

'Sleeper cells' in Lebanon Palestinian camps: experts

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AIN AL-HELWEH, Lebanon (AFP) — Despite the relative calm of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps in recent months, experts warn that Islamist groups are still operating within and could strike at any time.

At Ain al-Helweh, the largest of Lebanon's 12 camps, which is known to harbour extremists and fugitives, small sleeper cells have kept a low profile but could mobilize quickly depending on developments, they say.

"In theory, this is the sort of environment Al-Qaeda, for example, generally chooses for its sleeper cells, which could be used at any time," said Hazem al-Amin, a journalist and expert on regional Islamist groups.

"And that is not a reassuring thought. It might not happen immediately, but it is always a possibility."

His comments came as Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas discussed the plight of the refugees with Lebanese officials on Monday.

The spread of Islamist groups in the camps was brought starkly into focus in 2007 when Fatah al-Islam, an obscure Al-Qaeda-inspired militia, fought fierce battles with the Lebanese army at Nahr al-Bared camp in northern Lebanon.

The fighting killed 400 people, including 168 soldiers, and displaced some 30,000 refugees from the camp, which was levelled in the fighting.

There were widespread fears at the time that Ain al-Helweh, near the southern coastal town of Sidon and home to about 70,000 refugees, would be the next front for the Islamists.

Reports say that Abdul Rahman Awad, dubbed the "Prince of Fatah al-Islam," is holed up in the camp despite army calls to hand him over.

The group has been linked to deadly bombings targeting UN peacekeepers in the south and civilian buses.

By long-standing convention, the Lebanese army does not enter the camps, leaving security inside to the Palestinians.

At Ain al-Helweh, the main Palestinian factions moved quickly to try to contain the situation following the Nahr al-Bared battles and drew up a pact with the army to preserve the calm.

But parts of the camp where radical factions are thought to be based remain off-limits to outsiders.

Sahar Atrache, an analyst with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, said the camps, notably Ain al-Helweh, are fertile ground for extremism.

"It's a little prison: the conditions are deplorable and there are no prospects for the inhabitants," Atrache told AFP. "And these are the grounds where jihadis find their young recruits."

"And I'm not talking about the conventional Islamic Jihad and Hamas, but groups who follow the so-called global jihad."

Atrache and others say successive Lebanese governments are largely to blame for the miserable conditions of the refugees who are denied basic human rights.

The new cabinet headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri has acknowledged the need to address the issue, and included it in its policy statement.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) lists nearly 400,000 refugees in Lebanon.

But Lebanese and Palestinian officials say the number may be as low as 250,000 as UNRWA does not strike off its figures Palestinians who move to other countries.

In Ain al-Helweh, the scars of poverty and violence cannot be ignored.

Shanties fight for space, low-hanging electricity wires dangle haphazardly between bullet-riddled walls, and battered vehicles, pedestrians and sewage share a labyrinth of alleyways.

"If I had lived there, I would be the world's biggest terrorist," Khalil Makkawi, former head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, told AFP of conditions at the camp.

Mounir Maqdah, who commands the main police force in Ain al-Helweh, said he was well aware of the danger of extremist groups exploiting the sense of hopelessness among the younger refugees.

"We do realise that there are groups who could take advantage of the situation of our youth," he said.

But Maqdah and others downplayed concerns that groups close to Al-Qaeda could be taking root inside the camp.

"It is true there is a wave of Islamism which is affecting the whole world," said Sheikh Jamal Khattab, a Sunni cleric at Ain al-Helweh who heads the Haraka Islamiyya Mujahida and has allegedly recruited fighters for Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

"But if there were really any groups like Al-Qaeda in Ain al-Helweh, Lebanon today would be another Iraq."

Still, experts say it could be just a matter of time before the next bout of violence.

"Like any problem, you can ignore it, but it could explode at any moment," warned Atrache. "The way the Lebanese are dealing with it, it's ignoring the real problem."