

Lebanon destabilised by Chatah assassination

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30 December 2013

A massive car bomb in Beirut killed former Finance Minister Mohamad Chatah, an outspoken critic of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, and four civilians on Friday.

Chatah's assassination underscores the extreme tensions and the threat of war that have spread throughout the region, for which US imperialism is chiefly responsible. It has stoked sectarian tensions between the Lebanese regime and Hezbollah, the Shi'ite party sponsored by Iran that has defended the Assad regime against Sunni Islamists funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the CIA.

Before any serious investigation of Chatah's killing has been completed, it is being used to blame Hezbollah and press for a new Lebanese government more aligned with Riyadh, Paris, Washington and London—further isolating Syria and Iran. This threatens to engulf Lebanon in another civil war that, as with Syria, would be a proxy war fought on behalf of the regional powers.

An economist, Chatah had worked at the International Monetary Fund and served as ambassador to the United States from 1997 to 2000. He had been a spokesman for the Lebanese government and advisor to the former right-wing Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose Future Movement is closely aligned with Saudi Arabia. He was from the northern port city of Tripoli, which functions as the entry point for arms shipments to the “rebels” in Syria and has witnessed numerous gun battles between Syria's opponents and supporters.

Chatah had recently warned that Assad could never reform or restore stability to Syria, and that Assad's ally and Hezbollah's patron, Iran, would prefer a prolonged and spreading war to letting him fall.

Saad Hariri, speaking from his home in self-imposed exile in Paris, immediately pointed the finger of blame at Hezbollah. “Those who assassinated Mohamad Chatah are the ones who assassinated Rafik Hariri

[Saad's father],” he asserted, adding that they were “luring regional fires to our country.”

This was a reference to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that has indicted Hezbollah for the killing of Rafik Hariri, the billionaire former prime minister in 2005. The tribunal was instigated by the Bush administration. Posing the question, *cui bono* (who benefits?), the mostly likely culprit was Israel or another ally of the Western powers. But the tribunal first blamed four generals allied with Syria—who were imprisoned for four years before being released without charge—then alleged that Hezbollah was responsible. The tribunal is to reopen in The Hague in January.

Hezbollah rejected the accusation that it was behind Chatah's assassination, calling the bombing a “heinous crime, which comes in the context of a series of crimes and explosions aimed at sabotaging the country.” Syria likewise denied any involvement in the attack.

US Secretary of State John Kerry condemned the murder, saying, “The Obama Administration supports Lebanon as its leaders work to bring those responsible for this heinous and cowardly attack to justice under the rule of law.”

The UN Security Council condemned “any attempt to destabilize Lebanon through political assassinations and demanded an immediate end to the use of intimidation and violence against political figures.”

On Saturday, President François Hollande of France, the former colonial power, called on Lebanon not to let the assassination disrupt the presidential elections due in May. Hollande is currently in Saudi Arabia for talks with King Abdullah. He is expected to discuss “the need to preserve stability in Lebanon,” the Syrian conflict, and Iran's nuclear programme.

Hariri, by alleging that the same people who had murdered his father had carried out Chatah's assassination, may have said more than he intended.

A number of analysts have pointed out that Hezbollah

has no interest at exacerbating tensions at this time. Hariri's Sunni Future Movement is discredited for its right-wing economic policies and support for Israel in the 2006 war, and its political rival Hezbollah has been able to block any moves against it. Hezbollah fighters helped Assad push back opposition forces in Syria, while its leaders have been engaged in talks with Washington following the US deal with Iran in October.

Lebanon's political system, notorious for corruption and nepotism, has been deadlocked for months. Prime Minister designate, Tammam Salam, has been unable to form a government since Prime Minister Najib Mikati, the country's richest businessman, resigned in March.

Legislators—unable to agree on a new electoral law allocating seats according to the relative weights of different religious groups—were forced to postpone the parliamentary elections scheduled for last June until November 2014, citing “political deadlock and the civil war in neighbouring Syria.”

The tiny country faces an economic and social catastrophe. The Syrian conflict has devastated the Lebanese economy, which is inextricably linked to Syria. Tourism, its main earner, has plummeted, as has foreign investment from the Gulf.

Crucially, nearly a million Syrians have sought refuge from the fighting in Lebanon. According to the latest estimates by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, one in five residents are Syrian refugees. This has altered the country's demographics, increasing the Sunni population, and tied its fate immediately to the war in Syria.

The government has refused to provide camps for refugees, fearing they will become permanent like the Palestinian camps. Living in abject poverty, refugees have accepted work at any wage, displacing local workers, exacerbating social and sectarian tensions. In the absence of a progressive political alternative, this has provided a fertile breeding ground for jihadist recruitment.

The government continues to spend on projects that benefit wealthy businessmen and local banks, whose deposits exceed \$130 billion—three times Lebanon's GDP and twice public debt, which is now equal to 146 percent of GDP.

The political vacuum left by the Future Movement has been filled by Salafists, funded and armed by Saudi

Arabia.

The assassination is also aimed at further drawing Lebanon into the Shia-Sunni sectarian bloodletting the United States and its allies have stoked in Syria and helping derail any rapprochement with Iran.

It comes after a series of bombings targeting Hezbollah and Iran. These include the assassination of Hassan al-Laqis in December, widely attributed to Israel; an attack in November on the Iranian embassy that killed 23 people and wounded more than 140 attributed to forces allied with Saudi Arabia; and seven bombs and rocket attacks, as well as car bombs targeting Hezbollah along the Beirut-Damascus highway through the Beka'a valley.

In early December, Salafists targeted Lebanese army forces in the southern city of Sidon, home to Ain al-Hilweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp, and Sunni militants. Sidon is strategically located between the Beka'a Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold, and the only road to the south and the border with Israel.

Given this political context, it is not implausible to suppose that Chatah's killing, coming amid dismay in Riyadh and Tel Aviv over Obama's failure to attack Syria and his negotiations with Iran, was an attempt by Saudi- or Israeli-backed forces to break up the negotiations and lay the ground for war.

Israel for its part shelled southern Lebanon after two rockets landed across the border in northern Israel. It follows heightened tensions when Israel shot two Lebanese troops after an Israeli soldier was killed two weeks ago.

Last month, the *Jerusalem Post* carried a report that claimed Israel's army believed that Hezbollah “is carrying out massive preparations” for war with Israel, the justification for a massive build-up of forces to confront the group.



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