

What is Fatah al Islam?

Interview: As'ad Abukhalil on the Nahr al-Bared siege

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Thousands of Palestinian refugees are fleeing from Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon as five days of fighting by the Lebanese army and a militant group known as Fath al-Islam has left dozens of soldiers and fighters and an unknown number of civilians dead. As the situation of these Palestinian refugees worsens, 59 years after they were first expelled from their homeland into Lebanon, the world looks on in silence. Electronic Intifada co-founder Ali Abunimah spoke with As'ad Abukhalil, the creator of the [Angry Arab News Service](#) blog. Abukhalil explained the origins of Fath al-Islam, the events that led to the violence and what it means for Lebanon and the region.

EI: What is Fath al Islam?

ABUKHALIL: We hadn't heard of Fath al-Islam prior to late last year. There have been reports over the last two years especially after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon of a variety of extremist militant groups who are sprouting throughout the refugee camps of Lebanon, and elsewhere outside of the camps especially in northern Lebanon.

Some of the reports have been filled with sensationalism and sometimes groups that the government were complaining about turned out to have been funded by the Hariri family, for example Asbat al-Ansar and Jund as-Sham in Ain al Hilweh refugee camp, some of whose members later joined Fath al-Islam.

Fath al-Islam is clearly or at least predominantly a non-Palestinian organization. Based on interviews with their leaders that I have seen on television or in print in the last few months we can discern the ideological shape of the organization. They are extremist Sunni fundamentalists that have these general grandiose fundamentalist goals that only appeal to the margins of the margins of Islamic fundamentalist organizations. They denied links with al-Qaida yet they speak with the same rhetoric and they do not hide their sympathy if not affinity with al-Qaida.

EI: Is there any evidence that the Hariri family funded Fath al-Islam?

ABUKHALIL: We don't have evidence that the Hariri family did specifically fund Fath al-Islam. But that still allows for two possibilities. We know from Afghanistan the factor of blowback. Sometimes patrons may fund a client and, over a period of time the client turns against the patron. So the possibility exists, but I do not know of any evidence that Hariri funded directly that particular organization. What we know for a fact is that over the last several years, since 2000, and specifically since 2005 during the parliamentary elections, the Hariri family spent lavishly, especially in northern Lebanon to recruit among the

extremist, fundamentalist Sunni organizations.

Some of the people in Fath al-Islam who are fighting now were released in an unprecedented amnesty in 2005 insisted on by the Hariri family because they wanted to win favor among the Sunni fundamentalist organizations in Tripoli. So it is very likely that some of these people are beneficiaries of Hariri largesse in the area of northern Lebanon. But that doesn't mean that the Hariris knowingly financed Fath al-Islam, although we know that they funded fanatical Sunni groups some of whose members later joined Fath al-Islam.

EI: Palestinian refugees fleeing from Nahr al-Bared camp have been quoted in press reports saying that Fath al-Islam militants had infiltrated into the camp over the past year, that they were very separate and didn't have much contact with the camp residents except to condemn them for smoking, or playing music, or putting up posters. One of the things a refugee witness remarked on was that the camp is guarded on all sides by the Lebanese army. He wondered how these militants got in noting that they didn't drop in from the sky. How would you answer that question?

ABUKHALIL: I think it is certainly suspicious how all these people came into Lebanon, and all indications are that they came into Lebanon legally. We are not talking about infiltrations like those the American media talk about in Iraq. So they came to Lebanon with their passports, came through port entrances controlled by the Lebanese security forces and army and settled in those camps, and as you rightly indicated all these camps are under watch by the Lebanese army.

In an interview on Al-Arabiya television on May 23, the Lebanese defense minister, Ilyas Murr, stated that of the several dozen fighters killed in the battles, not a single a fighter is identified as Palestinian. He said they are mostly Lebanese, Saudi, Yemeni, Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan and so on.

EI: What triggered the violence in Nahr al-Bared?

ABUKHALIL: That's where it gets really bizarre and raises a lot of questions. After the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, the Hariri family did not trust the existing state security and intelligence forces, so with supervision and funding from the United States as well as Saudi, Jordanian and UAE support, they established their own quasi-militia called the Lebanese Internal Security Forces. They also established something called Jihaz al-Ma'alumat, the Intelligence Apparatus, which does not have a mandate to exist under Lebanese law. Be that as it may, they are now the most important security and intelligence forces in Lebanon and they are marginalizing all the others.

Prior to the outbreak of the violence, just the day before, the Hariri newspaper *Al-Mustaqbal* reported on the front page about a bank robbery near Tripoli. The newspaper said this was done by Fath al-Islam. One now asks, if it was known who robbed the bank, why did the authorities not follow them on the spot to arrest them?

According to the reports I am distilling for your readers, the Hariri security apparatus were apparently planning to do a spectacular raid on an apartment belonging to Fath al-Islam in Tripoli, and they wanted to take credit in order to impress the Lebanese viewers and they took along with them crews from Hariri TV stations. Well, they went there on that particular day to do the raid. It was botched from beginning to end. They were overwhelmed by the handful of fighters of Fath al-Islam. That's when they called in the Lebanese army. The

Lebanese press reported that the Lebanese army were not told about all this and were not briefed beforehand and they just called them in on the spot after the Lebanese Intelligence and Security Forces had botched the raid that was supposed to impress the Lebanese public.

EI: What has been the reaction to these events in Lebanon and are any groups or parties condemning the bombardment of Nahr al-Bared camp?

ABUKHALIL: As far as reaction in Lebanon this is one of the most painful elements of this story at the personal level. I have never felt more isolation as someone who speaks out on Palestine as I have felt in the past few days. There is an overwhelming, unanimous competition by people and organizations to rally behind the Lebanese army and to pay tribute to the troops. Not a single political party in Lebanon has spoken out, none, against the indiscriminate shelling of the refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared. Hizbullah has taken a position in support of the army, as has the Lebanese Communist Party, and other organizations. Of course we didn't expect anything different from the March 14 movement, but among the opposition it has been a competition of who can show more support. General 'Awn, the main Christian opposition leader has been totally, unconditionally supportive of the Lebanese army and its resort to what is called the "decisive military option" — which means to allow the Lebanese army to enter or invade the camps.

EI: Why is this the case?

ABUKHALIL: First, I understand the Lebanese army was hit hard last summer. It's morale and its prestige suffered tremendously because of the lack of performance in the face of brutal Israeli attacks. Because there are no unitary symbols for Lebanon, people always want to underline, well, 'maybe it's the army.' It can't always be baba ghanouj or hummus. It has to be something more concrete. And this is why there is a rush to support the Lebanese army.

Second, there is a general racist attitude — classical racism towards Palestinians — and one brave Lebanese columnist, Khalid Saghiyya wrote about this in *al-Akhbar*. This is why it is easy for so many people to tolerate indiscriminate attacks on Palestinian refugee camps.

This is not the first time. Just like in Jordan there were all these chapters of bombing of the camps culminating in Black September. Throughout the time I was growing up in Lebanon there were all these attacks by the Lebanese army and later by other militias. In 1973, when I was thirteen years old, Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon were bombed from the air by the Lebanese army. There is a long record. This Lebanese army doesn't show muscle except against defenceless Palestinian refugees.

Of course there is a Fath al-Islam organization, as I have mentioned, but this is a small fanatical group that could have been dealt with as a security matter. It didn't require the firepower of the Lebanese army which certainly we didn't know existed when last summer Lebanon was under attack by Israel, and when the Lebanese army was mostly hiding, and watching as few hundred Lebanese irregulars bravely resisted Israeli aggression.

EI: The Lebanese government would certainly respond to you that they are not targeting the residents of the camp and they have even made statements that they understand that the group that they are targeting is alien to the Palestinians in Lebanon.

ABUKHALIL: What is so ironic is yes, they said all that and they said more. They used the same words uttered by the Israelis when they bombed the refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. It's the same language the US uses in Afghanistan and Iraq: 'They are hiding behind civilians. They are using civilians as human shields. Hitting civilians is a mistake, the army cares about the civilian population.' All this propaganda of collateral damage is being used by the government.

The Palestinians are also weak regionally and internationally. There is no support for them among Arab governments which explains why the Lebanese government was not only willing and able to do what it did, but yesterday the official statement of the Arab League not only offered support and expressed "satisfaction" to use their own language, for what is happening in Lebanon but offered military assistance as a reward for the shelling of the camp.

EI: There is clearly an American hand in this. We saw the Lebanese government request military assistance, including ammunition and equipment from the United States, as a direct response to the events in Nahr al-Bared. How do you see the United States' role and let me broaden the question a little bit. How are the events in Lebanon linked to what is happening in Gaza and does the United States actually have a strategy for the region? What is the big picture here?

ABUKHALIL: Certainly there is a heavy-handed American role in all this. A mere week ago the American Undersecretary of State for the Near East, David Welch, was visiting Lebanon. He met in an unprecedented manner with the commander-in-chief of the Lebanese army. This never happened in the past. We do not know what was discussed but the Lebanese press — even the press loyal to the government — indicated how unprecedented it was that Welch met with the commander-in-chief.

As far as the Americans are concerned, we also have to note that first, there was an American official announcement that the Lebanese government made a request for emergency military assistance. And yet the Lebanese government promptly denied that it made such a request. And later they are denying the denial. Why are there these confused signals? What is being cooked behind the scenes? I think the answer to that is we have to look at the map of the Middle East to see the extent to which there are events that are quite related to one another.

You look at Gaza and you find that the American funded, financed and armed militias of Muhammad Dahlan and [Palestinian Authority President] Mahmoud Abbas were tasked with fighting and killing other Palestinians. You look at Lebanon today and you find a Lebanese government financed, funded and armed by the American government and they are doing the same. Palestine and Lebanon have become more important not so much because of any attention that the US administration is willing to pay to those places, but particularly because of the failure of the American project in Iraq. So with victory eluding Bush in Iraq there is a desperate attempt to make some progress — to use that cliché — somewhere other than Iraq. And the places favored are Palestine and Lebanon because in those places there are US-armed and financed puppet militias that the US can use against its enemies and the enemies of Israel.

EI: What do the current events tell us about the direction of events in Lebanon? The Israeli press, for example, keeps talking about another war this summer. Are these opening shots as many people fear?

ABUKHALIL: I am more of the opinion that this may be an indication that this conflict might be an alternative to such a war. Neither the Israelis nor Hizbullah are interested in a flare-up this summer at all. And I think what the United States is willing and capable of doing is to push the Lebanese government against the Palestinian refugee camps to disarm them, in order to make Israel more secure from their own standpoint. Even that would backfire because we have already seen that the Palestinian refugee camps are quite angry at what is happening.

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