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## **Portrait of Ghazi Kanaan, designer and implementer of the Syrian order in Lebanon, and handler of Palestinian and Lebanese terrorists serving the Syrian régime**

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**The “high commissioner” in Lebanon, Ghazi Muhammad Kanaan  
(Al-Jazeera, October 12, 2005)**

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## Overview

✿ General **Ghazi bin Muhammad Kanaan** (Abu Ya'rub) was born in 1942 in the village of Bhamra in the Latakia district of Syria, married and father of six,<sup>2</sup> member of the Ba'ath party and an Alawite Muslim.

✿ He began his professional career in the military security branch in the **Homs district** in northern Syria; the branch's main function was to uncover and suppress opposition to the régime. However, his crowning achievement was his long tour of duty in **Lebanon**, where the Lebanese referred to him as the "**high commissioner**."<sup>3</sup> For twenty years he worked there to establish the *Syrian order*. As the main enforcer of Syrian policy in Lebanon, he exploited a combination of intelligence activity, political pressure and manipulation of the Lebanese and Palestinian terrorist organizations against both Syria's enemies and Israel.

✿ During his posting to Lebanon he earned the reputation of being clever, aggressive and experienced in intelligence work, and very knowledgeable regarding the secrets of the Lebanese government. Like many other high-ranking Syrian officers, **he was not squeamish about exploiting his position and his control of terrorist and criminal elements to line his own pockets and ensure his economic future**, and it was not by coincidence that his name was linked to corruption in Lebanon. His political "achievements" and tactics of suppression and oppression won him the respect of the late Syrian president Hafez Assad and the top-ranking members of the régime.

✿ **Under Bashar Assad**, when Syria's influence in Lebanon weakened, **Kanaan fell from grace and was kicked upstairs** to assignments with less power and responsibility. He mysteriously committed suicide on October 12, 2005, a week before

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<sup>2</sup> According to Times Online, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,60-1828903,00.html>.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the High Commissioner of the French Mandate of Lebanon, created under the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War and lasting until Lebanon gained independence in 1943.

the UN report about the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was made public. The day before his suicide, the Lebanese television station NTV reported that Kanaan had admitted to the UN committee headed by Detlev Mehlis that **he had been involved in corrupt activities**. In the last interview he gave the Voice of Free Lebanon radio station he strenuously denied the NTV report.

## **Milestones in Ghazi Kanaan's career**

❖ **1963-1965**: Kanaan graduated from an officers' course in field artillery. When Alawite Muslims rose to power and took control of Syria, he abandoned field artillery for the sensitive role of protecting the régime's security.

❖ **1965-1983 -- Internal security activities in the Homs district:**

▣ After Hafez Assad took control and based his régime on Alawite Muslims, Ghazi Kanaan held a series of positions related to **internal security** in Homs. In 1973 he was appointed head of the military security branch in Homs, and between 1973-1983 he dealt with elements there subversive to Assad's regime, acquiring a great deal of experience in the field.

▣ Even then Ghazi Kanaan was involved in anti-Israeli terrorism and provided support for the Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FLP), the group led by Abu al-'Abbas. Interrogated operatives of the terrorist organization, which used hang gliders to infiltrate Israel in March 1981, mentioned the involvement of then-Lt. Col. Ghazi Kanaan, commander of intelligence for Homs. They stated that he had permitted the FLP to establish a permanent hang-glider and hot-air balloon training base at Homs, where its terrorist squads could prepare for missions. **The combination of security activity and support of anti-Israeli terrorism was to characterize his activities throughout his tour of duty in Lebanon.**

❖ **August 1983 to October 2002 -- Ghazi Kanaan, “high commissioner” of Lebanon:**

▣ In 1983 he was appointed **head of the security and intelligence branch of Lebanon** and for the next 20 years used the office to **amass power**. He became an important partner in **formulating the Syrian order in Lebanon and a key figure in implementing all aspects of Syrian policies there**.

▣ During that time he was in charge of important individuals and power centers in Lebanon, and it was not a coincidence that the Lebanese called him the “**high commissioner**.” His headquarters in ‘**Anjar** in the Beka’a Valley became the symbol of Syrian oppression. He also dealt with handling terrorist elements – individuals, groups and organizations – which served the Syrian régime as proxies,<sup>4</sup> acting against both Israel and those Lebanese who opposed Syria

▣ During his extended tour of duty in Lebanon, he amassed not only power and wealth as is usual in such circumstances, but enemies as well, some of them among the higher echelons of Syria. It should be noted that on October 12, 2005 the Ilaf Internet site reported that Detlev Mehlis showed Kanaan a document proving that during the previous ten years a million dollars had passed through his account at Al-Medina Bank; some of the funds were transferred to a Turkish bank a week after assassination of Rafik Hariri, former Lebanese prime minister, opposed to the Syrian order.

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<sup>4</sup> Until the 1990s Syria was **directly involved** in terrorist operations. From the beginning of the 1990s on, it became careful and made sure to use proxies and “contractors” to carry out its terrorist-operations, since during the second half of the 1980s its involvement in international terrorism was exposed. The climax of its direct involvement in terrorism was the Nizar Hindawi affair, when on April 17, 1986, an attempt was foiled to plant a bomb on an El-Al flight from London carrying 375 passengers. Behind the affair were high-ranking Syrians, among them Gen. Muhammad Khouli and his aide Hitham Sayid, of the Syrian air forces Security Directorate.

❖ **2002-2005 -- Ghazi Kanaan left Lebanon and developed his position under Bashar Assad:** With the mounting difficulties Syria faced in Lebanon after the death of Hafez Assad, in October 2002 Kanaan was forced to end his 20 years there (and was replaced by Brig. Gen Rustum Ghazala). **He was appointed head of the political security apparatus, lowering his stature.** Two years later, in October 2004, he was kicked upstairs to the office of Minister of the Interior, a position he held until his death.

🌿 **Under Hafez Assad,** Ghazi Kanaan's professionalism, effectiveness and achievements in the Lebanese arena won him the **respect and admiration** of much of Syria's higher echelons. **However, he fell from grace under Bashar Assad because of the widening cracks in the Syrian order in Lebanon, which changed from a Syrian asset to a millstone around the régime's neck.** Kanaan's appointment as Minister of the Interior would seem to have been high point of his career, but in actual fact he had **less authority** than he did as head of political security.

## **Ghazi Kanaan, designer of the Syrian order in Lebanon and operator of terrorists**

🌿 During his long tour of duty in Lebanon, from 1983-2002 Ghazi Kanaan **played a central role in determining the Syrian order there. He imposed Syrian hegemony on Lebanon and established a political system controlled by Syria (the Taif régime).** His preferred method for advancing Syrian political goals was the carrot and the stick, buying off Lebanese politicians with bribes and bonuses, and not hesitating to suppress or murder anyone who opposed Syria. He acquired a reputation as an efficient, experienced handler of affairs well-versed in the intricacies of Lebanese internal politics.

🌿 In 1983, when Ghazi Kanaan went to Lebanon, Shiite suicide bombers affiliated with Hezbollah (which was then in its infancy) carried out spectacular series of terrorist actions against **American and French targets.** Hezbollah played into the hands of Syria, which was anxious to get rid of the international force in Lebanon. Prominent among the actions were the car bomb explosions at the American embassy in Beirut in April 1983 and suicide car

bombing attacks at bases of American Marines and the French unit of the international force in October 1983. **More than 300 American and 40 French soldiers were killed in the attacks**, and the tracks of the perpetrators led to Baalbek in the Beka'a Valley, which was under the control of the Syrian army and Syrian intelligence. The Syrians had allowed the suicide bombing attacks, aided in their perpetration and aimed them at American and French targets. High-ranking Syrians, including the then-president Hafez Assad, praised and glorified the attacks.

✿ In enforcing the Syrian order on Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan played a key role in the main developments which took place in Lebanon between the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s. His main achievements, and of Syrian policy at that time, were **sabotaging the Israeli-Lebanese agreement signed on the May 17, 1983**, sponsored by the United States;<sup>5</sup> **the signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989** (officially “the Document of National Accord”), which put an end to the Lebanese civil war and established Syrian influence in the country; **the suppression of opposition to Syria headed by Michel Aoun**; and **the signing of Syrian-Lebanese mutual cooperation agreements**.

✿ In addition, the Syrian campaign against Israeli involvement and influence in Lebanon, in which Ghazi Kanaan played a major role through the proxies he operated, was successful: The IDF withdrew from Lebanon in January 1985 and May 2000 under terrorist pressure and **attempts made to reach an agreement between and Lebanon were sabotaged**.

✿ As an integral part of implementing Syrian policy in Lebanon, **Ghazi Kanaan made intensive use of terrorism**, which had always been an important weapon in advancing Hafez Assad's goals, both in Lebanon and against Israel. To carry out terrorist actions he used individuals, groups and organizations belonging to the **secular left (mainly the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP))** and radical Islam (**Hezbollah**, supported and fostered by both Syria and Iran from its inception).

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<sup>5</sup> After Ghazi Kanaan's death, Walid Jumblatt lauded him at a press conference as a man who had supported “Lebanese resistance” against the “Israeli occupation” and had helped in nullifying the peace treaty with Israel in 1983 (Agence France-Presse, October 13, 2005).

✿ Terrorist-operatives sent against Israel often reported under interrogation that Ghazi Kanaan and Syrian intelligence were directly involved in promoting terrorist activities. Members of terrorist squads from Palestinian and Lebanese organizations who were detained between 1985-1987 reported that Ghazi Kanaan often coordinated with them at his headquarters in Anjar and office in Shtura. Syrian intelligence provided support and sent them to carry out attacks – including suicide bombing attacks -- on Israeli targets in the security zone. Among the suicide bombers conspicuous at the time operatives of the SSNP, which had a tradition of acting as a contractor for Syrian terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

✿ During the 1990s **the leftist Lebanese and Palestinian terrorist organizations became less useful** to Syria and were replaced by **Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic organizations** ( Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) **directed by Syria and Iran.** During those years **Ghazi Kanaan and Syrian intelligence helped Hezbollah establish itself as a dominant factor in Lebanon** and overcome its rival movement, Amal, after a series of violent clashes which took place in southern Lebanon. The Syrians also made it possible for advanced weapons to be flown in from Iran to the Damascus airport, and **from there they were transported to Hezbollah in Lebanon.**

✿ The massive military aid and political support Hezbollah received from Syria established its strength and gave it immense influence in Lebanon's internal arena, turning it into the leading terrorist organization operating against Israel. To facilitate Hezbollah's operations against Israel **the Syrians implemented the Taif Agreement selectively**, including the sections dealing with the disarming of the Lebanese militias.<sup>7</sup> After the Israeli withdrawal from the security zone in May 24, 2000, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 425, when the fighting against Israel had seemingly ended, **the Syrians gave their support**

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<sup>6</sup> Habib Tanius Shartuni, a member of the SSNP and possibly a Syrian proxy, assassinated Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese forces and opposed to the Syrian order in Lebanon. On September 14, 1982, he was assassinated, three weeks after having been elected president.

<sup>7</sup> The Christian, Druze and Shiite militias were in fact disarmed. Based on UN Security Council Resolution 1559, the international community is demanding the disarmament of Hezbollah. For further information, see our Special Information Bulletins "[Hezbollah attacks at Har Dov \(Shebaa Farms\)](#)" and "[Disarming Hizbullah: The Public Debate in Lebanon.](#)".

**to the continuation of Hezbollah's activities and strenuously opposed its disarming.** It comes as no surprise that in the midst of the medals laid on Kanaa's grave there was the Kalashnikov rifle he had received from Hezbollah (Agence France-Presse, October 13, 2005).

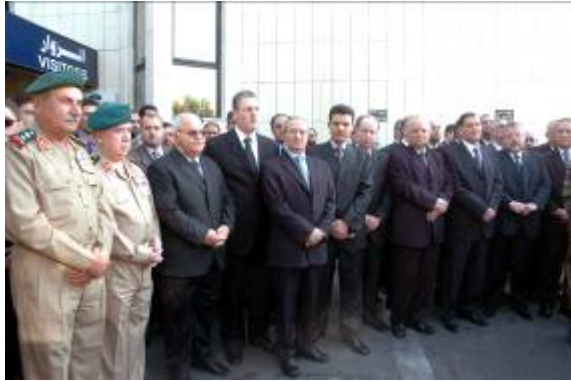
✿ Ghazi Kanaan, like many other high-ranking Syrian officers who served in Lebanon and were **involved in terrorism and crime, prospered.** It should be remembered that the Beka'a Valley, where the Syrian army was deployed and where Hezbollah reigned, was home to widespread, sophisticated industries of **drug production** (hashish, cocaine and heroin) and **counterfeiting** (principally \$100 bills). The Syrian security apparatus enabled the industries to **exist and prosper in the areas they controlled**, providing them with "protection" and enjoying huge profits. In addition, high-ranking Syrian officers serving in Lebanon (and senior Syrian government officials) also enjoyed ill-gotten gains from **shady business deals conducted with top Lebanese.**

## **Ghazi Kanaan's suicide and its possible implications for the Syrian régime**

✿ On the morning of October 12, 2005, Ghazi Kanaan died of a gunshot wound inflicted in his office. According to the official Syrian version, he committed suicide by firing a gun into his mouth. He was seriously wounded and rushed to a hospital in Damascus where he died after a number of attempts to revive him failed.

✿ **The death of Ghazi Kanaan poses a series of questions which so far have no answers:** Did he really commit suicide? Or was he the scapegoat of the Syrian régime? Was he murdered by assassins in the service of Bashar Assad? Was pressure exerted on him by the Syrian régime forcing him to commit suicide? Was he directly or indirectly involved in the assassination of Rafik Hariri? Could he have possessed information about Hariri's killers which led to Syria's upper echelons and which made them suspect him? Was his suicide

connected to Hariri's assassination and the current UN investigation of the affair, and if so, how? Will the committee headed by Mehlis investigate Kanaan's suicide as well?<sup>8</sup>



**Heads of the Syrian government attending Ghazi Kanaan's funeral (Syrian News Agency, October 13, 2005) Among those present are the Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa, prime minister Najji Otri and defense minister Hassan Turkmani**



**Ghazi Kanaan's funeral (Al-Sapir, October 14, 2005)**

✿ One (as yet unfounded) theory, raised on October 18 by **Al-Mustaqbal**, a newspaper owned by the Hariri family, is that **Bashar Assad's régime chose to sacrifice Ghazi Kanaan to extricate itself from its difficulties**. According to the paper, Assad's régime adopted the tactic of sacrificing high-ranking intelligence officers who served in Lebanon because of the corrupt, mafia-like ties they had with **Rafik Hariri**, to show that the motive for Hariri's murder was criminal and not political.<sup>9</sup>

✿ The death of Ghazi Kanaan can be seen as **giving the Assad régime more rope to hang itself with**. Internationally, Assad's situation worsened in the wake of the publication of the **Mehlis committee report on October 20, which pointed the finger at Syria and**

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<sup>8</sup> UN General Secretary Kofi Annan told reporters he was weighing the possibility of investigating Ghazi Kanaan's suicide (AP, October 17, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> In response the establishment Syrian media (Al-Thawra, October 15, 2005) accused the Hariri family of collaborating with Israel (the usual accusation hurled by the Syrian propaganda machine at anyone in Lebanon who opposes Syria) and instructed the paper's editors to "look for the real murderers within the media."

**Lebanese elements under its aegis as responsible for Hariri's assassination.**<sup>10</sup> The report is likely to increase pressure from both the United States and the international community on the Assad régime regarding a variety of demands. Among them are: non-involvement in Lebanon's internal affairs, stopping the passage of terrorists to Iraq and the end to Syrian support of Palestinian terrorism. **Internally**, Ghazi Kanaan's suicide and the Mehlis committee findings<sup>11</sup> may rouse fears among the higher echelons of the régime that **Bashar will sacrifice them** to save his neck and retain the remnants of his power.

✿ The dramatic events in Lebanon **reflect directly on Syria**, a situation well-illustrated by the affair of the [possible] suicide of Ghazi Kanaan. The **Syrian order** in Lebanon, which was given its final form during the last decade of Hafez Assad's life, is gone, and a new order in Lebanon being shaped. Lebanon, which was a Syrian asset under Hafez Assad, has become a burden for Bashar Assad's régime and the source of a threat which challenges its stability.

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<sup>10</sup> The full text of the report can be found at: [www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport](http://www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport).

<sup>11</sup> The Mehlis committee report mentioned the names of Asef Shawkat, head of Syrian military intelligence and Assad's brother-in-law, and Maher Assad, Bashar's brother, as involved in the planning of Hariri's assassination. The names were removed from the final version published by the UN Secretariat.