

Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism

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This article essentially seeks to examine the history and dynamics of salafist jihadism in Lebanon, explain its causes, investigate its impact on Lebanese domestic security, and explore its future trajectory. The article also puts forward a range of policy prescriptions that could help the Lebanese state effectively reduce and ultimately eliminate the threat of local salafist jihadism.

This article is intended to provide an independent and in depth assessment of the threat of Al Qaeda–inspired salafist jihadism to the present and future security of Lebanon. A calm and eye-opening discussion on the subject of Al Qaeda in Lebanon is necessary and long overdue. Such a discussion has unfortunately been elusive if not purposively avoided in the Lebanese public domain due in part to the domestic ruling elites’ tendency to indifferently treat and often play down, for various political reasons, the threat of Sunni religious extremism in their country.

By attempting to delve into its history, characteristics, and causes, the authors wish to break new ground and make the case that salafist jihadism in Lebanon is not exclusively a Palestinian phenomenon and that its universe is not limited to the Palestinian refugee camps. Furthermore, the article argues that the salafist jihadist movement is neither fictional nor a mechanical creation of Syria. As such, the authors put forward enough empirical data to demonstrate that the salafist jihadist movement has indeed been able to attract, for the past 5 years or so, a large number of Lebanese followers. In other words, the article attempts to prove that Al Qaeda in Lebanon has an indigenous constituency. Such “Lebanonization”

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of the salafist jihadist movement has actually accelerated and taken a more serious turn in the aftermath of the war in Iraq in 2003.

To cut through some of the semantic and value-generated fog that currently surrounds the concept of Islamic terrorism, the article begins by providing clear working definitions of salafism and salafist jihadism, two very dissimilar terms that have often been erroneously confused and used interchangeably in the public discourse and terrorism literature. It then explains the causes of Al Qaeda–associated salafist jihadism in Lebanon, describes its dynamics, unpacks the polymorphous entities that are and could be associated with it across the multiplicity of factions in Lebanon’s various regions, and assesses the threat it poses to Lebanon. Next, it carefully analyzes the role Syria could be playing in curbing the spread of Al Qaeda in Lebanon, clarifying the prospects and limitations of such role. Finally, it puts forward a range of policy prescriptions that are intended to help the Lebanese state reduce and ultimately eliminate the threat of local salafist jihadism.

Salafism and Salafist Jihadism: Working Definitions

In the global counterterrorism policy debate, a working definition of salafism has somewhat been elusive. As a result, many Western and Arab academics and government officials have been prone to making the mistake of equating salafism with religious violence and terrorism.

Salafists are Sunni Muslims who believe that the imitation of the behavior of Prophet Mohammed’s closest companions—which for salafists constitutes the purest form of Islam—should be the basis of the social order. Salafists believe that because the salaf (early virtuous Companions of the Prophet) learned about Islam directly from the Prophet or those who knew him, they commanded an enlightened and pure understanding of the religion. Salafists reject unwarranted calls for Islamic reformation brought to the religion in later years that resulted in their view to interpretative distortion of Islam’s straight path and unnatural divisions within the Muslim community.

Salafism is neither inherently synonymous with terrorism nor with militancy. It also comes in many different forms and degrees of orthodoxy or militancy. Although it is evident that salafists are doctrinally rigid and adopt a Manichean view of the world, they largely renounce violence as a means to attain their goals. It is not that they reject the struggle of the sword out of hand but rather salafists argue the prioritized necessity to propagate through *da’wa* to achieve the right societal conditions for establishing an Islamic state. As pointed out by Quintan Wiktorowicz, there is a significant difference between so-called reformist salafists, who believe in personal and societal transformation through propagation and education, and [jihadi] salafists (like Al Qaeda) that emphasize the absolute necessity of violence.¹

Salafist jihadists (also called neo-salafists) are a small minority strand within salafist thought.² As militant Sunni Muslims, this strand of followers believe that peaceful strategies of Islamic revivalism—*da’wa* and political reforms—are not viable; only violence and offensive jihad will lead to the establishment of an Islamist state. Salafist jihadists are influenced by Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya’s writings (although they misunderstand and even distort their true meaning) and follow or sympathize with Osama bin Laden’s vision of seeking to establish a pan-Islamic Caliphate and duty to expel Westerners and non-Muslims from Muslim countries. Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) lived in one of the most disruptive periods of Muslim history—the conquest of Muslim lands by the Mongols who had previously converted to Islam. His interpretation of jihad, which continues to elicit controversy and diverging interpretations, argues that even if a regime practices Muslim rituals, any failure to uphold Islamic law marks it as unbelieving and therefore subject to

resistance.³ However, Ibn Taymiyya did not explicitly endorse the overthrow of Muslim rulers. He also did not argue for the inevitability of violence as a means to uphold Islam. As a matter of fact, he only issued two jihad fatwas in his whole life—one against the crusader remnants and one against the Mongols who continued to follow the Yasa legal code of Genghis Khan instead of the shari'a. But in many ways Ibn Taymiyya provided the historic exemplary to guide the Muslim community through problems when their social order falls under the shadow or control of non-Muslim power. As such, despite its lack of coherence, it represents an ideology or tradition of resistance against non-Muslim influence.

Like bin Laden's Al Qaeda, salafist jihadists emerged as a product of the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979–1989, and it is no coincidence that many of their leaders are Afghan veterans. To bin Laden, there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the Holy Land. Citing Ibn Taymiyya, "to fight in defense of religion and Belief is a collective duty; there is no other duty after Belief than fighting the enemy who is corrupting the life and the religion."⁴ Bin Laden's fatwa of the World Islamic Front declaring "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders" became the manifesto of the full-fledged global salafist jihadist movement. In this document, bin Laden extended his previous concept of jihad from a defensive to an offensive one.

Although connected to the larger canvas of global Islamic insurgency, salafist jihadists still display the particularities of local variants and contexts as illustrated by its evolution and growth within Lebanon. Almost two-thirds of the terrorists forming the leadership of Al Qaeda, documents Marc Sageman, come from Egypt. The rest come from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, and the subject matter of this study, Lebanon.⁵

Salafism and Salafist Jihadism in Lebanon: An Overview

History and Causes

Social conflict theory provides useful insights into why individuals would generally engage in terrorism or militant activity. Such theory suggests that terrorism has a constructive purpose such as acting as a catalyst for necessary and positive social change, or forming a channel through which to express and alleviate political, social, and economic inequality.⁶ The implications of this approach for the roots of terrorism suggest that the causes of violence can be located in political, social, and economic grievances.

The roots of salafist jihadism in Lebanon are tremendously complex and can be investigated from the prism of an intermingling of forces working at three levels: the local, the systemic, and the individual.

On the local level, the surfacing of radical and militant Islamist ideology in Lebanon can be attributed to the historical deficiencies of the Lebanese sociopolitical order. A detailed analysis of the inbuilt anomalies of the Lebanese system of governance is beyond the scope of this article and can be found in other more focused writings.⁷ In brief, when Lebanon achieved independence from France in 1943, two popular Lebanese political elites devised the National Pact. A carefully crafted verbal agreement, the National Pact stipulated that the Christians of Lebanon would forego European protection and all military pacts with the Western powers, whereas the Muslims agreed to set aside any pan-Arab ideals and accept Lebanon's existing geographical boundaries. In addition, the pact-makers incorporated into the political system a confessional schism when they reconfirmed that future Lebanese presidents would be Maronite Christians, premiers would be Sunni Muslims, and the speaker of the Parliament would be Shi'ite Muslim. Civil service appointments and public

funding decisions would also be made on a confessional basis. Lebanon's national covenant supplements the 1926 constitution crafted by the French in conjunction with Lebanese jurists. Among the more important provisions of the constitution was that the confessional groups in Lebanon be represented proportionately in parliament. Prior to 1975, Lebanon's power-sharing arrangements had been praised by many for their ability to uphold a limited democracy and preserve civil order in a deeply divided, modernizing society set in a tumultuous region. Others however correctly recognized the weak edifice upon which the system's political consensus rested. Lebanon's brief civil war in 1958 was only one indication of the system's inherent frailty. Students of Lebanese politics including Michael Hudson⁸ observed that modernization and its concomitant force, social mobilization, were more important indicators of instability due to the host of problems they create for democratic regimes. Most notably, these processes increased the decision-making burdens on the Lebanese system and contributed to unevenness in regional development within Lebanon, while at the same time elites proved unable to integrate the increasing number of nontraditional interest groups and parties into the system due to their fears that it would result in a more radicalized Muslim state. Despite the enduring quality of these power-sharing arrangements, events in 1975 proved too formidable for the regime and its ruling coalition. The breakdown of the regime was attributed to a variety of internal factors, including the demographic shift that increasingly favored the Muslims over the Christians; the confessional rift that granted a privileged status to the Maronites over the Muslims; the rise of a radicalized intelligentsia supportive of sociopolitical change and pan-Arabism; and the inability of Lebanese elites to deal effectively with regional development and socioeconomic disparities that generally, although not exclusively, disadvantaged the Muslims (note that extremist and militant ideology in Lebanon has largely grown in regions that are the most politically marginalized, economically backward, and socially deprived). Adverse economic conditions coalesced with growing social unrest over the lack of attention paid to the poorer regions in southern and northern Lebanon. The 1989 Taef Accord, which ended the civil war, codified many of the provisions of the National Covenant, thus perpetuating the principles of confessional distribution of power. Instead of abolishing confessionalism, the Taef Accord reaffirmed that all positions in the state bureaucracy must be allocated along confessional lines. Add to that the shortcomings of the Lebanese electoral system, which negatively impact on the political system and make it inherently unfair. The electoral system's two main flaws are the electoral list system and the method of creating legislative districts. The list system is based on faulty data and as a result does not reflect the current Lebanese demographic reality, thus aggravating the confessional problem.⁹ Syria's military withdrawal in 2005 offered great potential for Lebanese reform. Yet, as the last Syrian soldier was leaving the country, the momentum for change in Beirut rapidly dissipated and the old divides in Lebanese politics and society resurfaced. Despite its united longing for freedom and sovereignty after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri, Lebanon remains a confused country whose political system lacks formal definition, whose society is fragmented and polarized, whose seemingly cosmopolitan politicians are stubbornly ingrained in a feudal era, and whose greatest problems arguably emanate not from external enemies but rather from chronic structural imbalances.¹⁰ The relatively free parliamentary elections of June 2005 and the ensuing political crisis confirmed once again that confessional politics were at the root of the political process in Lebanon. Change in Lebanon, as one Lebanese political scientist cleverly noted, was (and still is) taking place in a context of institutional and constitutional continuity.¹¹

For Lebanon's radical Islamists, particularly, the plural structure of Lebanese governance has always been a source of frustration and an obstacle to their maximalist

Islamist ideals and aspirations. Lebanon's plural system negates any efforts by any one group to carry out policies of state-imposed national assimilation in line with its communal and ideological outlook and aspirations. Imposing shari'a (Islamic law) in Lebanon has been and will always be an impossible task because no confessional group is capable of imposing its rule without engendering strong opposition to such an effort, or without suffering major setbacks. In other words, no confessional group is large and powerful enough to monopolize power, and no group is small enough—but dominant in key government positions and/or the army—to impose coercive minority rule, mobilize state resources, and eliminate opposition to insure total submission to government authority. Hizb'allah in the 1980s was forced to adjust its revolutionary and Shi'ite-Islamic ambitions—establishing Islamic rule in Lebanon on the basis of *velayat-e faqih*, the doctrine of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—after it came to grips with the realities of secular and multiconfessional Lebanon. History and geography in Lebanon have provided built-in mechanisms to neutralize sectarian domination in Lebanese society, for no group was and will be able to sustain power long enough to legitimize real communal authority.

Meanwhile, any lucid understanding of the root causes of Islamist militancy in Lebanon ought to include an explanation of how the prevailing external environment affected its rise and growth. In brief, the surfacing of Islamist militancy in the Middle East was non-coincidentally accompanied with a general identity crisis in Arab-Islamic society¹² and with a shared sense of humiliation and submission as a result of the Arabs' successive military defeats to Israel. In Lebanon, such crisis conditions were reinforced by a 15-year-old civil war (1975–1990) that for the most part pitted rightist Christians against leftist Muslims and more explicitly by Israel's invasion and subsequent 18-year occupation of the southern part of the country (1982–2000). Today, Islamist militancy in Lebanon remains heavily affected by a violent regional environment that hosts an ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict and a bloody sectarian war in Iraq pitting Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.

Investigating how Lebanese Islamist militancy took a salafist twist over the last fifty years would finally require a thorough examination of the active role played by local and foreign salafist jihadist leaders in helping salafist jihadist ideology prosper by penetrating Lebanese Muslim society (and more particularly the nonviolent salafist community). The pool of recruits for the salafist jihadist current in Lebanon, although obviously not limited to the local salafist community, ranges from salafist believers who have “strayed” by undergoing a thorough process of persuasion¹³ and ultimately become militant, to ordinary criminals, outlaws, and acutely alienated individuals facing identity crises who have little case for Islamic thought. To inquire into the role of such salafist jihadist “entrepreneurs,” a survey of the history of salafism and salafist jihadism in Lebanon is appropriate. Salafism (and non-coincidentally salafist jihadism) has emerged and developed mainly in Tripoli, Arqoub, Majdal Anjar, Qarun, and Sidon.¹⁴

Tripoli

In Lebanon, it is commonly understood that Tripoli was the first city to introduce salafist ideology to the country.¹⁵ Salafism in Tripoli, argues Sheikh Khaled, a 72-year-old Lebanese Sunni sheikh, grew mainly as a result of poor living conditions that have accumulated over the years and of its adherents' effective dissemination among the “Sunni street.”¹⁶ “For the people of Tripoli,” sheikh Khaled asserted, “Islam [or a particular version of it] seemed to be the answer to their problems.”

For the past fifty years, Lebanon's second largest city has been witnessing a steep decline in its ancient Roman, Ottoman, and Islamic fortunes. The former "jewel of the east," as Lebanese and Arabs used to call it, is today dishonorably associated with economic decline, drop in industrial and commercial activity, rise in unemployment, lack of development projects, and expansion of poverty.

Tripoli's communities have often felt politically and economically ignored, even during times when the prime ministers of Lebanon came from the city.¹⁷ Like the South, Tripoli has been suffering from Beirut's total neglect and uneven economic development policies. Political life in Tripoli is at its minimalist level, confined only to some activities in the houses of ministers or members of parliament on weekends. There is little presence of political parties, professional associations, or trade unions. As a result, mosques tend to be the most active and vocal institutions in the city. In squares of Tripoli, particularly its most religious neighborhoods such as Abu Samra, civic art is often a stark representation of God's name. On balconies are black banners with religious inscriptions usually associated with holy war. Anyone who knows or has lived in the city would easily notice the shift in social mores over the past few years: the proliferation of women's veils and men's beards, the flourishing of religious classes and the number of youths joining such classes.

Bab al-Tabbaneh is one of the largest salafist strongholds in Tripoli; it also happens to be the city's poorest and most depressing neighborhood. Many of the dilapidated concrete apartment buildings of Bab al-Tabbaneh bear deep scars of the civil war, their walls riddled with countless artillery and mortar shells. In December 1986, Lebanese leftist militiamen, following the orders of a secular Syrian regime concerned about the growing influence of Islamists in Tripoli, murdered most of the neighborhood's men, in front of—and sometimes with—their families. Women and children of Bab al-Tabbaneh were also found afterwards, shot in the head. Amnesty International reported that a massacre of 200 people took place in Bab al-Tabbaneh.¹⁸ The Lebanese dubbed it "the North's Sabra and Shatila," in reference to the massacre committed by Lebanese Christian Phalangists, in coordination with the Israeli forces, against Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp.

The demographic reality of Bab al-Tabbaneh reflects the steep cultural and developmental decline of Tripoli: males and females of Bab al-Tabbaneh, respectively, have 27 percent and 37 percent illiteracy rates; only 3 percent of its population are college enrolled male students and 6 percent female students; more than 27 percent of 7-member families in Bab al-Tabbaneh live with incomes of less than 200 dollars per month; and the neighborhood has the highest child death rate in the North.¹⁹

Attempting to fill the gap left by the Lebanese state over the years, salafists in Tripoli worked on providing employment opportunities and social services to the city's predominantly Sunni community. With donations from local individuals, coupled with the financial engine of Saudi Arabia's charitable organizations, salafists managed to create their own public space and spheres of influence by building mosques and religious institutes.

Tripoli is home to two well-established Islamist movements that have enjoyed close relations with the salafist community in Lebanon: these are Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (or Islamic Unity Movement) and al-Jemaah Islamiyah (the Islamic Association).

Created in 1979–1980 following the Islamic Revolution in Iran and activated in 1982 soon after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami served as an institutional and military extension to Sheikh Sa'eed Sha'ban, once one of the most charismatic Sunni Islamist leaders in Lebanon (also a former member of al-Jemaah Islamiyah). Sheikh Sha'ban's ideology sprang from the Muslim Brotherhood; he believed in shari'a-based Islamic rule, without which no government can be legitimate. In 1983–1984, Sha'ban's fighters, allied with Fatah militiamen, consolidated their control over Tripoli by defeating

a number of localized Islamist rivals; his movement, however, splintered at the height of its power in 1985 when members Khalil Akkawi and Kana'an Naji seceded to organize their own militant faction which they called Jund Allah (the Soldiers of God). To halt the spread of Islamist jihadism in Lebanon (and particularly in the North), the Syrian army entered Tripoli in the fall of 1985 and crushed Harakat al Tawhid al Islami's militia, though it permitted Sheikh Sha'ban to maintain leadership of his movement.²⁰ This defeat did not prevent the militia's subsequent reemergence in Beirut, Sidon, and other areas in southern Lebanon. In 1988, fleeing fighters from the militia joined forces with Hizb'allah to fight the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and the Israeli forces in Israel's self-declared "security zone" in the South.²¹

Al Jemaah Islamiyah is a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist group established in 1964 by young members of 'Ibad al-Rahman (or the Worshipers of the Merciful). Its origins, as documented by Nizar Hamzeh, go back to the height of Gamal Abdel Nasser's efforts at Arab unity in the mid-1960s.²² Al Jemaah Islamiyah believes in achieving an Islamic order in Lebanon based on shari'a law and as a local branch closely follows the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Wrongly attributed to being the founder of al Jemaah Islamiyah, Fathi Yakan is, however, its grandfather and main ideologue.²³ Yakan is a 73-year-old veteran Islamist scholar and da'iah (preacher) from Tripoli; he is a charismatic and influential Islamist figure in Lebanon and the region. A disciple of radical Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb, a believer in the revolutionary writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Marx/Engels, and an admirer of the philosophical teachings of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (although he is in disagreement with their militant strategies²⁴), he opposes secularist and communist ideology and considers Islam to be the basis of the sociopolitical order.

In the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Yakan joined Sa'eed Hawwa of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood to advocate jihad against the West and Israel. Along with fellow member Judge Faysal al-Mawlawi, he co-led al Jemaah Islamiyah during the Lebanese civil war and fought on the side of the leftist-Islamic coalition in Tripoli. In 1992, he broke with al Jemaah Islamiyah's leadership because of doctrinal differences and entered the first post-war Lebanese Parliament. Throughout the 1990s, he devoted himself to political and parliamentary life, leading a bloc of three Islamist deputies inside the Chamber of Deputies. From 2000 to 2005, Yakan mostly kept a low profile, trying to both reconnect with his old Islamist friends and develop his relations with a number of Islamist movements across the region, most important of which are the Syrian and Turkish Muslim Brotherhoods. Today, he is considered to be the Syrian regime's independent link to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (or "go-to-guy" whenever Damascus wishes to indirectly negotiate with the Brotherhood), enjoying not only good relations with Damascus²⁵ but also excellent ones with Ankara and Tehran.

In August 2006, Yakan formed Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami,²⁶ an umbrella organization that brings together major Lebanese Sunni groups and organizations from all parts of the country aiming to "fill an existing gap" and "create an authoritative body for the Sunnis in Lebanon" that will "work in cooperation with the other authoritative bodies." Of those groups are Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami; Majmou'at Islam bila Houdoud (or Islam Without Borders Organization), led by Ramzi Dayshum; in addition to several members of al Jemaah Islamiyah, like Abdallah al-Tiryaki, who broke with the leadership and opted to join ranks with Yakan.

Between 1995 and 1999, Tripoli witnessed a fierce struggle among the main Islamist movements (represented by Harakat al Tawhid al Islami, al Jemaah Islamiyah, and al Ahabash) to control the mosques. The mosque milieu continued to be the main mobilization

center for salafists, not only through Friday sermons, but also through religious lessons that some Sheikhs regularly give to their loyalists. This provided Bassem Kanj, a returnee from Afghanistan, an opportunity to establish a salafist jihadist group opposed to the core Islamic trends in the city. By virtue of his revolutionary stature and leadership abilities, Kanj managed to muster a sizeable number of recruits and proceeded to establish a military camp in al Dinniyeh, approximately 50 kilometers away from the north-eastern part of Tripoli²⁷; people that Kanj attracted had little to do with Islamic thought.

Bassem Kanj was born in 1964 in Azka, a small village in the al Dinniyeh area. After receiving a technical diploma in high school in the poor neighborhood of Kobbah in Tripoli, Kanj earned a scholarship from the al Hariri Foundation in 1985 that allowed him to travel to America where he pursued his studies in Boston. In Boston, he became increasingly impressed by the conferences on jihad in Afghanistan that were organized by Islamists and sympathizers of the Afghani Islamic cause, and went on to contribute donations for the Afghan resistance.

Through these contacts with Afghan-alumni and supporters in Boston, Kanj got to meet a number of Lebanese expatriates such as Khalil Akkawi who, like him, was pursuing his technical studies in America. After marrying an American woman who converted to Islam, Kanj left the United States in 1989. With the logistical support of the Services Bureau of Arab Volunteers directed by Abdullah Azzam, he traveled for the first time to Pakistan with his wife and daughter. He placed his family in the city of Peshawar, along the Afghan–Pakistani borders. After numerous military training sessions in Pakistan, he went on to fight the Soviet forces in Afghanistan alongside other Arab Afghans. During the military confrontations, he developed close and brotherly relations with many of his religious comrades. At the age of 25, he interacted with many Arab volunteers who would form years later the nucleus of his al Dinniyeh group. During this period, Kanj allegedly met with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. Injured in combat against the Soviets, he was transported in 1990 to a hospital in Peshawar.

In 1991, he briefly went back to Lebanon to spread the message he learned from Osama bin Laden. For the three years that followed, he fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina alongside the Muslim militias, only to leave the Balkans after the signing of the Dayton accords in 1995. This longevity in Bosnia was quite unusual as fighters usually stayed for 12–18 months before moving onto the next jihadi conflict zone. Chechnya was scheduled to be the next destination for Kanj; yet for obscure reasons, the men in charge of the Bureau of Voluntary Arabs for Chechnya refused to grant him an authorization to fight. He returned to America to live alone for two additional years before settling back in Lebanon in his native village of Azka in 1996.

Two preoccupations dominated Bassem Kanj's agenda after his return to Lebanon: re-initiating contact with his old Peshawar war comrades and setting up a salafist jihadist network in Lebanon. Kanj concentrated his recruitment efforts on two regions: the poor neighborhoods of Tripoli and the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el Helweh.

Kanj's focus on recruitment within Ein el Helweh occurred through one of his comrades in Peshawar, Ahmad al Kassam, who himself had close relations with the Palestinian salafist jihadist group *Osbat al Ansar*. Kanj's relationship with his friend took an abrupt end as Kassam was executed 24 March 1997, for his participation in the assassination of Ahabash leader, Nizar al Halabi (Kassam was succeeded by Ihab al Banna who acted as the main liaison between Kanj and *Osbat al Ansar*). Kanj managed to meet the emir of *Osbat al Ansar*, Abou Mohjen, as well as his lieutenant Abou Obeida, in charge of the military wing of the group. For members of *Osbat al Ansar*, Kanj's visit was extremely flattering as it underscored the militant group's importance on the local scene of salafist jihadism. The

visit also offered *Osbat al Ansar*'s men the opportunity to learn about Muslims' conditions in the various jihad fronts worldwide and to project their influence outside the narrow boundaries of Ein el Helweh.

In early 1998, Kanj went on to set up training camps in the region of al Dinniyeh, utilizing the logistical services of the salafist jihadist Palestinians of Ein el Helweh. In less than a year, Kanj was able to recruit more than 200 young men from the region with recruitment focusing on populous neighborhoods east of the old city: Abou Samra, Kobbe, and Bab al Tabbaneh.

Kanj propelled into the spotlight when his group launched an attack on the Lebanese army in al Dinniyeh on 31 December 1999. It took the army six days to defeat the insurgents. The military confrontations shocked the Lebanese population and brought back memories of the civil war. Although the "uprising" failed, and most of the militants were killed (31 people were dead in total, 11 of which were Lebanese soldiers, 5 civilians, and 15 Islamist militants), a band of survivors (including the infamous Islamist fighter Ahmad Miqati) fled by boat and took shelter in Ein el Helweh. The day after the incident, Lebanese journalists and political commentators rushed to argue that the incident in al Dinniyeh came as a reaction by the militants to the peace negotiations that had started two weeks earlier between Syria and Israel in Washington. Other observers reasoned that the militants' goal was to establish an Islamic state in Tripoli. Understanding what exactly the al Dinniyeh group hoped to accomplish is no easy job. Even working under the assumption that they had a firm alliance with *Osbat al Ansar*, it is difficult to grasp why they thought—or if they thought—that their operation would be a successful one. The region of Tripoli in 2000 was almost completely controlled by the Syrian army and intelligence services, and the balance of the Sunnis, while perhaps favorable to certain elements of radical Islam, would certainly not have been sympathetic to a group of outsiders establishing a state in their midst. Bernard Rougier seems to offer the most balanced explanation by arguing that the Islamists' goal was more modest and pragmatic as it was limited to recruiting young men from the region to join the Islamic cause in Chechnya.²⁸ Islamist combatants for the Caucasus were already being formed in Ein el Helweh; Bassem Kanj wanted to create a similar network for Chechnya from northern Lebanon.

Arqoub

Arqoub's first encounter with salafism occurred in the early 1970s, when a couple of young Lebanese students from this southern region founded an Islamist movement that they later called the "Arqoub salafist movement."

The first signs of salafist activity arrived to the town of Sheb'a (which is part of the Arqoub region) in the early 1980s through one of its sons, Sheikh Qassem Abdullah, having spent most of his life as an immigrant in the Saudi Kingdom.²⁹ With Sheikh Abdullah, salafism spread in the Sheb'a farms, a 25 to 40 square kilometer strip of land of disputed ownership and a population of roughly 25,000 located between the Lebanese village of Sheb'a on the northwestern slopes of Mount Hermon, the Druze village of Majdal Shams, and Israeli towns that it overlooks.

Arqoub's vast communal displacement, following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, enabled its salafist movement to spill over into neighboring regions. The withdrawal of Israeli troops in May 2000 helped its cadres re-enter Arqoub and start engaging its people by initiating developmental projects and providing social, cultural, religious, health, and educational services. At the western entrance of the town, salafist sheikhs built a giant

mosque that they called Abu Baker al Siddiq using private contributions and money from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Salafism in Arqoub flourished as a result of decades of neglect, poverty, and underdevelopment in the region. The signs of the Israeli bombardments in the 1970s are still present today: tens of destroyed houses and mosques, deserted agricultural land, unemployed youth, poor agricultural production, old infrastructure, and bad road conditions. This neglect is compounded by a basket of taxes and social problems including apparent power abuse of a number of clerics. All these crisis conditions combined opened the door to the emerging power of religion and salafist ideology.

The Arqoub salafist movement is decentralized and largely operates through informal social networks—study groups, mosque-related activities, seminars, publications, lessons in private residences, personal and familial ties, student–teacher relationships—that share a similar interpretation of Islam. These networks have aided the movement in avoiding state interference as manifested by extensive repression and major security crackdowns.

It is hard to determine the size of Arqoub’s salafist movement primarily because of its secretive nature. Members claim they do not believe in numbers because they represent an “intellectual” movement. The movement’s influence and expansion, however, benefits from its cooperation and coordination with the Sidon-based Al Awqaf al Islamiyya, a Lebanese Sunni charitable organization. Some observers from the region say that the number is still relatively low and does not exceed fifty members.³⁰ In other villages of Arqoub, the number is no bigger than one hundred, especially because other fundamentalist currents including the Ahbash³¹ and al Jemaah Islamiyah are competing for influence, which narrows the pool of recruits and divides it in three ways.³²

The movement supports Hizb’allah in its military struggle against Israeli occupation in the Sheb’a farms, but does not participate in the fighting. There is surprisingly neither overt nor covert non-Hizb’allah military activity in the Arqoub region, where there is open battle with the Israeli forces. The Arqoub movement’s role is limited to “enlightening” Muslims and providing social services to the poor. Arqoub’s salafists affirm that their activities are limited to preaching and social services; but “if Israel reoccupies our lands, our Islam compels us to defend it and our families.”³³ They have all the faith in Hizb’allah and advocate against any forced disarmament of the Shi’ite group. “If Hizb’allah’s arms did not exist,” they maintain, “we would have taken up the fight against the Israelis ourselves.”³⁴

Today, the Arqoub salafist movement is placed under close watch by the Lebanese internal security forces (ISF). The Lebanese authorities claim the movement has launched terrorist attacks against Lebanese and foreign targets in the past. The movement denies involvement in any terrorist activities.

Majdal Anjar

Located in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border, Majdal Anjar is one of the earliest bastions for salafist ideology and activity in the Bekaa region.

Salafists from Majdal Anjar, a town of 20,000 people, attribute the rise of salafism in their area to Sheikh Zuheir al Shawish, arguably one of the longest established salafist preachers in Lebanon.³⁵ Through his sermons and written works (published by an Islamic center that he owned), Sheikh al Shawish helped spread the “salafist message.”

Salafism also gradually grew as an ideological current after the return of a number of Bekaa’ite graduates from the Islamic University in Medina in Saudi Arabia in 1986, most important of which was Sheikh Adnan Muhammad Oumama and Sheikh Hassan Abdel Rahman.³⁶ These two men founded the salafist group in Majdal Anjar.

Majdal Anjar became a focal point after five of its residents were killed in Iraq in 2005 fighting the American forces. These were Hassan Sawwan, Ali al Khatib, Mohammed Nouh, Mustapha Darwish Ramadan, and his grandson Mohammed. Today, a man by the name of Mustapha Kurdi Beirut, married to a woman from Majdal Anjar, is reportedly in charge of training the town's youth and sending some of them to Iraq.³⁷

Of the five men who died in Iraq as insurgents, it was Mustapha Darwish Ramadan's story that particularly captured the attention of the Lebanese and Iraqi press. Born in Beirut but of Kurdish descent, Ramadan is married to a woman from Majdal Anjar. Having spent fourteen years in Denmark, he developed extensive contacts with radical Islamists across Europe. Eventually he joined a chapter of Ansar al Islam, a small Kurdish Sunni organization with roots in northern Iraq. During its early days, Ansar al Islam had only been involved with local conflicts, but by the time Ramadan joined it, it had recast itself as an international force in Islamic jihadism and expanded into Europe.³⁸

Ramadan turned up in Majdal Anjar in winter 2003. The townspeople were struck by dramatic changes in his appearance and conduct. He was abstemious, dressed like an Afghan Mujahid, and had let his beard grow. He began proselytizing among young salafists, winning them over to his call for takfir, or excommunication of anyone opposed to the cause of Sunni jihadism. In June 2003, differences within the community forced Ramadan and his family to leave Majdal Anjar for the nearby village of Kafir Zaid. By then he was able to attract a core of young loyalists who were prepared to go to Iraq and fight against its occupiers. In 2004, Ramadan emerged as a senior leader of Ansar al Islam, which Americans and Iraqis suspect of having carried out more than forty suicide bombings and other attacks, resulting in more than one thousand fatalities.³⁹ At that time, Ramadan operated under the name Abu Mohammed al Lubnani, or father of Mohammed the Lebanese, and had become a close aide to Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi, the emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq who was killed by the American forces in June 2006. Al Lubnani continued to recruit volunteers from Majdal Anjar, smuggling them into Iraq. But in early 2005, it was reported that al Lubnani was killed.⁴⁰ The claim was greeted skeptically by American officials, who believed it might have been disinformation. However, Iraqi-Kurdish sources confirmed that al Lubnani perished in an American air strike. A few months later, his son Mohammed met a similar fate.

The legacy of Ramadan remained strong as evidenced in September 2004 when about half a dozen men from Majdal Anjar (more than 35) were arrested on various terrorism charges, including encouraging young men to fight in Iraq and attempting to blow up the Italian embassy in Beirut.⁴¹ One of the suspects, described as the top Al Qaeda operative in Lebanon, reportedly died from a heart attack later under interrogation. Lebanon's then Interior Minister Elias Murr (currently Defense Minister) stated that the 31-year-old Al Qaeda suspect, Mohammed al Khatib, was planning to pack a car with 300 kilograms of explosives and ram it into the Italian embassy.⁴² Murr added that Khatib's salafist jihadist network was also plotting a sophisticated attack against the Ukrainian embassy in Beirut. Residents from Majdal Anjar protested and challenged the Lebanese government's assertion that al Khatib was associated with Al Qaeda, claiming he was illiterate and did not even own a fax machine or a computer.⁴³

Qarun

Until the mid-1980s, the Muslim and Christian residents of Qarun, like the residents of many mixed villages and towns in the area, lived peacefully and relatively free of sectarian tensions or religious discrimination. Salafism in the Western Bekaa area emerged later due

to the setback of the nationalist movement since the murder of Druze leader Kamal Jumblat and the departure of the Palestinian forces from Lebanon.

The stories of Ali Hatim and Qasim Zahir shed some light on the formation and growth of the salafist jihadist current in Qarun.

Hatim abandoned his studies at the Islamic Sharia'a College in Beirut in the mid-1980s to travel to Afghanistan and fight alongside the mujahidin. He was a member of the Harakat al Tawhid al Islami. In 1984, Zahir left Lebanon for Colombia where he met with and was taught by Hussein Ahmad, a Lebanese salafist jihadist Sheikh who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Three years later, Zahir returned to Lebanon. In Qarun, he briefly joined Hatim and Harakat al Tawhid al Islami in its fight during the Lebanese civil war. In early 1988, Zahir left for Canada. He frequented the Canadian Islamic Center in Edmonton, where he lived and got to meet many salafist jihadists who were working on collecting donations for the mujahidin in Bosnia, Kashmir, and Afghanistan. In 1993, Zahir traveled to Peshawar to reunite with Hatim and convince him to return to Lebanon. Upon his return to his homeland, he visited Osbat al Ansar leader Abdel Karim al Sa'adi at least twice. The two men agreed on the need for holy jihad and the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon.⁴⁴ In 1995, Zahir was introduced to Bassem Kanj, the leader of the al Dinniyeh group, during the World Islamic Conference in Chicago. After several meetings, Zahir and Hatim agreed to merge the Qarun group with the al Dinniyeh group in the North. The main task of the former was to secure financing and weapons for the latter. The funds came from the donations that Zahir collected in Canada, Panama, and Brazil whereas arms were supplied by dealers in the Bekaa.⁴⁵

Many members of the Qarun-al Dinniyeh group proceeded from the principle of jihad against Israel and were naturally against what Muslims in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and elsewhere were being subjected to. Only one of the 13 members of the group⁴⁶ is still in detention. Two others are fugitives, and one of them is Hatim. All the others have been released, but they still appear before the military court at trial sessions. Reports say they were released because they were not involved in the clashes that took place in al Dinniyeh as they refused to engage in any fight against the Lebanese Army.⁴⁷

Sidon

Situated about 20 kilometers south of Beirut, Sidon is Lebanon's largest city in the South. It is a lively and growing city that serves as the South's capital and biggest financial and commercial center. With a population of around 125,000 people, Sidon is 90% Sunni Muslim and 10% Shi'ite and Christian.

Sidon has always been known for its religious tolerance and sectarian co-existence. But during the civil war, inter-communal concord was gravely put to the test as Sidon, like most cities in Lebanon, witnessed sectarian fighting between Muslim and Christian militias. For Sidon, instability was particularly more pronounced as the city had to suffer from the biggest influx of Palestinian refugees who emigrated as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Among those refugees—stationed in camps around the city—was the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which played an active role in the Lebanese civil war.⁴⁸

For senior Sidonese Sunni ulamas, the growth of salafist ideology in their city tends to be exaggerated.⁴⁹ In their eyes, it is essential first to distinguish between the preaching part of salafism, which they concur does have its place in public schools in Sidon, and the jihadist part, which they see as marginal and disorganized. What complicates things,

however, is that both salafist and salafist jihadist factions use the same principles and textual references. Differences over strategy, not theology, separate these two groups.

The general agreement in Sidon is that the pluralistic and mercantilistic history of the city militates against the spread of religious extremism. Indeed, men of commerce who had to communicate, trade, and do business with neighboring and foreign communities could not afford to adopt extremist or closed-minded attitudes. Meanwhile, it is almost impossible in Sidon to differentiate between a Sunni and a Shi'ite as they all come from the same families and neighborhoods and live together peacefully. Another reason why it is hard for religious extremism to find fertile ground in Sidon is because the political scene has historically given birth to nationalistic and secular figures and political parties that were totally opposed to radical Islamist principles. Nevertheless, salafist ideology surfaced in Sidon in the late 1980s when a number of Lebanese Sunni ulamas, coming from Beirut and the North, settled in the city and started preaching about "the true path of the Prophet Mohammed." Two clerics in particular, Abd al Hadi and Daa'i al Islam al Shahal, seemed to be most involved in "spreading the salafist message."⁵⁰ Since then, salafism has gradually but surely grown in Sidon, even though its followers were split into two camps: those who favored nonviolent activism (the salafists) versus those who called for militant tactics (the salafist jihadists). In the early 1990s, nonviolent salafist followers built their first mosque in the Al Zouhour neighborhood, through remittances from Saudi Arabia.

In Sidon's Al Zouhour neighborhood, Nadim Hijazi, who runs the Jam'iyyat al Istijaba (Association of the Response), a state registered Sunni Islamic association that receives significant funding from Saudi Arabia, is a Lebanese Sunni cleric who preaches every Friday about the virtues of salafism in the al Sahaba mosque (Companions Mosque). Today, the Jam'iyyat al Istijaba is building a school in the outskirts of the Miyeh w Miyeh Palestinian camp in addition to engaging in civil defense work. In the Al Sabbagh neighborhood, Abu Zakariyyah Abou Hadawi, a Lebanese Sunni cleric who is close to Hijazi, independently runs a private institute called Kitab al Sahabi Abdallah Ben Mas'oud (the holy book of the companion Abdallah Ben Mas'oud). Abou Hadawi's institute teaches salafism and religious studies. For the past decade, Abou Hadawi and Hijazi have been working on engaging Sidonese salafists who have jihadist inclinations, urging them to return to the "true path" taken by the Prophet.

The two clerics would meet with young and disenchanting salafist jihadist recruits in mosques in the old sector of the city and discuss with them the history of Sidon and explain to them the reasons why the city must remain a bastion of religious moderation. Some would be persuaded and would ultimately convert but others would rebut pacifism and join their comrades in Ein el Helweh, Lebanon's largest Palestinian camp.

The Ein el Helweh Palestinian camp is reportedly a teeming recruiting ground for Al Qaeda currents in Lebanon and for the insurgency in Iraq. Located in the south-eastern part of Sidon's port and reputed to be the most impoverished and radical Palestinian refugee camp in the Arab world, Ein el Helweh is home to about 75,000 refugees.

Ein el Helweh breeds radicalism and despair. Nearly five decades after it was created, the camp still has no clean running water or sanitation. Refugees live there on a three-quarter-square mile piece of land that is ring-fenced by Lebanese army checkpoints and tanks. The Ein el Helweh refugees mainly depend on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for housing, health care, and schools; they are very poor and have no independent sources of income.⁵¹ The four entrances of Ein el Helweh are controlled by the Lebanese army. Internal security, however, is maintained by rival Palestinian groups, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right. Since Ein el Helweh's creation, it has been the policy of successive Lebanese governments to instruct the army to refrain from

entering the area for fear of clashing with reportedly more than a dozen militant factions all competing for influence inside the camp. Ein el Helweh is a conflict zone that is on the verge of spilling out into neighboring Sidon, as salafist jihadists return from wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq imbued with jihadism that is drawing more recruits and changing the complexion of the once secular Palestinian movement.⁵²

It was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 that revealed the existence of salafist jihadist networks inside the camp. In Ein el Helweh, the Islamist fighters held their ground against Israel for approximately 20 days in battles that Israeli officials later described as the most ferocious of the invasion. The Islamists who were in charge of the camp's defense were almost all students of the Palestinian Sheikh Ibrahim Ghunaym who lost a son during the camp's siege.

Bernard Rougier offers the most comprehensive biography of the Palestinian salafist jihadist Sheikh.⁵³ Rougier describes Sheikh Ghunaym as the "spiritual father of all Palestinian men of religion." The Sheikh's biography is important as it sheds light on the radical transformation of the camp of Ein el Helweh. Born in 1924 in the village of Safouriyya in the district of Nazareth, Ghunaym comes from a poor Palestinian family. In 1948, he fled Palestine as a result of the Arab-Israeli war and settled in East Beirut in a quarter called Maslakh, where he worked as a simple construction worker. In the early 1950s, he became a member of a Sufi organization from the area through the intermediary of Muhammad Ahmad Jumaid, a Syrian Sheikh of Kurdish origin. Ghunaym met the guide of the Sufi organization in Aleppo in 1953 and he was later assigned to spread Sufi principles in the small village of Akkar in northern Lebanon.⁵⁴ In 1963, Sheikh Ghunaym moved to Ein el Helweh where he started teaching Sufi theology in the Al Nour Mosque. His students—Jamal Khattab and Abdallah Hallak, both Palestinian, and Moharram Al Arifi, a Lebanese—later became the principal figures of radical Islamism in the camp and in Sidon.

Ghunaym traveled to Tehran during Israel's 1982 invasion and assisted in organizing the Iranian regime's "international conference of the disinherited." He later resided in the Nahr al Bared Palestinian camp next to Tripoli. In the same year, he got detained for two months by the Syrian intelligence services in the notorious Mazzeh prison in Damascus for his alleged links with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood who were (and still are) at war with the Syrian regime. After his release, he sought protection under the Iranian regime. In 1984, he helped create a clandestine militant group called Al Haraka al Islamiyya al Mujahida (or the Movement of Islamic Jihad) whose main leaders were Sheikh Jamal Khattab and Sheikh Abdallah Hallak, his two former students. With the financial help of the Iranian embassy in Beirut, Ghunaym built the Al Quds Mosque (Jerusalem Mosque) in the Nahr al Bared camp. To this day, he lives in a modest apartment near the mosque.

During the 1990s, Ghunaym participated in all the ceremonies that were organized by Hizb'allah over the political future of Palestine. In 1992, he contributed to creating a militant instruction center called the Movement of Islamic Jihad in Palestine in Khan al Abdeh in the northern region of Akkar. An old friend of Sheikh Sa'eed Sha'ban, the late leader of Harakat al Tawhid al Islami, and a faithful follower of the Khomeinist regime in the middle of a Sunni milieu, Ghunaym managed to establish good relations with Bilal Sa'eed Sha'ban (Sa'eed Sha'ban's son) who has taken up leadership of Harakat al Tawhid al Islami since his father's death.

One of the students of Sheikh Ghunaym at Ein el Helweh, Hisham Abdallah Shreidi, created in the mid-1980s, Osbat al Ansar. The group became in the early 1990s the principal salafist jihadist faction in Ein el Helweh.

Originally from the village of Safsaf in the Galilee, Hisham Shreidi was born in Ein el Helweh in 1957. Since his adulthood, Shreidi pursued Islamic theology under the

supervision of Sheikh Ghunaym in the Al Nour Mosque. After the camp's fall, Shreidi was captured by the Israelis and imprisoned in Ansar for a year and a half. Released as part of a prisoner exchange, he was appointed as chief orator of the Martyrs Mosque, built adjacent to the camp's northern entrance.

Shreidi's soft religious formation did not prevent him from being one of the camp's most influential and charismatic leaders. His military experience fighting the Israelis compensated for his lack of religious training. Back then, Shreidi's group used to be called Ansar Allah (the Partisans of God). The difference, argues Rougier, is not just semantic: during that period, the group was part of the Iranian proxies network in Lebanon and used to coordinate its military operations with Lebanese Shi'ite groups who later formed the nucleus of Hizb'allah.⁵⁵ The battles in 1985 against the Maronite Christian Lebanese Forces during which Shreidi was injured, gave the Palestinians of the camps a chance to affirm their common Islamic identity facing a "Maronite-Zionist conspiracy." In the late 1980s, the hostility between Shreidi's group and the local commander of Fatah in Ein el Helweh, Amin Kayyed, had reached the point of no return. Political differences aside, the crux of the problem lied in disagreements over the strategy of Islamist mobilization among the camp's inhabitants. To reinforce his position, Shreidi allied himself with a former officer of the PLO and student of Ghunaym, Jamal Khattab, who had broken with Fatah after establishing an alliance with the pro-Syrian dissident Ahmad Jibril, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). In 1990, Ansar Allah coordinated its military activities with the Phalange of Ein el Helweh, Jamal Khattab's local militia. A training camp was set up in the region of Jabal Halib (Mountain of Halib), eastern Sidon. Now 48, Sheikh Khattab is one of the most influential religious characters inside the camp. A holder of a Business degree from the prestigious American University of Beirut (AUB) in the early 1980s, he became the main Sheikh of the Al Nour Mosque in the late 1980s. In addition to his religious duties, Khattab worked as an accountant with UNRWA until he was released in 1993, for reasons of inciting confessional hate among Lebanese citizens. Since that date, he never got out of the camp.

Sheikh Khattab has gradually formed around him a solid nucleus of trustees who congregate in the al Huda library near the Al Nour Mosque. Khattab uses the library as a recruiting base for his salafist jihadist movement. His target is the camp's multinational inhabitants. Abou Mohammed al Masri, for example, is an Egyptian veteran from Afghanistan who fled Egypt in 1993 after fighting the Mubarak regime alongside the Muslim Brotherhood. Abou Mohammed al Masri was labeled by the Lebanese press as Osama bin Laden's local representative in Ein el Helweh.⁵⁶ In March 2003, he was assassinated in the morning in a car bomb outside his small restaurant upon his return from praying at the Al Nour Mosque.

On 15 December 1991, Sheikh Shreidi was assassinated—most probably following the orders of Amin Kayyed—in front of the Martyrs Mosque, which was later given the appellation "the Mosque of Sheikh Hisham." During his funeral, his spouse and his supporters, including Sheikh Maher Mahmoud, Sheikh Abdallah Hallak, and Said Barakat (leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in exile) were chanting "Abou Ammar—the nom de guerre of late PLO chairman Yasser Arafat—is the enemy of God."⁵⁷

Osbat al Ansar (or the new Ansar Allah) became the first Islamist militia in Ein el Helweh to explicitly endorse salafist jihadism. Abdel Karim al Sa'adi (or Abou Mohjen), also a former student of Sheikh Ghunaym, was behind the renaming of the group. He was elected as successor by a committee of Sheikh Ghunaym's former students. When he assumed leadership, Abou Mohjen was only 28 years old. His rise to prominence in Ein el

Helweh and his nomination could be associated with the spread of salafist jihadism in the camp and the loss of influence of Iranian tutelage and Khomeinite Islamism.

In any Palestinian camp or neighborhood, the walls are adorned with posters depicting “martyrs” of the fight against Israel. But in Osbat al Ansar’s neighborhood, the Iraq battlefield is evident. The main road has been renamed “Martyrs of Fallujah,” and signs glorify men killed fighting alongside Abu Mus’ab al Zarqawi. There are numerous cases, as documented by the SITE institute, which illustrate the Ein el Helweh–Al Qaeda link. Many are the young men that Osbat al Ansar is believed to have sent to the Iraqi battlefield: people like Ahmad Mahmoud al Kurdi (a Lebanese), Imad al Hayek, Nidal Hassan Mustapha (the brother of Abu Oubayda, Osbat al Ansar’s spokesperson), Saleh al Shayeb, Omar Dib al Sa’eed, Ahmad Yassine, and Hassan and Mohammed Abdullah Zeidan, to name only a few.⁵⁸

Other examples abound. On 7 October 2005, Osbat al Ansar issued a statement from Ein el Helweh confirming that one of its members, Abu Qateiba al-Maqdessi, became a martyr in Iraq after facing the “crusaders.”⁵⁹ On 9 June 2006, Osbat al Ansar released a message calling for a march to honor al Zarqawi.⁶⁰ Three days later, a half an hour sermon by Sheikh Abu Shari Aql at the Martyrs mosque, featuring a eulogy for al Zarqawi, was distributed across several jihadist forums.⁶¹ On 23 May 2006, Osbat al Ansar member Ayman Noor Salah (aka Abu Hafis) appeared in a video announcing his “martyrdom” under the leadership of Al Qaeda in Iraq.⁶² On 19 September 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq published and distributed the biography of Osbat al Ansar member Abu Jafar al-Maqdisi, describing the fighting in which Abu Jafar was engaged and highlighting his military prowess and courage against a purported “American cowardice.”⁶³ The biographer, Abu Ismail al-Muhajir, portrayed Abu Jafar as a close companion to al Zarqawi and his messenger, personal protector, and military and media advisor.

Osbat al Ansar is arguably the most capable (though not only) salafist jihadist group in Ein el Helweh.⁶⁴ With an estimated strength anywhere between two to three hundred members, this militant group is reputedly the source for numerous terrorist attacks against local and foreign targets in Lebanon.

In 1999, the group was accused of bombing the Lebanese Customs Directorate, as well as killing four Lebanese judges in the Justice Palace in Sidon.⁶⁵ In 2000, it was linked to an attack against the Russian embassy in Beirut with rocket-propelled grenades. The year after, Jordanian and Lebanese security forces foiled another alleged attack by the group on the Jordanian, American, and British embassies in Lebanon.⁶⁶ In October 2002, the Lebanese authorities detained two Lebanese and a Saudi national who allegedly had connections with Osbat al Ansar, for trying to set up two camps in Lebanon to harbor associates of Al Qaeda on the run. The three individuals were identified as Saudi Ihab Dafa’a (abou Hareth) and Lebanese Mohammed Sultan and Khaled Minawi. They were accused of trying to rent a house for the terrorist cell in Beirut and buy wireless communication equipment worth \$7,000 dollars for Al Qaeda’s alleged top operative in Iran, Saudi Abu Abdel Rahman al Saudi. The equipment was designed to help Saudi channel fleeing Al Qaeda men on the border between Iran and Afghanistan. The three men also planned to bring Philippine explosives experts to train salafist jihadists in Lebanon. Interrogations also allegedly revealed that Minawi traveled earlier that year with a fake passport to meet in Turkey with the head of the Al Qaeda network there, Abdallah al Turki.⁶⁷ In April 2003, Lebanese authorities arrested 22 suspected members for the bombing of a McDonald’s restaurant in Beirut. The group also attempted to assassinate the former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Vincent Battle, while he was visiting Tripoli in January 2003. The militants reportedly tried to fire an armor-piercing missile at the ambassador’s car.⁶⁸

Disagreements within Osbat al Ansar over Islamist mobilization strategies allegedly led a number of its members to split and form, along with other Islamists fighters (some of which belonging to the al Dinniyeh group), a group called Jund al Sham⁶⁹ (or Soldiers of Greater Syria, meaning present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine). The group is today dismantled and has once again bizarrely merged with Osbat al Ansar. Jund al Sham is a title claimed by several Sunni Islamic extremist entities, all or none of which may be tied together. In Lebanon, the group was led until October 2004 by Abu Yousef Sharqieh, a former official with Fatah—the Revolutionary Council, which was headed by Sabri Banna; the group is believed to be led today by not just one but a number of fighters including Imad Yassin. Banna, alias Abu Nidal, was found dead in Baghdad before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and was claimed to have committed suicide by the Iraqi authorities. He is blamed by almost all Palestinian groups of having had strong ties with Israel's foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad. Jund al Sham's alleged link to al Zarqawi stems from reports that he had arranged trainings for fighters at Al Qaeda camps. While in Pakistan, al Zarqawi made contact with Al Qaeda's leadership to train Jordanian nationals. His operatives (called Jund al Sham) began to arrive in Afghanistan in large numbers in 1999. Some of these operatives trained at Al Qaeda's Faruq Camp, where they received full support from Al Qaeda. Jund al Sham not only considers non-Muslims as infidels but also most Muslim sects, especially Shi'ite ones; its objective is to establish an Islamic caliphate in the greater Syrian region. Their former opponents, mainly Osbat al Ansar, say that their number does not exceed sixty to one hundred.⁷⁰ The group is allegedly behind a number of violent acts in Lebanon and Syria including the murder of Hizb'allah senior official Ghaleb Awali in July 2004 (Jund al Sham later confirmed its responsibility behind the assassination, although the general consensus in Lebanon is that it was Israel's Mossad who was behind the assassination) and terrorist attack against the American embassy in Damascus in September 2006.

Assessing the Threat

Since its awakening in the early 1980s, salafist militancy in Lebanon was largely defensive and reflected the perceived severity of *local* crisis conditions. Historically, Palestinian refugee camps served as hotbeds for various manifestations of Islamic militancy. Systematic security crackdowns by the Lebanese authorities, large-scale foreign (particularly Israeli) aggression against Lebanon, and violent clashes with rival Islamist groups tended to awaken and mobilize the salafist jihadist current as a whole in defense of an Islamic order. Still, salafist militancy remained grounded in local realities and only marginally (if ever) connected to Al Qaeda's global Islamic insurgency.

Although sympathetic to one another, Al Qaeda's allies in Lebanon are not united under a single umbrella or organization. Salafist jihadists in Lebanon have dissimilar agendas and are relatively small and clandestine semi-autonomous entities with informal organizational structures. Each is more concerned about its own survival than about waging an offensive jihad against "infidels." Some are also divided along political lines. Importantly, these groups have faced constant recruitment challenges within the Lebanese Sunni community, whose solid majority is opposed to salafist jihadist ideology.

Arguably, however, this relatively benign profile of salafist militancy in Lebanon is no longer germane. The tectonic changes that have taken place in Lebanon and the region over the past four years have profoundly affected and perhaps redefined salafist militancy not only in Lebanon but in the region as a whole. In other words, the threat today is both more complex and diffuse than it was in the past.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq offered global terrorism a new base of operations as it opened doors for Al Qaeda in the Middle East. Terrorism spread quickly inside Iraq and easily found Arab recruits eager to fight American forces. Spilling over to neighboring countries, salafist militancy was poised to become a key threat to the stability of countries throughout the Middle East. Lebanon, the weakest link in the chain, was no exception.

The spillover effects of the war in Iraq, the resurfacing of political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon following the May 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops (an event itself triggered by the assassination three months earlier of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri), the 2006 war between Israel and Hizb'allah, and the Sunni perception of ascending Shi'ite and Iranian power in the region gave new life and meaning to the salafist jihadist current in Lebanon. The story is now that of Fatah al Islam, the latest manifestation of salafist militancy in Lebanon.

Until May of this year, few people had heard of Fatah al Islam. Its true identity in fact remains controversial. Although some observers point to its links with Al Qaeda, others, including Lebanese senior security officials, claim that it is no more than Damascus's latest invention to advance Syrian interests in Lebanon and derail the establishment of an international tribunal to try al Hariri's killers (though no smoking guns have emerged from the UN investigation, Syria remains the prime suspect).

Fatah al Islam surfaced in northern Lebanon in 2006 when it publicly claimed to have split from the Syrian-based Fatah Intifada, itself a 1980s splinter of the more mainstream Fatah, led by the late Yasser Arafat. Its origins are Palestinian but the majority of its Arab fighters and cadres, who number anywhere from 500 to 900, come from Iraq. The group also has a sizable Lebanese constituency, evidenced by the high number of Lebanese that have been captured and killed in the ongoing battle with the Lebanese Army. Having been ousted from the neighboring Baddawi camp by rival Palestinian forces, Fatah al Islam now resides in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al Bared.

To claim that Fatah al Islam is merely a Syrian tool is not only simplistic but counterproductive. With the wealth of information that has recently surfaced, Fatah al Islam's connections with Al Qaeda are verifiable and unmistakable. Three points stand out: one, it has repeatedly claimed to be inspired by Al Qaeda's worldview and ideology; two, it shares Al Qaeda's *modus operandi*; three, its leaders have long standing contacts with Al Qaeda operatives in Iraq and worldwide.

Fatah al Islam's particular links to Al Qaeda in Iraq can be traced to a statement issued by the "Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq" (which communicates its Iraq agenda with bin Laden, al Zawahiri, and other Al Qaeda central staff members) in which it claimed to have exported its franchise to northern Lebanon under the umbrella of this new salafist jihadist group.

According to press reports, Fatah al Islam's main leader is Shaqer al Absi, a Palestinian whom Jordanian officials insist is an associate of the late Al Qaeda emir in Iraq Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi. Along with al Zarqawi, Absi was tried in absentia in Jordan and sentenced to death for his role in the 2002 slaying of a U.S. aid worker. He was also implicated in other planned terror plots in the Hashemite Kingdom. Around the time of the American official's death, Absi was jailed in Syria on charges of planning terrorist attacks inside that country; he was suspiciously released by the Syrian authorities in the fall. Born in 1955 to a poor Palestinian family in Ein Sultan, a village near the West Bank town of Jericho, Absi joined the Fatah movement under Arafat at the age of 18. Fearing arrest amid tensions between Jordan and the Palestinian movement, which sought to topple the Jordanian king, Absi fled to Tunisia in the early 1970s. From Tunisia, he traveled to Libya where he became a professional air force pilot. He attended aviation courses in several East European countries,

including East Germany, the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Months before the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Absi met and married a Palestinian girl in Lebanon. Today, he is embroiled in a life or death battle against the Lebanese Army and threatening civilians with attacks throughout the country.

Absi's role notwithstanding, Fatah al Islam is a clandestine and fluid network of salafist jihadist fighters who do not necessarily see eye to eye on jihad-related activities. Fatah al Islam's leadership and virtual organizational structure, as pointed out by Hazim al Amine, can be divided into three distinct layers.⁷¹ Those who have been killed so far by the Lebanese Army come from the second tier and tend to have special combat skills (the Syrian Mehyeddine Abd al Hay; Aby Midyan, the leader of the cell that was behind the double attack on a bus in the Mountains above Beirut in March; and the Lebanese Saddam al Haj Deeb who was accused of participating in the attempted bombing of two trains in Germany). The first tier is managed by three obscure ideologues, one of whom is Muhammad Ali Omar (a.k.a. Abu Hattab and Abu Azzam) who, unlike Absi, has yet to make a public appearance and who has most probably fled the country. The third tier includes the scores of fighters now coming from Iraq (many of whom are Yemeni and Saudi) who have been serving as logistical facilitators, technical experts and recruiters in northern Lebanon. Sleeper cells linked to Fatah al Islam are scattered across the North, most noticeably in Tripoli's Abu Samra, Akkar, and al Koura.

Spokesmen for Fatah al Islam claim that the group's only objective is to protect the Sunnis of Lebanon and to reform the Palestinian refugee camps according to the Islamic code. Their true ambition however, like Al Qaeda's, is to create an Islamic insurgent force to liberate Jerusalem and other Muslim lands from the infidels. The road to Jerusalem, Robert Fisk correctly wrote, lies through the city of Tripoli.⁷²

The very nature of the salafist jihadist movement in Lebanon plays against its ability to wage a durable and lethal insurgency. The Lebanese Army and its intelligence services have thus far dealt heavy blows to Fatah al Islam, preventing it from attempting to solidify and regroup the entire salafist jihadist movement under its umbrella. This in no way suggests that the security threat these factions pose to Lebanon is insignificant or inconsequential. As previously documented, the history of terrorism and political violence as perpetrated by salafist jihadist factions in Lebanon against foreign and Lebanese targets is itself cause for concern and indicative of these actors' terrorist potential and capabilities.

Unless one lives in suspected salafist jihadist strongholds for a considerable period of time and patiently conducts field research, it is almost impossible to provide an objective account of the total size of the salafist jihadist current in Lebanon. Yet, contrary to reports released by foreign intelligence agencies, Lebanon's local and foreign salafist jihadists number, according to independent (though not necessarily totally reliable) sources at the intelligence branches of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Army,⁷³ not in thousands but in hundreds and even these, as previously suggested, are splintered into factions.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, despite recent statements made by Al Qaeda ideologues underscoring the utility of Lebanon as another battlefield against the West, the "Al Qaeda hard-core" has yet to unequivocally declare Lebanon a theater for major operations. For Al Qaeda's senior leadership, notwithstanding the many advantages the Lebanese battlefield offers to the Islamic insurgency in the Middle Eastern corridor (most importantly the geographical proximity to the Israeli-Palestinian theater in general and the spiritual significance of Jerusalem in particular), Lebanon is not currently a priority; Iraq is.

A window into the strategic thinking of the leadership of Al Qaeda, in which Lebanon features only marginally, is provided by Jordanian analyst Bassam al-Baddarin.⁷⁵

Al-Baddarin explores what looks like a coherent long-term strategy by relying on the assorted writings of one of the Al Qaeda leadership's "strategic brains," Muhammad Ibrahim Makkawi. The document written and posted on the Internet by Makkawi, entitled "al-Qaeda's Strategy to the Year 2020," shows that Al Qaeda has already started on its master plan, to pursue a long-term jihad campaign of five distinct phases to rid the ummah of all forms of oppression. In the first stage, Al Qaeda aimed to provoke what Makkawi describes as "the ponderous American elephant" into invading Muslim lands. The second stage in the military plan was to reawaken another "giant elephant"—the ummah itself—by bringing large numbers of American soldiers onto Muslim soil, enraging the ummah, and provoking a full-scale confrontation. The third stage is the expansion of the conflict throughout the region and the engagement with the United States in a long war of attrition. Such expansion involves the opening of a jihadist triangle of terror, beginning with Afghanistan, passing through Iran and southern Iraq, and ending with southern Turkey, southern Lebanon, and Syria. The fourth stage is to become a global network through effecting organizational changes that will further take Al Qaeda outside the scope of international security forces.⁷⁶ The strategic planning capabilities of Al Qaeda have also been picked up by many Al Qaeda analysts around the world including the editor in chief of the London-based Arabic daily *al Quds al Arabi*, Abdel Bari Atwan. In his book "the Secret History of al Qaeda," Atwan, who had personally interviewed Osama bin Laden in 1996, writes:

What really sets al Qaeda apart and, I believe, makes it so 'successful' in its own terms, is that it has painstakingly developed a long-term strategy on the basis of experience, research and observation, which it strictly adhered to. This strategy will be the guiding principle for the future of al Qaeda.⁷⁷

Given Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership position within Al Qaeda, the two messages⁷⁸ he issued on 20 December 2006 and 13 February 2007, in which he briefly addressed Lebanon and Security Council Resolution 1701, are worth exploring. The fact that al-Zawahiri, not bin Laden, issued the statements should not go unnoticed. Although an effective organizer and military tactician, al-Zawahiri lacks the prestige and charisma of his superior. Bin Laden is the icon and central rallying figure in the jihadists' fight against infidels worldwide. Statements issued by bin Laden and the principles he articulates resonate with Muslims worldwide; he is hailed throughout much of the global Islamist community as the symbol of resistance to the enemies of Islam. This does not mean that any call for jihad issued by bin Laden is automatically obeyed and acted on. That there is a correlation between Al Qaeda's leaders calling for attacks and their eventual execution is certain. What is uncertain, however, is how strong and automatic this correlation is.

It is impossible to know precisely why Al Qaeda's allies act only selectively on their leaders' calls for jihad. It is safe to assume that answering bin Laden's call (or al-Zawahiri's) is largely contingent on the local environment. If conditions permit, it is assumed, jihad is waged against the "infidels." If local circumstances are unfavorable, jihad is postponed (sometimes indefinitely). After all, launching a terrorist operation that has a good chance of succeeding requires extensive field work including intelligence gathering, surveillance, recruitment, financing, and rehearsal, all of which are extremely difficult to carry out under conditions of tight scrutiny by the authorities.

Perhaps a good way to explain the decentralized relationship between Al Qaeda and its allies around the world is by first shedding some light on the definition of Al Qaeda. What does Al Qaeda stand for and how does it generally operate?

Many are the definitions of Al Qaeda that have surfaced over the years in the terrorism literature. Divergences aside, Al Qaeda is commonly believed to be this terrorist organization founded more than a decade ago by a wealthy Saudi Arabian religious fanatic that has grown into a fantastically powerful network, comprising thousands of trained and motivated men, watching and waiting in every country ready to carry out the orders of their leader, Osama bin Laden. This picture of Al Qaeda is simplistic and hugely flawed. To see Al Qaeda as a coherent and tight-knit organization with a defined ideology and personnel that had emerged as early as the late 1980s is to misunderstand not only its true nature but also the nature of Islamic radicalism then and now. The contingent, dynamic, and local elements of what is a broad movement rooted in historical trends of great complexity are lost. This tripartite division, as presented by Jason Burke, is helpful in defining Al Qaeda and understanding its nature and that of modern Islamic militancy.⁷⁹ The first element is the “Al Qaeda hard-core,” which consists of bin Laden’s early close associates, advisors, and preeminent militants. In other words, it is the leadership of Al Qaeda. The second element involves the scores of other militant Islamic groups around the world, often referred to as a loose “network of networks” that follow salafist jihadist ideology and could though not necessarily have to have connections with the “Al Qaeda hard-core.” Groups that have been examined in this article, including Osbat al Ansar, the now dismantled Jund al Sham and al Dinniyeh group, and rogue (turned salafist jihadist) elements inside Harakat al Tawhid al Islami and al Jemaah Islamiyah, are examples of such groups and individuals. The third element is the idea, worldview, and ideology of Al Qaeda and those who subscribe to it. In very broad terms, it is those young Muslim men who share the key ideas and objectives of bin Laden and the “Al Qaeda hard-core” and who are sufficiently motivated to devote considerable proportions of their lives and energies to the most extreme ends of Islamic militancy. In Lebanon, it is no exaggeration to state that the disaffected members of the Sunni community who belong to the lower and middle classes are all sufficiently moved by the ideology of Osama bin Laden and hence are potential recruits for Al Qaeda.

In Lebanon, although Lebanese salafist jihadist entities may see bin Laden as a heroic figure symbolic of their collective struggle, they have their own leaders and often deeply parochial agendas; they do not necessarily feel compelled to subordinate themselves to bin Laden or al-Zawahiri. Moreover, salafist jihadists in Lebanon have not one but several enemies—the Lebanese government, Israel, Shi’ite and Christian groups, and UNIFIL—and with their limited resources, selection and prioritization of targets are key to their strategic posture.

It is also worth noting that the salafist jihadist scene in Lebanon has yet to produce a unifying leader of the stature of the late al Zarqawi in Iraq. Although it has been circulated by Lebanese sources that the Emir of Bilad al Sham (who operates under the name of Abu Rushd al Miqati) is today present in Peshawar, is Lebanese and has fought in Iraq, and has extensive relations with salafist jihadist factions operating in Tripoli and Ein el Helweh, conclusive evidence remains inaccessible.

Finally, it is extremely difficult to dissect the multiplicity of actors that arm and financially support the various salafist jihadist groups in Lebanon. Most of the weaponry that enters the Palestinian refugee camps is of Syrian origin. Funding also comes from the Arab Gulf, where wealthy individuals with close government links seek to shape the strategic environment and balance of (communal) power in the region.

The Syrian Factor

Another important factor that must be included in any assessment of the threat of salafist jihadism in Lebanon is the role Syria is able to play in indirectly aiding this phenomenon

grow and operate on Lebanese soil. Support for militant Palestinian and Lebanese groups has long been an integral part of Syrian foreign policy. Daniel Byman accurately explains that aspect of Syrian policy:

[Syria's] support is nuanced and complex, reflecting Damascus's desire to both exploit terrorist groups and limit them "In many ways, Syria represents an antagonistic sponsor of terrorism, helping many particular groups become stronger but also working to control them and subordinate their overall cause to Syrian domestic and geopolitical goals."⁸⁰

Syria has backed a wide range of Palestinian militant groups over the years. Such backing stems from a mix of ideological, domestic, and strategic concerns and considerations. In the 1970s and 1980s, Damascus worked closely with several Palestinian groups, directing their operations and offering them funding, training, and organizational aid. Groups like Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the PFLP, and PFLP-GC all reside in Syria, and several groups maintain headquarters there.⁸¹ The sanctuary in Syria allows groups to coordinate their activities, organize, and otherwise operate with little interference, even though Damascus itself is often not directly involved in these activities.

In Lebanon, Syria uses its outstanding influence⁸² to indirectly support a number of Lebanese and Palestinian militant groups, including the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), Hamas, Fatah, PIJ, and other factions operating from the northern and southern Palestinian refugee camps.⁸³ Often with Syrian sponsorship, these groups have engaged in military activity in Lebanon to advance Damascus's foreign (and sometimes domestic) policy goals. Syria's indirect backing covers all Lebanese territory, stretching from the northern to the southern regions and including all the Palestinian refugee camps.

It has been a fixed policy by Syria to deliberately divide all the militant groups it supports, as this would enable it to effectively control them and direct their militancy. This is not to suggest that Syria controls all Lebanese and Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon. Some of these groups, although few, have been able to retain operational independence and create distance with the Syrian regime. Others, like the salafist jihadist groups, totally oppose Syria as they view the Alawite regime in Damascus as illegitimate and treacherous, having repressed and fought the Islamist Syrian Muslim Brotherhood since 1976.

Syria need not do much to allow Al Qaeda prosper in and operate from Lebanon. The prerequisites for such an eventuality, as earlier demonstrated, already exist. All Damascus has to do is refrain from blocking the transfer of additional Al Qaeda fighters and terrorist finances and equipment from Iraq and Syria into Lebanon, something it has had little problem doing for the past couple of years. The Syrian regime understands the dangers of the game it is allegedly playing (which it is also accused of playing more explicitly in Iraq by providing a range of support to Iraqi insurgents⁸⁴), given the strong ideological and political enmities between secular Damascus and militant Islamist movements and the bloody history they have shared since the 1970s. However, Damascus has shown it is willing to accept the risks given the relative benefits such policies have earned it over the years. It is therefore not misleading to argue that absent serious engagement with Syria, Damascus will continue on such course for the foreseeable future.

Vanguards at War: Hizb'allah and Al Qaeda

There is a general suspicion among parts of the intelligence community in Washington that Hizb'allah and Al Qaeda, despite their differences, have cooperated in the past and

continue to cooperate on jihad-related activities against the United States and its interests at home and abroad.

In June 2004, the U.S. 9/11 commission found no operational ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq. It did, however, conclude that bin Laden's global terrorist network had long-running contacts with Iran and Hizb'allah. The alleged relationship between Al Qaeda and Hizb'allah hit the spotlight in 2000 when it was reported that Imad Mugniyah, an international terrorist who is widely believed to be associated with Hizb'allah, met with bin Laden in Sudan to plan the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa.

Without access to reliable intelligence, the aforementioned allegation and others simply cannot be independently refuted. That one or more alleged Hizb'allah members may have met in their lifetimes with a leader or fighter belonging to Al Qaeda's global network is a possibility that cannot be repudiated.

The assumption that Hizb'allah and Al Qaeda have a solid operational or strategic relationship and cooperate on matters pertaining to global jihad can be challenged on the basis of the following four reasons.

One, irreconcilable theological differences: Al Qaeda follows a Manichean ideology that sees Shi'ite Muslims as the lowest of the low, even worse than the Jews and the "crusaders." For Al Qaeda, Shi'ites are rawafidh (rejectionist Muslims) and should be fought like all other infidels. A week before he was killed by a U.S. air strike, the Al Qaeda leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, issued a fiery statement accusing Hizb'allah of acting as a protective buffer for Israel. Hizb'allah, generally reserved in its comments on internal Islamic issues, first commented on Al Qaeda and its ideology soon after the 9/11 attacks when Hassan Nasrallah, the party's secretary general, described it as an "entity trapped in medieval ages and bent on killing innocent Muslims." In June 2006, Nawaf al-Musawi, the director of Hizb'allah's external relations office, replied to Zarqawi's allegations by accusing him of being a tool of the United States and Israel against Arab resistance groups and by viewing his criminal acts as solely intended to ignite civil wars and sectarian fighting.

Two, conflicting political strategies: Contrary to Al Qaeda, Hizb'allah has accepted the political process and has been legitimately engaged in participatory and competitive politics (notwithstanding of course the controversial nature of its paramilitary wing) in Lebanon since the nation's first post-civil war parliamentary elections in 1992. Although Al Qaeda is bent on destroying Arab regimes and their allies and on replacing them with Taliban-style systems of governance, Hizb'allah aims to work within the Lebanese system. As revolutionary as it is, Hizb'allah indirectly negotiates and makes deals with its enemies (evidenced in the several prisoner exchanges with Israel over the last decade). In sum, contrary to Al Qaeda, Hizb'allah can be engaged.

Three, strategic differences: It is hard to envision any strategic relationship between Al Qaeda and Hizb'allah when the former is officially at war with the latter's strategic orbit, comprised of Iran and Syria.⁸⁵ Several of Al Qaeda's leaders and grand ideologues have issued statements over the years describing Hizb'allah as nothing but an "agent of the Safavid empire" (in reference to Iran) and interpreting the Shi'ite group's agenda as solely intended to conspire to destroy Islam and to resuscitate Persian imperial rule over the Middle East and ultimately the world.

Four, the physical state of war between the two entities: Al Qaeda has demonstrated its hatred of Hizb'allah over the years by launching a number of attacks against the Shi'ite group. In July 2004, Jund al Sham claimed responsibility for the murder of a Hizb'allah senior official, Ghaleb Awali. In December 2005, in an attempt to implicate Hizb'allah in an attack against Israel, four fighters of Al Qaeda in Iraq launched 10 Krad rockets from southern Lebanon into Kiryat Shemona in northern Israel. Finally, in April 2006, the

Lebanese authorities foiled a plot by a local Salafist jihadist network to assassinate Hassan Nasrallah.

Lumping Al Qaeda and Hizb'allah in the same basket will only do disservice to the global counterterrorism campaign. Each entity poses a distinct set of challenges to the United States and the West. Underscoring their differences serves the global war on terrorism better than creating a sense of solidarity between them.

Countering the Threat: Policy Prescriptions

Finding a long-term solution to the threat of salafist jihadism in Lebanon will ultimately require a careful understanding of its complex root causes. As cliché as it sounds, there is no military solution to Al Qaeda's growing presence in Lebanon. Lebanon's most potent and strategic antidote to extremist and militant ideology involves a socioeconomic vision that is rooted in policies of balanced development. Terms like employment, education, social security, social justice, and general welfare are immensely better equipped in fighting salafist jihadism in Lebanon than those of counterterrorism, decapitation, or search and destroy.

The Lebanese state must learn from its past mistakes and include the previously examined underdeveloped regions and others in the large-scale post-war reconstruction process that is presently taking place. Focusing exclusively on rebuilding the capital at the expense of other regions has proven to be a disastrous policy over the years. Building solid state presence and capacity in relatively deprived regions in the country is fundamental.

In addition, Al Qaeda should ultimately be denied safe havens in Lebanon. Such safe havens include a number of northern and southern cities and towns and happen to center around the deprived Palestinian refugee camps across the country. This is a huge challenge. The Palestinian armed presence inside and outside Lebanon's refugee camps will likely present itself as a very complicated security issue facing the Lebanese state in the foreseeable future.⁸⁶ The issue of the Palestinian weapons⁸⁷ is, as former acting Lebanese Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat correctly put it, "the elephant in the Lebanese living room."⁸⁸

There is today an apparent consensus among the main Lebanese political factions to refuse the bearing of weapons by Palestinians outside the camps and to supervise the regulation of weapons inside the camps. Whether a genuine and transparent dialogue and a solution to the sensitive issue of Palestinian arms will emerge from the recent developments—such as the ongoing dialogue between the Lebanese government and the Palestinians—is questionable at the moment. Yet, the mere fact that a Lebanese–Palestinian discourse has opened up should be seen as a step in the right direction, which could further lead to negotiations on alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people by providing them with basic civil needs, rights, and liberties. Obviously, the Palestinian refugee problem in Lebanon (and other countries in the region) is intrinsically linked to the broader Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As such, only a comprehensive and lasting settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will bring about a definitive solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in its distinctive manifestations in various countries in the Middle East.

Finally, given their important role in and access to Sunni Muslim constituencies in Lebanon, the Lebanese state should finally aid moderate Sunni Islamic actors and official institutions in their efforts to convince extremist elements to snub militancy and embrace peaceful Islamic activism instead. The leadership of Al Qaeda most often relies on and enlists the support of underground as well as legitimate political parties to radicalize,

mobilize, and recruit Muslims. Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami is a fairly recent creation and has not yet reached political and organizational maturity (although its bodies are established and old); it is still a loose alliance (hence the term umbrella) whose members do not necessarily see eye to eye on all aspects of Islamic activism. To exploit such potential differences, Al Qaeda could (and has in fact already tried to) penetrate the umbrella organization and win over recruits, an outcome the Lebanese state must seriously avoid.

To jumpstart the process of combating Al Qaeda in Lebanon, the following near-term recommendations should be considered by the Lebanese government and its global allies, including the United States:

- Engage Syria—while preserving Lebanese sovereignty and independence—with the intention of securing its intelligence cooperation on arms smuggling and human trafficking along the Lebanese–Syrian borders: As argued earlier, Lebanon’s Al Qaeda problem is not caused by Syria. This hardly means that Damascus is innocent from what is taking place in northern Lebanon. A long-term solution to Al Qaeda’s growing presence in Lebanon simply cannot be attained without Syria’s cooperation. The Syrian government has recently said that it has “real hard knowledge” about the presence of Al Qaeda sleeper cells in Lebanon and that it is prepared to share it with the United States.⁸⁹ Syrian Cabinet member Amr Salem was also quoted saying that his government was ready to mediate discussions on Iraq between the United States and Iran. At this stage, it is almost impossible to judge the authenticity of Syria’s claims. Some commentators have interpreted Syria’s proposal as a threat or a reminder by Damascus that it still holds the key to stability in Lebanon, and that it remains the main player in the region that is capable of curbing militant Islamism. There is enough truth in such assessments. Nevertheless, assuming Syria’s proposal is valid, the question is what will Damascus ask in return for its cooperation on such essential demands.⁹⁰ Syria has already balked at the suggestion that UN peacekeepers could be deployed along its border with Lebanon. Ultimately, when it comes to proud and defiant states like Syria, the challenge is to find the right mixture of incentives and penalties that will induce cooperation.
- Improve surveillance, albeit intelligently and without provocation, around the Palestinian camps: It would seem rational for a salafist jihadist group to plan for future terrorist attacks in an area where Lebanese law enforcement agencies have little or no access. Ein el Helweh, for example, constitutes the perfect though not only site for planning a terrorist operation. Although it is presently imprudent for the Lebanese army to enter deep inside the camps and make random security checks,⁹¹ it should alternatively beef up security around Ein el Helweh and the northern camps of Nahr al Bared and Baddawi by setting up closed-circuit cameras and other modern surveillance equipment. The Lebanese Army seems to be moving already in such direction as on 30 October 2006, a high-ranking Lebanese Army official entered Ein el Helweh, for the first time in nearly 30 years, to meet with representatives from various Palestinian factions (with the logistical help of Hamas representative in Lebanon Osama Hamdan) including Osbat al Ansar to discuss the deployment of the Lebanese Army in the neighborhood of Taamir, located on the outskirts of Ein el Helweh.⁹² A couple of days after the negotiations, the Lebanese Army carefully deployed in Taamir, using more than twenty armored patrol carriers and five hundred soldiers with heavy artillery who are now in geographical proximity (a dozen of meters) to the moukhayyam al tawari’ (emergency camp), where Osbat al Ansar resides.

- Seek the cooperation of Hizb'allah, whose human and technical intelligence assets are essential to ensuring Lebanon's and UNIFIL's security: As counterintuitive or irrational as this might sound to Western and American officials, it would be foolish to deny the fact that Hizb'allah's human and technical intelligence assets are well disposed to help curb and contain the spread of salafist jihadism in the southern regions. At the time of writing, the highly polarized political environment in Beirut and the ensuing confrontational relationship between Hizb'allah and its allies in the opposition on one hand and the loyalist ruling coalition (led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Parliamentary majority leader Saad al Hariri, the son of assassinated and former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri) on the other hand, obviously works against any mutual efforts at conceptualizing a unified security front aimed at terminating the threat of local salafist jihadism.
- Adequately finance the budget of the Lebanese Military Intelligence Directorate (MID): Post-Syria Lebanon must embark on a serious and holistic process of security sector restructuring.⁹³ For nearly fifteen post-war years, the Damascus-controlled Lebanese security sector served as a structural impediment to Lebanese freedom and human development. Syrian intervention forced the Lebanese state to strategically marginalize all local forces that were capable of change or influence. Indeed, during Syrian presence, Lebanese political society suffered from repressive action, intimidation, and human rights violations. Restoring the integrity, credibility, and effectiveness of the Lebanese security apparatus is of vital importance to the future security and stability of the country. As yet, the Lebanese government's short-term operational measures at enhancing security have been deficient at best, as such procedures have not only failed to prevent the occurrence of additional assassinations and security incidents in the country but also fell short of a wider security reform approach. However, given how sensitive and politically loaded the task of Lebanese security restructuring is, the process could take forever. To efficiently start curbing the spread of Al Qaeda in Lebanon today, the Lebanese government should efficiently use the military aid it is receiving from the United States and the international community to supplement the budget of the MID. Despite its limited funds, small staff, and its very old technical equipment, the MID is the most experienced, effective, and capable counterterrorism public institution in the country. Trained by the Syrian military intelligence services since 1976, the MID has been able to foil numerous terrorist plots in Lebanon over the years.⁹⁴ In sum, the MID, which falls under the authority of the Minister of Defense, himself supervised by the collegial body of the Council of Ministers, should be, at least temporarily, at the forefront of any local counterterrorism campaign.

Conclusions

The Al Qaeda leadership's hitherto indecisiveness on the utility of Lebanon as a theater for major operations against the West and its Arab allies and the disunity of the salafist jihadist movement in Lebanon support the conclusion that salafist jihadism in Lebanon will continue to present itself as a containable problem. This, however, could change in the event that either bin Laden or Zawahiri (more importantly bin Laden) delivers a message in which he would start *explicitly* endorsing the salafist jihadist movement in Lebanon and call for its support in its fight against "infidels." The Al Qaeda leadership's focus will remain Iraq

and Palestine for the foreseeable future, and Lebanon will continue to serve as a staging ground to both theaters.

The previous conclusion, however, does not suggest that the threat posed by Lebanon-based Al Qaeda-inspired groups to Lebanon is minimal or nonexistent; it is real. Lebanese ruling elites have a tendency, for political reasons, to indifferently treat and often play down the threat of Sunni radicalism in their country or to blame its militant effects purely on Syria. But by burying their heads in the sand, Lebanon's ruling factions are missing an important opportunity to contain such threat at a relatively early stage in its development. It is no doubt that salafist jihadism in Lebanon, partly caused by extreme living conditions and fueled by a violent regional environment is gradually but surely growing.

Reducing the threat of salafist jihadism will require a balanced mix of soft and hard measures. Hard measures include active security and counterterrorism measures by the Lebanese military and security institutions aimed at denying Al Qaeda safe havens across the country. Soft tactics include creative diplomacy on behalf of Lebanon and its global allies to engage Syria, a country that has considerable intelligence over a large number of (though by no means all) Sunni Islamist militant groups in Lebanon and the region. Eliminating the threat of salafist jihadism starts with a serious and long-term effort by the Lebanese state to tackle some of its causes, which are reflected in social, economic, and political grievances.

If Lebanese officials do not swiftly and seriously deal with the spread of salafist jihadism in their country, it is only a matter of time before this violent movement solidifies, finds new leaders, and reaches organizational maturity, at which point it would be much harder to contain and eliminate. At the time of this writing, it seems reasonable to predict that the Lebanese Army's battle with Al Qaeda-inspired entities has just started.

Notes

1. For example, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 184–190.

2. This is a view espoused by a large number of political Islam scholars including Fawaz Gerges. See Gerges's *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. Referenced in Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The Salafi Movement in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32(2) (May 2000), p. 224.

4. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 19.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

6. Jason Franks, "Rethinking the Roots of Terrorism: Orthodox Terrorism Theory and Beyond," Draft, 10 April 2005.

7. Examples of first rate studies on Lebanese democracy and system of governance include: Michael Hudson, "Democracy and Social Mobilization in Lebanese Politics," *Comparative Politics* 1(2) (January 1969), pp. 245–263; Richard Hrair Dekmejian, "Consociational Democracy in Crisis: The Case of Lebanon," *Comparative Politics* 10(2) (January 1978), pp. 251–265; Theodore Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon. Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (Oxford and London: Centre for Lebanese Studies and Tauris, 1993); Leonard Binder, ed., *Politics in Lebanon* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1966); Samir Khalaf, *Lebanon's Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Farid El Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967–1976* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

8. Michael Hudson, "Democracy and Social Mobilization in Lebanese Politics," *Comparative Politics* 1(2) (January 1969).

9. For a detailed discussion of the problems of the electoral law in Lebanon and the prospects for electoral reform, see Julia Choucair, "Lebanon: Finding a Path from Deadlock to Democracy," *Carnegie Papers*, No. 64, January 2006.

10. Sateh Noureddine and Laurie King-Irani, "Elections Pose Lebanon's Old Questions Anew," *Middle East Report Online* (31 May 2005) (www.merip.org/mero/mero053105.html)

11. Paul Salem, "Lebanon at the Crossroads: Rebuilding An Arab Democracy," *Saban Center Middle East Memo # 7*, 31 May 2005 (www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/salemmemo20050531.htm), p. 7.

12. The crisis of individual and collective identity among Muslims stems from the progressive decline of the global Islamic community (the ummah), which felt it was losing the ideological and civilizational battle to the West and its respective system of beliefs.

13. For more on the process of persuasion, read Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al Muhajiroun and Radical Islam," available at (www.yale.edu/polisci/info/conferences/Islamic%20Radicalism/papers/wiktorowicz-paper.pdf).

14. Salafist activity in the Sunni inhabited regions of Lebanon, and especially in the Beirut area of Tariq al Jdideh, Iqlim al Kharroub, and Aramoun, has also been common for the past three decades. However, such activity is not as widespread and organized as in the other regions that are mentioned in this study.

15. *Assafir*, 19 September 2005. A Lebanese journalist who focuses on political Islam and Islamist movements in the Middle East, speaking on condition of anonymity to the authors challenged such claims arguing that salafism first emerged in Beirut and later spread to Tripoli and other Lebanese towns and cities.

16. Sheikh Khaled, who spoke to the authors on condition of anonymity, is a 72-year-old Lebanese Sunni cleric. He has lived all his life in Tripoli and has witnessed firsthand its bright and dark periods.

17. Since Lebanon's independence in 1943, Tripoli has had a handful of prime ministers, the most important of which belonging to the Karami family (Abdul Hamid Karami once in 1945, Rashid Karami eight times from 1955 to 1987, and Omar Karami twice from 1990 to 1992 and from 2004 to 2005).

18. *The Independent*, 22 July 1989.

19. *Al Hayat*, 18 August 2005.

20. Often considered as part of the Syrian space, Tripoli served as a safe haven for many members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1978–1982 war against the Ba'thist regime.

21. Nizar Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon: A Guide," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 1(3), September 1997.

22. *Ibid.*

23. For more on Fathi Yakan, see Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce Riedel, "Expanding the Jihad: Hizb'allah's Sunni Islamist Network," *The Brookings Institution*, 23 February 2007.

24. On 28 July 2005, Fathi Yakan issued a statement explaining his sharp disapproval with the militant strategies of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and urging them to stop spilling the blood of innocents. The statement was picked up by the website of the Muslim Brotherhood at www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ID=13351&SectionID=0&Searching=1

25. In September 2006, Fathi Yakan and his delegation (all former enemies of the Syrian regime, having worked closely with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) were invited to Damascus by Syrian President Bashar al Assad to discuss developments in the region, particularly in Lebanon, and the repercussions of the Summer 2006 war with Israel. See *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, "Syrian leaders discuss Lebanon with Islamist leader, joint council chief," 19 September 2006.

26. *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, "Islamist figure in Lebanon announces formation of Islamic Action Front," 5 August 5 2006.

27. *Assafir*, 8 February 2003.

28. Bernard Rougier, *Le Jihad Au Quotidien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, November 2004).

29. *Assafir*, 8 February 2003.

30. Discussion between the authors and Salim Atwa, a Arqoub resident and member of the village's salafist group.
31. Nurtured by the Syrian intelligence services in the mid-1980s to contain the power of Lebanese radical Islamism, the *Jam'iyyat al Mashari' al Khayriyya al Islamiyya* (or *Ahbash*, in reference to the Ethiopian Sheikh who founded the movement) established their regional center in the Ein el Helweh camp in the early 1990s.
32. *Assafir*, 8 February 2003.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Assafir*, 27 September 2005.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist, Inside Muslim Jihadism* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc, 2006), pp. 273–277.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *The International Herald Tribune*, 3 November 2004.
42. *Agence France Presse*, 27 September 2004.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Assafir*, 13 February 2003.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Qasim Muhammad Zahir, Ali Ahmad Hatim, Bahjat Gebara, Farid Ghayth, Muhyi al Din Umays, Ahmad Abu Ghawsh, Qasim Suwwan, Jamal Umays, Zuhayr Umays, Fadi Ghayth, Hussein Tleis, Ahid Mazlum, and Ali Ahmad al-Hammuri.
47. *Assafir*, 13 February 2003.
48. It is safe to assume that the majority of Lebanese society blamed the PLO for most of the violence that has ravaged their country for more than 15 years.
49. Discussion between the authors and Lebanese Sunni cleric Ahmad Sa'eed Moukhallati in his private residence in Sidon.
50. *Assafir*, 27 September 2005.
51. See details of UNRWA's program in Ein el Helweh at (www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon/einelhilweh.html)
52. Gary C. Gambill, "Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon's Zone of Unlaw," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 5(6) (June 2003), available at (<http://www.meib.org/articles/030611.htm>).
53. Bernard Rougier, *Le Jihad Au Quotidien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, November 2004), pp. 39–44.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–44.
56. *Assafir*, 10 January 2003.
57. Bernard Rougier, *Le Jihad Au Quotidien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, November 2004), pp. 43–44.
58. *Al Hayat*, 14 September 2005.
59. SITE institute, "Asbat al Ansar in Lebanon Announces that One of its Members Has Become a 'Martyr' in Iraq," 7 October 2005.
60. SITE Institute, "Asbat al-Ansar Calls for a Procession in Palestine to Honor Zarqawi," 9 June 2006.
61. SITE Institute, "Sermon from al-Shuhada'a Mosque in Ayn al-Hilwah Camp Eulogizing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Emir of al-Qaeda in Iraq," 12 June 2006.
62. SITE Institute, "Video Will of Ayman Noor Salah, a Member of Asbat al Ansar who Died in Iraq under al-Qaeda in Iraq," 24 May 2006.
63. SITE Institute, "From the Biographies of the Prominent Martyrs of the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq, Abu Jafar al-Maqdisi," 19 September 2006.

64. Assertion made by a senior Lebanese military intelligence officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, during a meeting between the authors and the officer at the Lebanese Ministry of Defense (MOD).

65. *Agence France Presse*, 9 June 1999.

66. *Agence France Presse*, 16 October 2001.

67. *Agence France Presse*, 9 October 2002.

68. Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, 'Asbat al Ansar, available at (www.fas.org/irp/world/para/asbat.htm).

69. For more on Jund al Sham, see MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, Jund Al-Sham, available at (www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4503).

70. *Al Hayat*, 16 June 2003.

71. *Al Arabiyah*, 23 May 2007.

72. *The Independent*, 25 May 2007.

73. Interview between Bilal Y. Saab and a senior ISF officer who has a leading position in the intelligence branch of the force and another interview with a senior officer in the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) inside the Lebanese MOD. Both officers, according to their colleagues, enjoy a relatively good degree of autonomy and professionalism in their work; they spoke on condition of anonymity.

74. The overwhelming majority of fighters in Ein el Helweh, for example, belong to the secular Palestinian organization Fatah, viewed by *Osbat al Ansar* and other salafist jihadists as "infidels." Fatah members do not support Al Qaeda and have tried to undermine and disarm salafist jihadists like Khattab and his bands. More than once the two rival camps have engaged in deadly skirmishes.

75. *Al Quds al Arabi*, 11 March 2005.

76. For a discussion in English of al-Baddarin's article, see Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda's Strategy Until 2020," *Terrorism Focus* 2(6) (17 March 2005).

77. Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al Qaeda* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 220.

78. In his first message al-Zawahiri said: "... all the UN resolutions that have taken parts of it, and recognized Israel's presence on it, starting with the partition resolution to Resolution 1701 are all null and void, and, in the balance of Islam, are worthless. We should reject, renounce and fight these resolutions. We should not take hesitant positions towards these resolutions by saying that we will respect and acknowledge them as a fact of life, and other such statements that would squander the Muslim's rights. Recognizing these resolutions implies the recognition of the Hebrew state." And in his second message he said: "I call on the brothers of Islam and of jihad [struggle] in Lebanon not to yield to resolution 1701 and not to accept... the presence of international and Crusader [Western] forces in south Lebanon."

79. Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 13–22.

80. Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections, States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 117–153.

81. U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2004), p. 93.

82. Syria's 29-year presence in Lebanon came to an end in April 2005, when Damascus, following intense international scrutiny, modest Arab pressures, and angry popular anti-Syrian demonstrations in Lebanon, was forced to implement Security Council Resolution 1559 (which mainly called for the withdrawal of all foreign armies from Lebanon and the disbanding of all militias) and remove its last soldiers and intelligence officers from the country. A series of events set the stage for Syria's pullout, namely the June 2000 death of Syrian President Hafez al Assad and his succession by his young and inexperienced son Bashar; the events of 11 September 2001, which arguably caused a drastic re-orientation of American foreign policy toward the Arab and Islamic world (arguably taking a more militaristic and less compromising approach with regard to security challenges emanating from the Middle East); the internal Lebanese dynamics and the developing role of the anti-Syrian Lebanese opposition; and a string of Syrian miscalculations and provocations in Lebanon, including Damascus's August 2004 directive of unconstitutionally extending the term of sitting Lebanese President Emile Lahoud for three additional years. Meanwhile, the specific event that

triggered Syria's exit was the 14 February 2005 assassination of Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri near Beirut's sea front; a terrorist attack that local, regional, as well as international actors have accused Damascus and its joint Lebanese–Syrian security network of staging (whether by default or design). Domestic and foreign observers and political analysts reasoned that Damascus eliminated al Hariri—formerly one of Syria's most important patrons in Lebanon—because it regarded him as a serious threat to its long-term interests in Lebanon, knowing the dubious role al Hariri allegedly played in his last years in leading, organizing, and financing a national political platform in the country that was opposed to Syrian policy in Lebanon.

83. Hizb'allah has been excluded from the list because it constitutes a special case. Since its formal emergence in 1985, not once has Hizb'allah acted on behalf of Syria and engaged in terrorist activity against fellow Lebanese parties. For more on the complex relationship between Hizb'allah and Syria and how it has evolved over the years, see Emile el Hokayem, "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship," *The Washington Quarterly* 3(2), pp. 35–52.

84. *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2005. Also, see Daniel Byman, "Confronting Syrian-Backed Terrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 28 (3) (Summer 2005), pp. 99–113.

85. For a perspective on the relationship between Al Qaeda and Iran, see Paul Hastert, "Al Qaeda and Iran: Friends or Foes, or Somewhere in Between?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30(4) (2007), pp. 327–336.

86. For a good discussion on the condition of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, see Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Harsh Present, Uncertain Future," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25(1) (Autumn 1995), pp. 37–53, and Jaber Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29(1) (Autumn 1999), pp. 66–80.

87. The Palestinian population in Lebanon is comprised of approximately 350,000 Palestinians—1948 refugees and their descendents—in 12 overcrowded, impoverished and, sometimes, violent camps. Palestinian refugees live in difficult conditions as they continue to be deprived of their rights (owning property and health care, for example). Furthermore, Palestinian refugees are banned from holding all but menial jobs and have become a source of cheap labor. The relationship between the Lebanese society and the Palestinian groups is marred by a sense of distrust and suspicion stemming, in part, from the role of Palestinian guerillas in the fifteen-year Lebanese civil war. Currently, the Lebanese government refuses to grant the Palestinians citizenship in an effort to, firstly, stave off permanent settlement of refugees that could destabilize the country's sensitive demographic and Muslim–Christian balance, and, secondly, to avoid the possibility of Palestinians being denied their right of return.

88. Meeting between the authors and Mr. Fatfat in his office at the Lebanese ISF Headquarters.

89. *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 2006.

90. For a discussion on the prospects and merits of engaging Syria, see Volker Perthes, "The Syrian Solution," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2006), pp. 33–40.

91. The charge that the Palestinian camps in Lebanon are "security islands" beyond the law is not precise according to Jaber Suleiman. The Lebanese ISF do enter the camps in coordination with camp authorities to arrest suspects and carry out similar missions. They also have informers and other contacts inside the camps. But the Lebanese state appears unwilling for political reasons to base the police or army in the camps, preferring to leave internal policing to the various factions operating inside the camps. See Jaber Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29(1) (Autumn 1999), p. 72.

92. *The Daily Star*, 31 October 2006.

93. For more on security sector reform in Lebanon, see Bilal Y. Saab, "Crying Out for Wholesale Security Reform," *The Daily Star*, 28 September 2005, and "The Perils of Lebanese Security Reform," *The Daily Star*, 10 March 2006.

94. The most noteworthy example of the Lebanese MID's successes is the detaining, in June 2006, of a sophisticated Israeli spying network allegedly involved in the assassination of Lebanese and Palestinian militants in Lebanon.