

## Current Lebanese Army Combat Operations

Contributed by Administrator  
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Phares on Current Lebanese Army Combat Operations [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]

Walid Phares's latest analysis (exclusive to The Tank) from various intelligence sources, as well as directly from high-ranking officials within the Lebanese government and the military addresses combat operations in Lebanon over the past several days:

The Lebanese Army is now inside some sectors of the Nahr al Bared camp. Operating in concert with artillery barrages on Fatah al Islam positions, Lebanese soldiers also have been engaging terrorists from other Syrian-sponsored organizations such as the Ahmed Jibril and Hamas-linked forces. Here is how it breaks down: The pro-al Qaeda forces (Fatah al Islam) have controlled all areas from the sea to the main road north of the camp. The Fatah central forces (Mahmoud Abbas) control the neighborhoods of Hay al Burwa and Hay al Magharba, as well as areas southwest. The southern areas of the camp from the main street to the state highway is controlled by both Fatah al Islam and Fatah central, with a greater presence of the Shaker al-Abssi elements (al Qaeda). The areas west of the camp are controlled by the Ahmed Jibril (general command) and Nayef Hawatmeh (FDLP) elements. They are deployed over half of the school districts. But they share the rest of the area with the al Qaeda elements. East of the camp is &mdash; or was &mdash; firmly dominated by the Fatah al Islam elements. "Colonel Youssef" (no real power. just the local baron) is the "official" commander of the camp on behalf of the Palestinian joint security apparatus, but obviously has very little control outside the central Fatah militias. Over the past few days, the Lebanese Army &mdash; including infantry, special operations commandos, tankers in old armor (including a few Soviet T-55s left by the militias after the war and American M48s) &mdash; have thrust into the Fatah al Islam defenses splitting the camp into two areas. But as soon as the soldiers moved in, the Syrian-controlled Ahmed Jibril forces attacked them, accompanied by other smaller pro-Syrian militias. This forced the LA to counterattack and push them back. The main offensive against al Qaeda was (is) advancing, but gradually. Interestingly and amazingly, Lebanese military intelligence has been supported by good information received from Palestinian civilians inside the camp. The current offensive is slated to separate Fatah al Islam's last enclave inside the camp and dismantle its defenses. But the assaults by pro-Syrian forces could widen Lebanese operations. Reports about the use of helicopters by the Lebanese Army are now being confirmed. The very old French-built Gazelles are equipped with precision air-to-surface rockets. These helicopters were used by the Lebanese Army in 1989 during clashes with the Syrian army. It is amazing to see the Lebanese Army using Cold War-era weapons to fight a lethal post-9/11 terrorist network. But it suggests that the determination by a local small force &mdash; if supported morally and politically by its people and the international community &mdash; can produce results against al Qaeda and pro-Syrian terrorists. However the question remains, until when? For no observer in Lebanon has any illusion about what I called the other components of Group A (Salafists elements in other locations) and Group B (Hezbollah and pro-Syrian forces).

It is interesting to note however, that the war room in Damascus has moved some elements from Group B such as the Ahmed Jibril militias in the battle of Nahr al-Bared. This scenario may repeat itself in other locations. There is a consensus among analysts that the bulk of Group B (Hezbollah) will be thrown into battle only after the Lebanese Army proves its success against the Al Qaeda Jihadists. For now, Syrian operatives are trying to set the tone for similar engagements in the Baddawi camp in the north and in the al Naama camp &mdash;- the fortress of Ahmed Jibril &mdash; south of Beirut. At the Lebanese Ministry of Defense in Yarze, plans to pacify Nahr al-Bared are clear, but the policies regarding other potential fronts north and south of the capital are still being reviewed. The first problem, naturally, is the degree of "tolerance" of Hezbollah regarding these operations. Hassan Nasrallah has declared that the camps to be "a red line." Which means that he &mdash; and through him Syria and Iran &mdash; is strategically committed to not seeing the camps being disarmed by the Lebanese Army. Speculation is still ongoing about when and how Damascus and Hezbollah might throw more forces against the Lebanese Army, and at what stage of the confrontation will they order the pro-Hezbollah elements in the Lebanese Army to pull out or paralyze the action of the little army. Until then, "the brave little force" is fighting its debut-battle in the far north. The outcome will determine the next stage, both for the Lebanese government and for the terror alliance. It is only the beginning, unfortunately. Dr Walid Phares is the Director of the Future Terrorism Project at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the author of The War of Ideas