

Lebanon: Hezbollah and the Jan. 25 Bombing

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Hezbollah was behind the Jan. 25 bombing that killed Lebanese intelligence officer Capt. Wissam Mahmud Eid, a reliable source has said. The bombing is part of an effort by Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, which are coordinating closely to step up an anti-government campaign in Lebanon.

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Analysis

Stratfor has received information from a reliable source that Shiite militant group Hezbollah carried out the Jan. 25 bombing that targeted and killed Capt. Wissam Mahmud Eid, a Sunni intelligence officer in Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF). Syria, Iran and Hezbollah are ramping up their anti-government campaign in Lebanon, and Eid's assassination is unlikely to be the last.

Eid reportedly had been targeted for assassination three times prior to the Jan. 25 attack, which took place in the Hamzieh-Chevrolet Christian district in an eastern Beirut suburb. The bomb that killed him was sizable, consisting of about 132 pounds of TNT. Though the exact details of the blast are still a bit murky, it appears that the bomb was placed in a car near a bridge close to a congested traffic roundabout during rush hour. The bomb was timed to go off as Eid was driving toward the bridge. This location had a number of characteristics making it a key choke point, allowing the perpetrators to ensure the blast hit the intended target.

Eid was tasked with monitoring Hezbollah activities in Beirut's southern suburbs, a stronghold for the militant organization. As Stratfor has recently reported, Hezbollah has sent special forces to the Ain al-Abed neighborhood in the southern suburbs for key operations. These special forces are equipped with state-of-the-art communications and other gear and report directly to a security officer code-named Abu Jafaar.

In coordination with Syria, Hezbollah has put plans in motion to up the ante in the group's anti-government campaign by carrying out targeted attacks — such as the Jan. 15 bomb aimed at a U.S. Embassy vehicle — and by orchestrating tire-burning protests during the past few days. Through his work, Eid reportedly confirmed that Hezbollah was behind the U.S. Embassy vehicle attack.

The Western-backed government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has devoted a great deal of resources to tracking Hezbollah operations ever since the end of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah summer conflict in Lebanon. Recently, Hezbollah has brought at least 10 booby-trapped cars into Greater Beirut. Hezbollah agents purchased the cars from used automobile dealers, an industry dominated by Lebanese Shia.

Hezbollah intends to paralyze the Siniora government's spy network through these attacks, and Eid's assassination was a clear sign of this goal. Sources report that Hezbollah is waiting for what it expects to be yet another failed Arab League summit bid to reach a political consensus in Lebanon; the next summit round will be held in Damascus at the end of March. Once this summit passes and Syria gets its time to shine, Hezbollah could resort to more spectacular tactics, such as hostage taking, to pressure the Siniora government into making concessions on a new political arrangement.

Though this was a Hezbollah operation, Syria probably was heavily involved. Ashraf Riffi, director-general of the ISF, said in a press conference following the attack that Eid was a key figure in the investigation of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. Riffi added that Eid possessed sensitive documents related to the investigation at the time of the blast. Syria aims to escape responsibility for involvement in the al-Hariri blast, giving it reason to take out Eid, too.

The Syrians, Iranians and Hezbollah are closely coordinating their intelligence operations in Greater Beirut. The Syrians have reportedly set up a specially fitted apartment for monitoring purposes in western Beirut's exclusive Bir Hasan residential area. A Syrian communications, monitoring and surveillance specialist is in charge of the new espionage site and reportedly works closely with Iranian and Hezbollah intelligence operatives.

Hezbollah — assisted by Syrian intelligence agents, who understand the Lebanese domestic situation better than their Iranian counterparts — is consolidating its operations in Matn, Antelias, Zalqa, Nahr al-Kalb and Junieh. These are areas of Christian-dominated eastern Beirut, where the bulk of Lebanon's bombings have taken place.

East Beirut is also a hub of government and military activities; most army intelligence and public security officers operate there. By contrast, western Beirut is the staging area for agents of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, since it is difficult for the Siniora government to penetrate Hezbollah's security apparatus there. Hezbollah is also motivated by a desire to avoid a Sunni-Shiite clash if such an operation were carried out in predominantly Sunni western Beirut.

Hezbollah's increased activity in Beirut and its collaboration with Syria to expand its anti-government campaign in Lebanon means the Eid killing will have a sequel.

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