

Al Qaida tied to bomb attack on the army of Hizbullah-backed Lebanon government

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NICOSIA — At least 14 people were killed when a bomb rocked the downtown section of the northern city of Tripoli on Aug. 13.

At least nine off-duty soldiers were killed and nearly 50 others were injured in the morning rush hour blast at a military gathering point in the coastal city.

The bombing marked the first major attack on the Lebanese Army since the introduction of the Hizbullah-dominated government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

The attack took place as Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, the outgoing military chief, left Beirut for Damascus to meet Syrian President Bashar Assad. The two men agreed to the first formal diplomatic relations between Beirut and Damascus.

"The Syrians are recovering Lebanon," [Ret.] Gen. Elias Hanna, a political science instructor at Notre Dame University, said. "The balance of power is not in the Lebanese favor. Whatever happens, [Syria] will have the upper hand. It doesn't matter who the culprit is." "This was a big terrorist explosion," Lebanese Information Minister Tarek Mitri said.

Officials said the bombing appeared to be the work of Sunni insurgents linked to Al Qaida. In 2007, the Lebanese Army fought a 104-day war at the Palestinian refugee camp of Naher Al Bared near Tripoli with the Al Qaida-aligned Fatah Al Islam, supported by Syria.

"The terrorist attack directly targets the army and national peace efforts," a Lebanese Army statement said.

"The hands of the criminals have hit in Tripoli against innocent soldiers and civilians," Mitri said. "Once again, they want our country to be an arena for settling scores and battling for influence."

The bomb was said to have contained 20 kilograms of TNT and detonated by remote control. Officials said the bomb contained nuts and bolts to ensure maximum casualties.

"It's part of the string of attacks against the Lebanese Army," Oussama Safa, executive director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, told the Lebanese Daily Star. "The army has been a target for a while now. What's worrying is the quality and the ferocity of the attack."

Despite its defeat, Fatah Al Islam has sought to renew attacks in Tripoli. The group claimed responsibility for a bombing on May 31 in which a soldier was killed.

The Lebanese Army has bolstered its presence in Tripoli amid clashes between Sunni supporters of Siniora and Alawite opposition groups aligned with Syria. The army, under increasing Hizbullah control, has refrained from direct intervention.

Another bombing was reported in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein Hilwe outside the Lebanese city of Sidon. Palestinian sources said the bombing targeted a senior Fatah operative.

http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2008/me_lebanon0432_08_14.asp

Bus Bombing in Tripoli

Grandmasta is currently on the road, but yesterday's bus bombing in Northern Lebanon seems too newsworthy to not mention. All summer Tripoli has seen violence, but it appeared to be good old fashioned ethnic hatred. Putting a bomb on a bus, clearly targeting soldiers, seems to be an escalation: A roadside bomb targeting a bus carrying mostly soldiers shook the downtown of this northern city Wednesday, killing at least 12 people, 10 of them soldiers, and wounding more than 50 others, security officials said. No party claimed responsibility for the morning rush-hour attack. But analysts and military officials suggested that Islamic extremists might have carried out the bombing to avenge their losing a fierce months-long battle against the army in the region last year.

Michael Young of the Daily Star Beirut plays down the threat from Sunni Islamic fanatics: Like the attack against a military intelligence office in Abdeh several weeks ago, the aim of those placing the bombs was to convince you and I that Sunni extremist groups are alive and well in the North, that they have an axe to grind with the army because of Nahr al-Bared, and that an insurrection has begun, one directed even against the Hariri camp.

He blames Syria: The reality, I believe, is different. Recently, colleagues who closely follow events in Tripoli have started hearing of Syrian warnings to the Lebanese that there would be no peace in the city until the Salafists were routed. Who would conduct such an operation but the army, explaining why soldiers have been the victims of recent attacks. Syria's implication in the bombings is highly probable, its objective being to push the army and the Salafists into a confrontation. This would create a serious rift within the Sunni community, weaken the disoriented pro-Hariri forces in Tripoli, and allow Damascus's allies to regain the initiative in the city.

It seems a bit cavalier to dismiss the Sunni radical groups as some kind of conspiracy. There is no doubt that these Al-Qaeda types) want to come to Lebanon and create this kind of havoc. After the collapse of the Hariri rent-a-cop militias, there was a sense that the Sunnis needed someone to protect them from Shia or other non-Sunni groups, especially in the North. At the Southern end of Lebanon, it is 100% certain that Sunni radicals, from all over the Middle East, want in against Israel and/or Hezbollah (which is blocking them from getting at Israel). See this post for more as well as links to several other posts on this topic.

Young's analysis could very well be correct. But at the same time, no one can deny that fanatical Sunni extremists want to create the kind of havoc we saw yesterday. Not being in North Lebanon, sitting at its cafes, meeting with its people etc, Grandmasta has no way of knowing one way or the other. Expect to hear more on further developments.

<http://arabicsource.wordpress.com/2008/08/14/bus-bombing-in-tripoli/>