

Lebanon: Hezbollah and the Jan. 15 Bombing

Contributed by Stratfor
Wednesday, 16 January 2008
Last Updated Friday, 25 January 2008

According to a source close to Hezbollah, the militant Shiite group carried out the Jan. 15 explosion in the north of Beirut that allegedly targeted a U.S. Embassy vehicle. While this is certainly a possibility, who actually carried out the bombing remains unclear.

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Analysis

A source connected to Hezbollah believes that the Jan. 15 explosion north of Beirut, Lebanon, allegedly targeting a U.S. Embassy vehicle was carried out by Hezbollah as a "low-key" action directed at the United States. The attack comes as U.S. President George W. Bush is in the region attempting to fortify his anti-Iranian coalition and speaking out about confronting Iran and its regional militant allies, including Hezbollah. The explosion that killed four Lebanese nationals was not intended to harm Americans, according to the source.

Stratfor does not have any further evidence to verify this claim, but Hezbollah certainly is a possible suspect in the incident. We earlier discounted the idea that Hezbollah would be behind the attack if U.S. diplomatic personnel were indeed the target, as Lebanese officials have alleged. Hezbollah is heavily focused on its internal political situation in Lebanon and is not looking for what would inevitably be a major confrontation with the United States over the killing of a U.S. government employee.

An unnamed Lebanese police officer says the U.S. Embassy car that was caught in the attack was an armored sport utility vehicle (SUV) that was returning from an assignment to Beirut's airport and on its way to the embassy compound in suburban Aukar, north of Beirut, when the explosion occurred.

As we explained previously, U.S. diplomatic personnel only travel in Beirut in armored SUVs with full security details. The U.S. Embassy vehicle hit by the attack was carrying a Foreign Service national, in this case a Lebanese citizen, who earlier might have been part of the security detail in a "follow" car for a U.S. motorcade traveling to the airport. The details are murky, and it is still difficult to conclude that the U.S. Embassy vehicle actually was the target of the attack, rather than simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. A perpetrator interested in hitting a U.S. target would have seen that there was no security lead or follow car, as is typical in security details for U.S. diplomatic personnel in Beirut.

If the attack was not intended to harm U.S. citizens, as the source says and the details of the attack suggest, the bombing might have been carried out by Hezbollah. Iran steadily has tightened its grip over Hezbollah in a reshuffling of the militant organization that included the demotion of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. U.S.-Iranian tensions have escalated in recent days, with the Jan. 6 Strait of Hormuz incident, and it is possible that Tehran commissioned the attack through Hezbollah as a low-key threat to the United States to back off its anti-Iranian campaign in the region.

According to a source in the organization, Hezbollah suspects that the United States and the Western-backed March 14 Lebanese parliamentary majority led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora are collaborating to achieve the eventual eradication of Hezbollah as a resistance movement. The organization's leaders have vowed not allow this to happen, enhancing suspicions that Hezbollah could be behind the blast.

In recent days, the militant Shiite group also has sent special forces into Beirut for key operations, which could include an attack like the most recent incident. The fighters reportedly are equipped with state-of-the-art communications gear and report directly to a security officer codenamed Abu Jafaar, who maintains his operations in the Ain al-Abed neighborhood in the southern suburbs.

Still, Hezbollah is not the only potential culprit; Syrian-sponsored jihadists operating in Lebanon are also on the list of suspects. A Lebanese police official said the bomb was placed under garbage containers and detonated by remote control. For a stationary explosive device, this was an extremely powerful blast. We still have not ruled out the possibility that a vehicle-borne explosive device was used in this attack. In any case, a garbage can bomb does not fit with Hezbollah's usual tactics.

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