

Syria: Trouble in Damascus

Contributed by STRATFOR
Monday, 10 March 2008

Syria's ruling al Assad family is experiencing an internal struggle

Summary

Syria's ruling al Assad family is experiencing an internal struggle, as the Feb. 12 assassination of top Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah in Damascus revealed. Syrian allies Iran and Hezbollah seem to have growing suspicions that certain elements of the Syrian regime might have been involved in Mughniyah's death, and Syrian President Bashar al Assad appears to be building a case against his brother-in-law, the director-general of Syrian intelligence.

Analysis

The Feb. 12 assassination of Hezbollah top commander Imad Mughniyah in Damascus has exposed what appears to be a massive power struggle afflicting Syria's ruling al Assad family. Since the assassination, Stratfor has received reports from a variety of sources that indicate the death of Hezbollah's most seasoned operative might not have been a surprise to certain elements of the Syrian regime. These suspicions appear to be shared by Syria's allies Hezbollah and Iran.

As Stratfor has discussed previously, even if the Israeli Mossad orchestrated the operation to take out Mughniyah, it likely had an inside source — perhaps in Syria's security apparatus — that facilitated the operation.

And Hezbollah does not appear to be taking any chances. A reliable source revealed to Stratfor that, in the past week, Hezbollah forces apprehended a group of Syrian concierges working in Beirut's southern suburbs. The concierges were blindfolded, interrogated and released the following morning after they and their families were threatened and told to keep quiet about the incident. Hezbollah was supposedly seeking to find out if the concierges knew any details about Mughniyah's travel to Damascus the night of Feb. 10 — two days before his assassination. According to the source, Hezbollah is highly suspicious that elements of Syrian intelligence either assisted in or acquiesced to Mughniyah's liquidation.

The extent of Syrian intelligence's involvement in the Mughniyah assassination could even reach up to the highest echelons of the al Assad family, with Syrian Director-General of Intelligence Asef Shawkat at the center of the conspiracy. The stability of the Syrian regime rests upon a delicate balance of close-knit clan relations within the al Assad family, the Alawite religious minority and the underlying rule of the Baath party. Any blows to this power structure could spell doom for the government, making it all the more critical for Syrian President Bashar al Assad to adroitly navigate the Byzantine maze of Syrian family politics.

Shawkat became a part of the al Assad clan through a marriage to Bashar's sister, Bushra al Assad. Though Bushra and Shawkat faced heavy resistance from the al Assad family when the two eloped, they have since amassed a great deal of power and influence in the al Assad regime, making them a force to be reckoned with in any major family dispute. In addition to being a prime suspect in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, Shawkat could have had something to do with the Mughniyah assassination, several signs indicate. Shawkat apparently felt threatened by Mughniyah's influence within the Syrian security apparatus and came to blows with his long-time foe Maher al Assad, the president's brother and head of the Republican Guard, over the issue.

There is an unverified rumor circulating that, prior to his assassination, Mughniyah had informed the Syrian president of meetings held between Shawkat and a CIA officer in a European city, where the two supposedly discussed a strategy for Shawkat to seize control of the regime. Al Assad then apparently confronted Bushra about Mughniyah's allegations, which then prompted Shawkat to organize an operation to take out the Hezbollah commander. Another source claims that Bushra has now moved with her children to Paris and is seeking to relocate to the United Arab Emirates for a long sojourn — a possible indication that the major female power broker of the al Assad clan has lost her bid to spare her husband's political and intelligence career within the ranks of the Syrian ruling elite.

Though the details of these rumors cannot be verified, there appears to be a case building against Shawkat behind the palace walls in Damascus. Stratfor has already learned of rumors of an impending military reshuffle that could very well remove Shawkat and wash the regime's hands of the al-Hariri assassination. But Shawkat is unlikely to go quietly into the night, and any attempt to remove him from the Syrian political scene could further complicate the regime's

already intensely bitter power struggle. Similar rifts emerged in the wake of the al-Hariri assassination when former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam and former Interior Minister Ghazi Kenaan schemed to topple the regime. The Syrian president managed to wade his way through that crisis rather adeptly, but this current power struggle reaches deep into the al Assad clan. And with Israel signaling that it is readying itself for another showdown with Hezbollah, the clock is ticking for al Assad to get his house in order.

March 10, 2008

By Stratfor. This Report Expresses the views of Stratfor

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of CRNews.