

Lebanese army lays siege to Palestinian refugee camp

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At least 60 people have died in fierce fighting over the past two days between Lebanese troops and the Sunni extremist Fatah al-Islam militia based at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp near the northern city of Tripoli. Security officials say that the dead include 27 soldiers, 15 militants and 24 civilians, but the actual toll could be much higher as there are no accurate figures for casualties inside the densely populated camp.

According to Lebanese officials, the clashes broke out early Sunday after police raided suspected Fatah al-Islam hideouts in Tripoli, searching for men involved in a bank robbery the previous day. Fatah al-Islam responded by seizing army posts outside the Nahr al-Bared camp, resulting in sharp gun battles as troops fought to retake the positions. Fighting continued yesterday, apart from a short ceasefire.

The Lebanese army brought up hundreds of reinforcements, backed by tanks, armoured personnel carriers and artillery, and has been pounding buildings inside the camp. A *Deutsche Welle* article reported that warships were patrolling nearby coastal waters to completely seal off the area. "It's a real war zone, there's a lot of tank fire and they just destroyed a whole building with 50mm guns," one bystander told the British-based *Guardian*.

The troops have made no move to date to enter the refugee camp—entry is forbidden under a 1969 accord between Arab states. But one refugee, Sana Abu, told Al Jazeera TV: "There are many wounded. We are under siege. There is a shortage of bread, medicine and electricity. There are children under the rubble." Another resident told the BBC by phone: "Really the situation is so bad because the camp is just one square kilometre and around 40,000 people live in this one kilometre. There are a lot of people injured and dead."

The fighting was the bloodiest since last year's US-backed Israeli war against the Shiite Hezbollah militia levelled much of southern Lebanon as well as sections of Beirut and other cities. The clashes are the worst in Lebanon's north since the country's sectarian civil war of 1975-90.

The government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora immediately blamed Syria for the violence, claiming that Damascus was deliberately creating instability in Lebanon to undermine UN moves to set up an international court to try suspects in the 2005 killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. Siniora declared on Sunday: "The blows dealt by Fatah al-Islam against the Lebanese army are a premeditated crime and a dangerous attempt to destabilise [Lebanon]."

Syria has denied any connection to Fatah al-Islam and shut two of its border crossings from Lebanon in response to the fighting. The group's leader Shaker al-Abssi was reportedly jailed in 2003 by Damascus for plotting against the Syrian government. He fled to Lebanon last year after being released and is currently wanted in Syria on new charges. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem told the media: "Our forces have been after them, even through Interpol. We reject this organisation. It does not serve the Palestinian cause and it is not after liberating Palestine."

Fatah al-Islam espouses Islamic extremism and makes no secret of its sympathy for Al Qaeda, but publicly denies any organisational link. Abssi was convicted in absentia in Jordan, along with former Iraqi Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for the 2002 killing of US diplomat Lawrence Foley. Both were sentenced to death. Abssi told the *New York Times* in March: "Osama bin Laden does make the Fatwas [legal pronouncements]. Should his Fatwas follow the Sunna [Islamic law], we will carry them out." The group has an estimated strength of between 150 to 200 fighters.

The Lebanese government blamed Fatah al-Islam for twin bus bombings in a Christian area outside Beirut in February. In response, the army strengthened its presence outside the Nahr al-Bared camp and last month launched a crackdown on Islamic extremists, further heightening tensions. According to *Time* magazine, as many as 200 people in Tripoli and northern Lebanon were detained by security forces, accused of ties to Al Qaeda, building up weapons and planning attacks.

It is quite possible that sections of the Siniora government have deliberately provoked the current confrontation and blamed Syria in order to refocus international attention on Lebanon. Last week, Siniora called on the UN to set up the Hariri tribunal despite the failure of the Lebanese parliament to approve the measure. At the same time, clashes enable the army to weaken further Fatah al-Islam and tighten security around Palestinian camps throughout the country.

The *Christian Science Monitor* quoted anti-Syrian telecommunications minister Marwan Hamade saying: "We have hermetically sealed them inside Nahr al-Bared and we will use popular and political means and the army to get rid of Fatah al-Islam."

According to the London-based *Times*, dozens of right-wing supporters of the Future Movement led by Saad Hariri, the son and political heir of Rafik Hariri, are gathered outside the refugee camp. Walid Hussein told the newspaper: "We are here to help the army. We have been carrying ammunition and water to them." Others have been egging the army on to demolish the camp. "We wish the government would destroy the whole camp and the rest of the camps. Nothing good comes out of the Palestinians," Ahmad al-Marooq declared to the *New York Times*.

There are 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, into which an estimated 350,000 people are crammed. The refugees, who were driven out of Israel in the late 1940s, and their descendents live in appalling squalor, with limited rights to work and a lack of basic services. Lebanon's former UN ambassador Khalil Makkawi told CNN: "The situation speaks for itself. Those camps have become fertile ground for the fundamentalists, the extremists." While sections of the Siniora government would undoubtedly like to take direct control of the camps, such a provocative move would likely plunge the country back to civil war.

The US connection

The Bush administration immediately backed the Siniora government. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared that the Lebanese army was working in a “legitimate manner” against “provocations by violent extremists”. He refrained, however, from directly blaming Syria. White House deputy press secretary Tony Fratto called for an end to the fighting, saying: “We believe that all parties should take a step back from violence.”

On the face of it, the US statements appear uncharacteristically mild. Washington has previously denounced Syria and Iran for supporting Hezbollah and other “terrorist” groups inside Lebanon. The Bush administration justifies its neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of waging a global “war on terror” against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. One cannot, of course, read too much into brief formal statements, behind which may lie many political motivations. But in all the media debate about the backers of Fatah al-Islam, no mention is made of the US connection raised by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh in his lengthy article “The Redirection” published in the *New Yorker* in February.

Hersh provided a detailed account of the Bush administration’s shift in Middle East strategy following the US mid-term congressional elections last November. In a bid to intensify pressure on Iran, Washington engaged in a flurry of diplomatic moves aimed at securing an alliance of so-called Sunni states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, to isolate the Shiite regime in Tehran. Backing for the Siniora government in Lebanon, which had been seriously weakened by the failed Israeli invasion and widespread support for Hezbollah, was an important element of the US strategy.

As Hersh pointed out, however, the new US strategy was not limited to diplomacy, but included covert backing for Sunni extremist groups against Shiite Hezbollah. The Saudi monarchy was also closely involved, providing funding through its Sunni allies in Lebanon. Hersh explained: “American, European and Arab officials I spoke to told me that the Siniora government and its allies allowed some of the aid to end up in the hands of emerging Sunni radical groups in northern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and around Palestinian 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.”

Former British intelligence officer Alastair Crooke pointed in particular to the emergence of Fatah al-Islam at the Nahr al-Bared camp last year. “The Lebanese government is opening space for these people to come in. It could be very dangerous... I was told that within twenty four hours [of forming] they were being offered weapons and money by people presenting themselves as representatives of the Lebanese government’s interests—presumably to take on Hezbollah,” he explained to Hersh.

It cannot be verified whether such an offer was made. But it is certainly not out of the question that the US administration, in league with the Siniora government and the Saudi monarchy, sought to manipulate an Al Qaeda-linked militia for their own political purposes. After all, the origins of Al Qaeda lie in the CIA’s massive holy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Nor would it be impossible for any one of the players involved to decide that the danger of another “blowback” was too high and to turn on the group.

Whatever the case, the US and its allies in the Middle East are responsible for the destabilisation of Lebanon and have directly or indirectly contributed to the latest flare-up of

bloody violence at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp.

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