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Attack on Iran's Embassy: Who are the Abdullah Azzam Brigades?

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Synopsis

Lebanon is on the brink of an abyss again. Who were behind the recent twin suicide attacks outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut? Why were the Iranians targeted? What are the potential implications for Lebanon?

Commentary

THE TWIN suicide attacks outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut on 19 November 2013 by a Sunni militant group known as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) killed two dozen people and wounded more than 140 others. The origins of AAB are shrouded in mystery while the group's activities seem to span several countries in the Middle East.

The use of the name "Abdullah Azzam Brigades" goes back to 2004, when a group adopting this name claimed responsibility for a series of bombings against tourist facilities on Egyptian resorts in the Sinai Peninsula. Egyptian security eventually dismantled the network that carried out the attacks and the Egyptian AAB quickly disappeared from sight.

Who are the Abdullah Azzam Brigades?

In 2005 three rockets were launched at targets in Jordan's Red Sea port of Aqaba. The attacks were claimed by the AAB and other groups, including Al Qaeda in Iraq. Jordanian security traced the attack back to a cell operating under the command of Abu Musab Zarqawi in Iraq who was allegedly seeking to establish a group to facilitate the flow of jihadist fighters into Iraq from Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. The AAB which launched the attack on the Iranian Embassy this month originated from this group which is focused on the Levant, namely Lebanon and Syria.

AAB in the Levant is an amorphous Sunni militant group named after the famous Palestinian Islamist thinker and activist, Abdullah Azzam, who played a prominent role in promoting Muslim involvement in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and was Osama Bin Laden's mentor. The founding leader of the AAB in the Levant was curiously a Saudi national named Salih al-Qar'awi who is now in Saudi custody.

AAB's geopolitical narrative

As leader of AAB, Qar'awi showed himself to be immensely hostile to Iran which supported the Lebanese Shia

movement Hezbollah. One of the group's first media releases was a September 2010 documentary titled "The Oppressed Sect," a simplistic and conspiratorial look at the region's contemporary politics, in which the oppression of Lebanon's Sunni minority becomes the principal narrative. Syria's government and Hezbollah are seen as ruthless players engaged in a conspiracy directed from Iran to keep the Sunnis in Lebanon down.

This is tied to what it sees as a regional conspiracy by the Shias and Iran to oppress the Sunnis and to help Israel maintain the integrity of its borders and proceed with its territorial despoliation of the Palestinians. This is then further woven into a broader narrative of the improbable global repression of the Sunnis at the hands of the Shia in Lebanon, Syria, the Jews/Israel and the West, and Iran.

Until the attack on the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon, the AAB in the Levant had remained out of the spotlight. Although this may be the result of a deliberate strategy which had primarily focused on establishing media credentials, its initial organisational weakness and rivalries with other Sunni militant groups in Lebanon played a role in the fact that it was a latecomer to violent action in Lebanon. In early 2011 the group urged Syrians to protest peacefully against the Damascus regime saying violence would undermine the uprising. This stance did not last; and its leadership began exhorting the Syrian people to violently oppose the regime. It sent cadres to participate in the war against Assad in Syria where they gained combat experience.

Since June 2012 it has been led by another Saudi national, Majid Bin-Muhammad al-Majid. Under al-Majid it continued to promote itself as a protector of Sunni Muslims and has repeatedly alleged Shia domination of Lebanon, blaming the militant group Hezbollah for Lebanon's instability. Under al-Majid it began to prepare itself for violent political action.

Implications of attack on Iranian Embassy

Given AAB's ideological hatred for Shias and Iran, it is not surprising that the Iranians became a target. Although well-protected, the Iranian Embassy was a much softer target than taking on the formidable Hezbollah on its own turf. The dual suicide attacks were undertaken by the Ziad al-Jarrah Battalion – named after one of the al Qaeda members (a Lebanese) who piloted one of the hijacked planes on 9/11. The AAB provided two justifications for the deadly attack on the Iranian Embassy. First, it was designed to force Hezbollah to withdraw from Syria. Second, it was to pressure the Lebanese government to release incarcerated Sunni militants.

Timing seems to have played an important role. In June 2013, AAB put out a statement railing against Iranian involvement in Lebanese politics. The statement also attacked Iran for its support of the Syrian regime. Indeed, around the same time, the tide of the war seemed to be turning in favour of Damascus as a result of support from Iran and Hezbollah. In fact, Hezbollah units played an important role in trouncing the Sunni militants in the battle of Qusair earlier this year. Currently, the Assad regime is moving to consolidate its successes by cutting off the Sunni militants from their supply lines in Lebanon.

The attack on the Iranian Embassy was both retaliation and a message. Al Qaeda's affiliates in Syria and Iran are on opposite sides of the Syrian civil war which, itself, is part of a larger conflict between Sunnis and Shias. Al Qaeda's two affiliates inside Syria, the Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Bilad al-Sham, or Levant (ISIS), are fighting Assad's forces, which are backed by Iran and Hezbollah which have provided troops and advisers to Damascus. Iran is unlikely to allow this assault on its embassy to go unpunished. However, it is equally unlikely that it will lash out blindly in revenge.

Tehran does not wish to seek full-blown sectarian violence in Lebanon. Nonetheless, Tehran is likely to retaliate in a covert manner either against AAB itself, against Sunni militants in Syria, or possibly against third parties which it sees as direct supporters of militant Sunni groups.

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