

## **DAILY STAR**

### **Lebanon News**

#### **High tension means big market for armored cars**

By Agence France Presse (AFP)

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*Agence France Press*

BEIRUT: Bloody wars, deadly attacks and chronic insecurity in the Middle East have created a lucrative market for Lebanese armored car manufacturers, who are raking in millions of dollars.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the owner of one armored car corporation in Lebanon told **AFP** that he was "making millions of dollars due to the awful security situation in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan."

The price of an armored car ranges from \$100,000 and \$200,000. However, prices are subject to change according to the quality of armor and car model. Dozens of vehicles have already been assembled in Lebanon, with production on the rise.

"Since 2003, I have sold more than 100 cars in Iraq, among which are 47 to the US Embassy," said Patrick Aouad said, the director of the Yaka Group, a company that specializes in armored cars with annual profits exceeding \$3 million.

A number of embassies, Iraqi political figures, international firms and even the US forces in Iraq make use of the services provided by the Yaka group.

"It is easier and much cheaper to import cars directly from Lebanon rather than the US," he said, adding that car orders are sent to Iraq by plane.

Regional market shares of such business have clearly increased since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but South America still dominates the market, where 50 percent of the 12, 000 civilian bulletproof cars produced each year originate.

Following the November 2006 assassination of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel, and the political crisis between the government and the opposition that resulted in deadly clashes in late January, Lebanese ministers, MPs and businessmen have become the main customers of armored car companies.

"In the last couple of month orders have gone up by 60 to 70 percent, Aouad said. "After each clash between the government and the opposition, we're overflowed with requests for armored cars. Sometimes normal citizen call us inquiring about the price of an armored car."

Aouad added that demand for his product was likely to increase after a bombing of public buses in the Ain Alaq earlier this week.

"One of the Arab embassies offered armored cars to two MPs allied to a Christian pro-government party," Aouad revealed. A number of other MPs have asked Aouad to lend them armored cars.

Lebanese armored car companies cater to the taste of all kinds of customers, "while some request bullet-proof glass, others want both the body and the windows of the car to be bullet-proof, in addition to blow-proof tires," Abboud explained.

In a period of four to six weeks a vehicle can be totally dismantled and reassembled "piece by piece" by professionals. The end product weighs between 700 kilograms to one ton more than before the process, depending on the material used, steel or Kevlar.

Clients can also rent an armored car for around \$1,000 a day, with driver; however Yaka's headquarters in Iraq offer extra services such as the rental of bodyguards, bullet proof vests and helmets.

Driving his own armored sports utility vehicle, Aouad said that business in Iraq was expected to flourish, especially with the deployment of an additional 21,500 US troops in the country.

To guarantee the quality of their work, armored car companies even provide their clients with "certificates of authenticity" for all the material used in the armoring process. Material is imported from the US, Germany and Italy.

Due to an increase in demand for armored vehicles a number of small garages across Beirut have begun to offer their services. "It's true that such garages offer very competitive prices," said one armored car professional. "Nevertheless, people ought to be careful because quality security is expensive."