

Syrian general Mohammed Suleiman, implications, for Syria, Israel, World

The Assassination of General Mohammed Suleiman

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On August 1, 2008, Syrian general Mohammed Suleiman was gunned down on the beach near the Syrian city of Tartous. Only after five days of thunderous silence, Syrian officials, with typical reticence, reported that the general had indeed been assassinated and that an investigation was underway to find the culprits. Meantime, journalists and commentators have proposed different theories regarding the identity of the assassin and the reasons for the attack. The answers to these questions have many - and contradictory - implications: for the Syrian regime, for Israel, and for other regional elements.

Who was Mohammed Suleiman and what did he do? Who wanted him dead and why? Outside the very senior echelon, most Syrian personnel involved in internal politics - not to mention those involved in the security services and the military - tend to operate behind the scenes and not earn media coverage. The various sources that have provided details about Suleiman since his death have differing agendas and therefore perforce have offered varying accounts. Western intelligence sources have posited that he was involved in the Syrian nuclear project; American intelligence sources have tied Suleiman to transfers of chemical weapons from Iraq to Syria in 2003 on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq; the Israeli media has pointed to his involvement in arms transfers to Hizbollah; Lebanese sources have claimed that Suleiman was a key witness in the investigation of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri; and Syrian opposition sources have explained that the Syrian general was one of the people closest to Asad and was involved in both security matters and party politics. Therefore, the latter have postulated that "something is rotten" at the very top in Syria. Various commentators have even suggested the conspiracy theory, i.e., that the assassination was a Hizbollah initiative to settle open accounts since the assassination of Imad Mughniyah in Damascus in February.

It is possible to identify Suleiman's hand in three primary areas: internal Syrian issues connected to the regime and the party; sensitive military issues; and Lebanon-related issues, through which he was apparently connected both to Hizbollah and to others in the Lebanese political arena. Therefore, there may be different elements wanting to see Suleiman dead, and the implications of his assassination vary according to the respective theories.

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The internal Syrian arena is the most intricate possibility. The fact that Suleiman was viewed as one of the people closest to Asad suggests a number of individuals, especially at the very top of the Syrian leadership, who might have benefited from the assassination, part of a power struggle at the highest levels of the regime. Since 2000, Bashar al-Asad's firm entrenchment of his rule has been accompanied by the removal of various senior officials - deposing them from positions of power and replacing them with people from his inner circle. The most prominent examples of this were the 2004 retirement of Syrian defense minister Mustafa Talas and a year later, the dramatic escape of Vice President Abd-al-Khalim Khaddam to France. After Mughniyah's assassination, various reports were published regarding tensions between Asif Shawkat, the head of military intelligence, and Bashar al-Asad.

There seems to be another locus of tension, between Shawkat and Asad's brother Maher, who heads the elite Republican Guards. In this scenario, the assassination of one of the president's inner circle may have been intended as a message from opposition elements, either from within the regime itself or from outside. At the same time, it is clear that from the intra-Syrian perspective, the implication of Suleiman's assassination for the regime is worrisome, as it raises the possibility that there are individuals not loyal to Asad within his inner circle. Oustings, "disappearances," and banishments of senior Syrian officials in the coming months may turn out to be connected to Suleiman's assassination and to internal power struggles.

Regarding military issues and special projects: given the lack of available information, it is hard to point to a specific motive or individual who might have wanted Suleiman dead. If involved in this sphere, Suleiman would undoubtedly have been privy to sensitive technological information as well as other state secrets. Neither one of those represents a good enough reason to have him eliminated by someone on the inside. Asad's regime has ways of removing people from the nexus of power, and assassination is not one of the common ones - unless Suleiman was intending to exploit the knowledge he had in a way detrimental to Syria, e.g., through defecting to the West, like former Iranian officer General Ali Reza Asgari did in 2007. In this light, the assassination might have served the Syrian regime both as a means of revenge and as a potent message to the inner circle.

Over the years, many people involved in the Lebanese quagmire have been badly burned and even lost their lives, and it is possible that Suleiman has joined their ranks. Several elements may be relevant in this scenario: first - the Syrian regime. If the reports from Lebanon are true that Suleiman was a key witness in the Hariri investigation and he was about to be summoned to testify, then the Syrian president himself would be interested in Suleiman's disappearance. This is far from fantasy: suffice it to mention the October 2005 suicide/assassination of Ghazi Kanaan, the Syrian interior minister, who for years served as the Syrian "commissioner" in Lebanon.

A second element that may have wanted to see Suleiman dead is Israel - if the reports were true that he was involved in arms transfers to Hizbollah, particularly anti-aircraft weapons (Sunday Times, August 10, 2008). This possibility is certainly intriguing and engages espionage buffs and those fascinated by secret intelligence services. Nonetheless, it is hard to know if Suleiman was a significant factor in the Hizbollah connection, and in any event cooperation between Syrian and Hizbollah is intense and does not depend on any particular individual. Therefore even Suleiman's removal would not be enough to impede this cooperation, and would at most cause a temporary setback. Moreover, from the Israeli perspective, it is possible that the risk inherent in such an operation would far outweigh its possible benefit; after the reported September attack on the Syrian reactor and the Mughniyah assassination - both of which have been ascribed to Israel - an assassination of one of the Syrian president's inner circle might prove to be the straw breaking the camel's back, and would push the two states towards a dangerous escalation.

Finally, the possibility that Suleiman was eliminated by internal Lebanese

elements such as Hizbollah or another organization seems remote. Hizbollah is too close to the Syrian regime to want to jeopardize its relations with it by assassinating a senior Syrian official. A different Lebanese outfit may have wanted Suleiman dead, but the means of this assassination - sniper fire from the direction of the sea - and the need for precise intelligence to execute an operation like this make this possibility unlikely. Instead, a car bomb or a roadside explosion would have signaled an internal Lebanese element as responsible for the assassination.

In the coming months, more solid information about the circumstances of the assassination will likely emerge. Until then, there is no doubt that this assassination will represent a considerable source of worry for the Syrian regime and President Asad himself.

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