

08 January 2014, Wednesday

YAŞAR YAKIŞ
y.yakis@todayszaman.com



Mohammed Chata and the proxy war in Lebanon

On Dec. 19 two blasts near the Iranian Embassy in Beirut killed 23 innocent people. An al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, claimed responsibility and added that such attacks would continue unless Hezbollah stops supporting the Syrian dictator, President Bashar al-Assad. Apparently other volunteers are waiting for their turn to blow themselves up for the sacred cause of killing a “takfiri” (heathen) in exchange for a guaranteed place in paradise.

Lebanese military authorities detained Saudi citizen Majid bin Mohammed al-Majid, leader of the Azzam Brigades, on Jan. 1. Majid is wanted in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan and several Western countries, including the US. Saudi Arabia asked Lebanon to extradite Majid “because what he had to say was going to be very important for Saudi Arabia.” However Majid could not fulfill this important task because he passed away on Jan. 5 “of natural causes” while he was in custody in Lebanon.

Before the mist around this double suicide bomb dissipated, another murder was committed on Dec. 27 in the same capital. This time, the victim was a very dear friend of mine, Mohammed Chatah, along with seven other Lebanese civilians.

Mohammed and I were members of a High Level Group chaired by His Royal Highness Prince Hassan of Jordan. This High Level Group was working on a project called “Blue peace in the Middle East.” A month ago I was in Amman with Mohammed, participating in a very fruitful meeting where he made substantive contributions to the work of the High Level Group, as he always used to do (See my column of Dec. 4, 2013: http://todayszaman.com/columnist/yasar-yakis_333126_blue-peace-in-the-middle-east.html). We had promised each other to continue our extremely pleasant exchange of views at the next meeting of the Blue Peace group in İstanbul.

Mohammed served as Lebanon's minister of finance and ambassador to Washington. He was a very trusted advisor to the late prime minister of Lebanon, Rafiq Hariri, who was murdered in 2005. Mohammed was a soft-spoken, very knowledgeable and wise man. Everybody attending his meetings always had an excellent impression of his contributions. He was regarded by many Lebanese as a man of dialogue and moderation.

The entire truth behind this murder will perhaps never be known. However, if Majid had not died “of natural causes” in custody, we would know a little more about the complicated background of these incidents. Saad Hariri, the son of late Prime Minister Hariri and former prime minister himself as well as the ex-leader of the Lebanese political party Moustaqbel (future) said immediately after the murder that the killers of his father and that of Chatah “are one and the same.” In the Lebanese jargon, this means the Syrian regime.

When he was killed, Chatah was on his way to host a meeting of the opposition parties called

the March 14 Coalition. The members of this coalition are unarmed, and they are also opposed to Sunni extremists. Hezbollah chose an easy target to punish its main adversary, Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah is closely linked to Iran and provides support to the Syrian regime. Hariri's comments are in line with the content of a tweet that Mohammed had sent one hour before he was murdered: "Hezbollah is pressing to be granted similar powers in security and foreign policy matters that Syria exercised in Lebanon for 15 years."

The Sunni-Shi'a divide has always been present in the minds of the people in Syria and Iraq, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Iran itself, but it was not voiced loudly for fear of the repercussions. The Iraqi domestic disturbances and the Syrian crisis turned the subject to a lively one.

Saudi Arabia extended a grant of \$3 billion to Lebanon to purchase military equipment from France. This grant is mainly aimed at countering Hezbollah in Lebanese territory. Iran also prefers Lebanon to fight the Saudi influence. The result is that Lebanon has become the battlefield of a proxy war, and valuable Lebanese political figures and many innocent civilians are killed for a cause that is not theirs in Lebanon, in this oasis of sophisticated society in the heart of the Middle East.

May peace be upon you, dear Mohammed!