

Can al-Qaeda's Lebanese Expansion Be Stopped?

by [Emily Hunt \(/experts/emily-hunt\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Emily Hunt \(/experts/emily-hunt\)](#)

Emily Hunt is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, where she analyzes evolving terrorist tactics.



Brief Analysis

As Israelis assess the implications of Hamas's victory in January elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, a new threat may be developing in Lebanon. Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists have been present in Lebanon for a decade, but recent statements by Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi suggest that the dual objectives of destabilizing Arab regimes and targeting Israel proper are becoming top al-Qaeda priorities. Al-Zarqawi-linked terrorists in Lebanon have already engaged in low-level targeting of Israeli and Lebanese interests, yet several obstacles may hinder their ability to launch significant attacks in or from Lebanon. The Lebanese government, although weak, has a clear interest in preventing both internally and externally directed al-Qaeda activity. The dynamic among Hizballah, the Palestinians, and al-Qaeda remains more ambiguous, but early signs suggest potential antagonism among the groups. Together, Israel and the United States may be able to help Lebanon contain this emerging threat.

Al-Qaeda-Linked Operations in Lebanon

One of al-Qaeda's entrees into Lebanon is Asbat al-Ansar, an al-Qaeda affiliate that has been responsible for numerous attacks in Lebanon since the mid-1990s. The group's members number several hundred, some of whom trained in Afghanistan with the first generation of al-Qaeda operatives. In November 2005, Abu Sharif, the leader of Asbat al-Ansar, told Beirut's Daily Star newspaper that four of the group's members had died fighting the United States in Iraq and that others had also traveled there to join the jihad.

Events since the autumn of 2005 further illuminate al-Qaeda's connection to Lebanon. In September French police disrupted a Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) cell allied to the Zarqawi network in the suburbs of Paris. Two of the detainees told authorities they had received explosives training at a camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon. Then, on December 27, nine Katyusha rockets were fired into northern Israel, hitting Kiryat Shmona, and Shlomi. Hizballah and the Palestinian factions denied culpability. On December 29, al-Zarqawi released a claim of responsibility, stating that the attack was "the beginning of an in-depth strike against the Zionist enemy." On January 13, 2006, Lebanese police announced the detention of thirteen al-Qaeda suspects with connections to al-Zarqawi who were in the process of planning suicide attacks in Iraq and possibly Lebanon. The detainees included seven Syrians, three Lebanese, a Saudi, a Jordanian, and a Palestinian.

Within days of the arrests, the Lebanese army intercepted a boat loaded with weapons, including long-range missiles, off the coast of Tripoli, en route to Gaza. Lebanese authorities believe the shipment was organized by the same cell responsible for the December rocket attacks on Israel. Then on January 24, a group calling itself "The Black

Tigers-al-Qaeda's military wing in Lebanon" posted an internet statement voicing support for the terrorist campaign in Iraq and threatening to attack UN personnel, Palestinian leaders, and Lebanese security forces. On February 2, an alleged al-Qaeda operative made a bomb threat to the Sada al-Balad newspaper; an explosion several hours later injured one soldier at Fakhreddine military barracks in Beirut. The caller claimed the attack was in retaliation for the January arrests of al-Qaeda suspects in Lebanon.

Potential Obstacles for al-Qaeda in Lebanon

Support for al-Qaeda is most prevalent in Sunni strongholds in northern and southern Lebanon, particularly the Naher al-Bard Palestinian refugee camp and the area around Tripoli, the Ein el-Hilweh camp, and Sunni villages along the border between Lebanon and Israel, such as Al-Abbasiyah, Dahira, Yarin, and Urjub. The Lebanese government has tried to prevent al-Qaeda attacks and to disrupt cells through aggressive police work. On January 30, Lebanese security forces announced the creation of a Special Agency to Combat Terrorism, which will have branches throughout the country and whose staff will receive international counterterrorism training. While police are best able to preempt terrorist activity in northern and central Lebanon, they are notoriously reluctant to intervene in the Palestinian refugee camps in the south, where Asbat al-Ansar elements have enjoyed a safe haven.

Al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq have alienated some of their most natural supporters through their unusually brutal tactics. Although it is too early to predict whether they will repeat this pattern in Lebanon, the Palestinians have shown a preliminary willingness to act against al-Qaeda operatives. In April 2004, Fatah forces in Lebanon arrested a Saudi al-Qaeda affiliate who had come to Ein el-Hilweh from Syria. Fatah has also skirmished with members of Asbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham (a splinter of Asbat) in Ein el-Hilweh, most recently at the beginning of January 2006. The January al-Qaeda warning for Palestinians to "return to Islam" and threats to "eliminate" Palestinian leaders will only escalate hostilities.

A more complex political calculus governs relations between Hizballah and al-Qaeda operatives in Lebanon. Although they have cooperated logistically in the past, Hizballah has historically sought to monopolize the jihad against Israel in southern Lebanon. There also appears to be a nascent ideological conflict between Hizballah and al-Zarqawi's wing of al-Qaeda. In an August 2005 interview with Kuwaiti newspaper al-Ray al-Amm, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah criticized the anti-Shiite sentiments of "some parties with Salafi inclinations" in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi's protracted campaign against Muslim civilians there, and his 2005 suicide attack in Amman, deepened the rift between the groups.

Counterintuitively, al-Qaeda-linked operatives in Lebanon have antagonized rather than appeased Hizballah. In July 2005, Jund al-Sham faxed a threat to assassinate several prominent Hizballah allies and leaders, including former spiritual leader Sayyed Hussein Fadlallah, to the Shiite Fatwa Center in Tyre. In the interview with al-Ray al-Amm, Nasrallah alluded to a similar threat that was posted on the internet in the summer of 2005. Although at the time Nasrallah did not take it seriously, Hizballah deputy secretary-general Naim Qassem -- one of the leaders named in the July 2005 threat -- publicly warned not to "make Lebanon an arena for settling scores."

Despite these apparent disputes, Hizballah may have an interest in allowing al-Qaeda elements to operate in its territory. If Hizballah can control the al-Qaeda operatives, their activities could prove useful by creating an ambiguity that complicates Israel's retaliation efforts. Ultimately, future interaction between the two groups will depend partially on the Iranian and Syrian stances on al-Qaeda operations in the Lebanese context. Iran in particular presents a danger if, emboldened by Hamas's electoral victory, it seeks to tighten the threat circle around Israel by supporting al-Qaeda's entrenchment in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda's ability to operate effectively in Lebanon will depend partially on the capability of Lebanese police and the

attitudes of terrorist groups already in the country.

Events suggest Palestinians and Hizballah are hostile toward al-Qaeda in Lebanon, yet the dynamic is still evolving. Though in the best case scenario tension among the groups could act as a de facto constraint on al-Qaeda's operations in Lebanon, the United States should focus primarily on strengthening the Lebanese government and security forces. Assistance could flow through Lebanon's new counterterrorism agency, or funds and training could be directed outside that framework. The United States might also encourage the Lebanese government to assert itself in the Palestinian camps, under the calculus that the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the prospect of al-Qaeda attacks may galvanize the government's will to extend its reach. Excessive pressure on this issue could destabilize the political environment in Lebanon, but if the effort takes place in the context of meaningful capacity building it could be an opportunity to strengthen the Lebanese government.

The United States should also consider ways to help the Lebanese and Israeli governments realize their mutual interest in disrupting terrorism in Lebanon. Though there are many political sensitivities on the Lebanese side, the United States might be able to serve as a go-between for intelligence sharing about terrorist activities directed against Lebanese targets

Emily Hunt is visiting Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute.

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