

# Aftermath of the al-Qaa Terrorist Attack: Shifts in Lebanese Politics

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Brief Analysis

## The eight suicide bombers were apparently dispatched to disrupt a new political paradigm in Lebanon: a Christian-Shiite alliance.

On June 27, eight suicide bombers attacked the Lebanese Christian-majority town of al-Qaa, located in the Bekaa region of north Lebanon on the Syrian border. The attack was the first of its kind targeting Christians in Lebanon since ISIS began its attacks on Shiite areas. But moreover, this attack had several unusual elements -- the attackers outnumbered the victims, and eyewitness accounts suggest that the attackers were not interested in mass killings. Instead, the attack seemed to be an attempt to disrupt a new political paradigm in Lebanon: a Christian-Shiite alliance.

This incident cannot be isolated from the many attacks that have recently taken place in Lebanon and Syria and the growing cyclical relationship between Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and the safety of displaced Syrians in Lebanon. But the attack on al-Qaa triggered new questions over why Hezbollah was fighting in Aleppo. On social media, phrases such as "the sons of Zahra are protecting the people of the Virgin" spread in a clear reference to Hezbollah's willingness to defend the Christian town. The Resistance Regiments utilized by Hezbollah to intimidate its opponents domestically appeared in al-Qaa's public sphere, attending the funeral of the five victims alongside members of the Lebanese Forces who constitute part of the town's partisan identity.

Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah addressed the criticisms concerning the fact that Hezbollah had moved fighting far away from the border with Lebanon in a speech, as he announced that another 26 Hezbollah members had been killed in the countryside south of Aleppo. Nasrallah announced that defending Aleppo was a means of defending Lebanon, and that any clash with terrorists in any location would help prevent such attacks from reaching Lebanon. He stated that he was even prepared to fight in Iraq "when necessary" and that Hezbollah "will do what needs to be done" regardless of criticism. He made clear that Hezbollah's actions were not up for discussion in the framework of internal balances in Lebanon.

On the other hand, the al-Qaa attack within Lebanese borders has triggered increased Hezbollah-style self-security among Christian residents. An unofficial armed deployment entered al-Qaa, with MP Antoine Zahra—a member of the Lebanese Forces bloc in parliament—making an appearance armed and accompanied by other armed men. The scene caused many opponents of the March 14 alliance to question the March 8 alliance’s accusations of self-armor among Hezbollah and its partners when March 8 members are apparently beginning to follow the same path.

Previously, Zahra had vehemently criticized both the concept of self-security and Hezbollah fighting in Syria, saying in an August 2013 interview with Radio Orient after bombings in the southern suburbs of Beirut that “Hassan [Nasrallah] talks about takfiris and the eminent danger they pose if Hezbollah does not intervene in Syria... [but] Self-security is an insult to both citizens and the state, which is responsible for protecting its citizens.”

In reality, these self-security forces appeared to constitute a disregard for state institutions, even as they eventually withdrew from the Christian areas they occupied to protect. More concerning are those who were victimized of the aftermath of the al-Qaa attacks. Self-security, Lebanese Army, and civil municipalities each took their own actions, often directed at displaced Syrians in these areas.

Recent events have highlighted the intense vulnerability of approximately 300,000 Syrians who have come to Lebanon after having been displaced from a strip of land in Syria stretching from the far western countryside of al-Qusayr in Homs governorate to the country’s south in the countryside of Damascus. With Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria, Lebanon is intimately involved in the fate of these displaced Syrians. Yet it seems that none of the Lebanese elite have thought to actively stop the attacks perpetrated against them inside Lebanon or apologize for Hezbollah’s actions against their homes and land. Instead, a culture of blaming these refugees has blossomed after each security incident in Lebanon. They have become a scapegoat for the always volatile Lebanese political scene, which have included bombings and assassinations for many years before Syrians began living in Lebanon.

The Lebanese army itself limited its efforts in the aftermath of al-Qaa to campaigns of collective punishment and arbitrary arrest against displaced Syrians throughout Lebanon and subsequently removed itself from the area altogether. The army arrested a total of 834 persons over three days – all Syrian except for two Bengali workers. Many were arrested within camps or clusters under the supposed supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Moreover, other sections of the government have done little to curtail actions against Syrians in Lebanon other than issuing public condemnations. The Lebanese Minister of Interior and Municipalities Nohad Machnouk announced that the suicide bombers who targeted al-Qaa were attackers from Syria itself, with no connection to Lebanon’s displaced Syrians. The Minister of Social Affairs Rashid Derbas emphasized that the presence of Syrians in camps or other locations was under control and did not represent a security threat.

Nevertheless, the Lebanese government has turned a blind eye to attacks against Syrians living in Christian areas. The most violent of these, according to the Lebanese Regional Representative for Human Rights Watch Nadim Houry, involved the beating of ten families for an hour and a half in the town of Hrajel in Keserwan, Lebanon. This violence had escalated in the town after the municipality published a circular identifying a series of measures to regulate the presence of Syrians in the town. The circular prohibited Syrians who do not work from residing within the town and called to search homes and count the number of individuals living in each home and room.

On July 2, the Municipality of Jounieh published a degrading image on its official Facebook page of Syrians lined up with the caption: “In cooperation with the Intelligence Directorate of the Lebanese Army, the Jounieh Police have conducted a comprehensive survey of Syrian nationals living in the city. We must thank the security agencies and especially the Intelligence Directorate of the Lebanese Army that has helped establish security and maintain the

safety of our nation and its citizens.”

In fact, this “survey” constituted a blatant violation of these Syrians’ rights, as they were arbitrarily arrested inside their homes. In response to criticism, the municipality deleted this image, but this came from social rather than official pressure. The municipality later claimed that the Syrians in the photo were undocumented and had been handed over to the relevant authorities.

Despite the many voices that have criticized these actions, the Interior Ministry has failed to act against these municipalities. The political exploitation behind the Al-Qaa attack highlights the local campaigns conducted against Syrian refugees’ now massive presence in Lebanon. Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil—an unlikely Christian ally of both Assad and Hezbollah -- appears to be leading this movement. He has used the Al-Qaa attack as a reason to provoke hostility toward vulnerable displaced persons, adding that, “Camps and clusters for displaced Syrians are prohibited in our towns.”

It is not expected in the near future for the Maronite-Shiite alliance between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) to expand to incorporate the Lebanese Forces Party. Exploiting the attack in al-Qaa against Syrians in Lebanon will continue to generate gains for the FPM and Hezbollah, which is suffering an economic crisis due to bank sanctions.

The al-Qaa attacks are not the end of terrorism in Lebanon. So far, ISIS—which has been officially accused of undertaking the operations—has not claimed responsibility for the attack, continuing a trend of unclaimed attacks also seen with BLOM Bank bombing in central Beirut. However, even with unclaimed attacks, Lebanese parties and municipalities that represent the Ministry of Interior cannot continue to use displaced Syrians as scapegoats for these attacks. With the Syrian Embassy in Lebanon taking no interest in preventing attacks on its citizens in Lebanon, given that these displaced persons do not support the Syrian regime, it is up to Lebanon to examine its own actions and prevent refugees from becoming the victims of the Lebanese political scene.

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