

Lebanon cracks down on alleged Syria-linked al Qaeda militants

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BEIRUT (Reuters) - Lebanon's military prosecutor has charged two suspected Lebanese militants with belonging to a Syrian rebel group tied to al Qaeda, judicial sources said on Friday, part of a crackdown on radical Islamists who have attacked the army this year.

Sunni Muslim militants in Lebanon have targeted military positions several times, including a suicide car bomb last month on an army checkpoint that killed three soldiers.

The attacks stem from an accusation that the government is dominated by the Lebanese Shi'ite militant group Hezbollah, which is helping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fight a majority Sunni revolt in neighbouring Syria.

The judicial sources said the two detainees and six fugitives were accused of belonging to the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front which has spread out of Syria and into Lebanon.

They said the two militants in custody were further accused of firing on the army in the Lebanese coastal city of Tripoli.

With memories of their own civil war still vivid, leaders of Lebanon's sectarian-based political factions have until now tried to minimise points of friction to avoid upsetting the careful balance that has kept the peace since 1990.

But for some Sunnis, what started as Sunni-Shi'ite hatred has grown to include the army and the government where there is a long history of intervention from Damascus and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, especially in the security apparatus.

Last month, influential Lebanese Sunni militant leader and cleric Ahmad al-Assir called for Sunnis to defect from the army, which recruits from all sects in Lebanon.

This week the army raided houses of militants in Tripoli, further enraging Sunni hardliners. Forces tried to arrest Sunni Islamist preacher Omar Bakri but he had fled, security sources said, angering Sunni hardliners in Lebanon and backers abroad.

(Reporting by [Oliver Holmes](#); Editing by [Mark Heinrich](#))