

Lebanon at Risk from Salafi-Jihadi Terrorist Cells

By Bilal Y. Saab

LEBANON FACES NO real danger in the foreseeable future of al-Qa`ida establishing an organized insurgent presence in the country.¹ The basic, societal conditions for such an ambitious and demanding enterprise are non-existent. In Lebanon, what al-Qa`ida represents—a *takfiri* ideology, a militant agenda, and a radical political vision—has yet to capture the interest of the Lebanese Sunni Islamic community, with its many different factions. While al-Qa`ida may have recently made headways in Yemen, Somalia, and in other weak states around the world, these gains are extremely difficult if not impossible to replicate in a country such as Lebanon. Acknowledging the difficulty of creating a Lebanese franchise, it is likely that al-Qa`ida has switched its strategy and gone underground.²

Clandestine terrorist cells—some of which are homegrown and remnants of Fatah al-Islam,³ while others continue

to arrive from regional battlefields⁴—constitute the new threat in Lebanon. It is assumed that these cells, aided by al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), are now pursuing al-Qa`ida's goals in Lebanon: attack the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL),⁵ destabilize and sow terror in the domestic political scene, and try to ignite another war between Hizb Allah and Israel by launching rockets from southern Lebanon into northern Israel. This article assesses the nature of the threat posed by these terrorist cells to the stability of Lebanon and the security of UNIFIL.

Nahr al-Bared: The Day After

The 105-day battle between the Salafi-jihadi group Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army in the summer of 2007 ended with a resounding defeat of the group and the destruction of the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared.⁶ With Fatah al-Islam crushed, the group's plot to create a Salafi-jihadi insurgency in northern Lebanon and establish a radical Islamic state with Tripoli as its capital was averted.⁷

4 Personal correspondence, senior Lebanese army general who is a close aide to Deputy Director of Army Intelligence Abbas Ibrahim, August 2009. The army general specifically mentioned the battlefields of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. He also suspected that some funding was coming from private sources in the Gulf, not from official government bodies.

5 Originally, UNIFIL was created by the Security Council in March 1978 to confirm Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, restore international peace and security and assist the Lebanese government in restoring its effective authority in the area. The mandate had to be adjusted twice, due to developments in 1982 and 2000. Following the summer 2006 war between Hizb Allah and Israel, the Council enhanced the force and decided that in addition to the original mandate, it would, among other tasks, monitor the cessation of hostilities, accompany and support the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy throughout the south of Lebanon, and extend its assistance to help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons. As of October 31, 2009, UNIFIL's force consists of 30 troop contributing countries with a total of 12,410 peacekeepers stationed in southern Lebanon. For details, visit the official website of UNIFIL at www.unifil.unmissions.org.

6 The reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared is presently underway.

7 For more on Fatah al-Islam's strategy, please see Saab and Ranstorp, "Fatah al-Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Project Went Awry."

Although the operation was a success, the enemy did not suffer a total defeat, as evidenced by the fact that on the last day of the battle a few dozen militants managed to escape. Several were caught in the hills to the east, but their leader

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Shakir al-Abssi and a few of his close aides, including the Saudi national Obeid Mubarak Abd al-Kafeel,⁸ were able to evade the dragnet.

With its leader in hiding at the time, Fatah al-Islam eventually transformed from a centralized insurgent group into a loose network of terrorist cells.⁹ “The battle is over and we won,” one Lebanese army general stated, “but the war has just started.”¹⁰ Today, a nonstop, largely behind-the-scenes intelligence war is raging between the Lebanese counterterrorism services and the terrorist cells. The outcome of this war will have important repercussions on the present and future stability of Lebanon and perhaps that of its neighbors.

8 Obeid Mubarak Abd al-Kafeel is a Saudi national and a senior member of Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon. He participated in the battle of Nahr al-Bared and lost his left eye due to a severe injury. With Shakir al-Abssi, he managed to escape on the last day of fighting to the nearby village of Markabta and then to the northern refugee camp of Baddawi, with the help of Lebanese Shaykh Hamza Kassem and Khaled Seif. Abd al-Kafeel stayed in Shaykh Kassem's house until his wounds healed. He later met Abu Hajer with whom he conducted the terrorist operations in Masaref district and al-Bahsas street. For more on Abd al-Kafeel, please see Ali Moussawi, “Sari: The Saudi al-Kafeel Executed the Damascus Bombing and Helped Jawhar in the Making of Bombs for al-Tall and al-Bahsas,” *al-Safir*, November 12, 2009.

9 For more analysis on Fatah al-Islam's transformation, please see Saab and Ranstorp, “Fatah al-Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Project Went Awry”; Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:10 (2007): pp. 825-855.

10 Personal interview, senior Lebanese military intelligence officer who currently has a leading role in the counterterrorism campaign in the north, August 2009.

1 For more on the reasons why al-Qa`ida has failed to establish an insurgent base in Lebanon, please see Bilal Y. Saab, “Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).

2 This is an assumption made by the author, supported by his reading of local events on the ground before and after the battle of Nahr al-Bared in summer 2007. Of course, no leader belonging to al-Qa`ida central or to any of its franchises in the Middle East has made a public statement detailing a switch in strategy in Lebanon. For more on the author's analysis of events in Lebanon before and after summer 2007, please see Saab, “Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon,” and Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Fatah al-Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Project Went Awry,” *The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defence College*, November 28, 2007.

3 Fatah al-Islam is a Salafi-jihadi group that is inspired by al-Qa`ida's ideology. Its links to al-Qa`ida in Iraq are verifiable and its members are mostly Arabs from various Middle Eastern countries. It emerged in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in November 2006. Its goals are unclear but include the establishment of an Islamic state in northern Lebanon, with Tripoli as its capital. In summer 2007, it fought the Lebanese army for more than three months in an effort to establish an insurgent presence in the north. The uprising failed and the Lebanese army eventually crushed the group.

A New Threat: Salafi-Jihadi Terrorist Cells

According to Lebanese press reports, soon after he fled the battlefield on September 2, 2007, Shakir al-Abssi handed over the leadership of Fatah al-Islam to Abdel Rahman Mohamad Awad (also known as Abu Mohamad Shahrour), Ousama Amine al-Shahabi (also known as Abu al-Zahra), and Ghazi Faysal Abdullah, three suspected Palestinian terrorists based in the refugee camp of Ain al-Hilwah.¹¹ The northern region, al-Abssi possibly calculated, was now under heavy surveillance by the Lebanese military intelligence services and was clearly not a favorable location for any terrorist re-mobilization campaign. Ain al-Hilwah was an ideal, although temporary spot where the terrorists could uninterruptedly plan ways to regroup.¹²

The instructions from al-Abssi, whose fate is unclear to this day,¹³ were clear and simple: to avenge the deaths of the Muslim fighters who died waging jihad against the “crusader” Lebanese army in Nahr al-Bared.¹⁴ The three men’s first job was to “test the pulse” of the Salafi-jihadi scene in the north and re-awaken the cells that were lying low in Tripoli.¹⁵ What they found, however, was not necessarily reassuring: many

of the cells lacked the human and technical resources necessary to wage any sustained terrorist campaign against the Lebanese authorities.¹⁶ Most importantly, the remaining terrorists’ drive and determination were low. One notable exception was Abdel Ghani Ali Jawhar (also known as Abu Hajer) who

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would eventually become the leading coordinator of the terrorist cells in the north. Abu Hajer’s role is crucial to the mobilization and re-activation of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon following the battle of Nahr al-Bared.

Abu Hajer is a 32-year-old Lebanese Sunni Muslim from the small northern town of Bibnine.¹⁷ After earning a diploma in laboratory studies at the age of 21 from a technical school in Qobbeh, Tripoli, he taught Salafism in several religious institutes and private households based in the Wadi al-Jamous area.¹⁸ According to Shaykh Abdullah Mas’oud, who has lived in Bibnine for more than 64 years, very few students attended Abu Hajer’s class, often citing to their friends his uncompromising style of teaching and his extremist views on Shi`a Muslims in particular and non-

Muslims in general.¹⁹ Months later, Abu Hajer stopped teaching and decided to more deeply involve himself in the Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon. Unable to travel to Iraq due to security reasons, he went to Ain al-Hilwah to mingle with fellow Salafi-jihadis.²⁰

Once at the camp, Abu Hajer reportedly underwent intensive military training at the hands of Jund al-Sham,²¹ a militant Islamist group, learning how to engage in combat and plant explosives.²² Soon after his preparations, he was appointed by Fatah al-Islam’s three leaders in the camp as the group’s point man in the north.²³ During a period of two months, Abu Hajer would form his own 11-person cell by enlisting young, poor, and alienated recruits from his hometown of Bibnine, starting with his brother Mohamad Ali Jawhar and including Isaac al-Sayyed al-Sabsabi, Imama al-Sayyed al-Sabsabi, Omar al-Sabsabi, Abdel Karim Mustapha, Rashid Mustapha, Razan al-Khaled, Ayman al-Hindawi, Rabi’ al-‘Ouweyid and Marwan al-Khaled.²⁴ Abu Hajer indoctrinated his followers at the “Islah” mosque in Bibnine, explaining to them the need to fight the “infidels,” be they Lebanese Shi`a Muslims or the Lebanese army.²⁵

After receiving the news of Abu Hajer and what he was able to accomplish in his hometown, Fatah al-Islam’s leadership in Ain al-Hilwah decided to offer him extra help.²⁶ Mohamad Mahmoud Azzam, an explosives expert who participated in the war in Iraq and

11 Ali Moussawi, “Mezher Orders Capital Punishment for Members of Fatah al-Islam Including Awad, Shahabi, and Jawhar,” *al-Safir*, September 14, 2009.

12 The Ain al-Hilwah Palestinian refugee camp is reportedly a recruiting ground for Salafi-jihadi currents in Lebanon. Located in the southeastern part of Sidon’s port and reputed to be the most impoverished and radical Palestinian refugee camp in the Arab world, Ain al-Hilwah is home to about 75,000 refugees. The four entrances to Ain al-Hilwah are controlled by the Lebanese army. Internal security, however, is maintained by rival Palestinian groups, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right. Since Ain al-Hilwah’s creation, it has been the policy of successive Lebanese governments to instruct the army to refrain from entering the area for fear of clashing with reportedly more than a dozen militant factions all competing for influence inside the camp.

13 Since the end of the battle of Nahr al-Bared, conflicting reports have circulated in the Arab and foreign media concerning the fate of al-Abssi. It is still unclear whether al-Abssi was captured or killed by Syrian forces while trying to cross the Lebanese-Syrian border. For more details, see “Fatah al-Islam Says Leader Ambushed in Syria,” *al-Arabiya*, December 10, 2008.

14 Moussawi, “Mezher Orders Capital Punishment for Members of Fatah al-Islam Including Awad, Shahabi, and Jawhar.”

15 Ibid.

16 This is the story recounted by captured terrorist Isaac al-Sabsabi, parts of which were covered in *al-Safir* newspaper on September 14, 2009. See Moussawi, “Mezher Orders Capital Punishment for Members of Fatah al-Islam Including Awad, Shahabi, and Jawhar.”

17 The author was offered a copy of the biography of Abu Hajer during a meeting in summer 2009 with several military intelligence officers in Yarzeh, the headquarters of the Lebanese Ministry of Defense. Subsequent references are marked “Biography of Abu Hajer.”

18 Ibid.

19 Personal interview, Shaykh Abdullah Mas’oud, Tripoli, Lebanon, July 2009.

20 “Biography of Abu Hajer.”

21 Jund al-Sham is a title claimed by several Sunni Islamic extremist entities, all or none of which may be connected. These entities mostly operate in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and their goals include the establishment of an Islamic caliphate throughout the Levant. During the battle of Nahr al-Bared, Jund al-Sham fighters joined Fatah al-Islam in their fight against the Lebanese army.

22 “Biography of Abu Hajer.”

23 Ibid.

24 Moussawi, “Sari: The Saudi al-Kafeel Executed the Damascus Bombing and Helped Jawhar in the Making of Bombs for al-Tall and al-Bahsas.”

25 Ibid.

26 This information is based on a report released by the Lebanese military intelligence services, parts of which were covered in *al-Safir* newspaper on December 2, 2009.

who allegedly was a confidant of the late AQI *amir* Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi,²⁷ was sent from the camp to Bibnine to meet with Abu Hajer, hand him a modest amount of money and teach him how to plant sophisticated plastic explosives and roadside bombs for the purpose of attacking UNIFIL and Lebanese army bases.²⁸ On May 31, 2008, Abu Hajer managed to place six plastic explosives in the Lebanese military intelligence base of Abdeh at 3:50 AM, only one of which exploded effectively, killing one soldier and injuring two during their sleep.²⁹ Approximately a month later, Abu Hajer asked two of his aides to plant another bomb on the road leading to the Qolei`at Lebanese air force base where many army vehicles pass by on a daily basis.³⁰ Fortunately, the bomb did not explode and was eventually detected and deactivated.

On August 13, 2008, two cells linked to Abu Hajer led by Saudi national Abd al-Kafeel (who later conducted a suicide attack in Syria) assaulted Lebanese army bases in the Masaref district and Bahsas neighborhood in Tripoli.³¹ On January 15, 2009, Abu Hajer, according to local media, personally shot and killed George Atieh, a Lebanese Christian drugstore owner, for selling alcoholic beverages.³² Following interrogations with Azzam and Isaac al-Sabsabi, who Lebanese military intelligence services arrested in two sophisticated operations in May and September 2009, the two terrorists confessed that Abu Hajer also had detailed plans to assassinate Lebanese Internal Security Forces Director Ashraf Rifi and to conduct high-profile operations against UNIFIL with the help of his allies in Ain al-Hilwah.³³

27 Moussawi, "Sari: The Saudi al-Kafeel Executed the Damascus Bombing and Helped Jawhar in the Making of Bombs for al-Tall and al-Bahsas."

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 This is the story recounted by captured terrorist Mohamad Mahmoud Azzam, parts of which were covered in *al-Safir* newspaper on September 14, 2009.

33 Moussawi, "Sari: The Saudi al-Kafeel Executed the Damascus Bombing and Helped Jawhar in the Making of Bombs for al-Tall and al-Bahsas."

The Link to Ain al-Hilwah

While Abu Hajer was planning and conducting terrorist operations with his aides in the north, the cells in Ain al-Hilwah were also actively involved in the campaign against the Lebanese authorities. In August 2009, the Lebanese military intelligence services arrested Hamza al-Kasem, an aide to Abdel Rahman Mohamad Awad, one of the three men now in charge of Fatah al-Islam's cells in Ain al-Hilwah.³⁴ Following interrogations with al-Kasem, he admitted that his boss was behind the December 12, 2007 assassination of Lebanese army general and director of operations Francois Hajj and the attacks against the Tanzanian, Spanish, and Colombian peacekeepers in June and July 2007.³⁵ Awad's cells are also suspected of killing Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel in November 2006, Member of Parliament Walid Eido in June 2007, and Lebanese Internal Security Forces Captain Wissam Eid in January 2008; no hard evidence, however, has so far surfaced linking Awad or Abu Hajer to these three assassinations.³⁶

Soon after the battle of Nahr al-Bared ended, Lebanese Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence Abbas Ibrahim entered Ain al-Hilwah with two of his aides to meet with leaders of Asbat al-Ansar.³⁷ The meeting was anything but cordial, but its purpose was to discuss a plan that would bring an

34 Khodr Taleb, "An Important Catch: The Army Arrests Fatah al-Islam Member Hamza al-Kassem," *al-Safir*, August 2, 2009.

35 On June 24, 2007, three Spanish and three Colombian UN soldiers were killed when a bomb destroyed their armored troop carrier. A month later, another bomb exploded near a UNIFIL position, causing no casualties. On January 8, 2008, two members of the Irish contingent were wounded when their vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb near Rmaileh village, 22 miles south of Beirut. See Hassan Oleik, "Naim Abbas Killed Francois Hajj," *al-Akhhbar*, August 29, 2009.

36 Zeina Karam, "Fatah al-Islam Assassinated Lebanese Minister Gemayel," *Ya Libnan*, July 8, 2007.

37 Asbat al-Ansar is a Palestinian Salafi-jihadi group that was involved in a number of terrorist operations against Lebanese official targets in the past, including the killings of four judges in a courtroom in Sidon in June 1999. Recently, it reached a permanent truce with the Lebanese authorities in return for its intelligence cooperation on al-Qa`ida elements in the Ain al-Hilwah camp. These details are based on the author's personal interviews with mid-level sources inside Lebanon's military intelligence services in summer 2009.

end to the "problem of Jund al-Sham" in the camp. Jund al-Sham, a network of freelance Salafi-jihadi fighters that has a presence in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, was the only Islamist force to heed Fatah al-Islam's call for support during its battle in Nahr al-Bared. On several occasions, Asbat al-Ansar tried to contain Jund al-Sham by offering membership to its fighters, but with little success.³⁸ Jund al-Sham accused Asbat al-Ansar of compromising its own Islamist credentials by cooperating with the "apostate" Lebanese authorities for material political fortunes.

Today, Jund al-Sham's network and Fatah al-Islam's cells in Ain al-Hilwah are allied and uneasily co-existing with the other Palestinian factions in the camp including Fatah, Hamas, Asbat al-Ansar, and al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Moujahida led by Jamal Khattab. The assumption is that as long as Jund al-Sham exists, Fatah al-Islam's cells in the north, led by terrorist-at-large Abu Hajer, will continue to receive supplies of men and materiel, making it more difficult for Lebanese counterterrorism services to combat the threat.

Conclusion

Despite the substantial evidence that has recently been released by the Lebanese authorities following interrogations with captured terrorists, a number of influential Lebanese commentators and editorialists continue to treat the issue of al-Qa`ida-related terrorism in Lebanon with great suspicion. In their minds, al-Qa`ida's global network has no independent presence in the country. They view the threat as a fabrication by the Syrian intelligence services intended to destabilize Lebanon and restore Damascus' political control that was lost after it was forced to withdraw its troops from the country in May 2005. While this is possible given the negative role Syria's intelligence services have played in Lebanon, the theory remains unsupported by hard evidence. What is encouraging is the fact that the official establishment, including many formerly anti-Syrian politicians who were once skeptical of the al-Qa`ida threat, are now revisiting their views and appreciating the gravity of the problem, allowing

38 Fidaa Itani, "Jund al-Sham to the Forefront from the Gate of Terror and Terrorism," *al-Akhhbar*, January 2, 2010.

the security apparatus to operate under fewer political constraints.

Underfunded and ill-equipped, the Lebanese military intelligence services, often in coordination with the internal security forces, have so far done a remarkable job in fighting the terrorism threat. Yet the threat is now arguably too big for a small country like Lebanon to handle on its own. The Lebanese government also has a legal responsibility to protect UNIFIL, but it cannot do this crucial job by itself. The newly-shaped Lebanese counterterrorism apparatus needs financial and technical help from its regional friends and from those countries that have a vested interest in preserving the fragile calm along the Lebanese-Israeli border. With a few terrorist leaders still at large and an unknown number of cells actively plotting attacks, UNIFIL continues to be at risk of another terrorist attack, the lethality of which this time could be greater than in the past.³⁹

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The Changing Scene in Londonistan

By Raffaello Pantucci

IN THE FIRST month of 2010, the world was reminded of the terrorism threat in the United Kingdom. Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab's partial radicalization in London, the decision to finally proscribe the extremist group al-Muhajiroun and the ratcheting up of the terrorism threat level ahead of the Summit on Afghanistan all highlighted once again how the United Kingdom remains the focus of the terrorism threat to the West.¹ The nature of this threat, however, has changed since the days before 9/11, when London was often called "Londonistan" due to the heavy presence of extremist groups in the city.² Today, radicalization and extremist activity in the United Kingdom no longer occurs at the level it once did. Nevertheless, the activity still taking place is harder to legislate against and more difficult to combat.

This article will explain how "Londonistan" has changed during the last decade. Overtly violent extremist preaching has become much more discrete, while the internet has become a major feature in radicalizing young people. The article will also show how old and new threats have melded together to create a threat matrix that presents a new set of legislative challenges for British authorities.

The Banning of Al-Muhajiroun

One of the most visible parts of Londonistan was laid to rest in January 2010 when the British government finally took the step of adding al-Muhajiroun to the list of banned organizations under the UK Terrorism Act of 2000. The decision was officially

made because al-Muhajiroun was "another name for both Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect,"³ two descendent groups of al-Muhajiroun that had been banned in July 2006. The reason for the apparently back-to-front nature of the proscription was that al-Muhajiroun had officially disbanded itself in October 2004, likely out of concerns of impending proscription at the time.⁴ It rapidly re-established itself in a series of different groups, most prominent of which were al-Ghurabaa (The Strangers), The Saved Sect, and Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah (The Followers of the Sunna). The first two were banned soon after they were linked to protests at the Danish Embassy in London in February 2006, which resulted in some individuals being prosecuted for inciting racial hatred.⁵ The third name, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, remains theoretically active, but has not yet been banned.⁶ Al-Muhajiroun, on the other hand, simply went silent, although individuals in the group described al-Muhajiroun as the overarching umbrella under which the other groups operated. More recently, the group marshaled its forces under the banner "Islam4UK," which was among the groups banned under the latest proscription order.

The actual decision to ban al-Muhajiroun was surprisingly controversial. The group had announced its intention to march through Wootton Bassett, a village that has become synonymous with British war dead due to the regular processions of coffins along the high street, and the public perception is that the ban was a reaction to this announcement. The British government, however, claimed that the decision was the product of a review of al-Muhajiroun's status by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Center (JTAC).⁷

1 Sean O'Neill and Giles Whittell, "Al Qaeda 'Groomed Abdulmutallab in London,'" *Times* [London], December 30, 2009; Dominic Casciani, "Analysis: Does Banning Terror Groups Work?" BBC, January 12, 2010; "UK Terrorist Threat Level Raised to 'Severe,'" BBC, January 23, 2010.

2 The term "Londonistan" was coined by the French security services who were angry at the volume of jihadist groups and individuals who found safe sanctuary in the United Kingdom and in its apparently lax legislation to counter radical groups not threatening British soil. Most were in London, hence the term Londonistan.

3 The official proscription order can be found at www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2010/uksi_20100034_en_1.

4 Omar Bakri Mohammed, "An Official Declaration Dissolving Al Muhajiroun," www.almuhajiroun.net, October 8, 2004.

5 "Four Men Jailed Over Cartoon Demo," BBC, July 18, 2007.

6 "Theoretically" because the al-Muhajiroun descendent groups tend to operate using many different fronts, making it hard to ascertain which one is behind any particular activity.

7 Casciani.

39 Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Terror Alert: Let Us Protect UNIFIL and Fast," *Daily Star*, February 1, 2010.