



Photo by Patrick Baz, AFP / Getty Images

Beirut: Echoes Of 1983 Marine Barracks Bombing In Hassan Attack



By Mike Giglio

October 23rd 2012 3:02 pm

[followMore Stories by Mike Giglio](#)

Twenty-nine years ago, the Marine barracks bombing killed 241 U.S. servicemen in the Marine Corps' biggest loss of life since Iwo Jima. Today, Beirut is staggering from another attack—and the same culprits are to blame. Mike Giglio reports.

Early on the morning of October 23, 1983, Tannous Mouawad was driving to the airport in Beirut when he saw a massive fireball burst into the sky. The explosion, about a mile away, was so big that he wondered if an earthquake had hit. "I thought it was the end of the world," he says.

Mouawad, who ran an intelligence division of the Lebanese Army at the time, sped immediately to the scene. He remembers being staggered by what he found. The blast had brought the headquarters of a peace-keeping force of 1,600 U.S. Marines to the ground. All that remained of the four-story building, which the Marines also used as a bunk house, was a smoldering mass of rubble and a crater 30 feet deep by 40 feet wide. "You knew it was something very big," Mouawad says. "You felt like the world stopped."

A suicide truck bomb packed with the equivalent of 12,000 pounds of TNT had plowed through a barbed wire fence and into the building's lobby as the barracks came to life on a Sunday morning at 6:22 am. The blast severed the building from its foundation, lifting it into the air. It was the largest non-nuclear explosion since World War II. With 220 Marines killed, along with another 21 U.S. servicemen, it was also the deadliest day the Marine Corps had seen since the battle of Iwo Jima.

America had sent the peacekeeping force to Lebanon in an effort to stabilize the country in the midst of its long-running civil war—a move opposed by Syria and its ally Iran, who saw themselves as the only players in town. The barracks bombing, which U.S. investigators later attributed to Syrian and Iranian proxies, hammered home this point. Shortly afterward, American forces withdrew. In his autobiography, Ronald Reagan called the day of the bombing the saddest of his presidency, "and perhaps the saddest day of my life."

[Col. Timothy J. Geraghty](#), who was commander of the U.S. Marines in Beirut at the time, says that he could sense the threat from Syria and Iran closing in as the U.S. efforts to help the Lebanese government moved along. Shells were coming at the Marines from areas under Syrian control, while Geraghty himself had narrowly escaped a car bomb just days before the barracks blast. "You could just smell that we were being set up," he says. "It's the same pattern. They'll target anyone that shows any support or leadership. And the whole point is that it hasn't changed."

"The regime wants to send the message that if you get rid of us, there will be a total mess not only in Syria, but in Lebanon and elsewhere too."

Twenty-nine years later, Beirut is facing the fallout from another blast, the latest in a long line of attacks as regional powers continue to vie for influence in Lebanon. Last Friday, eight people were killed and scores more injured by a car bomb so powerful that it devastated an entire city block. Among those murdered: Gen. Wisham al-Hassan, head of the country's internal security agency.

Hassan was a much different target than the Marines in '83. His groundbreaking intelligence work led many Lebanese to consider him a pioneer in pushing for the country's independence. But that might have made him an even bigger threat to the foreign powers that have long pulled

the strings of power in Lebanon—and in particular, to Syria, which Hassan had right in his policeman’s sights.

Over the summer, the general had completed an investigation into the 2005 assassination of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a former ally-turned-opponent of Syria. A special U.N. tribunal had already indicted several members of Hizbullah—a descendent of the underground militant Shiite group responsible for the Marine barracks bombing—in the attack. Hassan went further, arresting a former Lebanese minister with close ties to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. While evidence has surfaced that U.N. prosecutors were [suspicious of Hassan’s alibi during the Hariri assassination](#) and of his own dealings with Hizbullah, many Lebanese believe that Hassan represented Syria’s most high-profile opponent in the country and that Damascus was clearly behind his death. After Friday’s bombing, Najib Mikati, Lebanon’s Prime Minister, linked it to Hassan’s Syria-related work. Meanwhile, Hizbullah has [rejected calls](#) to refer Hassan’s death to the U.N. tribunal that had investigated the Hariri assassination.

In the bombing’s aftermath, protests broke out across Lebanon, with calls for the government to stand down and clashes erupting on the streets of Beirut during Hassan’s funeral. The government deployed army tanks on Monday to reinstate calm, but it appears to be struggling to contain the fallout from the assassination. As one of the country’s most powerful Sunni leaders, Hassan’s death immediately raised the sectarian temperature in Lebanon, just as the Syrian conflict is becoming viciously polarized along religious lines. (Assad has been forced to rely increasingly on his Shiite-aligned Alawite base against a rebellion fueled mainly by the Sunni majority.)

As the situation settles into a tenuous calm this week, many Lebanese like Mouawad—now a retired brigadier general and security analyst in Beirut—say the blast shows that Syria and its allies are ready to fight as viciously as ever to hold onto power in Lebanon, just as they showed back in 1983. “The targets are different, but the signature is the same. It’s done by the same hand. It’s the same technique and the same technician,” Mouawad says. “Before, they wanted to fight the U.S. presence in Lebanon. Now they want to forbid anyone in the Lebanese government from standing on their own two feet.”

The neighboring Syrian government has been a visible actor in Lebanon. Its military occupied the country from 1990 until 2005, when it was driven out by popular anger over the Hariri assassination. Yet Syria has managed to retain a large unofficial influence over Lebanon’s government, which now includes Hizbullah as an active political party. And this type of unofficial influence stretches back—far back, in fact, to the years before the barracks bombing.

In the early 1980s, with tensions between America and Syria running high, a hostage crisis took hold in Lebanon, says Nadim Shehadi, a Middle East scholar at Chatham House in London. Americans were kidnapped from Beirut and then, after negotiations with the Syrian government, released in Damascus. The abductions were part of a pattern, Shehadi says, that continues into the present day: when the Syrian government feels threatened, it causes problems in Lebanon and then puts itself forward as the best way to solve them.

“When the United States and the international community confront Syria, Syria destabilizes Lebanon. And when they engage Syria, Syria stabilizes Lebanon,” Shehadi says. “The best way to describe it is extortion.”

The Syrian government has never been under such a dire threat as it has during the past 19 months. Faced with a popular uprising calling for Assad’s ouster, the government has responded with a bloody crackdown in a conflict that has forced nearly 300,000 Syrians to flee and has caused at least 30,000 deaths, according to estimates by activist groups. Few analysts expect Assad to ultimately retain control—but as the situation looks increasingly desperate for him, many fear that he will seek to hold Lebanon hostage again. “The Syrian regime wants to send the message that if you get rid of us, there will be a total mess not only in Syria, but in Lebanon and elsewhere too,” says Sami Nader, a political analyst in Beirut. “They are trying to say it’s either us or chaos.”

This cross-border meddling is exactly what Hassan was seemingly able to prove. While Syria’s covert influence in Lebanon’s never-ending string of kidnappings and assassinations has been suspected for decades, Lebanon’s security forces have long been dominated by people considered pawns and never had the capability to prove Damascus’ involvement. But Hassan seemed to have come up with proof. In August, he arrested Lebanon’s information minister, Michel Samaha—a high-profile Assad ally—on charges of importing explosives into the country to set bombs and sow discord in Lebanon at Syria’s behest. Hassan had recordings and videotapes to back his assertions up, and even Samaha’s powerful friends in Damascus didn’t make much of a stir when the arrest came. To many Lebanese, it was long-awaited proof.

But others say that Assad is far too concerned with the chaos at home to worry about assassinating one man as a message to the international community. “Syrians don’t need to prove to anyone what they can do in Lebanon. It’s such a fragile country that you don’t need to work hard to destabilize it,” says Timur Goksel, an analyst in Beirut and former adviser to the UN force based there. “This is one thing we don’t need the Syrians for.”

If Syria indeed ordered the Hassan assassination, Goksel says, it would likely be because the general was fashioning himself into a formidable opponent and challenging long-standing Syrian power in Lebanon. “For me that’s a more reasonable reason to go after him than to make a political point,” he says.

“The guy was so high-profile and knew so much, and was threatening to uncover such sensitive stuff on Syria and Hizbullah, that he was the mission himself,” says Bilal Saab, a Middle East analyst at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. “Whatever additional message there might be is just icing on the cake.”

After the murder of Hassan, many fear the bloody lengths Damascus might go to if it feels its influence waning. Jawad Boulos, a Lebanese political analyst and former member of parliament, points to upcoming elections and the fact that Lebanon’s leaders had lately seemed to distance themselves from Assad. In the wake of Hassan’s death, he says, fearful politicians might fall in line. “Whether the assassination itself was meant to destabilize Lebanon, I think that’s anybody’s

guess. But by removing Hassan, I think they've removed a significant obstacle to any further attempts to repeat that experiment."

Boulos adds that he is worried for the country's future. "I think we're opening a new phase of our political life right now. I think the bombing has started something new," he says. "And frankly, I think it's going to be very long and difficult."