

Islamists Say Damascus Backed Lebanon Attack - Report

Contributed by Dow Jones News
Saturday, 15 November 2008

BEIRUT (AFP)--A Lebanese newspaper on Saturday published statements purporting to be by members of Fatah al-Islam showing the radical group had links with Syria and that Damascus had backed an attack in Lebanon.

The publication of the "evidence" in Al-Mustaqbal newspaper, owned by anti-Syrian majority parliamentary leader Saad Hariri, comes barely a week after Syrian television broadcast alleged "admissions" by Fatah al-Islam members that the group was financed by Hariri's Future Movement.

Al-Mustaqbal published undated and unsigned "copies" of statements by men held by Lebanese security services and prosecuting judges.

One of them, Ahmad Merhi, said a Syrian general with whom he had "excellent" relations told him in 2007 that there was coordination on information between Syria and Fatah al-Islam, which battled the Lebanese army in summer 2007.

The 15-week struggle in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared near Tripoli left 400 people dead, including 168 soldiers.

Merhi said General Jawdat al-Hassan, head of the fight against terrorism and fundamentalist groups within the Syrian army's information service, "asked me to help Shaker al-Abssi," the Fatah al-Islam leader who fled the camp.

Thanks to his links with the general, he was able to allow "dozens of Fatah al-Islam fighters" to escape to Lebanon, he said.

Merhi also said: "The Syrians asked Shaker al-Abssi to carry out the double attack at Ain Alak in February 2007" which targeted two passenger buses in the north of Beirut, killing three people.

The aim of the attack, committed the day before the second anniversary of the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, "was to dissuade people from participating" in a ceremony of commemoration, Merhi added.

Damascus is accused by Lebanon's anti-Syrian majority of responsibility for the murder of Hariri, who had turned against Syria's domination of Lebanon. Syria denies any involvement in the killing.

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