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## Regional wave of Sunni extremism reaches Lebanon

By Nicholas Blanford

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The deteriorating security situation and worsening sectarian climate has led to the worrying emergence of Lebanese Sunnis willing to blow themselves up against Shiite targets, a phenomenon that has become routine in places like Iraq and Pakistan but is unprecedented in Lebanon until now.

Lebanese Sunnis have accounted for two of the seven people to have blown themselves up in Lebanon since the Nov. 19 twin suicide bomb attack against the Iranian Embassy in Jnah in which 25 were killed. Four of the bombers remain unidentified.

Mouein Abu Dahr, a resident of Sidon and a follower of the renegade Salafist preacher Sheikh Ahmad Assir, died when he detonated his explosive vest beside the gate of the Iranian Embassy minutes before his Palestinian colleague set off a car bomb. The second Lebanese suicide bomber was Qutaiba Satem, who struck the Haret Hreik neighborhood of southern Beirut on Jan. 2, killing five people.

Abu Dahr's operation was an attack against a specific target, the Iranian Embassy, and

claimed by the Abdullah al-Azzam Brigades.

Satem, however, had the grim distinction of being the first Lebanese Sunni to deliberately drive an explosives-laden car into a Shiite neighborhood and blow himself up with the aim of killing as many Shiites as possible, emulating sectarian attacks that have blighted Iraq for a decade.

The significance of this new phenomenon of suicide bombings by Lebanese Sunnis is illustrated by a search for past examples from a community which traditionally has been religiously moderate and rooted in mercantile activities in the cities of the coast.

Indeed, with the exception of Ziad Jarrah, the only Lebanese among the Sept. 11, 2001, suicide bombers, one has to go back to the 1980s to find other Lebanese Sunnis who immolated themselves.

Of the approximately 33 suicide bomb attacks against Israeli troops and their Lebanese militia allies between 1982 and 1999, only three were carried out by Lebanese Sunnis. Ali Taleb, who blew up his car beside an Israeli patrol in Arnoun in July 1985, and Fadwa Ghanem who attacked another Israeli patrol in the same village four years later were both members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and from Akkar in north Lebanon. The third Sunni suicide bomber was Jamal Satti, a local Communist Party commander and resistance fighter from Kamed al-Loz in the Western Bekaa who persuaded his reluctant superiors to allow him to carry out a suicide mission.

He disguised himself as a Shiite preacher and rode with two donkeys carrying 100 kilograms of explosives into Hasbaya, where he blew himself up but only achieved some damage to an Israeli outpost.

The three anti-Israeli suicide bombers were motivated by nationalism while Satem and Abu Dahr were driven by religion and anti-Shiite hostility.

While Abu Dahr was known for his religiosity and ties to Assir, Satem's story appears more nuanced.

Satem was from the village of Hnayder, which lies on Lebanon's northern border in the Wadi Khaled district. Wadi Khaled does not have a reputation for religious militancy. Its residents are generally pragmatists who maintained good relations with their Alawite neighbors to facilitate smuggling networks across what was a porous border before the Syrian war and to avail themselves of cheaper prices of basic goods in Syrian shops.

Residents of Hnayder and neighboring Wadi Khaled village have reacted to Satem's death with a mix of disgust, pride and denial. Satem was reported to have traveled to

Syria and fought in the Qalamoun area in the weeks before he died. Friends and family insist that Satem only went missing four days before his death. Some of his friends said they do not dispute that Qutaiba was in the car that blew up in Haret Hreik, but they maintain he had been kidnapped by Hezbollah, drugged and placed in the car, which they say was detonated by remote control. They question how it was possible to find a near intact ID document so quickly and maintain that Satem did not know how to drive.

“No one in their right mind would take their ID card with them on such a mission. All the evidence against Satem was neatly laid out on the road,” said Sheikh Imad Malabas, a preacher in Wadi Khaled who was a friend of Satem.

Others in the area, however, endorsed Satem’s action, saying that he was “defending the dignity of the Sunni sect.”

“There will be more martyrdom operations if Hezbollah does not stop its oppression of Sunnis,” said Anwar, a resident of Hnayder.

Since Anwar made that comment, two more as yet unidentified suicide bombers have struck Shiite areas: Hermel on Jan. 16 and Haret Hreik again Tuesday.

The bulk of the attacks, including the two non-suicide bombings in southern Beirut in July and August last year, did not have specific targets but were intended to inflict casualties on Shiite citizens in general. The two exceptions were the twin suicide bombing of the Iranian Embassy in November and the Dec. 21 operation in the northern Bekaa which apparently was an attempt to strike a Hezbollah base in the hills behind Sbouba.

Hezbollah operates a string of military bases and training centers in the hills on the western flank of the Bekaa Valley. The existence of the bases is well known locally even if their specific locations are harder to determine. Launching a suicide bomb attack against one of them suggests an example of ambition overcoming reality; the entrances of the bases are usually guarded by Hezbollah checkpoints, which makes it unlikely that the bomb-laden car would have ever reached its target.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah now faces an array of domestic threats from the small but potent pool of suicide bombers, Lebanese and foreign, including indiscriminate bombings of Shiite-populated areas designed to undermine the morale of the party’s supporters and direct attacks against military assets in the Bekaa and elsewhere. And if anyone still had any doubt about that threat, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, which claimed responsibility for Jan. 2 and Hermel suicide bombings, Friday urged Sunnis to stay away from Hezbollah-controlled areas.

“We, Jabhat al-Nusra, announce that the Party of Iran and its security and military locations are a legitimate target for us wherever they are,” the group said in a Twitter message.