, and threats by Britain and the US to "isolate" Iran seem hollow unless one considers this strategy of division. For the US, Iran is simply dangerous and is unlikely to yield on the nuclear issue, which for the Bush Administration remains a deal breaker. Syria on the other hand, and in the words of one British diplomat, is more "misguided" and can possibly be persuaded. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, they believe, is isolated and his position is not one of strength. Certainly over recent years, he has performed in such a way that has alienated the other Arab governments. Saudi Arabia for example, has much invested in Lebanon, and Egypt and Jordan also would like to see the current Lebanese government stabilise. The Sunni Arab governments are also very concerned over Iranian revisionism across the region, especially in Iraq and with Hezbollah in Lebanon. They appear determined to shore up the Lebanese government and thwart Syrian-backed efforts by Hezbollah to make it fall.



Bashar al-Assad

Some observers believe that Syria is moving in the right direction, not least by its restabilising diplomatic ties with Iraq after years of hostility. In some respects, the assassination of Gemayel nearly spent this political capital as quickly as it was acquired, and it would be a risky enterprise indeed for Syria to engage in any murderous

adventures in Lebanon again that may come back to haunt it as the Hariri investigation has. Unfortunately, optimism that Syria will play the US and British game of co-operating and change its behaviour is misguided. Endemic mafia-style politics and short-term gains with a short-term strategic view has dictated much of what has been happened in Lebanon under Syria's influence, and this is unlikely to change.



The choice that Syria appears to face is that it would be far more profitable to come in from the cold and relinquish its profitable "prize" of Lebanon, co-operate over Iraq, and distance itself from Iran - and in return enjoy the fruits of a western détente and perhaps some support in regaining the Golan Heights. Syria however is unlikely to respond to this in any meaningful sense. Both Iran and Syria have agitated and sponsored insecurity around them to absorb the energies of their adversaries, and their prize has been that the US and Britain recognising their significance and making humbling attempts to "engage" them. Sadly, the power brokers of the Syrian old guard see more profit from Lebanon in the short-term, than the US in the long-term and it is unlikely that anything short of military action will rein in powerful Syrian figures from supporting Hezbollah and brutally removing of inconvenient rivals.

Assad has much to offer the West, and out of the regional crisis he has a great opportunity in the new realist approach by the US. It is hard to say how much freedom he has to move in this direction if he so chooses, and what power the Syrian old-guard exercises over him. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict here will be fundamental which requires in turn a dramatic shift of emphasis by the US, and that is also unlikely under the Bush Administration. In short, nothing much will change for Lebanon under all current foreign regimes' behaviour.

### Political fallout - the coming months

Lebanon was barely recovering from the July War when Pierre Gemayel was assassinated. Yet the murder, if it was indeed ordered by pro-Syrian interest groups, may prove to hinder rather aid the government's demise. There is little doubt that the situation in Beirut is very tense and will remain so, and some fear that although the political leaders see no profit in resorting to armed violence, a growing cycle of civil violence and revenge may emerge from the street level and escalate. There does seem to be a popular will to resist such a pattern however for now, despite the tensions and mass demonstrations.

Pressure is also likely to mount considerably in forcing the removal of the President Emile Lahoud, but he is unlikely to resign and an agreement on a successor between the March 14 and March 8 blocs will be hard to find. Any successor will likely be considered to be a neutral player, and his strength or weakness will depend more on personality than constitutional power.

The government is in a precarious position, and the most likely scenario in calming any conflict will be through elections. We do not anticipate, however, any early elections that will take place soon, at least not before the international tribunal for the Hariri case is up and running. The Hariri investigation will also now be expanded to include the murder of Pierre Gemayel and this is unlikely to meet with any resistance while Hezbollah claim the right to form part of a unity government. So for now, the assassination should not

change things at the political level but only polarise an already very tense situation. There are concerns that Nasrallah may do something rash, and force the current political schism into deeper crisis, but this seems unlikely for now as his opportunity to provoke greater division was passed over when he ordered his supporters off the streets last Thursday.

Hezbollah's next move will be critical, as will the moves of those responsible for the various murders of anti-Syrian figures. Political dialogue and compromise is the only way forward that Lebanon can afford, and resistance to provocation by powerful minorities will be the greatest test of Lebanese resilience and future sovereignty. The last thing the Lebanese people need as they once again reconstruct their war-ravaged country is deliberate provocation, or yet another political murder on the streets of Beirut. Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian political party that is particularly hated by Lebanese Shiites has already been touted as the next target for assassination by anti-Syrian activists. The Lebanese political blocs have a stark choice: negotiation and compromise, or ultimately force of arms.

**This article was written by Henry Wilkinson who is an analyst at Janusian Security Risk Management. He can be contacted at [wilkinson@janusian.com](mailto:wilkinson@janusian.com)**