

Escalation of Syria War: Ahmed Al-Assir, America's Pawn in Lebanon

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This weeks conflagration near [Sidon](#), a majority Sunni city in the South of Lebanon has been on the cards for some time. Sheikh Al Assir, the instigator of the street battle's with the Lebanese Armed Forces, (LAF) has been on a concerted campaign to incite sectarian strife and division between the Sunni and Shi'a sects in Lebanon, with one major goal; to draw Hezbollah into a sectarian-based conflict.

Many commentators on Lebanon have pointed out that contrary to his overt actions and rhetoric, Al-Assir does not enjoy a wide following or support base in Lebanon; he is a pawn that is being fomented and most likely funded by outside actors. These actors share the common goal of removing or weakening Hezbollah; a goal that is also synonymous with certain global actors' - [F.UK.US/GCC/Israel/Turkey](#)- desires and covert policies in the region, the results of which have been [ongoing in Syria for the best part of two years](#).

The street battles that occurred in Saida were planned in advance. There have been several attempts in the last few weeks by Al-Assir and his armed Salafist followers to deploy in the streets of Saida, this can be seen as a test of reactions and capabilities to withstand an armed uprising of sorts; a reaction from both the Lebanese Army, and from Hezbollah. In public speeches and rallies, Al-Assir and his followers have been actively attempting to incite a reaction from Hezbollah, who to the time of writing have refrained from openly hostile retaliation against Al-Assir. In Nassrallah's latest speeches, he specifically called upon his followers and the people of Lebanon to refrain from sectarian language, indeed, in many of his latest statements, Nasrallah has made efforts to rally against any sectarian reference.

The usual suspects: Western corporate journalists and think-tankers alike, immediately jumped at the opportunity when the fighting occurred to spout totally baseless claims such as: "hundreds of Hezbollah fighters attacking Al-Assirs mosque" and "Hezbollah 'leading the battle'". Again these 'reporters' and 'analysts' relay false declarations with no evidence to hand, and no possible way of verifying them. Their claims have since (two days later) been thoroughly debunked, and it appears Hezbollah played no major role in the fighting in Sidon. Both the LAF and several leading Lebanese political figures - including those hostile to Hezbollah - have denied any Hezbollah involvement. There are [many reasons](#) (that even the occasional observer could point out in almost real-time) to refute these dubious claims. If Hezbollah's own media outlets are not privy to their military objectives, why would Hezbollah fighters, or "sources" relay military manouvers to reporters that work for outlets that are hostile toward them?

Sheikh Al-Assir has made his name in Lebanon through being directly and openly hostile to Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. This direct and public targetting is what sets

him apart from other Salafi clerics in Lebanon. There is [undoubtedly a rising](#) current of such ideologues that have been bolstered in recent years in several areas of Lebanon, and this proliferation can be explained by a myriad of factors, but the militant aspect, and specific sectarian and anti-Shi'a/anti-Hezbollah rhetoric, can be explained primarily due to outside actors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar trying to assert dominance over political bodies that are tied to Iran's sphere of influence, as opposed to their own.

It is no coincidence the Syrian insurgency, or, 'revolution' was fomented and is still backed primarily by the same actors that support radical clerics in Lebanon. The proliferation of such ideologues inciting sectarian hatred and division; in order to create chaos, strife and destabilization to marginalise the targets of their paymasters is synonymous because it is part of an overriding GCC policy in the Levant. Needless to say, this policy is fully backed by the United States and the western nations in their 'special relationship' with the Gulf autocrats of Saudi Arabia, and new kid on the block Qatar.

This joint ["Redirection"](#) policy and its desired outcome upon Hezbollah and Lebanon are specifically cited by anonymous US intelligence officials in Seymour Hersh's oft-referenced piece from 2007, the results of which can be seen on the streets of Sidon today: (my emphasis)

The United States has also given clandestine support to the Siniora government, according to the former senior intelligence official and the U.S. government consultant. **"We are in a program to enhance the Sunni capability to resist Shiite influence, and we're spreading the money around as much as we can,"** the former senior intelligence official said. The problem was that such money "always gets in more pockets than you think it will," he said. **"In this process, we're financing a lot of bad guys with some serious potential unintended consequences. We don't have the ability to determine and get pay vouchers signed by the people we like and avoid the people we don't like. It's a very high-risk venture."**

American, European, and Arab officials I spoke to told me that the Siniora government and its allies **had allowed some aid to end up in the hands of emerging Sunni radical groups in northern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and around Palestinian refugee camps in the south.** These groups, though small, are seen as a buffer to Hezbollah; at the same time, their ideological ties are with Al Qaeda.

As we have found since the battles in Sidon ceased, the majority of the militants that attacked the LAF were of this very type; small radical Sunni groups, aligned to the Syrian insurgency, including Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda). [From McClatchy](#): (my emphasis)

The worst fighting in Lebanon in years, which wracked this coastal city one hour south of Beirut this week, **was touched off by an influx of foreign fighters from Syria, Palestinian camps and other Arab countries into the compound of a radical Sunni cleric,** according to knowledgeable people on both sides of the conflict. **The foreign fighters included members of Jabhat al Nusra, a Syrian rebel group also known as the Nusra Front,** which is affiliated with al Qaida, according to the accounts, including that of a Lebanese military official. Nusra is considered the most effective rebel group fighting to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad, and its presence inside Lebanon, if confirmed, would provide evidence not just that the Syrian conflict has spread, but that Nusra fighters have extended their influence outside Syria and Iraq.

The Salafi militants causing the current strife in Lebanon are a direct result of the above “Redirection” policy, as former MI6 officer Alistair Crooke pointed out in Hersh’s piece back in 2007, it would be a dangerous and risky strategy to foment and enable such ideologues, and would result in what we are seeing in Lebanon today: (my emphasis)

Alastair Crooke, who spent nearly thirty years in MI6, the British intelligence service, and now works for Conflicts Forum, a think tank in Beirut, told me, **“The Lebanese government is opening space for these people to come in. It could be very dangerous.”** Crooke said that one Sunni extremist group, **Fatah al-Islam, had splintered from its pro-Syrian parent group, Fatah al-Intifada, in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, in northern Lebanon. Its membership at the time was less than two hundred. “I was told that within twenty-four hours they were being offered weapons and money by people presenting themselves as representatives of the Lebanese government’s interests—presumably to take on Hezbollah,”** Crooke said.

The largest of the groups, **Asbat al-Ansar, is situated in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp. Asbat al-Ansar has received arms and supplies from Lebanese internal-security forces and militias associated with the Siniora government.**

Al-Assir was joined in his camp in Sidon by up to 60 members of Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda), and up to 30 members of Jund al-Sham, another radical group from the Ain el Hilweh refugee camp. Some reports suggested up to 300 militants were encamped in Al-Assir’s compound. This undoubtedly accounts for the heavy losses the LAF incurred during the first hours of their attempts to storm the stronghold. As the Syrian Arab Army have found to their detriment for the best part of two years; these radical militant groups are well armed, well funded, and above all, trained in paramilitary expertise. Such battle experience is not gained in a classroom, they are the product of the Syrian insurgency and its supporters. According to the above McClatchy report, it was Jabhat al Nusra members that were leading Assir’s men, and enabled him to escape once the LAF had overcome his compound. Assir’s current whereabouts are yet to be verified, but various reports have suggested he has fled to his fellow ideologues inside Syria.

The proliferation of radical Sunni clerics in Lebanon should be seen in a much wider context than domestic Lebanese politics alone. Saad Hariri’s Future Movement camp is inextricably tied to Saudi Arabia’s regional policy and their efforts to assert Saudi dominance and curb Iranian expansion, and through Hariri and the Future Movement the joint US/GCC/Israeli [“Redirection”](#) policy finds its prominent outlet in Lebanon. Hariri’s Future Movement stance against Hezbollah in Lebanon is an extension of the policies of Washington and Riyadh.

Furthermore, recent developments in Lebanon also shed light on at least part of the motivation behind Hezbollah’s ‘intervention’ in the Syrian/Lebanese border town of Qusair, and their growing alliance with the Syrian government. The incitement from radical clerics and ideologues tied to, and facilitating the Syrian insurgency from within Lebanon and the border regions have posed both a strategic, and ideological threat since the start of the Syrian insurgency; a threat that Hezbollah could no longer ignore, nor Syria fight alone.

The toll that small groups of militants inflicted upon the Lebanese Army in Sidon within two days, and the tens of thousands of Syrian soldiers that have been killed in the last two years; are a testament to the reality of the monster the GCC has unleashed upon the

Levant. The “Redirection” is upon Hezbollah’s doorstep.

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