

The Death of Lebanon's Pascal Sleiman: Was It a Crime, or a Political Assassination?

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Pascal Sleiman, head of the Christian Lebanese Forces' Jbeil district office, was kidnapped and killed by a gang of Syrian car thieves on April 7. He died after being hit on the head and chest by the criminals, who then stuffed him into the car's trunk, and later dumped him in a border area in Syria.

According to the Lebanese army, the politician and head of management information systems at Byblos Bank, was the victim of a carjacking by a criminal gang, who have been arrested.

"Following up on the case of Pascal Sleiman, who was kidnapped, the army intelligence directorate was able to arrest most Syrian gang members involved in the kidnapping", the Lebanese army announced in a statement on X.

The army added,

"During their investigation, it became clear that the kidnapped person was killed by them while they were trying to steal his car in the Jbeil area, and that they transported his body to Syria," the army stated. "The Army Command coordinates with the Syrian authorities to hand over the body, and investigations are completed under the supervision of the Cassation Public Prosecution."

A Lebanese judicial official said security forces had arrested seven Syrians on suspicion of involvement in Sleiman's killing. The kidnappers admitted that their goal was stealing the victim's car. A military official said Damascus had handed over three suspects.

However, in Lebanon's fractured political landscape, there are several interpretations to the story, depending on what political party you are affiliated with, and even depending on what

religious sect you have been born into.

Because Sleiman was an official within a political party in Lebanon, many first jumped to the conclusion it was a political kidnapping and murder, of which Lebanon is famous for. This baseless rumor has raised tensions in Lebanon and on Monday evening, hundreds of people blocked roads in Byblos, while videos circulated on social media of violence against Syrians.

The Lebanese Forces (LF) is a right-wing Christian political party headed by **Samir Geagea**, who was a militia commander during the Lebanese civil war 1975-1990. Geagea was the only war-lord to be imprisoned following the war, and was released in 2005.

Geagea dislikes the Syrian government, and Hezbollah, the resistance group and political party. Hezbollah supporters are primarily Shiite Muslims in the south of Beirut, and in the south of Lebanon.

The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), another Christian political party now headed by **Gebran Bassil**, allied with Hezbollah, making it at odds with the LF, and has divided Lebanon's Christian community.

The LF emerged as part of a wider Christian right-wing front fighting Palestinian, Muslim and secular left-wing forces during the civil war.

During the Israeli occupation of the south of Lebanon from 1982, Geagea supported Israel against his own nation, even though the south of Lebanon holds many Christian villages which suffered greatly under the brutal Israeli military occupation. It was Hezbollah which forced Israel to leave Lebanon in 2000.

Men, women and children were imprisoned in the infamous Khaim prison during the occupation, which Israel destroyed in summer of 2006 when Israel bombed all of Lebanon in an effort to destroy Hezbollah. Israel lost the 2006 war and was unable to advance inside Lebanon.

While Geagea and the Lebanese Forces were collaborating with the enemy, Hezbollah was fighting Israel, and was victorious in finally freeing Lebanon of Israeli occupation, except for the Shebaa Farms area on the border, which remains occupied by Israel.

The LF has used the tragic death of Pascal Sleiman as a chance to ignite the flames of sectarianism by blaming Hezbollah for a hand in his death. The killers were Syrians, and Hezbollah and the Syrian government are seen as allies, and part of the axis of resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms.

Since October, Hezbollah has traded attacks with Israel along the border in response to the brutal genocide Israel is waging on the Palestinian people in Gaza.

In a speech made on Monday, Hezbollah secretary-general **Hassan Nasrallah** said Sleiman's abduction "has nothing to do with politics or Hezbollah", condemning the accusations.

Tensions between Hezbollah and the LF have persisted over the years, and the LF accuses Hezbollah of endangering Lebanon in a full scale war with Israel in response to the repeated attacks by Hezbollah.

Lebanon's financial meltdown began in 2019, and the LF accused FPM and Hezbollah of being responsible for the economic crisis which saw banks closing and people on the brink of starvation.

The anti-Syrian sentiment is soaring after the death of Sleiman. Videos on social media show protests, blocked roads and sectarian tensions rising as some political groups call for Syrian refugees to face collective punishment.

Many Lebanese, including politicians, have long pushed for Syrian refugees to go home. The Syrians came flooding into Lebanon, and elsewhere, during the US-NATO attack on Syria which began in 2011 for regime change. The conflict in Syria is over, and many refugees have returned to Syria, but many Syrians living in Lebanon have put down roots after so many years and refuse to leave.

Syrians have been blamed for the economic crisis, instead of blaming the Lebanese officials who have sucked the country dry over decades of corruption.

Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi warned that "this country cannot withstand problems and sectarian strife".

The security forces have been instructed "to strictly enforce Lebanese laws on Syrian refugees", he told reporters after a meeting about Sleiman's killing.

"We will become stricter in granting residency permits and dealing with those (Syrians) residing in Lebanon illegally," Mawlawi added, urging people to stop renting apartments informally to Syrians.

He also called for "limiting the presence of Syrians" in the country, without saying how.

Lebanese **Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib** called the number of Syrians a "problem".

"We have 2.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a country of five million, and half a million Palestinians," he told reporters in Athens.

The United Nations refugee agency says more than 800,000 Syrian refugees are registered with the body in Lebanon, noting registrations have been suspended since 2015 following a government ruling.

Ramzi Kaiss from the US-based group Human Rights Watch said Beirut must ensure the investigation into the killing is thorough and transparent in light of decades of impunity in Lebanon for politically sensitive killings.

"Attempts to scapegoat the entire refugee population are deplorable" and "threaten to fuel already ongoing violence against Syrians in Lebanon," Kaiss told AFP.

The body of Sleiman was handed over to the Lebanese Red Cross from the Syrian authorities, and then was taken on a planned procession which stopped at the LF office in Jbeil. His final journey was accompanied by Kataeb supporters, and citizens hearing in the background the national anthem being played.

Most Lebanese say they saw enough civil war and never want to see it raise its ugly head

once more. They are looking for peace, economic recovery, and the future of their children. However, they are some who will use even a crime to stoke the flames of sectarian hatred.

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