

Syrian intelligence, Iran-backed Hizbullah running network of insurgency cells in Lebanon

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ABU DHABI — Syria is running up to 15 insurgency cells in Lebanon with the backing and support of Hizbullah.

A French parliamentarian said Syria has maintained between 10 and 15 cells in Lebanon. The unidentified parliamentarian said the Syrian-sponsored cells were being protected and supported by the Iranian-sponsored Hizbullah.

The Syrian cells were said to have been established in Palestinian refugee camps, Beirut and the Bekaa Valley. The cells were said to have been directed by Syrian intelligence and supported by Hizbullah, Amal and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party.

The parliamentarian said Lebanon has arrested four Syrians who work for Syrian intelligence. The alleged Syrian agents were arrested in the summer of 2007 and identified as Mohammed Abdul Rahim, Ahmed Mohammed Asili, Barakat and Hassan Abdullah Salah Eddin Mohammed Saleh.

Over the last year, Iran and Syria have bolstered their direct involvement in Lebanon. Iran has reshuffled senior commanders of Hizbullah in wake of the 2006 war with Israel. In one recent move, Iran replaced the head of Hizbullah's air defense command.

"These terrorist cells that have been formed over the past two years, along with those cells that were left behind by Syria following its military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, are behind the assassination of leaders of March 14 hostile to Damascus," the parliamentarian told the Kuwaiti daily Al Siyassa.

The French parliamentarian was identified as a member of the National Assembly's National Security and Foreign Relations Committee. The disclosure was said to have been based on French intelligence.

The Syrian-sponsored cells were said to contain Al Qaida-aligned Sunnis trained by Damascus. The parliamentarian said the cells resembled Fatah Al Islam, which waged a 106-day war against the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora in mid-2007.

Fatah Al Islam was defeated by the Lebanese Army and many of its operatives were permitted to flee to Syria. This included the group's leader Shaker Al Absi.

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'Special Groups' in Iraq are trained, funded, and coordinated from Iran

BAGHDAD — U.S. military officials said Shi'ite militias in Iraq, financed by Iran, have enhanced their capabilities in intelligence, improvised explosive devices and communications.

The officials said the militias could threaten local government and the oil industry in southern Iraq.

"We believe they'll continue to be influenced by those who seek to disrupt the government of Iraq and coalition forces," U.S. Army Col. Charles Flynn said.

At a Jan. 7 briefing, Flynn, a brigade commander, cited the Iranian-sponsored Special Groups, which operates in central and southern Iraq. Flynn, head of the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division, said Special Groups have been trained, financed and directed by Teheran.

Officials said Special Groups has been using advanced IEDs termed explosively-formed penetrators. EFPs were meant to destroy U.S. main battle tanks as well as other armed platforms.

The 1st Brigade Combat Team has trained and mentored Iraqi forces to detect and neutralize EFPs. The Iraqi forces, bolstered by civilian authorities, have also been assisted in the construction of combat outposts along supply routes.

"We have multiple contracts covering nearly 800 kilometers of highway," Flynn said. "These crews remove debris, fill in holes, and their mere presence has reduced the ability of EFP and IED cells to operate."

The emergence of the Special Groups was reported amid a decline of the Mahdi Army, led by Shi'ite cleric Muqtada Sadr. Flynn said the Mahdi Army has lost significant public support in southern Iraq.

"I attribute this decline to Muqtada Sadr's standdown and the resulting fractures within Jaysh Al Mahdi [Mahdi Army]," Flynn said. "As a result, we expect Muqtada Sadr to take a more active role in the political arena."

Since July 2007, officials said, attacks on coalition and Iraqi bases have steadily declined. They cited increased patrols, improved intelligence, the use of joint security stations and better outreach also have helped.

"Since arriving, our partnership has matured and we now conduct joint patrols and joint checkpoints," Flynn said. "This work is enabled by establishing those joint security stations to build trust and share information and intelligence. These are powerful positions as they afford U.S. and Iraqi forces to partner in defeating any extremist threats that may emerge."

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