

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: LBN34442
Country: Lebanon
Date: 23 February 2009

Keywords: Lebanon – Lebanese Army – Fatah al-Islam – State protection – Nahr el-Bared – Tripoli bus bombing

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Questions

- 1. How did the conflict between Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese army begin, prior to Nahr-El-Bared?**
- 2. Since Fatah al Islam were defeated in that conflict, what evidence is there that they are still operating in Lebanon?**
- 3. Is there any information about Fatah al Islam targeting members of the military who were involved in the Nahr-El-Bared conflict?**
- 4. What evidence is there that Fatah al-Islam were responsible for a bomb blast on the bus in Tripoli, August 2008? Is there any detailed information on how many soldiers were killed in that incident and where exactly it took place?**
- 5. Is there any update on information about how the authorities in Lebanon are able to protect those who are targeted by Fatah al Islam?**

RESPONSE

- 1. How did the conflict between Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese army begin, prior to Nahr-El-Bared?**

Question 2 of RRT *Research Response LBN33576* provides a history of Fatah al-Islam, including events within the organisation leading up to the fighting in Nahr el-Bared. No information was located to suggest that there was any conflict between the Lebanese authorities and Fatah al-Islam until the events of May 2007. An overview of some of the sources informing *LBN33576* as well as additional information follows below (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33576*, 29 July – Attachment 1).

A July 2007 article sourced from the *Mideast Monitor* provides a description of the events leading up to the conflict in Nahr el-Bared, which were sparked by a bank robbery carried out by Fatah al-Islam members near Tripoli on 19 May 2007:

On May 19, a band of Fatah al-Islam gunmen robbed a bank near Tripoli (their third) and were tracked to an apartment in a wealthy neighbourhood in the city. For reasons that are not entirely clear (but probably owe much to the visit of US Assistant Secretary of State David Welch three days earlier), this time Siniora sent the ISF [Internal Security Forces] into action (with a camera crew from Hariri's Future TV station in tow to record the momentous event). The pre-dawn raid was a disaster – not only was it easily repulsed, but Siniora's failure to inform the Army beforehand left Lebanese soldiers stationed outside Nahr al-Bared vulnerable to a withering reprisal hours later while most were asleep in their barracks (nine were found with their throats slit). ...the deaths of 22 soldiers that day (the ISF aborted its raid before anyone got killed) united the Lebanese people behind the Army's campaign to eliminate Fatah al-Islam... (Gambill, G. 2007, 'The Rise of Fatah al-Islam', *Mideast Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 1, June-July http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0705/0705_5.htm – Accessed 11 October 2007 – Attachment 2).

A January 2008 Carnegie Endowment report on Fatah al-Islam provides additional background to the conflict, suggesting that the confrontation "took everyone by surprise", and that Fatah al-Islam members "slaughtered at least fifteen Lebanese soldiers":

The confrontation with the Lebanese army, which led to the liquidation of Fateh al-Islam and a humanitarian disaster for the 40,000 Palestinian refugees, took everyone by surprise. A bank robbery near Tripoli in May led to clashes in the streets of Tripoli between security forces and members of Fateh al-Islam, the suspected robbers. Two members of the group were killed. In revenge, Fateh al-Islam members slaughtered at least fifteen Lebanese soldiers near the refugee camp. The army decided to attack the camp to capture those responsible. What was meant to be a quick operation went on for three months, suggesting that the group had been armed to the teeth and was prepared for such a confrontation. At the same time, Salafist figures close to Absi said that Fateh al-Islam leaders did not want a showdown with the Lebanese state and that the battle was badly timed (Abdel-Latif, O. 2008, 'Lebanon's Sunni Islamists – A Growing Force', Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment website, No. 6, January http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC6_abdellatif_lebanon_final.pdf – Accessed 25 August 2008 – Attachment 3).

A February 2009 report from the International Crisis Group (ICG) provides another version of the lead-up to the conflict between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islam:

In May 2007, violent clashes erupted between the army and Fatah al-Islam, which took refuge in Nahr al-Bared. The conflict began in North Lebanon on 20 May, when suspected bank robbers – members of the jihadi group – were confronted by the internal security forces (Forces de Sécurité Intérieure, FSI). The fighting soon spread to Tripoli and near Nahr al-Bared, where army members were attacked. Several hours later, an army patrol was ambushed in Qalamoun, a few kilometres south of Tripoli. That same day, two explosions racked Beirut. In Tripoli, the army and security forces took over the buildings in which some militants were located. Nahr al-Bared soon became the central arena of the confrontation, which lasted over three months (International Crisis Group 2009, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Middle East Report No. 84, 19 February, p. 11 – Attachment 18).

A footnote in the ICG report provides detail of a Fatah al-Islam attack on members of the Lebanese army prior to Nahr el-Bared:

The attack was particularly bloody and provoked widespread outrage throughout the country. Televised pictures showed the corpses of soldiers; the militants had slit one victim's throat. According to unconfirmed reports, the soldiers were killed while they slept (International Crisis Group 2009, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Middle East Report No. 84, 19 February, p. 11, footnote 87 – Attachment 18).

2. Since Fatah al Islam were defeated in that conflict, what evidence is there that they are still operating in Lebanon?

While much of the available reportage suggests that the Fatah al-Islam network has suffered considerable setbacks following the 2007 conflict there have also been reports of continued Fatah al-Islam operations in Lebanon and in neighbouring states such as Syria. A February 2009 article from the Lebanon *Daily Star* reports that “some analysts believed that the group had been crippled by the losses it suffered during and after the battle” at Nahr el-Bared, but then attributes the August and September 2008 Tripoli bus bombings to Fatah al-Islam, stating that “the militants burst back onto the radar of counter-terrorism officials in August, when they bombed a bus full of Lebanese soldiers in Tripoli”. According to an earlier report from *Reuters India*, from June 2008, “Fatah al-Islam claimed responsibility for a bomb that killed a soldier in north Lebanon last week”, although the report also noted that “[t]he authenticity of the statement, which Reuters received by fax, could not be verified”. The most recent reference to Fatah al-Islam activity in Lebanon came in a February 2009 article from *AFP*, hosted on the *Google News* website, which quotes Lebanese military sources who claim that Fatah al-Islam is planning to attack two Lebanese Members of Parliament, “who represent the anti-Syrian bloc in north Lebanon”. An October 2008 report from *The Daily Star*, sourced from the “pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*”, quotes a Lebanese Armed Forces statement which claims that “[a] ‘terrorist’ cell arrested in Tripoli over the weekend previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji”. This report also quotes “security sources” who claim that three of the suspects “were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group”. Fatah al-Islam has also been accused of being responsible for the September 2008 car bomb in Damascus, Syria which killed seventeen people; a November 2008 *Reuters Alertnet* article reports that alleged members of Fatah al-Islam confessed on Syrian state television that “they had helped plan the Sept. 27 attack on an intelligence complex in the Syrian capital” (for the Fatah al-Islam plot to attack Lebanese MPs, see: ‘Lebanon MPs warned of Islamist assassination threat’ 2009, *Google News*, (source: *AFP*), 10 February http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gtQ_zxsk30pg-g1iFl9nbcjvBgmA – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 4; for the February 2009 *Daily Star* report, see: Wander, A. 2009, ‘Trial of 29 terror suspects kicks off in Beirut’, *The Daily Star*, 18 February http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=99436# – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 5; for the assassination plot and Fatah al-Islam links to the Tripoli “terrorist cell”, see: ‘Tripoli cell ‘had planned to assassinate LAF chief’ 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27; for the June 2008 bombing, see: ‘Fatah al-Islam statement claims Lebanon bomb’ 2008, *Reuters India*, 2 June <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-33862520080602> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 9; and for the Syrian television confessions, see: Oweis, K. 2008, ‘Syria says Fatah al-Islam group behind bombing’, *Reuters Alertnet*, 7 November

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/OWE685030.htm> – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 8).

Reports speculate on the fate and current location of leading Fatah al-Islam figures, including the group's leader Shaker al-Abssi. The February 2009 *Daily Star* report quotes claims aired on "a website used by Islamist militants...which said that Abssi had 'probably' been killed in Syria and named another fugitive, Abed Awad, as the group's new leader". This report also states that Awad "is wanted for his links to the deadly blasts in Tripoli over the summer and was recently believed to be hiding in the sprawling Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp near Sidon", although "his current whereabouts are unknown". *BBC News* reported in December 2008 that Fatah al-Islam issued a statement announcing the death of Shaker al-Abssi, in an ambush by Syrian security forces "in the small town of Jermana, south of Damascus". A December 2008 article from *Al Arabiya* quotes reports from various Arab media sources which suggest that Abssi may be dead, in Turkey, or hiding in the Ein el-Hilweh camp (Wander, A. 2009, 'Trial of 29 terror suspects kicks off in Beirut', *The Daily Star*, 18 February

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=99436# – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 5; 'Fatah al-Islam says leader 'dead'' 2008, *BBC News*, 10 December http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7775239.stm – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 6; and 'Islamist group names successor to Abssi: Fatah al-Islam says leader ambushed in Syria' 2008, *Al Arabiya*, 10 December <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/12/10/61714.html> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 7).

An overview of the sources informing the above response follows below.

The most recent information indicating that Fatah al-Islam is still an operational organisation in Lebanon is a 10 February 2009 article from *AFP*, which quotes Lebanese military sources who claim that Fatah al-Islam is planning to attack two Lebanese Members of Parliament:

Two Lebanese members of parliament have been warned of possible assassination bids against them by an Al-Qaeda-inspired radical group, one of the MPs told AFP on Tuesday.

"The army command informed me that some members of Fatah al-Islam are preparing suicide attacks against me and fellow MP Moustapha Hachem," Moustapha Allouch said.

He said both MPs, who represent the anti-Syrian bloc in north Lebanon where the army fought a deadly 2007 battle with Fatah al-Islam militants, had taken precautionary measures that included cutting back on public appearances.

An army spokesman who did not wish to be identified confirmed that the security services had concluded that attacks might be being planned against certain MPs.

"The security services have warned the MPs concerned that they could be targets," he said, without giving further details ('Lebanon MPs warned of Islamist assassination threat' 2009, *Google News*, (source: *AFP*), 10 February http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gtQ_zxsk30pg-g1iFl9nbcjvBgmA – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 4).

Another February 2009 article, from the Lebanon *Daily Star*, reports that the trials of "29 men accused of serious terrorist offences", including Fatah al-Islam leader Shaker al-Abssi, have begun in Beirut. The report attributes the August and September 2008 Tripoli bus

bombings to Fatah al-Islam, and quotes a December 2008 statement on “a website used by Islamist militants” which claimed that “Abssi had ‘probably’ been killed in Syria”, and that Fatah al-Islam have “named another fugitive, Abed Awad, as the group’s new leader”:

The defendants, who are members of Al-Qaeda, Fatah al-Islam and Osbat al-Ansar, are accused of “forming armed gangs in order to stage terrorist attacks.” They are also being tried for “possession of explosives” and “training to use explosives and arms,” according to court documents relating to the case. Other charges include “possession of false identification” and “inciting assassination.”

...But of the 29 defendants in the trial, only 20 will be in court. Terrorist kingpin Abssi and eight other men have not been captured by security services and will be tried in absentia.

...Most of the defendants were arrested in the months after the fighting at Nahr al-Bared, and some analysts believed that the group had been crippled by the losses it suffered during and after the battle.

But the militants burst back onto the radar of counter-terrorism officials in August, when they bombed a bus full of Lebanese soldiers in Tripoli. A second deadly blast the following month led to another rash of arrests, but these cases have not yet reached trial.

If Abssi is found guilty it will be his second conviction for terrorist offences in absentia. He has already been tried and sentenced to death in Jordan for plotting the murder of the US diplomat Laurence Foley, who was killed outside his home in Amman in 2002.

Abssi’s co-defendant in the case was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who went on to lead Al-Qaeda in Iraq before being killed in a US air strike in 2006. In December, a website used by Islamist militants published a statement, purportedly from Fatah al-Islam, which said that Abssi had “probably” been killed in Syria and named another fugitive, Abed Awad, as the group’s new leader.

Awad, known as the “Prince of Al-Qaeda”, is wanted for his links to the deadly blasts in Tripoli over the summer and was recently believed to be hiding in the sprawling Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp near Sidon (Wander, A. 2009, ‘Trial of 29 terror suspects kicks off in Beirut’, *The Daily Star*, 18 February http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=99436# – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 5).

A December 2008 article from *BBC News* also reports that Fatah al-Islam issued a statement announcing the death of Shaker al-Abssi, in an ambush by Syrian security forces “in the small town of Jermana, south of Damascus”. This report also notes that “[a] US intelligence monitoring group said the authenticity of the online statement had not been confirmed”, and that “Syria says Fatah al-Islam was behind a bomb blast in Damascus in September which killed 17 people” (‘Fatah al-Islam says leader ‘dead’ 2008, *BBC News*, 10 December http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7775239.stm – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 6).

Another December 2008 article, from *Al Arabiya*, provides further detail on the purported capture or death of Abssi:

Following days of speculation and conflicting reports, Lebanon-based Islamist group Fatah al-Islam has announced that its leader had been “captured or killed” by Syrian forces and named his successor, according to a U.S. intelligence monitoring service.

The group said Shaker al-Abssi and two other members of its group were ambushed in Syria while trying to link up with other Islamic militants from Iraq and Afghanistan, SITE Intelligence Group Monitoring Service reported.

The three were either captured or killed in the ensuing gunfight with members of the Syrian security forces, said the statement.

Abu Mohamad Awad had been named to succeed Abssi at the head of Fatah al-Islam, said the group.

SITE said the statement, the authenticity of which has still not been confirmed, was posted on an Islamic militant website on Monday.

Conflicting reports have been circulating in the Arab media for over a week concerning the wanted Abssi. Al-Liwaa daily reported earlier this month that he may have headed to Turkey to live with a Lebanese extremist known as Abu Bakr Aqida. The paper added that Abssi was last seen “last week in what is known as the Taware neighborhood of the Ain al-Helweh refugee camp in Sidon,” Lebanon.

But An-Nahar newspaper said that another militant group, Osbat al-Ansar, had played a role alongside a leading Palestinian figure in hiding Abssi and his aides. It said Lebanese security forces have confirmed information that Abssi was still inside Ain al-Helweh, according to Lebanon’s English newspaper The Daily Star (‘Islamist group names successor to Abssi: Fatah al-Islam says leader ambushed in Syria’ 2008, *Al Arabiya*, 10 December <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/12/10/61714.html> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 7).

A November 2008 article from *Reuters Alertnet* reports claims aired on Syrian state television that Fatah al-Islam was responsible for the September car bomb explosion in Damascus that killed 17 people. According to this report, several members of Fatah al-Islam confessed “that they had helped plan the Sept. 27 attack on an intelligence complex in the Syrian capital”; the “Lebanese public prosecutor Said Mirza” is also quoted, claiming that “34 men including Syrians, Saudis, Lebanese and Palestinians” belong “to the Fatah al-Islam cell behind the attacks on the army”:

State television showed what it said were 12 members of Fatah al-Islam, an al Qaeda-inspired group that first emerged in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, confessing that they had helped plan the Sept. 27 attack on an intelligence complex in the Syrian capital.

Abdel Baqi Hussein, a Syrian who identified himself as the security coordinator of Fatah al-Islam, said the explosives had been smuggled from Lebanon and the suicide bomber was a Saudi national called Abu Aisha.

“The objective was to rattle the Syrian regime,” Hussein said.

He said he had discussed logistics with several Fatah al-Islam members in Lebanon, and that the car used in the bombing was a stolen Iraqi-registered taxi that had operated on the Damascus-Baghdad route.

...Syrian officials have warned of what they termed a terrorist threat from Lebanon, and linked the Sept. 27 bombing to attacks on the Lebanese army that killed 22 people in August and September.

The 12 people shown on state television were mostly Syrians and Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon or Syria. There was one Yemeni national and a woman described as the daughter of Fatah al-Islam's leader Shaker al-Absi, who is at large.

Syria says Fatah al-Islam has spread to take in members and sympathisers across the Arab world.

Lebanese public prosecutor Said Mirza last month accused 34 men including Syrians, Saudis, Lebanese and Palestinians of belonging to the Fatah al-Islam cell behind the attacks on the army (Oweis, K. 2008, 'Syria says Fatah al-Islam group behind bombing', *Reuters Alertnet*, 7 November <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/OWE685030.htm> – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 8).

A 15 October 2008 report from *The Daily Star* provides details of the arrest of the "terrorist" cell in Tripoli, sourced from "pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*". This article quotes a Lebanese Armed Forces statement which claims that "[a] 'terrorist' cell arrested in Tripoli over the weekend previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji". The report continues, quoting "security sources" who claim that three of the suspects "were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group":

A "terrorist" cell arrested in Tripoli over the weekend previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji, who was at that time commander of the 10th Brigade, pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* reported on Tuesday.

A statement by the LAF on Sunday said troops had arrested members of a terrorist group allegedly involved in recent bombings in North Lebanon. Sunday's statement said several people from a terrorist cell were arrested for their involvement in the August 13 and September 29 bombings in Tripoli.

Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat*, citing security sources, said the cell members admitted to planning an attack on the Internal Security Forces (ISF) headquarters in Beirut's Achrafieh district.

They also admitted failure to detonate a 10-kilogram bomb that was planted on the road leading to Qlayat air base in Akkar in North Lebanon, aimed at targeting Kahwaji's convoy, the sources said. They said the explosives, which were discovered by chance in June, had been defused.

Sources added that two more suspects were arrested in addition to the three others who were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group ('Tripoli cell 'had planned to assassinate LAF chief' 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27).

A June 2008 report from *Reuters India* states that "Fatah al-Islam claimed responsibility for a bomb that killed a soldier in north Lebanon last week", although the report also noted that "[t]he authenticity of the statement, which Reuters received by fax, could not be verified" ('Fatah al-Islam statement claims Lebanon bomb' 2008, *Reuters India*, 2 June <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-33862520080602> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 9).

3. Is there any information about Fatah al Islam targeting members of the military who were involved in the Nahr-El-Bared conflict?

The only report containing a threat against specific members of the military who were involved in the Nahr el-Bared conflict comes from the *Guardian*, which in August 2008 quoted Shaker al-Abssi as stating that he “has vowed to ‘hunt down the followers of Gen. Michel Suleiman’, who was the army commander during the Nahr el-Bared battle”. An October 2008 report from *The Daily Star*, sourced from the “pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*”, quotes a Lebanese Armed Forces statement which claims that “[a] ‘terrorist’ cell arrested in Tripoli over the weekend previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji”. This report also quotes “security sources” who claim that three of the suspects “were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group”. Two other recent reports state that Fatah al-Islam is seeking revenge on the military for the events of Nahr el-Bared, and that Abssi has publicly stated his desire for “revenge against the ‘enemies of God’ and added that suicide attackers were ready for action”. In addition, as noted in Question 2 above, Fatah al-Islam claimed responsibility for a June 2008 bombing in north Lebanon which killed a soldier, and, as noted in Question 4 below, are widely suspected as being responsible for the August and September bombings in Tripoli, which primarily targeted the military (for the threat to General Suleiman, see: Mroue, B. 2008, ‘Bomb in northern Lebanese city kills 18’, *Guardian* website, 13 August <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-7721920,00.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 11; for the plan to assassinate General Jean Kahwaji, see: ‘Tripoli cell ‘had planned to assassinate LAF chief’ 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27; for reports of Fatah al-Islam statements threatening the military, see: ‘Fatah al-Islam ‘wanted revenge’ 2008, *Arab News*, 14 October <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=115425&d=14&m=10&y=2008&pix=world.jpg&category=World> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 10; and ‘Fugitive Palestinian militant group’s chief slams Lebanon’s Sunni leaders, Hezbollah chief’ 2008, *AOL News* website (source: *Associated Press*), 11 June <http://www.aol.com.au/news/story/Fugitive-Palestinian-militant-group%27s-chief-slams-Lebanon%27s-Sunni-leaders-Hezbollah-chief/575871/index.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 12).

An October 2008 report from the *Arab News* quotes a “security official” who claims that a recently arrested terrorist cell, including members of Fatah al-Islam, was “seeking revenge for the army’s victory” in Nahr el-Bared. The official claims that “[s]o far the army is the sole target of attacks mounted by this cell and the operations they were planning target the army and internal security forces”, including the September and August Tripoli bombings, and a May bombing in Akkar. The report concludes by claiming that Abssi “has vowed revenge attacks against the army”:

A “terrorist” cell said to be behind three bomb attacks in Lebanon was seeking revenge for the army’s victory over an extremist group last year, a security official said yesterday.

“The cell is linked to Fatah Al-Islam and some of its members came from that group,” the official said, referring to an Al-Qaeda-inspired militia, which fought a 15-week battle last year against the army in a Palestinian refugee camp.

“So far the army is the sole target of attacks mounted by this cell and the operations they were planning target the army and internal security forces,” the official said on condition of anonymity.

He said the cell, whose members were arrested Sunday, was to blame for an attack on a military bus in the northern city of Tripoli on Sept. 29, when four soldiers and three civilians were killed.

It was also responsible for an attack in the port city in mid-August, which killed 14 people, including nine soldiers and a child, and the murder of a soldier in a bomb blast in Akkar in May.

“Documents seized in two places searched by a joint force – in Tripoli and Akkar – show that the army and internal security forces were also their next target,” he said.

The As-Safir newspaper reported that the cell was planning an attack on a Lebanese Army bus and on internal security forces headquarters in Beirut.

...Fatah Al-Islam chief Shaker Al-Abbasi...has vowed revenge attacks against the army ('Fatah al-Islam 'wanted revenge' 2008, *Arab News*, 14 October <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=115425&d=14&m=10&y=2008&pix=world.jpg&category=World> – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 10).

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A statement by the LAF on Sunday said troops had arrested members of a terrorist group allegedly involved in recent bombings in North Lebanon. Sunday’s statement said several people from a terrorist cell were arrested for their involvement in the August 13 and September 29 bombings in Tripoli.

Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat*, citing security sources, said the cell members admitted to planning an attack on the Internal Security Forces (ISF) headquarters in Beirut’s Achrafieh district.

They also admitted failure to detonate a 10-kilogram bomb that was planted on the road leading to Qlayat air base in Akkar in North Lebanon, aimed at targeting Kahwaji’s convoy, the sources said. They said the explosives, which were discovered by chance in June, had been defused.

Sources added that two more suspects were arrested in addition to the three others who were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group (“Tripoli cell ‘had planned to assassinate LAF chief’ 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27).

A 13 August 2008 report on the Tripoli bus bombing from the *Guardian* states that Abssi escaped the Nahr al-Bared conflict, and that he “has vowed to ‘hunt down the followers of Gen. Michel Suleiman’, who was the army commander during the Nahr el-Bared battle”. The report also claims that the Tripoli bomb blast has raised “fears that an al-Qaida-inspired militant group is stepping up revenge attacks against the military”, and notes that “[t]he army

described the blast as a ‘terrorist attack targeting the army directly’” (Mroue, B. 2008, ‘Bomb in northern Lebanese city kills 18’, *Guardian* website, 13 August <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-7721920,00.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 11).

A June 2008 article sourced from *Associated Press* and located on the *AOL News* website reports that Abssi “lashed out at Lebanon’s Sunni politicians and the country’s Shiite Hezbollah militants, and threatened suicide attacks in a new audio posted Tuesday on the Internet and carried by Lebanese television stations” (‘Fugitive Palestinian militant group’s chief slams Lebanon’s Sunni leaders, Hezbollah chief’ 2008, *AOL News* website (source: *Associated Press*), 11 June <http://www.aol.com.au/news/story/Fugitive-Palestinian-militant-group%27s-chief-slams-Lebanon%27s-Sunni-leaders-Hezbollah-chief/575871/index.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 12).

4. What evidence is there that they were responsible for a bomb blast on the bus in Tripoli, August 2008? Is there any detailed information on how many soldiers were killed in that incident and where exactly it took place?

Responsibility for the August 2008 Tripoli bombing

Several media reports suggest that Fatah al-Islam is suspected of being behind the attack, or that it may be responsible, while others attribute the bombing to unspecified Salafist groups (of which Fatah al-Islam is one), link them to the Alawite/Sunni violence in the months preceding the bombings, or to Syrian influence. A September 2008 report from *The Times* states that “[i]nitial suspicions for both bus bombings has fallen on the remnants of Fatah al-Islam”, but also discusses the “sectarian tensions” that have pitted Alawites and Sunnis against one another in Tripoli, and Alwaite claims that blame Saudi-backed Salafist Sunni groups for the violence; the Sunnis dismiss these accusations as “propaganda”. The *Guardian* reported in August 2008 that Lebanese “officials” claim that Fatah al-Islam may be responsible for the Tripoli bombing, and that they were “seeking revenge for the military’s assault last year” on Nahr el-Bared. A February 2009 article from *The Daily Star* refers to the Tripoli bus bombing as being “blamed on the Salafist militant group Fatah al-Islam”, and also refers to the September 2008 bombing in Tripoli that “targeted the army, killing five people”. An August 2008 *Stratfor* report on the Tripoli bus bombing attributes it to “Saudi-backed Salafist militants, who are trying to resist a coming Syrian-backed crackdown”. A November 2008 report from the *Inter Press Service* quotes Future movement MP Moustapha Allouch, who tells of a “crackdown on a terrorist cell accused of the [Tripoli] bombings, and further detail on the “crackdown” is provided by an October 15 report from *The Daily Star*. This latter report, sourced from the “pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*”, quotes “sources” who claim that three suspects “were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group”, and quotes a Lebanese Armed Forces statement that “said several people from a terrorist cell were arrested for their involvement in the August 13 and September 29 bombings in Tripoli” (for reports that name Fatah al-Islam as responsible for the bombings, see: Mroue, B. 2008, ‘Bomb in northern Lebanese city kills 18’, *Guardian* website, 13 August <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-7721920,00.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 11; Wander, A. 2009, ‘Joint call for panel of inquiry on wiretaps against Lebanese’, *The Daily Star*, 13 February http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=99322# – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 14; and ‘Tripoli cell ‘had planned to assassinate LAF chief’ 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27; for reports that explore

further possibilities as to responsibility for the bombing, see: Blanford, N. 2008, 'Six dead and seventeen injured in Tripoli car bombing', *The Times*, 30 September http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article4846164.ece – Accessed 23 February 2009 – Attachment 25; 'Lebanon: A Bus Bombing in Tripoli and a Message for Beirut' 2008, *Stratfor*, 13 August http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/lebanon_bus_bombing_tripoli_and_message_beirut – Accessed 2 September 2008 – Attachment 13; and Alami, M. 2008, 'Agreement brings peace to Tripoli, for now', *Inter Press Service*, 4 November – Attachment 17).

Details of the bombing

Several of these reports provide details on the particulars of the bomb blast and the number of soldiers killed. An October 2008 report from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy states that the "bus bomb in Tripoli killed fifteen people, including ten LAF soldiers", while a February 2009 article from *The Daily Star* puts the number killed at eighteen, and an August 2008 report from *The Guardian* concurs with this figure, numbering ten soldiers among the dead. August 2008 reports from *BBC News* and *ABC News* provide further information as to the location and circumstances of the bombing, which took place "at a bus stop often used by soldiers in Masarif Street in Tripoli's busy commercial district" (for the number of soldiers killed in the bombing, see: Schenker, D. 2008, 'Stability in Lebanon Threatened, Again', *PolicyWatch*, no. 1406, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 October <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2932> – Accessed 4 December 2008 – Attachment 15; and Mroue, B. 2008, 'Bomb in northern Lebanese city kills 18', *Guardian* website, 13 August <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-7721920,00.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 11; for details of the blast, see: 'Lebanese city rocked by bus bomb' 2008, *BBC News*, 13 August http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7557759.stm – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 16; and '11 killed in Tripoli bomb blast' 2008, *ABC News*, (source: *AFP/Reuters*), 13 August <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/13/2334281.htm> – Accessed 23 February 2009 – Attachment 26).

An overview of the sources informing the above response follows below.

A September 2008 report from *The Times* states that "[i]nitial suspicions for both bus bombings has fallen on the remnants of Fatah al-Islam", but that the sectarian Sunni-Alawite violence in Tripoli may also be a factor, with the Alawites blaming the allegedly Saudi-backed Salafist Sunni groups for the violence and the Sunnis dismissing these accusations as "propaganda":

Initial suspicions for both bus bombings has fallen on the remnants of Fatah al-Islam, a radical Islamist group which waged a three-month battle against the Lebanese army last year in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, 10 miles north of Tripoli. Although Fatah al-Islam was eventually crushed, some militants, including its leader, Shaker al-Absi, fled the camp and are believed to be hiding with sympathisers in north Lebanon and other Palestinian refugee camps.

Tripoli has been the scene of sectarian battles since May, pitting Sunni groups which support the Western-backed Lebanese Government against the city's Alawite community which is part of the opposition and has close links to the Alawite-dominated regime in Damascus.

A formal reconciliation was reached this month between the feuding factions in north Lebanon, but sectarian tensions remain high.

Rifaat Eid, the son of the leader of Lebanon's small Alawite community, accused Saudi Arabia of funding Salafi jihadists in north Lebanon, blaming them for the violence.

"The Salafis are like kittens when they are weak, but when they are strong they are like tigers," he said.

But Salafist leaders in Tripoli insist that the threat of jihadist militancy is exaggerated.

"They say we are fanatics and cite what is happening in Iraq, but this is just propaganda to weaken the Sunnis in Lebanon," said Sheikh Omar Bakri, the Salafist preacher who fled England in 2005 and today lives in Tripoli (Blanford, N. 2008, 'Six dead and seventeen injured in Tripoli car bombing', *The Times*, 30 September http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article4846164.ece – Accessed 23 February 2009 – Attachment 25).

A 13 August 2008 report from the *Guardian* quotes Lebanese "officials" who say that Fatah al-Islam may be responsible for the Tripoli bombing that killed at least 13 people, and that they were "seeking revenge for the military's assault last year" on Nahr el-Bared. The report notes that Fatah al-Islam had earlier claimed responsibility "for several small attacks on soldiers, including a May 31 bomb blast that killed a soldier in Abdeh, near Tripoli". Relevant extracts from the report follow:

The bombing was Lebanon's deadliest in more than three years, hitting a main Tripoli street crowded with people heading to work. The bus was left riddled with shrapnel, its windows blown out, as soldiers and bystanders carried away the dozens of bleeding wounded in the glass-strewn street.

...Some officials said the Tripoli bombing may have been the work of al-Qaida-inspired militants seeking revenge for the military's assault last year on their bastion in a nearby Palestinian refugee camp, Nahr el-Bared. Hundreds were killed in the months long battle that ended with the militant Fatah Islam group fleeing the camp.

Since then, Fatah Islam has claimed responsibility for several small attacks on soldiers, including a May 31 bomb blast that killed a soldier in Abdeh, near Tripoli. Fatah Islam's leader, Shaker al-Absi, has vowed to "hunt down the followers of Gen. Michel Suleiman," who was the army commander during the Nahr el-Bared battle.

The army described the blast as a "terrorist attack targeting the army directly."

Security officials said 10 soldiers and eight civilians were killed, while 46 people were wounded. A senior military officer told The Associated Press that at least 13 people were killed, including 11 soldiers. The discrepancy in figures could not immediately be explained. All the officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

...The bomb – packed in a bag with nuts and bolts to maximize casualties – was set by the side of central Tripoli's Banks Street and was detonated by remote control, security officials said. The small public bus was carrying passengers from the Akkar region, further north, home to many military members.

Electrician Hatem Hussein, 24, said he ran to the scene after hearing the loud explosion. "The wounded were lying on the ground, men in military uniforms," he said (Mroue, B. 2008, 'Bomb in northern Lebanese city kills 18', *Guardian* website, 13 August <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-7721920,00.html> – Accessed 27 August 2008 – Attachment 11).

An August 2008 *Stratfor* report on the Tripoli bus bombing attributes it to “Saudi-backed Salafist militants, who are trying to resist a coming Syrian-backed crackdown”:

An explosive device detonated Aug. 13 on a bus in a busy part of the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, killing at least 18 people and wounding at least 40 others. Initial reports say between seven and 11 soldiers were among the dead.

The bombing was most likely the work of Saudi-backed Salafist militants, who are trying to resist a coming Syrian-backed crackdown against them. As the crackdown intensifies, the Salafists will likely ratchet up their attacks – and tensions will rise between Damascus and Riyadh (‘Lebanon: A Bus Bombing in Tripoli and a Message for Beirut’ 2008, *Stratfor*, 13 August http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/lebanon_bus_bombing_tripoli_and_message_beirut – Accessed 2 September 2008 – Attachment 13).

A 13 February 2009 article from *The Daily Star* refers to the Tripoli bus bombing as being “blamed on the Salafist militant group Fatah al-Islam”, and also refers to the September 2008 bombing in Tripoli that also “targeted the army, killing five people”. The report also names Abdel-Ghani Jawhar as the “man believed to have masterminded the attacks”, and Abed Awad as “the group’s apparent leader”:

September’s bombing targeted the army, killing five people. A virtually identical attack that took place a month before killed 18 people.

Both blasts were blamed on the Salafist militant group Fatah al-Islam, which fought a bloody 14 week battle with the army at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in 2007.

In the weeks after the attacks, security services swooped on alleged members of the group in a series of intelligence operations that saw many of its senior figures taken into custody.

But the man believed to have masterminded the attacks, Abdel-Ghani Jawhar, and the group’s apparent leader, Abed Awad, have both managed to evade capture.

Awad is believed to be hiding in the sprawling Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp near Sidon, where Palestinian factions are deadlocked over whether to hand him to Lebanese security services. Jawhar’s whereabouts are unknown (Wander, A. 2009, ‘Joint call for panel of inquiry on wiretaps against Lebanese’, *The Daily Star*, 13 February http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=99322# – Accessed 17 February 2009 – Attachment 14).

An October 2008 report from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy states that: “On August 13, a bus bomb in Tripoli killed fifteen people, including ten LAF soldiers”, and also that the September bombing targeted “a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) transport” and killed another five soldiers. This report does not name Fatah al-Islam as being responsible for the bombings (Schenker, D. 2008, ‘Stability in Lebanon Threatened, Again’, *PolicyWatch*, no. 1406, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 October <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2932> – Accessed 4 December 2008 – Attachment 15).

A November 2008 report from the *Inter Press Service* quotes Future movement MP Moustapha Allouch, who tells of a “crackdown on a terrorist cell accused of the [Tripoli] bombings, which, according to information provided to me, was operating independently”. The report continues: “On Oct. 13, members of the terrorist group allegedly involved in the recent bombings targeting the army in northern Lebanon were arrested, according to a

statement released by the Lebanese army”. Fatah al-Islam is not named as being the terrorist cell referred to in the report (Alami, M. 2008, ‘Agreement brings peace to Tripoli, for now’, *Inter Press Service*, 4 November – Attachment 17).

A 15 October 2008 report from *The Daily Star* provides details of the arrest of the “terrorist” cell in Tripoli, sourced from “pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*”. This report does name Fatah al-Islam, quoting “sources” who claim that three suspects “were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group”, and quotes a Lebanese Armed Forces statement that “said several people from a terrorist cell were arrested for their involvement in the August 13 and September 29 bombings in Tripoli”. “Security sources” quoted by *Al-Hayat* claim that “cell members admitted to planning an attack on the Internal Security Forces (ISF) headquarters in Beirut’s Achrafieh district”, and that they “previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji”:

A “terrorist” cell arrested in Tripoli over the weekend previously planned to assassinate the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Jean Kahwaji, who was at that time commander of the 10th Brigade, pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* reported on Tuesday.

A statement by the LAF on Sunday said troops had arrested members of a terrorist group allegedly involved in recent bombings in North Lebanon. Sunday’s statement said several people from a terrorist cell were arrested for their involvement in the August 13 and September 29 bombings in Tripoli.

Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat*, citing security sources, said the cell members admitted to planning an attack on the Internal Security Forces (ISF) headquarters in Beirut’s Achrafieh district.

They also admitted failure to detonate a 10-kilogram bomb that was planted on the road leading to Qlayat air base in Akkar in North Lebanon, aimed at targeting Kahwaji’s convoy, the sources said. They said the explosives, which were discovered by chance in June, had been defused.

Sources added that two more suspects were arrested in addition to the three others who were detained near the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp for alleged connections with the Fatah al-Islam militant group.

Last year, the LAF fought a 15-week battle with the Al-Qaeda inspired Fatah al-Islam in the Northern refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared that left 400 people dead, including 168 soldiers.

Al-Hayat reported that security agencies had obtained photos of Abdul Ghani Jawhar, the alleged leader of the cell who remains at large, at the site of the attack in Tripoli’s Tal Square minutes before the September 29 bus blast which killed four soldiers and three civilians. A similar attack on August 13 killed at least 14 people, including nine soldiers and a child.

Jawhar had brought 50 kilograms of explosives from Ain al-Hilweh and transported them to the Beddawi camp near Tripoli, according to *Al-Hayat*.

Two wanted Fatah al-Islam members identified as Ousama al-Shehabi and Mohammad Awad reportedly bought the explosives and used them for the second Tripoli bombing (‘Tripoli cell ‘had planned to assassinate LAF chief’ 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 October – Attachment 27).

An August 2008 report on the bombing from *BBC News* states that “[t]he bomb went off at a bus stop often used by soldiers in Masarif Street in Tripoli’s busy commercial district”:

No-one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which also wounded at least 30 people.

Some reports put the number of dead at 18.

Nine of those killed were reported to be soldiers who had been travelling on the bus. The army has said it believes it was directly targeted by the attack.

...Witnesses said they saw men in military uniforms lying on the ground and that the dead included a popular bread vendor ('Lebanese city rocked by bus bomb' 2008, *BBC News*, 13 August http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7557759.stm – Accessed 18 February 2009 – Attachment 16).

Another August 2008 report, from *ABC News* (sourced from *AFP/Reuters*) provides further detail on the bombing:

At least 28 people were wounded, two of them seriously, by the bomb, which was planted either inside the bus or beside it and exploded in a busy district of Lebanon's second largest city.

"A bomb exploded on Masarif Street in central Tripoli Wednesday morning," an official said.

The bomb, placed in front of a garage door, exploded near a passenger bus that was also carrying Lebanese soldiers.

Masarif Street is in a commercial district and the bomb went off near a bus pick-up point ('11 killed in Tripoli bomb blast' 2008, *ABC News*, (source: *AFP/Reuters*), 13 August <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/13/2334281.htm> – Accessed 23 February 2009 – Attachment 26).

5. Is there any update on information about how the authorities in Lebanon are able to protect those who are targeted by Fatah al Islam?

No references were located providing information on the ability of the authorities to protect those targeted by Fatah al-Islam. Information provided in Questions 2, 3 & 4 above suggests that the stated targets of the organisation are military and political figures, and the bombings attributed by some sources to Fatah al-Islam appear to have been directed at members of the Lebanese army.

The availability of state protection in Lebanon has been addressed in several RRT research responses over the last two years. Summaries follow below, in reverse chronological order:

- Question 3 of *Research Response LBN33809*, of 2 October 2008, provides a summary of previous responses on state protection in Lebanon with particular reference to those perceived to be under threat from Hezbollah. Nonetheless, these responses provide relevant information on the composition and role of the various Lebanese security agencies, and their ability to provide effective protection (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33809*, 2 October – Attachment 19).
- Question 3 of *Research Response LBN33661*, of 9 September 2008, provides a thorough overview of the state security agencies in Lebanon, their religious and

political affiliations, and the ramifications of these affiliations on the accessibility of state protection for citizens in Lebanon. Although the question relates specifically to a Future Movement member fearing retribution from members of Hezbollah, much of the information on the police (or Interior Security Forces, ISF) and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) is nonetheless pertinent. This response provides extensive information regarding the composition, role and function of the various security agencies in Lebanon, and analyses the changes in the Interior Security Force (ISF), which under the Future Movement-led government has been transformed from a Syrian-dominated, marginalised entity into a Sunni-dominated, anti-Syrian and far better resourced and trained agency (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33661*, 9 September, pp. 60-74 – Attachment 20).

- *Research Response LBN33419*, of 27 June 2008, provides brief information on state protection in Lebanon and the role of the security agencies (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33419*, 27 June, pp. 8-9 – Attachment 21).
- Question 3 of *Research Response LBN32202*, of 11 September 2007, provides information on links between the Future Movement (*Tayyar Al Mustaqbal*), the leading coalition in the Lebanese parliament headed by Saad Hariri, and Sunni militant groups (RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response LBN32202*, 11 September – Attachment 22).
- *Research Response LBN32112*, of 1 August 2007, collates reports providing information on the ability of Palestinians to approach and access state protection in Lebanon through the police and legal system (RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response LBN32112*, 1 August – Attachment 23).
- Question 5 of *Research Response LBN31663*, of 3 May 2007, provides general information on state protection and the security agencies operating in Lebanon (RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response LBN31663*, 3 May – Attachment 24).

The abovementioned July 2007 *Mideast Monitor* article on Fatah al-Islam may be of interest in this context; it draws attention to the political problems for the Sunni-dominated March 14 coalition government in confronting Sunni Islamist groups:

Because its base of political support hinges on the Lebanese Sunni community (which sympathises strongly with overwhelmingly Sunni Palestinians), the March 14 coalition was not only loathe to violate the extraterritoriality of Lebanon's refugee camps, but reluctant to enter into a confrontation with any predominantly Sunni group. Thus, while the Siniora government's "Sunnification" of the internal security forces (ISF) may have bolstered its ability to contend with the Shiite Hezbollah movement, it has proven to be ineffective in combating Sunni Islamists. When a Sunni mob set fire to the building housing the Danish embassy in February 2006 (to protest the publication of offensive cartoons), hundreds of ISF riot police stood by and watched.

In the neighbourhood of Taamir adjacent to Ain al-Hilweh, the Siniora government did nothing for over a year and a half to remove the radical Islamist Jund al-Sham militia or prevent it from terrorizing the inhabitants. When the army finally deployed there several months ago, Jund al-Sham militants promptly seized control of a preschool and demanded financial compensation. Bahiya Hariri (Saad's aunt) paid off the militants (many of whom promptly relocated to Nahr al-Bared and joined Fatah al-Islam).

...For Hariri, political necessity dictates more than non-interference with Sunni radicals. With Shiites overwhelmingly backing Hezbollah's opposition to the government, he has little choice but to try and replicate Shiite assabiyya (group solidarity) among Sunnis. Thus, Hariri lavishly donated money to mainstream, nonviolent Sunni Islamist groups in Lebanon, such as Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), and turned a blind eye to the violent ones (Gambill, G. 2007, 'The Rise of Fatah al-Islam', *Mideast Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 1, June-July http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0705/0705_5.htm – Accessed 11 October 2007 – Attachment 2).

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