

Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon

By Bilal Y. Saab

THERE IS NO OFFICIAL consensus in Lebanon on whether al-Qa`ida has a presence in the country. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, all politics in Lebanon has been polarized. It is on the threat of terrorism where the gap is arguably most pronounced.¹ On the one hand, the anti-Syrian political coalition, led by Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and parliament majority leader Saad Hariri, believes that al-Qa`ida does not have an indigenous presence in Lebanon. What the country faces instead is a fabricated threat by Damascus and its intelligence services that is intended to destabilize Lebanon and restore Syrian hegemony.² On the other hand, the pro-Syrian alliance, spearheaded by Hizb Allah (also spelled Hezbollah) and the Free Patriotic Party of Michel Aoun, judges that al-Qa`ida exists in Lebanon and poses a real threat to national security. For them, the rise of al-Qa`ida in the country is largely attributed to a devilish pact between Lebanese Sunni politicians and extremist Islamic factions in the north, the purpose of which is to counter-balance the perceived ascending power of Shi`a Hizb Allah. The Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), an institution that is perceived to be fairly loyal to Siniora—in addition to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the two most influential regional patrons of the anti-Syrian coalition—are also accused by the pro-Syrian alliance of having a hand

in financing and arming these terrorist groups.³

It is critical for Lebanese from all sides of the political spectrum to come to a clear understanding of the nature of the terrorism threat. While terrorism may not be an existential threat to Lebanon, it has hit hard in various regions and in multiple directions. The past three years alone have registered more than 18 terrorist attacks that have taken the lives of innocent civilians, high-profile officials and politicians, prominent journalists and commentators, military personnel, and international peacekeepers. Furthermore, the two theories about al-Qa`ida in Lebanon as proposed by the anti-Syrian and pro-Syrian coalitions are not mutually exclusive. Their common denominator is the Lebanonization process of the Salafi-jihadi movement in the country. Five years after the start of the war in Iraq, Islamic radicalization is still on the rise in the Middle East. The spillover effects of the war in Iraq, the resurfacing of political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon following the May 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops, the 2006 war between Israel and Hizb Allah, and the Sunni perception of ascending Shi`a and Iranian power in the region gave new life and meaning to the Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon.

During the course of a six year period starting in 2002, the author conducted both practical and theoretical research on the subject of Salafi-jihadism in Lebanon.⁴ The findings, updated by

current events, support the following conclusions, each of which will be examined in detail:

- Al-Qa`ida's senior leadership, based in the tribal areas of Pakistan-Afghanistan, has no franchise or coordinated group in Lebanon.⁵

- The Salafi-jihadi movement has neither a local insurgent presence in Lebanon nor a unifying leader of the stature of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the presumed leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq.

- The Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon is neither fictional nor a mechanical creation of the Syrian intelligence services. It also has an important Lebanese constituency and is not exclusively Palestinian.

- The current Salafi-jihadi threat is caused by a network of capable terrorist cells scattered across the country, mostly in northern Lebanon. The most dangerous terrorist axis is the one that links, by land and sea, regions in the north—such as Tripoli, al-Koura and Akkar—to the Palestinian refugee camp of `Ayn al-Hilwa in Sidon. Pockets in the Bekaa Valley are also increasingly witnessing Salafi-jihadi activity.

- Al-Qa`ida's senior leadership values the target of the international peacekeeping force in the south⁶ and has a profound interest in attacking Israel, but it also understands the limitations and difficulties of waging jihad on Lebanese soil.

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Lebanon

Lebanese government attention on and local media coverage of Sunni Islamic militancy has always been episodic and tangential, focusing exclusively on a limited geographical area—the refugee camp of `Ayn al-Hilwa—and scrutinizing a specific ethnic population—the Palestinian refugees. `Ayn al-Hilwa is located on the southeastern part of the port of Sidon in southern Lebanon and has been historically known to

1 Many would dispute this assumption and argue that the issue of Hizb Allah's weapons is the most divisive issue among Lebanese politicians.

2 Media coverage by outlets sympathetic to or associated with the anti-Syrian coalition, such as the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and Future Television, have largely reported that the threat posed by al-Qa`ida is more imaginary than real, more Syrian-orchestrated than driven by domestic factors, and as a result less worthy of thorough coverage or investigative journalism. Anti-Syrian newspapers, such as *al-Nabar* and *al-Mustaqbal*, either totally dismiss the thesis that al-Qa`ida exists in Lebanon or argue that the threat is exaggerated. Most of their editorials and opinion pieces argue that the majority of the political murders that have taken place in Lebanon during the past two decades have been committed by the Syrian intelligence services, not by an al-Qa`ida-affiliated group.

3 Leading the campaign of warning against the rise of Salafi-jihadism in Lebanon are the leftist-leaning newspaper *al-Safir*, the pro-Hizb Allah newspaper *al-Akbbar*, and the pro-Syrian newspaper *al-Diyar*.

4 This research was conducted around the country from south to north including the regions of Akkar, Majdar Anjar, Tripoli, Qarun, Arqoub, Sidon, and others, where the phenomenon of Salafi-jihadism in its concrete and spiritual manifestations was investigated. This article relies on interviews of leaders from the mainstream Sunni Islamist community in Lebanon, militants who voluntarily associate themselves with the Salafi-jihadi movement, academics who specialize in political Islam, reporters who are experienced in covering terrorism, Salafist preachers, Lebanese politicians, leading intelligence officers in the ISF, and senior officers in the Military Intelligence Directorate. For more, see 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.

5 This is in contrast to, for example, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb or al-Qa`ida in Iraq.

6 Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Al Qaeda's Terrorist Threat to UNIFIL," Saban Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution and the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defence College, June 2007.

have served as a hotbed for Sunni Islamic militancy. A number of high-profile terrorist attacks with Salafi-jihadi imprints emanated from the camp, including the bombing of the Lebanese Customs Directorate and the killing of four Lebanese judges in the Justice Palace in Sidon in 1999,⁷ and the attack against the Russian Embassy in

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Beirut with rocket-propelled grenades in 2000.⁸ For too long, however, vast swathes of territory throughout the country that are fertile for terrorism have evaded the public eye.

Investigating the complex root causes of Salafi-jihadism in Lebanon is not easy.⁹ Since its awakening in the early 1980s, Salafist militancy in Lebanon was largely defensive and reflected the perceived severity of local crisis conditions. Systematic security crackdowns by the Lebanese authorities, large-scale foreign (particularly Israeli) aggression against Lebanon, and violent clashes with rival Islamist groups tended to awaken and mobilize the Salafi-jihadi movement as a whole in defense of an Islamic order. Still, Salafist militancy remained grounded in local realities and only marginally (if ever) connected to al-Qa`ida's global Islamic insurgency.

The two Salafi-jihadi groups that are closest to al-Qa`ida ideologically are Usbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham,

both based in `Ayn al-Hilwa. These two groups, whose relationship often fluctuates between cooperation and hostility, share a history of terrorism and politically motivated violence against the Lebanese state and society. In addition, the two groups have sent many young men to the Iraqi battlefield.¹⁰ Of the two groups, Usbat al-Ansar is the senior partner and arguably the most capable Salafi-jihadi group in `Ayn al-Hilwa with an estimated strength between 200-300 members, according to estimates by the Lebanese Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). Jund al-Sham, on the other hand, can be described as a relatively small group of 25-50 freelance jihadists that has no coherent organizational structure or important terrorist potential. Jund al-Sham militants have been accused, however, of murdering Hizb Allah senior official Ghaleb Awali in July 2004 and of attempting to assassinate Hizb Allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in April 2006. Other Salafi-jihadi entities—such as the Qarun group and the Majdal Anjar group—have also been involved in building networks of local fighters in their villages to join the jihad in Iraq. The village of Majdal Anjar, for example, became a focal point after five of its residents were killed in Iraq in 2005 fighting coalition forces.¹¹ In September 2004, half a dozen men from there were arrested on various terrorism charges including attempting to blow up the Italian Embassy in Beirut.¹² Lebanon's interior minister at the time, Elias Murr, stated that the group was planning to pack a car with 300 kilograms of explosives and ram it into the Italian Embassy in addition to plotting a sophisticated attack against the Ukrainian Embassy.

Although sympathetic to one another, Salafi-jihadi factions in Lebanon are not united under a single umbrella or organization. They have dissimilar agendas and are relatively small and clandestine semi-autonomous entities with informal organizational structures. Each is more concerned about its own survival than waging an offensive jihad

against “infidels.” Some are also divided along political lines. Importantly, these groups have faced constant recruitment challenges within the Lebanese Sunni community, whose solid majority is opposed to Salafi-jihadi ideology. In fact, this acute lack of support to al-Qa`ida's ideology and agenda explains why the two most ambitious attempts by the Salafi-jihadi movement to create a durable and potent insurgent force in the country have failed miserably.

The first attempt happened on December 31, 1999 in al-Dinniyeh, which is approximately 30 miles away from the northeastern part of Tripoli. A group of Lebanese Sunni Islamic militants, led by Afghanistan returnee Bassam Kanj, launched an attack on the Lebanese Army and fought it for six days. The army eventually defeated the insurgents and foiled their alleged plot of establishing an Islamic state in Tripoli. The second more deadly attempt was in the summer of 2007 when a group called Fatah al-Islam¹³ attacked a Lebanese Army outpost near Tripoli and slaughtered several soldiers during their sleep,¹⁴ an action that triggered an army counter-offensive. The three-month battle between the army and Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp ended on September 2, 2007 when most of the surviving few dozen militants punched through army lines in a desperate bid to escape. Several were rounded up in subsequent sweeps of the hills to the east, but an unknown number, including their leader Shakir al-Abssi, have so far evaded the dragnet. Even though the army crushed Fatah al-Islam in Nahr al-Bared, the organization still exists in an unknown number of cells, mainly in Tripoli, including in the Badawi camp, but also in `Ayn al-Hilwa. More recently, Fatah al-Islam seems to have established a presence in the Bourj al-Shemali and Rashidieh camps, where it appears to have amalgamated with Jund al-Sham. Scattered in the north, these cells (some of which are remnants of Fatah al-Islam) that have proven links

7 Agence France-Presse, June 9, 1999.

8 For more information on the history of terrorism and politically motivated violence in Lebanon, see Saab and Ranstorp, “Securing Lebanon from the threat of Salafist Jihadism.”

9 Ibid.

10 Usbat al-Ansar frequently issues statements from the camp confirming that its members became “martyrs” in Iraq after facing the “crusaders.”

11 Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist, Inside Muslim Jihadism* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 2006), pp. 273-277.

12 Agence France-Presse, September 27, 2004.

13 For a detailed account of the story of Fatah al-Islam, see Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Fatah al-Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Enterprise Went Awry,” The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defense College, November 2007.

14 This information is based on the account provided to the author by the MID.

with jihadists in `Ayn al-Hilwa have been responsible for a number of recent terrorist acts including the twin attacks on the Lebanese Army buses on August 13, 2008 and September 29, 2008, which killed 15 soldiers and six civilians.¹⁵

The story of Fatah al-Islam is important because it underscores the transformation of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon and sheds light on its future trajectory. That story, however, is anything but conclusive.

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The author’s analysis of Fatah al-Islam’s statements and behavior prior, during, and after the battle, coupled with intelligence assessments by senior officers in the MID and European intelligence agencies worried about the safety of their troops in southern Lebanon, support the following account: Fatah al-Islam is not merely a Syrian tool, but an actual jihadist group whose goals are inimical to Syrian interests and whose creation was greatly facilitated by spillover from Iraq.¹⁶ The conclusion reached by senior members of the Swedish, Danish, German and Italian intelligence agencies is that al-Qa`ida has a real presence in the country and is determined to strike hard against their interests in Lebanon and their troops in the south.¹⁷ It appears that this appraisal is now shared by most intelligence agencies in the U.S. government.¹⁸ This is evidenced by

15 *Al-Safir*, October 13, 2008; *al-Hayat*, October 14, 2008.

16 While local actors may have sharp disagreements over the nature of the threat of terrorism in Lebanon, all foreign governments and intelligence agencies that are concerned about the rise of terrorism speak with one voice on this matter and state that al-Qa`ida has a presence in the northern part of the country.

17 These conclusions were privately communicated to the author during several meetings in Stockholm, Berlin, Copenhagen and Beirut in the summer and winter of 2007.

18 For the past year, the author received a sense of the thinking of most intelligence agencies in the U.S. govern-

ment on the issue of al-Qa`ida in Lebanon during conferences and briefings in which he presented.

the public statements of several U.S. officials—including Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte—confirming that al-Qa`ida does have a presence in northern Lebanon,¹⁹ and by the visits of a handful of high level intelligence officers to Lebanon, including CIA Director Michael Hayden.²⁰

The argument that Syria did not create Fatah al-Islam or is not responsible for causing the recent wave of Salafist militancy in Lebanon does not exonerate Damascus from the terrorism threat and leaves a number of important questions unanswered. For example, it is concerning that there is no reliable information or explanation as to why Fatah al-Islam leader Shakir al-Abssi was released from Syrian prison in the fall of 2002. While Syria may not have given birth to the Salafi-jihadi movement in Lebanon, it surely has aided it and aggravated its threat by allowing the transfer of al-Qa`ida fighters and terrorist finances and equipment from Iraq and Syria into Lebanon. The Syrian regime understands the dangers of the game it is allegedly playing,²¹ given the strong ideological enmities between secular Damascus and militant Islamist movements and the bloody history they have shared since the 1970s. Damascus, however, has shown it is willing to accept the risks given the relative benefits such policies have earned it over the years.

Lebanon as Viewed by al-Qa`ida’s Senior Leadership

Al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership has yet to unequivocally declare Lebanon a theater for major operations. For al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership, notwithstanding the many advantages the Lebanese battlefield offers to the Islamic insurgency in the Middle Eastern corridor (most importantly the geographical proximity to the Israeli-Palestinian theater in general and the spiritual significance of Jerusalem in

19 Andrew Wander, “UNIFIL Says Attack Plot May Not Have Been Aimed at Peacekeepers,” *Daily Star*, October 22, 2008.

20 It is worth noting that Hayden’s visit was never publicly confirmed or commented on.

21 It is also accused of playing this game more explicitly in Iraq by providing a range of support to Iraqi insurgents.

22 Al-Zawahiri released two messages on December 20, 2006 and February 13, 2007 in which he briefly addressed Lebanon and Security Council Resolution 1701.

23 For an analysis of the letter, see Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “What Zawahiri’s Really Mean for Lebanon and the War on Terror,” *al-Hayat*, May 5, 2008.

particular), Lebanon is not a priority.

Recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri released yet another long message²² urging Muslims worldwide to join insurgencies, mainly in Iraq.²³ Reserving a few words for Lebanon, which he called a “Muslim front-line fort,” he said that the country will play a “pivotal role in future battles with the Crusaders and the Jews.” While Lebanon is not a “Muslim front-line fort,” al-Zawahiri was correct in his assessment that the country may play an important role in al-Qa`ida’s global Islamic insurgency. The events of Nahr al-Bared last summer were indicative of the relative ease with which al-Qa`ida in Iraq was able to transfer fighters—via Syrian territories and with Syrian acquiescence—to Lebanon to cause terror and havoc.

Al-Qa`ida’s senior leaders recognize the big challenges their organization would face in waging jihad on Lebanese soil. This is why they may have settled for using Lebanon as a staging ground to the Palestinian and European theaters

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and not so much as a jihadist battlefield. Still, terrorist operations against the international force in the south would be praised and welcomed, as al-Zawahiri has repeatedly reminded his followers. The reality is that Lebanon has turned into a place where jihadist travelers can quietly meet, train, and plan operations against Israel.²⁴ This

24 This is the most recent terrorism threat assessment reached by several European intelligence agencies on the

happens mostly along the axis that links by land and sea regions in the north to the troublesome Palestinian camp of `Ayn al-Hilwa in Sidon. Given how al-Qa`ida views Lebanon, the country might be spared the fate of Iraq. The international community, however, still needs to work closely with the Lebanese government to prevent al-Qa`ida from setting up operations.

Combating Terrorism: The Lebanese MID Role

The MID is pursuing a number of initiatives to combat terrorism in Lebanon,²⁵ some of which are listed below.²⁶

- Inside the MID (unlike other government institutions), there is overall agreement that these local cells are inspired by al-Qa`ida's ideology and have extremist ambitions, but have no verifiable connections with al-Qa`ida in Pakistan-Afghanistan. They are self-starters who are trying hard to earn the endorsement of Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri. They hope to catch their attention by staging terrorist attacks across the country and planning spectacular operations against high-value targets such as the United Nations headquarters in Beirut and the international force in southern Lebanon. While most of these cells are active, some of them are dormant. Their connection to al-Qa`ida's franchise in Iraq is traceable.

- The estimated number of members of these terrorist cells, according to military intelligence, is 3,700. Their nationalities range from Lebanese, Palestinian, Saudi Arabian, Algerian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and a small minority of non-Arabs. Experts in explosives occupy the biggest chunk of these members.

situation in Lebanon. It was privately shared with the author during meetings in European capitals.

²⁵ Due to the prevalent bickering and divisiveness in the Lebanese political sphere, the Lebanese Military Intelligence Directorate (MID), the leading public counter-terrorism institution, operates in a challenging environment. To effectively analyze and combat the terrorism threat, the MID has had to virtually insulate itself from politics.

²⁶ This information is based on several meetings the author had during the past five years with senior members of the MID. For more on the counter-terrorism effort in Lebanon, see Bilal Y. Saab, "Lebanon on the Counterterrorism Front," *Middle East Times*, March 19, 2008.

- The MID claimed it produced a clear map that shows the location and distribution of these cells, whether in the rural or urban areas in the north. The MID also said it possessed reliable intelligence on the means with which these cells communicate and secure weapons and funding.

- The MID, with the authorization of the Lebanese cabinet, has sent out letters to the Arab League, Arab embassies, and Arab intelligence agencies asking for old and new information about the terrorist cells in the north. The MID did not hide the fact that it was seeking the cooperation of elements in the Syrian intelligence services and coordinating with U.S. covert agencies.

- The MID's offensive plan to eradicate the threat of terrorism in the north is divided into four fronts: one, the army's 10th Brigade constantly monitors and tracks the cells to keep them on the run and in a state of disarray; two, lure the cells to closed areas and break them one by one; three, deny the cells any kind of support or sympathy from the few disenfranchised members of the northern populace; four, avoid confrontation with all the cells at once and avert a repeat of the Nahr al-Bared incident which resulted in heavy loss of lives on both sides.²⁷ Instead, apply a gradual approach and expand the network of informants (be they agents or citizens) to procure the best intelligence.

- The MID confirms that its plan, which it coordinates with the ISF, is working, as evidenced in the recent breaking of three cells in the north that perpetrated or planned terrorist attacks against Lebanese Army posts and vehicles. The military intelligence service, however, is badly funded, lacks sophisticated equipment and is overstretched. It claims it cannot do the job alone and needs the help of regional and international intelligence agencies who have an interest in neutralizing the terrorism threat in Lebanon.

²⁷ For more on that battle and the lessons learned by the army, see Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce Riedel, "Lessons for Lebanon from Nahr al Bared," *The Brookings Institution*, October 4, 2007.

Conclusion

The most reassuring aspect of the history of Salafi-jihadi terrorism in Lebanon is that it is not widespread and has few followers. Yet, in a small country such as Lebanon, even a small number of cells can cause havoc and terror. It is naïve to assume that removing the grievances of Salafi-jihadists in Lebanon will prevent terrorism from occurring, for the nature or root causes of these grievances are not clear. This is not to recommend an exclusive reliance by the Lebanese government on military approaches to solve the problem. Balanced economic and political development policies in the deprived north may deny the Salafi-jihadi movement additional recruits. It should be emphasized, however, that heavy-handed approaches by the MID are essential at this relatively nascent stage of the post-Iraq Salafi-jihadi movement because they help contain the threat and prevent it from inflating.

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