Sunni-Shi'ite battles diverting rage from Israel

“The Syrian war has come knocking on Iran’s headquarters in Lebanon, and it is being targeted directly by Sunni extremists,” an expert on Iranian politics told The Jerusalem Post.

He spoke after a suicide bomb ripped through Iran’s embassy compound in Beirut.

“This bodes badly for Iran’s efforts to portray itself as a protector of Muslims, since it is increasingly becoming involved in a sectarian war between Shi’ites and Sunnis,” said Meir Javedanfar, a lecturer on Iranian politics at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya.

Responsible for numerous rocket attacks on Israel, the al-Qaida-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades decided to exert its energies instead on attacking the “near enemy” – Shi’ites in Lebanon.

Radical Sunni groups such as the Azzam Brigades, founded in 2009, detest Shi’ites in general, and Iran and Hezbollah in particular, because of their support for the Alawite regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The Sunni-dominated opposition in Syria is fighting to topple Assad from power, partly because it does not see Alawites as true Muslims.

After rocket fire on Israel in August, the Azzam Brigades said it was ready for a holy war against the Jews. Sheikh Sirajuddin Zureiqat, a member of the brigades, at the time tweeted a link to a statement which said that Jews were benefiting from the Syrian revolution.

According to the statement, Israel and the West were giving Hezbollah a green light to fight in Syria so as to protect Israel’s security by keeping the Golan border quiet.

The Azzam Brigades is named after Abdullah Azzam (1941-89), a Palestinian and leading jihadist figure who was close to Osama bin Laden.

Shi’ites are long-time ideological foes of Sunnis, with the origins of the clash going back to the question of political leadership and the succession of Muhammad in the seventh century.

“Therefore there are many among the Sunnis, especially the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, who consider Shi’a as a kind of fundamental heresy,” wrote Mordechai Kedar, director of the Center for the Study of the Middle East and Islam (under formation) and a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, in a post on his blog.

“The Saudi regime forbids the Shi’ite minority to recite the call to prayer aloud, because even in the [Shi’ite] muezzin’s call to prayer there is an extra part praising Ali,” Kedar said.

Shi’ites regard Ali (died 661) and his descendants to be the rightful successors to Muhammad.

Thus, radical Sunnis throughout the region direct their burning rage at Shi’ites, the Assad regime and their fellow Sunni opponents, leaving Israel as mostly a sideshow for the time being.

– Ariel Ben Solomon