

Ghazi Kanaan's Mysterious Death An Organic Problem or a Threat to the Assad Regime?

by Don Quixote

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The Lebanese, and many Syrians, were surprised today by the death of Ghazi Kanaan, interior minister in the Baath regime in Syria and former governor of its Lebanese "protectorate" (1983 – 2002).

Kanaan is credited with dismantling the Lebanese internal security systems and engineering instead the Syrian-Lebanese security system. His system took control of Lebanon since 1990 and became the king-maker in Lebanese life at all levels. Most Lebanese politicians owe their role in politics to Mr. Kanaan. It was enough to gain his favor in order to secure a role in business or in government.

All this is history now. Many of Kanaan friends had a change of heart once the iron man left Lebanon and handed the mission to his successor Rustom Ghazaleh. The latter must have charged a higher premium for services to the dismay of many Lebanese leaders, so he became the lynchpin in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri along with the heads of the security systems that Kanaan had previously appointed.

Whether Kanaan killed himself, or was made to kill himself, or was assassinated by an element of the Baath regime, or an enemy thereof shall remain the subject of speculations. I doubt, though, if any Lebanese will shed a tear over his loss. Most Lebanese have had their fair share of Kanaan's heavy hand in Lebanon.

But the quintessential question may not be *who* eliminated Ghazi Kanaan (for that shall remain a mystery) but *why*? Once we find out the "why", we can reasonably deduce the "who".

The reasons for eliminating Kanaan range from the simple straightforward ones to the ones motivated by accusation of corruption (as in Mahmoud Zuabi case) to the ones motivated by security or political concerns. Without forgetting the conspiratorial, seven reasons come to mind:

Reason #1. Ghazi Kanaan may have suffered from a chronic depression that went untreated and led him to suicide. The World Health Organization reports that up to 15% of those who are clinically depressed die by suicide. A number of factors that can increase the risk of suicide include adverse life events and stress. Kanaan may have had his share of stress and adverse personal events. But one cannot ignore the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms, and the current international crisis of the Syrian regime. These may be the cause of extreme stress for many Syrian officials, particularly that the Golan Heights have been occupied for more than 38 years and are likely to remain occupied for a while. If this is the case, then this should prompt the Syrian authorities to launch a massive "depression awareness" campaign in Syria to prevent similar accidents from happening in the future, at least at cabinet levels.

Reason #2. This one is a favorite and it is the one propagated by many an authority in the Baath regime: Kanaan could not take all the attacks from the Lebanese media on his character and on the "positive" role that Syria played in Lebanon; especially after all he has done to this country. He was so saddened by the latest turn of events. So he made a phone call to a Lebanese radio station to refute some of these attacks, declare his last will and testament and then he committed suicide. Tell this to a "Homsy" and even he may laugh at you (no offense to the people of Homs). Those who know well Ghazi Kanaan, know equally well that it would have been easier for him to silence the news medium "Syrian style" than to commit suicide.

Reason #3. He masterminded the assassination of Rafiq Hariri believing this would strengthen Syria's hand in Lebanon. It backfired and Assad refused to protect him, but gave him the option of self-adjudication. He chose it.

Reason #4. He was the scapegoat in a new deal between Assad and the USA. Terminating him will facilitate a new agreement between Bashar's regime and the US administration. Assad the son, feeling the heat of the Mehlis report, may have decided to reach out to the US proffering to accept its "new deal" in the region, in exchange for staying in power (Gadhafi style). A proposition that the late Ghazi Kanaan opposed on "national" grounds, which prompted him to leave the regime.

Reason #5. He knew a lot. Specifically, he knew enough to implicate high ranking members of the Assad family, his regime and his security systems in the assassination of Hariri. Although a trusted member of the "old guard" under Assad the father, when push came to shove, it was safer to sacrifice him.

Reason #6. He realized the Baath regime in Syria was on a suicidal path and he wanted to distinguish himself from the group by doing it alone. Watching what happened to Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq gave him pause and pushed him to preempt a similar fate. He terminated his life.

Reason #7. The most likely scenario: he was part of the plan to overthrow the Assad regime. The plan included, among others, Abdel-Halim Khaddam (recently expelled from the Syrian Baath party and currently residing in Paris as a guest of Saad Hariri) and many senior members of the "old guard" disenfranchised by the ascension of young Bashar to power, only to see him ruin what they worked hard to build with his father. Ghazi Kanaan remained inside Syria to coordinate the intended coup with the intelligence and troops on the ground. The plot was uncovered and he was asked to self-terminate, "Nazi style."

He may have been led to believe that his life would be spared if he gave a pre-written statement on a Lebanese radio attacking Lebanese media and polishing the image of his regime. But having served for decades in the regime and perhaps having given similar ultimatums to others, he knew very well that it would be his last statement.

Regardless of the reason, his death marks the end of an era in Syrian and Lebanese politics. However, many Lebanese would have loved for him to live and stand trial for the atrocities he committed in Lebanon. Even in his death, he robbed them the pleasure of seeing his neck at the end of a rope.