

Fox News : Reporter's Notebook: A Dark Cloud Over Lebanon

Contributed by Dana Lewis
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You can feel it in the air -- the tension, the electricity and a sense of foreboding in Lebanon that hangs like a dark cloud over Beirut.

It's more than my gut telling me something is about to happen in Lebanon. It's my gut combined with interviews over the last 10 days with many Lebanese officials who feel the same way.

Everyone you talk to here speaks in hushed tones about the growing civil strife or chance of war.

For more than two months, the army has been fighting to root out "Fatah al-Islam" extremists from the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli.

The camp is just rubble now after all that artillery and tank fire. And only a few militants remain, making their last stand.

But look deeper and there are frightening undercurrents linking that crisis to the recent attacks on U.N. patrols in the south of Lebanon and even the assassinations of Lebanese cabinet ministers which continued in June with the bombing of parliament member (MP) Walid Eido.

What's the connection? There is evidence -- according to Lebanese intelligence -- that Fatah al-Islam was funded and supported by Syria.

Supposedly, there are confessions by some of the militants who were captured, and there's the fact that their leader was held and then later released from a Syrian prison. (Not too many people make it out of Syrian prisons unless they serve the regime's interests, which right now appear to be to destabilize Lebanon and take it back under its control.)

A car which was used by assassins in last year's killing of cabinet minister Pierre Gamayel has also been linked to the refugee camp and Fatah al-Islam.

A U.N. tribunal is investigating everything from Gamayel's killing to the 2005 killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and many say it will likely find a trail of hard evidence leading to Syria.

Syria, meanwhile, is trying to pre-empt all of that by removing the current government and blocking the tribunal.

That's why Syria-friendly Hezbollah walked out of the cabinet last year and set up a tent camp in the heart of Lebanon that has been choking the country's economy thus causing major trouble for the current pro-Western anti-Syrian government.

And if contract killers can knock off two more cabinet ministers or three more MPs, the current government's majority will end with simple, bloody, murderous calculations.

So at least 35 MPs from the current government have fled Lebanon and are living in self-imposed exile until they're needed to tip the scales in a crucial presidential election slated for this fall.

The rest are in hiding.

I visited Ahmed Fatfat, a cabinet minister (one of three of them) who lives in the prime minister's residence out of fear of assassination.

He told me it's been a dark and difficult eight months for him. He's suffered depression. But while even his own family has asked him to give up the struggle, he is sticking to it.

"For me, Syrians are doing this," he says.

I ask him how it all ends?

"It can end in a good way if we find a solution where we can keep our independence and our sovereignty." Or, he says "it

will end in a very dramatic way. I'm not saying it's a matter of someone being killed but the country will disappear."

On the outskirts of Beirut, Antoine Zahra has chosen to stay in Lebanon and to stay at home with his family.

But this member of parliament has security, lots of it. He rarely goes outside.

Again he points the finger at Syria. "It's Syria and their allies. It's very clear for us."

Zahra says what is encouraging is that America and Western powers are sticking with Lebanon this time, backing this young democracy as a pillar for the rest of the Middle East.

In some political circles here, Syrian President Bashar Assad is painted as some sort of mafia don trying to deep-six what he sees as a rival "family" instead of recognizing a free-and-democratic country.

Of course, Assad has denied any wrong doing.

And by the way, the U.N. tribunal has recently been praising Syria for it's "cooperation" in its investigation.

There's some politics in the U.N. statements, naturally, because this Syrian "cooperation" may only last until the investigation inevitably points the finger at Assad's regime.

Tehran is also pulling the strings in Lebanon, using Hezbollah to keep up the pressure on America and Israel by re-arming and threatening another war if Iran is attacked over the nuclear issue.

So stir this soup containing Syria, Iran, Palestinian extremists linked to Al Qaeda, the power-hungry Hezbollah, rival Sunni and Christian and Shiite factions and what do you get?

I hope my gut is wrong, but a civil or even regional war could be on the horizon. Unless of course, the Lebanese people choose peace over power and manage to keep the outsiders at bay.

By Dana Lewis, Fox News, Wednesday, July 25, 2007