

Syria's Export of Terrorism to Lebanon:

Threat and Response

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Jun 14, 2007

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Brief Analysis

Yesterday's car bombing in Beirut, which killed Future Party parliamentarian Walid Eido, underscores the Syrian-backed multifront campaign to undermine stability in Lebanon. One front is the Palestinian refugee camps, particularly Nahr al-Bared, where the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are currently fighting Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate with ties to Syria. A second front is Beirut itself, via terrorist attacks designed to destabilize the state. The blast that killed Eido was the sixth such attack in the past month, and Lebanon's Internal Security Force (ISF) has interdicted several other ambitious terrorist conspiracies, including a plot described by the Lebanese daily al-Nahar as "the Lebanese September 11."

Given the stakes, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will employ all force necessary to quell -- if not totally eradicate -- the immediate military threat posed by Fatah al-Islam. On the terrorism front, however, the assessment is not as reassuring. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's pro-Western, anti-Syrian government in Beirut faces yet another challenge to its survival: terrorism, almost certainly sponsored by Damascus.

Background

After a May 20 Fatah al-Islam bank robbery in Tripoli ended in a showdown with the ISF, the terrorist group retaliated by beheading ten LAF soldiers and sparking a full-scale military confrontation between the organization -- based in Nahr al-Bared -- and the Lebanese government. As of June 11, some sixty soldiers, sixty militants, and twenty civilians had been killed in the fighting.

Initially, LAF actions were limited to shelling Fatah al-Islam targets in the camp. But by the beginning of June -- bolstered by the arrival of a reported twenty planeloads of U.S. ammunition, weapons, and protective gear -- LAF forces entered Nahr al-Bared. Then, on June 3, fighting broke out in Ein al-Hilweh -- the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon -- between another al-Qaeda-affiliate, Ansar al-Islam (formerly Jund al-Islam), and the LAF.

In Ein al-Hilweh, the LAF is receiving some support from secular Fatah militants who consider Islamists to be rivals, and the problem appears to be contained. As for Nahr al-Bared, the LAF is currently preparing a large military offensive that could last weeks and result in heavy casualties.

Campaign of Terror

Six car bombs have been detonated in and around Beirut over the past month, including yesterday's attack. Earlier bombings targeted Christian, Sunni, and Druze neighborhoods of the capital. Although the attacks terrified many Lebanese, they did not result in large-scale casualties.

In early June, however, Lebanon was shocked by Arab press reports that the ISF had interdicted a large Fatah al-Islam plot -- the aforementioned "Lebanese September 11" -- to destabilize Lebanon. It would have involved attacks against Beirut's InterContinental Hotel Phoenicia; the Beirut airport; the Lebanese defense and interior ministries; and Lebanese tourist, diplomatic, and political targets, including the Maronite Patriarch. The plan also involved the destruction of the Shekka Tunnel and a bridge on the main arterial road to the north linking Beirut to Tripoli and Nahr al-Bared. According to the London-based pan-Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat, after the road was closed, Fatah al-Islam planned to announce the establishment of "the Islamic Emirate of North Lebanon." Once the plot was exposed, the cell's ringleader reportedly fled to Syria.

News of this plot came less than a week after reports that Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Lebanon, Abdul Aziz Khoja, had also been targeted for assassination by Fatah al-Islam suicide bombers. The Saudi daily al-Watan stated that Lebanese authorities had arrested two Syrians near the ambassador's residence.

And on June 7, 2007, the LAF discovered a car bomb and two vehicles packed with weapons and explosives in Bar Elias, a Lebanese town in the Bekaa Valley bordering Syria. Just a day earlier, Lebanese authorities had arrested three al-Qaeda members in the same town, discovering explosives, forged travel documents, maps of Lebanese cities, and night-vision equipment. This arsenal had almost certainly arrived in Lebanon via Syria.

Syrian Connections

Since hostilities began between Lebanon and Fatah al-Islam in May, many have speculated about Syrian relations with the group. Such a question is only natural -- Syrian officials have threatened to destabilize Lebanon if the UN Security Council votes to establish an international tribunal on the 2005 killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Syrians are the leading suspects, and the current crisis started ten days before the UN voted to proceed with the tribunal.

There are also significant ties between Damascus and key personnel in Fatah al-Islam. The organization's leader, Shukri al-Absi, spent two years in Syrian "custody" -- ostensibly for his affiliation with al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- before deploying to Lebanon and establishing his organization. According to al-Sharq al-Awsat, in 2006 -- one of his alleged years of incarceration -- al-Absi ran a military training camp inside Syria for "harboring and preparing suicide bombers connected to al-Qaeda" before they were dispatched to Iraq.

Arab press reports also indicate that several of Fatah al-Islam's military leaders are in fact Syrian military officers. Still other reports -- in al-Nahar, for example -- suggest that emissaries have traveled back and forth between Nahr al-Bared and Damascus, including a Lebanese Sunni Islamist leader named Fathi Yakhan, who reportedly met with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad on one such trip. More recent reports have claimed that foreign fighters are reaching Nahr al-Bared and Lebanon via Syria.

Damascus, of course, denies any role in facilitating the movement of al-Qaeda operatives across Syrian territory. According to Syrian foreign minister Walid Muallem, jihadist fighters "crossed Syria on their way from Iraq to Lebanon" without Syrian knowledge. Damascus likewise denies any role in the smuggling of weapons into Lebanon. Yet on June 11, following a Security Council meeting on Lebanon, UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen once again accused Syria of being the key node for weapons shipments to Lebanon. He described the "steady flow of weapons and armed elements across the border from Syria" as "alarming and deeply disturbing."

While proclaiming its innocence, Damascus has worked assiduously over the past year -- via both Lebanese allies and diplomatic channels -- to prevent the establishment of the international tribunal on Hariri. These efforts succeeded in preventing the Lebanese government from holding a trial of its own. Now that the UN has established an international tribunal, however, Syria appears to be upping the ante, attempting to scuttle the process by destabilizing Lebanon. Although the operational relationship between Fatah al-Islam and Syria is murky, an increasing body of evidence suggests that, at minimum, Syria is supporting the al-Qaeda affiliate's attempt to foment chaos in Lebanon. And in terms of Lebanese democracy, the Eido assassination reduces the Siniora government's parliamentary majority to just four seats. If the government were to fall, the tribunal process would be derailed.

Challenge to U.S. Policy

For Washington, this latest assault on the Lebanese government is cause for great concern, particularly because al-Qaeda and Syria appear committed to destabilizing Lebanon. Moreover, after thirty years of Syrian military occupation, the ISF -- now tasked with domestic counterterrorism -- is untested. In some circles, the Sunni-dominated ISF is even believed to harbor sympathies for Sunni Islamist militant organizations.

To help the Lebanese government weather what is sure to be a long war with Syria, Washington should be clear in its uncompromising support for the Hariri tribunal. It should also follow up on UN Security Council Resolution 1701 by pursuing a second resolution to secure Lebanon's border with Syria. In this regard, now that Beirut has overcome the questions of sovereignty associated with the tribunal, it may be time for Lebanon to request, with U.S. support, deployment of UN forces on this border. Indeed, defending Lebanon's stability sooner rather than later is key -- as the past month has shown, as long as the tribunal proceeds, Syria will not be deterred.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. ❖

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