

## The mystery and myth of Lebanon's militants

Contributed by Administrator  
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The face, arms and hands of Abu Omar, an Islamist "commander" in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain el-Hilweh in southern Lebanon, are covered in second-degree burns.

"They tried to kill me with a bomb," explains the militant, who is known around the camp as one of the leaders of a small jihadi group called Jund al-Sham, and wanted by the authorities in Beirut on charges of murder.

Dressed in battle fatigues, a pistol and extra ammunition clipped to his belt, he denies membership of the group, insisting that the organisation does not exist at all. "It's made up by the media," he maintains.

According to Lebanese security sources, however, the recent explosion that he claims was an attempt on his life was in fact a "work accident". They suspect an artillery shell blew up when he and his colleagues tried to extract the explosives.

Abu Omar's denial that he is a member of Jund al-Sham is part of the mystery that shrouds much of Lebanon's jihadi scene.

The emergence of Fatah al-Islam only six months ago in Nahr el-Bared, another Palestinian refugee camp, supported by hundreds of well armed fighters from a variety of Arab countries including Saudi Arabia and Algeria, has raised fears that the Levant is emerging as a significant new frontier for al-Qaeda.

Jund al-Sham is believed to be one of two smaller radical groups of salafis - adherents of a puritanical form of Islam - that have established a base in Ain el-Hilweh, the largest of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

The camps are off limits to the Lebanese army, based on a 1960s agreement between Lebanon and Palestinian factions, making them a refuge for fugitives and radicals.

Jund al-Sham - which means "The army of greater Syria" - first appeared in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and has been linked to attacks in Syria as well as Lebanon.

Some reports in the Lebanese media have suggested that it was recently disbanded, with its members joining the more established Asbat al-Ansar, a group set up in Ain el-Hilweh in the 1980s and accused by the US of having links with al-Qaeda after the September 11 attacks.

Curiously, however, there is one thing on which all the militants, security forces, religious scholars and terrorism experts agree: most of Lebanon's jihadis are inspired by al-Qaeda but not linked logistically to the core of the network. Nor do they take directions from senior operatives in either Iraq or Pakistan.

Speaking in the mosque in the militant Taamir district of Ain el-Hilweh, Abu Sharif, an Asbat al-Ansar leader, says al-Qaeda has evolved from a network of operatives to a school of thought.

"All the jihadi movements are adopting al-Qaeda's ideology," he says. "We have adopted it."

But he sees a big difference between the al-Qaeda approach elsewhere and in Lebanon. "There are some things that we do differently in Arab countries. Jihad is only fought where there is occupation, like in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine."

Many foreign and Lebanese observers, however, fear al-Qaeda's top echelons are beginning to see Lebanon as a base they can exploit and link up with more directly, particularly as the country hosts a 13,000-strong UN force mandated with policing the border with Israel.

Al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has called for attacks on what he calls "crusader forces" in Lebanon and in June, for the first time, a roadside bomb targeted the peacekeepers, killing six Spanish soldiers and raising fresh alarm.

Abu Omar rejects any link between Lebanon's jihadi groups and the UN attack. "We respect sheikh Ayman [al-Zawahiri] but we decide what is good for us here. If he asks us to attack Unifil [United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon], we will not do that."

Abu Omar used to go by the nom-de-guerre Abu Yahia al-Falastini and fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq, alongside Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late insurgent leader.

He is adamant that no major al-Qaeda figures have moved their base of operations to Lebanon. "I know them all from Iraq," he boasts, "I would have known."

Complicating the jihadi picture in Lebanon are long-running suspicions that Islamist militants are manipulated by elements in Syria, which effectively ruled Lebanon until its troops were pulled out in 2005. That is one thing that Abu Omar and the Lebanese authorities, dominated by anti-Syrian political parties, appear to agree on. "There is only fake al-Qaeda in Lebanon," says Abu Omar.

Members of the pro-Syrian Lebanese opposition, however, accuse the pro-western coalition government, dominated by a Sunni party, of having set up Fatah al-Islam as a counterweight to the Shia Hizbollah movement, which leads the opposition.

Elias Murr, defence minister, says he has seen no evidence of outside involvement in the group. But a senior security official says that among the militants rounded up, the lower echelons appear to believe they are fighting for al-Qaeda while their leaders know that this is not the case.

"Al-Qaeda is camouflage," he says, and both Fatah al-Islam and other jihadi cells recently arrested in the north and east of the country have some Syrian support, he claims.

"As to Jund al-Sham and Asbat al-Ansar, the jury is still out."

By Ferry Biedermann

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