

Demand for Lebanese Armored Vehicles on the Rise



""Between Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan, we have excellent business, in the millions of dollars,"" said the manager of one armored vehicles company who did not wish to reveal his identity.

The sector's business took a sharp turn for the better after the region went into a period of instability following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Dozens of armored vehicles have since been assembled in Lebanon, with prices ranging between 100,000 dollars and 200,000 dollars.

""Since 2003, I sold more than 100 cars in Iraq, including 47 to the U.S. embassy"" in Baghdad, said Patrick Awad, manager at Yaka Group which has an annual turnover of three million dollars.

Awad's client base includes foreign embassies, Iraqi officials, multinational companies, private security firms and U.N. peacekeepers.

""It is easier and cheaper for them to bring the car from Lebanon, instead of the United States,"" he said, adding that the Middle East's share in the global market for armored vehicles has been on the rise since the 2003 Iraq war.

Awad, who drives an armored four-wheel-drive, expects business to boom in Iraq even more with the arrival of an additional 21,000 U.S. soldiers to the war-torn country.

In Lebanon, demand has been on the rise since the November 2006 assassination of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel as well as deadly street clashes last month between opposition and government followers.

Clients are mostly government ministers, MPs and businessmen.

""In the last two months, we registered a rise in demand by between 60 and 70 percent,"" said the manager of the security company who requested anonymity.

""Every time there is a verbal dispute (between the opposition and the government), we are swarmed by calls, even from simple citizens who want to know the price of an armored vehicle,"" he said.

And demand is expected to further rise after the twin bus bombings last week which left three people killed in the town of Ain Alaq northeast of Beirut.

Awad said the Beirut embassy of an Arab country has offered two armored vehicles to two MPs from a pro-government Christian party, but declined further specifics.

Demand ranges from bullet-proof windows to the assembly of a completely armored body in order for the vehicle to resist gunshots and explosions. Clients also ask for tires that will keep rolling even when pierced.

Over a period of between four to six weeks, a vehicle can be taken apart and reassembled piece by piece with armored materials. It will eventually weigh between 700 kilograms and a ton.

As a quality guarantee, security firms offer authenticity certificates for materials imported from the United States, Germany and Italy.

The security firms also offer armored vehicles for rent, starting at 1,000 dollars a day with a driver.

Lured by the rising profits of the market, some mechanics in Beirut's suburbs have also started assembling armored vehicles.

""They are killing prices, but the clients should be cautious. Security costs money,"" said a mechanic