

[\[Print this article\]](#) [\[Close this window\]](#)

Opinion — Another Lebanese assassination; another Syrian message

By **Alain-Michel Ayache, The Suburban**

Once again anti-Syrian Lebanese MPs, and in particular Christian MPs, are targets of Syrian terror.

After last year's killing of Industry Minister Pierre Amine Gémayel, Antoine Ghanem last week became the second deputy of the Kataëb Party (Phalanges) to be mowed down by Damascus. All signs in the Ghanem murder have the signature of the Syrian secret service, in particular the booby-trapped car.

Even the Lebanese government could not help but signal this after the attack. The latest assassination occurs only a few days prior to the date planned for the meeting of the Lebanese Parliament for the election of a new president for Lebanon to replace current President Emile Lahoud, an unconditional ally of Syria.

The message for the March 14 movement (the originators of the Christian, Druze and Sunni Moslem Cedar Revolution born after the assassination of anti-Syrian former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri) from the latest killing is that the Syrian machine seeks to reduce the number of anti-Syrian deputies quickly so that the majority loses its voting weight in the upcoming parliamentary session scheduled for this week.

The physical elimination of anti-Syrian MPs would give Hezbollah, which heads the official opposition, the possibility of blocking the necessary quorum from being met for the process of presidential election to take place. Lebanon would then be in constitutional gridlock, paralyzing the fragile Lebanese democracy. It could very well lead to a crisis similar to that of 1989.

If the parliamentary presidential vote does not take place voluntarily, the Lebanese government has no constitutional method for forcing one. A stalemate would make it possible for the current president to name a new interim prime minister, de facto dissolving the U.S. backed Siniora government and leading to one that would be pro-Syrian. If western, particular American, support continues it is possible that Siniora will challenge any decision of current pro-Syrian President Lahoud. That would almost certainly lead to renewed internal civil strife.

Indeed, the blocking of the presidential election by the Opposition could also create two governments — one Shiite, one Sunni. Hezbollah would be the big winner since it already constitutes a state within a state with all needed infrastructure including a well equipped and trained "army." A government springing from its community, in opposition to another representing the majority and in particular the Sunnis, would mean that "Hezbollah-Land" will have been created. South Lebanon would be ruled by battle-hungry theocrats smack on Israel's border. Hezbollah, backed by Iranian money, has already started to purchase land, even entire villages, from Christian and Druze communities.

These non-Shiites communities have been "encouraged" to sell and seek new haven elsewhere. A "Hezbollahstan" will mean that the remainder of non-Shiite Lebanon will be pushed into disintegration by the rise of confessional mini-states. The weak central government will not have the capacity to prevent this rupture.

To avoid such a crisis, Washington and Paris have now begun to push the Speaker of the Parliament, Shiite Nabih Berri, to restart his bridge-building "initiative" in order to work out some order of co-operation between opposition and majority, at least to get through the presidential vote.

At the heart of this Lebanese constitutional crisis is a political struggle between Iran (Shiite) and Saudi Arabia (Sunni) for control of the Moslem world. Syria will soon be forced to make a critical choice. If it chooses to maintain its adhesion to the Arab world, it must become a captive of Saudi mood and money. This would force Assad to pay some kind of political price for the Hariri assassination. Only such a gesture, combined with Saudi protection, could help reduce the mounting internal pressure from radical Sunnis in Syria, specifically those of the Moslem Brotherhood.

The other choice would be a deeper and broader alliance with Tehran from whom Assad already receives at least \$100 million US a year. Syria would become the right arm of the Iranian strategic, political and soon, perhaps, military offensive against America and Israel.

The problem in both cases is that Damascus starts to look even more like a puppet than it already is. Assad has worked very hard to keep up the facade of being a major player. For him, that facade is essential.

The latest assassination in Lebanon may be a message that Damascus is stating: "Make no mistake! I am there! I will remain there!"

Alain-Michel Ayache is a Middle East expert in the Department of Political Science at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM).

2007-09-26 10:35:45

By **The Suburban.com**