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## Beirut Attack: Middle East Strategic Intelligence Update

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The Valentine's Day attack in Beirut that claimed as many as 15 victims including the billionaire ex-prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri has thrown the small nation into a renewed state of turmoil. After a break-neck recovery from 15 years of protracted civil war, the country now fears facing another era of bloodshed and internecine strife: as the Beirut-based Daily Star succinctly put it, **Hariri was 'assassinated in a way that brings the ghosts of the not-so distant past howling into present-day reality'.**

The politics of Lebanon are extremely complex, involving deep factional divides and – in previous decades – high levels of violence. The population is mainly divided between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Maronite Christians and Druze (followers of a heterodox offshoot of Islam), though there is also a strong presence of Greek Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Allawis and even Jews. Beyond these broadly religious divides lie further regional and familial affiliations which render the fabric of society even more complex.

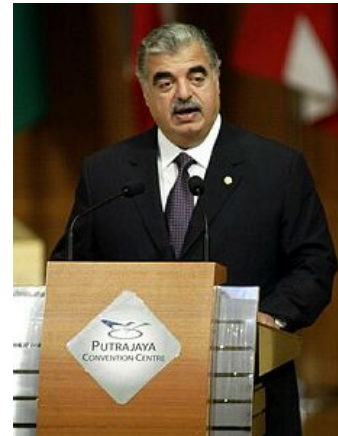
Since the war drew to a gradual close in 1990, Lebanon has remained relatively peaceful based on a delicate power-sharing formula similar in kind to that being developed in Iraq. Rules set down by the Lebanese constitution dictate that the President must be Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister Sunni and the Speaker of Parliament Shia, thus ensuring that nearly all factions in society are politically represented.

Despite this attempt at shared rule, the tensions that caused the protracted civil war remain engrained in the very fabric of society and peace is fragile. Many fear that the violent assassination of February 14<sup>th</sup> will cause a renewed upsurge of instability or even violence in Lebanon and the wider Middle East.

Whether or not this comes to pass is still uncertain, yet – as the reactions to the attack have proved – the entire region will be a site of increased tension whether or not the true culprits are found. The attack has highlighted far broader political issues and Lebanon has once again become the battleground of wider disputes.

**Though the central question at first appeared to be who was to blame for the attack in reality the main issue is which party, whether domestic or international, will make the most political headway out of the incident. As such it seems that the attack was aimed less at internal Lebanese score-settling and more at exacerbating regional tensions.**

### Rafiq al-Hariri



Rafiq al-Hariri returned to Lebanon having earned his fortune in the construction business in Saudi Arabia, and entered the mangled Lebanese political scene hoping to rebuild his war-ravaged country. He served as Prime Minister for 10 of the 15 years following the civil war, finally stepping down last October over a move by parliament to extend the term of the Maronite President Emile Lahoud, who was Syria's choice for the position. Although Christian Maronites have traditionally formed the backbone of opposition to Syria, Lahoud – who has control of the security forces – is regarded as a staunch Syrian ally.

The move involved forcibly amending the constitution which, though he originally acquiesced to the change following a trip to Damascus, provoked Hariri's resignation. He was then replaced by the current

Prime Minister Umar Karami. It is however only recently that Hariri began identifying himself with the opposition bloc now demanding Syria's complete withdrawal from Lebanon.

During his term in office Hariri kick-started the Lebanese economy, much of it through his network of connections and associates, and embarked on extensive rejuvenation plans for his war-torn country. Though successful in recreating the central district of Beirut, dubbed 'Down Town', Hariri's plans saddled Lebanon with a vast external debt while simultaneously enriching the company responsible for the reconstruction, Solidere, of which he was a majority share holder.

Though there has been a vast outpouring of sympathy since his death, Hariri was not quite so universally loved during his lifetime. His extravagance was often criticised, as he was a great fan of big-game hunting, yachting and the high life, hobbies viewed as excessive given that many in Lebanon still live close to the poverty line. At the same time, however, Hariri was known for his benevolence, pumping a proportion of his fortune into charitable causes. It is said that he financed the further education of as many as 33,000 Lebanese students.

## The Usual Suspects

Within hours of the attack accusations were already flying: Mossad, the CIA, Syrian Intelligence, radical Maronites, Mafia revenge, individual rivals with vendettas, al-Qaeda and even Iran have all been accused, with each individual accuser desperately attempting to further its own political agenda. In fact, though at the time almost globally disclaimed as a hoax, the speedy claim of responsibility from a previously unknown group of Jihadist fighters appears to be the most viable scenario. The group may have been acting on its own account for characteristic Jihadist reasons or it may have been encouraged or sponsored by a patron with a different agenda.

## The 'Official' Statement



A previously unknown group calling itself 'Victory and Holy Struggle in the Levant' issued a statement shortly after the attack claiming responsibility for the massacre. A video issued to al-Jazeera showing a banner naming the group and proclaiming 'there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet. God is great', stated that a Mujahid fighter named Ahmad Taysir Abu-Adas had carried out the attack against Hariri due to his relations with the Saudi authorities.

The statement said that it had 'meted out fair punishment' on the former Prime Minister to avenge the 'righteous martyrs who were killed by Saudi security forces in the land of the two holy mosques'. Rafiq al-Hariri, who held dual Lebanese and Saudi nationality and laid the foundations of his fortune in Saudi Arabia, was targeted for the attack as he was an 'agent and cheap tool of [the Saudi] regime in Greater Syria and a maker of illegal money'.

The statement further said that 'the implementation of a resounding martyrdom operation' had confirmed their 'promise to support and wage Jihad' and had been the 'beginning of many martyrdom operations against the infidels, renegades and tyrants in the Levant'.

According to an anonymous neighbour the attacker, Abu-Adas, left his home in the Beirut district of Tareek al Jadid – a Hariri stronghold – and never returned. In a note left to his mother, the neighbour claims, Abu-Adas explained that he intended to fight 'the infidels' from which they deduced that he would be travelling to Iraq or Palestine to fight. The

neighbourhood was shocked by what later transpired, especially as, the neighbour stated, 'he was not a clever enough kid to do something like this on his own. If he did carry out the bombing, he had to have someone behind him'.

In his early years, neighbours claimed, the ear-ringed and tattooed Abu-Adas more resembled a Satan-worshipper than an Islamic fundamentalist, but he had recently begun frequenting mosques known to be recruiting grounds for radical groups. He then began professing to follow radical Wahhabi tendencies which promote the idea of necessary Jihad against non-believers, an idea strictly adhered to by members of al-Qaeda related groups.

## Credibility of the Claim

### *Scale and Sophistication of the Attack*

Many claim that such a large scale attack by a previously unknown group seems unlikely. They argue that Hariri knew he had many enemies and took sophisticated countermeasures to prevent attacks. Local residents, for example, were well aware when Hariri's motorcade was in the area as high-tech tracking devices in his cars, aimed at detecting and even detonating bombs in advance, interfered with mobile phone frequencies and blocked communications. This, it has been argued, means that any attack on Hariri would have to involve a high level of sophistication.

However if the attack were a suicide bombing, as the Lebanese interior ministry has suggested, then no such countermeasures could have prevented it. The depth and location of the crater, which is located in the centre of the road and is 10 feet deep by 30 feet wide, suggest that either a car loaded with explosives attempted to ram the motorcade or a bomb was planted in a tunnel under the road in an area where public works maintenance took place days previous to the attack. It was brute force and careful planning rather than technological sophistication that rendered this attack so successful. Thus arguments claiming that the attack was overly successful and of a far too large scale for a newly founded organisation are misplaced.

Furthermore potential Mujahid fighters have been provided with a perfect and practical training ground in nearby Iraq, as the last generation of al-Qaeda militants had in Afghanistan and Sudan. In his first public testimony since taking his post, the CIA Director, Porter J. Goss, admitted to the Senate on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2005 that 'Islamic extremists are exploiting the Iraqi conflict' and that 'the Iraq conflict, while not a cause of extremism, has become a cause for extremists. These Jihadists who survive will leave Iraq experienced and focused on acts of urban terrorism'.

Thus the apparition of fledgling militant groups in the region that have the capacity to carry out large-scale and widely destructive attacks is unsurprising. Resentment of US policies is

growing and the ranks of adherents to – or even simple sympathisers with – extremist movements are swelling.

### *Planning, Ideology and Geography of the Attack*

We strongly suspect Jihadist involvement for the following reasons:

- Though Jihadist fighters tend to express their motivations in religious terms many of their targets are of economic rather than theological relevance, and Mujahid fighters are constantly reminded of the importance such strikes. A statement by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on December 18<sup>th</sup> 2004, for instance, recommended that Mujahideen 'strike all strongholds of the infidels and their collaborators' and more precisely that they strike 'oil fields and infrastructure which are not serving the Muslim nation but instead its enemies'. Not only did this latest strike target one of the regions richest and most economically influential players, but the attack was directed at the economic heart of Beirut, at a district packed with 5 star hotels, luxury boutiques and up-scale restaurants favoured by cosmopolitan Beirutis, wealthy Gulf tourists and international businessmen;
- Recent training materials for Jihadist fighters like the on-line training magazines produced by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have focused strongly on surveillance and intelligence gathering in order to ensure the maximum impact of attacks. Mujahideen are guided in intelligence gathering strategies that will enable them to maximise the direct material and indirect psychological results of attacks. Rigorous planning of the like is clearly visible in the devastatingly successful attack on Beirut. As stated above, the carefully selected location of the attack maximised disruption in a city striving to regain its popular tourist appeal as 'the Paris of the Middle East'. After years of making headline news due to massacres and bloodshed, Beirut has recently been the focus of countless newspaper travel guides and recommendations. Furthermore, Hariri's extensive security precautions were renowned and the attack was quite clearly planned to foil such measures. The attackers carefully exploited a security soft spot;
- The attack bears the hallmark of recent suicide attacks in Iraq carried out by al-Zarqawi's recently renamed al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Though previously an independent organisation, the renaming of Zarqawi's group suggests a greater level of adherence to the al-Qaeda cause than before. *Update:* Information released over the weekend by Rachid Mezher, a senior investigator for the Lebanese military tribunal, suggests that those involved in the attack had been recruited from Islamist groups operating against coalition forces in Iraq;



- The statement issued falls clearly in line with broader Jihadist currents, echoing al-Qaeda's project of cleansing the Arab world of alien and apostate elements.

### **The Counter Statement**

A parallel statement, attributed to a group called 'al-Qaeda in the Levant', was posted on the internet denying that Jihadist movements had any relation to the attack and blaming either the Israeli Mossad or the Lebanese/Syrian regimes. It said the previous statement was mere fabrication, adding that 'the priority of Jihad groups in the Levant is to support our brothers in Iraq and Palestine, not to blow up cars'. The statement, which was reported by al-Jazeera television, went on to say that 'the attempt to cast the blame on Jihadi and Salafi movements by the cell that carried out [the attack] amounts to slander'.

Yet given the speed at which the initial statement was issued and the subsequent disappearance of Ahmad Abu-Adas there is no reason to believe the claims of this second statement. It must be remembered that constant media references to an all-encompassing umbrella organization called al-Qaeda that is centrally directed are misleading. Individual Jihadist groups and cells sympathetic to so-called al-Qaeda's general aims tend to work independently of each other.

It is consequently highly probable – and even necessary to the success of the attack – that individual groups have no knowledge of the activities of sister organizations and might even disapprove of their targets and actions. We are not inclined to believe the counter statement.

### **Update**

On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February information spread about a possible six suspects in Hariri's assassination, all Lebanese of Islamist affiliation and holding Australian passports. The six reportedly flew to Sydney immediately after the bombing. Traces of explosive materials were found on seats on the aircraft in which they traveled.

A security source revealed that contacts had been established between the Lebanese and Australian Interpol offices on this matter, but nothing new has yet been reported. The Australian Federal Police have confirmed they are conducting enquiries at the request of the Lebanese government.

Australia, with its close proximity to numerous South East Asian countries in which Jihadist groups have a strong presence, is known to be the base for certain al-Qaeda affiliated cells.

## Relations between Syria and Lebanon

Though many indicators show that the attack was the act of members of a Jihadist network, popular blame and resentment has primarily been directed towards Syria. Many Lebanese citizens view Syria to be an occupying State, whose occupation has laid the groundwork for political assassinations like that of 14<sup>th</sup> February. A brief look at historic relations between the two states is necessary for understanding the situation.



Syria entered Lebanon upon the request of the then President Suleiman Franjeh at the outset of the war in the 1976, ostensibly to stabilize the country and to bring an end to the war, but more realistically to fight a proxy war with Israel and to retain control of a geographically significant region. They have since used their troop presence in Lebanon to dominate Lebanese politics.

The Syrians initially entered Lebanon with American and Israeli blessing and Syrian military support did

indeed help end Lebanon's seemingly endless war. Now, however, Syria's domineering presence is widely regarded as a destructive factor in the region, despite the existence of pro-Syria factions within Lebanese society, primarily amongst the Shi'ite Muslims.

The Taef agreement of 1989 lay down a framework for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon yet 14,000 Syrian troops remain in Lebanon to this day and, more alarmingly, Syrian secret services are widely embedded throughout the country. Many feel that it is Syria that pulls the punches in Lebanon with Lebanese politicians serving as mere puppets when it comes to external affairs. Though powerful and influential both on domestic and international fronts even Hariri, as a politician, had to keep his domineering, business minded nature in check in order to placate those in power in Syria.

Hence the controversy surrounding Syria's 'suggested' three year extension of the pro-Syrian President Lahoud's term brought about through a forced constitutional amendment. Such external interference by a neighbour state provoked strong reactions both inside Lebanon and amongst external spectators. It led the United States and traditionally pro-Arab France to present resolution 1559 to the UN Security Council advocating free and fair Presidential elections in Lebanon and the complete withdrawal of external (read Syrian) forces from Lebanese territory.

In political circles a growing chorus of voices has been calling on the Syrians to leave. Hariri seemed set to win a sweeping majority in Lebanon's upcoming elections in May, having allied himself with the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt who has also recently taken a stance not so

much against Syria itself but against the presence of Syrian security forces in Lebanon. Hariri had also allied himself with the Christian leadership as well as Sunni members of the Lebanese opposition.

Such a trans-confessional desertion, which was galvanising a new kind of national unity, was a grave threat to Syrian overlords in Lebanon and had obviously offended many in Damascus. In the week previous to the attack, Syria sought to punish Mr. Hariri for trying to reduce its influence, publishing a scathing attack on him in the national newspaper al-Ba'ath.

On a popular level the outpouring of sentiment at Hariri's funeral serves as further proof of Lebanese animosity towards the brutish actions of its neighbour. Tens of thousands of Lebanese turned the funeral of the former Prime Minister into a display of public wrath against Syria, instantly blamed by opposition leaders for the bomb that killed him.

### Direct Syrian Involvement in the Attack



Despite all of the accusations being levelled at Syria it is however unlikely that the Syrian government was linked to the attack. It is clear that Lebanon is essential to Syria and that, as the Lebanese Parliament Member Adnan Arakchi put it, for Syria 'giving Lebanon up is like putting a noose around its neck.' We must beware of the old analytical sin of "transferring judgement" – in other words just because we view something as extremely stupid and reckless does not mean that others would necessarily see it that way. Yet for the Syrians to go to such indelicate lengths to assassinate an uncomfortable political opponent, especially in the aftermath of their botched constitutional amendment, is much like diplomatic suicide.

The situation has taken on further dimensions and the question of whether Syria was really involved in the attack is of little relevance: what matters is that they have been blamed for either directly or indirectly causing the death of the popular ex-Prime Minister and for the subsequent eruption in regional tensions.

### UNSCR 1559 to end Syrian Occupation

The Resolution, backed by the United States and France, was squeezed through by 9 votes (the minimum number possible) with 6 abstentions on September 2, 2004.

It called for:

- the respect of Lebanese sovereignty;
- the withdrawal of remaining foreign forces in Lebanon;
- the disbanding of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias;
- the extension of Lebanese government control over all Lebanese territory;
- free and fair Presidential elections.

The United States swiftly recalled Ambassador Margaret Scobey from Damascus, constituting one of the most pointed of all diplomatic moves, yet Condoleeza Rice was forced to acknowledge that the withdrawal was prompted by more than just Hariri's death. The removal of Ambassador Scobey, she said, 'relates to the fact that the relationship [between the US and Syria] has been for some time not moving in a positive direction, but this event in Lebanon is the proximate cause of the withdrawal'.

Many have read the recall of the US Ambassador as direct proof of Syria's role in the attack yet at the time of the recall any firm confirmation of the blame was missing. As Rice herself admitted in the short period following the attack, the identities of those who carried out the bombing were unknown. 'We're not laying blame', she asserted, 'it needs to be investigated'.

Yet, while Rice stressed there is no proof of responsibility, she told senators that Syria's continued military presence in Lebanon 'does put on the Syrians a special responsibility for the kind of destabilization that happened there and that this sort of thing could happen'.

### ***The Syria Accountability Act***

In November 2003, the United States Congress passed the 'Syria Accountability Act', which was signed into law by President Bush in December.

#### **US Demands**

- End support for terrorists;
- Pull troops out of Lebanon ;
- End acquisition and production of weapons of mass destruction and long-range ballistic missiles;
- Prevent terrorists and weapons from entering Iraq.

#### **Measures**

- Ban on sales of dual-use technology;
- Export ban;
- Prohibition of operations by US businesses;
- Limits on Syrian airline flights within US;
- Reduction of diplomatic contacts;
- Freeze on Syrian assets in US.

The United States is clearly exploiting world furor over the assassination to generate momentum against the already unpopular Syrian regime. The US government had so far only implemented 2 of the 6 possible economic measures against Syria that had been approved by the Syria Accountability Act and, as a consequence of Hariri's assassination, is now seeking to apply further sanctions.

Whether or not Syria is to blame for the incident the US actions have far broader implications: yet again Lebanon has surfaced as a fighting ground for broader battles. and the event has proved convenient in American plan to remodel the Middle East. As Elie Ferzli, Lebanon's information minister, says 'there is no way that we can see what is happening here outside the scope of the regional situation'.

#### **Indirect Syrian Involvement**

There remains the possibility that factions in Syria, who have strong business/drugs interests in Lebanon and would thus absolutely oppose withdrawal, could have been linked to

the attack without the knowledge or collaboration of Bashar and official state apparatuses.

Under the pressure of resolution 1559 those with intricate business ties to Lebanon have a strong motivation to instigate such an attack as a desperate measure to eradicate a leader who was fast becoming the pillar of anti-Syrian political movements in Lebanon.

But the fact remains that such a large-scale assassination is a self-defeating act as, rather than block Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, it has served only to speed it up: just as the forced extension of President Lahoud's term drew international scorn and provoked heightened international pressure on Syria to end its meddling, so too would a large-scale attack on a high profile and respected politician provoke international ire. Given Syria's recent diplomatic history anyone planning this type of attack would be acutely aware of the potential negative repercussions on Syria's international image.

#### **A Move Towards Democratic Reform?**

Lebanon and its neighbours lived the days following the huge assassination attack in fear of the explosion of another civil war yet the attack has had strong repercussions on potential political reform in the region. The Lebanese Opposition seized the opportunity to hold its government accountable and create the change it desires from within. Despite the everyday criticisms levelled at him during his life time, nearly 200,000 Lebanese attended Hariri's funeral, a fact that constituted an all important 'reality check' - as the Lebanese Daily Star put it - for the pro-Syrian party of Prime Minister Omar Karami. Popular support was galvanised against undemocratic rule and inter-state meddling.

There is a real possibility that the united front that the attack engendered - which struck almost all factions of Lebanese society with equal horror - will spark a Ukraine-like push for democratic change. Lebanon seems set to embark on a path that US and coalition leaders hope that Iraqis will follow.

Whether or not this new born movement will bear fruit is hard to predict at the present time yet the very fact that the population has united in its outspoken demand for democracy and regime change is of great importance in a region where civil liberties and freedom of speech are severely restricted. Whatever the outcome, it is a step in the right direction.

#### **Troop Withdrawal**

In the week following the Beirut attack US officials have been pressing hard for the speedy withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon, in other words for the implementation of UNSCR 1559. To begin with it appeared that the Syrians could do nothing but acquiesce, especially given the intense pressure placed upon them by both Lebanese politicians and populace. Yet the Syrians are standing their ground and putting forward their own set of demands.

Damascus has allegedly told senior American officials over the weekend that a unilateral withdrawal of its 15,000 troops was out of the question until Israel ended its occupation of the Golan Heights, which it seized from Syria in 1967 and annexed 14 years later. Despite the potentially catastrophic implications of the current situation and of Syria's continued military 'support' for Lebanon, Syria is proving unwilling to renounce its useful bargaining chip. Continued presence in Lebanon not only keeps Syria firmly on the world stage but it also lends the opportunity to strike a grand deal with the United States to secure the future of the Ba'athist regime in the evolving new Middle East order.

Unfortunately Syrian opportunism also opens up one of its greatest weaknesses: as last week's events proved the continued occupation of Lebanon almost poses an existential threat to the Syrian regime. Continued international pressure on Syria is pushing the state into more and more rash actions as it seeks to hold onto any strategic advantage available to it. Consequently Syria has resorted to forging a Syria-Iran Mutual Defence Pact, despite the vast ideological differences that exist between the Iranian Theocracy and the Secular Socialist Syrian state.

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