

# Lurking in Lebanon

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Articles & Testimony

**P**rime Minister Rafik Hariri of Lebanon announced on Sunday that Lebanese authorities will not enter a Palestinian refugee camp where al Qaeda operatives are known to be, even at the height of the war on terror.

Asbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans) was tied to a foiled assassination plot against the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon in January and successful attacks against U.S. business interests. More recently, the group was at the center of a bloody battle inside the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp. Eight people were killed and 25 others wounded.

But, as one Lebanese journalist notes, officials in Beirut are "acting as if the issue is of no concern to them."

Asbat al-Ansar also appears to have fallen off the radar screen of the U.S. government, even though it was among the first eleven international terror groups listed in President Bush's executive order of September 23, 2001.

Asbat al-Ansar is a Sunni Muslim group that "receives money through international Sunni extremist networks and Bin Laden's al Qaeda network," according to the State Department. Its cadres, numbering several hundred, trained in al Qaeda camps or are battle-tested from their service in the Afghan war. In 1999, the group was behind an explosion at the Lebanese Customs Department, as well as an attack on a courthouse that killed four judges. In 2000, Asbat attacked the Russian embassy in Beirut with rocket-propelled grenades. In 2001, Jordanian and Lebanese forces foiled an Asbat attack on the Jordanian, U.S., and British embassies in Lebanon.

Despite these high-profile attacks, Asbat al-Ansar is seen in Lebanon as only a local problem. The group is based almost entirely out of Ein al-Hilweh, a Palestinian refugee camp that is utterly lawless. It is lawless because the Lebanese government sees refugee camps as outside of its authority and refuses to govern them. Indeed, the Lebanese fear the camps because it was the Palestinians that prompted Lebanon's civil war in the 1970s. It is also believed that the integration of the mostly Sunni Palestinian refugees into the general population would upset the delicate balance between Lebanon's Christian, Maronite, Shia, and Sunni sects. Thus, not wanting to rock the boat, Lebanon has instead chosen to allow an al Qaeda affiliate to proliferate unchecked.

The most recent spate of violence prompted by Asbat al-Ansar has now lasted for nearly a year. Tensions stem from the fact that Asbat al-Ansar seeks to wrest control of Ein al-Hilweh from Fatah, the traditional ruling faction of the camp, led by Yasser Arafat's lieutenants. "We . . . will turn Ein al-Hilweh and the rest of Lebanon into a pool of blood to wash away your treason and corruption and send you to hell," read a recent Asbat communique to its Fatah foes. For months, Fatah loyalists in the camp have been the targets of shootings, grenade attacks and car bombs.

But Fatah is not the only target. Attacks are also aimed at other secular factions in Ein al-Hilweh, such as the Syrian

As-Saiqa and the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Civilian targets similarly find themselves in Asbat's crosshairs, such as UNWRA (the U.N. entity that provides aid to the camp), and the camp's open vegetable market. Indeed, any entity that is not Islamist in nature is a potential target.

Recently, Asbat al-Ansar operatives were believed to be behind higher-profile attacks outside the camp. Lebanese authorities arrested 22 suspected Asbat members for an April bombing of a McDonald's restaurant in a Beirut suburb. Some of the wanted men escaped, however, and now enjoy refuge in Ein al-Hilweh, knowing that the authorities will not enter.

The Lebanese newspaper an-Nahar reported that Asbat also attempted to assassinate the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Vincent Battle, while he was visiting Tripoli in January. The militants reportedly tried to fire an armor-piercing missile at the ambassador's car.

In one of the camp's wildest stories, it appeared that North Korea was also attempting to benefit from the lawlessness of Ein al-Hilweh. In February, the Lebanon Daily Star reported that a North Korean agent named Jim Su Kim was arrested and held by the Lebanese army for questioning. Was Kim trying to work with al Qaeda's Lebanese operatives? There was no follow-up in the Lebanese press, and no official statement from Beirut.

In recent weeks, however, the focus has shifted back to the camp. Two weeks ago, Abdullah Shreidi, the leader of an Asbat cell, was ambushed by Fatah gunmen as he drove home from a funeral. Shreidi was taken to a hospital and was stabilized. But Shreidi's compatriots feared another Fatah attack. In an unbelievable account, An-Nahar reports that the militants

". . . managed to switch electric power off in the camp at nightfall Sunday, and punched a big hole in the hospital's rear wall that allowed twelve of them to sneak into the operating theater. They held doctors and nurses at gunpoint in the corridor while others lifted their leader onto a stretcher and smuggled him out from the intensive care unit. . . . Appeals for O-positive urgent blood donations rang out from neighboring mosque minarets to help Shreidi."

The Lebanese government remained on the sidelines while tensions mounted. Soon, fresh battles erupted. Five hours of clashes on May 19 resulted in eight deaths and 25 wounded. During the fighting, machine guns, mortar rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, and even armor-piercing missiles were used. Finally, a cease-fire allowed for both sides to bury their dead. An uneasy calm remains today.

As analysis emerged from Lebanon, some groups cited a "lack of official determination in the country to disarm Palestinians" a direct incrimination of Lebanon's lack of involvement in the camps. Even Lebanon's parliamentary speaker, Nabih Berri, stated that Lebanon "cannot remain idle."

But Lebanon continues to remain idle, burying its head further in the desert sand. While chaos continues inside Ein al-Hilweh, Lebanese troops linger on the camp's perimeter in what can only be seen as a ceremonial presence. More must be done.

For its part, the U.S. government can push Lebanon for more action. Until now, Washington's focus has been on the Iranian-funded Hezbollah, even though Asbat al-Ansar is Lebanon's arm of al Qaeda the primary target in the U.S. campaign to stamp out global terror.

In the end, Asbat al-Ansar may be one of the few instances of "low-hanging fruit" in the war on terror. Unlike other al Qaeda operatives, who hide in the shadows, we know who these people are and where they live. Asbat al-Ansar is, therefore, easier to destroy.

Lebanon, however, allows this group to grow by ignoring it. If this continues, Asbat al-Ansar may come to pose a greater threat. Indeed, it could become a launch pad for other al Qaeda attacks in the future. ❖

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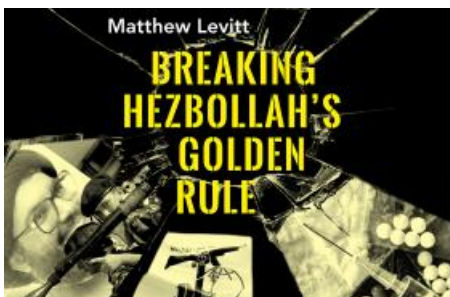
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