Without evidence or logic

Bush administration and US media blame Syria for Gemayel assassination

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When a murder investigation begins, the starting point is not to shout from the rooftops some unfounded suspicion, but to assemble, in a methodical and serious fashion, all the physical and circumstantial evidence. A list of suspects must be drawn up, each with their possible motives.

Such a systematic approach is especially necessary in the case of the murder of a prominent political personality, where a "crime of passion" or accident can be ruled out, and the clearest avenue to determining responsibility is to ask: who stood to gain by the individual's elimination?

In the assassination of Lebanese cabinet minister Pierre Gemayel, however, the Bush administration and its allies in the American media follow no such procedure. Before any evidence had been collected, almost before the body was cold, the US government and its media servants began declaring that the killing was a Syrian plot.

The ferocity of this response should in and of itself raise eyebrows. Another agenda is at work. Or, worse, the clamor to blame Syria, without evidence or any attempt at substantiation, represents a premeditated course of action, prepared ahead of time, suggesting foreknowledge of the event.

It is of central importance that the Gemayel assassination takes place at a critical point of internal conflict within the American state. A raging battle is taking place within the US ruling elite over pursuing relations with Syria and Iran, in an effort to salvage what can be saved from the debacle of the US conquest and occupation of Iraq.

The Iraq Study Group, the bipartisan panel established by Congress to review US policy in Iraq and reluctantly embraced by Bush, is known to be considering a proposal for direct talks by the US government with both Syria and Iran. Sections of the Bush administration, and particularly the neo-conservatives linked most closely with Israeli foreign policy, have begun a preemptive attack on this forthcoming proposal.

Nearly three weeks before the murder, on November 2, the Bush administration issued an hysterically worded warning of plans by Iran, Syria and Hezbollah to seize power in Lebanon. Without offering any factual basis, the White House statement declared that the US government was "increasingly concerned by mounting evidence that the Syrian and Iranian governments, Hezbollah and their Lebanese allies are preparing plans to topple Lebanon's democratically elected government."

Since then, there has been a steady drumbeat in the American media about alleged Syrian conspiracies, culminating in the editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* Wednesday, issued barely 24 hours after Gemayel's death, declaring that Syria was responsible and calling on the Iraq Study Group to reconsider its plans to recommend a Washington approach to Damascus for talks.

Why would Syria order the killing of the Lebanese minister of industry? Unlike former prime minister Rafik Hariri, murdered in 2005, Gemayel was not a leading personality in the so-called "anti-Syria" faction of the Lebanese ruling elite. He was a distinctly junior figure, famous only for his last name.

Gemayel's grandfather and namesake was the founder of the Phalange, the Lebanese Christian organization formed in imitation of the Nazi brownshirts. His uncle Bashir and father Amin were both presidents of Lebanon, and Amin Gemayel still heads the remnants of the Phalange, a group now thoroughly discredited for collaborating with both Syria and Israel at various points in the Lebanese civil war.

The Phalange became notorious for its arrogant and dictatorial attitude towards anyone outside the Maronite sect from which it arose, whether other non-Maronite Christians or the various Muslim religious groupings. Its bloodiest action came in 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when Phalangist militiamen massacred Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, with the permission and assistance of the Israeli army (the crime for which Ariel Sharon was removed as Israeli defense minister).

Pierre Gemayel was killed Monday in Beirut by gunmen wielding automatic weapons. Previous assassinations of anti-Syrian figures in Lebanon have been carried out by remote-controlled car bombs, a method requiring some degree of technical sophistication. The killing of Gemayel was carried out in broad daylight by attackers who clearly knew the victim by sight, as they riddled him with bullets but spared his driver.

If they had been captured—certainly a risk in heavily armed Beirut—the paymaster could have been quickly determined. If the Syrian regime was responsible, it was running an enormous risk of having the crime traced back to Damascus and providing a pretext for outside military action, by the United States, Israel, the UN Security Council, or some combination.

The assassination makes no sense from the standpoint of the interests of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Syria's international position was clearly becoming more favorable, with the resumption of diplomatic relations with Iraq and a proposal for a tripartite summit of Iran, Iraq and Syria to discuss issues raised by the ongoing anti-US insurgency. The day of Gemayel's death, the Syrian foreign minister was received in Baghdad for the first time in two decades.

Moreover, Assad has the prospect of an impending diplomatic approach by the United States, for the first time since the US ambassador was withdrawn from Damascus after the assassination of Hariri. Former secretary of state James Baker, the chairman of the Iraq Study Group, has already had extensive face-to-face contact with Syrian diplomats, signaling that the US policy of isolating Syria is breaking down.

James Steinberg, former Clinton administration deputy national security adviser, told the *International Herald Tribune* that there "are so many potential candidates who might have played a role," besides Syria. "If you look at it rationally, the Syrians are on a semi-roll now, so why would

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they do something like that?" he asked.

An analysis in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz conceded, "pure political and diplomatic logic makes it difficult to see Damascus behind the assassination. The day Gemayel was killed, Syria chalked up one of its most significant diplomatic achievements since its defeat in Lebanon in April 2005: the renewal of full diplomatic relations with Iraq. Syria is also on the way to achieving a semi-official stamp of approval from Washington as able to calm things down in Iraq."

In terms of its political impact in Lebanon, the Gemayel assassination comes just at the beginning of a campaign by Syria's ally, the Shiite Hezbollah organization, to force a redistribution of political power in favor of the Shiite parties. Only days before the murder, five Shiite members resigned from the cabinet and Hezbollah leader Sheik Hasan Nasrallah announced a campaign of mass demonstrations to pressure the government to reach a deal for greater Shiite representation.

In his November 18 speech, Nasrallah called on Prime Minister Fuad Siniora either to resign in favor of a national unity government that would give increased representation to Hezbollah and another Shiite party, Amal, or to hold early parliamentary elections. He emphasized that Hezbollah would organize peaceful protest demonstrations and opposed any effort to settle the political crisis by force. "Nobody is raising arms," he told his followers. "Nobody is making a coup or popular revolution."

Nasrallah's appeal was widely expected to produce huge demonstrations in southern Beirut and other Shiite-populated areas. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, the Germayel assassination has undermined this campaign: "Fueled by anger over Gemayel's death, the anti-Syria bloc may end up beating Hezbollah to the streets. The coalition called on mourners to turn out en masse for Gemayel's funeral Thursday; the procession will double as a pointed political display."

Given these circumstances, it is entirely possible that the motive for the Gemayel assassination was to weaken Syria's suddenly improved international position and reverse the gains being made by Hezbollah in Lebanese internal politics. In that case, the suspicion would fall, not on Syria, but on its antagonists, particularly Israel and the United States.

Two additional factors reinforce such a suspicion. The assassination of Gemayel coincided with the release of a United Nations report on the Israeli use of cluster bombs in Lebanon during the month-long war last summer. UN investigators found that Israel had engaged in "a significant pattern of excessive, indiscriminate and disproportionate force" that constituted "a flagrant violation" of international law.

Some 90 percent of the cluster bombs used by Israel—containing millions of explosive bomblets that continue to maim and kill and make much of south Lebanon uninhabitable—were dropped in the final three days of the war, when the impending ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal were an established prospect and only the final details were being worked out.

According to the report, "these weapons were used deliberately to turn large areas of fertile agricultural land into 'no go' areas for the civilian population." Moreover, the report rejected Israel's claims that in bombing bridges, roads, power plants and other sites, it was targeting Hezbollah fighters. Instead, the UN investigators said they were "convinced that damage inflicted on some infrastructure was done for the sake of destruction."

The Gemayel assassination, however, chased this UN report off the front pages of newspapers. Television news broadcast footage of the bullet-riddled car in Beirut, rather than noting the authoritative international finding that Israel was guilty of war crimes and "collective punishment" against the Lebanese people

Israeli UN ambassador Dan Gillerman accused Syria with responsibility for the Gemayel assassination—without offering any evidence to back the charge. His Syrian counterpart, ambassador Bashar Al-Jafaari, denied responsibility and noted that Israel itself was a "beneficiary" of the crime. "Israel, only two days ago, on Friday, was condemned in the UN General Assembly for its crimes in Gaza. So there was a unanimous international voice to condemn Israeli terrorism committed in the occupied territories. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Israeli assassinating hand to shed light on somebody else."

There is a final "coincidence" to note. The day after Gemayel was shot to death in Beirut, another prominent Middle Eastern political figure was the target of an assassination attempt, albeit one much less publicized. A bomb exploded on the undercarriage of the armored SUV in the motorcade of the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani. Investigation found another, much larger bomb on another car in the motorcade, which had not yet been detonated.

The incident was unusual because Mashhadani's vehicles were inside the Green Zone, the US-controlled section of downtown Baghdad where American troops maintain tight security. How could a bomb be attached to any car in the Green Zone without US security forces knowing about it? Given Mashhadani's political views—he is a strident Sunni nationalist, who has condemned the US occupation as "the work of butchers," and vehemently denounced the Israeli attack on Lebanon—the suspicion is unavoidable that the bombing was the work of US or allied intelligence agencies seeking to send a message to a particularly troublesome Iraqi political figure.

It is in the nature of the secretive criminal methods of political assassination that it may well be impossible to make a definitive judgment about who is responsible. It is possible, though unlikely, that Syria, or perhaps a rogue faction of Syrian intelligence, actually ordered the killing of Pierre Gemayel. It is possible, and quite likely, that US or Israeli intelligence played the main role. Or some other agency: Iran, a Lebanese Christian faction or elements within the Phalange itself who had some grievance with the Gemayel clan.

One thing is certain however. The Gemayel murder has been seized on by the Bush administration, the American media and the state of Israel for their own purposes, to shift public opinion in the United States in favor of military action against Syria.

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