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Gulf drive against Hezbollah may hit ordinary Shi'ites

7/5/2013

Gulf Arab states are punishing Hezbollah for its role in Syria by expelling Lebanese expatriates linked to the group in a move that could victimize Shi'ite Muslims with no ties to the militants apart from their shared religious faith.

Set up by Shi'ite power Iran in the 1980s to fight Israeli occupation forces in south Lebanon, the Islamist group has sent its guerrillas to fight alongside the army in Syria's civil war, leading to defeats for rebels armed by some Gulf Arab states.

The Sunni Muslim Gulf countries, led by regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia, have supported Syrian rebels with arms and money in a fight to topple President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran.

Denouncing what it called Hezbollah's interference in Syria, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) last month announced its six member states would revoke the residency visas of people associated with Hezbollah and target their financial and commercial dealings in the Gulf.

The expulsions illustrate how the war in Syria has encouraged age-old tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims to spread across its borders and through the region.

The U.S.-allied GCC is a grouping of six energy-rich Arab countries comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain.

During a meeting of senior GCC security officials in Riyadh on Thursday, the undersecretary of Bahrain's Interior Ministry, Major General Khaled al-Absi, said the move against the group came

after the "discovery of several Hezbollah terror cells in the Gulf states, their involvement in training of terror groups ... and their flagrant involvement in Syria."

"Unfortunately, some people will pay the price without being involved," Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, an Emirati political scientist, said of the deportations.

"But Hezbollah should be held responsible for this. Hezbollah left its national boundary and interfered in a purely Syrian matter with brazenness and stubbornness. This should not be left unheeded."

SCORES EVICTED

At least three Gulf states -- Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar -- have evicted scores of Lebanese since the GCC announced on June 2 they were considering punitive measures against the group, according to a Doha-based security source and Hassan Alayan, a Lebanese critic of the campaign.

The security source said 17 or 18 Lebanese Shi'ites were expelled from Qatar in June while Gulf-based analysts following the matter suggested the number could be larger in the UAE.

Alayan, a spokesman for Lebanese Shi'ites who have been evicted from the Gulf, said between 20 to 30 Lebanese Shi'ites were believed to have been expelled from Saudi Arabia in the past month alone.

"I don't know what's their interest in expelling people who lived in their countries for decades and offered the best they could in service of these countries," said Alayan, a Shi'ite Muslim who added that he had lived in the UAE for 27 years before being told in 2009 to leave.

Expulsions of this sort are not new, but the publicity and coordination surrounding the current campaign is unusual. For years some Gulf Arab states have made it tough for Shi'ites in general to get residency visas, especially when applying for jobs in government or government-related entities.

This is a result, analysts say, of a longstanding view among some states that Shi'ites are a security threat, mainly because of what Gulf Arab officials say is Iranian meddling in Arab internal affairs. Iran denies such accusations.

Mutual suspicion has fuelled a historic rift in Islam that began after the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD. Shi'ites, followers of the Prophet's son-in-law Ali and his descendants, complain of systematic discrimination and neglect of their communities.

EXPULSIONS SEEN AS "REPRESSIVE"

Another source of tension is a dispute over Iran's nuclear program, which the West and its Arab allies suspect is aimed at obtaining a nuclear weapons capability. Iran denies this.

Many Lebanese see Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's support for Assad against an insurgency dominated by Syria's Sunni majority as a miscalculation that will drag Lebanon into the Syrian quagmire, exacerbate fighting in Lebanon itself and deepen Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian rifts in the region.

Speaking from Beirut, Alayan said he knew of at least 400 Lebanese families who had been evicted from the UAE alone since 2009, but believed the number was bigger.

"This is repressive. People have lost their investments and their livelihood," he said. "They want to create a financial burden on a certain party in Lebanon (Hezbollah) to tell them that if it were not for them, this would have not happened."

Some Gulf officials are concerned to show the campaign is not directed against Lebanese as a whole. Lebanese are prominent among the region's leading professionals, administrators and entrepreneurs, many co-owning companies with Gulf partners.

Qatar's new emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Khalifa, who took power on June 25 after his father abdicated, dispelled fears about widespread deportations of the Lebanese community.

"The Lebanese presence in Qatar is protected, and the Lebanese in Qatar are among their own people. They abide by the state's laws and respect them," Sheikh Tamim was quoted as saying on June 30.

Lebanese migration to the Gulf started after World War Two with the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and in the 1980s to other countries, especially the UAE, Guita Hourani, Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University in Lebanon, wrote in a 2010 paper.

Hourani said Lebanon's political instability and weak economy led a "reservoir of qualified human resources" to continue to migrate to the cash-rich Gulf states, sending back home hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

Theodore Karasik, director of research at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, said that although the Gulf states had expelled Lebanese Shi'ites for years, Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria heralded a tougher stance.

"I think that there will be a systematic deportation program

as opposed to picking out certain individuals ... and given the environment it's going to be pretty high," said Karasik.