

# Lebanon: France and the Hezbollah Threat

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Hezbollah could be planning to target French interests in Lebanon

By Stratfor Today This Report Expresses the views of Stratfor.

## Summary

Hezbollah could be planning to target French interests in Lebanon, according to Stratfor sources. Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian patrons hope that targeting — or at least threatening — French interests in Lebanon will cause Paris to capitulate to the Shiite group's demands and work to persuade the Lebanese government to reach a deal with Hezbollah. Such an attack actually could lead France to decide its former colony is no longer worth the headache, however.

## Analysis

Stratfor sources have indicated that Hezbollah might have plans to target French interests in Lebanon. The named targets named include the French Embassy in Beirut, which straddles east and west Beirut near the National Museum of Lebanon, and the French contingent of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah is reportedly waiting for the forthcoming visit by Arab League chief Amr Mousa to Beirut (the date of Mousa's visit has not been announced) to pass before launching attacks against French targets. The organization expects Mousa's mediation efforts to fail, providing it with an excuse for a military escalation.

Stratfor cannot verify that these attack plans actually are on Hezbollah's agenda. In fact, Hezbollah could have more of an interest in spreading rumors of such attacks to heighten the threat in Lebanon and increase pressure on the Western-backed government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to cave in to its demands.

Hezbollah acts in close coordination with Syria and Iran, which also are pressing demands against France and the United States regarding Lebanon and the wider region.

Thus far, the Hezbollah/Syrian/Iranian intimidation tactics in Lebanon have not forced the Siniora government to capitulate and allow Syria's candidate of choice to take the presidency and Hezbollah to expand its presence in the Cabinet. On the contrary, the series of car bombings in the capital have hardened Siniora's stance, with Paris and Washington heavily leaning on the prime minister to stand firm. As a result, Lebanon has sunk deeper and deeper into the political quicksand with no political resolution in sight, particularly after the Jan. 28 army shooting of Shiite protesters in Beirut.

By targeting — or at least threatening to target — French interests in Lebanon, Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian patrons hope France will realize the risk in resisting the radical Shiite group's demands and that Paris will use its sway over the Siniora government to work out a deal. After all, France is the lynchpin for the UNIFIL force in southern Lebanon. If French troops withdraw, other countries will follow, fitting nicely into Syria and Hezbollah's elaborate scheme to get the UNIFIL forces out of the Shiite-dominated south and rebuild Hezbollah fortifications in preparation for another military confrontation with Israel.

Whether this strategy will actually work is seriously in doubt. Hezbollah would be operating under the assumption that the French government under President Nicolas Sarkozy would allow itself to be pressured into a deal after French targets are directly targeted in militant attacks. But Paris and Washington have been closely aligned in maintaining a hard-line stance in Lebanon, and such attacks could very well end up placing Hezbollah on the EU terrorist list — and killing any chance of a compromise. In all likelihood, Hezbollah and Syria would outsource such attacks to the nebulous jihadist front that has taken root in Lebanon with the aid of Syrian military intelligence. Though this would create plausible deniability, there is no guarantee the trail would not lead back to the puppet masters.

But a larger issue also is in play concerning France's foothold in the Middle East. Sarkozy's election marked the end of the 50-year Gaullist era in France in which French interests abroad were more concerned with countering the United States than with strategic and economic sense. Sarkozy's France views its strategic interests in the Middle East with a new lens, one in which Lebanon's attractiveness seems to be dimming.

French ties to Lebanon date as far back as the Crusades. In the 20th century, Lebanon was a French protectorate; Paris relied on the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and Tripoli for maritime trade. When the British and French began carving up the region after World War I, France's blueprint for Lebanon guaranteed a monopoly of influence for pro-French Maronite Christians over the country's Sunni, Shiite and Druze factions. Over time, Maronite influence waned. When Lebanon's 15-year civil war ended in 1990, Syria had become Lebanon's kingmaker, and bolstered the Shiite position (roughly 27 percent of the population) through the remodeling of the country's political and military apparatuses.

Despite Syria's increased role in Lebanon, the French have maintained their influence in the country &mdash; particularly among the Maronite community &mdash; and France has played a key role in mediating among Lebanon's warring factions. Though French influence in Lebanon's political affairs has carried on, French commercial interests in Lebanon have steadily waned, with most remaining commercial links dating back to the Gaullist and colonial eras.

With those ties weakening, Sarkozy is on a mission to cement French power into strategic nodes rather than obsess about its colonial legacy in states that do not serve critical French interests. For this reason, French interests in the energy-producing states of Libya and Algeria remain strong while the European Union is working to divert itself from its dependence on Russian energy. At the same time, France has spent a great deal of effort cozying up to the Persian Gulf states, with a recently signed deal to establish a permanent French military base in the United Arab Emirates.

In Lebanon, however, France's foothold might be slipping. Syria is creating the conditions for a return to its power broker status in the country since its 2005 troop withdrawal, and is depending on its militant proxies to ensure its interests in its western neighbor. If Hezbollah or its numerous militant surrogates do target French interests in Lebanon, the French government could very well decide that its former colony is no longer worth the headache. STRATFOR

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