

# New Evidence of Wider Threats from Lebanon's Asbat al-Ansar

by [Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](#)

Oct 3, 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](#)

Jonathan Schanzer, a former terrorism finance analyst at the Treasury Department, is senior vice president at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.



## Brief Analysis

Lebanon and occupying Syria have downplayed the threat of Asbat al-Ansar ever since the al-Qaeda affiliate was named a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. government on September 23, 2001. Made up of only a few hundred fighters, Asbat was thought to be contained within Ein al-Hilweh, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Accordingly, Beirut and Damascus continued to allow the group to operate virtually unrestrained.

Asbat has recently given policymakers cause for increased concern, however. Besides daring terror attacks in Lebanon, the arrests of al-Qaeda operatives deeply connected with Asbat in Australia and Spain have demonstrated the group's global reach in conjunction with Osama bin Laden's terrorist network. Therefore, now may be the appropriate time to step up actions against Asbat.

## Lebanon's al-Qaeda Affiliate

According to the State Department, Asbat al-Ansar is an Islamist group that "receives money through international Sunni extremist networks and Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network." Its members trained in al-Qaeda camps or fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In 1999, the group was behind explosions at the Lebanese Customs Department and a courthouse. In 2000, Asbat attacked the Russian embassy in Beirut with rocket-propelled grenades. In May 2003, the group was at the center of an Ein al-Hilweh bloodbath in which eight people were killed and twenty-five wounded. During the fighting, machine guns, mortar rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, and even armor-piercing missiles were fired.

In January 2003, Asbat members of the so-called Tripoli Cell (Khaliyat Tarablus) attempted to assassinate U.S. ambassador Vincent Battle. This Tripoli Cell is strongly linked to Asbat; according to the London-based Arabic daily al-Hayat, the cell is directed by Ibn ash-Shahid, a Yemeni Asbat member based in Ein al-Hilweh. By their own admission, several apprehended members of the cell are Asbat operatives.

In addition to the January assassination attempt, the Tripoli Cell has been linked to several other attacks in recent months. In June, several Asbat militants tied to the cell launched a missile strike against Lebanon's Future TV station, owned by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. More recently, a Lebanese military court accused more than thirty suspects of participating in the Tripoli Cell, bombing a McDonald's restaurant in Beirut in April, and attempting to attack a Russian airliner in Lebanon. In the McDonald's attack, four people were injured when a bomb exploded in a bathroom; a device planted outside the restaurant failed to detonate.

## The Australian Connection

One of the linchpins that ties al-Qaeda, Asbat al-Ansar, and the Tripoli Cell together is Bilal Khazal, an Australian citizen of Lebanese origin. Also known as Abu Suhaib, Khazal is head of Australia's "Islamic Youth Movement" (Ash-Shabab al-Islami), a small but influential group of perhaps 150 members that is suspected of recruiting Islamic radicals. Since 1994, the organization has published a radical Salafist magazine called Nidaa ul-Islam (call of Islam). According to the Lebanon Daily Star and al-Hayat, Khazal is also a direct financier of Asbat and other radical factions inside Ein al-Hilweh. For example, one member of the Tripoli Cell told a Beirut military court last week that the cell's leader, Mohammed Ka'aki, received at least \$1,800 from Khazal. Recent Australian press reports indicate that Khazal has been friends with Ka'aki since the late 1990s, and that Khazal's brother, Maher, met with Ka'aki during the same period to discuss financing for terrorist operations in Lebanon. Beirut issued a warrant for Khazal's arrest in June 2003.

Khazal is known to have other ties to al-Qaeda. Australian authorities have been suspicious of his activities for nearly five years. He is thought to be the organizer of an illegal weapons training camp uncovered in Australia in August 2000. According to the Lebanese daily an-Nahar, authorities searched his home just before the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, and in 2001, authorities confiscated his passport based on suspicions that he was linked to al-Qaeda. Australian authorities now indicate that Khazal is closely linked to Mahmoud Habib, an Australian national currently held at Guantanamo Bay.

According to a 2002 CIA document, "the al-Qaeda leadership has allegedly delegated responsibility" to Khazal. The document cited uncorroborated intelligence that he was planning attacks against U.S. targets in the Philippines and Venezuela. The document also claimed that Khazal "was in Afghanistan in 1998, where he was affiliated with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Usama bin Laden." Other reports suggest that Khazal has met repeatedly with Abu Qatada, a London-based radical cleric who was initially detained under Britain's antiterrorism laws and who now faces extradition to Spain after formal charges were placed against him in September for allegedly participating in al-Qaeda.

The charges against Qatada stem from the dismantling of an al-Qaeda cell in Madrid in November 2001. That ongoing investigation has revealed even deeper al-Qaeda participation on the part of Khazal. Documents from court proceedings show that Abu Dahdah (a.k.a. Imad Eddin al-Yarkas), the Madrid cell's leader now regarded as one of the masterminds of the September 11 attacks, was an "important contact" of Khazal's. Similarly, the Australian Broadcast Corporation reports that Dahdah, who also had close associations with September 11 terrorist leader Mohammed Atta, was in "constant contact" with Khazal. In February 2001, Khazal solicited support from Dahdah to help "a brother" slip into Europe after Italian immigration officials issued him "a stamp prohibiting his entry." According to Spanish court documents, Dahdah facilitated the individual's illegal entry and provided accommodations in Madrid. Court documents also reveal that Dahdah, Qatada, and Khazal met in Spain, though the purpose of the meeting is not stated.

## Next Steps

The case of Khazal demonstrates that Asbat al-Ansar is not a small, insignificant al-Qaeda affiliate, as Beirut and Damascus would have the world believe. Rather, Khazal's activities demonstrate that the group is inextricably connected to al-Qaeda, with both international links and international targets. In order to step up pressure against Asbat and Khazal, the U.S. government should:

Provide intelligence and support for Australia's investigation into Khazal's activities. Such support could assist Australian authorities in charging him with participating in or aiding a terrorist group. Australia may even permit his extradition to Lebanon.

Investigate whether Khazal qualifies as a Specially Designated Terrorist. One Australian official asserts that Khazal is a "significant figure for al-Qaeda in Australia." Proving this accusation would help Australia and other governments further weaken al-Qaeda's presence on their soil.

Encourage Lebanon's apparent willingness to prosecute Khazal and the terrorists he has financed. The United States could also offer increased antiterrorism cooperation against other al-Qaeda operatives in Lebanon (although not without continuing to press Beirut to dismantle Hizballah, another terrorist group that operates openly on Lebanese soil).

Pressure Lebanon and Syria to fully dismantle Asbat al-Ansar. Both Beirut and Damascus refuse to bring Asbat and other violent factions in Ein al-Hilweh under control. Instead, they limit themselves to weak security measures on the camp's perimeter, despite specific knowledge of Asbat's strongholds and cadres. Should Beirut continue to permit Asbat to operate freely, especially in light of Hizballah's ongoing terrorist activity, Washington could consider penalties, even economic sanctions.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #791

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)