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June 11, 2013

Embassy killing may herald hardened Hezbollah stance

Analysts fear new threats to freedom of expression after the Sunday killing of a peaceful student demonstrator



Were it not for the young man in the bulletproof vest, leaning confidently on the butt of his AK-47 under the awning by the entrance, the La Diva building would have looked no different than any other apartment block in the elegant Mar Taqla neighborhood of Hazmiyeh, overlooking Beirut and the Mediterranean from the hills to the south-east.

As it happens, though, the multi-story building is the headquarters of the Lebanese Option (LO) Party, a small Shiite group opposed to the Hezbollah-Amal duopoly that wields almost total political control of Lebanon's largest religious minority. NOW paid the office a visit Tuesday afternoon during condolences held for Hisham Salman, the 28 year-old head of the party's student faction who was **shot dead** by presumed Hezbollah affiliates during a protest Sunday outside Beirut's Iranian embassy. With reports of further harassment of LO members following the killing, Salman's comrades were evidently taking few chances on security.

Inside, the walls of a large room on the ground floor had been lined with thick wooden chairs, some of them occupied by solemn men and women dressed in black. The party's leader, Ahmad al-Assaad, was busy greeting those had come to offer their condolences, so NOW spoke in an adjacent office to Abir al-Assaad, the party's youth chancellor who is also Ahmad's wife.

"It was a peaceful demonstration, to oppose the decision to involve Hezbollah in Syria's battles," she told NOW. "We never imagined it would be dangerous, we had full permission from the interior ministry and notified them five days in advance. We thought this was Lebanon, we are allowed to say whatever we want."

Instead, according to an LO **statement** as well as eyewitness accounts, the demonstrators had scarcely alighted from the bus on which they arrived before they were confronted by dozens of men wearing black shirts and yellow armbands, who beat them with batons and then fired on them. Salman was shot in the back, legs, and stomach, dying shortly afterward.

Though the identities of the gunmen have not been confirmed, they are widely believed to be affiliated with Hezbollah, the militia-cum-party with strong political, ideological, and financial ties to Tehran. Dr. Imad Salamey, professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, pointed to the fact that Hezbollah **prevented** Salman's body from being buried in his hometown's cemetery as further evidence implicating the Party in his death. Both the Hezbollah press spokesperson and the Iranian embassy declined to comment on the incident to NOW.

“They can only be those opposing our beliefs, which means either Hezbollah or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards,” said al-Assaad. “Whether they were Hezbollah members or just ‘supporters’ is irrelevant to us, the effect is the same.”

One of several unusual features of the story is that recent months have seen Hezbollah exercise notable restraint against Lebanese critics, some of whom – such as Sidonian Salafist Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir – have been far more physically provocative than the nonviolent, relatively obscure LO.

“Maybe it’s because we are Shiites,” said al-Assaad when NOW asked why the response had been so singularly violent in this case. “It’s forbidden to be a liberal Shiite who opposes the Party of God.”

“Or maybe the Iranian embassy is a holy site,” she jokes, alluding to Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria on the pretext of defending the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus.

Indeed, the Party’s unprecedented decision to send thousands of fighters to the inter-Arab war next door – and the hundreds of casualties incurred as a result – may be compelling it to take a firmer stance against internal dissent, according to Salamey.

“There’s blood on the ground,” he told NOW. “Hezbollah has lost a lot of people, and tensions are running high. They feel they’re in an existential struggle, in which they either live or die. So whoever opposes them now is being portrayed as part of the conspiracy against them, in which case justifying their extermination becomes easy.”

Accordingly, Salman’s killing may be a message from Hezbollah that the prior period of restraint with critics is over.

“This is very new for Lebanon, what happened in front of the Iranian embassy. We’ve never seen anything like this before. And it has very strong implications for the right to protest, the right to peaceful assembly. It’s the first time we see such a violent reaction to people voicing their views toward a particular policy.”

“This is the political culture sponsored by the Iranian brand of theocracy. What happened in Iran in 2009 is now being carried out by Iran’s supporters in Lebanon.”

Maya Gebeily and Yara Chehayed contributed reporting.