



Al Qaeda's New Front in Lebanon

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Yesterday in northern Lebanon, a group named Fatah al Islam conducted several attacks against the Lebanese Army, killing (up to) 25 soldiers and losing (up to) 15 members in addition to civilian casualties. The fighting is still raging at this hour. This security development, which could be happening in many other spots in the troubled Middle East, from Iraq to Gaza, and from Somalia to Afghanistan, has however a special dimension. It signals in fact the opening of a new front in the War with al Qaeda's Terror: Lebanon. Here are the reasons:

Fatah al Islam is based in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al Bared in Northern Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city with a Sunni majority. The group is an offshoot of another previously formed group, Fatah al Intifada, both dissidents from the Palestinian Authority headed by

Mahmoud Abbas and both - importantly- backed and financed by the Syrian intelligence. But Fatah al Islam, formed last November and headed by Palestinian-born Shaker Absi, is linked directly to al Qaeda. Absi was a colleague of Jordanian-born Abu Musab al Zarqawi, killed by an US air raid last year. Fatah al Islam since its inception has told its supporters and the population in its areas of training and operations that it follows the Jihad of al Qaeda.

Fatah al Islam aims at creating an "Emirate" (Islamist principality as in the Taliban model) in the Sunni areas of Lebanon, and is planning on conducting operations similar to the ones in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq. But according to the Lebanese Government and terrorism experts, the group is being secretly supported by the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad. The question arises in the West about the logic of having a so-called

“secular” Baathist regime supporting an “Islamic Fundamentalist” organization. First, the Baathist logic is to use groups not necessarily carrying its Pan-Arab ideology to attack the regime’s foes and achieve strategic goals: For decades, the Assad (father) regime supported and used the national-socialist SSNP (Syrian neo-Nazi organization), the Christian war lord Frangieh, the Maronite militiaman Elie Hobeika, Arab Socialist factions, the Shiia Jihadist Hezbollah and most importantly a roster of Jihadi Sunni networks. From Tripoli to Sidon, the Assads' regime manipulated Harakat al Tawheed al Islamee and the Gamaat Islamiya, both al Qaeda-like Jihadists. Inside the Palestinian camps of Lebanon, the Syrian Mukahabat remote controlled many groupings – Jihadi in their ideology and outlook, but feeding from the Baathist machine.

The Fatah al Islam is the latest marriage of convenience between a group of committed Jihadists, rotating in the al Qaeda’s constellation but gravitating around Damascus influence. The group accepts Bashar’s support and the Syrian regime tolerates the organization’s “Sunni” outlook: Both have a common enemy, even though they may come at each other’s throats in the future. The men of Bin Laden anywhere in the world, including in Lebanon, have the same standing order: Bringing down the moderate Arab and Muslim Governments (even in multiethnic societies) and replace them with Emirates. The men of Bashar Assad and Mahmoud

Ahmedinijad have converging goals, bring down the democratically elected Government in Lebanon and replace it with a Hizbollah-Syrian dominated regime, as was the case before 2005. Thus each “axis” has one objective in Lebanon: crush the Seniora Government. They will take all their time to fight each other after.

Today's clashes between the al Qaeda linked terror network and the Lebanese Army are a prelude to terror preparations aimed at crumbling the Cedars Revolution, both Government and civil society this summer. It is a move by the Assad regime to weaken the cabinet and the army in preparation for a greater offensive later on by Hizbollah on another front. In short the Damascus-Tehran strategic planners have unleashed this “local” al Qaeda group in Tripoli to drag the Lebanese cabinet in side battles, deflecting its attention from the two main events, highly threatening to Assad: One is the forthcoming UN formed Tribunal in the assassination case of Rafiq Hariri. The second is the pending deployment of UN units on the Lebanese-Syrian borders. Both developments can isolate the Syrian regime. Thus, the Fatah al Islam attacks can be perceived as part of a preemptive strategy by the Tehran-Damascus axis. But the results, if the Lebanese Army fails to contain the terrorists, could be very serious to the Seniora Government and the UN. Worse, if the first piece of a Sunni Triangle is put in place in Lebanon, this could affect the geopolitics of the War on Terror glob-

ally: The rise of Salafi Jihadism along the coasts of Lebanon, from Tripoli to Sidon, passing by Beirut. This Emirate-to-be, could become the closer strategic enclave of Bin Laden to the US Sixth Fleet, Europe's cities and Israel.

The United States and the West are now faced with a new development which they cannot allow to grow unchecked: an al Qaeda base on the Eastern Mediterranean. The strategic responses are only two: Reshape the Lebanese Army to face off with the Jihadists and deploy multinational forces on the Syrian Lebanese borders as soon it is possible. The Seniora Government also has work to do: It must without hesitation call on the UN Security Council to de-

ploy forces on the borders, in application of UNSCR 1559 and under Chapter 7. The three main leaders of the parliamentary majority supporting the cabinet have opened the path for such a move: Saad Hariri, the leader of the Sunni community has blasted Fatah al Islam as a threat to Muslims; Walid Jumblat, leader of the Druses and Socialists has already been calling for a UN military intervention; and last but not least, the various Christian parties opposed to Assad have accused the Syrian regime of igniting Terror. All planets are now aligned for a successful move against al Qaeda in Lebanon, before it is too late. But the question is: will the Lebanese politicians seize the moment?

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