

Ein al-Hilweh: Lebanese Tinder Box

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

Nov 12, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

Last week's bombing of a coffee shop and car-bombing attack against a Fatah figure in Ein al-Hilweh, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, are the latest developments in a wave of recent violence in the camp. Al-Sharq al-Awsat has reported no less than nineteen bombings in Ein al-Hilweh since the end of September 2002. Asbat al-Ansar (League of partisans) -- a predominantly Palestinian terrorist group based in the camp, with established links to al-Qaeda -- is seen as the culprit behind this violence. In an apparent move to ignite heightened Arab-Israeli tensions, the group has destabilized the camp and surrounding areas. Mounting tensions in this long-neglected and impoverished camp could undermine Lebanese stability, aggravate its refugee crisis, and enfeeble America's efforts in the "war on terror."

The Camp

Ein al-Hilweh is the largest of Lebanon's twelve Palestinian refugee camps. Located about 30 miles south of Beirut, it was established in 1948 with an original population of 9,000. Today, 44,133 refugees are registered in the camp, while an estimated 75,000 persons actually live there. Even after the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) entered the camp in 1952, Ein al-Hilweh was neglected for nearly two decades; factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) did not begin serving Lebanon's refugees until after the 1969 Cairo Agreement. The PLO presence was strengthened when the organization relocated to Lebanon from Jordan in 1970. After Israel expelled the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, Ein al-Hilweh again went neglected. In 1985, the camp was the site of pitched battles between the pro-Syrian Amal militia and pro-Arafat factions. In the wake of the first intifada, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) filled a political void and provided valuable social services. Fatah reasserted control in the 1990s, installing Arafat loyalists in camp committees. This resulted in the patchwork of factions that run the camp today. In November 2001, a formal security committee was created with delegates from each faction.

Meanwhile, the camp has become a breeding ground for a plethora of militant groups. The Associated Press reports regular "turf clashes" in a camp "known for lawlessness." These groups include Fatah, Ansar Allah (Sunni Islamist), al-Ahbash (pro-Syrian and anti-wahhabi), al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah (Sunni, pro-Iranian, and linked to Hizballah), Hamas, PIJ, and Asbat al-Ansar.

Currently, Palestinian refugees are second-class citizens in Lebanon. They are considered a threat in that their integration would upset the delicate balance between Lebanon's Christian, Maronite, Shi'a, and Sunni sects.

Accordingly, Lebanon strictly limits employment and restricts travel. Moreover, a 1990 Lebanese constitutional amendment stipulates that there is to be "no settlement of non-Lebanese in Lebanon." The prevailing wisdom among the Lebanese is that the refugee problem is primarily an Israeli one, that internal politics justify delaying a solution, and that the problem will eventually disappear.

Recent Violence

In August, al-Sharq al-Awsat reported "intense armed presence and reciprocal military alerts between [the] Fatah movement and the Islamic Asbat al-Ansar." Whereas the complicated political landscape of Palestinian factions often led to internal violence in the past, Asbat al-Ansar has ratcheted tensions to levels previously unseen. The recent tensions initially arose over clashes between Fatah and the al-Dinniyah group, a little known faction supported by Asbat al-Ansar. To ease the situation, officials from the various factions concluded an agreement which stipulated "placing al-Dinniyah group under forced residence, under the custody of Asbat al-Ansar, as a prelude to working out a solution whereby they would be evicted from the camp."

Of more concern to Lebanon (and, by default, Syria) were al-Dinniyah's clashes with Lebanese forces in 2000. More recently, Badi Hamadah (aka Abu Obeida), a member of the group, was accused of killing three Lebanese military personnel in July 2002 when they tried to arrest him for other attacks. On the run, he sought refuge in Ein al-Hilweh. Though Asbat al-Ansar handed him over to Lebanese authorities on July 16, tensions lingered as violence continued. Following a spate of attacks in October, senior Ein al-Hilweh figures declared an "emergency situation." The attacks included bombings and shootings of Fatah, Lebanese, and UNRWA targets.

Asbat al-Ansar

Based almost entirely in Ein al-Hilweh, Asbat al-Ansar was among the first eleven international terror groups to have its assets frozen by President George W. Bush in his executive order of September 23, 2001. The group is also of serious concern to Lebanon and Syria. Led by Ahmad Abdul Karim as-Saadi (aka Abu Muhjin) since the early 1990s, the group justifies violence against civilians to achieve political ends -- namely, "overthrowing the Lebanese Government and thwarting perceived anti-Islamic influences in the country," according to State Department reports.

The State Department lists Asbat al-Ansar as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and notes that the group "probably receives money through international Sunni extremist networks and Bin Laden's al-Qaida network." Its cadres, numbering between 100 and 300, have reportedly fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir. On September 25, 2001, Asbat al-Ansar issued a statement denying its links to al-Qaeda while still praising Osama bin Laden, his words, and his deeds. Several months later, a Yemeni al-Qaeda emissary, Salah Hajir, met with the group's leaders.

In the early 1990s, Asbat al-Ansar bombed nightclubs, theaters, and liquor stores throughout Lebanon. In 1995, the group played a part in the assassination of Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi, former chairman of the "Islamic Charity Projects Society" and affiliated with al-Ahbash. In 1999, Lebanese officials reported clashes with guerrillas linked to Asbat al-Ansar on the outskirts of Tripoli. Also in 1999, the group was behind an explosion at the Customs Department and a courthouse attack that killed four judges. In January 2000, the group attacked the Russian embassy in Beirut with rocket-propelled grenades. In 2001, a Jordanian official announced that Jordanian security forces, in conjunction with Lebanese forces, foiled an attack on the Jordanian, U.S., and British embassies in Lebanon by Asbat al-Ansar affiliates.

Policy Implications

Despite prodding by the Lebanese military to launch operations against insurgents inside Ein al-Hilweh, Syria refuses to order its forces into the camp for fear of sparking a wider Lebanese-Palestinian conflict. With this in mind, the U.S. government has asked Lebanese authorities only for information about the "movements and activities" of

Abu Muhjin and other individuals linked to Asbat al-Ansar and al-Qaeda. But if Washington identified Asbat al-Ansar as an FTO with the goal of dismantling it, such requests are not sufficient. The United States must vigorously press Lebanon and Syria for more results.

For their part, Lebanon and Syria must address their dire refugee problem. Lebanese president Emile Lahoud recently rejected a "plan to demilitarize the camps, emphasizing that this issue is not urgent at the moment." But the situation is decidedly urgent, as indicated by the growing unrest that has resulted directly from poor conditions and reprehensible policymaking. Although Lebanon traditionally insists that the Palestinian refugee problem is an Israeli one, it has become a Lebanese problem in the absence of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Lebanon, Syria, and Fatah (the dominant faction) must therefore take steps to ballast Ein al-Hilweh. Failure to do so could destabilize Lebanon, exacerbate Lebanon's refugee crisis, and undermine U.S. efforts to combat international terror.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at the Washington Institute.

Policy #676

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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)

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