

Trails of Many Muslim Fighters Mingle

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BEIRUT—A miasma of battling interests with a government only nominally in charge, Lebanon has become a regional crossroads for international Islamic movements spawned in Afghanistan and deeply hostile to Israel and the West.

Islamic extremists here recently have included Saudis, Egyptians, Bahrainis and Algerians, according to Arab and Western officials who monitor the groups. Although divided by nationality and often by Islamic doctrine, the radicals have in common their service in the U.S.-organized war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and determination to fight Western or Zionist inroads in the Middle East.

Little is known of their activities in Lebanon, which take place in secret, largely in the eastern Bekaa Valley outside the Beirut government's control, and fluctuate according to shifting alliances. But most come to seek help from Hezbollah—the influential Lebanese Shiite political party, with a strong militia linked to Iran—that runs training centers in the Bekaa for Lebanese and foreign militants, the officials said.

"There's certainly a relationship there," said a Western official who follows developments in Lebanon closely.

As a result, investigators seeking a foreign link to the June 25 truck bombing that killed 19 U.S. servicemen in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, seem likely to follow a trail leading at one point through Lebanon. According to Saudi sources, two reasons to look for links in the Bekaa Valley already have emerged:

■ Saudi investigators at Dhahran have found an electronic detonator of a kind used by Hezbollah.

■ Saudi intelligence has acquired a video purporting to show Saudi extremists undergoing training in eastern Lebanon.

"We know some are here," said a Western official. "Whether they're based here, whether they stay here, whether they're brought here in a programmatic fashion—all this is open to question."

Egyptian officials also have charged that some members of the underground Islamic Group have received training in the Bekaa Valley to further their four-year-old campaign against the U.S.-allied government of President Hosni Mubarak. At least two Islamic Group bands broken up in Egypt recently included extremists who said they trained in Lebanon, some also with help from Iran, the Egyptian sources said.

"The training in the Bekaa is continuing because circumstances in Lebanon permit everything," an Egyptian official said.

Lebanon, with its long tradition of militias and clandestine military training, has to some degree become a haven for Islamic extremists previously based in Sudan, where the fundamentalist government has come under heavy pressure to halt backing for such groups.

Hezbollah, which is part of regular political life here, has long taken pride in its close ties to Iran but refuses to discuss training of foreigners in the Bekaa. The Lebanese army, while acknowledging that first Palestinians and then Hezbollah have trained foreign militants in the past, denied any training bases remain.

"I will sign my name to it," affirmed one Lebanese officer.

In fact, the Lebanese army has little control—or even presence—in the fertile Bekaa Valley, a strip of gentle hills and farmland that runs north-south just east of Lebanon's

main mountain range and just west of the border with Syria. The Syrian army has controlled the area since 1976, exercising more or less authority as the political or military situation evolves.

Iran's help for Hezbollah, including funding and weapons deliveries through Damascus, and for other militant Islamic groups in Lebanon has thus depended for years on Syria's willingness to look the other way. Syrian President Hafez Assad has allowed Hezbollah's militia to train and receive Iranian help in the Bekaa in part because resulting pressure against Israeli troops in southern Lebanon is a lever in his negotiations with Jerusalem.

But Assad does not always give the militia or its allies a free hand. Arab veterans of the Afghan war, reportedly headed to Jordan with plans to attack Israelis visiting there, were arrested in Syria last month, presumably after moving from bases in the Bekaa. According to Jordanian officials quoted in the Arab press, the capture came after King Hussein turned over intelligence on their plans to Assad during the two leaders' reconciliation at the Arab summit conference in Cairo last June.

Some of the Islamic extremists arrested in Syria were Egyptians. Egyptian intelligence officers have visited Damascus to work with their Syrian counterparts in interrogating the prisoners, an unusual display of anti-terrorism cooperation, the reports said.

With peace negotiations with Israel stymied for months, Assad recently has sought warmer ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. In that light, Saudi sources said, the Riyadh government has warned him he will be held responsible for any Syrian implication in—or even tolerance of—preparations for the Dhahran bomb-

in Lebanon

ing that may have occurred in Syria or the Syrian-controlled Bekaa.

Cross-border movement of Saudi extremists planning attacks in the kingdom would not be without precedent. Saudi guards on the border with Jordan intercepted a car March 29 that carried four Saudis and 85 pounds of concealed plastic explosives. The origins of the car and the plastic have not been revealed.

Some Saudi and Lebanese sources expressed skepticism that the kingdom's radical Islamic underground would have extensive ties with Hezbollah. Both fundamentalist groups—Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Sunnis and Hezbollah's Shiites—consider the other's stream of Islam to be apostasy, they pointed out.

Cooperation between Hezbollah and Bahrain's Shiite-based opposition, which the Bahraini militants have acknowledged, seems logical, they said. But the Saudi militants, they added, appear more likely to receive help from Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi businessman who has proclaimed his support for Islamic underground groups. He helped finance their training in Sudan until he was forced recently to leave there for Afghanistan.

But Western and Arab officials said such doctrinal considerations appear to have been put aside, at least temporarily, for Bekaa visits by Saudi, Egyptian and Algerian militants and, in some instances, for assistance from Iranian intelligence operatives who spend time there. And some of the Saudis arrested in March on the Jordanian border were Shiite, others Wahhabi.

"I don't think they're going to stand on doctrinal niceties," a diplomat here remarked.

Correspondent John Lancaster contributed to this report from Cairo.