



INSS Insight No. 488, November 21, 2013

**The Bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut:
Hitting Two Birds with One Stone**

Yoram Schweitzer and Benedetta Berti

Over the past two years the Syrian conflict has evolved from non-violent political demonstrations into a militarized, sectarian, and prolonged civil war. Furthermore, massive external involvement in the internal war has turned Syria into a proxy regional war. This is not only because of the major humanitarian crisis triggered by the conflict and the economic and political pressure Syria's neighbors face in seeking to accommodate the growing influx of refugees, but also because the war in Syria risks destabilizing the entire Middle East. Indeed, the November 19, 2013 attack against the Iranian embassy in Beirut is an example of the ever-growing regional price of the Syrian civil war. Simply put: the myth that external actors could take an active part in the conflict in Syria while entirely shielding themselves at home from the costs of their involvement has been shattered.

Lebanon in particular has been affected: the Syrian civil war has drastically worsened the already shaky relations between the political and sectarian forces supporting the anti-Assad opposition – the March 14 coalition – and those who, led by Hizbollah, have been supporting Assad. This has also aggravated the relations between the Sunni and Shiite communities and led to a state of political paralysis.

Moreover, along with the physical absence of Lebanon's main political leader, Saad Hariri, the civil war in Syria has fueled a sense of helplessness and resentment within the Sunni community, with an overall strengthening of the role played by radical salafist preachers and with a growing number of Lebanese Sunnis actively participating in the Syrian civil war. In this context, this week's suicide attack claimed by the Lebanese branch of the Battalion Abdullah Azzam, an al-Qaeda affiliated organization active in the region since 2009 and with a number of local affiliated branches, should be seen as extremely worrisome.

Reut Friedman, Ilan Shaklarski, and Elior Albachari, interns in the INSS Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program, assisted in preparation of this article.

The suicide bombing represents a new peak in the trend of growing defiance toward Hizbollah and its local supporters, with salafi-jihadist groups actively planning and perpetrating attacks against Hizbollah, with the stated intention of both punishing the group for its involvement in the Syria civil war and deterring it from continuing to support the Assad regime militarily. These groups have detonated car bombs and fired rockets against Hizbollah's southern Beirut stronghold, the Dahiya quarter, and the Beqa valley. By attacking Hizbollah controlled areas the jihadists have wanted to both physically hit the organization, while dispelling the myth of invulnerability surrounding it.

Attacking the Iranian embassy sends an even broader, message: not only is Hizbollah not secure in its country anymore, but the group's capacity to protect its own allies is also questionable. The attack allowed the perpetrators both to project power and to weaken the myth of Hizbollah's and Iran's military invincibility. Finally, the embassy bombing represents an evolution and escalation from the modus operandi employed by the salafist groups in the past, not just because of its reliance on suicide bombers – a clear al-Qaeda trademark – but also because hitting the Iranian diplomatic premises represents a declaration of war of sorts directed at both Hizbollah and its powerful patron state, Iran.

In the past Hizbollah's reaction to attacks against its own community has been noticeably restrained, with Hassan Nasrallah repeatedly calling for calm while avoiding direct violent responses within Lebanon, and even going as far as letting the Lebanese Armed Forces enter the Dahiya for the first time. Indeed, Nasrallah's strategy has been to preserve calm in Lebanon, while continuing to fight alongside Assad in Syria. The Hizbollah leader has repeated on a number of occasions that the group does not want to see the confrontation between pro- and anti-Assad forces exported into Lebanon. At the same time, however, during his recent public speeches on the occasion of the Ashura festival, the Secretary General also reiterated his determination to continue to fight and support the Syrian regime until Assad's victory over the opposition. In addition, although calling for domestic calm, Hizbollah rhetoric has done little to alleviate the situation, with the group adopting an increasingly more antagonistic and sectarian tone to justify its decision to intervene in Syria, and with Nassrallah warning on multiple occasions against the dangers of the Syrian anti-Assad *takfiri* opposition.

Hizbollah's mix of defiance and calls for domestic calm has done nothing to soften the criticism of anti-Assad groups in general, and the salafi camp in particular. Criticism of Hizbollah's involvement in Syria has become especially vitriolic after the group's direct military assistance proved crucial for the regime to secure control of the strategic western Syria border town of al-Qusayr. Now the salafi-jihadist camp in Lebanon has decided to place the war directly at Hizbollah's footsteps, also fueled by the perception that the

group intends to replicate the Qusayr precedent in the impending battle for Qalamoun, which, if won by the regime, would represent a watershed in the civil war.

The attack against the Iranian embassy is thus a heightened level in a dangerous radicalization process accompanied by a gradual souring of inter-community relations. In the immediate future, this places Lebanon in an extremely precarious situation, risking not only prolonged internal paralysis, but also a devastating socio-economic crisis, and an erosion of the country's fragile social fabric. While a fully-fledged civil war is not in the interest of any of the major political actors in Lebanon, including Hizbollah, still the radicalized al-Qaeda affiliates could push the country into a new spiral of internal violence.

In the future, preserving the dual military involvement in Syria and civilian engagement in Lebanon will prove increasingly difficult and costly for Hizbollah, as the Beirut suicide bombing effectively dispelled the myth that groups like Hizbollah and its patron could become major players in an external civil war and still shield themselves from retribution.

The battlefield of the proxy war has been extended, and even though overall the war will continue to be fought predominantly in Syria, it will be impossible to continue denying the regional spillover of the conflict. With the civil war giving no sign of drawing to a close, not only will sectarian relations be negatively affected across the region, but radical groups like those behind the Iranian embassy bombing will continue to operate in growing numbers and strength.

Seen from Israel's point of view, the ongoing tension between Iran, Hizbollah, and the transnational jihadist network does not necessarily represent a positive development. As the Iranian embassy bombing clearly showed, instability and extremism can be exported, and the rise of a more active, organized, and determined salafi-jihadist camp will, in the long term, create problems for Israel.

