Lebanon bombings linked to civil war in Syria

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22 October 2012

Two bombings in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, have thrown the country into crisis, further exposing the danger that the civil war in Syria could spark a far wider conflagration throughout the region.

On Friday, a massive explosion in Beirut killed eight people, including a top Internal Security Forces officer, Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan. An estimated 78 people were injured in the blast, which hit a motorcade passing through a historic Christian neighborhood of the city.

A Lebanese security official told reporters that immediately prior to his killing, Hassan had returned from a visit to France and Germany. The car in which he was riding at the time of the attack was reportedly not armored, despite the obvious dangers associated with his position and the volatile state of Lebanese politics.

General al-Hassan headed an investigation this year that implicated a former minister in the Hezbollah-led government of Lebanon in an alleged plot with Syrian officials to carry out terrorist attacks inside the country. The minister implicated in al-Hassan's investigation, Michel Samaha, is reported to have longstanding links with US, French and Syrian intelligence agencies. A former member of the fascist Phalangist movement during the Lebanese civil war, Samaha had in recent years formed an alliance with Hezbollah.

Several leading Lebanese politicians jumped to blame the government in neighboring Syria for the assassination. Saad al-Hariri, the leader of Lebanon's main opposition bloc, accused the government in Damascus of being behind the killing of al-Hassan.

Hariri is the son of Rafik al-Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister assassinated in 2005. Washington and its local allies blamed that killing on Syria, leading to the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country and the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon. General Hassan was considered very close to the Hariri family and their March 14 opposition movement. Hassan's body was buried alongside Rafik Hariri at the weekend.

Syria's information minister, Omran al-Zouebi, condemned the bombing, calling it a "terrorist and cowardly" attack.

As well as pointing the finger at Damascus, pro-US politicians in Lebanon were quick to utilize the assassination to call for mass protests against the Hezbollah-led government. Demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Lebanese opposition figures have attempted to use Friday's bombing to call for a new government in Beirut that would take a harder line toward the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Responding to pressure from the opposition, Mikati made a show of offering his resignation Saturday. However, Lebanon's president, Michel Suleiman, requested that he remain in his post "in the national interest."

A statement from the Shiite-based Hezbollah movement, which is the largest party in the unstable Lebanese coalition government, expressed "great shock over this terrible crime" and demanded that police and intelligence officials catch the perpetrators.

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland condemned Friday's bombing in Beirut, while claiming that the US had no information about the attackers. However, in a thinly veiled criticism of Syria, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented that al-Hassan's assassination was "a dangerous sign that there are those who continue to seek to undermine Lebanon's security."

In the face of diplomatic pressure from Washington and its allies, the government in Beirut has refused to join the US-led campaign to oust the Assad regime. Hezbollah has for decades received support from Syria and the government in Iran.

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The US-backed proxy war in Syria has placed renewed strains of the tenuous peace between the rival religious-political factions in Lebanon. The Hezbollah-led government and the opposition parties have increasingly come into conflict over the response of Beirut to the civil war in Syria. “Rebel” fighters, mainly Islamists, have been able to use parts of Lebanon to launch attacks inside Syria and supply opposition forces there.

Over the weekend, demonstrators gathered in Beirut and other towns and villages, blocking roads with burning tires and clashing with police. There were reports of some heavy fighting in the northern city of Tripoli, a center of opposition to the Hezbollah-led government and a bastion of support for the Syrian opposition.

As the anti-Syrian and anti-Hezbollah protests were taking place Sunday, another bombing took place in Beirut. Leaving at least 13 people dead and many more injured, a car bomb went off outside a police station in a busy part of the same predominantly Christian district of the city.

No group has claimed responsibility for either bombing.

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