

The New York Times and the Gemayel assassination

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The November 23 editorial of the *New York Times*, “Another Killing in Lebanon”, begins with the assertion:

“It is too early to know who ordered this week’s assassination of the Lebanese cabinet minister Pierre Gemayel, but there are many reasons to suspect Syria.”

Indeed, there are many reasons to suspect all sorts of people for being responsible for Gemayel’s death—and quite a few of them enjoy the editorial support of the *New York Times*. He was killed amidst an intense internal and international conflict to decide who controls the Lebanon. The assassination took place in the aftermath of a multi-million dollar military offensive by Israel that was fully backed by the United States, and which cost more than 1,500 lives. When such high stakes are involved, there will be many parties for whom the life of a relatively insignificant government minister is small change.

Moreover, as yet no investigation has been mounted and no evidence offered that would enable anyone to be identified with Gemayel’s murder.

The *New York Times* ignores such rudimentary considerations and instead falls in behind the campaign being waged by the Bush administration to blame Syria for the killing, attributing to Damascus the motive of an attempt to bring down the pro-Western government of Fuad Siniora. According to the *Times*’s preferred scenario, “If the cabinet now loses even one more minister, through intimidation or worse, Lebanon’s pro-Western government will collapse—a collapse that Hezbollah, Syria’s ally and henchman, has been publicly seeking.”

Many commentators have questioned the attempt by the Bush administration, within hours of Gemayel’s death, to attribute responsibility for the assassination to Damascus. There are many reasons why the Syrian

regime would view involvement in such an operation as a foolhardy venture.

In its own way, the *New York Times* acknowledges that the assassination serves the interests of Washington and its allies in the Siniora government.

“Hezbollah has been insisting on veto power over all government decisions, including whether it will participate in a U.N. tribunal. *If there is any possible good to come from Mr. Gemayel’s death*, it is that Hezbollah will now have to postpone its announced plan to call thousands of demonstrators into the street to bring down the government. We hope Mr. Siniora can use this time to rally the majority of Lebanese who still believe in national reconciliation and the spirit of the Cedar Revolution.” (Emphasis added)

An amazing paragraph, which undermines the efforts of the *Times* to pin the assassination on Syria. What the *Times* presents as an accidental result of Gemayel’s assassination provides a more convincing argument for anti-Syrian forces being responsible than its own efforts to blame Hezbollah or Syria.

As the *Times* predicted, Hezbollah has been forced to put the planned anti-government rallies announced earlier by its leader Sheik Hasan Nasrallah on hold. Instead, Gemayel’s funeral yesterday was the focus of a massive demonstration by anti-Syrian and pro-government forces.

Equally, no one can seriously argue that Syria has benefited from Gemayel’s killing. Following the defeats suffered by the Bush administration in the US elections, there were numerous reports that the Iraqi Survey Group would offer Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad a role in political efforts to stabilise Iraq and as a go-between in Washington’s dealings with Iran.

In the days leading up to the assassination, Britain’s prime minister Tony Blair made a key note address on

foreign policy in which he made such a call, and rejected attempts to draw an 'equals' sign between Damascus and Tehran. His statements on Gemayel's assassination were cautious. "We genuinely don't know who was responsible for this act," the prime minister's spokesman said.

And, as we have previously noted, Gemayel's murder occurred on the same day that the Syrian foreign minister was received in Baghdad for the first time in two decades. He was there to make preparations for a proposed tripartite summit of Iran, Iraq and Syria to discuss measures to deal with the insurgency in Iraq.

Outside of Lebanese forces aligned to the Siniora government, those seeking to make the most political capital from the Gemayel assassination are the neo-cons within the Bush administration and the Israeli government. Both have made clear their opposition to any proposed overtures to Damascus and Tehran.

John Bolton, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, has led Washington's efforts to use Gemayel's killing to propagandise in favour of moves against Iran and Syria. He has warned, "Syria and Iran, acting through Hezbollah, might be on the verge of an attempted coup d'état in Lebanon. One has to wonder whether this despicable assassination is not the first shot."

The editorial in the *New York Times* registers its support for efforts to reach an accommodation with Syria. But it seeks to reassure the Bush administration that this must be dependent on placing maximum pressure on Damascus to ensure its acceptance of US dictates.

It insists, "President Bashar al-Assad needs to understand that neither the [UN] tribunal nor Lebanon's independence will ever be on the bargaining table. Europe, Russia and all of Syria's neighbors need to join Washington in delivering that message."

It is to this end that the *Times* has thrown its weight behind efforts to utilise Gemayel's assassination to "rally forces" against Syria.



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