

TIME

Beirut Bombing: Is Lebanon Edging Back Toward Civil War?

Sunni politicians blame Hizballah and Syria

By Karl Vick @karl_vick Dec. 27, 2013 18 Comments

The massive explosion in downtown Beirut on Friday morning that killed Mohamad Chatah, a moderate Sunni politician who once served as Lebanon's ambassador to Washington, blackened the sleek facades of the redeveloped neighborhood that also formed the backdrop to the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Both men were well known as critics of Hizballah, the Shiite Muslim militant group that is a powerful player in Lebanese politics. A U.N. tribunal ultimately blamed Hizballah for Hariri's assassination and on Friday the group immediately came under suspicion in the death of Chatah.

"This is a conversation carried out through bombs," says [Benedetta Berti](#), [co-author](#) of *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*. Berti noted that Chatah played a prominent role in the 2005 "Cedar Revolution" that pressured Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon — at the political expense of Hizballah, a Syrian client. "It's really hard to see it as anything else than a signaling. Which is not a new game, we've seen this over and over."

The larger question, just visible through the black smoke billowing from a scene that left five dead and 70 wounded, was whether the roar that echoed across the city Friday morning was just one more exclamation in an extremely loud quarrel, or the announcement of a new civil war.

"It's somewhere in between, really," says Shlomo Shpiro, who follows Hizballah at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University outside Tel Aviv. "It may be signaling worse things to come. I think it's a strong retaliation over what Hizballah perceives as messing around with it — challenging the current role that Hizballah thinks it has in Lebanese politics. We're not all the way down the road to civil war or civil strife that we saw a few years ago. But it could go either way."

Investigators may find clues in social media. Less than an hour before his car exploded, Chatah [posted](#) a criticism of the Shiite group on Twitter: "[#Hezbollah](#) is pressing hard to be granted similar powers in security & foreign policy matters that Syria exercised in Lebanon for 15 yrs." (That was a reference to Syria's former role as a de facto occupier of its politically weak and fragmented neighbor.) Chatah's political allies lost no time assigning blame. Saad Hariri, the son of Rafik — whom Chatah had served as an aide during Saad Hariri's term as prime minister — issued a statement drawing attention to the

U.N. Tribunal [scheduled next month to try](#) four Hizballah members who are charged as accomplices in the blast that killed Rafik Hariri.

“Those who assassinated Mohamad Chatah are the ones who assassinated Rafik Hariri; they are the ones who want to assassinate Lebanon,” the younger Hariri said in a statement [quoted](#) in the Beirut *Daily Star*. “The suspects are those who are running away from international justice and refuse to appear in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; they are the ones opening the window of evil and chaos to Lebanon and the Lebanese and are drawing regional fires.”

The regional fire rages most fiercely in Syria, where Hizballah has sent its formidable fighting force to support President Bashar Assad, a key ally. That increasingly sectarian conflict has spilled into Lebanon repeatedly – in street fighting in Tripoli, and terrorist strikes such as the Nov. 19 suicide bombing of Iran’s Beirut embassy, which killed 23 people. The borders between the nations are porous and Lebanon’s governing institutions notoriously feeble, easing the flow of arms, fighters, and blame. Jamal Jarrah, a lawmaker in Hariri’s Future party, made the case against Syria and Hizballah on Lebanon’s OTV television: “The team that is led by the Syrian regime and Hizballah insists on communicating through the language of murder, assassination and blood at the expense of National Dialogue and nationwide understandings.”

But Shpiro, the Israeli specialist, read the explosion as an attempt by one element within Hizballah to draw attention away from Syria, where the group’s involvement is a source of contention among the rank and file.

“I think you can clearly see there’s a lot of voices within Hizballah now who question the depth of Hizballah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war,” Shpiro says. He notes that some in Hizballah are concerned that the group’s military involvement in Syria is a distraction from its ostensible mission of confronting Israel and is weakening it in its home base of Lebanon. “I think the assassination of Chatah today was obviously done by hardliners within Hizballah,” Shpiro says. “This is sending a message: we are here, we are strong, we are here to stay. We have a role in Lebanon politics.”

Author [Berti](#), a researcher at the [Institute for National Security Studies](#) at Tel Aviv University, says that given Hizballah’s “extremely strong cohesion” she would be surprised if the bombing was “rogue.” But she too says one of the signals being sent from the blackened crater was a reminder that Hizballah’s focus remains Lebanon.

“Whoever did it said, ‘We’re still here, we’re pretty confident. We’re coming back. And one of the things we’re going to do is take care of our political enemies. To anyone who thought we were going to go away, we’re on the winning side.’”

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