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New suicide bombing drags Lebanon closer to civil war

Explosions create climate of fear, with residents increasingly nervous about unfamiliar cars and certain neighbourhoods.

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BEIRUT - A suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt inside a minibus south of the Lebanese capital Beirut on Monday, wounding two people, medical and government officials said.

"A man wearing an explosive belt boarded a public minibus in Choueifat and

blew himself up," Interior Minister Marwan Charbel told Lebanon's Mayadeen television channel.

The blast is the fifth to hit Lebanon this year, and comes after at least four people were killed on Saturday in a suicide bombing in the eastern town of Hermel.

Footage from the scene broadcast on television showed the mangled remains of a vehicle surrounded by shards of glass and other objects strewn across the road.

Red Cross communications director Ayad Monzer said: "The bomber was killed, and two others were injured -- a man, who is in critical condition, and a woman with moderate injuries."

Ali Mcheik said on LBC television that his brother was the man injured in the blast and had been driving the bus.

"When the bomber got on, he noticed that his stomach area looked bulky and asked him about it, then the bomber detonated his explosives," he said.

He told the channel that his brother Hussein Mcheik was undergoing surgery in a nearby hospital after surviving the attack.

Choueifat lies south of Beirut, not far from the suburbs of the city, which have been targeted in multiple bomb attacks in past months.

It is home to a mixed Christian and Druze population.

Previous blasts have largely targeted areas sympathetic to Lebanon's powerful Shiite group Hezbollah, which has dispatched fighters to battle alongside the Syrian regime against a Sunni-dominated uprising.

Jihadist groups believed to be linked to those fighting in Syria have claimed responsibility for most of the attacks, saying they will continue for as long as Hezbollah battles in Syria.

But while the attacks have apparently targeted Hezbollah, the victims have been civilians.

The explosions have created a climate of fear in the country, with residents increasingly nervous about unfamiliar cars and certain neighbourhoods.

Charbel told Lebanon's MTV television that the country had seen a spike in the theft of cars, which were being driven across the border to Syria, packed with explosives and returned to Lebanon.

The latest attack drew swift condemnation from the US and British embassies in Beirut.

"Our thoughts are with the victims and their families. We condemn this act of terror," the US embassy in Beirut wrote on its Twitter account.

Britain's ambassador Tom Fletcher called the blast a "callous effort to terrorise and divide", on his Twitter account.