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## What really happened in Arsal?



The street was closed in front of the Arsal municipality building on Wednesday at noon, as many village residents were protesting.

“We are not terrorists. There is no al-Qaeda in Arsal. This is a lie. We are innocent,” a woman shouted as her neighbors, children and adults, gathered around her nodding in approval. “We all saw what happened. Why is the army against us?”

Arsal, a village in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, was the scene of an incident that left two Lebanese army officers and a terrorism suspect dead last Friday. But what really happened is still being debated.

The LAF announced that Major Pierre Bechaalany and Adjutant Ibrahim Zahraman had been killed after being ambushed during an operation to arrest Khaled Hmayyed, a 45-year-old Aarsal resident wanted on terrorism charges. According to official statements, during the operation the soldiers were attacked by a group of armed men who killed the two officers. The LAF placed checkpoints at all the entrances to the village in search of the suspects and sent a list with the names of 80 wanted people to the municipality.

However, many villagers in Aarsal who claim they saw everything on Friday tell a different story from what the LAF has been reporting.

The Toyota pickup truck that Hmayyed was driving at the time of the incident is still at the location of the shooting. Municipality council members said it will not be moved until an independent commission is named to investigate the incident instead of the Lebanese military intelligence.

The suspect was shot through the front window of the car, with what appears to have been a machinegun. Hmayyed's neighbors say they saw everything. Most of the witnesses were women, because at noon on Friday, most men were at the mosque to pray.

"They came with two cars, a jeep and a van," a woman in her 60s told NOW. "They waited over there in the bushes, and when he came out of his house and drove onto the road, they stopped him, one car from the back and one from the front. Then men in civilian clothes shot at his car. I don't think they killed him on the spot, because I saw them while they dragged him out and they shot him in the head. Then they took the body away to their car," she said.

"I live right there, next to his house," said a young woman standing nearby, pointing toward a group of houses around 100 meters away from the road where the shooting had happened. "Why didn't they come to take him from home? Why did they have to kill him like this?" she said, sobbing.

"We all thought they were Hezbollah, because the two cars were civilian and the people who shot him were wearing civilian clothes," the younger woman said. "The army with the Hummers came in later, after the people attacked those who killed Khaled [Hmayyed] because they were taking his body away. The army came in to put an end to the fight. One of the officers [Bechaalany] had been shot in the head, I saw him. He died on the spot. The other man [Adjutant Ibrahim Zahraman] was shot in the chest, and we took him to the municipality building. He died because the ambulance did not come in time," she said.

It is not clear what ultimately happened to the men whom villagers say killed Hmayyed.

Vice President of the municipality Ahmad Fleeti told NOW that they investigated why Hmayyed was wanted by the army, which claims he had ties to al-Qaeda, though it has offered no proof. “Khaled was never called for any investigation. His record was clean. This was not an arrest, it was an assassination. We have evidence, we collected pictures and we want an independent commission to investigate this. We refuse to cooperate with the military intelligence,” he added.

Arsal has been making headlines for the past two years because it sheltered thousands of Syrian refugees who crossed the border through the village’s farmlands to escape the fighting in their home country. Arsal also made the headlines when the Syrian army **shot** two Lebanese shepherds and accused them of being al-Qaeda operatives, and **bombarded** the Lebanese farmland close to the border last year because Syrian rebels allegedly prepared their operations there.

“Arsal played a big role since the Syrian uprising began,” Fleeti said. “The Syrian army attacked all the time this border area. We called for the army to come and stop all the attacks and patrol the border. But they never showed up.”

“My father was a good man. He was no terrorist,” said Hmayyed’s eldest daughter, 22-year-old Walaa Ameid, adding that all her aunts are married to Syrians and the whole family is sheltering refugees.

Fleeti confirmed that Hmayyed was known to have been an activist who helped Syrians and often transported wounded people over the border.

“He had brought a wounded man the night before he was killed. That was the last thing he did before he died,” Fleeti said. “If Khaled was a terrorist, we are all terrorists because we are all activists and we are all helping Syrians against the regime.”