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Country Reports on Terrorism 2007 - Lebanon

Political violence continued throughout 2007. Most notable were the June 13, September 19, and December 12 car bombing assassinations of MP Walid Eido, MP Antoine Ghanem, and General Francois al-Hajj, respectively. The two MPs were part of the pro-government March 14 coalition, and several political allies of the two MPs charged that the Syrian government was responsible for the assassinations, which Syria strongly denied. These acts, the latest in a series of assassinations and attempted assassinations over the last three years, seemed designed to intimidate the pro-government forces and eliminate, through the process of killing MPs, their numerical majority in parliament.

On May 20, a conflict involving the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and militant Islamic fundamentalist group Fatah al-Islam (FAI) erupted in Nahr el-Barid, a Palestinian refugee camp in the north. After a three-month battle, the Lebanese Army took control of the camp on September 2. The death toll was 168 LAF soldiers and an estimated 42 civilians. While the LAF were able to defeat FAI militants and secure the Nahr el-Barid camp, the Government of Lebanon still lacked control of the other eleven refugee camps in the country.

The assassinations of the MPs and the battle against FAI were followed by a December 12 car bombing that killed LAF Brigadier General Francois al-Hajj in the Christian town of Baabda, east of Beirut. General al-Hajj had been in charge of operations when Lebanon's army fought Islamic militants from Fatah al-Islam in Nahr el-Barid refugee camp. No one publicly claimed responsibility for the bombing, though potential suspects include FAI and its sympathizers.

On June 24, six soldiers in the Spanish contingent of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) were killed, and another two injured, when two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) exploded near their vehicle in southern Lebanon. While no organization claimed credit for the attack, it was widely viewed as an effort by those who oppose UNIFIL's efforts to prevent attacks against Israel launched from southern Lebanon.

During the last three years, there have been at least 12 assassinations and assassination attempts that resulted in more than 49 deaths, including that of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Other attacks targeted Lebanese journalists and politicians critical of Syrian interference in Lebanon. All of these attacks remained unsolved. The UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) continued its investigation of the Hariri assassination and its assistance to Lebanon in the Lebanese investigation of the other assassinations.

By confronting and defeating FAI in the Nahr el-Barid camp, the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the LAF took a strong incremental step in combating and preventing terrorist activities. The battle against FAI marked the first time in 40 years that the LAF fought a major conflict as a single entity, and it was the first time the army entered a Palestinian refugee camp to eliminate an Islamic militant terrorist group and reestablish order and security. Also, the LAF continued to strengthen its border presence and increased patrols in the south, with assistance from UNIFIL. Even with the conflict in north Lebanon, the LAF was able to maintain its deployment commitments in the south.

While the Lebanese government has made progress, there were still concerns about its ability to combat terrorism. The Lebanese government continued to recognize Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, as a legitimate "resistance group" and political party. Hizballah

retains its strong influence among Lebanon's Shia community, which comprises about one-third of Lebanon's population. Hizballah maintained offices in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon.

The ongoing political stalemate over both the election of a president and the failure of Parliament to meet has contributed to enabling militant foreign Islamic extremists affiliated with or sympathetic to al-Qa'ida (AQ) to infiltrate Lebanon, and to set up operational cells. Palestinian militant groups continued to capitalize on the lack of government control within the camps. Some of these groups, such as AQ-affiliated Asbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham, have been able to find safe haven within the camps to support their actions, most notably in the Ain el-Hilwah camp.

Although Syria withdrew its military forces from Lebanon in April 2005, it still maintains a covert intelligence presence. The Lebanese government has accused Syria of continuing to support and facilitate arms smuggling to Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist groups. Even with the continued LAF troop deployments, the Government of Lebanon still did not exercise full control over areas in the Hizballah-dominated south, the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Bekaa Valley, and inside eleven Palestinian-controlled refugee camps. This lack of control provided opportunities for terrorist groups to operate relatively freely in some of these locations.

At the end of the year, the Lebanese government had not fully implemented provisions of UNSCR 1559, which called for respect for the sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon, the end of foreign interference in Lebanon, and the disarming and disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. While the Lebanese government was committed to fulfilling the provisions of UNSCR 1559, it maintained that implementation of Hizballah's disarmament should be accomplished through "national dialogue" rather than force.

Lebanese authorities maintained that the amnesty for Lebanese individuals involved in acts of violence during the civil war prevented the government from prosecuting terrorist cases of concern to the United States. These cases included individuals involved in the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, during which a U.S. Navy diver was murdered, and the abduction, torture, and murder of U.S. hostages in Lebanon from 1984 to 1991. U.S. courts issued indictments against Lebanese Hizballah operatives responsible for a number of those crimes. Mohammad Ali Hamadi, who spent 18 years in a German prison for his role in the TWA hijacking, was released in December 2005 and was believed to be in Lebanon. The United States continued its efforts to bring him to trial before a U.S. court and formally requested his extradition.

With regard to terrorism finance, Lebanese officials played an active leadership role in the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENA/FATF). The Central Bank of Lebanon's Special Investigation Commission (SIC), an independent legal entity with judicial status that is empowered to investigate suspicious financial transactions, investigated 209 cases involving allegations of money laundering and terrorist financing activities. On two occasions, the SIC was unable to designate or freeze the assets of two groups affiliated with Hizballah, because the groups were affiliated with a political party participating in the Lebanese government, and thus, a decision to freeze their assets would have been a political, rather than a legal decision.
