

Lebanon under siege

Contributed by Administrator
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Analysis Interview with Dr. Walid Phares

For the record... Dr. Walid Phares, senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

Why a fight against al-Qaida militants may be only the beginning for an embattled government?

INTERVIEW. Lebanon's battle with an al-Qaida-linked militant group holed up in a Palestinian refugee camp might just be a small skirmish in its pro-Western government's fight for survival. Despite a show of support for the government by Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah, the Lebanese government may find itself fighting a familiar foe if the unrest continues.

Dr. Walid Phares, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the author of "The War of Ideas: Jihadism Against Democracy," talked to Metro about how the Lebanese government will survive not only with help from the U.S. and U.N., but also from Tehran and Damascus.

How does Fatah al-Islam and, by proxy, al-Qaida, seek to earn popular support?

Their recruitment is essentially through madrassas or their equivalents. They aren't seeking to obtain Sunni support per se, but trying to build a jihadi base within the Sunni communities among Palestinians and Lebanese alike. They would be like Trotskyites rather than the classical Communist parties by comparison. The bigger hidden card is that Syrian intelligence are feeding and supporting [them], hence controlling a number of cadres of Fatah al-Islam, including its leader. This Syrian intelligence operation allows Damascus, and thus its allies such as Hezbollah to "use" the card of Fatah al-Islam at will. They can pressure them to engage in battle, widen the confrontation and push it to the limits of suicide bombings.

With Hezbollah coming out against Fatah al-Islam, what is its role in this conflict?

The Hezbollah statement condemning Fatah al-Islam is all scripted. Syrian intelligence sends the small jihadi group to engage the Lebanese army and create chaos in Tripoli, opening the path for the so-called "opposition" led by Hezbollah to corner the Lebanese cabinet and ask them to resign or include Hezbollah in the government. According to the plan, if [Fuad] Saniora quits or invite Hezbollah to join the governments, the objective would be reached and thus the Fatah al-Islam issue will be resolved quickly.

Which has worse implications for U.S. interests in the region: an al-Qaida emirate in Lebanon or the bolstering of Hezbollah?

Obviously, they are equally dangerous on the long term. But a Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon will link up with Syria, Iran and potentially an Iranian-controlled Iraq. Strategically, it would mean the rise of a regional superpower. A sudden rise of an emirate in the Sunni areas in Lebanon could be still reversed by a local coalition as was the case in Somalia.

You say that the U.S. and the West should "reshape the Lebanese army to face off with the jihadists." In that scenario, wouldn't the Lebanese army be fighting on two fronts?

Excellent question. Al-Qaida has no real enclaves "yet" in Lebanon. On the other hand, it is not said that a U.S.- backed Lebanese army will have to fight an up-front battle against Hezbollah. There are many other means to isolate al-Qaida's cells and contain than to marginalize the military power of Hezbollah. The resources of the Lebanese people aren't just by relying on their army, but they certainly need an army to start with.

Considering that Lebanese politicians have called for an international presence along Lebanon's border with Syria, will this incident prompt the U.N. to put such a force in place?

It is well known - especially by Syria and Iran - that such a deployment would reverse the balance of power to the advantage of the current Lebanese government. But the Lebanese politicians act very slowly and take into consideration their direct political interests. This is where the Syria and Iran intelligence operation is winning. They intimidate and outmaneuver the "politicians," paralyzing the greater decisions of government in this regard. But sometimes,

miscalculations by Damascus - such as throwing Fatah al-Islam into battle - may backfire on the Syrian regime and its allies.

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