

THE \$3 BILLION SAUDI PLEDGE TO LEBANON: MILITARY SUPPORT, EXTRADITION FEE OR HIT JOB PAYMENT?

Back in November, two bomb blasts in front of the Iranian embassy in Beirut killed 23 people. From the very beginning, it was known that an al Qaeda-linked group known as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades was responsible for the attack. In a fascinating sequence of events, we have learned that the mastermind of the attack, Majed al-Majed, died in Lebanese custody. Iran claims that Majed had very strong ties to Saudi Arabia, and specifically to Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan. In a very interesting twist, Saudi Arabia announced a pledge of \$3 billion to Lebanon, ostensibly to be used to buy weapons from France. The announcement most likely came after Majed had been arrested but before news reports had leaked out about his detention, although news reports vary widely on when and where he was detained.

The announcement of the Saudi pledge to Lebanon came on December 29:

Saudi Arabia has pledged \$3bn for the Lebanese army, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman announced, calling it the largest grant ever given to the country's armed forces.

/snip/

"The king of the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is offering this generous and appreciated aid of \$3bn to the Lebanese army to strengthen its capabilities," Suleiman said in a televised address on Sunday.

He said the funds would allow Lebanon's

military to purchase French weapons.

An AFP report suggested that Majed was arrested around December 26:

An Al-Qaeda-linked Saudi suspect detained in Lebanon is being held in a military hospital because “he is in poor health”, a medical official told AFP Friday.

/snip/

The doctor who had been treating Majid before his arrest without knowing who he was said he suffers from kidney failure and requires regular dialysis.

“On December 26, the hospital where Majid was being treated contacted the Red Cross to arrange his transfer to another hospital,” said the source.

But before the suspect arrived at the second facility, “the Lebanese army intelligence intercepted the ambulance and arrested Majid,” the source said, adding that neither the hospital nor the ambulance teams had prior knowledge of who Majid was.

In its announcement on January 1 of Majed’s arrest, the New York Times has highly conflicting information about when the arrest took place. First, this bit suggests they were working under the assumption that the arrest was near the January 1 date of the article:

He was taken into custody just three days after Saudi Arabia pledged a \$3 billion aid package to the Lebanese Army.

But near the end of this same article, the Times suggests that he was in custody as early as December 15 (clearly before the Saudi pledge was announced):

While it is not known when Mr. Majid was detained, Hezbollah's television channel Al Manar quoted Lebanese security officials as saying that an attack on a security checkpoint on Dec. 15 near Sidon and the Ein al-Hilwe camp was an attempt by militants to free him.

Given the additional detail and reporting from doctors involved in his treatment, the AFP report seems to me to be more reliable, placing Majed's arrest after December 26, but most likely not very long after that date since a patient requiring dialysis cannot put it off for very many days.

The Times report suggests that Saudi Arabia considered Majed to be a criminal:

While there was no immediate response from Saudi Arabia, there is little sympathy in its government for Mr. Majid, who is on its list of people most wanted for links with Al Qaeda. A Lebanese newspaper, Al Safir, wrote that he was "wanted by Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and several other Western countries, mainly the United States."

Iran has a starkly different reading on Majed's relation to the Saudi government. From a Sunday Mehr News article that also mentions that Majed died on Saturday, we have this:

A high-ranking Lebanese General disclosed the identity of a Saudi national who was detained by the security forces along with Majed al-Majed, the mastermind of the November 19 bombing attack on the Iranian embassy in Lebanon and ringleader of the terrorist Abdullah Izzam Brigade.

"The Saudi national accompanying Majed al-Majed at the time of detention was the son of Saudi Intelligence Chief Bandar bin Sultan," the Lebanese General

told FNA on Sunday on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

Although the dates are still fuzzy, it seems most likely that Bandar's son would have been accompanying Majed as he was being transferred from the first hospital to the one where he was to undergo dialysis. If Bandar's son was indeed with Majed as he was receiving medical treatment from doctors who didn't know who he was, that suggests very strongly that Majed was under the control of Bandar rather than being sought by the Saudi government as a wanted terrorist. The Mehr News article cited Lebanese sources to the same effect:

On Thursday, Lebanese sources disclosed that Majed had taken orders from Saudi Spy Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan.

Iran makes further interesting claims in this same Mehr News article. They suggest that the \$3 billion pledge from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon was meant as a reward for releasing Majed to them:

Earlier today, senior parliamentary officials in Tehran disclosed that Saudi Arabia had offered to pay \$3bln to the Lebanese government in return for the extradition of Al-Majed, the suspected head of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades – Ziad al-Jarrah Battalion, that claimed responsibility for the November attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut which killed 23 people.

"The Saudi government has considered \$3bln for the extradition of the individual behind the Iranian embassy blast in Lebanon, indicating that the remarks he might make are vitally important for the Saudi government," Vice-Chairman of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Mansour Haqiqatpour told FNA

on Saturday.

However, with Majed now dead, there are other considerations. From the same article again:

Political analysts believe that the supporters and financiers of Abdullah Izzam terrorist group have killed Majed for the fear of the possible revelations he could make against the Saudi Takfiri groups and his masters.

Oh my. Does that mean the \$3 billion is more of a payoff for a hit rather than an enticement to extradition?

This is, of course, all wild speculation. More conventional analysis of the Saudi grant is here. But Iran seems determined to dig further into the situation, as they are now even offering to help with an autopsy. Remember that normally, Islamic practice calls for burial as soon as possible. Autopsies are not common and an autopsy several days after death would be even more unusual.