

Attack Targets U.S. Embassy Car in Beirut, Lebanon

Summary

The explosion occurred around 4:30 p.m. on the coastal road north of Beirut. A parked car containing the explosive device was remote-detonated as a sport utility vehicle (SUV) belonging to the United States' embassy in Beirut passed it on the road. The bomb did not hit its mark directly. The car's sole passenger – a Lebanese national employed by the embassy – was unharmed.¹ The driver of the SUV was wounded. The US State Department characterized his injury as “non-life threatening.”²

Casualties

At least three bystanders were killed: one pedestrian and two passengers in a nearby car badly damaged by the blast, according to a Lebanese security official interviewed by AFP. However, the US State Department report stated a total of four civilians were killed.³ AFP has reported that one of the dead civilians was a Syrian citizen.⁴ AFP also reported an estimated 26 people wounded.⁵ The number wounded varies among different news agencies reporting on the explosion.

Context

The incident coincided with U.S. President George Bush's eight day visit to the Middle East. It also took place a day before a scheduled Arab League Conference, when Amr Moussa, the Secretary of the Arab League, is coming to Lebanon to mediate negotiations with Lebanese officials on a plan to elect a president. Factional turmoil has thus far prevented the Lebanese government from holding presidential elections.⁶

Suspects

There have been no claims of responsibility for the attack. Neither the Lebanese nor US governments have accused any particular party. Recent events in Lebanon and the timing of the incident indicate that the primary suspects are pro-Syrian forces in Lebanon.

Syria, or its allies in Lebanon, have been implicated in a series of small-scale bombings occurring in the country since “the Cedar Revolution,” a peaceful movement which

¹ Smit, Martina, “Beirut Attack on US Embassy Car Kills Three,” The Daily Telegraph, 16 January 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/01/15/wleb115.xml>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, and “Alhayat: Three were Killed and 20 were Injured During an Attack that Targeted U.S. Embassy Car , the Bloody Series Hits Beirut Again” Al-Hayat Newspaper, 16 January 2008.

⁴ “Three Killed in Beirut Attack on US Embassy Car,” AFP, 16 January 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Alhayat: Three were Killed and 20 were Injured During an Attack that Targeted U.S. Embassy Car , the Bloody Series Hits Beirut Again” Al-Hayat Newspaper, 16 January 2008 http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/01-2008/Item-20080115-7efe5f20-c0a8-10ed-01ae-81ab6c2285b4/story.html

expelled the Syrian military occupation from Lebanon in 2005. Syria had occupied the country to various degrees since 1976. The main factional divide in Lebanon's government is between the ruling anti-Syrian coalition, which rejects Syrian interference or control of Lebanese affairs, and the pro-Syrian, Hezbollah-led opposition.

Syria and its Lebanese cohorts are not the only suspects, however. Islamist extremist organizations have also been responsible for similar bombings in recent years. Al-Hayat newspaper pointed out that the leader of the al-Qaeda linked group Fatah al-Islam threatened upcoming attacks in the country just over a week ago, on January 7th.⁷ The group is suspected of two terrorist incidents just one week prior to this recent bombing, on 8 January. Early that morning, rockets were fired into northern Israel from southern Lebanon. Later that day, two United Nations' employees—Irish citizens—were lightly wounded when a bomb targeted their vehicle as they attempted to investigate the rocket firing.⁸

Government and International Response

The U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed outrage in response to the attack. "To the degree that there is any thought of intimidation in an attack of this kind, the United States will of course not be deterred in its efforts to help the Lebanese people, to help the democratic forces in Lebanon, to help Lebanon resist foreign interference in their affairs," Rice stated.⁹

Ahmad Fatfat, Lebanese member of Parliament and former Lebanese Interior Minister, said the attack was an attempt to undermine the Arab League's efforts to bring an end to the Lebanese presidential crisis.¹⁰

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah denounced the attack "regardless of who might be targeted." He indicated that he was not speaking on behalf of Hizballah alone, but on behalf of "the Shiite opposition party in Lebanon."¹¹

The U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned the attack and said that "it is imperative that Lebanese authorities find the perpetrators of this cowardly crime and bring them to justice."¹²

Previous Attacks Targeting the U.S. Embassy in Beirut:

In April 1983, an attack on the U.S. embassy killed 63 people.

⁷ Al-Hayat Newspaper, 16 January 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Rice Expresses Outrage over Lebanon Bombing," ABC News, 16 January 2008.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/16/2139265.htm?section=world>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ AFP, 16 January 2008.

¹² "UN Chief Ban Ki-Moon Condemns UN Attack," Times of India, 16 January 2008.

http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/World/The_United_States/UN_chief_Ban_Ki-moon_condemns_Beirut_attack/articleshow/2703634.cms

In September 1984, a bombing targeted the U.S. embassy killed 11 people.

In September 1989, the embassy closed and all American staff were evacuated due to security threats. The embassy reopened in November 1990 when civil war violence abated.

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