

A Bomb in Damascus

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Hezbollah supporters march in the funeral procession of Imad Mugniyah. (AP /Mohammed Zaatari)

The November 2007 Annapolis summit, which aimed to breathe life into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, put Syria back on the diplomatic map. After initial questions over whether Damascus would be invited, analysts [applauded Syria's attendance](#) and suggested a push for Israeli-Syrian reconciliation might be a first step toward a broader peace. Now, a few months down the road, that idea seems sidelined. Several incidents this week—including the assassination of Hezbollah's fugitive terrorist mastermind, a dangerous stalemate in Lebanese politics, and new U.S. sanctions against Syria—could have lasting ramifications for the region.

First, a February 12 [car bombing \(NYT\)](#) in Damascus took the life of [Imad Mugniyah](#), widely considered the brains behind several [Hezbollah](#) terrorist acts in the 1980s and 1990s. At one point, before Osama bin Laden gained widespread notoriety, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) listed Mugniyah as the most wanted terrorist in the world. The United States had a \$25 million bounty on his head, equal to that for bin Laden. Israeli officials

[deny involvement in the assassination \(Haaretz\)](#), but a video report from al-Jazeera notes [speculation to the contrary](#) and *Haaretz* writes that Israeli embassies have gone on [high security alert](#) in the days since. Another Israeli paper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, quotes former senior CIA official Bruce Reidel saying Israel's Mossad intelligence service [almost certainly ran the operation](#).

Beyond possible reprisals, the implications of Mugnyiah's killing remain myriad. On February 13, a day after the bombing, President George W. Bush announced [an expansion of U.S. sanctions against Syria](#), freezing U.S. assets of Syrian officials deemed to have benefited from "public corruption." He accused Damascus of working against stability in Iraq, and said Syria "continues to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy, imprison democracy activists, curtail human rights, and sponsor and harbor terrorists."

Reuters notes that Damascus has [repeatedly denied allegations](#) levied against it by Washington. Syria ended a twenty-nine-year presence in Lebanon in 2005, following the international uproar that coincided with the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, an act still under investigation that UN officials have previously [blamed on Syrian intelligence officials \(WashPost\)](#). Washington says Syria continues to play a destabilizing role in the region, particularly during Lebanon's recent effort to install a new president. It also accuses Syria of cooperation with Washington's regional bête noir, Iran. Tehran sent its foreign minister to the Beirut funeral, and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [hailed Mugnyiah \(IRNA\)](#) as a "great man who devoted his life for freedom of his country."

All of this brought new attention to the political stalemate in Lebanon at a time when tensions in Beirut have already risen to fever pitch. Analysts watched closely on February 14 as [rival groups gathered in Beirut \(al-Jazeera\)](#), one to mark the three-year anniversary of Hariri's assassination, the other to mourn Mugniyah. In a CFR meeting on February 12, Fellows Steven A. Cook and Mohamad Bazzi examined [Syria's support of opposition parties](#) in Lebanon and Hezbollah, noting that pressures from pro-Syria factions in Lebanon's government have blocked attempts to install a new president. The *Daily Star* broaches the possibility that political tensions in Lebanon could [devolve into civil war](#), but notes that the Lebanese military stands poised to step in should fighting break out.

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