

# The Muslim Brothers Give Hamas a Foothold in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

**Most Lebanese Sunnis have resisted the MB's mobilization so far, but this sentiment could shift quickly due to pressures from the Gaza war, the economic crisis, the local political vacuum, and the inroads being made by Hamas and Hezbollah.**

Since the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Sunni Muslim Brotherhood branches across the Middle East have renewed their calls for jihad, and some have reactivated their military cells. In Lebanon, the MB branch al-Jamaa al-Islamiyah (JAI) and its al-Fajr Forces have been involved in [rocket attacks](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>) against Israel in coordination with Hezbollah. In response, Israeli forces have killed seven of the group's fighters so far, including senior commander Shurahbil Ali Alsayed via a strike near Majdal Anjar.

The Fajr Forces currently command about 500 fighters, but the group's primary significance is not in its military capabilities or arsenal. Rather, JAI and its armed wing are crucial to Hamas and Hezbollah because they provide a good Lebanese cover, allow for plausible deniability regarding certain attacks, and have greater access to the country's Sunni community, which has been headless and detached from politics since former prime minister Saad Hariri left the scene in 2019.

## Timeline of a Growing Alliance

JAI was established in 1964 and formed the Fajr Forces in response to the Israeli invasion in 1982. For decades afterward, its stances and alliances largely echoed those adopted by other regional MB branches. For example, during the Syrian uprising in 2011, JAI had a serious dispute with Hezbollah over the latter's support for the Assad regime, echoing the MB's support for Syria's Sunni opposition.

More recently, however, JAI has shifted to a strong political alliance with Hezbollah and Hamas—a trend that emerged well before the Fajr Forces were reactivated during the current Gaza war. This began in 2022, when Mohammad Takkoush led JAI's pro-Hamas camp to victory in the group's internal elections, then pushed for a more formal alignment with the Hezbollah-Hamas axis.

That same year, JAI reportedly won (<https://www.lebanondebate.com/news/650146>) 22,978 votes in Lebanon's parliamentary election, up from 11,442 in 2018. This jump was mainly due to the absence of political leadership within the Sunni community, and the group's popularity has continued to grow of late due to the popularity Hamas garnered after the October 7 attack.

## Fajr Activity During the Gaza War

The first sign that the Fajr Forces were reactivated came on October 18, when the group announced (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2023/10/18/new-statement-from-jamaat-al-islamiyah-al-fajr-forces-launch-a-missile-strike-at-the-occupation-sites/>) that it had attacked northern Israel “in response to the Zionist aggression that targeted our people in southern Lebanon, including civilians and journalists [and] a number of martyrs and wounded, in addition to the bombing and destruction of homes and mosques.” Since then, it has announced other attacks against targets such as Kiryat Shmona (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2023/10/29/new-statement-from-jamaat-al-islamiyah-al-fajr-forces-targeting-zionist-enemy-positions-near-kiryat-shimona/>).

The war has also seen JAI attempt to blend itself with Hamas and the wider “resistance” axis. For example, after senior Hamas commander Saleh al-Arouri was killed (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-leader-dies-beirut>) this January by an Israeli strike in Beirut, JAI's condolence statement claimed that (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/01/04/new-statement-from-jamaat-al-islamiyah-the-secretary-general-during-the-funeral-of-the-martyr-al-aruri-lebanese-and-palestinian-blood-mixed-to-complete-the-liberation-process-and-the-r/>) “Lebanese and Palestinian blood mixed to complete the liberation process together.” This integration was further cemented when JAI released ([https://t.me/Ikwan\\_lebanon/1526](https://t.me/Ikwan_lebanon/1526)) a martyrdom notice for Alsayed on May 18, noting that he was a commander for both the Fajr Forces and Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

Similarly, after a helicopter accident (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-emergency-election-will-signal-khameneis-intentions>) killed Iran's president and foreign minister last month, JAI was the only regional MB branch to release a condolence statement (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/05/20/new-statement-from-al-jamaah-al-islamiyah-offering-its-condolences-to-the-iranian-leadership-and-people-on-the-death-of-president-raisi-and-his-companions/>). In contrast, its MB sister branch in Syria explicitly stated (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/05/20/new-statement-from-the-syrian-muslim-brotherhood-about-the-death-of-the-iranian-president-we-affirm-that-the-iranian-regime-and-its-symbols-are-an-enemy-of-our-syrian-people-and-a-cornerstone-of-t/>) that it would not eulogize the victims because the “Iranian regime and its symbols are an enemy of our Syrian people and a cornerstone of the crime committed against Syria,” highlighting the real shift that the Lebanese branch has made in recent years. JAI leader Takkoush even hosted ([https://t.me/Ikwan\\_lebanon/1024](https://t.me/Ikwan_lebanon/1024)) Iran's cultural advisor twice this year, along with officials from the Shia party Amal ([https://t.me/Ikwan\\_lebanon/1074](https://t.me/Ikwan_lebanon/1074)) in January and

Hezbollah ([https://t.me/Ikwan\\_Lebanon/1435](https://t.me/Ikwan_Lebanon/1435)) in March.

As the pattern of Fajr rocket attacks and Israeli responses continued in recent months, JAI has issued [more](https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/03/10/new-statement-from-jamaat-al-islamiah-on-the-path-to-liberating-jerusalem-and-palestine-a-group-of-commanders-were-martyred/) (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/03/10/new-statement-from-jamaat-al-islamiah-on-the-path-to-liberating-jerusalem-and-palestine-a-group-of-commanders-were-martyred/>) and [more](https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/04/26/new-statement-from-al-jamaah-al-islamiah-celebrating-two-martyrs/) (<https://ikhwanology.wordpress.com/2024/04/26/new-statement-from-al-jamaah-al-islamiah-celebrating-two-martyrs/>) martyrdom claims, enabling it to exploit widespread sympathies with the October 7 attack. The group also turned at least one [recent funeral](https://t.me/Ikwan_Lebanon/1528) ([https://t.me/Ikwan\\_Lebanon/1528](https://t.me/Ikwan_Lebanon/1528)) into a military and political parade. This projection of power was aimed at boosting JAI's recruitment of young Sunnis desperate for leadership, belonging, or an identity—similar to the way Hezbollah engaged Shia youths in the 1980s, albeit on a smaller scale.

## Taking Advantage of the Sunni Power Vacuum

Last August and September, clashes erupted in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, led by rival Fatah and Hamas affiliates identified as Jund al-Sham and Shabab al-Muslim. At the time, Hamas was emboldened by pledges of support from the Hezbollah-sponsored “joint operations room” and decided to take over decisionmaking in the Lebanese camps through force of arms. Its Islamist affiliates launched a weeks-long offensive that [displaced](https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/lebanon-unrwa-forced-postpone-start-school-year-south-due-ein-el-hilweh-events) (<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/lebanon-unrwa-forced-postpone-start-school-year-south-due-ein-el-hilweh-events>) around 4,000 Palestinians, and the clashes continued off and on until the October 7 attack on Israel. Although Hamas did not completely eradicate Fatah's presence in Ain al-Hilweh, it asserted itself as a strong force in Lebanon and boosted its alliance with Hezbollah.

Indeed, a stronger Hamas with political hegemony over the Lebanese MB could do much to help Hezbollah infiltrate the country's Sunni community—a goal that Hezbollah leaders have held for years, especially since the 2022 election [exposed](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon>) the weakness of their Christian ally Gebran Bassil. For electoral and political reasons, Hezbollah has always tried to give itself non-Shia cover by coopting other sectarian communities. Given its gradual loss of the Christian community, the group is now keen on exploiting the vulnerability of the Sunni street.

Northern Lebanon is the most vulnerable Sunni community due to its rampant poverty and lack of prospects. Although Hezbollah has a presence there, it has long been hesitant to make a concerted push for local control given the area's deep Sunni resentment, which grew after the militia assassinated former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and intervened in the Syria war on the Assad regime's behalf. At present, JAI is not strong enough to back a full-scale Hezbollah push in these communities, but the potential is there. By playing on Sunni sympathies for Gaza and exploiting the north's need for financial help, Hamas and JAI could find receptive ears for Hezbollah's message. Already, the Fajr Forces and Hezbollah's “Resistance Brigades” have seen an increase in young Sunni recruits since October.

This unholy convergence—violent Sunni Islamists reemerging in Lebanon and allying with radical Islamists in the Shia and Palestinian communities—is a dangerous trend. Unfortunately, it could flourish amid Lebanon's [seemingly unstoppable](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>) economic collapse, leading to even greater destabilization.

## Recommendations

The Sunni street in Lebanon is very exposed at the moment, especially in the impoverished north. Although Prime Minister Najib Mikati hails from the key northern city of Tripoli, his tenure has seen very little institutional effort to address chronic problems in the area. Indeed, Lebanese authorities have historically dealt with northern crises after the fact, not before.

The U.S. government should take this emerging threat seriously. It has several avenues for helping out right away.

First, it should prod the Lebanese government to be more attentive to the north. New development and economic projects are needed to provide local Sunni youths with alternatives. Most important, Beirut must do more to counter radical narratives in Islamist schools and cultural centers. This means strengthening the public education sector and providing more effective social services. Of course, the Lebanese economy is in tatters, and the state does not have the money to implement new development and educational projects right now. In the past, however, the wealthy Hariri family has been willing to fund such initiatives with support from Saudi Arabia, so Washington should pursue that option once again.

Years ago, Riyadh removed itself from the Lebanese political scene and drastically decreased its financial support—partly due to a shift in the kingdom’s priorities, but also because Hezbollah’s domestic power kept growing. Despite this shift, now is a critical time for Washington to convince the Saudis to reengage. After all, the current threat is not just Beirut’s problem—widespread Sunni radicalization in Lebanon would inevitably feed radicalization across the region, making the issue a matter of Saudi national security.

In terms of religious and ideological leadership, much of Lebanon’s Sunni community still prefers Saudi Arabia’s relative moderation over the extremist views espoused by other actors. Yet Riyadh’s complete absence from the scene in recent years has created room for JAI and other radicals. Most any sign of renewed Saudi attention would do much to avert the takeover bid by actors like JAI, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Accordingly, the U.S.-Saudi and French-Saudi tracks in Lebanon should prioritize Riyadh’s return, with a focus on making sure that the historically pro-Saudi Sunni community does not turn to Hezbollah.

Washington should also encourage the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security institutions to rethink their approach to unrest in this community. Currently, **[their response \(https://civilsociety-centre.org/content/justice-everyone-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-islamists-lebanon\)](https://civilsociety-centre.org/content/justice-everyone-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-islamists-lebanon)** to clashes or other security incidents in these areas is to detain young Sunni men and delay their trials, and/or make blanket arrests that sweep up nonviolent individuals. The LAF would be better off targeting those who instigate violence, provide weapons, and organize local radical cells, while other authorities seek to address the root problems in these impoverished communities.

Finally, the U.S. government should consider formally designating the Fajr Forces as a Foreign Terrorist Organization if it conducts more attacks or expands its activities. At the very least, this could sever any connections the group might have to global financial institutions and send a message that randomly targeting civilians is unacceptable.

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