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Medhat's killing deals blow to efforts to repair Palestinian rifts

Thousands Mourn Slain PLO Official in Lebanon

Members of rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas turned out in their thousands on Wednesday for the funeral in Beirut of a top Palestine Liberation Organization official killed in a bombing.

Kamal Medhat, the PLO's number two in Lebanon, died in Monday's roadside bombing outside the Mieh Mieh refugee camp in southern Lebanon along with three other people, including two of his bodyguards.

The coffin of Medhat and the other three victims, draped in Palestinian flags, were carried about three kilometers (less than two miles) through the streets of Beirut from Imam Ali mosque to the Palestinian "martyrs cemetery."

PLO guards marched in front of the thousands-strong procession chanting revolutionary songs while some in the cortege carried photographs of the four victims and others waved Palestinian, Fatah and Hamas flags.

During the procession, the PLO representative in Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, walked side by side with Hamas officials.

Medhat was leading efforts to end the rift between Fatah -- the faction led by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas -- and the Hamas movement as well as several other Islamist groups operating in some of the 12 camps housing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Medhat, 58, was also a former aide to the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and a former intelligence chief for Fatah in Lebanon.

Lebanese newspapers said the killing could be a "settling of scores" between Fatah and Hamas.

Top PLO official Kamal Medhat was likely the victim of inter-Palestinian feud, the daily As Safir reported Wednesday.

It quoted a security source as saying that initial findings show that the bomb was Palestinian-made that was likely prepared at the refugee camp of Ain el-Hilweh in southern Lebanon.

The source said Medhat was "definitely" the victim of a clear split within mainstream Fatah ranks, particularly since new arrangements for the governance of Fatah were in the works to separate management from the military.

As Safir said Sultan Abul Aynein was doomed to be in charge of management while Kamal Medhat would head Fatah's military wing.

The daily also quoted a senior Lebanese security official as warning against turning Ain el-Hilweh into another Nahr el-Bared in a bid to torpedo upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections.

Fatah spokesman in the West Bank Fahmi al-Zaarir said the group's leader in Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, was with Medhat on the visit to Miyeh Miyeh refugee camp but was not hurt since he left the camp a few hours earlier. It was not immediately known if Zaki might have been the target.

No one has claimed responsibility for the roadside bomb which killed Medhat, deputy of Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Lebanon Zaki, near Miyeh Miyeh in southern Lebanon on Monday. Three other people, including two of his bodyguards, were also killed in the midday blast.

There have been power struggles between competing factions, but Zaarir said

Abul Aynein, a senior Fatah commander in Lebanon, has warned that the bombing could be the beginning of a "cycle" to target other Fatah officials in Lebanon.

Osama Hamdan, Lebanon's representative of the rival militant Hamas group, said Medhat had played "a major role" in

efforts to unify rival Palestinian factions, especially between Fatah and Hamas.

Several rounds of talks between rivals Fatah and Hamas mediated by Egypt broke down last week without a deal on a national unity government.

A government source on Tuesday was quoted as saying that Medhat's assassination was a "warning" to Lebanese leaders.

According to the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), between 350,000 and 400,000 Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon -- a country of more than four million inhabitants -- most of them living in the camps.

Other estimates put the number of refugees at 200,000 to 250,000 as UNRWA does not strike off its lists the names of those who emigrate.(AFP)

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<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&15A7FB1EEBCE71D5C225758300727AE3>

Medhat's killing deals blow to efforts to repair Palestinian rifts - analysts

By Andrew Wander

Daily Star staff

Wednesday, March 25, 2009

BEIRUT: The fragile peace between rival Palestinian factions in Lebanon has been jeopardized by Monday's assassination of senior Fatah official Kamal Medhat, experts warned on Tuesday.

Medhat was killed, alongside three others, in a massive explosion that tore through his convoy, hurling his car from the road into a field near the Mieh Mieh camp outside Sidon. He had been visiting the camp to solve a dispute between rival families that had escalated into armed clashes, killing two people over the weekend.

Medhat was a key peace-broker between rival factions in Lebanon's 12 Palestinian camps and his death has raised concerns that the delicate balance of power in the Palestinian community could be destabilized.

Security experts and those familiar with Palestinian politics told The Daily Star that Medhat had been one of the most important promoters of Palestinian unity in the country.

They warned his death could undermine what one described as a "tacit agreement" between Fatah and Hamas not to engage in the violence that has characterized their relations elsewhere.

A source with extensive knowledge of Lebanese-Palestinian relations said that Medhat had played a unique role in bringing the Palestinian community in Lebanon together. "He was trying to do his best to unify the Palestinian cause," he said. "He believed that if they showed a disunited front to the Lebanese, it would be harder to get what they want. It's not going to be easy to find a man with all these qualities to replace him. I don't see it coming soon."

The source said there was "great anger" among Medhat's allies at the killing. "Let us hope that there are no repercussions, but it's a terrible crime" he said. "It's a very sensitive issue." Timur Goksel, a former UNIFIL staffer with more than two decades of experience in Lebanon, agreed that Medhat's killing was a "very significant" blow to Palestinian unity.

"He was the guy who kept the Palestinians together, so it's a negative development for them," he said. "They were keeping some semblance of unity. He was telling them to not to offend the Lebanese state. He really deserves most of the credit for keeping the Palestinians out of Lebanon's troubles in recent years."

"This is scary because it could cause a serious split, and they can't afford any more splits. I don't know if anyone will be able to step into replace him," he said. "I don't know whether they will be able to hold it together after this."

Retired Lebanese army General Elias Hanna said that the killing was certain to have an effect on relations between rival Palestinian factions. "What he was doing will stop for a while," he predicted. "Relations between Hamas and Fatah will be affected. They might appoint a replacement, but they won't be as efficient. This guy was experienced and that's irreplaceable."

He said security measures among Palestinian officials will be stepped up after the attack. "The PLO and PA will reconsider its security steps in Lebanon. They will have to reshuffle what they were doing here."

The killing has been roundly condemned by Palestinian leaders, who accused Israel of being behind the blast in a bid to sow discord in the camps.

Analysts agreed that Israel could have been behind the killing, but said that it was too early to apportion blame for Medhat's death. "Whoever did this had knowledge about Medhat and what he was doing, and they were able to plant the explosives," said Hanna. "We can't exclude Israel from the job, but there are a lot of unknowns."

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=100349

 Medhat received death threats - Fatah leader
 Jumblatt offers condolences to PLO
 By Mohammed Zaatari
 Daily Star staff
 Wednesday, March 25, 2009

BEIRUT: Slain senior Palestinian official Kamal Medhat had reportedly received several death threats and had recently sent a letter to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas detailing the threats, a top Fatah commander said on Tuesday. "We will not issue haphazard accusations and we leave it to the Lebanese judiciary and security forces to uncover the truth," Brigadier Munir al-Maqdah told reporters following a large-scale meeting of Palestinian factions inside Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in Sidon.

Senior Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) official Kamal Medhat, two of his bodyguards and another Palestinian official were traveling in a convoy when the bomb exploded at the entrance of the Mieh Mieh camp near the coastal town of Sidon.

He said Medhat's killing is "a blow to security in stability not only inside Palestinian refugee camps but also in Lebanon."

"Today's meeting stressed the need to reinforce Palestinian unity in order to counter all the threats and dangers that surround us," he added.

Maqdah said Palestinian factions agreed not to turn Lebanon "into an arena to settle Palestinian disputes."

"We will cooperate with the Lebanese judiciary," he stressed.

The 58-year-old Medhat, who was a close aide to the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, was the highest-ranking Palestinian official killed in Lebanon since the PLO was forced to pull out of the country in 1982 after the Israeli invasion.

In Mieh Mieh on Tuesday, residents ruled out a deteriorating situation in the camp.

"The assassination aimed to send a message to all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, not only to the Mieh Mieh camp," Maryam Zbib told The Daily Star.

Another resident, Mohammad al-Hassan said the assassination "aims to create rifts between Palestinians."

Meanwhile, Medhat's assassination drew widespread condemnation. UN chief Ban Ki-moon slammed late on Monday the "terrorist" roadside bombing that killed Medhat.

"The secretary general condemns the terrorist attack today," his press office said in a statement, adding that the UN chief hoped "the perpetrators of this crime will be brought to justice promptly."

"Such actions must not be allowed to endanger the climate of calm that currently prevails in Lebanon," Ban added

In Lebanon, meanwhile, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt paid a visit to PLO representative in Lebanon Abbas Zaki on Tuesday to offer condolences.

"I extend my condolences to the Fatah party and the Palestinian national authority. Fatah has always sacrificed its prominent members, for the Palestinian cause," Jumblatt told reporters afterward.

"As long as the Palestinian state has not yet been established, we should work on securing [Palestinian refugees] certain civil rights, because if we want to prevent naturalization, then we should not deprive them of their essential rights," the PSP leader said, urging Lebanese authorities to stop discriminating against refugees.

"In Nahr al-Bared the Palestinians had nothing to do with what happened, and so they should be able go back to the camp," he said, referring to the 106 days of fighting between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Al-Qaeda inspired Fatah al-Islam militant group in 2007 that reduced the northern refugee camp to rubble.

"I was also told that that some Lebanese security forces are not treating the Palestinians properly," Jumblatt added.

For his part, Zaki welcomed Jumblatt's support, adding that the PSP leader was "the first to call him after Medhat's killing." Zaki said Jumblatt advised him "to urge his followers to practice self-restraint and to avoid any attempt to sow discord among the Palestinians."

In other reactions Tuesday, Lebanese Forces boss Samir Geagea condemned Monday's killing saying it was a "terrorist" attack that targeted both Lebanese and Palestinian stability. Geagea called on the Palestinians to unite around their "just cause" and to stay away from conflicts that would "drain their will to persevere."

Lebanese newspapers on Tuesday described the assassination as a settling of scores between rival Palestinian factions.

"Mieh Mieh: a fratricide?" said the French language L'Orient-Le Jour newspaper.

The As-Safir newspaper echoed the view. "Although all Palestinian factions were quick to denounce the crime and blame Israel and its agents, security officials believe that Medhat was killed in a settling of scores," it said. - With AFP

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=100346

Senior PLO official killed in south Lebanon bombing

By Mohammed Zaatari

Compiled by Daily Star staff

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

A top Palestinian official and three other people were killed in a roadside bombing outside a restive refugee camp in southern Lebanon on Monday. Senior Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) official Kamal Medhat, two of his bodyguards and another Palestinian official were traveling in a convoy when the bomb exploded at the entrance of the Mieh Mieh camp near the town of Sidon.

Medhat had visited the Mieh Mieh refugee camp to pay condolences to the family of Raef Naufal, the head of Fatah's Committee in the southern camp who died during armed clashes over the weekend.

"The bomb was apparently hidden in a little shed on the side of the road and was detonated as Medhat's convoy drove by," an army spokesman told AFP.

An army spokesman also told Elnashra news website Monday that the roadside bomb weighed between 30 and 50 kilograms.

Medhat, who was a close aide to the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, is the highest ranking Palestinian official killed in Lebanon since the PLO was forced to pull out of the country in 1982 after the Israeli invasion.

Medhat, 58, was the PLO's deputy representative in Lebanon and also a former intelligence chief for the mainstream Fatah movement in the country.

LBCI television quoted well-informed Fatah sources as saying that the bomb was meant to target the Palestinian Authority's representative in Lebanon, Abbas Zaki.

Zaki blamed Israel for the killing and warned it would have serious repercussions in Lebanon and the Palestinian camps.

"Those behind the killing are working in one way or another for Israel," said Zaki, who had left the camp in another vehicle just minutes before the blast. "We are trying to calm the situation inside the camps." Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is also the head of the PLO, "condemned this terrorist crime," according to a statement from his office.

In statement Monday, Hizbullah said the attack bore "the fingerprints of the Zionists and was aimed at sowing discord."

The bomb, made up of more than 20 kilograms of TNT, was detonated by remote control, Munir Maqdash, who is in charge of security at Lebanon's refugee camps, told AFP.

The other victims were identified as Akram Daher, who was in charge of the PLO's youth organization in Lebanon, and bodyguards Khaled Daher and Mohammed Shehadeh.

Maqdah said three people in a second car had been seriously wounded.

The force of the blast tore through Medhat's car and hurled it into a nearby olive grove.

Tensions have been running high in Mieh Mieh where two people died over the weekend in an apparent settling of accounts between rival clans.

Medhat "was on his way out of the camp where he had visited officials in a bid to ease the tension," Hisham al-Debsi, a PLO official, told AFP.

Medhat, also known as Kamal Naji, was a close aide to Arafat when the PLO chief was leading his guerrilla war against Israel from Lebanon.

The representative of the Palestinian Islamist faction Hamas in Lebanon, Osama Hamdan, condemned the killing, saying it was aimed at creating discord in Palestinian camps, considered breeding grounds for extremism.

Tension between Fatah and Islamist groups inside the camps has run high in the past year, with clashes and attacks leaving at least 12 dead.

The Lebanese Army does not enter the camps, leaving responsibility for security to Palestinian factions.

The explosive situation was brought to light in 2007 during fierce battles at the Nahr al-Bared camp in northern Lebanon between the army and Fatah al-Islam, an Al-Qaeda-inspired militia.

The fighting killed 400 people including 168 soldiers, and led to the army entering a Palestinian camp for the first time since the 1975-90 Civil War.

According to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), there are between 350,000 and 400,000 refugees in Lebanon, most of them living in the 12 camps.

Other estimates put the number of refugees at 200,000 to 250,000 as UNRWA does not strike from its lists the names of those who emigrate.

Fatah's representative in Lebanon Sultan Abu al-Aynayn said the bomb that killed Medhat also aimed to "target Palestinian unity."

Abu al-Aynayn said that "it seems the fate of the Palestinians is sacrificing more blood."

"Accusations can be directed at many parties, but I am confident in the capability of the Lebanese Armed Forces to discover those responsible for committing this crime. I will not accuse a certain party or say whether the assassination was planned by parties involved in the internal Palestinian political struggle," he added, but did not rule out the possibility of Israeli involvement in the crime.

Education Minister Bahia Hariri condemned the blast and made a series of phone calls to top Palestinian officials to learn more on Medhat's killing.

Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun also condemned the assassination saying "the killing of moderates is always a bad sign."

The Amal Movement issued a statement condemning the blast, and said the bombing of Medhat's convoy "meant to jeopardize efforts for Palestinian reconciliation."

Amal also pointed the finger at Israel.

Amal urged Fatah and other Palestinian factions to cooperate with the Lebanese Army and security forces "in order to safeguard Lebanon's stability and security."

Echoing Amal, the Future Movement said the blast threatened Lebanon's security and urged the judiciary and security forces to uncover the perpetrators. - Mohammed Zaatari, with AFP

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=100306

Medhat's Assassination … Warning to Lebanese Leaders

The assassination of top PLO official Kamal Medhat was a "warning" to Lebanese leaders, a government source told the daily An Nahar.

The source said Medhat's murder has "raised a number of immediate questions about whether it was a message from abroad, the work of a Palestinian faction or a new attempt to disrupt peace in Lebanon."

An Nahar said Medhat was known for being one of the key figures who "stroved to calm tensions and reconcile Palestinian factions."

As Safir newspaper, however, said Medhat's assassination could be a "settling of scores."

"Although all Palestinian factions were quick to denounce the crime and blame Israel and its agents, security officials believe that Medhat was killed in a settling of scores," As Safir wrote.

Medhat, the deputy of Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Lebanon Abbas Zaki, was killed in a roadside bombing near the Miyeh Miyeh refugee camp in southern Lebanon on Monday. Three other people, including two of his bodyguards, were also killed in the midday blast.

Medhat was also a former aide to the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and a former intelligence chief for the mainstream Fatah movement in Lebanon.

As-Safir said Medhat was in charge of reconciling rival Palestinian groups in Lebanon, mainly in Ain el-Hilweh, the largest of 12 refugee camps and scene of frequent violence between Fatah and Hamas.

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<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&15A7FB1EEBCE71D5C225758300727AE3>