

Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad

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Denne rapporten tar for seg den militante sunniekstremistiske gruppen *Fatah al-Islam* (FAI), som ble dannet i det nordlige Libanon i november 2006. Rapporten stiller fire hovedspørsmål: Hvordan oppsto *Fatah al-Islam* og dets forløpere i Libanon? Hvorfor valgte *Fatah al-Islam* å gå inn i en åpen, langvarig konflikt med den libanesiske hæren? Hva skiller *Fatah al-Islam* fra tidligere jihadistgrupper i landet? Og hvilke strukturelle forutsetninger bidro til gruppens raske vekst i første halvdel av 2007?

Siden begynnelsen på 1990-tallet har militant Islamisme blant den palestinske flyktningebefolkningen i Libanon gradvis utviklet seg fra å dreie seg om en konkret nasjonalistisk kamp mot staten Israel – forstått som et krav om å gjenvinne okkupert land og å realisere flyktingernes rett til å vende tilbake – til å bli mer et spørsmål om å forsvare en særskilt gruppetilhørighet. Konkret gav dette utslag i en voksende orientering mot radikal pan-islamisme og salafi-jihadisme. De palestinske flyktingene begynte å sammenlikne tilværelsen sin med andre undertrykte muslimer verden over. Ved å uttrykke sin sak gjennom salafi-jihadistisk retorikk som vektla frigjøringen av hele den islamske nasjon (*umma*), ikke bare Palestina, fra okkupasjon, sekulære regimer og vestlig innflytelse, klarte de å nå ut til og få støtte fra mange nye aktører over hele den muslimske verden. Samtidig førte deres endrede språkbruk med seg en endring i gruppens identitet.

Kampene i flyktningeleiren Nahr al-Barid mellom *Fatah al-Islam* og den libanesiske hæren ser ut til å ha blitt utløst mer som et resultat av en uoverveid hendelseskjede enn av en klart definert, utarbeidet strategi. Det ser også ut til at FAIs lederskap hadde regnet med en langt mer omfattende støtte fra det lokale militante salafistmiljøene i Libanon enn det som i virkeligheten skjedde.

Kampene i Nahr al-Barid skiller seg fra tidligere konfrontasjoner mellom sunnimuslimske jihadistgrupper i Libanon og det libanesiske regimet i det at *Fatah al-Islam* holdt stand mye lenger, og ytte langt større motstand, den dets forgjengere hadde gjort. En viktig grunn til dette var at lederskapet greide å mobilisere støtte fra mange ulike globale og regionale aktører. Gruppen identifiserer seg ideologisk med bin Laden og al-Qaida, selv om de benekter at de har noen organisatorisk tilknytning til det sentrale lederskapet i al-Qaida. Samtidig spiller gruppen spiller på palestinsk nasjonalisme og anti-regime retorikk for å maksimere sin støtte og nå frem til ulike segmenter av den lokale palestinske og libanesiske befolkningen.

Fremveksten av *Fatah al-Islams* kan sees på som en konsekvens av den ustabiliteten som for tiden hersker i Libanon og av et resultat av at regionale aktører, i første rekke Syria, har sterke interesser i å influere situasjonen i Libanon.

English summary

This report looks at the militant salafi-jihadi group *Fatah al-Islam* (FAI), which was founded in Northern Lebanon in November 2006. It asks four questions: What is the origin of *Fatah al-Islam* and salafi-jihadi militancy in Lebanon? Why did *Fatah al-Islam* decide to engage in a full-scale military confrontation with the Lebanese army? How can *Fatah al-Islam* be distinguished from previous examples of jihadi groups in that country? And, what factors helped its rapid growth?

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Islamic militancy amongst Palestinians in Lebanon has evolved significantly. Its traditional nationalist focus on the struggle against Israel to liberate the occupied territories and fulfill the refugees' right to return has gradually been replaced by a struggle over the definition of identity. The Palestinian refugees began identifying with Muslims suffering in other regions of the world, and to a greater extent than before, they began adopting salafi-jihadi discourses, which called for the liberation of the entire Islamic nation (umma), not only Palestine, from occupation, secular rule, and Western influences.

The fighting in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp between *Fatah al-Islam* and the Lebanese Army seems to have broken out as a result of a chain of events, rather than being part of a meticulously prepared strategy. It also seems that the FAI leadership had expected far more support from local militant salafis than they actually received.

The FAI represents an important historical departure from previous salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon, in the sense that the FAI demonstrated far more resilience and perseverance in its fight against the Lebanese authorities than witnessed in previous uprisings by such groups. They owe much of their strength to the fact that they have succeeded in mobilizing support from a wide range of global and regional actors. Ideologically, the group adheres to bin Laden and al-Qaida's strain of militant Islam. Yet the group also exploits the rhetoric of Palestinian nationalism in order to maximize the support of the local population. The rise of *Fatah al-Islam* in Lebanon can also be attributed to the instability of the Lebanese political order, and the efforts by regional actors, Syria in particular, to influence the situation in Lebanon.

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1 Introduction

On 3rd September 2007, the Lebanese Defence Minister, Elias Murr, declared that the army had taken control of the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp north of Tripoli in Northern Lebanon, after a prolonged conflict with Sunni extremist militants, lasting more than a hundred days. The clashes between the Lebanese army and *Fatah al-Islam* (lit. “The Conquest of Islam”), a militant group, propagating an ideology similar to that of al-Qaida, had been triggered by police investigations into a series of bank robberies in the Tripoli region. The incident proved to be the worst internal conflict in the country’s history since the end of the civil war in 1989.

Salafi-jihadism, which is how al-Qaida’s ideology is commonly coined, is not new to Lebanon. When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, in what became known as the Peace in the Galilee invasion, the ‘Ain al-Helweh refugee camp in South Lebanon gained notoriety when Israeli troops had to make a detour around the camp, being unable to penetrate the militant stronghold. From 31st December 1999, to 5th January 2000, Lebanese and Palestinian Sunni militants fought Lebanese security forces for six days in the Sir al-Diniyyeh region, until the uprising was crushed and most of the militants killed. A number of analyses have examined the rise of salafi-jihadism in refugee camps in Lebanon. These studies have focused mainly on ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* (lit. “The League of Partisans”), which was established in 1991 in ‘Ain al-Helweh as the military extension of a network of salafi mosques and teaching institutions in the Palestinian refugee camp.¹

Still, it could be argued that *Fatah al-Islam*, largely unheard of until fighting broke out on 20th May this year, represents a historical rupture with previous salafi-jihadi experiences in Lebanon. The relative success of the militants, who stood up against the US-equipped Lebanese army for over a hundred days, raises a central question: With Israel only a few kilometres away, why did jihadis decide to go for an all-out war against the Lebanese government, fighting an army that was at least partly Muslim?

In the following, I shall try to analyse the phenomenon of *Fatah al-Islam* (FAI). Who are its members, who supports them, and what are their long-term goals? Can Lebanon be seen as a new front for al-Qaida, attracting professional global jihadis with valuable experience in urban guerrilla warfare? The study consists of four main parts. First I describe how Sunni-Islamism in Lebanon evolved, transforming the local Jihad against the “Zionist enemy” into a battle for the

¹ See Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: the Rise of Salafist Militancy in Lebanon*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).

whole Muslim nation (or *umma*). Secondly, after a short description of how fighting broke out in the Nahr al-Barid camp, the *Fatah al-Islam* movement will be analysed, focusing on its chief characteristics, and what distinguishes it from previous trends of Sunni Islamist militancy in the Levant. Thirdly, I shall analyse the factors that enabled *Fatah al-Islam* to grow as strong as it did in pluralistic Lebanon. Fourthly, I will try to assess the variety of external actors that facilitated the rise of *Fatah al-Islam*.

My survey finds that *Fatah al-Islam* is indeed a multifaceted and fragmented group. Any attempt to reduce the group to the works of just one external actor will prove highly simplistic. The main threat of the group lies in the fact that it is supported by a multiplicity of local, regional, and global forces. Compared to the Diniyyeh clashes, FAI militants have displayed much more perseverance. This can partly be attributed to the changed local and geopolitical conditions in which the fighting took place. At the same time, FAI also has a much higher number of militants and better material supplies. They apparently received material support from Palestinian militias opposing the Oslo Accords, as well as from regional groups aiming to restore Syrian hegemony in Lebanese affairs. At the same time, their affiliation with global jihadi actors has given them ideological credibility, and enabled the group to recruit many foreign fighters into its ranks.

2 Islamism in Lebanon: From local to global jihad

2.1 Islamism in the Palestinian camps

Rougier's main argument in his excellent pioneering study of Islamic militancy among the Palestinians in Lebanon is that salafi-jihadism represents a total ideological rupture from the nationalist oriented territorial struggle represented by the secular Fatah movement, and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic, but still nationalist Hamas.² To a great extent, the youths in the refugee camps have lost faith in the possibility of achieving victory over Israel. Hezbollah's on-going struggle with Israel, culminating in Israeli withdrawal from the South of Lebanon in 2000, and, recently, its "victory" in last summer's 33 day war, have led to a feeling of frustration in certain segments of Lebanese Sunni Islamist circles that the "fighting in the south has been monopolized by the Shiites". The Sunnis have not fought on the Lebanese front since 1985, when Israel withdrew to the South of Lebanon, establishing a buffer zone between itself and Lebanese territory.³ Since then, Hezbollah has succeeded in mobilizing large parts of the Lebanese population, and not only Shiites, in support of its resistance campaign in the South. The Israeli withdrawal from the South

² Rougier (2007).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 243.

of Lebanon in 2000 has been widely interpreted as proof that Hezbollah's model of armed resistance yields results. Hezbollah has, in fact, been one of the only Islamist actors in the Arab and Muslim world to succeed in achieving some of their goals. Hezbollah has therefore triggered both jealousy and inspiration for its model of resistance in Sunni Islamist circles.⁴

In salafi discourse in Lebanon, a recurrent theme is that lack of faith, resulting in lack of unity and courage, was to blame for the repeated losses against Israel. For example, in the *al-Hidaya* magazine, which was published by *The Muslim Student's Union* in 1990-1, a common refrain is that: "The only path back to Palestine and to Holy Jerusalem (*al-Quds al-sharif*) is Islam; only Islam can mobilize the Islamic nation on purely religious bases".⁵ This point is also made by *Fatah al-Islam*, who calls for a return to Allah, "the only one who can unify our ranks, and the one way to victory".⁶

Therefore, Rougier argues that salafi scholars are re-interpreting the material struggle for Palestine, as represented by the retrieval of occupied land and the "right to return", into a question of identity. The Palestinian cause was re-framed in salafi discourse as part of the universal struggle for Islam; it became just another chain in the "conspiracy against Muslims world-wide". The largely Sunni Palestinian refugee population came to receive the same status as the other dispossessed Muslim people, caught in the hands of "Crusaders, Jews, and apostate Arab governments" (Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria, Afghanistan, etc.). As one of the militants interviewed by Rougier put it, 1924, the year of the abolishment of the Islamic Caliphate, has become "more important than 1948".⁷ This means that, to a large extent, the camps have ceased to be part of Palestinian society, and have been transformed into "only spaces open to all the influences running through the Islamic world"⁸.

⁴ For an analysis of Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, see, for instance, Walid Chahara and Frédéric Domont, *Le Hezbollah. Un mouvement islamo-nationaliste*, (Paris, Fayard, 2004). See also Bernard Rougier (2007b), "L'islamisme Sunnite au Liban face au Hezbollah", in Frank Mermier and Elisabeth Picard (eds.), *Liban, une guerre de trente-trois jours*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2007).

⁵ *al-Hidaya* 1991, cited in Rougier (2007) p. 86.

⁶ Fatah al-Islam, "Announcement of the Establishment of Fatah al-Islam" (in Arabic) in Fatah al-Islam, "A Call to the Knights of Islam in all Parts of the World and Especially in Lebanon, the Announcement of Jihad in Jerusalem" (in Arabic), *markaz al-fajr lil-i'lam*, [*al-Fajr Media Centre*], April 25, 2007, <http://kaled.modawanati.com/>, accessed June 2007.

⁷ Rougier (2007), p. 146.

⁸ Bernard Rougier in Scott Wilson, "Splinter Groups Rise in Refugee Camps' Decline of Palestinian Institutions", *Washington Post*, May 22, 2007.

2.2 Structural factors at the local level

The radicalization of Palestinians in Lebanon cannot be fully understood without giving consideration to the grave and on-going socio-economic deprivation and legal discrimination felt by Palestinian refugees in the country. Early on in Lebanese discourse, it was perceived that if Palestinian refugees, predominantly Sunnis, were to settle permanently in Lebanon, it would tilt the precarious balance between Lebanon's confessional groups. It must be pointed out that due to the difficulty of power-sharing among confessional groups in Lebanon, a census has not been held since 1932.⁹ The fear of *tawtin*, or the permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon, has legitimized a wide range of discriminatory practices directed against the refugee population in the country. These range from socio-economic deprivation and legal discrimination, to verbal attacks on Palestinians. For instance, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are banned from a wide range of white-collar professions, and they have very restrained property rights. As a comparison, Egyptian guest workers in Lebanon are far better off.¹⁰ In addition, many Lebanese actors exaggerate the security difficulties inside the camps by employing the term *juzur amniyya* ("Islands of insecurity"). This is a verbal practice supported by Syria and other actors opposing the Oslo Accords, since it contributes to inflating the danger of an eventual permanent settlement of refugees in Lebanese discourse.

Living conditions of Palestinian refugees differ greatly from one camp to another. The North of Lebanon was traditionally dominated by the Syrian regime, which relied on heavy surveillance, combined with advanced welfare services, in order to discourage refugees from turning to Islamic militancy.¹¹ Therefore, until the formation of *Fatah al-Islam*, the religious networks in Nahr al-Barid had avoided turning to violence.¹² At the same time, salafi doctrine was promoted by preachers both inside the Nahr al-Barid camp and in the city of Tripoli. The country's Sunni capital, and birthplace of a leading cleric of the early salafi reform movement, Shaykh Rashid Rida, seems to have regained its position as a stronghold for Islamist militancy in the late 1990s. This is due to several factors. First, from 1996 onwards a Lebanese Afghan veteran, Bassam Kanj, better known as Abu 'Aisha, succeeded in establishing a network of supporters in the city's poor neighbourhoods. Secondly, new Islamic teaching institutions played an important role (see below). In 1981, more than fifty youngsters from Tripoli were sent as exchange students to the

⁹ See Georges Corm, *Le Liban contemporain. Histoire et société*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2003).

¹⁰ Are Knutsen, "The Law, the Loss, and the Lives of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", *CMI Working Paper* No. 2007: 1, (Bergen: Christian Michelsen Institute, 2007), <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/?22607=the-law-the-loss-and-the-lives-of-palestinian>, accessed June 2007.

¹¹ Rougier (2007), p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Islamic University of Medina, Saudi Arabia. Some of these former students today make up the main nucleus of the Sunni shaykhs in the region.¹³

Syria's policies towards the Islamists have witnessed many shifts over the years, depending on the assessments made by the Syrian regime as to whether the Islamists constituted a direct threat, or conversely, represented merely a convenient vehicle to promote Syrian interests in Lebanon.¹⁴ The regime seems to have been more lenient in the late 1990s, when it turned a blind eye to the existence of an Islamist training camp uncovered in 1999-2000 in Sir al-Diniyeh, in North Lebanon. It seems plausible that Damascus did not perceive training camps established by the global jihadi movement as a threat to the regime, as long as the Islamists' anger was directed towards the West or the Russian regime, not against Syria.¹⁵ However, when Islamist fighters attacked the Lebanese army at the end of December 1999, the Syrians realized that the possibility of jihadis turning their wrath against the Syrian regime was not inconceivable. From this point onwards, Damascus seems to have become increasingly concerned with curbing Sunni extremist groups. This policy seems to have been furthered independently of the support to Hezbollah, a Shiite group, which is increasingly seen by Sunnis as heretic and a rival.¹⁶

PLO influence, often deemed to be a barrier to the growth of salafi-jihadism among Palestinians, also varies significantly from one camp to another. PLO and Fatah influence is stronger in 'Ain al-Helweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, than in Northern Lebanon, where the PLO was totally crushed by the Syrian army in the mid-1980s. After the conclusion of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, the PLO and Fatah also suffered temporary setbacks in the camps in the South. Before the Syrian pull-out in April 2005, Syria controlled the camps in the North, and PLO the camps in the South, with Syrian influence gradually declining southwards.¹⁷ After 2005, Damascus seems to have relied increasingly on proxy actors, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), to further its policy. PFLP-GC is a communist-oriented militant group opposed to the Oslo Accords, led by Ahmed Jibril and headquartered in Damascus. At the same time, the Syrian pull-out left a vacuum in the North of Lebanon, which Islamist clerics and grassroots movements in Tripoli could fill.¹⁸

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-259.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 230, 260-263.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Bernard Rougier (2007) in Elisabeth Picard and Franck Mermier, *Une guerre de 33 jours*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2007).

¹⁷ Rougier (2007), pp. 16-18.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the impact of the Syrian pull-out and, especially, on the notion of an "institutional void", see Nadim Hasbani, "Liban : crise politique sur fond d'un nouveau partage du pouvoir", *Politique Etrangère*, 2007, Spring, no 1, pp. 39-51; Georges Corm, "Le Liban doit s'émanciper", *Le Monde*, 23rd

2.3 Internal dynamics

Rougier explains the above-mentioned ideological shift from Palestinian nationalism to global salafi-jihadism using institutional factors. The main variable explaining the transfer of ideology from Peshawar to 'Ain al-Helweh is the growth of *intermediaries*, such as places of worship, Islamic teaching institutions, and Islamic associations or confederation of '*Ulama*', connecting 'Ain al-Helweh to the outer world of salafi-jihadism and spreading the new discourse among the inhabitants in the camp.¹⁹ Most important of those was Murshid, the Supervisory Council of Islamic Affairs, established in the mid-1980s by the Iran-backed and sufi-inspired (*naqshabandiyya*) Shaykh Ghunaym to "develop a political awareness that [would] allow refugees to reject the peace formula". Murshid's main role was to re-Islamize the Palestinian refugee population by supporting religious education and training. In addition, in 1986, Hisham Shraydi, one of Ghunaym's disciples, established the militant group *Ansar Allah*, (lit. "God's Partisans"), which later evolved into '*Usbat al-Ansar* (lit. "The League of Partisans"), whose main stronghold is the 'Ain al-Helweh refugee camp. It represents the oldest and probably most important salafi-jihadi group in Lebanon. Another salafi-jihadi militant group, *al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida* ("Islamic Combatant Group"), founded in 1984 by Lebanese shaykh Jamal Khattab, centred around the al-Nur mosque in 'Ain al-Helweh. "Shaykh Jamal" received his education at the American University in Beirut (AUB), and is also the imam of the mosque, a function previously held by shaykh Ghunaym.²⁰ The group undertakes a crucial function as the coordinator of Islamic militant activity in 'Ain al-Helweh, and has played a key role in settling foreign jihadists in 'Ain al-Helweh, employing some in the *al-Huda* (lit. "guidance") book store. For a year, the group operated a TV station, *al-Risala* ("the message"), from the ground floor of the mosque.²¹ '*Usbat al-Ansar* and *al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida* are heavily interwoven, both in terms of members and activities. Hence, it is correct to view '*Usbat al-Ansar* as the military branch of a larger salafi edifice which was established in Lebanon at the end of the 1980s.

In the 1980s, the salafi infrastructure in the camps was financed, advocated, and supported by external actors, and especially Iran.²² The pragmatic skills of local actors, and the myriad of links and informal networks inside the camps, resulted in a lack of transparency in terms of beneficiaries of aid. This helped the group to become autonomous at the end of the 1980s. It then

November 2005; and Elisabeth Picard, "L'ombre portée des ambitions syriennes", in Frank Mermier and Elisabeth Picard (eds.), *Liban, une guerre de trente-trois jours*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2007).

See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network theory*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 27-51.

consolidated its sense of belonging to a Sunni agenda. The Sunni identity of the group was clear from the outset, but was re-affirmed in 1991, when Shraydi's successor, 'Abd al-Karim Sa'di a.k.a. Abu Mohjen, took over and reoriented '*Usbat al-Ansar* towards a salafi-jihadi agenda and the emerging Arab-Afghan movement.

With the war in Afghanistan and the Arab-Afghan mujahidin departing to fight the Soviets, the local salafi-jihadi framework in the camps became increasingly coloured by "the ideological universe of Peshawar". From the late 1980s, an Islamic group established in Lebanon in the late 1950s, the *Ittihad al-Talaba al-Muslimin* ("Muslim Student Union"), coordinated its activities with 'Abdallah Azzam's *Maktab al-Khidamat* ("Arab Services Bureau"). The group served as a communication network between Peshawar and 'Ain al-Helweh, with branches at all Pakistani universities.²³ Through its newsletter, *al-Hidaya*, published in 1990 and 1991, narratives of the Arab-Afghans' fight for the universal cause of Islam, most important was among them the Palestinian 'Abdallah Azzam, became rooted in the minds of the Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon.²⁴

'*Usbat al-Ansar* gained further legitimacy in Lebanon when, in the 1990s, it assumed a leading role among Sunni groups in Lebanon while confronting the pro-Syrian group *al-Ahbash* (also referred to as "The Ethiopians").²⁵ *Al-Ahbash* was an apolitical Islamic group which gained ground during the early 1990s. Its followers claimed that it was a "moderate" and "tolerant" group. Nevertheless, Lebanese salafists, and most other actors outside the Syrian orbit, perceived it as a great threat to Islam, and accused the Syrian intelligence services of having created it to undermine political Islam in Lebanon. As frustration mounted among certain segments of Sunnis in Lebanon in the 1990s, '*Usbat al-Ansar* plotted an operation against "the heretic *al-Ahbash*".²⁶ On 31st August 1995, the leader of *al-Ahbash*, Nizar al-Halabi, was assassinated, probably by '*Usbat al-Ansar* militants. The murder and the subsequent weakening of *al-Ahbash*, was widely perceived as a victory for '*Usbat al-Ansar*. Conversely, it was also seen as a humiliation for the official religious institutions, especially the *Dar al-Fatwa* (lit. "The House of Religious Rulings"). The latter had lacked legitimacy from the outset because it had been created by the French colonialists. Lebanese salafists claimed that *Dar al-Fatwa* had been unable to fulfil its duty as "the guardian of Islam" in Lebanon. Therefore, '*Usbat al-Ansar* could promote itself

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75. For a biography of 'Azzam, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam, l'imam du jihad", in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milleli (eds.), *al-Qaida dans le texte*, (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2005).

²⁵ See 'Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* (in Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, December 2004), p. 783.

²⁶ Rougier (2007), p. 124.

among Lebanese Sunnis as a new force which had taken over from *Dar al-Fatwa* in the struggle against apostasy.²⁷

2.4 Radicalization and fragmentation

By the end of the 1990s, with the globalization of local jihadism, the established salafi groups had grown increasingly radicalised and fragmented. Local jihadi networks opened their eyes to the outside world of salafi-jihadism, as they expanded their network and established the first close contact with actors belonging to al-Qaida and the global jihadi movement. As demonstrated above, the shift and globalization of ideology had taken place in the late 1980s.

The key person linking *'Usbat al-Ansar* to the global jihadi movement was Bassam Kanj, perhaps better known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu 'Aisha. Kanj was born in 1965 in Tripoli, to a middle class family. He left Lebanon in the late 1980s with a scholarship from the Hariri foundation enabling him to pursue his further studies in Boston in the United States. Networking through the al-Farook mosque in New York, he became inspired by Jihad in Afghanistan and departed for Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1989.²⁸ He stayed in Peshawar, where he became acquainted with leading personalities in the landscape of global jihadism, including Usama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the important Palestinian salafi-jihadi cleric Abu Qatada al-Filastini (whose real name is 'Umar Mahmud 'Uthman 'Abu 'Umar), as well as the leading strategic thinker Abu Mus'ab al-Suri.²⁹ Kanj was later injured and returned to the United States. Sometime before 1995, he left for Bosnia, where he reportedly fought with the Arab mujahidin legion allied with Muslim Bosnian forces. Subsequently, he tried to go to Chechnya, but the director of the Service Bureau for Arab Combatants in Chechnya, in Azerbaijan, refused to grant him a permit.³⁰ In 1996, Kanj moved back to his native Lebanon, bringing along his global network of contacts. He proceeded to set up solidarity networks in 'Ain al-Helweh, and the poor neighbourhoods in Tripoli.³¹ He drew on his contacts amongst militants and financiers from Afghanistan and the United States, including among others, Qasim Dahir, a fundraiser for Afghanistan and a former sympathizer of the Lebanese *al-Tawhid* movement.³² Kanj had met Dahir at the 1995 International Islamic Conference in Chicago, and managed to elicit the latter's support.³³

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁸ Gary C. Gambill and Bassam Endrawos, "Bin Laden's Network in Lebanon", *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, September 2001, www.meib.org/articles/0109_11.htm, accessed July 2007.

²⁹ For more on al-Suri, see Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*.

³⁰ Rougier (2007), p. 232.

³¹ Gambill and Endrawos, "Bin Laden's Network in Lebanon".

³² For more on Sa'id Sha'ban's *al-Tawhid* movement in Lebanon, see subchapter 4.5 of this study.

³³ Rougier (2007), p. 233.

Kanj's Lebanese network is sometimes referred to in current media reports as *Takfir wal-Hijra* (lit. "Excommunication and Emigration"), alluding to the fact that the group withdrew from society and resided in Akkar, an isolated, mountainous region to the north-east of Tripoli (i.e. engaging in voluntary exile, or "hijra", which is Arabic for "emigration"). The network gradually became interwoven with '*Usbat al-Ansar*'.³⁴ Kanj coordinated his activities with Abu Mohjen, and provided religious training to militants, which enabled local youths, many of whom had never left their region of birth,³⁵ to be socialized through the use of new symbols and narratives from Afghanistan.³⁶ Through the exchanges between Kanj's and Mohjen's networks, militants in 'Ain al-Helweh acquired weapons and new legitimacy, while Kanj's group obtained zealous volunteers and logistical resources.³⁷

On 31st December 1999, an uprising broke out in the Sir al-Diniyyeh region in Akkar in North Lebanon as a "pre-emptive attack" on a Lebanese army patrol, launched by Bassam Kanj. The militants also seized a radio station, and took two Lebanese mediators hostage. Clashes with the Lebanese army lasted for six days, and ended with the killing of fifteen rebels, including Kanj himself, as well as the arrest of fifty-five others. Eleven soldiers and five civilians were also killed during fighting.³⁸

The exact reasons for Kanj's decision to launch an uprising remain unclear. The Syrian-born al-Qaida strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri writes in his famous book *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* that he "became friends with brother Abu 'Aisha al-Lubnani [Kanj] during the days of the Afghani Jihad" and describes how they continued their correspondence through letters. Al-Suri advised Kanj to return to Afghanistan to improve his military program, and wait until the time was ripe for opening a front in the whole of the Levant region, not just Lebanon. Nevertheless, al-Suri writes, Abu 'Aisha was convinced of his plan and did not pay heed to al-Suri's strategic advice. According to al-Suri, Kanj's plan of opening a jihadi front solely in Lebanon was:

[...] one that goes against the geography, the politics, and the available elements of the day, and I felt that they should return to Afghanistan, where they might take advantage of the situation there during the Taliban era. I felt this would give them time to better prepare for the execution of this plan. [...].³⁹

³⁴ Gambill, "Syrian, Lebanese Security Forces Crush Sunni Islamist Opposition".

³⁵ For the social background of '*Usbat al-Ansar*' sympathisers, see Rougier (2007), p. 233.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

³⁸ Gambill, "Syrian, Lebanese Security Forces Crush Sunni Islamist Opposition".

³⁹ See al-Hakim, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, p. 784.

Although Kanj and his militants officially claimed to be trying to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon, it has been pointed out that the group primarily aimed to control a piece of territory in Lebanon, which would enable them to train volunteers to fight at various “jihadi battlefronts”, especially in Chechnya.⁴⁰ Prior to the clashes in Sir al-Diniyyeh, salafi-jihadi organizations in Lebanon had engaged in solidarity campaigns, transmitting the narratives of the sufferings of Chechen civilians. This had occurred to the extent that it had had an impact on the very identity of the Palestinian refugee population, which had begun comparing its own situation with that of the Chechens.⁴¹ During the uprising, another militant Islamist, Ahmed Abu Kharrub, attacked the Russian embassy in Beirut, in solidarity with his “Chechen brothers”.⁴²

The Diniyyeh group in general, and Bassam Kanj’s contacts and “Pakistani version” of radical Islam in particular, could therefore be viewed as concrete manifestations of the coming to age of global jihadism in Lebanon. Together they can also be viewed as the starting point for the internationalization of ‘Ain al-Helweh’s extremists, who had formerly lived in an “imagined universe” of global militancy still limited by the material capabilities of the local world around them.⁴³

After the crushing of the uprising in Sir al-Diniyyeh, fourteen militants fled to ‘Ain al-Helweh, where they were given refuge. The “Diniyyeh cell” subsequently functioned as a driver for militancy in Lebanon, and it has, to a large extent, targeted foreign/Western interests.⁴⁴ The network was allegedly behind the operations against a McDonald’s fast-food outlet in Beirut in April 2003, and an attempt in January 2003, to assassinate the US ambassador Vincent Battle as he was visiting Tripoli. The late Lebanese Abu Horeira, who was *Fatah al-Islam*’s second-in-command right up to his death in July 2007 (see below), may also have taken part in the Diniyyeh uprising.

With the further weakening of the PLO at the end of the 1990s, differences over political issues in the Palestinian refugee camps widened. According to Rougier, “since the civil war ended, we can no longer speak of a Palestinian society in Lebanon, so deep are the rifts [in the population]”.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Rougier (2007), p. 242.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁴⁴ See Nicholas Blanford, “Pressured by the US, Arab countries are arresting dozens of Islamic militants, some with Al Qaeda ties”, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20, 2003,

www.csmonitor.com/2003/0520/p06s02-wome.htm, accessed July 2007.

⁴⁵ Rougier (2007), p. 148.

Memories and narratives of collective suffering no longer had the uniting force shielding the population from internal divisions.⁴⁶

After 2000, the polarization between the secularists and Islamists had become so strong it was tantamount to a “civil war ideology”. Inside the ‘Ain al-Helweh camp, which is the object of Rougier’s field study, hostilities repeatedly resurfaced and armed fighting broke out in May 2001, July and August 2002, March and May 2003, and in January 2006.⁴⁷ Issues related to the handing over of criminals wanted for their involvement in the killings of Fatah officials or Lebanese security forces, such as Diniyyeh militants, often triggered these clashes or blood-feuds. However, the underlying stake seems to have been an interest-based struggle between two parties rivalling for dominance over the camp space.⁴⁸ The struggle between the parties resembles that of a zero-sum game, where the gain of one party is equal to the loss of the other. The conflict had repercussions on the ideology and identity of the Islamists, contributing to further radicalization and fragmentation of ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* elements.⁴⁹ As a consequence of the new emphasis on religion, the symbolic perception of the enemy changed. From being strictly an Israeli soldier, the image could now include everyone from Lebanese state officials to Palestinian secularists.⁵⁰

In the face of rising splinter groups taking up more extreme positions, ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* was, ironically enough, pushed slightly towards the centre of the spectrum. Its leadership has held meetings and co-operated with other Palestinian forces, including secularists, on important security issues. For instance, in July 2002, the ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* leadership accepted the handing over of a militant wanted by the Lebanese security forces, Badih Hamadeh a.k.a. Abu Obeida, to Fatah.⁵¹ In addition, after the outbreak of violence between *Jund al-Sham* elements⁵² and Lebanese security forces in the Ta‘amir area in the camp, ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* participated in emergency meetings uniting all Palestinian forces in ‘Ain al-Helweh, and agreed to take control of a 40-man patrol force tasked with re-establishing stability in the camp. However, accepting tasks of responsibility can be seen as yet another way for ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* to further its own interests – broadening its constituency and gaining further control of camp territory. Hence, the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Are Knudsen, “Islamism in the Diaspora, Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon”, *CMI Working Paper* No. 2003: 10, (Bergen: Christian Michelsen Institute, 2003), www.cmi.no/publications/file/?1664=islamism-in-the-diaspora, accessed June 2007; and Gary C. Gambill, “Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon’s ‘Zone of Unlaw’”, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, June 2003, http://www.meib.org/articles/0306_11.htm, accessed July 2007.

⁴⁸ Rougier (2007), p. 75.

⁴⁹ Gambill, “Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon’s ‘Zone of Unlaw’”.

⁵⁰ Rougier (2007), p. 146.

⁵¹ Gambill, “Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon’s ‘Zone of Unlaw’”.

⁵² *Jund al-Sham* is a group based in the Ain al-Helweh camp in South Lebanon, which consists of around 50 militants. See below.

shift is not so much a change in ideology, as a shift in tactics. In addition, *'Usbat al-Ansar*, which has close contact with preachers and institutions in the Sunni environments in Lebanon, cannot risk alienating more mainstream Sunni forces. As emphasized by Rougier, *'Usbat al-Ansar* has a clear interest in maintaining stability, and thus, control, in *'Ain al-Helweh*.

2.5 Becoming only spaces?

Are purely international actors exploiting the “security vacuum” of the Palestinian refugee camps, by using them as training grounds for foreign jihadis? The importance of such camps in Lebanon has been propagated by Islamist actors external to the Palestinian and Lebanese scene. For instance, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri has argued that military training in Palestinian refugee camps had clear advantages compared to training in Afghanistan. It was made possible by the absence of defined authority in the camps, given the fact that Lebanese security forces, under the 1969 Cairo Agreement, do not have the right to enter the refugee camps.⁵³ First, it was far cheaper and easier for Europeans to travel to Lebanon than to Afghanistan, where one had to sneak in from either Pakistan or Iran. Secondly, a Lebanese stamp carried far less suspicion than that of a Pakistani one:

For those brothers wanting to go for Jihad in Afghanistan, the cost of training is very high; it amounts to almost 2,000 dollars. Protection of the recruits after they have returned from Afghanistan is indeed a very difficult and complicated task, since everyone who goes to Afghanistan becomes a suspect. Hence, a high-level decision was taken to train the brothers in *'Ain al-Helweh*, because costs there are lower and their activities will not arouse suspicion.⁵⁴

Bernard Rougier tells the story of how Chechen militants were welcomed into the Palestinian-Lebanese orbit of militant Islamism. Prior to the year 2000, Chechens had received military training in Lebanon, inside the *'Ain al-Helweh* refugee camp (South Lebanon), and in a training camp operated by the Abu 'Aysha network outside of Tripoli. According to Rougier, one of the motivations of the Diniyyeh cell for fighting against the Lebanese security forces in December 1999 and January 2000 was to defend their training camp where they hosted foreign fighters. A variety of sources have repeated the claim that Chechens were trained at *'Ain al-Helweh*.

⁵³ The 1969 Cairo Agreement was concluded under the auspices of the Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, between General Émile Boustani, the chief general of the Lebanese army at the time, and Yassir Arafat. The agreement legalized the presence of armed Palestinian factions in Lebanon. It was concluded in the context of the severe governmental crisis in Lebanon, which culminated in the civil war the following decade. See Georges Corm, *Le Liban contemporain*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2003), pp. 114-115; and Nadine Picardou, *La déchirure libanaise*, (Paris, Les éditions complexe, 1989), pp. 117-118.

⁵⁴ Interview with Abu Musab al-Suri by Badi' Farqani in Kabul prior to 2001. See Badi' Farqani, “al-Qaida in Lebanon: A Painting of the 2007 Goals” (in Arabic), *al-mu'tamar*, January 21, 2007, <http://www.almotamar.net/news/39293.htm>, accessed June 2007.

According to the Lebanese weekly *al-Kifah al-Arabi*, the Ukrainian government informed Lebanese officials in 1999 of Chechen fighters being trained in ‘Ain al-Helweh.⁵⁵

There is also some evidence that Lebanese territory has been used as training ground by European jihadis. In September 2005, French intelligence services dismantled a network said to be planning attacks on targets in France. The cell, which called itself *Ansar al-Fath* (lit. “Partisans of Islamic Conquest”), consisted of 15 North Africans and French militants, and was led by an Algerian called Safe Bourada, who had been imprisoned in 1998 for his involvement in the 1995 GIA bombings of the Paris métro. The cell had connections to the Algerian *Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat* (GSPC), as well as indirect connections to *al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers*.⁵⁶ Initially, one cell member had visited Lebanon for “family and tourist purposes” and, subsequently, two other volunteers had gone for training in North Lebanon. They had stayed in Lebanon between late 2004 and early 2005, and learned how to handle arms and to fabricate explosives. During a meeting in 2005 with representatives from the jihadi movements in Iraq, Lebanon, and Europe, the *Ansar al-Fath* cell received orders to return to France, in order to carry out attacks there.⁵⁷ According to French interrogation reports, training took place in “discrete houses” located outside of Tripoli, and was led by a Lebanese citizen. Saudis and Egyptians, allegedly linked to al-Qaida, were also among the training staff.⁵⁸ It seems that the camp was operated by an ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*’ splinter group, called *Jund al-Sham* (lit. “Soldiers of the Levant”), possibly in coordination with the infamous insurgent leader in Iraq, Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi.⁵⁹ Whether or not al-Zarqawi was actually directly linked to the training camp is unclear. This is partly because the name *Jund al-Sham* has been used about different groups and networks coming out of the Levant. The name was used to refer to the ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*’ splinter faction

⁵⁵ Cited in: Gambill, “Syrian, Lebanese Security Forces Crush Sunni Islamist Opposition”.

⁵⁶ See Clara Beyler, “The Jihadist Threat in France”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 3, February 16, 2006, http://www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.44/pub_detail.asp#, accessed August 2007; John Ward Anderson, “France Says Extremists Are Enlisting Its Citizens Police Assert Some Trained in Mideast Could Attack”, *Washington Post*, October 19, 2005; and Olivier Guitta, “Updated Details on the possible biological attack foiled in Paris”, *Counter-Terrorism Blog*, October 14, 2005, http://counterterror.typepad.com/the_counterterrorism_blog/2005/10/details_on_the_.html, accessed August 2007.

⁵⁷ Jean Chichizola, “Des Français entraînés par al-Qaida au Liban”, *le Figaro*, December 11, 2006.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Alexis Debat, “Terror and the Fifth Republic”, in Nikolas K. Gvosdev (ed.) *The National Interest*, 82 (Winter 2005/06), Washington DC: The Nixon Center, http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/Debat_TNI_82%5B1%5D.pdf, accessed July 2007, pp. 56-61; and Guitta, “Updated Details on the possible biological attack foiled in Paris”.

dealt with above, but it was also used in Afghanistan to describe mujahidin hailing from the Levant who trained in al-Zarqawi's training complex in Herat, Afghanistan.⁶⁰

In addition, Lebanese security forces have carried out several arrests and seizures of materials that highlight the extent of the international networks of the salafi-jihadi militants in the Palestinian camps. For instance, in April 2002, a Swede of Palestinian descent was arrested at the Beirut Rafiq al-Hariri International Airport while trying to enter Lebanese territory, in possession of a large sum of money. According to Lebanese security sources, the courier, who had been under surveillance for some time, had travelled repeatedly to Europe to collect money, and had visited Shaykh Jamal Khattab of al-Nur mosque each time he returned to 'Ain al-Helweh.⁶¹

The existence of international training and financing networks suggests that the Palestinian camps in Lebanon have become more global in their nature and identity. They are no longer controlled solely by local Palestinian or Lebanese militants. The camps are also a vehicle for promoting a *global* Islamist militancy, not merely local, nationalist agendas.⁶²

2.6 Islamic militancy in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Iraq war

In 2003, with the US invasion of Iraq, the priorities for the global jihadi movement gradually shifted from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Palestine, and other theatres of war, to Iraq. Starting in this period, Palestinian camps in Lebanon were used as training grounds by militants before leaving for Iraq. A common route to Iraq for the mujahidin has been via Syria. There are numerous reports of Lebanese volunteers who died in Iraq, or were arrested close to the border areas. Syria toughened its stance towards fighters crossing over to Iraq from Northern Syria in early 2005, following US pressure.⁶³ However, given the length of the Syrian-Iraqi border, and the remoteness of the areas in question, it has proved practically impossible fully to seal borders. In addition, commercial incentives for smuggling are great, a factor that further complicates the task of closing off the borders between the two countries.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ See Sayf al-'Adl, "The Jihadi Biography of the Slaughtering Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi", *al-jabha al-'alamiyya al-islamiyya al-'alamiyya* via *mufakkirat al-majalla*, May 25 2005, <http://www.almjhl.net/vb/showthread.php?t=8378>, accessed May 30, 2005.

⁶¹ Cited in Gambill, "Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon's 'Zone of Unlaw'".

⁶² These findings confirm and amplify Rougier's argument that the camps have ceased to be part of Palestinian society and have been transformed into "only spaces open to all the influences running through the Islamic world." See Bernard Rougier in Wilson, "Splinter Groups Rise in Refugee Camps".

⁶³ See Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Outside Iraq but Deep in the Fight A Smuggler of Insurgents Reveals Syria's Influential, Changing Role", *the Washington Post*, June 8, 2005; and Matt Brown, "US pressures Syria over Iraq border infiltrations", *ABC*, February 14, 2006, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1570021.htm>, accessed August 2007.

⁶⁴ Ferry Biedermann, "Alleged transit of fighters from Syria to Iraq slows", *Financial Times*, February 8, 2006.

It could be argued that the Iraq war thus brought about a shift in the activities and concerns of Islamic militants in Lebanon. First, many volunteers left 'Ain al-Helweh to fight alongside Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, gaining first-hand experience in urban guerrilla warfare which could be applied subsequently throughout the more urbanized parts of the Islamic world, such as the Levant. 'Usbat al-Ansar's main function after the outbreak of war in Iraq seems to have been to engage in support activities for mujahidin in Iraq, mainly by training recruits and sending them to the battlefield. The fact that 'Usbat al-Ansar's logo often figures next to that of the *Islamic State of Iraq* group's, the major al-Qaida-led insurgent coalition in Iraq, could be an indication that the two networks have coordinated their activities. Also, 'Usbat al-Ansar has repeatedly posted statements on jihadi web forums announcing the martyrdom of its cadres in Iraq.⁶⁵

Many Lebanese volunteers have lost their lives in Iraq over the past few years. A posting on *bayt al-maqdas* jihadi web forum in November 2006 displayed pictures and eulogies for 14 fallen Lebanese militants as "martyrs" in Iraq. For example, a young militant, with green eyes, short hair and a trimmed beard, Abu Shihab al-Maqdisi, died in the "second struggle of Falluja". Hassan Sulayman Abu Thabit died during a battle in Tal'afar, a Northern Turkmen city located 400 kilometres north of Baghdad; Ahmed Mohamed al-Maqdisi, a.k.a. Abu Haroun, died fighting in the city of al-Qa'im, adjacent to the Syrian border.⁶⁶ Another Lebanese martyr in Iraq, Mustafa Ramadan, a.k.a. Abu Mohamed al-Lubnani, was allegedly recruited in Denmark, but spent time in Lebanon before going to Iraq.⁶⁷

The international orientation of Lebanese salafi-jihadi militants in Lebanon (including both Palestinians and Sunni-Muslim Lebanese) extends beyond the Iraqi theatre of jihad. Other "jihadi fronts" are also considered legitimate. It was recently hypothesised that the failed train bombings in Germany in July 2006 were meant to be a test of courage for the militants, before qualifying to fight in Iraq.⁶⁸ According to *Der Spiegel*, an e-mail written by one of the perpetrators, Youssef al-Hajddib, to his associate, Jihad Hamad, six weeks before the failed attack took place, stated that they had to "be patient for a little longer until we have totally made it and passed the initiation

⁶⁵ See, for example, posting by "Abu Mojen", "One of 'Usbat al-Ansar's Cadres in Iraq has Become a Martyr" (in Arabic), *shabakat filistin lil-hiwar*, January 29, 2006, www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=48799, accessed July 2007.

⁶⁶ Posting by "al-Mujahid al-Islami" [Abu 'Abdallah al-Maqdisi], "Pictures of the Caravan of Martyrs from *Bilad al-Sham* Who Lost their Lives in Iraq. May God Strengthen Them with a Swift Victory", *muntada al-bayt al-maqdas*, February 11 2006, www.albaytalmagdas.com, accessed February 2006.

⁶⁷ Hazim Amine, "The Path to the Threefold Lebanese-Syrian-Iraqi Jihad [...]" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 10, 2007.

⁶⁸ Andreas Ulrich, "Failed Bomb Plot Seen As Al-Qaida Initiation Test", *Spiegel Online*, April 9, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,476238,00.html>, accessed July 2007.

test. Then we'll travel to Iraq together".⁶⁹ However, there are no other examples of similar initiation tests from European-based jihadi networks

Conversely, no direct full-scale clashes have taken place between Islamic militants and the Lebanese forces in the time between the Diniyyeh uprising in 2000 and the fighting in Nahr al-Barid (and to a lesser extent 'Ain al-Helweh, beginning in May 19, 2007). This could be an indication that salafi-jihadi militants in Lebanon have, for the most part, given priority to fighting a classic defensive Jihad in Iraq, rather than revolutionary Jihad at home.⁷⁰

3 A short history of Fatah al-Islam

An analysis of the background of *Fatah al-Islam* fighters sheds light on the movement to and from Lebanon in the last year. According to some reports, foreign fighters began to arrive in Lebanon during the war against Israel last summer. It has been argued that 2006 constitutes a shift in the activities of global Islamists, where actors who formerly fought against the Americans in Iraq are now returning from Iraq, and establishing new fronts through which to export the anarchy of Iraq. In the following, I will try to address the argument, and discuss whether Lebanon today constitutes a new front for global jihadis. Can the post 2006 period in Lebanon be seen as further globalization of the Lebanese jihadi scene, or is it merely a repetition of previous patterns of Lebanese jihadism, such as the Diniyyeh clashes? To what extent have the Iraq war and the weakness of the Lebanese state contributed to the current trend of jihadism in Lebanon? Or, can the rise of FAI be attributed to regional political actors regaining their power over the camps? We might find the answer to these question in the narrative of the *Fatah al-Islam* movement; its ideology, and its affiliations with the global jihadi movement.

3.1 What is *Fatah al-Islam*?

Fatah al-Islam (FAI) was officially established on 26th November 2006, when Shakir al-'Absi seized control of *Fatah al-Intifada's* bases in Nahr al-Barid, raising black banners with the inscription *tawhid* (lit. "God's unity") over the camp, and issuing fliers stating that they were "bringing religion to the Palestinian cause". His group arrived in the camp after being ousted from the nearby Beddawi camp, where clashes had resulted in the deaths of two militants. 'Absi arrived in Lebanon earlier that fall. He had previously spent three years in Syrian prisons for arms-smuggling, and was freed in February 2005. The Syrian Ministry of Information stressed

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the distinctions between classic, revolutionary, and global Jihad, see introductory chapter in Thomas Hegghammer, *Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism* (Paris: Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, PhD thesis, 2007).

that Syria sought to re-arrest ‘Absi in January 2006/7?, only to discover that he had “disappeared”. Some say that ‘Absi went to Iraq, subsequent to his release from prison in Syria, and later reappeared in Lebanon in 2006.

In January 2007, Shakir al-‘Absi told the Lebanese newspaper *al-Hayat* that *Fatah al-Islam* elements had entered Lebanon around a year after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1559. This Resolution, which dealt with the issue of the disarming the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, was voted for in September 2004.⁷¹ In 2005 and 2006, many Islamists adhering to *Fatah al-Intifada* trained at the group’s facilities in the Beqaa Valley, under the personal direction of Abu Khaled al-‘Umla, the Secretary-General of *Fatah al-Intifada*, based in Damascus. Two of the arrested *Fatah al-Islam* members confessed to having received training at the *Fatah al-Intifada* and PFLP-GC training bases in Kusaya and Helweh, and to the fact that a group of them had left the training camp for the Nahr al-Barid camp where they swore allegiance to Shakir al-‘Absi.⁷² Media sources, citing the Lebanese intelligence services, claim that these two pro-Syrian groups have hosted Lebanese and Palestinians militants at their training camps, in addition to volunteers from other Arab countries. Figures linked to Shakir al-‘Absi subsequently headed for the Burj al-Barajneh camp next to Tripoli, and the Shatila camp in Southern Beirut. Other *Fatah al-Islam* militants stated that they had arrived in Lebanon from abroad during the July war with Israel in 2006. After the war, they left for the North, settling not only in the Nahr al-Barid camp, but also in Lebanese Sunni areas in Tripoli, where they sought to recruit Lebanese Islamists.⁷³

3.2 A fragmented group

An assessment of the background of FAI militants shows that there are three major elements within the group. First, there are fighters who were formerly members of *Fatah al-Intifada*. Secondly, there are foreign fighters, who came to Lebanon from Iraq and elsewhere. Some were recruited through the jihadi web forums. Thirdly, there are locals, Palestinian and Lebanese youngsters, who have been recruited via salafi preachers and institutions in the Palestinian camps, or in the Sunni environment in and around Tripoli.⁷⁴ In addition, there are other groups which

⁷¹ Saleh al-‘Ayubi, “First Chatter with Him after the Announcement of his Secession from Fatah al-Intifada” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), January 6, 2007.

⁷² “He inquired about Targets for Fatah al-Islam and Detected the Movements of UNIFIL. Ahmed Mar’i Arrested the Saudi National “Talha” in Syria and Asked to Move “Militants” to Europe, Where They were immediately Arrested!” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 13, 2007.

⁷³ Hazim Amine, “*al-Hayat* Visited their Training Camp in the Barid [...]” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London) March 23, 2007.

⁷⁴ A similar classification was presented by Bernard Rougier soon after clashes broke out in Nahr al-Barid. See Sylvain Cypel and Luc Vinogradoff, “Le Fatah Al-Islam, symbole de l’islamisation des camps palestiniens” (transcript from audio file), *le Monde*, May 23, 2007,

seem to have assisted FAI in supplying materials and fighters. These are linked to regional powers, primarily Syria (see below).

It is hard to determine the exact national composition of FAI. A report by the *al-'Arabiyya* TV-network alleges that 45 percent of those fighting in Nahr al-Barid were Palestinians or Syrians, 30 percent Saudis, 20 percent Lebanese, and five percent from other Arab or Muslim countries.⁷⁵ The 107 suspects in custody as of 21st August 2007 included 62 Lebanese, 36 Palestinians, five Saudis, two Syrians, one Russian (a Chechen), one Tunisian, and an Algerian. In addition, among the 119 wanted *Fatah al-Islam* members, there were 38 Saudis, 11 Syrians, an Iraqi, a Yemeni and many others of unknown nationalities.⁷⁶ A posting on a jihadi web forum dated 24th September 2007, publishing the names and nationalities of sixty arrested FAI militants, claims that ten of them were of Tunisian nationality.⁷⁷ Some militant Islamists linked to *Fatah al-Islam* also had European citizenship, such as Danish Walid al-Bustani and Yusuf Dib, arrested in Germany last summer. In addition, one of those arrested was reportedly a close relative of Bilal Khazal, who runs the Australian-based Muslim Youth Movement.⁷⁸

According to a PLO representative in Lebanon, 'Abbas Zaki, only six Palestinians had been part of the group since its establishment.⁷⁹ The group succeeded in recruiting more members as it came to establish itself in the Nahr al-Barid camp. A lion's share of its recruits included those who perceived membership to be an opportunity to gain income.⁸⁰ Many recruits left the group immediately following the outbreak of fighting on 19th May 2007.⁸¹ Based on interviews with

<http://www.lemonde.fr/web/panorama/0,11-0@2-3218,32-914104@51-912531@1-7164,0.html>, accessed July 2007.

⁷⁵ The numbers probably do not show the full picture as they seem to be based on those arrested and killed and date from the beginning of July. See "How did Fatah al-Islam Succeed in Recruiting Youngsters?" (in Arabic), *al-Arabiyya net* (transcript from audio file), July 3, 2007, www.alarabiya.net/programs/2007/07/03/36142.html#002, accessed July 2007.

⁷⁶ See Malik al-Ka'kur, "A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before and Went to Beirut for the Liberation of Jerusalem" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 1, 2007; and Michael Bluhm, "Army steps up siege of Nahr al-Bared, former general assures militants are 'doomed'", *The Daily Star*, August 21, 2007, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=84674, accessed August 2007.

⁷⁷ Posting by "Moslem81", "The List of Mujahidin from Fatah al-Islam Taken as Prisoners by the Lebanese Crusader Government", (in Arabic) [allegedly copied from the *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper], *muntada al-ikhlas*, <http://al-ekhlaas.net/forum/showthread.php?t=84809>, accessed September 2007.

⁷⁸ Amine, "The Path to the Threefold Lebanese-Syrian-Iraqi Jihad [...]"

⁷⁹ Rym Ghazal and Hani M. Bathish, "PLO Chief Heaps More Pressure on Fatah al-Islam", *The Daily Star*, March 22, 2007, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=80708, accessed July 2007.

⁸⁰ Mohamed Younes, "Abbas Decides on Aid to the Refugees from the Barid" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 8, 2007.

⁸¹ See "Towards Forming a Security Force in the Camps and the Army Blows up a Building Filled Up with Gas" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 6,, 2007.

FAI militants who surrendered themselves to Fatah or to the Lebanese army, it seems that these militants were extremists who deemed the struggle in Iraq legitimate, but who had more difficulty in justifying a full-scale fight against the Lebanese army. In addition, the army made repeated calls and various incentives for surrender.

The FAI seems to have elicited support from very different types of supporters and sponsors: Syrian linked actors, such as Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), and Abu Musa's *Fatah al-Intifada* allegedly supported *Fatah al-Islam*, at least logistically. Furthermore, global jihadis assisted in financing, recruitment, and propaganda, while local cells were in charge of the training of militants in explosives and the handling of arms, as well as recruitment inside Lebanon.

FAI's leader, Shakir al-'Absi, is a Palestinian born in the 'Ain al-Sultan camp close to Jericho, who settled in the Wehdat camp in Amman, Jordan, with his family after the 1967 war, when many Palestinians fled or were expelled. He joined Fatah when he was 16.⁸² After three years of training in Libya and taking up subsequent courses in East Germany, Hungary, former Yugoslavia, and Russia, he became an air force pilot. In the 1980s, he fought alongside Ortega and the Sandinista in Nicaragua, and subsequently along with the Libyans in the Libyan-Chad conflict. He was in Lebanon for a brief period in 1982, when Israel launched the Peace in Galilee invasion of the country. 'Absi claims to have fought with the Palestinian resistance in the Beqaa Valley. In 1983, he left Fatah for *Fatah al-Intifada*.⁸³ According to some sources, Arafat personally requested that he go back on his decision, which he declined.⁸⁴ In interviews with the press, 'Absi's brother, the doctor 'Abdul Razaq al-'Absi, stressed that the *Fatah al-Islam* leader was a Palestinian nationalist who was not very concerned with religious affairs. However, he left Libya for Damascus in 1993, in sympathy with the thousands of Palestinians who were ousted from Libya in what was Qaddafi's probably most erratic and tragic act of protest against the Oslo Accords. Deeply impressed by the tragic mass expulsion, 'Absi embraced religion. He is said to have memorized the whole of the Qur'an in only three years and to have gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) in 2000.

⁸² "A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis. Close to Hamas, 'Absi is an Oppositional, not a Fanatic" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), May 30, 2007.

⁸³ *Fatah al-Intifada* was established by Abu Moussa and Abu Khaled al-'Umla in 1983 in opposition to PLO's negotiating line after its evacuation from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in June 1982. *Fatah al-Intifada* was supported by the Syrian regime, which rivaled the PLO's position as guardian of the Palestinian cause, before, during, and after the Lebanese Civil War. See Georges Corm, *op.cit.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Another prominent personality in FAI was Abu Horeira, the *Fatah al-Islam* second-in-command, who joined the group as a regular member, but rose quickly to become a leadership figure. Having lived in ‘Ain al-Helweh since 1989, and of Lebanese nationality, Abu Horeira is linked to both the local salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon and to the global jihadi network. According to some of Bernard Rougier’s sources gathered during field work effectuated in August 2007 in Beddawi, Abu Horeira, born in 1971, in his early youth contributed to the extraction of *al-Tawhid* fighters besieged by the Syrian army in the popular neighbourhood of Bab al-Tabbané.⁸⁵ Arrested by the Syrian authorities and imprisoned for three years in Syria, he came under the ideological influence of members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Upon his release in October 1989, he chose to install himself in ‘Ain al-Helweh, where many of his former contacts from *al-Tawhid* had found refuge. It was at this period he began frequenting prominent members of *‘Usbat al-Ansar*. In 1992, when studying at an Islamic Institute and living in Tripoli, he was again arrested by Syrian authorities.⁸⁶ After his release in 1996, he returned to ‘Ain al-Helweh. He found work selling vegetables and coffee in ‘Ain al-Helweh, where he married a Palestinian woman. He possibly took part in fighting the Lebanese army in Diniyyeh in December 1999 and January 2000. Many sources claim that he has been to Iraq, but others assert that he was not able to make it all the way. Much information about him was also revealed in a eulogy published by the *Global Islamic Media Front* and written by Abu Mohamed al-Filistini. This biography, found on a jihadi web forum, narrates that Abu Horeira left to fight in Iraq in 2004, but was blocked in Damascus, and forced to hide from the Syrian authorities. After 40 days, he managed to return to ‘Ain al-Helweh.⁸⁷

3.3 *Fatah al-Islam* activities

Sources interviewed by *al-Hayat* stated that the Lebanese intelligence services started to keep their eyes on FAI outside the Nahr al-Barid camp in March or April 2007. In March of that year, one militant died in clashes with unknown, armed aggressors.⁸⁸ Due to increased surveillance, top *Fatah al-Islam* commanders, especially those with links to al-Qaida, grew increasingly concerned, fearing that the group had been infiltrated by the intelligence services. Others began questioning the links between some of ‘Absi’s top aides, and regional forces, especially those tasked with sending mujahidin into Lebanon through Syria.⁸⁹ It has been claimed that Ahmed Mar‘i, a senior *Fatah al-Islam* official, who took care of transporting mujahidin from Syria to

⁸⁵ See Bernard Rougier, “Liban: Les Leçons de Fatah al-Islam”, *ICG-Report*, forthcoming, 2007.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Abu Mohamed al-Filistini, “The Heroic Abu Horeira is dead. May God Receive him” (in Arabic), *al-jabha al-i‘lamiyya al-islamiyya al-‘alamiyya (Global Islamic Media Front)*, *muntada al-ekhlaas*, August 27, 2007, <https://al-ekhlaas.org/forum/showthread.php?t=77439>, accessed August 2007.

⁸⁸ Amine, “*al-Hayat* Visited their Training camp in the Barid [...]”.

⁸⁹ “A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis”.

Lebanon, maintained close relations with the Syrian intelligence services (see below). These uncertainties led several international jihadists to leave Lebanon, including, among others, the Saudi Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Afghani, and the Jordanian ‘Abd al-Rahman an-Yahia a.k.a. Talha.⁹⁰ Some sources allege that it was Mar‘i who extradited “Talha” to the Syrian authorities.⁹¹ Others claim they were expelled, possibly by other forces inside the camp.⁹²

There are indications that the group existed long before its official declaration to have done so. Khaled Dahir, a spokesman for the *al-Liqa al-Islami al-Mustaqill*, stated in an interview in the leading Arab daily *al-Hayat*, that Tripolitanian clerics were sent in October 2006 to inquire about the position of FAI elements and returned with negative impressions. The shaykhs also indicated that the group was planning to strike UNIFIL.⁹³

The group seems to have initiated the launching of its activities in early 2007. In January, clashes took place between the militants and Jordanian police in Irbid, Northern Jordan. The militants were allegedly sent by ‘Absi to carry out operations in Jordan, and, possibly, Palestine. The Jordanian region of Irbid borders the state of Israel, and it was an important base for operations carried out by the Fedayin up to Black September.⁹⁴ Subsequently, on 13th February, two bombs exploded onboard a bus in ‘Ain ‘Alaq, a Christian village, near Beirut. The results of the Lebanese judicial investigation, announced on 1st August, confirmed that the perpetrators of the bombings had links to *Fatah al-Islam*.⁹⁵ According to a judicial report, issued on 31st July, FAI militants were supplied with explosives in the Nahr al-Barid camp.⁹⁶ The crime was committed by individuals belonging to an “external branch” of *Fatah al-Islam*, led by an individual called Abu Yazzan, but was still under the command of the FAI leader Shakir al-‘Absi. Abu Yazzan, a Syrian, whose real name is Majd al-Hamid ‘Abbad, was allegedly the third in command in FAI. He died during the Nahr al-Barid clashes in late May 2007, only seventeen or eighteen years of age.⁹⁷ The *Fatah al-Islam* leadership has, in all interviews and press releases, denied any

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “He Inquired about Targets for Fatah al-Islam...”

⁹² “Tense times as rival Islamist groups vie for control of refugee camp”, *Reuters Alert Net* via *IRIN*, August 6, 2007, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/008f5f40f0c6a35de0f595425e377d27.htm>, accessed August 2007.

⁹³ Amine, “*al-Hayat* Visited their Training camp in the Barid [...]”.

⁹⁴ See Thomas Hegghammer, “Abdallah Azzam, l’imam du jihad”, *op.cit.*

⁹⁵ “Magistrate concludes probe into Ain Alaq twin bus bombings”, *The Daily Star*, August 1, 2008, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=84242#, accessed August 1 2007.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ See “Who’s Abu Yazzan” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 7, 2007, www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/06-2007/Item-20070606-024b850d-c0a8-10ed-01b1-69964a8a91a1/story.html, accessed July 2007.

involvement in the attacks. ‘Umar Bakri, a militant Islamist preacher, formerly based in London but situated in Lebanon since the summer of 2005, published an article on 2nd June 2007, claiming that there had been secession within the ranks of FAI, separating the “true brothers” from the Syrian-dominated “hawks of Fatah al-Islam”. According to Bakri, it was the latter group that carried out the ‘Ain ‘Alaq attacks.’⁹⁸

3.4 The outbreak of full-scale fighting, May 2007

Clashes between *Fatah al-Islam* gunmen and the Lebanese army broke out on 20th May 2007, when the *Fatah al-Islam* militants ambushed an army check-point patrol near the gate to the Nahr al-Barid camp North of Tripoli. The ambush was in retaliation to a police raid against a Tripoli apartment, where several militants were arrested. The police raid was the outcome of an investigation into a bank robbery in the village of Amion on 19th May.⁹⁹ The bank robbery was the third in a series of three robberies carried out in the North and South of Lebanon. Jihadi militants and Lebanese officials disagree on who actually initiated the fighting. According to the *Fatah al-Islam* spokesperson, the group “acted in self-defence after brothers of ours in Tripoli were subjected to arrests. We rose to defend our people”.¹⁰⁰ Fighting escalated over the next couple of days, while more forces arrived from other regions in Lebanon to partake in the siege of the camp. Most of the camp’s inhabitants (officially 31,000, but in reality over 40,000) fled to the nearby Beddawi camp, taking shelter in a school building. The Lebanese army was initially restrained by a 1969 Arab League agreement stating that the Lebanese army and security forces do not have the right to enter the Palestinian camps in the country without Arab League approval.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the Lebanese army fired from their positions outside the camp, repeatedly called on the militants to surrender, and accepted mediating efforts from the *Federation of Palestinian ‘Ulama’* and Fathi Yakan’s *Islamic Action Front*.¹⁰² In early June, tanks and armoured personnel moved into the newer northern sectors of the camp.¹⁰³ Having

⁹⁸ Umar Bakri, “Fatah al-Islam is a Fabrication of Syria and Saudis Participate in it” (in Arabic), *muntadayat shabakat al-hisbah*, June 2, 2007, http://islamtoday.net/albasheer/show_news_*****.cfm?id=69451, accessed June 2007.

⁹⁹ Bassem Mroue, “Battle in Lebanon between Islamic Militants and Security Forces Leaves Casualties”, *Associated Press*, May 20, 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Monica Czwarno, “Lebanon’s Endless Mélange of Conflict”, *Centre for Defence Information (CDI) website*, June 25, 2007, http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?documentid=3967&programID=39&from_page=../friendlyversion/printversion.cfm, accessed June 2007.

¹⁰¹ I.e., the 1969 Cairo Agreement, outlined above.

¹⁰² “Fatah al-Islam Talk to *Asharq Al-Awsat*”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English edition), June 4, 2007, <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9171>, accessed June 2007; and “Lebanese Islamists seek militants’ surrender”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English edition), June 7, 2007, <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9197>, accessed June 2007.

¹⁰³ Hassan M. Fattah and Nada Bakri, “Lebanese Army Takes Fight inside Refugee Camp”, *International Herald Tribune*, June 1, 2007; and “Army, Islamists Trade Fire on Day 33 of Lebanon Camp Siege”, *al-*

taken control of FAI bases there, the army proceeded in mid-June to fight within the borders of the camp.¹⁰⁴ Fighting also spread inside the city of Tripoli following further police searches for militants on 24th June. One month later, starting on 15th July, *Fatah al-Islam* militants began firing Katyusha rockets at surrounding towns and villages in ‘Akkar and Diniyyeh, raising further the anxiety of the Palestinian civilians in the area.

When re-iterating that his group would not surrender, one *Fatah al-Islam* spokesman, Abu Salim Taha, stressed that there were sleeper cells throughout Lebanon sympathizing with the group and waiting to attack. Nevertheless, few steps to support the group were actually taken. Some attempts were made to open new fronts, allegedly to ease pressure on the besieged militants inside the Nahr al-Barid camp. On the morning of 4th June, fighting broke out between *Jund al-Sham* militants and the Lebanese army in Ta‘amir, an area in the newer Sector of the ‘Ain al-Helweh camp, controlled by ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*. One militant and two soldiers died in the fighting.¹⁰⁵ The evening before, *Jund al-Sham* gunmen had attacked an army checkpoint outside the ‘Ain al-Helweh camp in North Lebanon, and a bomb had exploded in Sidon.¹⁰⁶ It has been hypothesized that the death of a *Jund al-Sham* fighter in Nahr al-Barid on 3rd June could have incited *Jund al-Sham* in ‘Ain al-Helweh to initiate the attacks.¹⁰⁷ (The *Jund al-Sham* fighter seems to have been Na‘im Taysir al-Ghali a.k.a Abu Riyad.) However, the attempt to spread the fighting to ‘Ain al-Helweh came to an end after a 40-man patrol force, administrated by ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*, was set up in the area. At the same time, ‘*Usbat al-Ansar* spokesman Abu Sharif ‘Aql declared that *Jund al-Sham* was dissolved.¹⁰⁸

At around the same time, Lebanese officials reported that positions in the Beqaa belonging to the PFLP-GC were heavily built up with vehicles, that gas masks were plentiful, and that approximately 100 fighters had arrived from Syria.¹⁰⁹ An alleged FAI sleeper cell was dismantled

Sharq al-Awsat (English edition), June 21, 2007,

<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9332>, accessed June 2007.

¹⁰⁴ “Lebanon Defense Minister: Militants at Camp Crushed”, *Associated Press*, June 21, 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Posting by “al-Muslima”, “Usbat al-Ansar Announces the Martyrdom of Abu Hamza (Pictures)” (in Arabic), *muntada al-Farouq Umar al-muslima*, June 6, 2007, www.farouqomar.net/vb/showthread.php?t=5668, accessed June 2007.

¹⁰⁶ See “Supplication, Supplication. ‘Usbat al-Ansar are your Brothers” (in Arabic), *muntada al-firdaws al-jihadiyya*, June 4, 2007, <http://alfirdaws.org/vb/showthread.php?t=34496>, accessed June 2007; and Nicholas Blanford, “More Clashes as Second Radical Group Joins Attacks in Lebanon”, *The Sunday Times*, June 5, 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Blanford, “More Clashes as Second Radical Group Joins Attacks in Lebanon”.

¹⁰⁸ Posting by Abu Dujaneh al-Shami, “Fatah al-Islam: Events and Positions. A Speech by shaykh Abu Sharif ‘Aql” (in Arabic) (author’s own transcript of audio file), June 11, 2007, *muntada minbar al-muslim*, www.aaa3.net/vb/showthread.php?t=1861&goto=nextoldest, accessed July 2007.

¹⁰⁹ “Identical letters dated 12 June 2007 from the Chargé d’affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary General and the President of the Security

in the town of Barr Elias near the Syrian border on 6th June. Led by a Saudi, it had been in charge of “launching rockets on Christian villages from Shiite areas”, in support of the “Ahl al-Sunna” in Nahr al-Barid. Analysts saw these developments as indications that FAI was trying to set up a third front in the Beqaa after the *Jund al-sham* “uprising” in ‘Ain al-Helweh had been crushed. (The role of PFLP-GC in *Fatah al-Islam*, a controversial issue, will be discussed below.)

Furthermore, the conflict between FAI and the Lebanese army took on a new dimension after six peacekeepers in the Spanish contingent of UNIFIL, three Spanish and three Colombians, were killed in a car bomb attack in the UN-controlled area in South Lebanon.¹¹⁰ Hezbollah condemned the attack. According to the Spanish investigation, there were indications that the attacks were carried out by Sunni extremist groups, most probably by FAI elements.¹¹¹ This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that FAI repeatedly threatened to attack UNIFIL in the previous months, following a statement issued by al-Zawahiri in September 2006, where he condemned the UNIFIL peacekeeping force (see below).

The summer of 2007 also witnessed a number of other attacks which were not directly linked to the FAI uprising, but clearly had a bearing on the conflict. On 17th June, rockets were launched against Kiryat Shemona, Israel.¹¹² A group calling itself “Jihad Badr Lebanon branch” took responsibility for the attacks. There were many random bomb attacks, a total of seven bombs exploding across Lebanon, one of which killed MP Walid Eido on 13th June. Four other bombings in different areas in Lebanon targeted the country’s tourist industry. However, FAI denied that its fighters were behind these operations. The killing of Eido was carried out three days after the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1757, calling for the formation of an International Tribunal to convict those responsible for the murder of Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. There is no proof that Islamists were behind the killing of Eido, although it happened at the time when clashes between FAI militants and Lebanese army were ongoing.¹¹³

Council”, *Security Council Report, Monthly Forecast: Lebanon*, www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Lebanon%20S2007348.pdf, accessed August 2007.

¹¹⁰ Nada Bakri, “5 U.N. Peacekeepers Killed in Lebanon”, *The New York Times*, June 25, 2007.

¹¹¹ Miguel Gonzales, “CNI sospecha de tres grupos como autores del ataque en Líbano”, *El País*, July 9, 2007.

¹¹² “Lebanese Army Battles Militants on Two Fronts”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English edition), June 18, 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9302>, accessed September 2007.

¹¹³ Peter Walker, “Lebanese MP reported dead in Beirut blast”, *the Guardian*, June 13 2007, www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,2102228,00.html, accessed June 2007.

3.5 Devastating outcomes, but...

When Defence Minister Elias Murr declared on 3rd September 2007 the army's take over of Nahr al-Barid, the fight in the camp had been on-going for more than three months. It left most of the camp's infrastructure in ruins. Although fighting could be said to have helped unite the Lebanese population in the face of an "external enemy", material and humanitarian losses were devastating, and the conflict represents the largest internal conflict in Lebanon since the end of the civil war.

The fighting was also severe on the side of the militants. Whether or not the *Fatah al-Islam* leaders had intended to engage in a full-scale confrontation with the Lebanese army, it seems clear that they had not calculated the devastating material losses that the conflict would inflict on the group. As of August 2007, most *Fatah al-Islam* activists were either killed, arrested, or in hiding. Around a hundred fighters were still besieged in a confrontation with the Lebanese forces in the core of the Nahr al-Barid camp. On 20th August, the Lebanese judiciary filed charges against 227 persons allegedly linked to *Fatah al-Islam*. In addition, the group had lost most of its original high-level officials. With 'Absi and Shahin Shahin as the only cadres remaining, the group lost Abu Horeira (killed on August 7), Abu Midian, Abu Yazzan (number three in *Fatah al-Islam*, responsible for the 'Ain 'Alaq bombings), and Saddam el-Hadjib. Sheikh Hitham Al-Sa'di, FAI's spiritual guide, and the organization's physician, surrendered to the army.

At the beginning of June, all traces of the original leadership suddenly disappeared and on 10th June, it was announced that Shahin Shahin had taken over the leadership of FAI. According to *al-Hayat* sources, Shahin Shahin's real name is Azzam Nahar, and his brother is Aksam Nahar, who is wanted by Interpol.¹¹⁴ According to a representative of the *Congregation of Palestinian 'Ulama* who conducted meetings with the FAI leadership, Shahin Shahin, a Palestinian from Nablus, fluent in classical Arabic, was among elements linking FAI to al-Qaida.¹¹⁵ Shahin Shahin was also known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Salma. Less radicalized than 'Absi, he had allegedly held "reasonable positions" towards most of the issues brought up by the negotiators.¹¹⁶

Days earlier, one of the *Fatah al-Islam* detainees, Ahmed Mar'i, had told the Lebanese police that the movement had close links to the Syrian intelligence services. Those who claim Syria is behind *Fatah al-Islam* allege that the change of leadership was a show-off only. They said it was allegations of Syrian patronage to FAI that pushed *Fatah al-Islam* officially to declare its

¹¹⁴ "Only 2 Saudis among the 28 Fatah al-Islam Detainees Arrested Since Sunday" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), September 6, 2007.

¹¹⁵ "The Congregation of Palestinian 'Ulama' Wants to Revive Mediation and Reveals Information about the Leadership in Fatah al-Islam [...]" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), July 8, 2007.

affiliation with al-Qaida. Shahin Shahin was, in fact, not a new figure in FAI, but an aide of 'Absi. He had been present at 'Absi's side during previous meetings, before the outbreak of the fighting in Nahr al-Barid, as a financial advisor, a spokesman, and military official.¹¹⁷

While it is uncertain to what extent Shahin Shahin's self-proclaimed take-over of the group signified a rupture in *Fatah al-Islam*, it should be seen as a response to the situation on the ground, and perhaps as an early indication that the group's initial plans had failed.

When the uprising against Lebanese security forces was crushed in Diniyyeh in January 2000, most of the members of the insurgent group, including its leader, Bassam Kanj (see above), became "martyrs". Nevertheless, Lebanese security forces only needed six days to defeat them. In stark contrast, open fighting with *Fatah al-Islam* continued for more than a hundred days. The resilience of the FAI militants, compared to previous cases of jihadi militancy, can partly be attributed to the fighting conditions. The 1999/2000 clashes broke out in the isolated, mountainous Akkar region, close to the village of Sir al-Diniyyeh. However, FAI engaged in urban guerrilla warfare within the camp space itself. Fighting a guerrilla war within an urban, narrow space, where the militants knew every alleyway must have provided clear advantages for the group in terms of finding hideouts, escape routes, and ambush opportunities. In addition, the army did not enter the camp before mid-June, given its initial observance of the provisions of the 1969 Cairo Agreement, outlawing Lebanese intervention in the Palestinian camps in its territory without prior Arab League approval. However, the perseverance of *Fatah al-Islam* in its fighting against the Lebanese army attests to FAI's military skills and capabilities, and the resources and the morale that the group commanded. This is the main focus for this study and shall be further assessed in the last two parts.

3.6 Was the fighting planned or a coincidence?

There are several indications that the fighting with the Lebanese army, the worst in Lebanon since the Civil War, was not intended by the militants, at least not to such a great extent. However, as fighting broke out, and supplies arrived from various regional actors, the militants felt that they had no choice but to engage fully in the struggle.

Several FAI militants arrested during the conflict indicated that the organization had, in fact, been planning a confrontation with the Lebanese army, but at a later stage. The police seized different materials which underpin the confessions of the militants. During the fighting in Tripoli, over 450

¹¹⁶ "Information Claim 'Absi is Wounded and All Contact is Lost with Abu Horeira" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat*, (London), June 8, 2007.

grams of powder was discovered, used as a substitute for aluminium nitrate and ammonium nitrate, used to fabricate explosives, mines and hand-made bombs,¹¹⁸ The bombs and explosives were supposedly prepared in a warehouse in Aleppo used for the fabrication of cement and chemical products. In early June, a shipment of weapons to Nahr al-Barid, possibly from Syria, was detected by Lebanese security forces.

FAI's plan was dubbed "Operation 755", and it allegedly included expanding the territory controlled by *Fatah al-Islam* to the North, declaring an "Emirate" in the region, and cutting off main arteries between that area and the rest of Lebanon. It was foiled by the Lebanese police and subsequent moves were never implemented as the militants were caught up in Nahr al-Barid.

Nevertheless, it seems that "Operation 755", if it was really planned, was more a tentative strategy to seize control of territory than a plan to engage in a full-scale struggle. The group seems to have used Lebanese territory mainly as a refuge. The Nahr al-Barid camp, and the surrounding areas in North Lebanon, was of strategic interest for FAI primarily as a space where they could form an independent "mini-Emirate", and establish training camps for recruits who would subsequently be sent to Iraq or other jihadi hotspots. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that, in spring 2007, *Fatah al-Islam* was still sending fighters to Iraq. In early May 2007, four *Fatah al-Islam* fighters, including at least one chief figure, Abu Layth, who was the son-in-law of 'Absi, died as they tried to cross the Syrian border into Iraq. A communiqué was issued by *Fatah al-Islam* deploring his death.¹¹⁹ Another high-level member of the group, the Algerian Khaled al-Agha, one of the FAI's main spiritual guides, was also recently killed by US forces at the Iraqi-Syrian border.¹²⁰ Al-Agha had lived in 'Ain al-Helweh since 1996 and was member of 'Usbat al-Ansar.¹²¹ When visiting the FAI training camp in March this year, Lebanese journalist Hazim Amine also indicated that the group was sending recruits to Iraq.¹²²

No group would rationally plan to become besieged by a US-equipped army for more than three months in a refugee camp, with all main cadres at risk. The fighting with the Lebanese police, as it evolved, could not possibly have been what *Fatah al-Islam* had planned. It was, on the other hand, triggered by a coincidence, i.e. the police investigation of a bank robbery committed by the group. The group's stock of explosives and arms could also have been for training or for

¹¹⁷ "The Congregation of Palestinian 'Ulama' Wants to Revive Mediation".

¹¹⁸ "A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis...".

¹¹⁹ "Fatah al-Islam Informs the Islamic Nation about the Death of Two of Its Leaders" (in Arabic), Blog entitled "Ansar Fath al-Islam Abu Abdallah al-Maqdisi al-Muhajir al-Islami", <http://kaled.modawanati.com>, May 10, 2007, accessed June 2007.

¹²⁰ "A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis...".

¹²¹ See Bernard Rougier, "Liban: Les Leçons de Fatah al-Islam", *ICG-Report*, forthcoming, 2007.

patrolling camp territory, and does not weaken the hypothesis that the fighting broke out coincidentally.

It could certainly be argued that *Fatah al-Islam* was still the party initiating the full-scale confrontation, ambushing army positions at the entrance of the camp and on the roads between the camp and Tripoli, killing two soldiers. However, it must be stressed that FAI is a fragmented group, consisting of various elements: global jihadis and local salafists fought in Nahr al-Barid side-by-side with former *Fatah al-Intifada* members and petty criminals, recruited in Lebanese prisons. In addition, estimates show that many of the group's followers are youngsters under the age of 25.¹²³ When robbing the bank, some could have been motivated by private gains, or an adrenalin rush, when retaliating against the Lebanese army. Factors such as hasty and precipitated actions, and unelaborated and ill-considered plans, can sometimes lead a group to engage in activities not previously intended.

Add to this a weak leadership, with the largest public figures of the group, 'Absi and Abu Horeira, only having experience as foot soldiers. Therefore, it seems plausible that not all wings of the movement were fully controlled by the leadership.

If involved in the decision to ambush the army patrol, the *Fatah al-Islam* leadership misread the situation on the ground. Those giving the green light for opening fire with the Lebanese army seem to have lent an ear to a narrative telling them that the stalemate in the Lebanese state had brought about a lack of legitimacy for the regime, and that there was thus a large security vacuum. This led them to think that the regime would have little leverage to mobilize against Sunni insurgents.¹²⁴ The truth of this perception notwithstanding, the fact that it existed in the minds of the militants does explain some of the rationale behind the initial attacks (see below).

When engaging in the battle with the army, *Fatah al-Islam* also seems to have counted on sleeper cells which had previously vowed to support the group logistically and politically. 'Absi had allegedly reached an understanding with groups based in the South of Lebanon that they would target Lebanese military interests and UN offices and assassinate important Lebanese politicians and intellectuals. At the same time, *Fatah al-Islam* would be fighting the Lebanese army in the

¹²² Amine, "Al-Hayat Visited their Training camp in the Barid [...]".

¹²³ The numbers probably do not show the full picture as they seem to be based on those arrested and killed and date from the beginning of July 2007. See Al-Arabiyya, "How did Fatah al-Islam Succeed in Recruiting Youngsters?".

¹²⁴ International Crisis group, "Lebanon at a Tripwire", Middle East Briefing, N°20, International Crisis group website, December 21, 2006.

North.¹²⁵ If this had materialized, it would have eased the pressure on the militants besieged in Nahr al-Barid, and would have made the group more likely to be able to overcome the Lebanese army. According to *al-Hayat* sources, ‘Absi and Abu Horeira harshly criticized the sleeper cells, blaming them for FAI’s inability to defeat the Lebanese army.’¹²⁶

As the battle evolved, it was claimed that the FAI leadership had only two choices: victory or “martyrdom”. Even when victory proved impossible, particularly after the speedy shipment of US, Jordanian, and UAE anti-tank missiles, armoured vehicles (100 Humvees), and C-17 cargo planes to Lebanon on 25th May,¹²⁷ *Fatah al-Islam* reiterated their refusal to surrender. Actors praised FAI on jihadi web forums, while sharply criticising the “cowardliness” of the Lebanese army.¹²⁸

The group seems to have been increasingly radicalized after clashes with the army. From insisting on fighting the Jews and the United States and supporting Mujahidin in Iraq, the group ideologues began legitimizing a struggle against the Lebanese army.¹²⁹ Mediators from the *Congregation of the League of Palestinian ‘Ulama’* met ‘Absi before and during the fighting. One of them explained that the *Fatah al-Islam* leader was “poisoned with extremism” after the outbreak of fighting with the Lebanese army. While having initially expressed conformity with most of the congregation’s positions, he had refused to speak about the handing over of arms, about leaving [Nahr al-Barid], and about all other issues.¹³⁰ As the situation deteriorated, *Fatah al-Islam* issued threats that they would launch a “hell fire” over Lebanon.¹³¹

Therefore, it seems that *Fatah al-Islam*, especially in the beginning, used the Palestinian camp merely as an available space, and did not primarily aim for confrontation with the regime, or to re-Islamize the population of the camps. The fighting with the Lebanese army, as it evolved, was neither planned, nor in the interest of the militants. At the same time, there existed certain plans to launch an offensive to carve out a territorial base in Lebanon. The fighting seems to have been

¹²⁵ “A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis”; and al-Ka’kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

¹²⁶ “A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis.”.

¹²⁷ See Riad Kahwaji, “U.S. Rushes Arms to Lebanon As Beirut Confronts Terrorists”, *Defence News*, May 28, 2007, <http://defensenews.com/story.php?F=2783840&C=mideast>, accessed June 2007; and “Aid from U.S., allies arrives in Lebanon”, *Associated Press*, May 25, 2007.

¹²⁸ See *The Media Committee of Tanzim al-Qaida fi Bilad al-Sham*, “The crusader wars have returned” *World News Network*, May 25, 2007, www.w-n-n.com, accessed May 2007.

¹²⁹ “Fatah al-Islam to Target Top Lebanese Officials”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* English edition, posted on June 14 2007, www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9268, accessed June 2007.

¹³⁰ “*The Congregation of Palestinian ‘Ulama’* Wants to Revive Mediation.”.

motivated more by the wish to maintain training camps than from enmity towards the Lebanese army. However, once thrown into a fight, the group mobilized all its material and ideological forces.

3.7 Explaining the bank robberies

There seems to have been a certain disparity in the accounts and actions of *Fatah al-Islam* members in terms of their access to finance and military supplies. On the one side, there are testimonies indicating that FAI militants had access to “huge military supplies and tens of millions of dollars”¹³², as well as luxury cars.¹³³ On the other, the fact that members committed bank robberies indicates that the group might not have been as well-equipped as first believed. Engaging in criminal activity carries a risk of getting caught, and does not seem a rational choice for a group that already has good finances.

In this context, the fragmented nature of the movement must again be stressed. Therefore, it could well be that only parts of *Fatah al-Islam*'s members have succeeded in reaching out to donors. In addition, some members, recruited from Lebanese nationals, are regular criminals, and could therefore be less hesitant about committing petty crimes.

There are also other indications to support the theory that some *Fatah al-Islam* elements really were in need of finance. One of the Saudis recruited via the internet (see above), called his brother in the Kingdom asking him to transfer money to buy weapons. Al-Qahtani told his brother that there were very little supplies to carry out military training, and practically no food. He fasted every day and only ate dry bread and the likes.¹³⁴

It is still somewhat unclear as to why the group decided to commit bank robberies. A need for money among some elements seems to be the explanation, but it remains to be seen why all members did not have access to funding and equipment. The low degree of group solidarity and sharing among its members must be noted. Another arrested Saudi militant told the police

¹³¹ “The Fatah al-Islam Military Leader was Imprisoned in Syria and Fought in Iraq. Abu Horeira to *al-Hayat*: Our Sleeper Cells Shall Retaliate by Opening Fronts all Over Lebanon” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat*, (London) May 25, 2007.

¹³² “Fatah al-Islam to Target Top Lebanese Officials”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English edition), June 14, 2007, www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=9268, accessed on June 2007.

¹³³ See, for instance, Javier Espinosa, “Fatah al-Islam”, ricos y instruidos”, *El Mundo*, May 27, 2007, www.elmundo.es/papel/2007/05/27/mundo/2129039_impresora.html, accessed July 2007.

¹³⁴ Malik al-Ka'kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

interrogators that other FAI members had stolen from him 28,000 Saudi riyals (around 5,300 euros).¹³⁵

Solidarity among “brothers” is a common characteristic of salafi-jihadi movements, though conflicts also occur. Salafists, believing that they are imitating the Prophet and his Companions, put a great weight on creating tight personal bonds between members, through the sharing of belongings and inter-marriage. Close personal bonds are also an important feature of socialization among members.¹³⁶

4 Why Fatah al-Islam? What context enabled its formation and growth?

What are the contextual factors, material and ideological, that enabled a militant group in Lebanon to last over a hundred days fighting the Lebanese army, only six months after it was established? Are external factors important for understanding the “success” of *Fatah al-Islam*, in comparison with former salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon? In the following, I will analyse the factors which encouraged the growth of a strong global salafi-jihadi network in Northern Lebanon. I will divide the analysis into four parts. First, I will assess the state of a globally oriented, fragmented salafi-jihadi network in Lebanon, as it evolved between January 2000 (the crushing of the Sir al-Diniyyeh rebellion) and November 2006 (the formation of *Fatah al-Islam*).

Secondly, I will discuss how external factors, at the local, national, and regional levels, encouraged the setting up of *Fatah al-Islam* in Nahr al-Barid. Globally, the Iraq war and its repercussion on displacement of jihadis between the Levant and Iraq, must be considered an important factor. At the national level, the fragility of the Lebanese state was a crucial element, enabling jihadis to establish themselves in Lebanon. A contributing factor is *Fatah al-Islam*'s links to other salafi-jihadi groups in the camps and beyond, especially in 'Ain al-Helweh. I will also examine the role of Tripoli, Lebanon's Sunni capital. Another contributing factor, in the Middle East region as a whole, is the rise of Shiite power, and the growing fear of Hezbollah.

¹³⁵ Muhammad Shaqir, “Riyadh Requests that her Citizens be Brought Back and One is Wanted by the Police and Was Made Use of to Deliver Fatwas” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), March 15, 2007.

¹³⁶ For a case study showing how sharing was crucial for socializing the Madrid bomber, see “Sumario 20/2004, auto de procesamiento del diez de abril 2006” [“Proceedings 20/2004, Indictment of April 10 2006”], *Juzgado Central de Instrucción Nº 6 de la Audiencia Nacional*, [Court of First Instance Number 6 of the Audiencia Nacional, the Spanish High Court], www.elmundo.es/documentos/2006/04/11/auto_11m.html, accessed July 2006, pp. 528-529.

Factors at the structural level of analysis explain, to a large extent, why Lebanon was attractive to global jihadist actors. However, these factors can be supplemented by factors at the individual and group levels, which explain the interaction between the individual members and the group. Much of the “success” and strength of *Fatah al-Islam*, compared to former jihadi groups in Lebanon, can be attributed to the fact that they succeeded in mobilizing support from a variety of external actors through their global salafi-jihadi ideology. Thus, in the third part, I present the ideology and long-term goals of *Fatah al-Islam*. Comparing the group’s aims and strategy to the ideologies of similar movements fighting on other fronts throughout the Islamic world, I shall try to see how FAI was able to connect with global jihadis in their search for personnel as well as material and ideological support. I shall also take a closer look at the individual backgrounds of *Fatah al-Islam*’s members. Were they primarily recruited from the local or from the global jihadi scene? Surveying the individual narratives, I pay special attention to the question of whether Lebanon can be seen as a new front for global jihadi actors, primarily those linked to the insurgency in Iraq.

My analysis indicates that the group managed to gain support from actors in the global jihadi movement, from local militants, as well as from groups linked to the regional political scene. At the individual level, ideology seems to have been the most important mobilizing factor. Iraq still seems to be the one issue that attracts jihadis from all over the region. Therefore, the group’s adherence to the ideology of the global jihadi movement must be stressed. Non-Islamist groups affiliated with the regional scene, such as the PFLP-GC and *Fatah al-Intifada*, also played a role; given their vested interests in the Islamists, these groups supplied them with material support, albeit on a limited scale. The main explanation for the swift growth of *Fatah al-Islam* seems to be the fact that they reached out to a multiplicity of actors. The downside was that not all of these actors were fully controlled by the group, and were in fact engaged in battles of their own. This had consequences for the group’s *modus operandi*, and made it difficult for the leadership to pursue any well-calculated strategic plan.

4.1 Starting point: The state of the jihadi network in Lebanon in 2006

As I have shown above, the salafi-jihadi network in Lebanon, as it evolved after the Diniyyeh uprising, was a globally oriented, but still a fragmented and loose network, centred around a few leading personalities. Jihadi militants who survived the Diniyyeh uprising fled to ‘Ain al-Helweh, triggering the formation of radicalized splinter groups there, such as *‘Usbat al-Nour*¹³⁷ and *Jund al-Sham*. The Iraq war involved the departure of militants to Iraq, which in turn widened the split

between activities outside and inside Lebanon. Even if few operations took place in Lebanon between 2003 and December 2005, there were indications that a new wave of attacks in the Levant was drawing close. A wide range of Western and government interests throughout the Levant seemed to be at stake.

Several arrests took place. In early January 2006, 13 suspected “al-Qaida- and al-Zarqawi-linked” militants were arrested, being suspected of planning suicide attacks in Lebanon. The group consisted of seven Syrians, three Lebanese, one Saudi, and one Jordanian, in addition to one Palestinian.¹³⁷ Later the same month, Lebanese security forces claimed they had arrested five people involved in attacks against military positions. During the same period, jihadi elements also issued a number of threats. For instance, in a January 2006 Internet statement, a group calling itself “Black Tigers al-Qaida Military Wing in Lebanon” threatened to attack UN officials, Palestinian leaders, and Lebanese security forces, and voiced support for Iraqi insurgency. Then, in February 2006, the *Sada al-Balad* newspaper, an independent Lebanese daily, received a threat from an alleged al-Qaida operative, followed by an explosion targeting military positions in Beirut only hours later. The latter was claimed by the militant group as retaliation for the January arrests. Signs of a military build-up within the jihadi groups emerged when, in January 2006, a boat loaded with weapons was detected off the coast of Tripoli, allegedly en route to Gaza.¹³⁸

US sources assert that in mid-2001, the leader of *al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers* (formerly *The Jama‘at al-Tawhid wa’l-Jihad*), the late Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, received more than 35,000 dollars from bin Laden for work in Palestine.¹³⁹ Reportedly, he used the money to send more Jordanians and Palestinian recruits to his camp in Herat, Afghanistan, and also to purchase passports and facilitate travel to Lebanon.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ ‘Usbat al-Nour split off from ‘Usbat al-Ansar in October 2001, after a dispute over leadership issues. See Gary C. Gambill, “Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon’s ‘Zone of Unlaw’”, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, June 2003, http://www.meib.org/articles/0306_11.htm, accessed July 2007.

¹³⁸ Andrew Cochran, “Arrests & Seizures by Lebanon: Sign of Terrorists”, *Counter Terrorism Blog*, January 13, 2006, http://counterterrorism.typepad.com/the_counterterrorism_blog/2006/01/arrests_seizure.html, accessed August 2007.

¹³⁹ Emily Hunt, “Can al-Qaeda’s Lebanese Expansion Be Stopped?”, *Policy Watch* No. 1076, (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 6, 2006), www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2440, accessed July 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew Levitt, “USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, April 1, 2004.

¹⁴¹ The Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Six al-Qaida Terrorists”, Press Release, *The Department of the Treasury of the United States of America*, September 24, 2003, JS-757, www.treasury.gov/press/releases/js757.htm, accessed July 2007.

Al-Zarqawi's network appeared to play a key role in the wave of Islamist militancy that seemed to engulf Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, several years ago, escalating only in 2005. In February 2001, two Palestinians and one Jordanian were arrested as they entered Turkey illegally from Iran. One militant confessed that they were on their way to Israel.¹⁴² Jordanian police claim they were sent by al-Zarqawi, and were part of the "Bayat al-Imam", an early name of al-Zarqawi's *al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad* group. The name was probably made up by investigators or journalists. Travelling in the Levant after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi was suspected of having outlined and facilitated plots to assassinate US diplomats. Lawrence Foley, a US Agency for International Development official, was assassinated in Amman on 28th October 2002. Al-Zarqawi allegedly met Foley's murderers in Syria, where the militants were subsequently trained and equipped. The assassination was allegedly the first time al-Zarqawi has worked out of Syria.¹⁴³ There are also indications that he visited 'Ain al-Helweh during the same period.¹⁴⁴ *Fatah al-Islam* leader Shakir al-'Absi, an associate of al-Zarqawi, was convicted in the Foley case. According to the Jordanian indictment, 'Absi was one of al-Zarqawi's many subordinates who helped the gunman with money, logistics, and training in weapons and explosives.¹⁴⁵ Al-Zarqawi had reportedly entered Jordan to select the recruits; he also provided 60,000 dollars and equipment to the militants.¹⁴⁶ Al-Zarqawi, who subsequently established himself in Iraq in 2002 and became the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, was believed to have kept a keen eye on the Levant.

In November 2005, al-Zarqawi claimed responsibility for a large-scale attack against three hotels in Amman. Al-Zarqawi had links to elements in the *Jund al-Sham* group, and is believed to have played a part in the September 2006 plot against Amman airport. On 27th December 2005, Katyusha rockets were fired from Southern Lebanon against settlements in the residential area of Kiryat Shemona, Northern Israel. Two days later, al-Qaida in Iraq issued a communiqué claiming responsibility.¹⁴⁷ In addition, there was an attack on the US embassy in Damascus in September 2006, allegedly also by a group calling itself "Jund al-Sham".

It seems clear that even if the new wave of jihadi violence after 2000 in the Levant was diversified and consisted of multiple groups and actors, it was increasingly interwoven with

¹⁴² Levitt, "USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network".

¹⁴³ Alon Ben-David, "Jordanian Indictment Reveals Operations of Jund al-Sham's Terror Network", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 13, 2003.

¹⁴⁴ Levitt, "USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network".

¹⁴⁵ Souad Mekhennet and Michael Moss, "In Lebanon Camp, a New Face of Jihad Vows Attacks on U.S.", *The New York Times*, March 16, 2007.

¹⁴⁶ Levitt, "USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network".

¹⁴⁷ The Media Department of al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, "Al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers Announces a Rocket Attack on the Jewish State" (in Arabic), *muntadayat shabakat al-hisbah*, December 20, 2005, <http://www.alhesbah.com/v/showthread.php?t=45199>, accessed January 2006.

global jihadis. This also introduced strategic dilemmas for these networks. The jihadis in Lebanon were heavily pulled between their support activities for Jihad in Iraq, on the one side, and the wish, in certain circles, to open a new front in Lebanon, on the other. Elements from these fragmented networks later gravitated around the *Fatah al-Islam* group. FAI seems to have started their recruitment and propaganda activities on jihadi web forums already in mid-2006. Many events in 2006 contributed to making Lebanon an attractive destination for global jihadis. First, the 33-day war of July 2006 had many implications for the Lebanese and regional political scene, which, in turn, provided fertile conditions for the growth of *Fatah al-Islam* and other radical groups. The continuous stalemate in Lebanese internal politics, the weakening of the Lebanese state, Hezbollah's proclaimed "divine victory", and the establishment of an expanded and more intrusive UNIFIL peacekeeping force, which provoked the ire of al-Qaida's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, together increased the mobilizing power of Sunni extremist actors. This will be dealt with below.

4.2 Contributing factor at the national level: A perceived security vacuum

The rise of salafi-jihadi clerics, institutions, and networks in Lebanon in 2006 and 2007 might, to a large extent, be attributed to the weakness of the Lebanese state and its lack of authority in the Palestinian camps in the country.

Although the flaws of the Lebanese political system, which insists on power sharing among the country's three main confessional groups, Shiites, Sunnis, and Maronite Christians, have been long apparent, the Lebanese political scene has witnessed further instability in recent years. An in-depth discussion of the stalemate between the ruling pro-Western March 14 coalition and the March 8 opposition, is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁴⁸ Suffice to say that Syria, after the forced pull-out of its troops from Lebanon in April 2005, and the subsequent establishment of an international tribunal to convict those responsible for the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in October 2004, has lost great influence in Lebanon. The Syrian regime, which sees Lebanon as a natural extension of its territory, allegedly strives to regain this influence through various means, including by the increased use of proxies, such as Hizbollah, and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian armed factions opposed to the Oslo Accords.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, Paul Salem, "The Future of Lebanon", *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (6), (November/December 2006), pp. 13-22; Simon Haddad, "The origins of popular support for Lebanon's Hezbollah", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (1), 2007, pp. 21-34; and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, and Marina Ottaway, *Hizbollah and Its Changing Identities*, (Beirut: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of Syria's role in Lebanon, see for example, Elisabeth Picard, "L'ombre portée des ambitions syriennes", in Frank Mermier and Elisabeth Picard (eds.), *Liban, une guerre de trente-trois jours*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2007); Mouna Naïm, "Liban : fausse sortie pour la Syrie", *Politique Étrangère*, 2005, Summer, n°108, pp.81-93; Emile El-Hokayem, "Hizballah and Syria: outgrowing the proxy

It is frequently stated that the current situation in Lebanon has polarized the Lebanese street, pitting “one Lebanon against the other”. The Lebanese regime has been almost on the verge of a civil war since the 11th November resignation of five pro-Hezbollah ministers, following the collapse of the all-party talks on giving their camp more say in government, and the still on-going sit-in in front of the Lebanese parliament. Since 2005, eight members of the pro-US majority in Lebanon have been assassinated, and many now reside in the luxury high-security Phoenicia Hotel, fearing for their lives.¹⁵⁰ This illustrates the current security vacuum in Lebanon, which can easily be exploited by outside actors.

Although *Fatah al-Islam* has, probably rightly, pointed out that it takes little interest in internal Lebanese politics, the national context is still important. According to one analyst, “the fragility of the state, coupled with intense foreign interests, has produced an environment conducive to the growth and success of armed non-state actors”.¹⁵¹ These foreign interests are allegedly, in *Fatah al-Islam*’s case, mostly Syrian.

4.3 Regional factors: A “spill-over from Iraq”?

At the regional level, an underlying cause explaining the growth of *Fatah al-Islam* is the arrival of mujahidin with experience from Iraq to join forces with the group. Can *Fatah al-Islam* thus be seen as a repercussion of the war in Iraq? This report argues that although *Fatah al-Islam* militants use a number of tactics tried out by the insurgency in Iraq, the spill-over effect from Iraq seems to be less significant than first believed.

The dangers connected with the transfer of “battle-hardened militants from Iraq” to new zones of combat have already been explained. In a 17th April 2007 report written for the U.S. government and quoted by the *New York Times*, former US intelligence official Dennis Pluchinsky said that Iraq had become a laboratory for urban guerrilla tactics, and that relevant terrorist skills were more easily transferable to Europe from Iraq than from Afghanistan. These tactics include the use

relationship”, *Washington Quarterly*, 2007, Spring, vol.30, n°2, pp.35-52; and Samir Kassir, *Liban : un printemps inachevé*, (Paris, Actes Sud, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ Rym Ghazal, “MP Antoine Ghanem assassinated. At least seven others killed, 56 wounded as ruling coalition fingers Damascus”, *The Daily Star*, September 20, 2007, www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=85421, accessed September 2007.

¹⁵¹ Mahan Abedin, “Lebanon Faces Prolonged Turmoil as The Fragile State Fails to Quash Islamist Challenge”, *The Saudi Debate*, July 1, 2007, www.saudi Debate.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=828&Itemid=1, accessed July 2007.

of safe houses, surveillance, bomb making and use of mortars.¹⁵² However, no Iraq veterans have yet been involved in terror operations in Europe.¹⁵³

Fatah al-Islam has adopted some of the guerrilla techniques of the Iraqi insurgency. According to Nizar ‘Abdel Kader, a defence analyst and retired Lebanese Army brigadier general, *Fatah al-Islam* and *al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers/Islamic State of Iraq* share a number of tactics, such as: recruitment of foreign Arab and Muslim fighters through Syria; financial self-sufficiency through bank robberies and the exploitation of the infrastructure of other groups; use of local media to win sympathy in the local (Sunni Muslim) population (see below); and the use of rented apartments as “safe houses”. These are all part of the *modus operandi* of the Iraqi insurgency.¹⁵⁴ In addition, both *Fatah al-Islam* and *al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers/Islamic State of Iraq* have played on anti-Shiites rhetoric, in order to recruit volunteers. However, even though the groups share a *modus operandi*, it is not at all certain to what extent FAI militants have gained combat experience from the Iraqi theatre of war. Similarities in tactics might also indicate that *Fatah al-Islam* is simply copying some of the tactics of a larger, more successful jihadi group. Manuals detailing different guerrilla tactics are widely available on jihadi web forums.

This raises the question of how many (if any) *Fatah al-Islam* militants have trained and/or fought inside Iraq. Although it is often reported that *Fatah al-Islam* comprises a high number of foreign Iraq veterans, far from all non-Lebanese and non-Palestinians came via Iraq. A closer look at the background of *Fatah al-Islam*’s members shows, for example, that many of its Saudi members came directly from Saudi Arabia, having been recruited through the Internet. Mostly, they seem to have arrived in Lebanon eager to proceed to Iraq. They do not seem to take a particular interest in the Lebanese or Palestinian dimension, but rather wish to exploit the lawlessness of the Palestinian camps for training. This concurs with the conception of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as simply open spaces (see above).

It is therefore not accurate to see the growth of *Fatah al-Islam* as a direct repercussion of the Iraq war. Far from the majority of *Fatah al-Islam*’s members have first-hand combat experience from Iraq. Rather, it seems that the Iraq war has been important primarily as a mobilizing factor for *Fatah al-Islam*, drawing militants to embrace the salafi-jihadi ideology. Furthermore, the Internet has also been an important forum for recruiting fighters from abroad (see below).

¹⁵² Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, “Iraq War Militants Spill over Border Urban Terror Skills Pose Threat Abroad”, *The New York Times*, May 28, 2007.

¹⁵³ Petter Nesser, “Jihadism in Western Europe After the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq War on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (4) (June 2006), pp. 323-342.

¹⁵⁴ Kahwaji, “U.S. Rushes Arms to Lebanon as Beirut Confronts Terrorists”.

4.4 Local factors: Salafi-Jihadi groups in the camps

As discussed above, most FAI members were recruited locally. Out of the 107 *Fatah al-Islam* members in custody by 21st August 2007, more than half were Lebanese, while a third were Palestinian.¹⁵⁵

The importance of mosque networks for recruitment inside the refugee camps must be stressed. For instance, Abu Sharif ‘Aql, *‘Usbat al-Ansar’s* lieutenant and official spokesman, is the imam of the *al-Shuhada* mosque in ‘Ain al-Helweh. In addition, as pointed out above, the networks and institutions connected to the *al-Nour* mosque, where Islamic Combatant group leader Shaykh Jamal Khattab is imam, is one of the main meeting places for *‘Usbat al-Ansar* militants.¹⁵⁶ Militant groups have also made use of flyers to propagate their positions, for example when they declared the formation of *Fatah al-Islam*. In addition, one source noted that *Fatah al-Islam* distributes aid to the local population.¹⁵⁷ This is also a common feature of more moderate Islamist movements, from the Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas and Hezbollah.

Although based in Nahr al-Barid in the North of Lebanon, *Fatah al-Islam* also has bonds with jihadi groups in ‘Ain al-Helweh, in the South of the country. Members of *Jund al-Sham*, an *‘Usbat al-Ansar* splinter group based in ‘Ain al-Helweh, fought alongside *Fatah al-Islam* elements in Nahr al-Barid. There are also close contacts between *Fatah al-Islam* and more mainstream segments of *‘Usbat al-Ansar*, despite the talk of differences in opinion and mutual accusations¹⁵⁸. Many militants have moved from one group to the other, and they had vowed to back-up each other. *‘Usbat al-Ansar* spokesman Abu Sharif ‘Aql has admitted that seven militants moved from ‘Ain al-Helweh to Nahr al-Barid, to join forces against the Lebanese army. Those who left could have belonged to *‘Usbat al-Ansar* splinter groups, disillusioned with the “softer line” of the group after the handover of Badia Hamada to Lebanese security forces in 2002.¹⁵⁹ This is a typical pattern for fragmentation and the formation of new alliances amongst the militant movements.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Bluhm, “Army Steps Up Siege of Nahr al-Bared”.

¹⁵⁶ Rougier (2007), pp. 93-95.

¹⁵⁷ Muhammad Shaqir, “Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham, and Ansar Allah are Multiple Names for One Multinational Corpus” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), May 21, 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Hazim Amine, “How did the Group Find a Foothold in the City? Al-Zahiriyyah and the Mitayn Separate the McDonalds Tripoli from the Tripoli of Fatah al-Islam” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London) May 24, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ See Abu Sharif ‘Aql’s statements in Haytham Za’aytar, “First Chat with the Spokesman of Islamic ‘Usbat al-Ansar (in Arabic)”, *al-Liwah*, July 4, 2007,

http://khiyam.com/pages/articles_details.php?articleID=809, accessed July 2007; and Amine, “How did the Group Find a Foothold in the City?”.

¹⁶⁰ I am indebted to FFI Research Fellow Petter Nesser for this information.

Furthermore, *Fatah al-Islam* comprises militants who took part in the Diniyyeh uprising and subsequently fled to ‘Ain al-Helweh. (In fact, it has been alleged that one of the reasons why *Fatah al-Islam* refused to surrender was that it gave highest priority to sheltering these elements wanted by the Lebanese judiciary. Over the past years, many residents of the Tripoli belt area have taken refuge in ‘Ain al-Helweh, fleeing legal prosecution. The most important are Ghandi al-Sahmarani a.k.a. Abu Ramiz and Shihab al-Quddor.¹⁶¹ Another of these fugitives was Abu Horeira, who joined *Fatah al-Islam* as a regular member, but overtime was appointed second-in-command.¹⁶²

4.5 Patterns of recruitment and mobilization

In a recent article on al-Qaida’s threat to Lebanon, Bilal Saab and Magnus Randstorp argue that jihadi actors in Lebanon can draw upon two different pools of recruits: the broader non-violent salafi environment (through a process of radicalization leading to activists embracing violence as a means), and regular criminals and alienated individuals.¹⁶³

Fatah al-Islam has succeeded in creating bonds with Sunni activist networks in Tripoli. FAI is known to comprise around 30 Tripoli youths.¹⁶⁴ These activists are mostly youngsters from poor neighbourhoods in Tripoli. There are a number of ways youngsters living in the Tripoli region can be socialized into the universe of salafi-jihadism. Many correspond with ‘Ain al-Helweh’s jihadi preachers through cell phone conversations and the Internet, and receive their *fatawa* (sing.: *fatwa*). Many other Islamist militants hailing from Tripoli have also travelled to either ‘Ain al-Helweh, or Iraq, or both.¹⁶⁵

Tripoli, Lebanon’s Sunni capital, has, in recent times been singled out as a stronghold for Sunni radicalism, where marginalized youth in the poorer areas of the city are being inspired by local salafi preachers. Local shaykhs take up much space in Tripoli, channelling their message through Islamic teaching institutions, and even agricultural co-operatives run by Islamists.¹⁶⁶ These preachers seem to share the ideology of ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*. Though they oppose the idea of targeting Lebanese security forces and UNIFIL, they call for Jihad in Iraq with much ferocity. *Fatah al-Islam* members reportedly met with local shaykhs in Tripoli repeatedly. Although confrontations between the two sides took place, there was also positive interaction. According to

¹⁶¹ Amine, “The Path to the Threefold Lebanese-Syrian-Iraqi Jihad [...]”.

¹⁶² al-Filistini, “The Heroic Abu Horeira is dead. May God Receive him”.

¹⁶³ Bilal Saab and Magnus Randstorp, “Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 (10), p. 829.

¹⁶⁴ Amine, “How did the group Find a Foothold in the City?”.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

one Tripoli shaykh, such dialogues initially helped convince the *Fatah al-Islam* leadership to renounce several of their strategies, such as targeting the UN interim force, before they went back on that decision.¹⁶⁷

Tripoli has strong salafi credentials. Between 1983 and 1984 sheikh Said Shaaban's *Tawhid* militia recruited followers to carry arms, and, for a period, turned Tripoli into an "Islamic emirate"..¹⁶⁸ The militia succeeded in banning all modern expressions that contradicted their strict interpretation of Islam in its sphere of influence, closing nightclubs, and public swimming pools, etc.¹⁶⁹ Some of those fighting in the ranks of *Fatah al-Islam* are former *Tawhid* sympathizers.¹⁷⁰ The father of Youssef and Saddam el-Hadjib, both prime suspects in the July 2006 train bombing case in Germany and *Fatah al-Islam* members, was a known member of the *Hizb al-Tahrir* (HIT).¹⁷¹ HIT was legalized by then Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat in Lebanon in May 2006, in a step to ease tensions with Sunni extremists.¹⁷²

The strength of the salafi presence in Tripoli, in addition to the fact that the population is almost predominantly salafi, appears to have been one of the reasons why 'Absi chose to establish himself in Nahr al-Barid, after having been ousted from the Beddawi camp in October 2006. In addition, he saw that it was impossible to get a foothold in 'Ain al-Helweh, due to the strength of other groups, including Fatah, struggling for control of that camp.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Rougier (2007), pp. 237-239.

¹⁶⁹ David Schenker, "One Year after the Cedar Revolution: The Potential for Sunni-Shiite Conflict in Lebanon", *Policy Watch* No. 1114, (Washington DC: The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, June 20, 2006), www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2479, accessed July 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Amine, "How did the group Find a Foothold in the City?"

¹⁷¹ Hassan M. Fattah, "Different Paths Taken by 2 Bomb Suspects", *The New York Times*, August 30, 2006. *Hizb al-Tahrir* (The Party of Liberation) is a transnational, Sunni, pan-Islamist movement aiming to unite all Muslims and restore the historical Caliphate. The movement was founded in Jerusalem in 1953 and has been active for many years in Lebanon. The movement engages in humanitarian work in the Muslim world, and puts the persecution of, and crimes against Muslims on the International agenda. At the same time it strongly opposes Western democracy and represents fierce anti-Americanism, anti-Judaism, anti-Hinduism, anti-Westernism, and general intolerance against non-Muslim people and practices. The movement is known to support and sympathize with militant activism in the Muslim world. However, there are, no examples that members have been involved in terrorism in the West. I am indebted to research fellow Petter Nesser at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment for this information.

¹⁷² Schenker, "One Year after the Cedar Revolution".

¹⁷³ Muhammad Shaqir, "Absi Attacks Those Who Broke their Oath. Doubts Addressed to Members Close to bin Ladin about the Role of "Middle Men". Fatah al-Islam Began to Prepare their Northern Emirate in April and a Group from al-Qaida Pledged itself to Support it but Abstained" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 4, 2007; and "A Professional Air Force Pilot who Plays Hobby Chess and Tennis".

FAI's recruitment base also consisted of former criminals. For example, two *Fatah al-Islam* members were recruited in Romiyyeh prison.¹⁷⁴ They were both petty criminals; one was serving a sentence for theft, and the other for drug-trafficking. According to *al-Akhbar*, both have admitted before the Lebanese military investigators that they had been "guided" inside the prison and that they had joined one of the jihadi groups in Lebanon upon their release.¹⁷⁵

4.6 Hizbollah's "divine victory" and its impact on Sunni identity: Fear and jealousy

One of the contributing factors for the rise of salafi-jihadism in Lebanon in recent years is the growing power of Hezbollah. In fact, Shiite Hezbollah is regarded by many Sunni extremists, among them the leading London-based cleric Abu Qatada al-Filastini, as one of the main obstacles for the spread of Sunni Jihadism in Lebanon, and has thus become one of its main targets.¹⁷⁶ Lebanese Sunnis, who have not fought on the Lebanese front since 1985, resent the Shiite group, which, they believe, has monopolized the fight against the Jewish state. Its jealousy of the "Party of God" only grew after Israel withdrew from the South of Lebanon in 2000. The Israeli withdrawal from the South of Lebanon was interpreted as proof that Hezbollah's model of armed resistance yields results, and that it should be *the* model to follow. Hezbollah also succeeded in obtaining a certain "pan-Islamic status" by its "divine victory" over Israel in last summer's 33-day war.¹⁷⁷ The military wing of the "Party of God" has succeeded in obtaining a special status compared to other armed groups in Lebanon, since it is regarded by March 8 politicians as a "national resistance movement", not a regular militia. The opposition block therefore dispensed it from having to lay down its arms, an obligation of other militias in Lebanon after the Ta'if Accords (1989), which ended the Lebanese civil war.¹⁷⁸ The call to disarm was reiterated and received further backing by the international community with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in 2004.

The issue of disarming Palestinian groups in Lebanon is highly controversial. Armed resistance against Israel represents the *raison d'être* of Palestinian armed groups, including those linked to Syria, such as PFLP-GC and *Fatah al-Intifada*. In a public address, the PFLP-GC rejected the

¹⁷⁴ "Information Claims 'Absi is Wounded and All Contact is Lost with Abu Horeira" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat*, (London), June 8, 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Hassan 'Aliq, "Al-Qaida Finances Fatah al-Islam and Recruitment of Jihadists Takes Place in the Romiyyeh Prison" (in Arabic), *al-Akhbar* (Beirut), June 22, 2007, www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/35015, accessed July 2007.

¹⁷⁶ Farqani, "Al-Qaida in Lebanon".

¹⁷⁷ See Rayan Haddad, "Al Qaida/Hezbollah : la concurrence à distance entre deux logiques d'action, *Culture et Conflits*, August 12 2007.

¹⁷⁸ For more on the Ta'if Accords, see, for instance, George Corm, *Le Liban Contemporain*, (Paris, LA découverte, 2003), pp. 140-143.

implementation of Resolution 1559, stating that “the attempt to sacrifice the weapons of the Palestinians of Lebanon in line with Resolution 1559 (2004) will not be greeted with silence or compromise.” The statement added that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora would bear “direct responsibility for the hostile measures against our Palestinian people under the cover of a political and media campaign of disinformation”.¹⁷⁹

Hezbollah’s “success” in fighting the Israelis has been interpreted by Sunni extremists as proof that religious faith guarantees victory.¹⁸⁰ In principle, the global salafi-jihadi movement seems to share Hezbollah’s strategic goals, if not its ideology. However, the diverging ideology, and enemy perceptions, has become more and more evident in Sunni extremist discourse over recent years. According to the leader of ‘*Usbat al-Ansar*, Abu Tareq, interviewed by Rougier in 1999: “Armed action against Israel is tantamount to working for the success of Hezbollah and the Shiites,” and this is impossible due to differences in religious doctrine (*aqida*).¹⁸¹ There are several reasons for this, most important of which are the growing popularity of Nasrallah, and the Sunni’s growing jealousy on the one side, and the general tendency of growing Sunni-Shiite confrontation in the Arab world, especially in Iraq, on the other.¹⁸²

A common discourse among shaykhs in the Lebanese city of Saida is that there are no institutions in Lebanon representing only Sunnis; “Sunnis come last in Lebanon and the Lebanese state is dominated by Shiites”.¹⁸³ According to a recent analysis carried out by the Pew Global Attitudes survey, 88 percent of all Lebanese see Sunni-Shiite tensions as a concern extending beyond Iraq, and as one of the major problems facing the Arab world as a whole.¹⁸⁴ Equally, views on Hezbollah are becoming more unfavourable among Sunni Muslims. According to another militant interviewed by Rougier, Hezbollah has changed and been “corrupted” in light of their growing share of power in the Lebanese political landscape. As one militant put it, “I preferred them when they were dispossessed in the 1980s. Today, power has changed them”.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ See Kofi Annan, “Letter dated 26 October 2005 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council”, *The United Nations General Assembly*, October 28, 2005, <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0080ef30efce525585256c38006eacae/9b97cee4476b0ec2852570ad0069449e!OpenDocument>, accessed September 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Rougier (2007), p. 57.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁸² For more on Hezbollah, please see *ibid.*, p. 138. Two articles dealing with the rise of inter-sectarian violence in Iraq are Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq”, 2006, *The Brookings Institution* and *The University of Bern*; and International Crisis Group, “The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict”, *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, 52, February 2006.

¹⁸³ Rougier (2007), p. 137.

¹⁸⁴ “Global Opinion Trends 2002-2007: 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey”, *The Pew Research Centre*, July 24, 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/257.pdf>, accessed August 2007.

¹⁸⁵ Rougier (2007), p. 138.

Thus, rather than seeing the “victory” of Hezbollah in the 33 day war as a victory for Palestine, and, by extension, for the Islamic cause, the antagonism of Hezbollah in the eyes of Sunni fighters has grown over the last year. Hezbollah leaders received Internet and fax threats from Sunni extremists in July 2005, in which Fadlallah and Na‘im Qassem were explicitly mentioned. Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has himself also pointed to the growing Sunni fear of Hezbollah. In an August 2005 interview with Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Ray al-‘Amm*, he criticized the anti-Shiite sentiments of “some parties with Salafi inclinations” in Iraq, and especially al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers.¹⁸⁶

Growing hostility to Hezbollah and Shiite dominance in Lebanon has clearly been a factor in the rise of Sunni Extremism there, and it has contributed to raising the legacy of Sunni extremist militancy inside Lebanon. It could also have contributed to giving Sunni activists in Lebanon the idea of imitating Hezbollah in its exploitation of ideology to receive support.

5 Mobilizing mutually opposed external actors for logistic and ideological support

Perhaps the single most important factor behind the rapid growth of *Fatah al-Islam*, compared to previous cases of salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon, is their support from a multiplicity of sources. A number of outside actors have political, strategic, or economic interests in Lebanon. As such, Lebanon is a mirror of power conflicts in the whole region. And *Fatah al-Islam*, by skillfully playing on diverse mobilizing slogans, has succeeded in receiving both material and immaterial support from most of these actors. They have mobilized ideological support and sympathy from elements in al-Qaida and the global jihadi movement, while also allegedly receiving logistical aid from groups linked to the Syrian regime.

5.1 The exploitation of ideology to mobilize support

When answering the question of how *Fatah al-Islam* succeeded in mobilizing support from external actors, their use of ideology must be emphasized. The group has played on a variety of themes in order to gather sympathy from diverse, sometimes rival, factions.

The name “Fatah al-Islam” is, in itself, ambiguous. It plays on the Palestinian agenda (Giving allusion to the Fatah movement, with the word “fath” having highly a positive connotation in Arabic, alluding to conquest and victory), but also on Islamic attachment, cf. al-Islam (lit. “Islam’s Conquest” or “Islam’s Victory”). This indicates that the group plays on several strings

¹⁸⁶ Hunt, “Can al-Qaeda’s Lebanese Expansion Be Stopped?”.

simultaneously, trying to gain sympathy from various camps. *Fatah al-Islam* statements show that they sympathize with the global salafi-jihadi movement. The first official statement published by the group, written on fliers and distributed throughout the Nahr al-Barid camp, stated that “their method was the Qur’an and the Sunna”. It added that the group arrived to establish religion and reform what was corrupted, and to raise the banner of the *tawhid* (the credence that there is no god but Allah) over the skies of Palestine.¹⁸⁷

The group also presented itself as a successor to the Palestinian cause, exploiting the Palestinian nationalistic agenda. According to communiqués, *Fatah al-Islam* was created as a response to the corruption and deviation in the Fatah movement, and to stand up and defend the Palestinian people, who had long been exploited to the benefit of others. “We are from you and for you; we have what you have, your duty is our duty [...] and we share the same enemy”, a statement issued by the group emphasized.¹⁸⁸ In an interview with *al-Hayat* Lebanese newspaper in January 2007, ‘Absi pointed out that his group was part of the Palestinian agenda, and that they had come to Lebanon to help Palestinians preserve their right to carry arms in the wake of the UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

Although claiming to be part of the Palestinian national agenda, *Fatah al-Islam* also clearly identifies with the global jihadi movement and the salafi-jihadi current. The ideology of the group is hence not limited to the liberation of Palestinian land. Their stated aim is to liberate Palestine and fight against the Jews and those who support them among the “Zionist Crusaders” in the West. Because of the military superiority of their enemy, *Fatah al-Islam* leaders argue that the only way for Palestinians to achieve their goals is to turn to Allah.¹⁸⁹ Victory is dependent on support from a united Islamic Nation. By turning to Islam, the group tries to mobilize support from Muslims world-wide.

So hurry to the assistance of the Blessed al-Aqsa mosque and to save our honour from the hands of hate occupying Invaders.¹⁹⁰

In interviews with Islamic and Western media, ‘Absi emphasizes that his group is independent and that it has no organizational links to al-Qaida. However, bonds of an emotional and fraternal nature exist, according to ‘Absi: “all those who fight under the banner of *tawhid* against the

¹⁸⁷ Fatah al-Islam, “A Call to the Knights of Islam in all Parts of the World and Especially in Lebanon, the Announcement of Jihad in Jerusalem” (in Arabic), *markaz al-fajr lil-i‘lam*, [al-Fajr Media Centre], April 25, 2007, <http://kaled.modawanati.com/>, accessed June 2007..

¹⁸⁸ Fatah al-Islam, “Announcement of the Establishment of Fatah al-Islam”.

¹⁸⁹ al-‘Ayubi, “First Chatter with Him after the Announcement of his Secession from Fatah al-Intifada”.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

enemies of Allah, who are those who [...] occupied the land of the Islamic nation and stole her dignity, are brothers to us”.¹⁹¹ *Fatah al-Islam* shares the conception that there is currently an international conspiracy against Islam and that Muslims are under a vicious assault and that armed struggle is therefore a legitimate self-defence. The group is therefore an ally to “all those who fight for the sake of his faith, defending his land.”¹⁹²

5.2 Maximalist media strategy

Fatah al-Islam relies on both jihadi web forums and mainstream media to spread its message and recruit militants. The use of ideology sometimes seems pragmatic, as the rhetoric used inside Lebanon differs from that used to attract foreign fighters.

Fatah al-Islam has also relied on the mainstream media to gain support. FAI leader Shakir al-‘Absi and his military commander, late Abu Horeira, have given several interviews to both Arabic language and Western media. For instance, the New York Times interviewed ‘Absi in March 2007.¹⁹³ The London-based pan-Arab daily al-Hayat interviewed FAI officials on several occasions, first in January 2007.¹⁹⁴ In addition, the group uses jihadi web forums to publish their communiqués, which is a common media strategy used by jihadi groups.¹⁹⁵

Fatah al-Islam has no website of its own, as was the case formerly with *‘Usbat al-Ansar*, but uses password protected jihadi web forums, such as *al-Nusra* and *al-Ikhlās*, to publish its communiqués. The group seems to have sought to expand its support in spring 2007. Between 14th March and 25th April, the group issued a totality of five communiqués on jihadi web forums, announcing Jihad against “the Jews and those in the “Zionized”-Crusader West who support them” and calling for support. In addition, on 18th May, the group issued a eulogy for the deceased Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah, thus joining the ranks of global jihadi movements in deploring his death.

In seeking to mobilize foreign, zealous volunteers, the FAI ideologues play on religious slogans, such as “Jihad against Americans in Iraq”, or in the “liberation of Jerusalem”.¹⁹⁶ A stay in

¹⁹¹ Fatah al-Islam, “A Call to the Knights of Islam in all Parts of the World and Especially in Lebanon”.

¹⁹² al-‘Ayubi, “First Chatter with him after the Announcement of his Secession from Fatah al-Intifada”.

¹⁹³ Mekhennet and Moss, “In Lebanon Camp, a New Face of Jihad Vows Attacks on U.S”.

¹⁹⁴ al-‘Ayubi, “First Chatter with him after the Announcement of his Secession from Fatah al-Intifada”; and Amine, “Al-Hayat Visited their Training camp in the Barid [...]”.

¹⁹⁵ Hanna Rogan, *Al-Qaeda’s Online Media Strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007*, (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Est. (FFI), FFI-Report, forthcoming, 2007).

¹⁹⁶ Hadi al-Saleh, “Saudi National in Fatah al-Islam: ‘I did not Know about the Plans of the Group on Causing an Internal *Fitna*’” (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 17, 2007, www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issue=10428&article=423960, accessed June 2007.

Lebanon, in the Al-Helweh camp and in the Samid hall in Nahr al-Barid, was presented as an opportunity for training and preparation before fighting in Iraq.¹⁹⁷

Recruitment inside Lebanon seems to have occurred through the exploitation of various discourses. Some joined *Fatah al-Islam* in order to fight the Americans, while others joined for confessional reasons – to rise against the Shiites or to confront the Alawis. Still others joined the group wishing to fight the Lebanese “infidel” state.¹⁹⁸ This suggests that the FAI ideologues have skillfully played on various sentimental bonds in order to maximize support.

One *Fatah al-Islam* militant, Abu Mus‘ab, surrendering himself to the Fatah forces following the outbreak of fighting in the Nahr al-Barid, told the police that the Saudis fighting in Nahr al-Barid were recruited through jihadi web forums.¹⁹⁹ Although he spoke of volunteers from Tunisia, Ethiopia, Yemen, Algeria, and Morocco in the same light, their background is not entirely clear.

The story of Aid al-Qahtani, a young Saudi who fled the Nahr al-Barid camp and surrendered himself to the Lebanese police, sheds light on how young Saudis were recruited through the Internet to go to Lebanon. Many of them were apparently led to believe that they would subsequently be sent as mujahidin to Iraq. The 22-year-old Aid al-Qahtani, who hailed from a conservative middle-class background in Riyadh, had studied Islamic Sciences and had never left the Kingdom before going to Lebanon in February 2007. According to information released in the press, he was radicalized watching news from Iraq and Palestine, and began practicing sports such as karate and boxing. According to his family, al-Qahtani had started being absent from his house on Thursdays and Fridays, travelling thousands of kilometres to meet people in Riyadh and al-Qasim. He was subsequently lured into *Fatah al-Islam* through the Internet, and possibly with the aid of other FAI supporters in Saudi Arabia. Al-Qahtani had corresponded with FAI officials by storing messages in the “outbox” of his e-mail account, a method frequently used by jihadi militants, including, among others, by the M-11 bombers.²⁰⁰ The FAI recruiters encouraged him to proceed to Lebanon, where he would be given military training that he could subsequently use to fight in Iraq or Palestine. The FAI also offered him financial compensation for joining its ranks, promising that they would find him a wife and supply him with a house and other commodities.²⁰¹ He entered Lebanon legally on 10th February 2007.²⁰² However, living

¹⁹⁷ “Fatah al-Islam to Target Top Lebanese Officials”.

¹⁹⁸ ‘Aliq, “al-Qaida Finances Fatah al-Islam and Recruitment of Jihadists Takes Place in the Romiyyeh Prison”.

¹⁹⁹ “Fatah al-Islam to Target Top Lebanese Officials”.

²⁰⁰ “Sumario 20/2004, auto de procesamiento del diez de abril 2006”.

²⁰¹ al-Ka‘kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

²⁰² al-Saleh, “Saudi national in Fatah al-Islam”.

conditions offered to him in Lebanon proved to be poor; he fasted every day and only ate dry bread and the likes.²⁰³ In addition, he was not allowed to carry weapons, but set to work on the computer.²⁰⁴ Al-Qahtani finally surrendered himself to the Lebanese police, finding that FAI had not proved to be what they had told him prior to his arrival in Lebanon.

Another Saudi FAI recruit, Sa'd al-Ka'ubur, who died in Nahr al-Barid, had allegedly also been recruited over the Internet.²⁰⁵ According to his family, he had left his home town, al-Dammam in Eastern Saudi Arabia, for Lebanon eight months before the outbreak of the clashes. Before leaving, he had spent hours studying [jihadi] web pages.²⁰⁶ Both al-Ka'ubur and al-Qahtani had left "farewell letters" for their respective families, stating that they had left for Jihad in pursuit of after-life.²⁰⁷ According to his family, al-Ka'ubur had started showing signs of radicalization after he enrolled in the faculty of Islamic Law [Shari'a] at the Islamic Imam Mohamed Sa'ud University in Riyadh. He was part of an association called the "library group", which used to meet in a mosque in al-Dammam. He also started accusing his family of wasting time watching television, and gathered them every Friday for the three o'clock prayer [salat al-'asr] to give them religious lessons. He was close to breaking off relations with his family when they displayed signs of reservations against signing up for an on-line campaign denouncing the Danish Mohamed caricatures.²⁰⁸

Abdallah Bishi, a Saudi cleric or *alim* [sing. of '*ulama*'] wanted by the Saudi police, was arrested before the outbreak of the clashes in Nahr al-Barid, while trying to leave Lebanon.²⁰⁹ Before he came to Lebanon, Bishi had lived in Iran. He joined the FAI after being told that the group was in need of someone to deliver religious rulings (*fatawa*) and offer guidance.²¹⁰ In Lebanon, Bishi fell out with 'Absi, after the former refused to give a fatwa legalizing bank robberies and smuggling (so as to finance jihadi operations).²¹¹

²⁰³ al-K'akur, "A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...".

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Majid al-Khamis, "He Left Saudi Arabia in Search of the "White in the Eye" (Paradise)" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), July 4, 2007.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ al-Ka'kur, "A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before..."; and *ibid.*

²⁰⁸ al-Khamis, "He Left Saudi Arabia in Search of the "White in the Eye" (Paradise)".

²⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia has requested the extradition of Bishi. See "Lahoud Postpones the Extradition of Bishi to Riyadh. Arrest of "Liaison" between Fatah al-Islam and al-Qaida [...]" (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 1, 2007.

²¹⁰ Shaqir, "Riyadh Requests that her Citizens be Brought back...".

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Three other Saudis were arrested at the Rafiq al-Hariri International Airport when trying to leave Lebanon in January this year.²¹² They had also come to Lebanon in response to a call (*da'wa*) over the Internet. Finding that “the practices of the group on the ground contradicted with their original call”, they decided to return to their country of origin.²¹³ The three Saudis told the Lebanese military interrogators that shaykh Bishi had been the one encouraging them to leave Lebanon, after he had declared the slogans of the group “apostasy”.²¹⁴

This shows that the ideology propagated by the group, on the one side, and the practices followed by members on the ground, on the other, were perceived as being contradictory. Many youngsters who had initially come to Lebanon following a call for jihad, seem to have been disappointed with the reality of *Fatah al-Islam*.

5.3 Al-Qaida's ideological support

In September 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a statement condemning UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and calling for attacks on the expanded UNIFIL peacekeeping forces:

[W]e cannot possibly accept a resolution [1701] which pushes back the Lebanese borders 30 kilometres, imposes the international crusader presence in Lebanon, outlaws Jihad against the Jews in Palestine and isolates the mujahideen in Palestine from the mujahideen outside it.²¹⁵

The statement is largely seen as fatwa sanctioning attacks on the UN force and giving further legitimacy to jihadi groups operating in Lebanon. Al-Zawahiri had condemned the UNIFIL in a previous communiqué, stating that “accepting this resolution is an historic fall, which cannot be justified or excused”.²¹⁶ The importance of the warning was amplified after the threat was acted upon and the UNIFIL force was attacked on 24th June 2007, leading to the death of six Spanish peacekeepers (see above).

It has been said that al-Qaida, beyond voicing ideological support for *Fatah al-Islam*, is also directly involved in operations in Lebanon. The argument is that actors highly placed in the global jihadi network of militants see Iraq largely as a battle ground that they have already won.

²¹² al-Ka'kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

²¹³ Lahoud Postpones the Extradition of Bishi to Riyadh”.

²¹⁴ al-Ka'kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

²¹⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri “Tremendous Lessons, Events in the Year 1427 AH” (in Arabic) (author's own transcript of audio file), *muntada al-firdaws*, February 14, 2007, www.alfirdaws.org/vb/showthread.php?t=26490, accessed February 2007.

²¹⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Correct Equation” (in Arabic) (author's own transcript of audio file), *al-sahab*, *muntada al-firdaws*, January 15, 2007, www.alfirdaws.org/vbss/showthread.php?t=6211, accessed January 2007.

Waiting for the US to withdraw from Iraq, they are proceeding to “export” the struggle to other countries in the region, especially Lebanon. According to this theory, *Fatah al-Islam* would equal al-Qaida’s wing in Lebanon. It could thus be expected that the group is set up on instruction from al-Qaida officials. After FAI swore allegiance to Usama bin Laden on 10th June 2007, one would expect the group subsequently to adopt the brand name “al-Qaida”, as did “al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb” and “al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers”.²¹⁷

Does al-Qaida have explicit goals in Lebanon? In a text posted on jihadi online forums, allegedly written by Sayf al-‘Adl, “al-Qaida’s 2020 Plan” is presented. Al-Qaida is now drawing near the conclusion of the second of a total of seven phases. The present phase, called the Eye-Opening Stage, began with the occupation of Baghdad. With the al-Qaida organization reduced to a diffused, fragmented current, after the fall of the Taliban, it now seeks new territories in which to establish new bases. The Levant is to be the new focus after the war in Iraq comes to an end. The new period, the “Stage of Uprising and Standing up on Two Feet”, is said to last from 2007 to 2010. The ultimate goal of al-Qaida is, according to the document, to engage in a direct confrontation with Israel. Al-Qaida can only engage in this struggle after new “awakened” sympathizers across the Islamic world join the network after the war in Iraq.²¹⁸

The author writes: “The idea of *Jund al-Sham* is an idea that was suggested a long time ago in Afghanistan and which was not accomplished due to the American invasion. The youth who worked on that idea returned to Syria and Lebanon and some of them are now in Iraq. And they have prepared themselves to take a chance in what is currently happening in Lebanon, and will soon happen in Iraq. A foothold in the Levant will enable mujahidin to subsequently engage in a direct confrontation with the Jews”.²¹⁹ A letter allegedly written by al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi points in the same direction. In the letter al-Zawahiri stresses that the opening of jihadi fronts in Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon would be a direct step towards the goal of re-establishing the Caliphate, which is al-Qaida’s ultimate goal.²²⁰

In Zawahiri’s letter and statements, there is no explicit mentioning of local groups or individuals that could contribute to the furthering of al-Qaida’s goal in the Levant. Al-Qaida’s silence on FAI has been a source of concern among their sympathizers and supporters. In a posting in early June

²¹⁷ For an analysis of the reasons why GSPC joined al-Qaida, see, for instance, Lianne Kennedy Boudali, “The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa’ida’s Global Jihad”, *The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), United States Military Academy at West Point*, April 2007.

²¹⁸ “Al-Qaida’s 2020 Plan”, in Fouad Hussein, *Al-Zarqawi: al-Qaida’s Second Generation* (in Arabic), (Beirut: Dar al-Khayal, 2005), pp. 202- 211.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 205.

2007 by “Abu Dujana al-Shami” on a jihadi web forum addressing the “War Minister of the Islamic State of Iraq”, the author complained that al-Qaida had not yet voiced public support for *Fatah al-Islam* in its battle against the Lebanese army. The posting argued that the fact that *Fatah al-Islam* had declared its allegiance to al-Qaida without al-Zawahiri giving them any recognition or praise had created a feeling of frustration among the mujahidin in Lebanon, and this was one of the reasons why they had not succeeded. According to the posting, the fact that al-Zawahiri had issued several statements in which he commented on the events in Gaza, only contributed to deepening this feeling of frustration.

Such statements appear to weaken the argument that the establishment of *Fatah al-Islam* in Lebanon was somehow an initiative taken or supported by the al-Qaida leadership. However, the global jihadi movement, which goes beyond the al-Qaida core, has channelled ideological support to jihadis in Lebanon, thereby giving *Fatah al-Islam* some needed legitimacy. As attention shifted to Lebanon last summer during the war with Israel, a number of foreign jihadi actors took greater interest in the Lebanese arena, primarily seeking to exploit the “open space” provided in the camps.

5.4 Syria’s disputed role

On 3rd September 2007, the Lebanese defence Minister, Elias Murr, declared that the army had taken control over the Nahr al-Barid camp north of Tripoli, after a prolonged conflict with Sunni extremist militants lasting over a hundred days, the worst internal conflict in the country’s history since the civil war.

Many articles about *Fatah al-Islam* in the press have dealt with the possibility of Syrian sponsorship of the group. It has been alleged that *Fatah al-Islam* is a mere tool used by the Syrian intelligence services to re-establish control in Lebanon after the Syrian forced pull-out in April 2005. And it does seem plausible that Syria has some influence over *Fatah al-Islam*, at least among some of its elements. It could be that these links mainly exist through the intermediary of PFLP-GC, a pro-Syrian group, headquartered in Damascus. For reasons of simplicity, the contribution of PFLP-GC shall be dealt with below, in a separate paragraph.

Most FAI militants appear to have some links to Syria –they have either spent some time in a Syrian prison, or they have worked in Syria as gatekeepers of mujahidin to Iraq, or both.²²¹ Among the figures with such links to Syria are Saddam el-Hajdib and Abu Horeira. The former

²²⁰ “Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi”, *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, October 11, 2005, retrieved via www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/dni101105.html, accessed August 2007.

died in June 2007 in clashes with the Lebanese army. He is the brother of Youssef el-Hajdib, who was arrested in connection with the failed bomb plot in Germany last year.²²² Abu Horeira is the military commander in *Fatah al-Islam*.

It seems clear that Syria has wanted to exaggerate the danger of an eventual permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In hypothetical future negotiations between Damascus and Tel Aviv, this would be an important card to play to put pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied Golan Heights. The Syrian regime may therefore have an interest in maintaining an image of chaos in the Palestinian refugee camps and to portray them as “islands of insecurity”. The rise of Sunni extremism in the camps comes on top of an already existing concern about the threat that the Palestinians pose to the demographic and ethnic composition of Lebanon. Hence, the emergence of violent groups such as FAI contributes to convincing Lebanese politicians and public that Palestinians cannot and must not be fully integrated into Lebanese society. *Fatah al-Islam* militants and the global jihadi movement as such are certainly ideologically opposed to the Syrian regime, which ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam in the 1980s referred to as “nusayri phalangists”. Nevertheless, the fact that the FAI and Syria appear to share the same enemy might have prompted the FAI leadership to bestow a short-term “nominal legitimacy” on the Syrian regime, in return for material support. In fact, the only thing Syria would have had to do to support *Fatah al-Islam* is to allow elements to pass through its territory from Iraq and cross the border over to Lebanon.

Ahmed Mar‘i, a Lebanese national from the Khaled Valley in the ‘Akkar region in North Lebanon,²²³ seems to be one of the connections between *Fatah al-Islam* and the Syrian regime. Arrested by Lebanese security forces in an apartment in the al-Ashrafiyyeh neighbourhood in Beirut,²²⁴ he is suspected by Lebanese interrogators of having been a high-level coordinator between the Syrian intelligence and *Fatah al-Islam*.²²⁵ Other sources identify him as being a coordinator between al-Qaida and *Fatah al-Islam*.²²⁶ His two older brothers, Mohamed and Khadr, who were arrested during clashes in Tripoli, were also FAI members.²²⁷ Mar‘i seems to have travelled back and forth between Syria and Lebanon. He left Lebanon at the same time as the Syrian pullout in April 2005. In November 2006, he returned to Lebanon and swore an oath of

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² “Suspect in German Bomb Plot Killed in Lebanon Fighting”, Deutsche Welle, June 21, 2007, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2546292,00.html>, accessed June 2007.

²²³ “Lahoud Postpones the Extradition of Bishi to Riyadh”.

²²⁴ al-Ka‘kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

²²⁵ “He inquired about Targets for Fatah al-Islam and Detected the Movements of the UNIFIL”.

²²⁶ ‘Aliq, “al-Qaida Finances Fatah al-Islam and Recruitment of Jihadists Takes Place in the Romiyyeh Prison”; and “Information that Absi is Wounded and that Touch with Abu Horeira is Lost”.

²²⁷ “Lahoud Postpones the Extradition of Bishi to Riyadh”.

allegiance to ‘Absi in Nahr al-Barid. On the night before clashes broke out in Nahr al-Barid, Mar‘i travelled to Syria. Lebanese police claim it was to meet Syrian officials.²²⁸ A few days later, he returned to Lebanon through the Beqaa Valley, where he was arrested.²²⁹ Mar‘i is suspected by Lebanese police of being an important player in the moving of “resistance fighters” to Iraq, and the dispatching of other elements to European countries.²³⁰ He also seems to have been an operational leader who took part in planning attacks. He was allegedly in charge of inspecting the potential targets of attacks and in assessing their value. For instance, he is believed to have visited the southern coastal areas where the UNIFIL troops are centred.²³¹ Many FAI members have come from Syria. Although the majority seems to be deprived Palestinian refugees from the Yarmouk camp outside Damascus, others are rather wealthy. It has been alleged that one Syrian, ‘Abdallah Barakat, better known as Abu Mohamed al-Suri, had ensured supplies of money and explosives to *Fatah al-Islam*.²³²

It is true that much of what happens inside Lebanon is often attributed to a “Syrian hand”. The assassinations of Rafiq al-Hariri in October 2004, and a considerable number of other anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians, journalists, and intellectuals over the past few years are undoubtedly somehow linked to the continued struggle for hegemony in Lebanon between pro- and anti-Syrian forces. However, to reduce *Fatah al-Islam* to puppets of the Syrian regime would be highly simplistic and only result in misreading the more complex regional political landscape. Rather, *Fatah al-Islam* as a group has clear interests in exploiting existent power struggles in order to elicit funding and sponsorship.

It must also be pointed out that the Islamist community within the narrow camp street is small and that, at least in ‘Ain al-Helweh, funding is often shared among all “Islamist brothers”, so that there is little control over who actually benefits from each particular fund. In ‘Ain al-Helweh, for instance, Saudi funding to “moderate” Islamic teaching institutions is also shared with groups that oppose the Saudi regime. *‘Usbat al-Ansar* is among the groups that benefit from the Saudi funds.²³³ It is likely that the situation was somewhat similar in Nahr al-Barid. This implies that, although *Fatah al-Islam* could be receiving support from Syria, the control of the group is exercised by the group’s leadership, *not* by the Syrian regime.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.* and Malik al-Ka‘kur, “A Story of a Young Boy who had never Travelled Before...”.

²³⁰ “Lahoud Postpones the Extradition of Bishi to Riyadh”.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² “*Al-Hayat* Retrieved the Names of a Number of Them. Eleven Saudis Killed and Six Arrested During the Fighting (in Arabic)”, *al-Hayat* (London), July 2, 2007.

²³³ Rougier (2007), pp. 63-65.

5.5 The role of Fatah al-Intifada and PFLP-GC

The pro-Syrian Palestinian militia group Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), headed by Ahmad Jibril, has currently four positions in Lebanon, with a total number of 475 personnel on alert, equipped with various kinds of heavy and medium-ranged weapons, rockets, and anti-aircraft missiles. The group has been involved in a number of clashes with Lebanese security forces since the Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon in April 2005, the most important of which took place in October 2005. Another pro-Syrian militia, the *Fatah al-Intifada* holds ten positions with around 500 personnel on alert, equipped with missiles, mortars, anti-tank weapons, and anti-aircraft weapons. *Fatah al-Intifada* and PFLP-GC are probably the two most important pro-Syrian Palestinian militias in Lebanon.

Seizure of materials by the Lebanese army during the three months of fighting in mid-2007 revealed that FAI had access to large financial supplies and advanced equipment. This concurs with statements made by inhabitants and Fatah officers in the camps, that FAI showed off luxury cars inside the camp, and paid very high rents.²³⁴ Much of the seized material seems to originate from the *Fatah al-Intifada* movement, or from PFLP-GC. There are indications that FAI and *Fatah al-Intifada* have had continuous contacts, despite the official break between the two factions.

In a testimony to the Lebanese police, *Fatah al-Islam* militant Abu Mosab stated that the group was reinforced by “350 news fighters, huge military supplies and tens of millions of dollars”, shortly after fighting broke out.²³⁵ Although this does not necessarily prove that they were supported by external actors, all sources do point in the same direction, that they were.

Coordination between PFLP-GC and *Fatah al-Intifada*, on the one side, and salafi-jihadi groups, on the other, dates back to the 1990s, when Jamal Khattab and Abu Mohjen coordinated their groups, *al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Muqatila* and *'Usbat al-Ansar*, respectively (see above), with the PFLP-GC. A training camp was set up in the region of Jabal Halib, East of Sidon.²³⁶

At the beginning of June 2007, Lebanese military sources reported that there was large mobilization at both *Fatah al-Intifada* and PFLP-GC bases. It was also alleged that PFLP-GC

²³⁴ See, for instance, Espinosa, “Fatah al-Islam”, ricos y instruidos”.

²³⁵ “Fatah al-Islam to Target Top Lebanese Officials”.

²³⁶ Rougier (2007), p. 47 and Randsburg and Saab (2007), p. 839.

personnel had carried out surveillance of army movements in the area.²³⁷ In addition, the two groups were suspected of fighting alongside *Fatah al-Islam* elements in West and Central Beqaa.²³⁸

When four militants, two Syrians, one Saudi, al-Maghamis, and one Palestinian, Mustafa Auda, were arrested in Bar Elias in the Beqaa Valley, 42,000 euros, weapons, explosives, and falsified Iraqi identity papers, were found. They had arrived in Lebanon from Syria.²³⁹ Palestinian Mustafa Auda is a former member of *Fatah al-Majlis al-Thawri* (“Fatah Revolutionary Council”), a group led by the late Sabri al-Banna a.k.a. Abu Nidal, and more recently of *Fatah al-Intifada*.²⁴⁰ The fact that these well-equipped elements were part of *Fatah al-Islam* indicates that FAI has benefited greatly from using *Fatah al-Intifada* infrastructure and taking over some of its members.

Arrested FAI elements have admitted that PFLP-GC was fighting alongside Shakir al-‘Absi’s fighters, according to Lebanese officials. The PFLP-GC had thrown its entire human and equipment force consisting of rocket launchers, missiles, hunting equipment, and mines, into the battle.²⁴¹ A letter dated 12th June 2007 addressed to the Secretary General and the Security Council president by the Lebanese *Chargé d’Affaires* to the UN claimed that positions in the Beqaa belonging to the PFLP-GC were heavily built up with vehicles, gas masks were plentiful, and a staff of approximately 100 youngsters had arrived from Syria between 29th May and 6th June. On the eve of 1st June, 31 members of the PFLP-GC’s “Front Vanguard”, youth from the Yarmouk and Suwayda camps in Syria, entered Lebanon and travelled to one of the group’s outposts in the Beqaa (Jabal al-Mu’aysarah).

The PFLP-GC has denied all accusations of having played a role in supporting the FAI. Instead, the group has accused the Lebanese government of “embarking upon direct agitation against the PFLP-GC through fabricated information [...] trying to cause damage to the role played by the Front as a part of the opposition to the American-Israeli project [in Lebanon]”.²⁴² The group communiqué, released on 8th June says:

²³⁷ “Identical letters dated 12 June 2007 from the Chargé d’Affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary General and the President of the Security Council”.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ “Security Sources Believe a Sleeper Cell was Getting Ready to Support Fatah al-Islam” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London) June 8, 2007.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ Yusuf Diab, “Those arrested in the Nahr al-Barid camp confess on PFLP-GC support to Fatah al-Islam” (in Arabic), *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (print edition), June 28, 2007.

²⁴² “The ‘General Command’ Answers The Security Council Address” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (London), June 8, 2007.

We have requested the Lebanese government to form a Joint Committee [...] to investigate the truth on these accusations directed against us. However, we did not receive any reply. Thus, we call upon the Lebanese government to refrain from this antagonistic policy that does not benefit the situation on the ground and that will only lead to an aggravation of the situation.²⁴³

The issue of whether Jibril's group has actually been fighting alongside *Fatah al-Islam* remains a controversy. Anyhow, it seems that the groups, willingly or not, have contributed logistic and financial aid to *Fatah al-Islam* fighters.

Still, as their ideology and member structure indicate, *Fatah al-Islam* also has an agenda of its own. The group's *modus operandi* is not solely dictated by the global jihadi movement, or by Syria and its proxies in Lebanon. Rather, Syrian proxies, such as the PFLP-GC, exploited the instability in Lebanon to increase their own militant activities. *Fatah al-Islam* also succeeded in mobilizing many actors linked to the global jihadi movement, with no links to the Levant. The group must therefore rather be seen as a *mélange* of various interests and ideologies. This caused them to operate somewhat freely of the Syrian regime and its allies.

6 Conclusion

Fatah al-Islam represents a historical break with previous salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon in its perseverance while fighting the Lebanese army in Nahr al-Barid. It owes its strength to the fact that it has succeeded in mobilizing support from a wide range of global and regional actors. Albeit heavily supported by external actors, it seems to have had space to manoeuvre when drawing up its long-term goals and strategies. Ideologically, the group adheres to bin Laden's salafi-jihadi current. Still, the group also exploits the rhetoric of Palestinian nationalism in order to maximize support from the local population. The fighting in Nahr al-Barid seems to have begun more as a result of a chain of events than a long-prepared strategy. It also seems that the FAI leadership had calculated more support from the local salafi community than they actually received.

The "spatial" or territorial dimension behind FAI's uprising in May 2007 should not be forgotten. According to Mohamed Abu Romaneh, interviewed by *al-Arabiyya*, "Fatah al-Islam is a manifestation of events going on in Iraq, in the sense that the youngsters [in Fatah al-Islam] are a part of a group of people who have been to Iraq and subsequently left the country and are now

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

looking for an “uncontrolled territory” (*jib amni*) in the state of anarchy”.²⁴⁴ One such space is the Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

In this author’s opinion, claims that the birth of FAI is directly staged by the al-Qaida leadership or by Iraqi jihadi groups having travelled to Lebanon, wishing to open a new battle front, does not seem very plausible. Launching a war against the Lebanese army is ideologically controversial in global jihadi circles. Many salafi scholars consider the Lebanese army, by and large, a Muslim army, and, therefore, that a fight against it is not legitimate, but rather sparks a *fitna*. In addition, strategic thinkers seem to consider that the grounds are not yet ready for opening a new front in the Levant. Iraq is still the main priority and concern of global jihadi actors.

The main reason for the growth of *Fatah al-Islam* in Lebanon can be attributed to the internal Lebanese scene. The instability of the Lebanese state has given new incentives to regional actors seeking to re-establish the former status quo of a Syrian-dominated Lebanon. Proxy groups such as the PFLP-GC seem, at least to some extent, to have been utilized as a vehicle by the Syrian regime after its forced pull-out from Lebanon in 2005. In turn, *Fatah al-Islam* managed to elicit material support from such groups and therefore also, *indirectly*, from Damascus. In light of the intense power struggles currently going on in Lebanon, it would seem rather odd if Syria, while having the possibility to do so, had not have taken advantage of the opportunities at hand. However, *Fatah al-Islam*’s ideologues and members clearly identify themselves with salafi jihadism, not Syria. It seems that it was a global call to Jihad that gave rise to the group, but that, once established, the group succeeded in reaching out to non-Islamist actors. Various militant factions and militias, sharing a common wish to undermine the Lebanese state and to oppose the international status quo on Lebanon, represented by the Oslo Accords and UN Resolutions 1559, 1701 and 1757, seem to have coordinated their activities while at the same time staying committed to their very own goals and ideologies.

²⁴⁴ “How did Fatah al-Islam succeed in Recruiting Youngsters?[...]”.

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