

Who Tried to Kill Palestinian Ambassador Abass Zaki and Why?

Four Murders at Mieh Mieh Refugee Camp

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Yesterday afternoon, Kamal Medhat, 58, known in Lebanon's Palestinian Camps affectionately as 'Kamal Naji', a senior member of the Palestinian Fatah movement was killed exiting Mieh Meih Camp by a 25-30 kilogram bomb. The bomb was hidden in a small roadside shed between two checkpoints, one manned by the Lebanese army and the other at the Kifah el Musallah Camp security check point. According to Fateh intelligence sources, a man on a tall building near the Camp entrance watched Medhat's car approach and detonated it as he passed at almost exactly 2 pm.

The bombing appears to have been an assassination hit aimed at the Palestinian Ambassador to Lebanon, Abass Zaki. Also killed were Akram Daher, Director of the PLO's youth organization in Lebanon, and Medhat's bodyguards, Khaled Daher and Mohammed Shehadeh. Three Palestinians in a second car were seriously injured and are being treated in hospital.

Fateh sources claim the real target was Abass Zaki, the PLO Diplomatic Representative to Lebanon. Zaki had left Mieh Mieh, a camp of about 5,000 refugees, about 7 minutes earlier in a nearly identical window-darkened black car to that of his deputy, Kamal Medhat. Medhat has paused in exiting the Camp to further express his condolences at a funeral held for his friend and Chairman of the Mieh Mieh Camp Popular Committee, Raef Naufal who was killed while trying to calm down a two-family feud between the Faraj and Kaouch families two days earlier.

The much respected Medhat, who joined Fatah from his village near Gaza when he was sixteen years old, was a loyalist to, and confidant of Yasser Arafat and Abu Jihad. He rose within the PLO's ranks and earned a PhD in International relations and military science in the USSR. Recently Medhat played a key role in tamping down violence and tension among various groups in Ein el Helwe and in fostering dialogue among Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian community. Among his PLO portfolios was former Head of Intelligence in Lebanon. PLO Embassy staff noted that Medhat had recently expressed to colleagues his suspicions that he was being targeted for assassination and that he advised his superiors in Ramallah of his concerns.

Their response, if any, was not known to the Embassy staff, but according to Fatah sources close to Zaki, the Mokhabarat Jeish Lebneene (Lebanese army intelligence) has been warning both Medhat and Zaki not to move around the Camps and to restrict their movements outside their secured offices.

Zaki, mild mannered, reserved, and a bit formal and distant on first meeting, appears to be increasingly well liked in the Palestinian and Lebanese community. He is available to his people and at virtually every Palestinian event I have attended the past 30 months, Zaki was there—from distributing laptops to Palestinian youngsters on the 26th anniversary of the Sabra-Shatila Massacre last September 16 in Shatila Camp, or various rallies in support of Gaza. He rarely missed Palestinian holidays or commemorative events at UNESCO Palace or other venues and sometimes joined with Hamas leader Osama Hamdan, in preaching Palestinian unity! Palestinian Unity! Palestinian Unity!

Whoever tried to kill him knew that there was a very good chance that Zaka would, in Arab tradition, visit Mieh Mieh yesterday for the funeral of his friend and colleague, Raef Naufal.

There is common agreement in Lebanon's Palestinian community Tuesday morning that the motive for the assassination attempt was to torpedo the growing intra-Palestinian unity moves in Lebanon and in order undermine Lebanon's recent stability. Zaki and his colleagues have been working hard for Fatah-Hamas unity in Lebanon.

Fatah's 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," he told the press.

Osama Hamdan, the popular representative of Hamas in Lebanon, condemned the killing, saying it was aimed at creating discord in Palestinian camps. Hezbollah said the attack bore "the fingerprints of the Zionists and was aimed at sowing discord."

No one has claimed responsibility and no one likely will. The most frequently mentioned suspects this morning include Israel, Syria, Egypt and the US.

One suspect mentioned is a "third party Palestinian faction" led by Mohammad Dahlan in Ramallah working on behalf of Israel and the US and wanting to prevent Palestinian unity to confront Israel.

Some have mentioned an Egyptian involvement arguing that Mubarak does not want the Cairo talks to succeed because he fears Hamas will have the upper hand in becoming the new Palestinian leadership.

A Lebanese army source noted that the 30 kilo bomb used (one body was thrown 200 meters from one of the two destroyed vehicles and Medhat's car was literally blown up the hill into an olive grove) was similar to the m.o. used in the Tripoli attacks on the Army in 2007. Fatah el Islam is the primary suspect in that attack.

The fact of the two-day, Beirut-hosted Arab Interior Ministers' Meeting which ended yesterday at the Phoenicia Hotel and which was focusing on "Combating Internal Terrorism" may have been the recipient of a message from Al Qaeda or another group has been speculated upon.

Kassem a very knowledgeable Fatah official in Shatila Camp and longtime friend, reported a fairly common deep suspicion that Syria was somehow behind the killing.

Kassem, it must be said, is no admirer of the Syrian Assad regime. At the beginning of the Syrian instigated Camp Wars in the mid-1980's, when the Amal militia cut electricity,

Kassem was hauling an electrical generator from Shatila Camp to Akka Hospital on Kuwait Embassy road and was stopped by a Syrian Army patrol and accused of supporting Yassir Arafat from whom the Syrian were trying to wrest control of the PLO. Tortured repeatedly, and imprisoned for four years, Kassem sees Syrian involvement yesterday at Mieh Mieh:

“Maybe they used Fatah el Islam in Meih Meih of Jung el Sham or others. But they don’t need those fools. Syria has the same intelligence capability as before their army left in 2005. For sure they have never stopped trying to split and control the PLO for their own benefit and not for ours.”

At this point, Kassem’s politically astute teenage daughter Zeina mercifully intervenes:

“I am not so convinced it was the Syrians, Bapa (father). The Israelis still have plenty of agents in the camps. We all know that for sure. Remember the recent Israeli spies caught? I thought that one man was one for a long time. There are even Israeli spies inside Hezbollah like their trusted vehicle-supplier man in Nabatiyeh arrested a couple of weeks ago. I think it’s not the Syrians but the Israelis.”

Like just about everything that happens in Lebanon these days , yesterday’s assassination is analyzed locally through the prism of who stands to gain by this crime in the fast approaching June 7 election. The Pro US-Saudi March 14 ‘majority team’ or the pro-Syrian-Iran March 8th Opposition lead by Hezbollah?

Meanwhile the Lebanese authorities promise an immediate, thorough investigation to find those responsible for the murders at Mieh Mieh. The good people of Lebanon, as is their fate, will patiently wait for the Investigation Report, just as they still wait for the reports of the Lebanese investigations into the most recent 46 political assassinations in Lebanon over the past decade, more than half of those killed being body guards of the intended victims.

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