The local politics of Global Jihad

A study on the evolution of militant Islamism in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilwe

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Abstract

Can Jihadists become pragmatics? In Palestinian refugee camp Ain al-Hilwe, located in Southern Lebanon, the Jihadi-Salafi militia Usbat al-Ansar has a long history of catering to the needs of the local refugee population. Integrated into the political system of the camp, the group shares the responsibility for what is now close to 90,000 refugees, as people at the time of writing keep pouring in from a war-stricken Syria. While Usbat al-Ansar might best be known for a wave of terrorism and assassinations launched against both Palestinian leaders and Lebanese officials during the 90s, the group has in recent years chosen a different pattern of behavior. Whereas Usbat al-Ansar still commits to the principle of readying the world for the emergence of a global caliphate through armed jihad, it now participates in a Unified Political Leadership of the Palestinian factions that administer Lebanon's twelve refugee camps. How should we understand this development?

The aim of this thesis is to further explore the meaning of Usbat al-Ansar 's venture into national Palestinian politics in Lebanon. Have the Palestinian mainstream movements been able to contain the radical Jihadi-Salafis, or should we understand this formation as a sign of clandestine extremist groups gaining ever more ground in the Palestinian community in Lebanon? I pursue the hypothesis that Usbat al-Ansar has developed from being a clandestine militia, into becoming a significant political and military force in their native camp. This study shows that the group is an integral part of the Islamic Forces, a political constellation which controls a significant part of Ain al-Hilwe. Inviting the Islamic Forces into national Palestinian politics has been a way for the mainstream Palestinian movements to ensure their continued stake in what is the country's biggest and most important refugee camp. Ironically, we will see that the Jihadi-Salafis of Usbat al-Ansar have become one of the most efficient forces when it comes to warding off the present-day volatile, clandestine militias the camp society still suffers at the hands of.
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Erling Lorentzen Sogge,
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Notes on Arabic transliterations

I loosely base my transliterations on the guidelines provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies 1.

Citations in Arabic will be written in both Colloquial Arabic and Formal Arabic depending on the source. Although one in Levantine Arabic most often replaces the letter qāf [q] with a glottal stop, the hamza [ʔ], or in some dialects gāf [g], I will in all cases use the letter q for clarity. For the sake of simplicity my transliterations of formal Arabic will exclude modes and cases.

When typing out names of lesser known groups, organizations or places I will display these fully transcribed and translated in the notes the first time they appear. I will not transcribe people's names, but rather use the spelling most commonly used in the Lebanese English language press. All transliterations and translations of Arabic or Norwegian are mine.

Abbreviations and Arabic glossary

DFLP  Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

*Fedāʾī (pl. Fedāʾīn)*  A combatant. The term sometimes refers to the PLO combatants who “sacrificed” themselves while throwing themselves at Israeli tanks during the 1968 battle of Karāme in Jordan.

*ḥaqq al-ʿawda*  The right of return

ICRC  International Committee of the Red cross

*ʿIlm*  Knowledge. For scholars of Islam, ʿilm is a scientific approach to extracting the knowledge of the Islamic sources

LAF  The Lebanese Armed Forces, i.e. the Lebanese army

MB  The Muslim Brotherhood

*al-Nakba*  The disaster. The word is commonly refers the expulsion of the Palestinians during the creation of the state of Israel in 1948

PFLP  Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

PFLP – GC  Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - *General Command*

PLO  The Palestinian Liberation Organization

PRS  Palestinian Refugee(s) from Syria

PRL  Palestinian Refugee(s) from Lebanon

*Shūra*  The Islamic principle of consultation. Sometimes referred to as an alternative to democracy

*Tawfīn*  Naturalization, the act of making someone a citizen

UNHCR  United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNRWA  United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East
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Introduction

According to Thomas Hegghammer, director of terrorism research at The Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, events following the outbreak of the «Arab Spring» have shaken our understanding of militant Islamism. This has particularly been evident in the battlefield of the ongoing Syrian war, he argues, where al-Qaida affiliated groups have shown an unexpected amount of pragmatism and adaptability. As these groups gain ground, they are posed with new challenges and adapt accordingly: Is this the first time we have seen al-Qaida-affiliated militias pass out medicines and food among people in need? Looking at Palestinian Jihadist groups in Lebanon, one might wonder why our perspective hasn't been challenged earlier.

In the Palestinian refugee camp Ain al-Hilwe, located in Southern Lebanon, the Jihadi-Salafi militia Usbat al-Ansar has a long history of catering to the needs of the local refugee population. Integrated into the political system of the camp the group shares the responsibility for what is now close to 90,000 refugees, as people keep pouring in from the war-stricken neighboring country. While Usbat al-Ansar might best be known for a wave of terrorism and assassinations launched against both Palestinian leaders and Lebanese officials during the 90s, the group has in recent years chosen a different pattern of behavior. After the Jihadist militia Fatah al-Islam engaged in a long drag-out battle against the Lebanese Armed Forces in 2007, an event which displaced nearly 30,000 Palestinian refugees and completely destroyed the northern Nahr al-Barid camp, Usbat al-Ansar issued a fatwa condemning any attacks on Lebanese soldiers.

In the wake of the crisis at Nahr al-Barid the International Crisis Group advised the Palestinian factions to “create a single representative body” to serve as a unified interlocutor in their dialogue with Lebanese authorities. As of 2013 this unified Palestinian body is a reality. The project,
spearheaded by Hamas, came at a point when the factions were at loggerheads over the Syrian crisis and must perhaps be seen as an attempt to contain the mounting political tension. Interestingly this body includes some of the Jihadist movements from Ain al-Hilwe that earlier were thought to pose the biggest threat to stability in the camp.

After completing a field study in Ain al-Hilwe in the early 2000s, political scientist Bernard Rougier warned that Usbat al-Ansar was taking part in a “warlike cult of jihad” he saw emerging in the camp; one that through its violence had been able to reduce the influence of the “Palestinian national movement” to the extent where one no longer could “speak of a Palestinian society in Lebanon's camps”. Rougier's work has become a benchmark study in analyzing the emergence of militant Islamist groups in the refugee camps of Lebanon, but recent events suggest that the dynamics of Palestinian Islamism in said country might be changing.

Whereas Usbat al-Ansar still commits to the principles of militant jihad and the struggle for a global caliphate, it now takes part in national Palestinian politics in Lebanon, where it routinely meets the PLO and the other factions at the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut. How should we understand this development?

Research question

The aim of this study is to further explore the meaning of Usbat al-Ansar's venture into national Palestinian politics in Lebanon. My research question is as follows: Is the inclusion of Usbat al-Ansar in the Unified Political Leadership of the Palestinian factions a result of the mainstream Palestinian movements having been able to contain the threat of Jihadi-Salafism and its most significant proponents in the camps, or should we understand this formation as a sign of clandestine extremist groups gaining ever more ground in the Palestinian community in Lebanon?

In order to seek an answer to this question I pose the hypothesis that Usbat al-Ansar has developed from being a violent, clandestine militia, into becoming a significant political and military force in their native camp. This study shows that the group is an integral part of the Islamic Forces, a political constellation which controls a significant part of Ain al-Hilwe. Unable to compete with their military force, the mainstream Palestinian movements have reluctantly accepted Usbat al-Ansar as a party they need to cooperate with.

The structure of the study

In the first chapter I will give an overview of previous studies done on Islamism in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon, before I situate this thesis within a theoretical framework.

In chapter two I will present the methodological approach which forms the foundation of this study, and discuss ethical implications.

In chapter three I delve into the security zones of Ain al-Hilwe where I present an updated political map of the camp. Although it is the base of the Islamic Forces, I contest the hypothesis that Ain al-Hilwe is a breeding ground for Jihadism. I maintain that it rather should be seen as a contested ground, where a myriad of movements are vying for influence.

The fourth chapter seeks to improve our understanding of the ideology of Usbat al-Ansar, as it follows their evolution from Teheran-backed resistance militia, into a global Jihadist movement. In this chapter we are introduced to volatile Jihadi-Salafi groups such as Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham, where I argue that Usbat al-Ansar has developed in a different direction.

In chapter five I present the circumstances surrounding the creation of a Unified Political Leadership and seek to understand why the Islamic Forces of Ain al-Hilwe have been included in this project. Further, I explore how clandestine militias are confronted by the mainstream Palestinian movements.

The sixth and final chapter concludes the study and provides a summary of its main findings.
1 Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of the situation of the Palestinian camp dwellers in Lebanon, and look at how the notion of Islamism in the camp societies have been dealt with in previous studies.

The precarious situation of the refugees in Lebanon

The Palestinian's history in Lebanon predominantly dates back to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 when waves of refugees fleeing from acts of war in Northern Galilee, mainly hailing from the cities Akka, Haifa, Jaffa, og Safed, were driven across the Lebanese border. Although the refugees originally constituted roughly 100,000 individuals, it's hard to give an accurate estimate of their numbers nearly four generations later. Using UNRWA's estimates from November 2013 as a starting point, we can assume that 270,000 Palestinian refugees currently reside in Lebanon. However, this figure excludes Palestinians who have settled down in Lebanon since violence broke out in the al-Yarmouk area in Damascus in late 2012; at the time of writing they account for nearly 50,000 individuals.

Like in most Arabic states, Palestinians in Lebanon are legally not able to apply for citizenship. Roberts claims the stately aversion to naturalizing the refugees is connected to their religion. In a country where political power is allocated based on a denominational system, the mainly Sunni Palestinians threaten a delicate sectarian power balance. The aversion to tawītin, naturalization, is ironically shared by the refugees themselves. The right of return [ḥaqq al-ʿawda] is defining for the diaspora, and accepting citizenships from their host countries would by many be seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian position in Lebanon, as advocated by PLO, has been to demand a modicum civil rights as long as they are not able to return to their home country.

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11 According to UNRWA, the number is expected to remain stable as the ongoing violence in al-Yarmok, and other areas in and around the Syrian capital where the vast majority of PRS in Lebanon fled from, persists. This figure suggests a 19% increase in the Palestinian population of Lebanon. As is the case with the original refugee population, around 50% of the displaced PRS reside in Lebanon's twelve official Palestinian refugee camps. The area taking in the most PRS percentage wise has been the eastern al-Jalil camp along with a number of informal gatherings along the Syrian border, while the largest actual number of refugees have settled down in Ain al-Hilwe in the outskirts of the southern city Saida, forcing its previously assumed population of 70.000 to rise to well over a 90.000 (UNRWA numbers are based on the author's interview with Firas Abo Aloul, Area Communication Officer for UNRWA in Central Lebanon, Beirut January 2014)
12 Rebecca, Roberts Palestinians in Lebanon: Refugees Living with Long-term Displacement (I.B. Tauris, 2010), 70
Lebanese authorities have for their part maintained that giving the refugees civil rights that they demand, would be a pretext for a gradual integration into society, and is therefore unwanted. After 66 years of exile, the refugees are still legally treated as “stateless foreigners”.

Practically speaking this means that Palestinians in Lebanon are met with a myriad of restrictions which systematically prevent them from building a future in the country. They cannot own land or property, and much less pass it down to their children – inheritance is forbidden. Further, they cannot work within the public sector and are legally prevented from at least 25 occupations that require memberships in Lebanese syndicates. While labor rights for Palestinians have been slightly amended in recent years, the fact remains that 56% of the camp dwellers are still unemployed, and those who have jobs are for the most part doing unskilled labor with little job security. As for the Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) in Lebanon, 90% of are unemployed. Living under harsh legal and social conditions, the Palestinians in Lebanon are more subject to abject poverty and are in more need of humanitarian support than in any other part of the diaspora.

Previous studies

It is particularly the precarious situation of the camp dwellers that continuous to be the field of study for scholars researching the Palestinians of Lebanon. The violence that the camps experienced during the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 1990), and the isolation and social misery the refugees would come to experience in the post-war republic, has been dealt with in a wide array of studies.

War, memory and civil rights

Studies like al-Hout's recollection of the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982, and Sayegh's “Too

References:

many enemies” 21, covering the camp wars in Beirut (1985 - 1987), do an excellent job in retracing oral testaments of traumatizing events that have been defining for the diaspora in Lebanon. Haugbolle 22 also touches on the camps, and particularly the role played by PLO, when exploring Lebanese recollections of the Civil War. Political scientist Brynen has written extensively on the expulsion of the PLO 23 while al-Natour 24 and Roberts 25 focus more explicitly on the refugee's lack of civil rights as a consequence of not being included in the post-war state. The latter gives an interesting account of the survival strategies of the camp dwellers, given their current status as stateless persons. Peteet 26 deals with modes of coping in an anthropological perspective, as she explores how social systems from Palestine are being reproduced in the Lebanese camps because of their detachment from Lebanese society.

Governance

More recently we have seen a series of studies focusing less on memories and identity, but rather look at the systems of governance found in the refugee camps. The most prolific scholar taking on this perspective is Sari Hanafi, a sociologist based at the American University of Beirut. Seeing that Lebanon no longer treats the PLO as a sole representative for the refugees, Hanafi contends that the state prevents the Palestinians from “establishing effective governance structures” 27, rendering the camps “laboratories” 28 where a wide array of modes of governance compete with each other, thus creating an environment of “Rampant factionalism, clientelism, sectarian strife, oppressive Lebanese security and surveillance” 29.

Inspired by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Hanafi describes the camps in Lebanon as “spaces of exception” 30. Whereas Agamben 31 originally uses the term “states of exception” to

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22 Haugbolle, Sune, War and Memory in Lebanon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)
25 Roberts, Palestinians in Lebanon
28 Sari Hanafi, “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon As a Space of Exception” REVUE Asylon(s), no. 5, (2008); http://www.reseau-terra.eu/article798.html
29 Hanafi and Long, “Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon,” 2
30 Hanafi and Long, “Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon”
describe a repressive suspension of law enacted by European governments during the first and second world wars, Hanafi finds that Palestinian refugee camps in post-war Lebanon exist in a constant state of law being suspended: A lack of proper internal governance is explained by pointing at the external state-sanctioned repression of the camp societies. This outside-in narrative is to a high degree also present in studies dealing with the surge of Islamism in the Palestinian communities of Lebanon.

Islamism in the camps

Hanafi and Long believe the ”rise and spread of Islamism” 32 in the camps to be one of several consequences of Lebanese authorities' delegitimisation of the PLO. It is here understood that Islamism, as a social force, has found its footing in the camps in the absence of a strong Palestinian authority, which is prevented by the Lebanese state. Where Hanafi and Long underline the significant position the Islamist nationalists of Hamas have been able to assume, as a result of a weakened PLO, the the smaller, violent and clandestine networks have attracted far more scholarly attention.

Knudsen 33, Suleiman 34 and Hamzeh 35 each give detailed and interesting accounts of how both Islamist Palestinian factions and smaller militant networks of Jihadists came to be an emerging force in the camps from the early 90s and onwards. Gade's study on Fatah al-Islam and the Nahr al-Barid crisis is equally informative 36, while Rosen places the Lebanon-based Jihadi-Salafis in a broader regional context 37. Further, Pall's study on Lebanese Salafism, mainly concentrating his searchlight outside of the camps, provide us with interesting points for reference 38.

The French Political Scientist Bernard Rougier 39 is, however, quite unique in devoting an entire book to describing the Palesinian Jihadist militants challenging the PLO and its leading faction, Fatah, for their hegemony in Ain al-Hilwe. In his seminal work Everyday Jihad, the author believes

38 Zoltan Pall, Lebanese Salafists between the Gulf and Europe: Development, Fractionalization and Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013)
39 Rougier, Everyday jihad
a “warlike cult of jihad”⁴⁰ to be on the rise in the camp: A threat, we learn, that is likely to spread also to other camps – maybe even to the Palestinian territories⁴¹. The prominence and relative celebrity of groups like Usbat al-Ansar, a militia more preoccupied with the global Jihadist scene than the traditional struggle against Israel, is explained by pointing to the social misery felt by Ain al-Hilwe-youth in the post-war republic, and, again, by the PLO's dwindling influence. Where the PLO is unable to unite the refugees under a national banner, extremist movements rise to power.

**A different angle**

In his monograph on the Islamic movements in the camps of Lebanon, Ra'fat Morra⁴² provides an extensive and detailed historical trajectory of Palestinian Islamism in Lebanon that might have slipped under the international radar due to the book only being available in Arabic language. Being a Hamas official himself, Morra's account of his own movement's legacy in Lebanon is at times biased, nonetheless, as an insider he provides an insightful study that stands in contrast to some of the aforementioned works. Where he puts emphasis on the evolution of the continuously changing political and religious landscape of the camps from the 80s until recent years, an extremist takeover is not what he sees as the emerging trend: Morra portrays a broader Islamic alliance consisting of anything from Jihadi-Salafi militias, quietist movements, to nationalistic resistance groups, and other seemingly unlikely partners.

While much attention has been given to the many Jihadist militias based in and around the Ain al-Hilwe camp, scholars have perhaps overlooked the fact that some of these, since the early 90s, have been a part of the camp's internal political administration. The Palestinian factions commonly draw a clear line between the groups that are inside or outside what is referred to as the *Islamic Forces* of Ain al-Hilwe; a broad political alliance that takes part in running the camp. This division provides us with an interesting starting point for further exploring the dynamics of Jihadism in the Palestinian community in Lebanon.

**Firewalls and Conveyor-belts: A typology**

In his discussion on the Muslim Brotherhood, Marc Lynch⁴³ seeks to understand the relationship

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⁴⁰ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 2
⁴¹ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 278
between the movement and smaller radical networks operating within the Jihadi-Salafi realm. Does the Brotherhood work as a “firewall” against the violent groups by capturing Islamists within a relatively moderate organization and stopping their further radicalization, or is it rather a “conveyor-belt” for the extremist groups, seeing that their “non-violent extremism [sic]” might only be one stage on the road to radicalization? While Lynch directs these questions at the US foreign service as he urges his readers to distinguish between the MB and al-Qaida, this model might also be useful in analyzing the role of the Islamic Forces and Usbat al-Ansar. As a working hypothesis I suggest that we see three mobilizing fronts in Palestinian Islamism as represented in the camps of Lebanon:

1) Nationalist resistance movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who trace their origins back to Palestine, 2) The local Lebanese brand of Palestinian Islamism as represented by the Islamic Forces of Ain al-Hilwe, 3) and clandestine, militant Jihadist networks operating outside of Palestinian factionalism, which mainly are found in and around Ain al-Hilwe.

Whereas the Lebanese branches of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are pragmatic movements which have a history of cooperating with a wide array of organizations, ranging from socialist and communist Palestinian groups, to the Shiite-Islamists of Hizballah, where should we place the Islamic Forces? As we will see in chapters to come, this political alliance consists of movements that potentially could fit under both category 1 and 3. A focal point in this study will be to determine whether the Islamic Forces should be understood as a firewall against the extremist militias, or a conveyor-belt for their radicalism.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has dealt with the precarious situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and shown the ways it has been dealt with in a vast array of studies. We have paid close attention to studies of both governance and Islamism in the camps, as these are often interrelated. A main hypothesis shared by many scholars is that the removal of the PLO as a central authority in the camps in the early 80s, has paved the way for other movements to gain a footing. Whereas the

44 Lynch, “Islam divided between Salafi-Jihad and the Ikhwan”
45 The camps of Lebanon also host a number of Palestinian and Lebanese quietist Islamist movements who predominantly stay out of politics. I have chosen not to focus on them in this thesis, as we are specifically addressing movements engaged in what can be interpreted as a struggle for political and territorial ground. It would be naïve to assume that the quietest movements don't participate in this struggle to a certain degree, but they are not a driving force.
clandestine militants of Ain al-Hilwe continue to be the center of attention of many scholarly studies, they don't necessarily constitute the driving force among the Islamist factions competing with a weakened present-day PLO in Lebanon. In chapters to come we will look closer at the political system of Ain al-Hilwe, and try to determine whether Usbat al-Ansar and the Islamic Forces represent a firewall or a conveyor-belt towards the extremist expressions of Islamism found in the camp.
2 Methodology

A Field study

This thesis builds on a field study conducted between August 2013 and January 2014 as a part of a six month stay in Lebanon. During my stay I worked as a trainee at the Norwegian Embassy in Beirut where I completed a thirty page field report of the Shatila camp. In this report I explored the ways the Syrian crisis was manifesting itself in the Beirut camp; this particularly pertaining to inter-factional tension. I documented how local Hamas officials feared that their pro-Syrian allies would turn on them, as the former were perceived to have sided with the Syrian rebellion against president Bashar al-Asad. When discussing these topics with interlocutors from various Palestinian factions, the Islamic Forces in Ain al-Hilwe would frequently come up. I took note of how these groups and their supporters generally were thought to be the least willing to commit to the guidelines of neutrality that the mainstream factions allegedly were following. I also learned that the Islamist dissidents from the southern camp also recently had been included in a new Unified National Leadership for the Palestinian Factions.

After concluding my study on Shatila, I continued my conversations with the Palestinian leadership in Lebanon inquiring more about this new creation and while exploring views on the Islamic Forces. These conversations, 16 in total with 7 different factions, form the base of this study. (See chapter 7 for a list of interviews)

Access and limitations

Being employed at the Norwegian embassy, I was prevented from entering Ain al-Hilwe because of my employer's security measures; due to a surge of recent assassinations and clashes the embassy deemed the camp too unsafe. Out of respect for my employer's wishes I waited until I had finished my business with the embassy to plan a trip to the camp, but was again prevented from going when my contacts from a few local NGOs, that earlier had invited me to come see them, no longer were willing to accept me. They hinted it would be risky for them to be seen with a foreigner given the current climate. In the end I made plans with a delegation from the Fatah movement in Shatila to take me, who in turn also backed out when I told them with whom I wished to speak: Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, The former chief of the PLO's armed forces and the person to possibly survive the largest

46 The report “Shatila under den syriske krisa (Shatila during the Syrian crisis)” was published internally by the Norwegian foreign service in January 2014.
number of assassination attempts in the camp, had recently been ousted from the movement on allegations of corruption and was now seen as a highly controversial figure. I figured Issa would be a good source of information as he is reputed to be the staunchest opponent to the clandestine militias in the camp. I acquired his phone number from another source, but Issa himself suggested that it would be safer if I sent someone in my place to interview him. I prepared questions and a tape recorder for a trusted contact in Shatila who was willing to go in my place. He executed the task perfectly, but before he was able to go from Fatah to seek out other factions as planned, heavy machine gun fire broke out in the camp and forced him to cut his visit short. We agreed we wouldn't make a second attempt.

Why center this study around a camp I wasn't able to enter myself? Usbat al-Ansar and the Islamic Forces aren't present in any other place than Ain al-Hilwe, and exploring their role in their local context is pivotal in understanding their rise to preeminence in Palestinian factionalism in Lebanon. Moreover, it is not uncommon for scholars to research groups or places that are unattainable for various reasons; we would hardly have any studies on al-Qaida if researching the network only could be done through meeting its combatants in their homes. Although the camp itself was out of bounds for me, information about what was happening inside of it was not hard to find. As both journalists and politicians for better or worse was giving the camp a great deal of attention due to the heightened security level in Lebanon, Palestinian officials from any political constellation were usually more than willing to meet in order to discuss the situation at their headquarters in Beirut.  

The interviews

Meeting the factions
The first bout of conversations (September – November 2013) mostly dealt with inter-factional relations during the Syrian crisis and abilities to overcome social and humanitarian issues in the camps and camp security. These were mainly conducted in the framework of the report I was writing for the embassy, but many of the conversations proved to be relevant also for this study. The second batch of interviews (December 2013 – January 2014), would revolve more specifically around the factions' relationship with the Islamic Forces. The interviews were conducted in the Shatila, Burj al-Barajne and Mar Elias camps, the latter being the camp where most factions have their central headquarters in Lebanon. This excludes Hamas whom I met with at their offices in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

47 An exception is the Pro-Syrian faction al-Saaia. Despite having made three appointments to meet with them, they never showed
Although meetings with Ain al-Hilwe-based factions such as Usbat al-Ansar and al-Harika al-Islamiyya al-Moujahida for practical reasons were not realistic, interviews with these were continuously being published in the media, and I would frequently ask other factions to comment on the ideas and views presented in these.

**Civilians, NGOs and writers**

During my field study I would continuously run into Ain al-Hilwe inhabitants visiting family or attending weekend classes in the Beirut camps, who provided me with invaluable perspectives concerning life in the camp. Comparing this data with the Beirut camps was especially interesting.

Further I met with five authors that have written extensively on the Palestinians in Lebanon in various publications: Mohsen Saleh, general director of the think tank al-Zaytouna Centre, Soheil al-Natour, a human rights lawyer and DFLP official located in the Mar Elias camp, Hamas' own Ra'fat Morra, journalists Franklin Lamb and Mohammad al-Zaatari, the latter frequently reporting from Ain al-Hilwe for the Lebanese daily, the Daily Star.

Further, I met with representatives of the following NGOs that work with Palestinian refugees: UN's Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Beit Atfal al-Somoud, which provides education for Palestinian children, the Popular Aid for Relief and Development, which provides aid and healthcare for refugees who live in the adjacent areas of camps such as Shatila and Ain al-Hilwe, and The Youth Fraternity, who prepare young refugees for career life. These meetings proved to be fruitful as I could bounce ideas off professionals who had one foot in and one foot outside of the camp societies.

Although not every source is cited in this thesis, each and every one of these encounters have helped broaden my understanding pertaining to the topic of this study.

**Language**

All but four interviews were conducted in colloquial Arabic. Although not my mother tongue, having studied the language intensively for three years prior to this study, half of that time in the Arabic world, I had few concerns about conducting the field work in Arabic. It was the language I used at home in Beirut, and oftentimes in the workplace, and it felt natural to also use it in the field. I was at times offered to speak English, but preferred to continue in Arabic, as I had prepared my questions in this language. A significant portion of my written sources are also in Arabic, ranging from news coverage, documentaries portraying the factions of Ain al-Hilwe, academic works, to social media pages connected to the camp in question. These have been important as they have provided me with updates, and local context not necessarily found in English language sources. I
have taken extra precautions when navigating in the Lebanese media landscape, as most publications are funded by political parties, and to some extent reflect their owner's views.

**Ethical implications**
I would seldom find myself conducting one-to-one interviews. Whether sitting in offices, Popular committees, or family homes, my interlocutors and I would often be surrounded by people coming and going. These would often lend their comments to the discussions, and sometimes even participate eagerly. As it was impossible to provide each and everyone of them with a detailed description of my project, to the extent that these are cited in this work, I will not display their names.

The same goes for civilian camp dwellers. Although these without exception gave their consent to having their names disclosed, this was in certain instances quite obviously a product of peer pressure from family members or friends who were overzealous in providing me, the researcher, with personal details concerning the interviewees. Well aware that this study revolves around controversial themes, I decided to anonymize my civilian interlocutors.
A political map of Ain al-Hilwe

In interviews with Fatah officials in the Beirut-camps, I would often be told that the “real revolution” takes place in Ain al-Hilwe. “It is the only place where Fatah is still proud” a man working for the PLO's National Security Forces in the Burj al-Barajne camp lamented. While Ain al-Hilwe by some is seen as a Fatah stronghold, others see it as a base of renegade Jihadist militias, and it is in the media commonly depicted as a “Zone of unlaw”, a “security island”, or a “breeding ground for Islamist militants”.

Is Ain al-Hilwe a Fatah stronghold or a base for clandestine Jihadists? In this chapter I will delve into the security zones of the most conflict-stricken camp in the country as I provide an overview of the different movements vying for influence. First off I will give a historical backdrop for understanding how the PLO went from ruling the camps of Lebanon, into being expelled, fragmented and contested for their hegemony upon their return.

The rise and fall of a revolution

Ain al-hilwe, meaning The sweet spring, is also the name of the urban district where the camp is seated at the south eastern side of the coastal city Saida, often referred to as Lebanon's southern capital. With its renowned vegetable market and cheap housing (accommodating a wide array of nationalities like Iraqis, Egyptians Sri Lankans, and working class Lebanese families), the camp is a vital part of Saida's urban fabric. It is also, paradoxically, the heaviest guarded of the Palestinian camps; army checkpoints surround both the the site itself and its adjacent areas.

The history of Ain al-Hilwe, is one of power changing hands. What in ancient times allegedly was a Phoenician necropolis, would come to be one of Lebanon's seven emirates under the Druze.

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48 Mahmoud Abu Jaber al-Afifi, Fatah official in Shatila, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
50 NOW News Lebanon, “Fī jazīrat ʿain al-ḥilwe...baqāyā faṣa’il wa ṭalāʾiʿa al-qāʿida [In the Island of Ain al-Hilwe...the remnants of factions and the vanguards of al-Qaida], January 14. 2014: [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/newspecialar/529999-في-جزيرة-عين-الحلوة-بقايا-فصائل-وطلاع-القاعدة](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/newspecialar/529999-في-جزيرة-عين-الحلوة-بقايا-فصائل-وطلاع-القاعدة)
52 Rashid al-Mansi, Youth programme coordinator for P.A.R.D., an NGO that deals with refugees living in adjacent areas of the refugee camps Shatila and Ain al-Hilwe, interview with author, Beirut, September 2013
prince Fakhr-al-Din Ibn Maan of the Maan dynasty during the Ottoman period. The site itself was a military camp during the French rule of Lebanon (1918 – 1943), and its remains were used to construct a refugee camp shortly after al-Nakba, the catastrophe, struck in 1948. Just like the eleven other present-day Palestinian camps, Ain al-Hilwe started as an informal cluster of displaced refugees who found themselves unable to return to their home villages of northern Palestine after the creation of the state of Israel on May 15, 1948. Neither the refugees nor Lebanese authorities expected the displacement to last: According to writer Leila Abu Saba, her grandparents and other Saida landowners were first requested by the state to lend their property to the refugees for only two weeks, until they later started collecting a symbolic sum for the land. While the tent landscapes set up by the ICRC rapidly grew, the refugees continued to live under sparse conditions. In the beginning materials like nails and cement were in the eyes of the state equated with “continuity” and therefore strictly forbidden. Matters improved slightly as UNRWA began operating in the camp in 1952 and gradually replaced its canvas tents with concrete shelters, but the faith of the refugees wouldn’t turn until Yaser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) set up their offices in Lebanon in the late 60s.

**Days of revolution (Ayyām al-thawra)**

If the Nakba of ’48 hadn’t already, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Jerusalem following the six day war of 1967 certainly resulted in a strong politicization of the diaspora. It also led to a significant growth in support for the Palestinian cause throughout the Arabic world. In Lebanon this cause was adopted by a broader leftist opposition movement that sought to challenge the mainly Christian nationalist elite. When the PLO was forced to resettle from Jordan to Lebanon in the wake of Black September, the Lebanese public was seemingly overwhelming in its welcome: 46% were in full support of the PLO's right to wage a war on Israel from Lebanese soil, and 40% gave their reserved support. A weakened Lebanese government buckling under pan-Arabic leftist pressure saw no other solution than to sign the renowned Cairo Accords of 1969, thereby formally allowing the PLO to continue with their “Palestinian revolution” against Israel from the refugee camps, albeit under supervision of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

For most camp dwellers, this meant a dramatic improvement of their livelihoods. The PLO,

56 Haugbolle, War and memory, 30 – 40
57 Brynen “The politics of exile”
58 Brynen, Sanctuary and survival
backed by petrodollars from the gulf states, introduced social, educational and health services to the camp societies, and employed as much as half of the Palestinian workforce themselves. What is often referred to the most prosperous period for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon would come to an abrupt end as the PLO came under heavy fire with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 90).

The death of the revolution

Through its continuous attacks on Israel carried out from the southern refugee camps, the PLO made powerful enemies in the process. Israel, Syria, and the Lebanese christian nationalist al-Katā’ib party (The Phalange), all took turns at trying to end the Palestinian revolution. While the PLO were subject to crippling military defeats in the camps, their political support also plummeted as Israel responded to their aggression and invaded Lebanon both in 1978 and 1982, laying waste to much of the country's infrastructure and killing thousands of civilians in the process. In the wake of the latter invasion, American diplomats brokered a deal with the Lebanese government to let the PLO evacuate the country peacefully, while providing guarantees that the camps wouldn't be attacked in their absence. Ariel Sharon still believed the Palestinians to be hiding no less than 2000 armed PLO-combatants in the capital, and Israeli forces surrounded the Beirut-camps. In the middle of September 1982 a militia connected to the al-Katā’ib-party was able to enter and kill what is estimated to be at least 1700 civilians in the Shatila-camp and its adjacent neighborhood Sabra. Arafat, having relocated to Tunis, would come under fire from his own shortly after. As the Lebanese army was inching closer to a complete collapse and splinter into various factions, and


60阿拉伯语的“Too many enemies”

61 The southern camps also suffered great losses. In Burj al-Shamli the renowned al-Ḥūlī kindergarten was destroyed by phosphorous bombs dropped from Israeli war planes, resulting in the death of nearly a hundred children. What remained of Ain al-Hilwe after the bomb raids, was bulldozed to pieces after Israeli soldiers passed through the southern parts of the country on their way to Beirut. According to UNRWA's estimates 57% of homes in the eight refugee camps in the Beirut, Saida and Sor areas were destroyed, with another 36% damaged in aerial bombardment, ground fighting, and subsequent bulldozing, following Israel's invasion of 1982. The vast scale of the damage affected some 73,500 refugees in the aforementioned areas. See Kalache and Christoff “Radio Documentary - Burj el-Shemali Refugee Camp”, June 16. 2006: http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/radio-tadamon/radio-documentary-burj-el-shemali-refugee-camp; Badil,Overview of Secondary Displacement of Palestinians in and from Host Countries, BadiL.org, 2010: http://www.badil.org/es/monitoreo-continuo-de-los-desplazamientos/item/1363-overview-of-secondary-displacement-of-palestinians-in-and-from-host-countries
Israel was gradually pulling out of the war, the fate of both the Lebanese and the Palestinian people came to rely more and more on the Syrian Baath state under Hafez al-Asad.

In 1983 Fatah officer Said Abu Musa Muragha ended his relationship with his movement, and instead formed the faction Fatah – al-Intifada in opposition to Yaser Arafat. He joined ranks with other Damascus-based groups such as the PFLP-GC and al-Saiqa which had parted with the PLO years ago. Syria's policies regarding the Palestinian camps didn't differ much from its overall political ambitions in Lebanon; it generally sought to subdue any opposition to its rule. When al-Asad cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood in Tripoli, this also meant removing whatever was left of the PLO who had been funding some of the Islamic movements in the northern city.

Coordinating with Syrian troops, Muragha's new faction engaged in clashes with Arafat's Fatah in the eastern Beqaa-valley and the northern parts of the country. Thus Nahr al-Barid, Badawi and al-Jalil were the first camps to be taken over by the aforementioned anti-Arafat, Damascus-based factions.

As for the Beirut-area Hafez al-Asad cooperated with the Lebanese Amal-movement in targeting alleged PLO officials left in the camps. Through 1985 to 1987 Shatila and Burj al-Barajne came under lengthy sieges and suffered heavy bombardment, but the camps were never taken over. When the “camp wars” spread to Saida in 1986, Amal was equally unsuccessful in storming Ain al-Hilwe. A broad alliance of civilian militias, later to be known as the Islamic Forces, had warded off the attackers.

The aftermath of the war

Lebanese authorities abrogated the Cairo Accords in 1987, thereby officially ending its relationship with the PLO. In the war-ending Taif Accords of 1989 the Palestinians served as a convenient scapegoat, and the PLO was largely blamed for violence breaking out in the first place. In 1991 an amnesty law was passed, allowing former Lebanese warlords and militia leaders to be excused from their actions, but this law didn't pertain to the Palestinian zu‘amā’ (chieftains), and tension between the PLO and the new Lebanese state continued.

66 Fatah - al-intifāda - Fatah – The uprising
67 Fatah still have strong ties to the Tripoli based Salafi movement al-Tawḥīd al-islāmī (The Unification Movement) who they provided with money and arms during the civil war. Although Arafat's Fatah movement is principally a secular organization, many of its founders had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, as was the case with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. See Hilal Khaskan, “Lebanon's Islamist Stronghold,” The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2011): [http://www.meforum.org/2948/lebanon-islamist-stronghold]; Ziad Abu-Amr, Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).
68 Sayegh, Too many enemies
69 Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya fi-l-mujtamʿ al-‘arabī fi-l-mashriq al-adliyya
70 Roberts, Palestinians in Lebanon
71 Elizabeth Picard «The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon» in War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East, ed. Steven Heydemann, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)
The near cleansing of Fatah combatants in northern and eastern Lebanon, meant that the camps in these areas were to a lesser extent targeted by state sanctions as the Syrians would impose their control over the country at the end of the war in 1990. While building materials would be allowed in the northern camps, the situation in the south was quite a different story. Fatah remained present, although severely reduced in the southern camps. Ain al-Hilwe had served as an important hideout for PLO-fedā'īn resisting the evacuation from the Beirut bays, and it would suffer because of it: In the post-war republic the camp increasingly came to be surrounded by checkpoints, fenced in by barbed wire and walls, and the population was punished with economical sanctions for harboring Arafat-loyalists. To the extent that the Palestinian community under the PLO's guardianship could be described as a “state within [a] state”, it was now one without clear leaders.

**A present-day political map of Ain al-Hilwe**

Although the Cairo Accords no longer exist, the Lebanese Armed Forces largely still operate by a self-imposed policy of not entering the camps and the state rarely interferes with the lives of the refugees. The responsibility of their well-being is left with a number of local and foreign NGOs. Most prominent is UNRWA, a UN agency which works to provide education, health care, financial support and other social services for the refugees. Inside of the country's twelve camps, agencies like these are integrated into a complex cobweb of informal political and social structures of governance.

Where the governance of the Lebanese state ends, the mandate of the many Popular Committees (al-lijān al-shʿabiyya) begin. These are mainly organized by the 19 Palestinian political factions and function like internal municipalities who administrate the camps financially and politically. Despite what their names might suggest, these committees are not elected and their representation reflect factional power in the given camp more than the popularity of its members. The same goes for the Security Committees (al-lijān al-amniyya) who take on police tasks and provide for security in the camps.

Since the evacuation of the PLO in 1982, a unified political force has not existed in the camps. Even after the re-emergence of the PLO during the mid 90s in addition to the establishment of a

72 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 8 - 12
73 Mahmoud Abu Jabir al-Afifi, Fatah official in Shatila, interview with the author, Beirut, October 2013
74 Soheil al-Natour, author, lawyer and DFLP official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
76 Mohsen Saleh notes that “the strength of a faction is not only reflected in its popular support, as its own military power on the ground and regional support, (official and/or popular) that it enjoys, may extend and widen its influence.” (Interview with the author, Beirut, 2014)
Palestinian embassy in Beirut in 2011, the organization still finds itself competing with a number of dissident factions loyal to the Baath regime, who remain strong even after Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The Alliance of Palestinian Forces (Tahāluf al-qiwā al-filasṭīniyya) combines factions with a socialistic outlook such as the PLFP-GC, Fatah – al-Intifada and al-Saiqa, with Islamist nationalist movements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Where they differ widely in ideology, The Alliance factions have since the early 90s been united by their shared rejection of negotiations with Israel and their oppositions to the PLO which they criticize for monopolizing the Palestinians cause. The influence of the socialist Damascus-based groups in Lebanon matches the geographical extension of Syrian power during the civil war: These factions play a pivotal role in organizing the camps of Beirut and the north, but less so in the south. In Ain al-Hilwe it is their Islamic ally Hamas that holds The Alliance's strongest political card.

To make matters more complex, The Alliance and the PLO run parallel Popular Committees in nearly every camp. This not only creates a great deal of confusion for the camp dwellers, but the quest to form cohesive modes of governance and security is at all times challenged by any political disruption or conflict that takes place in the West Bank and Gaza on one hand, and along the Damascus / Teheran axis on the other. While some camps are limited to the two competing institutions, Ain al-Hilwe has an additional Follow-Up Committee (lajnat mutābʾaa) which seeks to combine the efforts of the political blocs and also includes a small number of civilians that are tasked with different assignments in taking care of the camp. Typically Ain al-Hilwe dwellers take pride in the Follow-Up Committee, and consider it to be a sign of progress.

The Islamic Forces

Joining the 22 member Follow-Up Committee in Ain al-Hilwe are the Islamic Forces, a factional constellation that doesn't occur in any other camp. Its origins hark back to the civil war when a band of civilians, religious congregations, and Palestinian officials from several factions formed a broad front in order to resist the Israeli invasion of 1982. As many PLO officials either were arrested, fled the camp, or joined the following evacuation, these irregular militias continued to defend Ain al-Hilwe during the camp wars of the mid 80s. As a result they came to occupy the role as a local Palestinian Islamic resistance before Hamas and Islamic Jihad could set up their offices in Lebanon.

77 Erling Lorentzen Sogge, Shatila under den Syriske krise [Shatila during the Syrian crisis], Norwegian Foreign Service report, published internally, 2014
78 Commonly referred to as simply al-Taḥāluf, meaning the Alliance
79 Mohsen Saleh, General director of the Beirut based think tank and publisher house al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
80 al-Qūwa al-islāmīyya – The Islamic Forces
It is difficult to pinpoint exactly who the Islamic Forces are, as the organization is loosely defined. A number of individuals and smaller groups operate under its banner, but don't necessarily have official ties to its leadership. Its main core can, however, be traced back to three movements:

al-Ḥaraka al-al-islāmiyya al-mujāhida (The Islamic Combatant Movement)

This group is perhaps better known by its prominent leader and the influential Imam of the al-Nur Mosque, Shaykh Jamal Khattab who is also the secretary of the Islamic Forces. The movement was an active militia during the civil war and retains an armed force in the camp, but has since taken the profile of a pious movement more than a militant one. The group has a Salafī outlook, albeit with heavy nationalist undertones. In the words of Khattab “…the Salafis here [in Ain al-Hilwe] have rather a moderate attitude, especially for us, the Palestinians. Our country is occupied. Our energy is focused on our country”.

Uṣbat al-anṣār al-islāmiyya (The Islamic League of Partisans)

Ideologically Usbat al-Ansar resemble no other official Palestinian group in Lebanon in that they are Jihadi-Salafis and reject both notions of nationalism and democracy. Whereas the militia is not able to compete with the popularity of Shaykh Jamal and his group, it makes up for its lack of pious credentials in sheer firepower; with around 200 armed militants it is reputed to be one of the heaviest armed groups in the camp. If Khattab and his movement are the brain behind the Islamic Islamic Forces, Usbat al-Ansar are the muscle

Anṣār allah (Partisans of God)

Led by Former Fatah commander Jamal Suleiman, Ansar Allah are technically not a part of the Islamic Forces as an organization, but are included here as they are the third Lebanon-based Islamist faction to be integrated with the Palestinian movements. Often described as the Palestinian version of Hizballah, the group is looked at with suspicion by some of their Salafī coleagues.

81 Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya fi-l-mujām‘a al-filāstīnī fi lubnān
82 For the sake of clarity I have here excluded Ḥizb al-tahrīr (The Liberation Party). Although the international Pan-Islamist group reportedly is apart of the organization, they don't participate in Palestinian factionalism. In an conversation with Jamal Khattab aired on al-Mayadeen, the Shaykh also understood Hamas and Islamic Jihad to be on board his team in a broader sense, although the two groups underlined in interviews with the author that they belonged to The Alliance and no other political bloc. See Al-Mayadeen, “ḥiwār al-sā’aa: khalfīāt faṣl al-līnū min harakat fatah wa-l-khilafāt al-falīṣṭīnīyya dākhil al-mukhayyamāt [The talk of the hour : Backgrounds for the split between al-Lino and the Fatah movement and Palestinian conflicts in the camps],” October 8. 2013
84 Daily Star journalist Mohammad Zaatari, Phone interview with author, January 2014
According to their military leader Maher Oweid, members of the group were trained by Hizbullah to help fight the Israeli occupants of southern Lebanon between 1989 and 1990. However, as of late 2012 Hizbullah severed their ties to the militia, allegedly because of Ansar Allah's support of the Syrian uprising. The group vows to continue on the path of jihad and resistance as an “independent Palestinian Islamist movement that will continue to uphold the rights [of the Palestinians] no matter how great our sacrifice is.” Ansar Allah differ from the other Ain al-Hilwe groups in that they also have a presence in some other camps.

A divided Fatah

Whereas Fatah's hegemony in Ain al-Hilwe is contested by both the Alliance and the Islamic Forces, the organization might be said to be equally challenged by reoccurring bouts of internal rivalry. Located near the Bustan al-Yahudí neighborhood along the north-western side of the camp, Munir al-Maqdah is a renowned and well respected political figure. He was one of the Fatah officials to stay behind and fight Israel in 1982, but is perhaps better known as the founder of the al-Aqsa Brigades in Palestine. Despite this, his relationship with the mother organization has at times been rocky. When the Oslo accords went public in 1993, he fell out with the leadership of Arafat and instead started his own militia in Ain al-Hilwe aligning with the rejectionist pro-Syrian forces. A reconciliation was initiated and he rejoined Fatah's mainstream in late 1998, but was again in 2010 relieved of his duties as a PLO commander on the grounds of not complying with president Mahmoud Abbas' leadership in the West Bank. In 2012 his personal military faction was dissolved and reintegrated into the PLO's newly formed National Security Forces led by Subhi Abu Arab. The decision was reportedly an attempt to centralize security responsibilities and put an end to the seemingly endless rivalry between al-Maqdah and Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, both running their own Fatah-groups.

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88 Ra'fat Morra, author and media spokesperson for Hamas, interview with the author, Beirut, December 2013

89 Suleiman, “The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon”, 66


92 The Daily Star, “National Security Forces take over Ain al-Hilweh checkpoint”
Issa, residing at the southern entrance of the camp in the Sufriyye neighborhood, is best known as the previous head of al-Kifāḥ al-mussalah 93, PLO's recently dismantled military branch in Lebanon. In October 2013 he was fired from Fatah on allegations of receiving personal funds from Muhammad Dahlan; the Palestinian president's bitter rival. Issa is now heavily guarded by his private entourage of armed bodyguards. The father of five is determined to stay despite almost routinely finding himself to be the target of assassination attempts 94. Contradictory to media reports he doesn't figure the attacks to be coming from Jihadi gangs based along the eastern Fawqāni-street, by locals sometimes described as the Area of Death (Minṭaqat al-maut): “Let's be clear; any faction or group could be behind these actions, as any one of them could be penetrated by foreign hostile elements. This is the reality in our camp” 95.

Security and arms

After heavy clashes broke out in Ain al-Hilwe between the PLO and the post-war Lebanese state in 1991, an attempt was made to handover the camp's armory but the process was never finished due to a breakdown in communication between the parts 96. While a 2004 U.N. Security council resolution calls for the “disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias” 97, the Palestinian factions to date remain largely armed. A mantra often heard is that the question of arms will be dealt with only in the framework of a broader discussion about the refugees' civil rights 98, although some factions, like Islamic Jihad, say they would retain their weapons in any case 99. In the view of Hamas leader Ali Barake the weapons is something that make the host country respect the Palestinians: “They particularly respect Ain al-Hilwe because of its arms” 100.

While the Palestinian weapons might be a headache for the Lebanese state, camp dwellers themselves commonly feel that a bigger problem is a lack of monopoly of arms. “In Ain al-Hilwe we have more guns than people. Everyone is armed” 101 an inhabitant claimed. “The camp lives on its nerves. The smallest conflict will result in someone getting shot. And then we wait for the retaliation” another shared 102. The camps are densely populated societies where unemployment is

93 al-Kifāḥ al-mussalah – The Armed Struggle
94 Mahmoud Abu al-Abd al-Lino Issa, interview with the author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014
95 Mahmoud Abu al-Abd al-Lino Issa, interview with the author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014
96 Soheil al-Natour, Interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
98 Ahmad Mustafa, DFLP official in the Burj al-Barajne camp, interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
99 Abu Ashraf, leader of Islamic Jihad in the Burj al-Barajne camp, Interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
100 Ali Barake, interview with author, Beirut November 2013
101 “Fatime”, a young Palestinian from Syria currently living in Ain al-Hilwe, interview with author, Beirut, October 2013
102 “Rahaf”, an Ain al-Hilwe inhabitant taking weekly classes in the Burj al-Barajne camp, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014

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high, and social desperation is widespread; it doesn't take much for conflict to erupt. Given that most people in the camps have allegiance to a broad set of social groups, be they factions, clan like social structures, or extended family, even petty conflicts can take on a level of political or factional disputes. While this is the reality in most camps, Ain al-Hilwe is unique as camp dwellers figure the root of violence to be Palestinian political divisions. This might in part be explained by the fact that Ain al-Hilwe until recently has had two parallel security committees.

In other camps the security committees are joint projects employing several factions, although they commonly are led by one dominant group. The Islamic Forces have however for quite some time retained their own security committee, working in parallel with the PLO one. Internal rivalry being what it is, the camp is understood to be divided into eight overlapping security zones, that are controlled by a number of formal and informal factions. In an attempt to overcome security issues the National and Islamic Forces of Ain al-Hilwe are at the time of writing planning to form a Trilateral Committee (lajna thulāthīyya) to tend to security measures. Reportedly the committee will be led by Fatah (PLO), Hamas (The Alliance), and Usbat al-Ansar (Islamic Forces).

The clandestine militants

There are still armed groups in and around the camp who retain an antagonistic attitude towards the Palestinian factions and their ever-changing security plans.

Where brick walls and barbed wire follow the camp along its western and eastern sides, the northern neighborhoods around the Bustan al-Yahudi street float seamlessly into the adjacent Lower al-Tamir and al-Tawari-areas. By extension of the camp, these neighborhoods have gone from being a center of power and economic prosperity during the PLO years (1969 – 1982), to being destroyed during the Israeli invasion of 1982 and suffer losses in the following war of the camps. In post-war Lebanon al-Tawari and al-Tamir have come to be societies as enclosed and

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103 Author's interview with employee of the NGO Beit Atfal al-Somoud who wished to remain unnamed, Beirut, October 2013
104 During my field study in the Shatila camp, an accusation made against a member of a local NGO, overnight turned into a conflict between the PFLP and Hamas, given the allegiance of the people involved. Rumors had it that Hamas people were planning to light the NGO on fire, but the leaders of the factions were able to diffuse the tension in the run of a week (Field notes October 28. 2013)
106 Franklin Lamb, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
108 Tamir al-taḥta - Lower Tamir. The name Tamir, in arabic meaning «construction» hints towards the building of the neighborhood in the wake of an earthquake that hit Saida in 1965. The lower and upper al-Tamir neighborhoods are separated by al-Tawāri‘ in the middle. Often people refer to these areas as one place: “al-Tamir / al-Tawari”
impoverished as the camp itself. In fact, many inhabitants in he adjacent neighborhoods north of Ain al-Hilwe feel they are worse off than the refugees, since they are not supported by the social services that the camp dwellers receive. In Lebanon al-Tamir is perhaps best known as the home of pop-singer Fadel Shaker, who in later years has renounced his career and joined the radical Salafi cleric Ahmad al-Asir, becoming one of the group's most proactive voices. Al-Asir's rhetorical warfare against the Lebanese state has had a certain resonance among the marginalized working class neighborhoods of Saida, where he often would perform sit-ins urging his followers to confront Hizballah for bullying the country's Sunnis. In July 2013 mounting tension led to full-blown clashes against the army, after which both al-Asir and Shaker took refuge in Ain al-Hilwe. Not surprisingly Palestinian officials are adamant that al-Tamir and al-Tawari are not apart of Ain al-Hilwe, and are thus outside of their jurisdiction. When speaking to Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, the former Fatah commander suggested it would be better if “the Lebanese blocked these neighborhoods off from the camp”, seeing as they formed an “open door for suspicious groups” to enter the camp community.

True as this might be, Ain al-Hilwe also hosts a number of smaller clandestine armed groups who consist of Palestinians, many of whom are native to the camp. Residing in the al-Tairi neighborhood along the al-Fawqâni street, a young man named Bilal Badr has since 2012 run his own militia. The group, allegedly numbering around 30 – 50 combatants, has recently taken on the moniker “The Muslim Youth” (al-shābān al-muslimīn). In addition to Badr we also find number of other prominent “Islamist activists”, as they often are described in local media, that surround themselves with clan-like entourages of armed followers. Many of these are wanted by the Lebanese state, such as cleric and Ain al-hilwe-resident Baha al-Din, who has been linked to the controversial Abdallah Azzam Brigades, the organization to claim the suicide attacks against the Iranian embassy in Beirut on October 19, 2013.

110 Ghandour, “Who is 'Ain al-Hilweh?”
113 Their whereabouts are disputed, but former Fatah official Mahmoud al-Lino Issa claimed the two were in the camp as of January 2014 (interview with author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014)
114 Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, interview with author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014
115 Names that frequently came up during my field study were Tawfiq Taha, Usama al-Shehabi, Haytham al-Shaabi. These, along with Bilal Badr, were thought to be affiliated with a number of different groups, ranging from the Abdallah Azzam brigades, the remnants of the groups Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham to the Syrian branch of al-Qaida; Jabhat al-Nusra. These statements were often contradictory to one another, and impossible to verify.
116 katā‘ib ʿabd allāh ʿazzām – The Abdallah Azzam Brigades
The camp's clandestine groups are commonly thought to contribute to the turmoil the community periodically experiences, but are not alone in using violence. During the spring of 2014 the camp witnessed a string of night-time assassinations where a number of people associated with the aforementioned clandestine militias have turned up dead. While an Ansar Allah official blamed the “wave of assassinations” on Israel, social media pages connected to Ain al-Hilwe were experiencing something resembling a media campaign where supporters of Badr's group were calling out members of Fatah and the Islamic Forces, claiming them to be behind the murders. In mid May the tension resulted in an armed standoff between Bilal Badr's group and the entourage of Fatah official Talal al-Urduni.

In the midst of the clashes, a spontaneous civilian mass protest broke out, where people poured out in the streets condemning the violence. The protesters could be heard calling out both Fatah and what they understood to be the Jihadi group Jund al-Sham, as they shouted “Ism’aū ya msallaḥīn, hayyā ḍaṭāiq filasṭīn! - Listen up gunmen, get going on your way to Palestine!”

**Conclusion**

In his seminal work on the history of Beirut, Samir Kassir notes that the tragedy of pre-civil war Lebanon was ironically its rare form of pluralism where no community seemed to constitute a majority and no political bloc could stake its claim to preeminence, thus causing conflict to be constant. In many ways the Palestinian refugee camp Ain al-Hilwe seems to have suffered the same fate. It is perhaps a Fatah stronghold, as well as a base for Jihadi militias, but it is more than anything contested ground.

In this chapter we have seen how the outcome of the civil war has to a high degree determined the present day Palestinian political landscape in the country. Through their patronage to Hafez al-Asad

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119 Talal al-Urduny [from Fatah] will pay for his crimes. He has death in store for him”, one commenter said. “Every faction is more deranged than the previous” another added: “Don't tell me 'Fatah', don't say 'the Islamic factions', they are all despicable dogs […] you conceal your agendas, putting them before the interest of our people, and our sons and our daughters...”. Comments retrieved from the Facebook site Aṣdiqā' mukhayyam ‘ain al-ḥilwe after the news of one of Bilal Badr’s constituents were published in May 2014: https://www.facebook.com/AsdkaaMokhayamAinAlHelwe


the Pro-Syrian dissident factions of the Alliance came to play an important role in organizing the north and the Beirut area; a role they retain even after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The PLO has since their expulsion made a comeback, but in terms of camp authority they are contested even in their alleged southern strongholds. Since the end of the civil war the Islamic Forces, led by the renowned Jamal Khattab, have been a central component in the camp's Follow-Up Committee and social life in Ain al-Hilwe. Whereas this committee gathers all factions in the camp, security has largely been left up to individual efforts; sometimes even within the same faction, as is the case with the local Fatah faction. The several security zones of the camp, with each group protecting their “own neighborhood”, must be said to be a result of no movement being able to constitute the stronger part. This also contributes to the reoccurring turmoil the camp periodically goes through.

Another destabilizing factor are the many clandestine Jihadi groups that oppose, and to some extent antagonize the Palestinian factions, although it must be noted that the largest Jihadist militias have chosen to work alongside the mainstream movements. This is evident when looking at the new trilateral security formation where Hamas and Fatah are joined by Usbat al-Ansar in being its main contributors. This gives us an image of who wields military power in the camp, but raises another question: How did the two biggest movements in the Palestinian world come to share power with a local Jihadi Salafi militia in Ain al-Hilwe? In the next chapter we will look closer at this group.
“Before and after the fall of the Caliphate the people have lived in a bitter reality. Our Islamic lands have been infested with the ideas by nationalist thought, communism and secularism. The enemies of Islam have taken advantage of the opportunity, ravaging our soil with corruption by trying to convince the sons of the *Umma* that it is because of their religion and their creed that they have been struck by backwardness and depravity...”» Internal brochure published by Usbat al-Ansar, 123

It was mainly after the the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11. 2001 that researches operating within the realm of Terror studies started to take note of Ain al-Hilwe. While foreign fighters kept pouring into the battle fields of the Afghan (2001) and Iraqi (2003) wars, it became a concern to map out the places they were being recruited from. Ain al-Hilwe turned out to be one of them. In the early 2000s American political scientist Gary Gambill wrote a series of articles on the camp claiming it “has been linked to virtually every case of al-Qaeda activity in Lebanon, while renegade terrorists residing in the camp have been tied to the global terror network's operations in Jordan, Turkey and elsewhere in the region” 124. Jonathan Schanzer made Ain al-Hilwe one of his main destinations on the terror map while tracing “Al-Qaeda's Armies” in the book with the same name from 2005 125, as Blake Ward listed the leader of Usbat al-Ansar to have been one of Bin Laden's most important henchmen during the 90's 126.

While Usbat al-Ansar's controversial nature brought them to the center of attention in a vast array of studies during the early 2000s, it was another Jihadi-Salafi group that would make the headlines when the Nahr al-Barid camp exploded in the summer of 2007. The violent battle between Fatah al-Islam and The Lebanese Armed Forces was by many seen as a logical conclusion to the emergence of groups that already had gained prominence in Ain al-Hilwe, but during the turmoil things took a different turn in the southern camp. The events that transpired showed Usbat al-Ansar displaying a level of pragmatism that set them aside from their clandestine Jihadist contemporaries in Lebanon.

In this chapter I will analyze the evolution of Usbat al-Ansar, as I follow them from their inception as an Iranian-backed resistance militia, into becoming a global Jihadist movement, and eventually venture into cooperation with the Palestinian mainstream movements. First off we will

123 Usbat al-Ansar publication with no date cited in Morra, *al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-ʾIslāmiyya*, 173
take a closer look at what the concepts of Jihadi-Salafism and Global Jihadism actually involve.

*Who are the Jihadi-Salafis?*

This far we've left both Salafism and Jihadism undefined. The Arabic adjective *salafī* is derived from the term *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, the pious ancestors, which refers to the first three generations of Muslims whose way of conduct and building an Islamic society serves as an ideal for the movement. The birth of Salafī thought is commonly attributed to Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703 - 1792) who in his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, Book of unification, urged fellow believers to return to a total and exclusive worship of God alone. This involved purging the faith of all human bias or traditional practices considered to be *bidʿa*, or innovation. Where Salafis are united when it comes to the principle of God's oneness, they often differ in the application of it. Based on this, Wiktorowicz divides Salafī scholars into three archetypes: “Purists” who avoid politics and vie to change society through Islamic proselytism, or *daʿwa*, “Politicos” who seek influence through the political arena, and finally the marginal branch of “Jihadists”, who strive to achieve their goals through violence.

It should be noted that Jihadism is a problematic term as not many would describe themselves as a *jihādī* in Arabic. The derived adjective *mujāhid* is often used, but is also fairly general and doesn't necessarily describe more than just a combatant. That being said the expression Jihadi-Salafism (*al-salafīyya al-jihādīyya*) is usually linked to the contemporary Jordanian agitator Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who rose to fame in the early 1990s. Meijer views his ideology a highly politicized version of the teachings of The Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayid Qutb, with an emphasis on the oneness and sovereignty of God's rule (*tawḥīd al-ḥākimīyya*)

Judging by the targets that groups within the Jihadi sphere choose, scholars often distinguish between those who fight the “Near enemy”, and the “Far enemy”. The former presumably meaning “morally corrupt” Muslim governments close to oneself, while the latter refers to global entities such as the USA, Israel, or even governments in the Arab world such as the Iraqi one. Hegghammer sees the dichotomy between the near and the far as insufficient as it doesn't tell us much about the ideologies at play; he instead distinguishes between “Revolutionaries” and “Global

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Jihadists”. “Revolutionary Islamism”, Hegghammer writes “advocates military confrontation with Muslim regimes in order to topple them and capture the state. Global jihadism promotes military confrontation with the United States and her allies, to avenge and deter non-Muslim oppression of Muslims”131. As we will discover, Usbat al-Ansar's has oscillated between practicing both revolutionary and global Jihadism.

Who are Usbat al-Ansar?

Many of the leading positions of Usbat al-Ansar are occupied by the al-Saadi family. They are natives to the camp but trace their roots back to the northern Palestinian village of Ṣafṣāf in Galilee; incidentally their headquarters are also found in the Safsaf neighborhood of Ain al-Hilwe. Usbat al-Ansar has been led by Abu Tareq al-Saadi ever since his brother and previous leader Abd al-Karim Abu Muhjin al-Saaidi was sentenced to death in absentia in the late 90s, forcing him into going underground. Most people might however associate Usbat al-Ansar with its spokesperson and Islamic scholar Wafiq Abu Sharif Aql who provides the movement with a certain religious alibi. His Friday sermons at the Martyr's Mosque are often antagonistic in language: Here the Sunni community is typically blamed for being weak in their religion, failing to stand up against their oppressors in Iraq and Syria among other places.

Although they claim to be innocent in most of the charges directed at them, a portion of Usbat al-Ansar's member base has been found guilty, by Lebanese courts, in committed a long list of crimes ranging from shooting people bringing alcohol into Ain al-Hilwe and staging a number of deadly explosions in Saida, to killing four Lebanese judges in 1999, a cleric in 1995, and plotting the failed assassinations of the former American and Italian ambassadors in the early 2000s 132. Pending death penalties has become a family trait for the al-Saadis.

The group is not only controversial because of its violent history, but also because of its tendency to put more emphasis on the global injustices of Muslims than the Palestinians bereft of their land. The main political goal of Usbat al-Ansar is no less than to make the world ready for the re-establishment of an Islamic Caliphate 133. Whereas a number of clandestine movements or

individuals operating in Ain al-Hilwe might fit the description of Jihadi-Salafis, Usbat al-Ansar is the only one of the current 19 factions in Lebanon to describe themselves in this manner. In fact the group believes “secularism, democracy, socialism, and nationalism” to be ideas “alien to Islam” and adhering to these principles is in their eyes equal to apostasy – a crime punishable by death. They understand jihād to be the act of “combating infidels, apostates and the enemies of God”, and is, in their eyes, a duty for every Muslim living under the rule of governments following a different path than that of “The laws of Islam”. Despite there perhaps being a mutual admiration between al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Usbat al-Ansar, there is little if any proof of official ties between the two; the latter deny any connection and say they differ with al-Qaida on key-issues: Usbat al-Ansar doesn't approve of the network's attacks on “innocent Muslims” and it doesn't view Lebanese soldiers nor the country's UNIFIL forces as legit targets. Whereas the group considers the PLO an organization to be “outside of Islam”, it claims it doesn't pass judgment on the individual members – it explains two decades of reoccurring violent drag-out clashes with the principally secular Fatah, to be a matter of the other part not accepting any contestants to its hegemony in Ain al-Hilwe.

The origins of jihadi Salafism in Ain al-Hilwe

A Teheran-backed Jihad

The founders of the first Jihadi-Salafi militia in the Palestinian community in Lebanon ironically received military training from communists. After the civil war broke out in 1975, the PLO drafted many of the youth of the southern camps to enroll in the military training programs of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Hisham Shraidi, born in Ain al-Hilwe in 1957, was in fact himself at one point a member of the PFLP, although he later left the organization to join both the Islamist Hizb al-Tahrir and the local Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood; al-

135 Internal brochure with no date cited in Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya, 174
136 Internal brochure with no date cited in Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya, 178
137 Muhammad Zaatari, Journalist of the Daily Star, Phone interview with the author, Beirut, January 2014
138 Abu Sharif Aql cited in Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya, 180 - 181
139 When al-Zawahiri called upon Muslims to attack UNIFIL forces in Lebanon, Usbat al-Ansar denounced this idea saying it would be better to keep “the jihad within the realm of Iraq (...) If we beat them there, we will beat them here”. See Al Arabiya, June 17. 2007
140 Abu Sharif Aql in Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya, 180 - 181
141 Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya, 10
Jamaa al-Islamiyya. He was among many combatants to fight Israel during their invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and as a consequence was sent to an Israeli jail after Ain al-Hilwe was overrun and bulldozed to pieces, having lost the battle against its invaders. Shraidi however returned to the camp after being freed in a prisoner exchange and assumed the role as a preacher at the small Martyr's Mosque. Eventually cutting ties with his previous affiliations, he started to gather his own adherents in the mosque community, and in 1985 he formed the group Ansar Allah, later to be renamed Usbat al-Ansar.

After the evacuation of the PLO, the dynamics of resistance had changed in the southern camps. Many Palestinian militia leaders had fled or been arrested, and those who were left had few means to defend the refugee communities as the civil war would go into its last phase. When staving off the Lebanese Forces in the battle of southern Saida in 1985, it was armed Palestinian Islamists fighting under the banners of the militias of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya that predominantly led the resistance. In the opinion of the prominent imam of the al-Quds Mosque in Saida, Mahir Hammoud, it was these battles that set in stone a mentality that merged the militarism and violence of the civil war with Islamic activism, that came to serve as a foundation for Usbat al-Ansar. According to the imam, Shraidi could be described as a person that was «unique in his courage, in his prowess and physical force – not so much in his knowledge of iʿlm or clear Islamic concepts».

Shraidi's campaign of increasingly antagonizing speeches targeting both the leadership of Yaser Arafat and the local Fatah-faction, whom he claimed had “betrayed the religion of Palestine”, clearly coincided with Iran's falling out with the PLO over attending the Madrid peace conference in 1991. When clashes ensued between Fatah and Hizballah in the outskirts of the camp, Shraidi

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143 Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-islāmiyya, 173
144 Rougier, Everyday Jihad, 46
145 Masjid al-shuhadā’ – The martyr's mosque. Nearly 30 years later it is still the headquarters of Usbat al-Ansar in Ain al-Hilwe in the Safsaf neighborhood.
146 Not to be confused with the present day Jihadi movement run by Jamal Suleiman, which was formed already in 1982.
147 Al-quwwāt al-lubnānīyah - The Lebanese Forces. A Maronite political party formed by Samir Geagea. Not to be confused with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), as in the official Lebanese military.
148 Morra, al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-islāmiyya, 69
149 Hammoud in Al Arabiya documentary “ʿuṣbat al-anṣār,” 2008: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9s0tvOCFU
150 Hammoud in Al Arabiya documentary «ʿuṣbat al-anṣār.»
152 Rougier, Everyday Jihad, 47
sided with the latter. The animosity between the charismatic shaykh and Fatah leader Amin Kayid was likely to have contributed to Shraidi's assassination in 1991, where he was shot by an unidentified attacker. When his successor, Abd al-Karim Abu Muhjin al-Saadi, would transform Shraidi's Ansar Allah into Usbat al-Ansar, ties to Islamist Shiism to the likes of Hizballah were cut, introducing an ideology that was a huge departure from other Palestinian Islamist movements. Abu Muhjin did however preserve the mentality of civil war militarism in his bid to purge society of Islam's enemies.

**Aligning with the Lebanese Salafi current**

Rougier understands the social misery that Ain al-Hilwe experienced at the end of the war, being fenced in with barbed wires and cut off from the outside world, to have paved the way for global Salafism taking root in the camp. It is possible to imagine that the Palestinian identity, offering nothing but restrictions in the new republic, seemed so much of a burden to carry that youth found an escape in affirming a broader Sunni-identity - one extending past the cramped confines of a refugee camp. In any event, looking at the political climate in Lebanon in the early 90s, Ain al-Hilwe looks to have been a recipient of ideas predominantly being formed outside of its bounds.

The ideological shift away from Iranian tutelage must bee seen in context of a broader Lebanese Salafi current being shaped in the northern city of Tripoli, but also in Saida at this point in time. During the civil war the prominent Salafi preacher Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal had been forced to relocate his activities to Saida as Syrian troops targeted the Islamic Unification Movement of Tripoli with harsh military campaigns, assassinations and persecution during the civil war. In the post-war republic, the Unification Movement came to be an influential voice in Sunni-politics as they positioned themselves against the forces operating within the Damascus/Teheran axis, effectively laying the groundwork for an epistemological battle of Islamists on either side of the divide. The pro-Syrian and Sufi-oriented Association the Islamic Charitable Projects, commonly referred to simply as Al-Aḥbāsh (The Ethiopians), launched a counter campaign against the growing trend of Salafism which it understood to be an infiltration of «extremists» into the mosques of

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153 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 47
154 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*
155 *Ṭrāblus - Tripoli*
156 *Ḥarakat al-tawḥīd al-islāmī*, held to be the founders of Salafism in Lebanon
158 *Jamʿaiat al-mashārīʿa al-khayrīyya al-islāmīyya – The Association of Islamic Charitable projects*. The group acquired its nickname, al-aḥbāsh (The Ethiopians), because its Ethiopian founder, the scholar Abdallah al-Harariyy. He founded the group in Beirut in 1983
Lebanon. This would involve physically taking control over mosques and thereby directly challenging the authority of the stately Sunni institution Dār al-fatwā. Pall notes that this turmoil gave the Salafis, often being dragged into violent clashes with their opponents, an opportunity to further affirm themselves as the true guardians of Sunni-identity in the country. If al-Ahbash hadn't already caught the attention of the militant Islamists of Ain al-Hilwe, it certainly must have when the organization set up a local office inside the camp. When al-Ahbash leader, Nizar al-Halabi, was shot dead in Beirut by four gunmen on August 31, 1995, a Lebanese court found Usbat al-Ansar's young new leader, Abu Muhjin, guilty of having plotted the operation. For the Palestinian the sentence was death – albeit in absentia as the Lebanese state had no means of getting a hold of him.

**Setting the stage for global jihad**

According to Fatah commander Munir al-Maqdah, the long-running conflict between his movement and Usbat al-Ansar was more than anything a result of Hisham Shraidi and former Fatah leader Amin Kayid both trying to use their family ties to the Galilean city of Safsaf to mobilize political power in Ain al-Hilwe – the camp perhaps wasn't big enough for them both. Whether the conflict originally had roots in Teheran-backed groups trying to use the Islamist militia in subduing Fatah's control over Ain al-Hilwe in the late 80s, or actually began as a struggle involving family interests, the camp community would periodically live in a state of instability as the parts for nearly two decades engaged in violent clashes and mutual assassinations, leaving many causalities on either side. While exerting a certain degree of military prowess, Usbat al-Ansar were not only challenging Fatah for their checkpoints in the camp, but by expanding their territory they were also creating spaces for like-minded groups to exist.

Morra considers the practice of istijāra, the Islamic concept of providing refuge for fellow Muslims who require it, to have been the most troubling aspect of Usbat al-Ansar. Although the group categorically denies having provided protection for any outlaws, the camp has proved to be a useful shelter for groups wanted by the state, ranging from elements of the Unification Movement

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159 Pall, *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe*, 47 – 48
161 Pall, *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe*, 47 – 48
163 al-Maqdah cited in Al Arabiya documentary “ʿ usbat al-anṣān.”
164 Mahmoud al-Lino Issa claimed that Fatah never has had an official policy of targeting Usbat al-Ansar or any other movement, but “members acting alone” had in the past carried out retaliatory attacks against the Jihadi-Salafis (Interview with author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014)
165 Morra, *al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-‘islāmiyya*, 187
after the civil war 166, to Saida-natives such as Ahmad al-Asir in recent times. However, it was Usbat al-Ansar's connections to the controversial Tripoli-native Basim Abu Aisha al-Kanj that would put Ain al-Hilwe on the map of global Jihad. Al-Kanj had in the early 90s spent time in Peshawar, Pakistan mingling with personalities who would become leading figures in the al-Qaida network, and he had later gone to fight with an Arab mujāhid legion in Bosnia, before returning to Lebanon in 1996 167. Al-Kanj set up his own network in Ain al-Hilwe where he, allegedly cooperating with Usbat al-Ansar's Abu Muhjin, used the site as a training camp for foreign fighters 168. Despite intents of returning to the global battlefield, al-Kanj changed strategies and got himself killed after his group led a violent raid against the LAF in the northern al-Diniye region in late December 1999 – Early January 2000 169. Usbat al-Ansar, on the other hand, would shortly after confront the “far enemy” for the first time as it ventured to Iraq in 2003. According to spokesperson Abu Sharif Aql the group sent around twenty members to the Iraqi battlefront claiming it their right: «Islam has no borders – it is our duty to defend the Umma» 170.

Judging by Usbat al-Ansar's outlook from its inception up until the early 2000s, it is perhaps no wonder why the movement ended up on numerous governments' terror radars, not at least the Lebanese one. In the last part of this chapter, starting with the battle at Nahr al-Barid, we will see how the group came to take a slightly different path.

**When a refugee camp becomes an emirate**

In the fall of 2006 a leader of the pro-Syrian faction Fatah – al-Intifada inquired his superior concerning the presence of a group of strangers in the Nahr al-Barid and Bedawi camps. These stuck out as they had long beards, were heavily armed, and seemed to be well-payed 171.

The newcomers would turn out to be led by the Jordanian-Palestinian Shaker al-Absi. Having been a PLO commander, al-Absi joined Said Muragha's rebellion against Yasir Arafat in 1983. Years later he found himself fighting alongside the reputed mujāhid Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, where he recruited foreign fighters from both Lebanon and Syria to resist the American invasion 172. After spending some time in a Syrian jail, al-Absi settled in Lebanon, bringing with him a band of foreign fighters. Upon his arrival he assumed cooperation with the mainly socialist Fatah – al-

166 Morra, al-harakāt wa-l-qiwā al-'islāmiyya, 187
167 Tine Gade, Fatah al-islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad, 10 - 11
168 Tine Gade, Fatah al-islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad, 14
169 Rougier, Everyday Jihad, 239 – 241
170 Abu Sharif Aql cited in Al Arabiya documentary “ʿuṣbat al-anṣār.”
Intifāda, but announced his separation from the movement in late November 2006, creating instead Fatah al-Islam. In a statement al-Absi declared the new faction “an Islamic group which aims to fight the Jews and those who support them among western Zionists” and sought “to free the al-Aqsa Mosque and to protect the Sunnis of Lebanon who are subjected to elaborate persecution” 173.

In Nahr al-Barid, al- Absi’s group ceased three compounds belonging to his previous pro-Syrian affiliates and raised black flags displaying the *shahāda* 174 in white letters 175. Reportedly, groups of civilians staged sit-ins against Fatah al-Islam taking over their camp. A few local imams tried to calm the growing tension by vouching for the presence of al- Absi and his gang on the grounds that they were “pious, faithful people” 176. al- Absi was not only able to find a footing in the camp; he even set up his own *Shura council* and crowned himself the ruler of an emirate stretching from his throne in Nahr al-Barid and eastwards into *bilād al-shām*, Greater Syria 177.

When local Fatah – al-Intifada leader Abu Yasir inquired his superior about the newcomers, Abu Khalid al-Amle, the organization’s second in command, got back to him from Damascus saying "We have new fighters (…) We must learn from Hizballah's military and discipline" 178. In an interview with author Nir Rosen, Abu Yasir accuses al-Amle of having gone behind the back of his own movement, by hiring al- Absi in order to confront “the Americans in Lebanon” 179. Even tough al- Absi had declared a war against the distant enemy, he would soon end up facing the near. The “emir” didn’t only evoke a controversy among camp dwellers; The Lebanese Armed Forces were also paying close attention to his group. After Fatah al-Islam were accused of blowing up a bus in Ain Alaq, east of Beirut, in early March 2007, the LAF set up checkpoints around the entrances of Nahr al-Barid, forcing the tension inside the camp to skyrocket 180. However, the spark of crises wasn't lit until two months later when the LAF prevented a gang of Fatah al-Islam militiamen from heisting a bank in Tripoli. Al- Absi’s group retaliated by slitting the throats of 23

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173 Defection statement cited in Mohsen Saleh et. al., *Awḍā’a al-lāj’īn fī lubnān* [The situation of the Refugees in Lebanon]. (Beirut: al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2012), 172

174 In islamic terms *shahāda* refers to the act of testifying that “There is no god but God. Muhammad is God’s messenger (lā ilāha illa āllāh. muḥammadun rasūl ullāh)”


176 Hanafi and Long, “Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon” 177


180 Saleh et. al., *awḍā’a al-lāj’īn fī lubnān*, 72
sleeping Lebanese soldiers at a nearby military base, prompting the LAF to shortly after block off the northern entrances of the camp. The ensuing battle would be the fiercest the Palestinians had witnessed since the civil war.

After fifteen weeks of heavy bombardment, Fatah al-Islam was crushed, and Nahr al-Barid was mostly reduced to rubble. 250 militants were dead, 169 Lebanese soldiers had lost their lives, and 33 civilians were killed in the fierce violence that forced most of the camp's population of 30,000 to flee to other refugee camps.

**Lessons from Nahr al-Barid**

Although the PLO, like Lebanese state officials, were outspoken in their praise of the braveness of the soldiers that had put an end to Shaker al-Absi's group, Palestinian representatives were deeply displeased with the course of action taken by the Army. Fatah had offered to participate in ousting Fatah al-Islam from the camp by offering the Lebanese Armed Forces 200 fighters to join efforts in defeating the Jihadists. “It only made sense” a Fatah leader in Beirut said:

“Our people had access to the camp and we could have acted swiftly. But the army turned down this offer and instead chose to remain outside the camp indiscriminately lobbying bombs inside. If the Lebanese [Armed Forces] had trusted the PLO we could have avoided this catastrophe”.

The fact remained that Fatah didn't have much support from the Palestinian movements either. PLO factions such as the PLFP and the DFLP had opted for a political solution. As had Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who didn't denounce Fatah al-Islam but rather, in the words of sociologist Sari Hanafi, took a “non-stand”. In Hanafi's view the events at Nahr al-Barid showed a weakness in all Palestinian factions in managing the crisis. Did a lack of consensus among the movements that run the camp make it impossible to take action against the extremists? A PFLP official from Nahr al-Barid commented that there was little the factions could do about Fatah al-Islam, as they didn't want to “interfere with the internal affairs of Fatah - al-Intifada”, the pro-Syrian faction he thought to had provided for the stay of the Jihadi-Salafis. A PFLP-GC leader thought the Lebanese Armed Forces were entirely to blame for the events: “When speaking of Fatah al-Islam it is

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182 Abu Khalil Kazim, leader of Fatah in the Beirut-area, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
183 Ziad Hammu (PFLP), leader of PLO's Popular Committee in Shatila, and Ahmad Mustafa (DFLP) until recently the leader of PLO's Popular Committee in Burj al-Barajne, interviews with author, Beirut, September and December 2013
184 Hanafi “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon As a Space of Exception.”
185 Hanafi “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon As a Space of Exception.”
186 Rosen, *Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World*, 205
important to remember that their conflict was with the state of Lebanon, not with the Palestinians” Abu Musa Sabir said:

“We are mainly socialists and we disapproved of their behavior which was irrational in many ways, but what could we have done? We're not the police. I will tell you this much; If there is a problem we always seek a diplomatic solution, not a violent one.” 187

“People always ask us about Fatah al-Islam”, Abu Wasim said. He is a Fatah - al-Intifada official in charge of security in the Shatila camp:

“Truth is we have nothing to do with them. Some people say that Syrian intelligence was behind the group. I say, why entertain such theories when the real conspiracy is so obvious: The army used Fatah al-Islam as an excuse for blowing the Nahr al-Barid camp to pieces. Generals were decorated with medals for making 30,000 Palestinians homeless. There is a plot to destroy our camps. The Lebanese state is to blame in this matter” 188.

With the exception of Fatah, the Palestinian factions didn't perceive Shaker al-Absi and his gang as an immediate threat to the community in Nahr al-Barid, and no policy was adopted to remove the self-imposed emir who ended up turning the camp into a war zone. Where a lack of communication between the LAF and the Palestinian factions had catastrophic consequences for the camp, events took a different turn in Ain al-Hilwe - much owing to the response of the camp's homegrown Jihadists.

Shock waves in Ain al-Hilwe

In mid-June 2007 the ongoing conflict of Nahr al-Barid was also looming in the south. A Jihadi group named Jund al-Sham 189 was reportedly found fighting alongside Shaker al-Absi in the northern camp 190, and as a result Lebanese soldiers encircled their native base in the al-Taamir and al-Tawari neighborhoods bordering to Ain al-Hilwe. Tension peaked when militants started to throw bombs at LAF checkpoints in the area.

187 Abu Musa Sabir, leader of PFLP-GC in the Beirut area, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
188 Abu Wasim, (Fatah – al-Intifada), leader of the joint security forces in Shatila, interview with author Beirut, November 2013
189 Jund al-Shām – Soldiers of the Levant.
190 In February 2007 Sunni-bloc politician and Saida native Bahia al-Hariri had in an attempt to help end an ongoing feud between Fatah and Jund al-Sham, payed off the latter to move out of their homes in al-Taamir / al-Tawari and relocate elsewhere. Many headed north and seemingly joined Fatah al-Islam instead. Because of al-Hariri’s brokering many Lebanese news publications on the Syrian side of politics accused the al-Hariri family and the Sunni-bloc of being behind Shaker al-Absi's group. Others accused Syrian intelligence for manufacturing it seeing that al-Absi had close ties to Fatah – al-Intifada. See Knudsen, “Nahr al-Bared”, 101; Rosen, Aftermath, 204 - 205

38
This prompted Usbat al-Ansar to confront the renegade militants by forming a “security force”\textsuperscript{191}. According to a Palestinian official “al-Usba took this decision after the security situation in Ain al-Hilwe was about to cross the red line and there was no time to toy with the fate of the camps of Lebanon (…) in light of what had happened and was still happening in Nahr al-Barid”\textsuperscript{192}. Furthermore, the Lebanese Armed Forces chose another strategy than they had in Nahr al-Barid, this time trusting the autonomous security committee of the Islamic Forces to deal with the problem. Coordinating with the LAF, Usbat al-Ansar were able to apprehend the militants, thus earning the status as a power broker and a partner the Lebanese state could deal with\textsuperscript{193}. According to the movement itself, this was the first time it had “resorted to negotiations and dialogue” with Lebanese state officials, calling the events “a blessing”\textsuperscript{194}. Later, Usbat al-Ansar publicly announced that it had dissolved Jund al-Sham and annexed some of their militants into the Islamic Forces of Ain al-Hilwe\textsuperscript{195}. “We were born out of the injustice inflicted on the Muslims with the hope of doing something fruitful”, Jund al-Sham's military leader Gandhi al-Sahmarani commented in an interview with NOW News: “Yet ever since our inception, others have viewed us as a ‘fault.’ The faults began accumulating (…) We were thus over as an organization”\textsuperscript{196}.

Ironically the Islamic Forces showed less tolerance for clandestine armed groups than the mainstream Palestinian factions had, and were able to pressure the militants into laying down their arms at a point where Ain al-Hilwe was about to erupt. Showing signs of a change in behavior, Usbat al-Ansar would soon also end their long-running feud with Fatah. As we will learn, Hamas was a driving force behind this reconciliation.

\textit{The Hamas effect}

Many current members of Hamas in Lebanon were during the 80s and 90s organized in the Salafi organization called the Islamic League (\textit{al-rābiṭa al-islāmiyya}) which was widespread in the camps of Lebanon\textsuperscript{197}. After striking a deal with the movement Hamas took over many of their offices upon officially announcing its arrival in country in 2000. Judging by surveys conducted in 2005 and

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\textsuperscript{191} Abu Sharif Aql in al Mustaqbal, “mas'ūl fī ‘usbat al-anṣār yuʿlin ḥall jund al-shām wa waḍʿa ʿanāṣirha taḥt imrat al-qiwā al-islāmiyya [Usbat al-Ansar officials announces the dissolving of Jund al-Sham, and the placing of its members under the command of the Islamic Forces],” November 1. 2007: \url{http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=mp&Articleid=239480}

\textsuperscript{192} Unnamed Palestinian official cited in Saleh et. al., \textit{awḍāʿa al-lāj'īn f ī lubnān}, 180

\textsuperscript{193} Nir Rosen, \textit{Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World}, (Nation Books, 2010), 212

\textsuperscript{194} Al Arabiyya, “zʿaīm “ʿuṣbat al-anṣār” yataḥaddath ʿan al-ʿalāqa mʿa tanẓīm al-qāʿida.”


\textsuperscript{196} NOW Lebanon, “A call to arms: three Palestinian militant groups.”

\textsuperscript{197} Morra, \textit{al-ḥarakāt wa-l-qiwā al-islāmiyya}, 111 - 127

2006, refugees gave the newcomers a warm welcome: Between 20% to 30% of the camp dwellers said they supported Hamas. In May 2006, following the elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, they were even scoring higher in the polls than Fatah.

As Lebanese journalist Michael Young notes, Hamas' popularity among camp dwellers is a sign that “Palestinian nationalism remains dominant in the camps”. That being said, in Gaza, Hamas has in recent years been grappling with a number of smaller violent groups that have challenged the legitimacy of the organization after it ventured into party politics. Targeted by propaganda campaigns and at times even physical attacks by al-Qaida-inspired networks such as Jund Ansar al-Sham, Hamas has, according to Hovdenak, not been able to stand up against its challengers: Feeling a need to compensate in the face of extremist groups, officials within the movement report that Hamas has been pulled in a radical direction. Whereas Hamas in Gaza have been declared apostates by their opponents, Hamas in Lebanon, although not participating in elections in this country, has been more successful in dealing with their Jihadi Salafi challengers - at least in Ain al-Hilwe.

When Fatah and Usbat al-Ansar for the first time sat down to sort out their differences in 2008, it was Hamas who mediated between the parts. “Their conflict was tearing the camp apart” Hamas' leader in Lebanon Ali Barake said: “It was something obscene. We had no other choice but to go between the parts and make them see sense.” According to Barake he was able to convince the leadership of Usbat al-Ansar that the struggle against Israel was a Palestinian's most important form of jihad:

“How can you fight each other when the al-Aqsa mosque is being raped? When our lands are being defiled by the settlers? We are Palestinians and our jihad must be waged against Israel. This is what we told our brothers in Usbat al-Ansar, and thank God they agreed with us.”

In an interview with anthropologist Dag Tuastad, Usbat al-Ansar leader Abu Tareq al-Saadi

199 According to author of the study Mohsen Saleh these are the last surveys conducted the political views of Palestinians in Lebanon, but he didn't expect the present situation to be much different (Interview with author, Beirut, January 2014.
200 In comparison, their allies in Islamic Jihad didn't even reach 3% on the popularity scale, although they have a far bigger popular following than any of the Ain al-Hilwe factions and have more members than the Islamic Forces combined. See Saleh and al-Hassan, The political views of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, 24 - 26
203 Ali Barake, interview with author Beirut, November 2013
204 Ali Barake, interview with author Beirut, November 2013
confirms aligning with the ideas of the Hamas: “We are the same as Hamas, we are the soldiers, the same ideology. Ali Baraka is my twin” 205. In Fatah's narrative of the events Hamas played a smaller role, but officials nonetheless agreed that the days of armed confrontation with the Jihadi-Salafis in question were long gone: “Since 2008 we have had an agreement with Usbat al-Ansar”, a former employee of the Palestinian embassy said:

“We approached them and gave them some responsibilities. This also goes for [Jamal Khattab's] al-Haraka al-Mujahida, and they are doing very well. This is the only way. The other option would have led to the destruction of the camp” 206.

To what extent Usbat al-Ansar actually have followed in Hamas' ideological footsteps is hard to tell, but comparing older press statements to newer ones, we can nevertheless sense a certain shift in rhetoric. In a 1999 interview with Bernard Rougier, leader Abu Tareq al-Saadi expressed that “Armed action against Israel is tantamount to working for the success of Hezbollah and the Shiites,” claiming that such a cooperation would be impossible due to differences in religious doctrines (’aqīda) 207. 15 years later the group appears to view both cooperation with Hizbollah and the struggle for Palestine differently. In a recent interview the movement's spokesperson Abu Sharif Aql informs that Usbat al-Ansar meets Hizbollah regularly and that their relationship is “based on the principle of warding off sectarian fighting and avoiding incitements [to aggression] that only serves the enemies of our nation” adding that “we are keen on unifying all of our efforts in support of Palestine and the people of Palestine” 208.

The movement retains its loosely defined goals of readying the world for a global caliphate as a primary objective, although they stress that fighting the Israeli occupation of their homeland would be a priority in this matter. The current Syrian battlefront is described as a distraction: “The causes of the Islamic Umma are many” Abu Sharif said in a speech in the fall of 2013: “Iraq today is hurting […], Egypt today is hurting, Syria today is hurting….but Palestine is more holy than any of these causes. Not only for the Palestinian people, but also for God. God has chosen us, the Palestinians” 209. For a movement previously having condemned nationalism as a religious sin, these

205 Dag Tuastad “Hamas' concept of a long-term ceasefire: A viable alternative to full peace?.” PRIO Report November 2010 (Oslo: Peace research institute Oslo (PRIO) ), 28
206 Edward Kattoura, Former employee of the Palestinian embassy in Beirut, interview with author, January 2014, Beirut
207 Abu Tareq al-Saadi cited in Rougier, Everyday Jihad, 57
were radical statements.

**Conclusion**

In Everyday Jihad Rougier claims that it is no longer possible to speak of a Palestinian society in Lebanon's camps: “so deep is the fracture between the PLO and its hard core (Fatah), on the one hand, and the Salafi militants, on the other” he writes. Seeing as Usbat al-Ansar, the “oldest and probably most important salafi-jihadi group in Lebanon” as Gade puts it, has taken measures to mend this fracture with the PLO, it might be wise to rethink Rougier's notions.

In this chapter we have seen Usbat al-Ansar go through stages of oscillating between revolutionary violence (against Lebanese clerics and judges), globalist violence (fighting in Iraq), and employing hostile sectarian language (anti-Shiite rhetoric), into settling as a purely globalist Jihadi movement. That being said, their “far enemy” of choice appears to be no different than that of their Islamist big brothers in Hamas, or any other Palestinian faction for that matter. As with the Lebanese branch of Hamas, Usbat al-Ansar has no history of fighting Israel, but the Jihadi-Salafis have significantly expanded their presence in their native camp. Unlike Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham, Usbat al-Ansar no longer behaves like an explosive fringe group, but has gradually become an integrated political force in their camp society – one that to this date have a running dialogue with a number of Lebanese clerics political parties, and the LAF.

That being said, a change of behavior doesn't necessarily involve a change of hearts. Interestingly Usbat al-Ansar didn't denounce Fatah al-Islam after the events in Nahr al-Barid, but instead described them as their “brothers” and claimed to share with them a common understanding as they spoke “the language of the Quran and the Sunna.” In the aftermath of Nahr al-Barid Gade suspected the movement's newfound pragmatism was merely a change of “tactics.” In my interviews with factions from both the PLO and the Alliance, similar suspicions were heard. Some officials were in fact unsure where the allegiance of the entire Islamic Forces lay. In the final chapter we will look further into these notions as we explore Palestinian views on the Islamic Forces during the Syrian crisis.

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210 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 3
211 Gade, *Fatah al-islam in Lebanon*, 12
212 Ranging from the al-Hariri family, representing the March 14. alliance and the Sunni-bloc in Lebanon, to Hizballah and the pro-Syrian March. 8 alliance.
214 Gade, *Fatah al-islam in Lebanon*, 18
5 Confrontations during the Syrian crisis

Forming a national leadership

Although the idea had been in works for years, it was the Syrian crisis looming in the camps of Lebanon that more than anything helped Hamas push for the formation of a Unified Political Leadership for the Palestinian Factions in Lebanon (qiyyāda siyāsīyya muwaḥḥada lil-faṣā'il al-afilasṭīnīyya fī lubnān). When the project went public in the fall of 2013, the factions had already for some time engaged in monthly meetings at the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut. In the words of Hamas, the formation showed that despite internal differences, the factions were able to “stay out of any sectarian or political strain taking place in Syria or Lebanon” 215. A PLO official noted that the project was giving the factions a unified voice when facing the Lebanese state; he expressed an annoyance with the Alliance and the Islamic Forces sending their own delegates to meet with state officials 216. Others were more skeptical, bemoaning that this was only one of “countless formations [tashkīlāt] that hardly lead to any significant change on the ground” 217. One change had, however, taken place: The factions al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida, Ansar al-Allah and Usbat al-Ansar, who’s influence previously barely extended past the Follow-Up Committee and security forces of Ain al-Hilwe, were now taking part in national decision-making. As each of the 19 factions were represented by one member in the Unified Political Leadership, a fairly marginal group like Usbat al-Ansar found themselves having representation equal to the largest movement, Fatah. As it turned out, not all parts were happy with this arrangement.

In this chapter we will explore Palestinian motivations behind including a Jihadi-Salafi militia like Usbat al-Ansar in politics at a national level. Further we will see what strategies are applied to counter the smaller clandestine militias of Ain al-Hilwe.

Echos from Syria

While the Lebanese media was busy covering a string of suicide bombs that were hitting the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Palestinian factions were dealing with another aspect of the Syrian crisis. In December 2012 The Palestinian district of al-Yarmouk in Damascus became a scene of conflict between forces loyal to the Syrian president and those opposing him. Although the PLO and

215 Abu Khalil, leader of Hamas in the Burj al-Barajne camp, interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
216 Abu Iyyad Shaalan, leader of the PLO's popular committees in Lebanon, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
217 Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, interview with author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014
the Alliance claimed to be mediating between the combatants that had entered the area through the southern entrance, and the Syrian forces occupying the northern entrance, rumors were that Hamas and PLFP-GC had joined either side of the divide and engaged in armed clashes with each other 218. In any event, Hamas' long-running friendship with the Syrian state had already deteriorated a year earlier when the movement decided to move its politburo out of the country. Being perceived to have sided with the anti-government rebels, Hamas lost their funding from Iran, and fell out with Hizballah 219. An official of the movement in Beirut even reported that the pro-Syrian factions wanted Hamas out of the Alliance 220. Having been able to gather the factions in a Unified Political Leadership in this political climate was no small achievement. That being said, the camps of Lebanon were still haunted by the Syrian war in every way imaginable.

Waves of refugees fleeing from the war-stricken country weren't the only persons to arrive in Ain al-Hilwe 221, the camp was also witnessing the return of those who were participating in the Syrian war. As foreign fighters returned to their homes, relatives and friends would fire machine gun rounds into the air in celebration 222. While the pro-Syrian factions in the Beirut camps had forbidden demonstrations against the Syrian regime 223, these were commonplace in Ain al-Hilwe. People would typically gather around the western adjacent neighborhood al-Sekke, where several displaced Palestinian families from Syria lived in tents. The tent landscape was a strong symbol; it was chillingly reminiscent of how the camps looked the first years after al-Nakba, and for those opposed to the Syrian regime it served as proof that Bashar al-Asad had committed a crime not unlike Israel had. The factions loyal to the Baath regime of Damascus were thus being called out by groups of camp dwellers. At one point local Islamist agitator Bilal Badr had stormed the offices of al-Saiqa displaying hand grenades – allegedly he had wanted to hand their headquarters over to refugees from Syria 224. Furthermore, the media was reporting that cartons of Hizballah's aid designated for displaced Palestinians from Syria had been gathered and burned by followers of Shaykh Jamal Khattab's group while protesting the Shiite-Islamists' presence in the neighboring country 225.

While the Islamic Forces had at the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut vowed to keep the
camp out of regional conflict lines, some of their colleagues were worried that they weren't trying very hard.

Palestinian perspectives on the Islamic Forces: A question of security

Was Usbat al-Ansar participating in the Syrian rebellion against Bashar al-Asad, like they had fought the Americans in Iraq? Leader Abu Tareq al-Saadi insisted in an interview with the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar that this wasn't the case this time around: “Intervention in this battle would be a setback to the military struggle against Israel and the US” he claimed, however “if an external aggression on Syria occurs, jihad will become a duty” 226. Underlining his support for the young men fighting in Syria, al-Saadi was displeased with the ones that were returning to Ain al-Hilwe too quickly, stating that their “intent of jihad was not pure and it was merely for show and vacationing.” 227. Whereas Hamas leader Ali Barake vouched for Usbat al-Ansar's neutrality in the Syrian question, stating that “our brothers in Ain al-Hilwe share our total commitment in keeping the camps out of any regional conflict” 228, his allies in Islamic Jihad were less optimistic:

“Usbat al-Ansar have a very different mindset than we do. It is very unlikely that the Islamic Forces are sending people to Syria, but that doesn't mean that some of their elements haven't gone independently. This is almost certain. To these I say put on an explosive belt [ḥazzim ḥālak] and go to Israel, what are you doing in Syria, ya ʿammī?!" 229

Some Palestinian officials put forward that it wasn't only the mindset of the Ain al-Hilwe groups that set them apart from the other factions, but also their organizational structures. “Hamas and Islamic Jihad are are completely different from the Islamic Forces” Abu Iyyad Shaalan, the leader of the PLO's popular committees in Lebanon, shared:

“They have internal conferences and elect their leaders. Usbat al-Ansar, Ansar Allah and Khattab's group are not like this, they don't have bylaws or an internal system. The only two thoughts they are capable of expressing are “This place is an emirate” and then “I am the emir”. We don't think of them as organizations [tanẓimāt], these are groups of individuals that are collected under one leader. Tomorrow when Khattab dies, that will be the end of his group. They have no future because they have simplistic organizational structures.” 230

227 Al Akhbar, “Ain al-Hilwe Islamists: We are not the Nusra Front.”
228 Ali Barake, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013
229 Abu Ashraf, Leader of Islamic Jihad in the Burj al-Barajne camp, interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
230 Abu Iyyad Shaalan, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014

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Hamas' spokesperson in Lebanon, Ra'fat Morra, having written extensively on the Islamic Forces, expressed similar sentiments:

“We as a movement are found in 40 states in the world, and we are therefore very different than these local factions that you only have in Lebanon. [These] are very small, some would say almost insignificant. They're not like the Palestinian organizations that have a profound history of resistance and revolt against the occupation.” 231

Whereas Hamas perhaps viewed the Islamic Forces to lack credibility in that they were detached from Palestine itself, the movement's officials expressed no concern pertaining to their motives. The PLO's Abu Iyyad Shaalan, on the other hand, suspected that cooperation itself might be damaging to his organization: “Every political or religious force have their own goals and their projects which can make cooperation difficult”, he said:

“Just look at Egypt. The Muslim Brothers under Morsi made an alliance with al-Sisi's demons [sic], and then they were overturned and the country collapsed. As for the the Islamic Forces, they definitely have their agendas, and ways of working to implement their influence, and they are probably just waiting for a convenient time to overrun the others.” 232

Considering that the Islamic Forces were described as insignificant, owing to their limited numbers or lack of presence in Palestine on the one hand, or suspected of having ulterior motives on the other, why were both Hamas and the PLO adamant in giving these a role in national decision-making? According to the leader of the PLO's Popular Committees, the agreement was central as it allowed the parts to work out a plan for sharing security in Ain al-Hilwe “This rapprochement happened as a result of sensing the danger that surrounds the camp”, Abu Iyyad Shaalan said:

“Usbat al-Ansar have a certain relevance in the security apparatus of the Islamists, and we needed to find a way of working together instead of against each other. There is something called 'the interest of' of the camp' and this is our priority. That being said, we differ from one another in many matters, and we might part ways at a later stage.” 233

A Fatah leader in the Beirut area explained the situation in a similar way: “Cooperation is not easy

231 Ra'fat Morra, interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
232 Abu Iyyad Shaalan, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
233 Abu Iyyad Shaalan, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014

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for us, not for any of the parts to be honest, but it is necessary”, he said. “In the circumstances we live in, the most important thing is securing the camps. We must ensure that we speak the same language when it comes to security” 234.

Having more than one base along Shāriʿa al-fawqānī, The upper street, which runs alongside the entire eastern side of the camp, Usbat al-Ansar had become a central security provider in Ain al-Hilwe. In contrast to their days of glory, Fatah no longer had a stake in this area of the camp. When speaking to civilians, there seemed to be some confusion as to who represented the organization. Inhabitants still spoke of “Fatah Munir al-Maqdah” or “Fatah al-Lino” and some were even unaware of Subhi Abu Arab in the al-Baraksāt neighborhood, who now was in charge of the PLO's National Security Forces. The fact that the Islamic Forces for a long time had been running their own security committee was in the words of the PLO, “not ideal” 235. Forming a shared security committee seemed like a better prospect than being reduced to controlling only one corner of the camp. If this meant giving the Jihadi-Salafis a seat at the monthly meetings in the Palestinian embassy, it was seen as worth it.

**On containing the radicals**

Fatah's concern for security was not out of place. Despite having come to an agreement with the biggest Jihadi-Salafi militia, the movement was still locked in a feud with the clandestine groups of Ain al-Hilwe. Considering that Fatah through negotiations, helped by Hamas' relentless brokering, had been able bury the hatchet with its longest running rival, could the same approach be applied to smaller militias like Bilal Badr's group?

When faced with this question Hamas was reluctant at best. “These are only individuals. They aren't worth our time”, spokesperson Ra'fat Morra claimed 236. “Usbat al-Ansar is one thing, Bilal Badr is another”, Hamas leader Ali Barake said: “People like him cannot be reasoned with. They don't understand the language of dialogue” 237. A former employee of the Palestinian embassy in Beirut suspected that Hamas was currently in no position to deal with the various clandestine Islamists of Ain al-Hilwe: “For the last three months, at least, Hamas has been trying to amend its relationship with Hizballah and Iran. Their relations with the Islamic movements have been disturbed, because the Islamists support the rebellion against Bashar al-Asad.”, Edward Kattoura

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234 Abu Kazim Khalil, leader of Fatah in the Beirut area, interview with the author, Beirut, November 2013
235 Abu Iyyad al-Shaalan, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
236 Ra'fat Morra, author and spokesperson for Hamas in Lebanon, interview with the author, December 2013
237 Ali Barake, leader of Hamas in Lebanon, interview with author, November 2013
For his part, Kattoura hoped that his own movement, Fatah, would take the step of engaging in dialogue with its bitter jihadist rivals:

“There are two ways of dealing with what is going on in Ain al-Hilwe concerning Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham, al-Qaida, [the] Abdallah Azzam [Brigades], whatever you want to call this [phenomenon]: Either you confront them and try to end this issue through armed confrontations, or you decide to contain them in a political way. The first option will mean the end of Ain al-Hilwe as a camp. The second option is viable. It has been done before. Just look at Usbat al-Ansar today”.

Kattoura's former colleagues in the PLO were less optimistic: “The fundamentalist movements (al-ḥarakāt al-uṣūlīyye) we see in Ain al-Hilwe don't represent the Palestinians. Should we include al-Nuṣra in our political body? Any dialogue with these people is a dead end”, said Abu Iyyad Shaalan, adding that one “had seen signs” of the Syrian branch of al-Qaida, Jabhat al-nuṣra gain a presence in the camp around new year's 2013. Speaking from his office in the Sufriyye neighborhood in Ain al-Hilwe, Mahmoud al-Lino Issa thought Jabhat al-nuṣra's presence to be limited, but expressed a concern that local Jihadist dissidents such as Bilal Badr and the al-Tamir / al-Tawari groups probably were trying to join forces with the network. According to the former commander, there had actually been attempts at establishing a dialogue with the clandestine militias:

“We do talk with some of their leaders, but in terms of negotiating, it has proven to be impossible. They are solely here to implement foreign agendas and have no regard for this camp or its people. Is there any wonder we always end up clashing with them?”

Although the factions reported that negotiations were tantamount to impossible, a deal was nevertheless struck between Fatah and Bilal Badr's group in March, 2014. Allegedly, Usbat al-Ansar, Hamas and Islamic Jihad had overseen the process where Badr, accompanied by other Jihadi dissidents, signed a statement where they agreed to “denounce the recruitment of individuals from the Palestinian camps in Lebanon to carry out security or military operations”, adding that Palestinians in the "camp are united under one religion, and that killing is prohibited under God’s

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238 Edward Kattoura, former employee of the Palestinian embassy in Beirut. Interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
239 Kattoura had been ousted from Fatah in May 2013 due to an internal controversy in the movement, where he along with others had confronted the faction's leadership in Lebanon.
240 Edward Kattoura, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
241 Abu Iyyad Shaalan, interview with author, Beirut, January 2014
242 Mahmoud al-Lino Issa, interview with author's research assistant, Saida, January 2014
The agreement wouldn't last long. After several members of Bilal Badr's group were subjected to assassination attempts, resulting in the death of a young man outside his apartment in al-Fawqāni Street, the militants sought to settle the score with the persons they figured to have been behind the operations: The following May heavy clashes ensued between the armed entourage of Fatah official Talal al-Urduni and Badr's group (See chapter three).

In the aftermath of the clashes the Lebanese daily al-Nahar noted that while the PLO's National Security forces had been unsuccessful in stopping the violence, a large group of militants led by a man called Abu Tareq al-Saadi had appeared in the last stages of the shootout, finally forcing the gunmen on both sides to pull back. According to the al-Nahar journalist, locals had saluted Usbat al-Ansar, expressing that the inclusion of the movement in the new security committee will inhibit the growth of “extremist and fundamentalist groups to the likes of Bilal Badr, or the remnants of Jund al-Sham.” Ironically a group of armed Jihadi-Salafis was held to be the most effective firewall against extremism.

Conclusion

In 2007 Bernard Rougier listed Usbat al-Ansar, al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida and the remnants of Basim al-Kanj’s group as the main clandestine networks of Ain al-Hilwe. Today the pictures looks different. The two former movements, along with the Jihadist militia Ansar Allah, have reluctantly been included in the Palestinian political leadership in Lebanon. They might have equal representation to the largest of the Palestinian factions, but they aren’t seen as equals. Being marginal in size, not having a presence in Palestine, and fronting ideologies, perceived by some to be at odds with Palestinian neutrality in the face of the Syrian crisis, the Islamic Forces are met with suspicion. Nevertheless, the major factions draw a clear line between these movements and the present day clandestine militia networks.


246 It should be noted that Rougier conducted his field work in the early 2000s, and mostly cover events that transpired during the 90s.

247 Rougier, Everyday Jihad, (Guide to Political and Religious groups), ix
As much as it might be seen as an oddity in the Palestinian political landscape, Usbat al-Ansar has come to represent one of the most coherent military forces in Ain al-Hilwe. The PLO's wish for cooperation with the group was explained as a pure necessity in handling the volatile security situation in the camp. Paralyzed by crippling internal disputes, the PLO's leading movement, Fatah, seems unable to adopt a clear strategy in handling their aggressors, wavering between attempts at establishing a dialogue and giving away to tit for tat violence. Usbat al-Ansar and the Islamic Forces have, on the other hand, been able to position themselves as the most effective oppressors of the volatile clandestine militias of Ain al-Hilwe. This also explains their place in the Unified Political Leadership in Lebanon.
6 Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to shed light on the circumstances surrounding the inclusion of Usbat al-Ansar and the Islamic Forces of Ain al-Hilwe in the framework of the Unified Political Leadership of the Palestinian factions in Lebanon. Initially I posed the question whether this move should be understood as “a result of the mainstream Palestinian factions having been able to contain the threat of Jihadi-Salafism and its most significant proponents” or rather “as a sign of clandestine extremist groups gaining ever more ground in the Palestinian community in Lebanon”.

Whereas some Palestinian officials suggested they had been able to “contain” the Islamic Forces by giving them political responsibilities, a more accurate description of events would be to say that the movements in question have reluctantly been accepted as partners because both the PLO and the Alliance found themselves unable to compete with their military force. That being said, the inclusion of Usbat al-Ansar in the unified leadership, is not an example of a “warlike cult of jihad” gaining ground. As much of an oddity as they are in the Palestinian political landscape, the Islamic forces are a different breed than the antagonistic clandestine groups we have been introduced to in this study. It might appear as though the role of the Islamic Forces has been largely overlooked by scholarly studies taking on Palestinian Islamism in Lebanon. As fluid and loosely defined as this organization might be, Shaykh Jamal Khattab and his constituents have as members of the Follow-Up Committee been a part of Ain al-Hilwe's social and political fabric since the end of the civil war. Despite periodically being engulfed in turmoil and surrounded by controversy, the movements within this system have fared notably better than the clandestine renegade militias who typically peter out due to lack of staying power, or end up getting obliterated through their revolutionary violence and armed standoffs with the Lebanese Armed Forces. The clandestine militias do pose a serious threat to the camp societies and their surroundings, but they should not by any measure be understood as a dominant social or political force.

In Lebanon, the nationalist brand of Islamism, as fronted by Hamas, has a far more solid grounding in the Palestinian camps than any variety of global Jihadism. Its influence is evident when looking at the evolution of a movement like Usbat al-Ansar and its outspoken allegiance to its Islamist big brothers. Although Hamas has played a pivotal role in turning one of the most explosive Jihadists groups in Lebanon into a team player, it remains to be seen if a resembling approach can be applied to the al-Tamir / al-Tawari militants or Bilal Badr's gathering of Muslim Youth. It wouldn't be surprising to see the Islamic Forces take a leading role in this type of dialogue.

248 cf. Rougier, Everyday Jihad, 2
– they could prove to be an efficient firewall against the more extreme groups.

Is the current pragmatism of Usbat al-Ansar merely a change of tactics? Are they holding back locally, in order to concentrate their violence on global targets? This is a quite possible scenario. Although, it should be noted that when a globalist Jihadi movement like Usbat al-Ansar, based on commitments of neutrality made to the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, seemingly have chosen to stay out of the Syrian war, a conflict that possibly has attracted more foreign fighters than any other conflict in history 249, we can safely say that a remarkable development has taken place. For the time being it seems Usbat al-Ansar, the “oldest and probably most important salafi-jihadi group in Lebanon” 250, has chosen local politics over global Jihad.

Closing remarks

During a visit to the Burj al-Barajne camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut a director of a local NGO told me: “In our camps there is religious extremism, and there is political extremism. In principle they are the same” 251. By political extremism he referred to the rampant factionalism that exists in every camp. While the inclusion of the Islamic Forces in the Unified Leadership, as I have argued, is not a sign of Jihadi Salafism taking over Palestinian politics, it could perhaps better described as a symptom of “political extremism” persisting in the camps. In Lebanon we find that marginal movements symptomatically take up a disproportionately big space in running the camp societies. As long as popular committees remain unelected, and no open political channels exist in the camps, the only two movements with a significant popular following, Fatah and Hamas, will continuously find themselves both grappling and cooperating with a number of marginal movements vying for power, be they pro-Syrian socialists or Jihadi-Salafis.

250 cf. Gade, Fatah al-islam in Lebanon
251 Hassan al-Mustafa, General director of the Youth Fraternatiy, Interview with author, Beirut, December 2013
7 List of interviews

Ali Barake, Beirut, November 28. 2014
The leader of Hamas in Lebanon.

Ra'fat Fahd Morra, Beirut, December 12. 2013
Author and Chief communication officer for Hamas in Lebanon

Abu Khalil, Beirut, December 10. 2013
Leader of Hamas in the Burj al-Barajne camp

Abu Tafish, Beirut, November 14. 2013
Leader of Hamas in the Shatila camp

Abu Ashraf, Beirut, December 16. 2013
Leader of Islamic Jihad in the Burj al-Barajne camp

Abu Iyyad Shaalan, Beirut, January 11. 2014
Fatah official and leader of the PLO's popular committees in Lebanon

Fatah's leader of the Beirut region

Muahammad Dabbour and Omar Ghadban, Beirut, December 16. Leader of Fatah in the Burj al-Barajne camp

Mahmoud Abu al-Abd “al-Lino” Issa, Saida, January 11. 2014
Former leader of al-Kiffah al-Musallah, the PLO's armed forces in Lebanon. Issa was excommunicated from Fatah in October 2013 on allegations of receiving monetary funds from Muhammad Dahlan, the Palestinian president's rival. Interview conducted by research assistant at

Former employee at the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut. Kattoura was excommunicated by Fatah after confronting the Palestinian president in a letter in May 2013. He considers himself a “dissident” within his movement. Interviews conducted in English.

Mahmoud Abu Jaber al-Afifi, Beirut, October 17. 2013
Interview conducted at Fatah's office in the Shatila camp, October 2013

Ziad Hammu, Beirut, October 21. 2013
PFLP official and leader of PLO's popular committee in Shatila.

Soheil al-Natour, Beirut, November 20. 2013
DFLP official, author, and human rights lawyer. Interview conducted in English.

Ahmad Mustafa, Beirut, December 9. 2013
DFLP official in Burj al-Barajne. Mustafa had just resigned from his post as the leader of PLO's popular committee in the Burj al-Barajne camp when I spoke to him, and had started working in an NGO dealing with displaced Palestinians from Syria.
Abu Musa Sabir, Beirut, November 10. 2013
PFLP-GC's leader in the Beirut region

Abu Wasim, Beirut, November 9. 2013
Fatah - al-Intifada official and leader of the joint security committee in the Shatila camp

Firas Abo Aloul, Beirut, January 9. 2014
Area Communication Officer for UNRWA in Central Lebanon.
Interview conducted in English.

Franklin Lamb, Beirut, November 2014
Journalist and volunteer for the Sabra and Shatila scholarship program
Interview conducted in English.

Mohsen Saleh, Beirut, January 11.2014
Author and general director for al-Zaytouna Centre for learning and consultations.

Mohammad Zaatari, January 10. 2004
Zaatari is a Journalist for the Daily Star based in Southern Lebanon, who has a long experience of covering Ain al-Hilwe. Interview conducted by phone.

Rashid al-Mansi, Beirut, September 7. 2013
Coordinator of the youth program of the NGO The Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD).
The organization is mainly based in Sabra and neighborhoods adjacent to Ain al-Hilwe. It works with displaced refugees who for various reasons don't receive help from UNRWA.

Hassan al-Mustafa, Beirut, December 9. 2013
General director of the Youth Fraternity, an NGO which prepares young Palestinians for career life employee.

Employee of Beit Atfal a-Somoud in the Shatila camp in Beirut, Beirut, October 20. 2013
The employee wished to remain unnamed in this study.
Her NGO provides education for Palestinian children in the camps of Lebanon.
8 Bibliography

Books, journal articles and reports


Pall, Zoltan. *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe: Development, Fractionalization and Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press


Taarnby, Michael and Lars Hallundbaek. *Fatah al-Islam: Anthropological Perspectives on Jihadī Culture.* Real Institute Elano, 2008: [http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1/8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1/8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=8efaad804f018b80b7f73170b3a4d1) [Accessed May 16. 2014]


Newspapers and online news publications


TV / Video and podcasts

Al Arabiya, «ʿuṣbat al-anṣār», the TV documentary from 2008 can be viewed on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9s0tvOCFlU [Accessed March 1.2014]


Websites


9 Major Palestinian factions in Lebanon

*The Palestinian Liberation Organization:*

Fatah (The Palestinian National Liberation Movement)
The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)
The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)

*The Alliance of Palestinian Forces:*

Hamas (The Islamic Resistance Movement)
Islamic Jihad
PFLP – GC (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command)
Fatah – Al-Intifada
al-Saaiqa

*The Islamic Forces and Ansar Allah:*

al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida (The Islamic Combatant Movement)
Usbat al-Ansar al-Islamiyya (The Islamic League of Partisans)
Ansar Allah (God's partisans)
A map of the official Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon

From north to south: 1 Nahr al-Barid, 2 Bedawi, 3 al-Jalil / Wavel, 4 Dbaye, 5 Mar Elias, 6 Shatila, 7 Burj al-Barajne, 8 al-Miyye wa Miyye, 9 Ain al-Hilwe, 10 al-Bus, 11 Burj al-Shamali, 12 al-Rashidiyye.