

Bombings Strike Lebanon, as Mosques Are Targeted in Growing Violence
By Hwaida Saad and Ben Hubbard
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TRIPOLI, Lebanon — Car bombs exploded outside two Sunni mosques in this northern Lebanese city on Friday as many worshipers were just finishing prayers, killing dozens of people, wounding hundreds and sending new sectarian shudders through the country, already deeply unsettled by the conflict in neighboring Syria.

The double bombing was the first time that mosques were targets in what had been an escalating series of attacks in Lebanon in recent months. Coupled with the sectarian overtones of the Syrian war and renewed fighting in Iraq — where at least 36 people were reported killed Friday in sectarian attacks across the country — the bombings compounded fears that the Middle East could be plunging into unbridled Sunni-vs.-Shiite warfare.

President Michel Suleiman cut short a visit abroad to meet with security officials and exhorted them to “deploy their efforts to reveal the perpetrators and the instigators.” Lebanon’s prime minister-designate, Tammam Salam, said in a statement that “the Tripoli crime is an additional indicator that the situation in Lebanon has reached a very dangerous level.”

Witnesses and the Lebanese news media said the blasts hit the Taqwa and Al-Salam mosques, which are in different parts of the city, minutes apart just before 2 p.m. Tripoli’s mayor, Nader Ghazal, was quoted as saying at least 50 people were killed, while the Health Ministry put the death toll at 35. The Lebanese Red Cross said more than 500 were wounded.

The toll easily surpassed the casualties and destruction from a bombing a week earlier in southern Beirut that targeted Hezbollah. The Shiite militant group has aligned with Syria’s government against a Sunni-led insurgency, which has contributed to an increasing polarization in Lebanon.

Political analysts expressed fear that a broad section of the region stretching from the Mediterranean east to Baghdad and beyond was becoming a battleground between Sunnis and Shiites, the major Islamic sects. Many said the Tripoli bombings would not go unanswered.

“This was an upping of the ante,” said [Mona Yacoubian](#), the senior Middle East adviser at the Stimson Center, a nonpartisan research group in Washington. “I think we’re seeing the contours of this arena forming in front of our eyes.”

The first bomb hit about 50 yards from the gates of the Taqwa mosque, setting dozens of cars and a nearby building on fire and shattering windows of surrounding buildings. The blast snapped the trunks of palm trees and left a crater that punctured a water main, flooding the street. On the roof of the mosque’s entryway sat the carcass of a blown-up car that people nearby at the time said had contained the bomb, hurtling it into the air.

The second bomb, near the Al-Salam mosque, blasted a six-foot-deep hole in the asphalt and shattered the windows of apartment towers down the block.

Both explosions struck just before the conclusion of Friday Prayer, the largest gathering of the week for Muslims. Many people said that if the bombs had detonated when they were leaving the mosques, the death toll would have been much higher.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility, but the Taqwa mosque was home to Sheik Salem al-Rafei, an outspoken Sunni preacher, who has inveighed against Hezbollah and exhorted worshipers to support the Sunni insurgency trying to topple Syria’s president, Bashar al-Assad.

Many Taqwa worshipers said they believed their mosque had been targeted because of Sheik Rafei. A large banner on the mosque's fence bore photographs of three men killed in the battle for the border city of Qusayr, Syria, nearly three months ago, in which Hezbollah fighters joined the Syrian Army to defeat Sunni insurgents ensconced there. The battle has been widely viewed as a turning point in the Syria conflict. Text next to the photographs said the men had been "martyred defending the dignity and pride of the nation."

Sheik Rafei was not hurt in the bombing, worshipers said, but efforts to contact him were not immediately successful.

One Taqwa worshiper, Saad al-Din Turkomani, 27, said he was in the mosque listening to Skeik Rafei's sermon when the explosion blew out the windows and filled the hall with smoke. He said he saw the attacks as retaliation for [last week's bombing](#) in a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut.

"One from our side went to them, so they sent two of theirs to us," he said. "They are making us pay the price."

Like many people in Tripoli, he expected more sectarian violence. "We are entering a hard stage," he said. "Things are catching fire between the Sunni and the Shia."

Hezbollah condemned the bombings. "These two terrorist explosions come as a translation of the criminal plot that seeks to sow the seeds of discord among the Lebanese and drag the country to internal strife under the headline of sectarianism and religious differences," the group said in a statement. Accusing unidentified foreign forces of backing the attacks, it said such mayhem benefited "the evil regional international plan that wants to break up our region and drown it in oceans of blood and fire."

While Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has made it clear that it is committed to backing Mr. Assad's government, he has told his supporters that Hezbollah is not fighting Sunnis in general, but the extremists among them, and not to blame all Sunnis for attacks on Shiites.

Mr. Nasrallah's assertions seemed to carry little weight with aggrieved survivors in the Tripoli attacks. "Nasrallah is the first suspect in this bombing," said Ahmed Johar, who was among groups of men removing damaged furniture from the Al-Salam mosque and sweeping shattered glass and splintered wood that covered the green carpet.

Samir Jalloul, 39, said he had been in the mosque near the end of his prayers when the explosion hit. His head was wounded by flying debris, but he came back to the bombing site to look for his identification card, which he had lost while fleeing.

"I expected that there would be bombings, but not at a mosque during prayers," he said.

The bombings, he said, will change no one's position on the war in Syria. "There are crimes going on in Syria, so there is no way we can keep silent," he said.

Video of the scenes broadcast just minutes after the attacks showed thick smoke billowing across Tripoli. One video [clip](#) posted on YouTube showed angry crowds converged outside the smoking Taqwa mosque.

A second video [clip](#), from a security camera inside the Al-Salam mosque, showed the precise moment of an enormous blast as many worshipers were still praying.

Since the uprising started in Syria more than two years ago, fighting in Lebanon has flared sporadically, but [Tripoli has been a particular tinderbox](#) because of tensions similar to those across the border. The most frequent street fights pit Sunni Muslims against members of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam to which Mr. Assad belongs.

The tensions have worsened since April, when Sheik Rafei responded to a speech by Mr. Nasrallah, saying that if Lebanese Shiites were fighting in Syria, Sunnis should be as well.

“If support is being sent in the form of men and other things, and they are carrying out operations to defend their brothers in Syria, I say that we, too, will send support in the form and men and all support and weapons to make them victorious,” he said.

David Jolly contributed reporting from Paris, and Christine Hauser and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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