

Who killed Wissam al-Hassan?

Contributed by Tony Badran
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Who killed Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan? Following the assassination last Friday, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt blamed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. However, Jumblatt refrained from addressing "whether Hezbollah or any others [were] behind the assassination, because we would be doing what Assad wants us to do." Jumblatt's concern is understandable. His priority is to avoid internal Sunni-Shiite sectarian tension and to keep the security situation in Lebanon under control. However, Hassan's assassination reaches far beyond Lebanon. There's a compelling case to be made that the elimination of the influential security chief is part of Iran's contingency planning, from Iraq to Lebanon, to consolidate Tehran's gains, especially in the event they lose their Syrian ally.

Like Jumblatt, both the Lebanese president and prime minister linked the murder to Hassan's recent arrest of former minister, and close friend of Assad's, Michel Samaha. The former minister was caught red handed and charged with plotting terrorist bombings on orders from Assad. As a result, Hassan received countless, explicit, death threats from Syria's allies in Lebanon. Therefore, in light of his role in the Samaha case, it was easy to see Assad's obvious motive.

However, Jumblatt's comment shows he understands that an operation of this scale strongly suggests Hezbollah involvement. For one, the nature of the operation required an apparatus with intelligence and logistical capabilities of the kind Hezbollah alone possesses. Indeed, none other than Michel Samaha has attested to this fact.

In the transcripts of the surveillance tapes that led to his arrest, the informant recruited by Hassan reaffirms to Samaha that "in Lebanon other than the Party [of God], there's nothing. The rest are a joke." Samaha replies in agreement, adding: "the party and the structure directly around it—the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Baath." Needless to say, the SSNP and the Baath are small-time local thugs. It is Hezbollah that controls the airport and fields its own intelligence network.

However, when we speak of Hezbollah, we're really speaking of Iran. To be sure, Iran shares Assad's objectives. Still, even as Tehran has marshaled all the instruments of its national power to ensure Assad's survival, it also has had to plan for his potential loss. To achieve both goals, Iran has been on a region-wide drive to consolidate its assets. Effectively, this means fortifying its position in Iraq and Lebanon.

To that end, Tehran has been aggressively pushing to secure a military and security agreement with Baghdad. Moreover, it has sought to shore up its ally, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had faced a challenge in parliament from the president of the Kurdish Regional Government, Massoud Barzani.

Tehran tried reaching out to Barzani in order to broker a détente with Maliki. But it has also sought to isolate the Kurdish president by moving closer to his Kurdish rivals, and has increased its support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK also affords Iran the ability to raise the heat on Barzani's ally, Turkey. In addition, Iran has reportedly advised the PKK to seek closer ties with Maliki, who was receptive to the idea, as it affords him an avenue to pressure Barzani.

Kurdish MP Mahmoud Osman explained Iran's moves in Iraq. The most important issue for Iran at the moment is Syria, Osman recently said. He then added, "The visit of [Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad] Wahidi to Baghdad and [Quds Force commander Qasem] Soleimani to Kurdistan coincided in order to convince the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad to assist Iran at this stage."

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, Iran has been even more blatant in its push for control. It has dispensed with the shackles of diplomatic protocols, openly and repeatedly declaring (what everyone knew) that Hezbollah was an arm of Tehran. It now speaks not only on behalf of Hezbollah, but also on behalf of Lebanon, bypassing the Lebanese government altogether.

Where does Wissam Hassan fit in this picture? Hezbollah mouthpiece al-Akhbar provided the clearest answer: "Hassan headlined the Lebanese-regional front active against the Syrian regime, and, secondly, against Hezbollah and Iran. [...] He represents the front led by the US as well as Arab and regional states. [...] He is at the heart of the open war."

In other words, for Iran, Hassan represented the confluence of its enemies in the regional Sunni pro-American bloc. Moreover, he stood atop the only security apparatus not controlled by Hezbollah. As Iran seeks to shore up its

proxy's grip on the Lebanese state, as a hedge against a critical setback in Syria, it has to eliminate all threats, while also leaving the Sunnis in disarray. To quote Samaha once more, "you must be ready for anything. Along with Iraq … and Lebanon."

Iran is conducting a region-wide drive with an eye on the regional balance of power. This is what's at stake in Syria, and what's playing out in Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, Lebanon and Turkey. This Iranian power play best explains why Hassan was killed.

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Credit: NowLebanon