

Lebanon intercepts covert arms shipments bound for Syria

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Lebanese army intelligence has intercepted a covert shipment of 1,000 assault rifles, reportedly destined for the city of Baniyas in Syria. Army investigators say they have uncovered ties between the smugglers and the political entourage of former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who is backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Baniyas is one of a number of cities hit by protests against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the months since the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The Syrian regime has mobilized the Syrian army against these protests, which have been concentrated in majority-Sunni regions of the country, claiming it was trying to repress violent opposition by armed guerrilla movements.

On Saturday August 6, Lebanon's *Al-Akhbar* newspaper reported details of the arms shipment to Syria based on Lebanese security sources. According to *Al-Akhbar*, army intelligence had been notified that two members of the Tamim clan from Tripoli were seeking large quantities of arms to be delivered to Syria. One of the two suspects was the manager of the tourist seaport of Marina, which is administered by Solidere, a real-estate firm founded by the late billionaire and former premier Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri's father.

Lebanese intelligence eavesdropped on discussions between the suspects and an arms dealer, in which the two sides agreed on a down payment of US\$100,000 once buyers were shown high-quality Kalashnikov and M-16 rifle samples. The plan was to either ship the rifles in one batch by sea to Baniyas in Syria, or to divide it into smaller batches and smuggle it through Lebanon's northern border. The suspects and the dealer were followed and arrested by army intelligence forces on July 30, after delivery of the arms in Ras Beirut.

On August 8 the *Al-Safir* newspaper quoted a security official: "The recently foiled operation is still under investigation, and there has been highly significant information gleaned from those involved who are affiliated with a prominent tendency in the March 14 alliance. This is not the only operation that they have carried out."

The March 14 alliance is a coalition of Lebanese political parties hostile to Syria, whose largest member is Saad Hariri's Al-Mustaqbal ("The Future") movement. Its name comes from the date of the so-called Cedar Revolution of 2005, a series of US-backed street demonstrations that led the Syrian army to evacuate Lebanon after the assassination of Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005.

Saad Hariri served as prime minister from 2009 to January 2011, when Hezbollah—a Syrian-backed Lebanese Shiite political party and armed militia—left Hariri's governmental

coalition, bringing down his government.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar television identified the smugglers as Wassam and Samir Tamim. They have reportedly confessed to running over 30 arms-smuggling operations from Marina to Baniyas with the assistance of Mohammad Kabbara, a member of the Al-Mustaqbal parliamentary bloc tied to Saudi intelligence. Al-Manar stated that the center of operations was Kabbara's farm in northern Lebanon, adding that this was also a transit point for Islamist (Salafi) fighters traveling to the Syrian city of Homs.

The Syrian army claimed last week that in recent fighting near Homs it has detained hundreds of Salafi fighters (reportedly including Afghans) with Lebanese documents, whose transfer to Syria was facilitated by Kabbara.

The Lebanese cabinet met Monday to discuss the arms-smuggling case. There are increasing tensions between political forces inside Lebanon—especially between the US-backed March 14 alliance and the Syrian-backed March 8 alliance formed around Hezbollah.

The discovery of covert arms shipments to Syria by Saudi-backed Lebanese politicians comes amid rising pressure by US imperialism and its Arab proxies on the Syrian regime. US officials are warning they may soon issue a statement formally demanding the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies have withdrawn their ambassadors to Syria, while criticizing Assad for his regime's repression of protests in Homs, Hama, and other Syrian cities.

Lebanese arms-smuggling revelations lend support to claims that Saudi or US forces are trying to seize on protests in Sunni-majority regions of Syria to destabilize Assad, and replace him with a regime more directly aligned with the interests of US imperialism.

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