Al-Qaeda's Terrorist Threat to UNIFIL

June 2007

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On August 11, 2006, in response to the 34-day summer war between Israel and Hizb'allah, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1701, which called for a more robust international military presence along the United Nations-drawn Blue Line dividing Israel and southern Lebanon. But the strengthened United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is likely to face a range of security threats that could undermine its peacekeeping duties and endanger its personnel. Among the more serious threats, underscored by intelligence reports over the past few years that indicate a growing al-Qaeda presence in Lebanon, is a catastrophic terrorist attack against UNIFIL by local salafist jihadist entities.

UNIFIL IS WORRIED

Since its deployment, UNIFIL has publicly voiced concerns about a terrorist attack by al-Qaeda, not Hizb'allah, against its troops.[1] These legitimate concerns have been reinforced by stern (yet unsubstantiated) warnings issued by Lebanese, Israeli and Western officials about al-Qaeda's growing presence in Lebanon.[2] For UNIFIL, the ongoing violent clashes between al-Qaeda inspired Islamic militants and the Lebanese Army, which erupted May 20 in northern Lebanon, have only heightened its sense of insecurity.

Concerned about the safety of their troops, UNIFIL commanders do not have the necessary intelligence resources to protect against a terrorist attack. Lacking clear authority to engage in counterterrorism or intelligence gathering activities, UNIFIL is forced to rely on the cooperation of a relatively weak Lebanese security apparatus (whose competency is seriously hampered by the polarized political environment).[3] Yet without solid data and objective threat assessments supplied by its host state, UNIFIL has only official reports which are largely unreliable, unfocused assessments from UN headquarters in New York, and fiery statements by al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al Zawahiri, urging al-Qaeda allies in Lebanon to fight Security Council Resolution 1701.[4]

THE "OLD" THREAT OF SALAFIST MILITANCY

The surfacing of radical and militant Islamist ideology in Lebanon can be understood at the local level as a natural reaction to the Lebanese socio-political order. For Lebanon's

radical Islamists, the plural structure of Lebanese governance, which negated efforts by any one group to carry out state-imposed national assimilation policies, has always been a source of frustration and an obstacle to maximalist Islamic ideals and aspirations. On a regional or systemic level, the surfacing of Islamist militancy in the Middle East was non-coincidentally accompanied by a general identity crisis in Arab-Islamic society[5] and by a shared sense of humiliation resulting from the Arabs' successive military defeats to Israel. In Lebanon, this "identity crisis" was exacerbated by a 15 year-old civil war (1975-1990) which in large part pitted rightist Christians against leftist Muslims, and also by Israel's invasion and subsequent 18 year occupation of the southern part of the country (1982-2000). Today, Islamist militancy in Lebanon remains heavily affected by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the bloody sectarian war in Iraq pitting Sunni against Shi'ite Muslims.

Islamist militancy in Lebanon took a salafist twist in the early 1980s when local and foreign salafist jihadist leaders penetrated the generally non-violent Lebanese salafist community. Then, as now, the pool of recruits ranged from salafist believers who embraced militancy following a thorough process of ideological persuasion, to ordinary outlaws and alienated individuals with deep economic and political grievances but little care for Islamic thought.

Since its awakening in the early 1980s, salafist militancy in Lebanon was largely defensive and reflected the perceived severity of *local* crisis conditions. Historically, Palestinian refugee camps served as hotbeds for various manifestations of Islamic militancy. Systematic security crackdowns by the Lebanese authorities, large-scale foreign (particularly Israeli) aggression against Lebanon, and violent clashes with rival Islamist groups tended to awaken and mobilize the salafist jihadist current as a whole in defense of an Islamic order. Still, salafist militancy remained grounded in local realities and only marginally (if ever) connected to al-Qaeda's global Islamic insurgency.

Although sympathetic to one another, al-Qaeda's allies in Lebanon are not united under a single umbrella or organization. Salafist jihadists like Osbat al Ansar, Jund al Sham, the dismantled al Dinniyeh group, [6] the Qarun group, and the Majdal Anjar group have dissimilar agendas and are relatively small and clandestine semi-autonomous entities with informal organizational structures. Each is more concerned about its own survival than about waging an offensive jihad against "infidels." Some (such as Osbat al Ansar and Jund al Sham) are also divided along political lines. Importantly, these groups have faced constant recruitment challenges within the Lebanese Sunni community, whose solid majority is opposed to salafist jihadist ideology.

Arguably, however, this relatively benign profile of salafist militancy in Lebanon is no longer germane. The tectonic changes that have taken place in Lebanon and the region over the past four years have profoundly affected and perhaps redefined salafist militancy not only in Lebanon but in the region as a whole. In other words, we are looking today at a threat that is both more complex and diffuse than it was in the past.

THE "NEW" FACE OF SALAFIST MILITANCY

The US invasion of Iraq offered global terrorism a new base of operations as it opened doors for al-Qaeda in the Middle East.[7] Terrorism spread quickly inside Iraq and easily

found Arab recruits eager to fight American forces. Spilling over to neighboring countries, salafist militancy was poised to become a key threat to the stability of countries throughout the Middle East. Lebanon, the weakest link in the chain, was no exception.

The spillover effects of the war in Iraq, the resurfacing of political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon following the May 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops (an event itself triggered by the assassination three months earlier of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri), the 2006 war between Israel and Hizb'allah, and the Sunni perception of ascending Shi'ite and Iranian power in the region gave new life and meaning to the salafist jihadist current in Lebanon. The story is now that of Fatah al Islam, the latest manifestation of salafist militancy in Lebanon.

Until May of this year, few people had heard of Fatah al Islam. Its true identity[8] in fact remains controversial. While some observers point to its links with al-Qaeda, others, including Lebanese senior security officials, claim that it is no more than Damascus's latest invention to advance Syrian interests in Lebanon and derail the establishment of an international tribunal to try al Hariri's killers (though no smoking guns have emerged from the UN investigation, Syria remains the prime suspect).

Fatah al Islam surfaced in northern Lebanon in 2006 when it publicly claimed to have split from the Syrian-based Fatah Intifada, itself a 1980s splinter of the more mainstream Fatah, led by the late Yasser Arafat. Its origins are Palestinian but the majority of its Arab fighters and cadres, who number anywhere from 500 to 900, come from Iraq. The group also has a sizable Lebanese constituency, evidenced by the high number of Lebanese that have been captured and killed in the ongoing battle with the Lebanese Army. Having been ousted from the neighboring Baddawi camp by rival Palestinian forces, Fatah al Islam now resides in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al Bared.

To claim that Fatah al Islam is merely a Syrian tool is not only simplistic but counterproductive. With the wealth of information that has recently surfaced, Fatah al Islam's connections with al-Qaeda are verifiable and unmistakable. Three points stand out: one, it has repeatedly claimed to be inspired by al-Qaeda's worldview and ideology; two, it shares al-Qaeda's modus operandi; three, its leaders have long standing contacts with al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq and worldwide.

Fatah al Islam's particular links to al-Qaeda in Iraq can be traced to a statement issued by the "Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq" (which communicates its Iraq agenda with bin Laden, al Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda central staff members) in which it claimed to have exported its franchise to northern Lebanon[9] under the umbrella of this new salafist jihadist group.

According to press reports, Fatah al Islam's main leader is Shaqer al Absi, a Palestinian whom Jordanian officials insist is an associate of the late al-Qaeda emir in Iraq Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi. Along with al Zarqawi, Absi was tried in absentia in Jordan and sentenced to death for his role in the 2002 slaying of a US aid worker. He was also implicated in other planned terror plots in the Hashemite Kingdom. Around the time of the American official's death, Absi was jailed in Syria on charges of planning terrorist attacks inside that country; he was suspiciously released by the Syrian authorities in the fall. Born in 1955 to a poor Palestinian family in Ein Sultan, a village near the West Bank

town of Jericho, Absi joined the Fatah movement under Arafat at the age of 18. Fearing arrest amid tensions between Jordan and the Palestinian movement, which sought to topple the Jordanian king, Absi fled to Tunisia in the early 1970s. From Tunisia, he traveled to Libya where he became a professional air force pilot. He attended aviation courses in several East European countries, including East Germany, the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Months before the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Absi met and married a Palestinian girl in Lebanon. Today, he is is embroiled in a life or death battle against the Lebanese Army and threatening civilians with attacks throughout the country.

Absi's role notwithstanding, Fatah al Islam is a clandestine and fluid network of salafist jihadist fighters who do not necessarily see eye to eye on jihad related activities. Fatah al Islam's leadership and virtual organizational structure, as pointed out by Hazim al Amine, can be divided into three distinct layers[10]. Those who have been killed so far by the Lebanese Army come from the second tier and tend to have special combat skills (the Syrian Mehyeddine Abd al Hay; Aby Midyan, the leader of the cell which was behind the double attack on a bus in the Mountains above Beirut in March; and the Lebanese Saddam al Haj Deeb who was accused of participating in the attempted bombing of two trains in Germany). The first tier is managed by three obscure ideologues, one of whom is Muhammad Ali Omar (a.k.a. Abu Hattab and Abu Azzam) who, unlike Absi, has yet to make a public appearance. The third tier includes the scores of fighters now coming from Iraq (many of whom are Yemeni and Saudi) who have been serving as logistical facilitators, technical experts and recruiters in northern Lebanon.

Spokesmen for Fatah al Islam claim that the group's only objective is to protect the Sunnis of Lebanon and to reform the Palestinian refugee camps according to the Islamic code. Their true ambition however, like al-Qaeda's, is to create an Islamic insurgent force to liberate Jerusalem and other Muslim lands from the infidels. As Robert Fisk correctly wrote, the road to Jerusalem lies through the city of Tripoli.[11]

THE CURRENT THREAT: REAL BUT NOT IMMINENT

A *catastrophic* terrorist attack against UNIFIL by al-Qaeda inspired entities in Lebanon is real but not likely imminent. The very nature of the salafist jihadist movement in Lebanon plays against its ability to wage a durable insurgency or to plan a major attack against the international force. Random explosions (such as the recent ones in Beirut and elsewhere) near UNIFIL stations should be anticipated. These will affect UNIFIL's posture and morale, but should neither inflict heavy casualties nor cause serious harm to the troops. As argued earlier, UNIFIL may be ill-equipped to avert all attacks, but its current state of high alert and awareness due to the numerous threats it has been receiving lately[12] is unquestionably its best line of defense.

Meanwhile, despite recent statements made by al-Qaeda ideologues underscoring the utility of Lebanon as another battlefield against the West, the "al-Qaeda hardcore" has yet to unequivocally declare Lebanon a theater for major operations. For al-Qaeda's senior leadership, notwithstanding the many advantages the Lebanese battlefield offers to the Islamic insurgency in the Middle Eastern corridor (most importantly the geographical proximity to the Israeli-Palestinian theater in general and the spiritual significance of Jerusalem in particular), Lebanon is not currently a priority; Iraq is.

Given Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership position within al-Qaeda, the two messages[13] he issued on December 20, 2006 and February 13, 2007, in which he briefly addressed Lebanon and Security Council Resolution 1701, are worth exploring. The fact that al-Zawahiri, not bin Laden, issued the statements should not go unnoticed. Though an effective organizer and military tactician, al-Zawahiri lacks the prestige and charisma of his superior. Bin Laden is the icon and central rallying figure in the jihadists' fight against infidels worldwide. Statements issued by bin Laden and the principles he articulates resonate with Muslims worldwide; he is hailed throughout much of the Arab-Muslim world as the symbol of resistance to the enemies of Islam. This does not mean that any call for jihad issued by bin Laden is automatically obeyed and acted upon. That there is a correlation between al-Qaeda's leaders calling for attacks and their eventual execution is certain. What is uncertain however is how strong and automatic this correlation is.

It is impossible to know precisely why al-Qaeda's allies act only selectively upon their leaders' calls for jihad. It is safe to assume that answering bin Laden's call (or al-Zawahiri's) is largely contingent upon the local environment. If conditions permit, it is assumed, jihad is waged against the "infidels." If local circumstances are unfavorable, jihad is postponed (sometimes indefinitely). After all, launching a terrorist operation that has a good chance of succeeding requires extensive field work including intelligence gathering, surveillance, recruitment, financing and rehearsal, all of which are extremely difficult to carry out under conditions of tight scrutiny by the authorities.

In Lebanon, though Lebanese salafist jihadist entities may see bin Laden as a heroic figure symbolic of their collective struggle, they have their own leaders and often deeply parochial agendas; they do not necessarily feel compelled to subordinate themselves to bin Laden or al-Zawahiri. Moreover, salafist jihadists in Lebanon have not one but several enemies – the Lebanese government, Israel, Shi'ite and Christian groups, and UNIFIL – and with their limited resources, selection and prioritization of targets are key to their strategic posture.

It is also worth noting that the salafist jihadist scene in Lebanon has yet to produce a unifying leader of the stature of the late al Zarqawi in Iraq. While it has been circulated by Lebanese sources that the Emir of Bilad al Sham (who operates under the name of Abu Rushd al Miqati) is today present in Peshawar, is Lebanese and has fought in Iraq, and has extensive relations with salafist jihadist factions operating in Tripoli and Ein el Helweh, conclusive evidence remains inaccessible.

Sheikh Bilal Sha'ban, the current leader of *Harakat al Tawhid al Islami* (a Lebanese Sunni Islamist movement formed by Sheikh Sa'eed Sha'ban soon after the 1979 revolution in Iran) who admires bin Laden and al-Zawahiri but has strong reservations about their militant strategies, may have summed up the situation in Lebanon, and specifically the reluctance to engage in a military confrontation with UNIFIL, by stating the following:

> "*You can't consider the international troops as occupation forces...Osama bin Laden faced in Afghanistan the Soviet occupation followed by an American [occupation], and in Iraq he has confronted the American occupation, but in Lebanon, no occupation exists over all the territories such as in Iraq...International resolutions are not formulated to the benefit of the ummah, however I don't see al-Zawahiri's call to put down the resolution as realistic,*

despite our position against [Security Council Resolution] 1701; Sheikh Osama represents an intellectual school, however the citizens of Mecca know better of its customs [an Arab saying meaning "we know better what to do"], and it is us who will identify our national interests, and before we enter into a military confrontation we have to agree over who is the enemy and who are we fighting." [14]

Finally, it is extremely difficult to dissect the multiplicity of actors that arm and financially support the various salafist jihadist groups in Lebanon. Most of the weaponry that enters the Palestinian refugee camps is of Syrian origin. Funding also comes from the Arab Gulf, where wealthy individuals with close government links seek to shape the strategic environment and balance of (communal) power in the region.

PRECIPITANT FACTORS

For salafist jihadists in Lebanon, there are several events (called precipitants) which might change the current calculation and focus attention on a terrorist operation against UNIFIL. As background to this assessment, the authors interviewed two Lebanese militants whose thoughts are offered here to illuminate the thinking of one segment of the salafist jihadist current. [15] Needless to say, the ideas expressed by these individuals should not be interpreted as either binding or representative of the disparate views of the salafist jihadist current in Lebanon as a whole.

In order of magnitude, the following precipitants were communicated to the authors: first, the killing or capture of bin Laden;[16] second, the convening, under Chapter 7 of the United Nations (UN) Charter, of an international tribunal to try the killers of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri;[17] third, the loss of Iraq as an operational base for al-Qaeda in the Middle East; and fourth, the defeat of al-Qaeda in the global war on terror in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

THREAT CONTAINMENT AND ELIMINATION

Finding a permanent solution to the threat of salafist militancy in Lebanon will ultimately require a careful understanding of its complex root causes. As cliché as it sounds, there is no military solution to al-Qaeda's growing presence in Lebanon. Any winning strategy aimed at solving the problem of al-Qaeda in all its dimensions must combine both hard and soft measures, with an emphasis on the latter. Lebanon's most potent antidote to extremist and militant ideology is a socio-economic vision rooted in policies of balanced development. Building solid state presence and capacity in relatively deprived regions of the country is fundamental. Such an approach, as crafted and implemented by responsible elites, will very much help to deny al-Qaeda additional Lebanese recruits and foot soldiers. Concomitantly, al-Qaeda should be denied safe havens in Lebanon. Such havens include several relatively isolated northern and southern regions – Majdal Anjar, Qarun, Arqoub, Tripoli and Sidon. Meanwhile, no durable solution to the problem of al-Qaeda in Lebanon can be achieved without seriously addressing the armed Palestinian presence inside the refugee camps. This continues to be a huge challenge for the Lebanese state. For decades, all salafist jihadist activity in Lebanon has been linked to the camps in one way or another. There is today an apparent consensus among the main Lebanese political factions to refuse weapons to Palestinians *outside* the camps and to supervise the regulation of weapons *inside* the camps. Whether a genuine and transparent dialogue and a solution to this sensitive issue

will emerge from recent developments – such as the ongoing dialogue between the Lebanese government and the Palestinians – is questionable at the moment. Yet, the mere fact that a Lebanese-Palestinian discourse has opened up should be seen as a step in the right direction, one which could further lead to negotiations on alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people by providing them with basic civil needs, rights and liberties. Obviously, the Palestinian refugee problem in Lebanon (and in other countries in the region) is intrinsically linked to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, only a comprehensive and lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will bring about a definitive solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To secure UNIFIL today, the following near-term recommendations should be considered by the UN and participating sovereign nations, in consultation and coordination with the Lebanese government including its security and military institutions:

- o *Engage Syria (while preserving Lebanese sovereignty and independence) with the intention of securing its cooperation in providing intelligence regarding arms smuggling and human trafficking along the Lebanese-Syrian borders.[18]*

- o *Seek the cooperation of Hizb'allah, whose human and technical intelligence assets are essential to ensuring UNIFIL's security.[19]*

- o *Improve surveillance, albeit intelligently and without provocation, around Palestinian refugee camps.[20]*

- o *Ensure UNIFIL personnel's physical security by maximizing the distance between potential terrorists and inhabited UNIFIL buildings and barracks and by equipping UNIFIL personnel with intrusion detection systems, a mass notification system, automated entry control equipment, cargo inspection devices (including under-vehicle inspection devices), modern communications equipment, delay and denial technology (including fences, barriers and locks), explosives detection and explosive ordnance disposal devices (including hand-held and static), and unattended ground sensors.*

- o *Adequately finance the budget of the Lebanese Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) since it is the most capable public counter-terrorism institution in the country.[21]*

- o *Earn the trust of local communities in the South for the purpose of securing their human intelligence cooperation. Ensure their protection and welfare and convince them that UNIFIL's job is limited to monitoring the cease fire and keeping the peace, not disarming Hizb'allah.*

CONCLUSIONS

The terrorist threat to UNIFIL posed by al-Qaeda affiliated entities in Lebanon is not likely imminent and should not be exaggerated. It is nevertheless real and, contrary to what Lebanese officials continue to claim, *uncaused* by Syria. This hardly means that Damascus is innocent from what is taking place in northern Lebanon. Syria's lack of real cooperation on arms smuggling and human trafficking along the Lebanese-Syrian borders seriously undermines any efforts aimed at fighting salafist jihadism in Lebanon. There is no doubt that salafist militancy in Lebanon, fueled locally by harsh living conditions and regionally by continuing bloodshed in Iraq, is gradually but surely growing. If Lebanese officials do not swiftly and seriously deal with the spread of salafist jihadism in their country, it is only a matter of time before this violent movement solidifies, finds new leaders, and reaches organizational maturity, at which point it would be much harder to contain and eliminate. The Lebanese Army's battle with Fatah al Islam is likely to come to an end soon, but Lebanon's war with al-Qaeda has just started.

Endnotes:

[1] The head of Spain's military contingent in Lebanon, Colonel Luis Melendez, has underscored his concern about the threat posed by a foreign organization, such as al-Qaeda, to his troops (see *Agence France Presse*, September 19, 2006). Also, former commander of the UNIFIL mission, French General Alain Pelligrini, in an interview with Italian newspaper *La Republica* on December 20, 2006, said that "the threat issued by al-Qaeda is to be taken seriously. We have stepped up security measures so as to protect the Blue Helmets against any attacks." (See *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, December 21, 2006).

[2] On December 20, 2006, Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema warned of a risk of an attack by al-Qaeda against UNIFIL. "It is right to warn the UN contingent about the risks, because the risks are real," he said (see *Associated Press*, December 20, 2006). Later on January 9, 2007, Israeli military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that "dozens, if not hundreds, of al-Qaeda operatives arrived in Lebanon. These operatives are trained and have terror knowledge." Yadlin added: "those who can be harmed by al-Qaeda operatives are UNIFIL and Western interests in Lebanon (see *Yadiot Ahronot*, January 10, 2007). Recently on February 8, 2006, Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr warned that there were intelligence reports of possible attacks being planned against UNIFIL. "We have information on threats against UNIFIL," Murr said in an interview with the privately owned Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) (see *Associated Press*, February 8, 2006).

[3] On a general level, the convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel is extremely vague in its articles 7,9,11, and 12. The term "terrorist attack" does not even feature in the document; instead there are general laws and regulations aimed at preventing and dealing with crimes against UN personnel. See http://www.un.org/law/cod/safety.htm

[4] On December 20, 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the second man in al-Qaeda, issued a statement urging his followers to fight Security Council Resolution 1701 (see *Agence France Presse*, December 20, 2006). Later on February 13, 2007, al-Zawahiri issued a similar audio statement also urging Lebanon's Muslims to reject Security Council Resolution 1701 (visit Al Jazeera.net, February 13, 2007, at http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/2EDF40EC-6133-473C-9C1B-3526932E1DEE.htm)

[5] The crisis of individual and collective identity among Muslims stems from the progressive decline of the global Islamic community (the *ummah*) which felt it was losing the ideological and civilizational battle to the West and its respective system of beliefs.

[6] The al Dinniyeh group is attempting to regroup in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el Helweh under the leadership of Ahmad Miqati.

[7] See Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back", *Foreign Affairs*, (May/June 2007), p. 27.

[8] See the SITE Institute's report on November 29, 2006 titled "Fatah al-Islam announces their split from Fatah at the Nahr al Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp in Northern Lebanon" online at http://siteinstitute.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=publications230506&Category=publications&Subcategory=0

[9] *Al Akhbar*, April 28, 2007.

[10] *Al Arabiyah*, May 23, 2007.

[11] *The Independent,* May 25, 2007.

[12] Fatah al Islam spokesperson Abu Salim Taha has accused UNIFIL of shelling the group from the sea in support of the Lebanese Army and has threatened to retaliate against the international force. UNIFIL has categorically denied such accusations.

[13] In his first message al-Zawahiri said: "....all the UN resolutions that have taken parts of it, and recognized Israel's presence on it, starting with the partition resolution to Resolution 1701 are all null and void, and, in the balance of Islam, are worthless. We should reject, renounce and fight these resolutions. We should not take hesitant positions towards these resolutions by saying that we will respect and acknowledge them as a fact of life, and other such statements that would squander the Muslim's rights. Recognizing these resolutions implies the recognition of the Hebrew state." And in his second message he said: "I call on the brothers of Islam and of jihad [struggle] in Lebanon not to yield to resolution 1701 and not to accept ... the presence of international and Crusader [Western] forces in south Lebanon."

[14] *Al Akhbar*, September 28, 2006.

[15] Interview between the authors and two militants who are former members of an established Lebanese Sunni Islamist movement. Both fighters, who spoke on condition of anonymity, now live in the Nahr al Bared refugee camp and are close to salafist jihadist circles.

[16] Attacking UNIFIL would constitute, in the interviewed militants' mindset, the "perfect revenge."

[17] The argument made was that further internationalization of the Lebanese crisis could only mean further submission to a US-dominated regional system, which must be fought at all cost.

[18] This is the toughest nut to crack. The authors believe that a long term solution to al-Qaeda's growing presence in Lebanon is extremely hard to attain without Syria's cooperation on the Syrian-Lebanese border. The Syrian government has recently said that it has "real hard knowledge" about the presence of al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Lebanon and that it is prepared to share it with the United States. Syrian Cabinet member Amr Salem was also quoted saying that his government was ready to mediate discussions on Iraq between the United States and Iran. At this stage, it is almost impossible to judge the authenticity of Syria's claims. It is not illogical to interpret Syria's proposal as a threat or reminder by Damascus that it still holds the key to stability in Lebanon, and that it remains the main player in the region capable of curbing militant Islamism. Nevertheless, assuming that Syria's proposal is valid, what will Damascus ask in return for its cooperation on such essential demands? Syria has already balked at the suggestion that UN peacekeepers could be deployed along its border with Lebanon. Ultimately, when it comes to defiant and proud states like Syria, the challenge is to find the right mixture of incentives and penalties that will induce cooperation.

[19] As unpleasant or irrational it might seem to Western officials, it is a fact that Hizb'allah's extensive intelligence repertoire in the South can considerably help UNIFIL avert a terrorist attack against it.

[20] It would seem rational for a salafist jihadist group to plan for future terrorist attacks in an area where Lebanese law enforcement agencies have little or no access. The Palestinian refugee camps of Nahr al-Bared and Ein el Helweh are perfect though not the only sites for planning a terrorist operation.

[21] Post-Syria Lebanon must embark on a serious and holistic process of security sector restructuring. For nearly fifteen post-war years, the Damascus-controlled Lebanese security sector arguably served as a structural impediment to Lebanese freedom and human development. Syrian intervention forced the Lebanese state to strategically marginalize all local forces that were capable of change or influence. Indeed, during Syrian presence, Lebanese political society suffered from repressive action and intimidation. Restoring the integrity, credibility, and effectiveness of the Lebanese security apparatus is of vital importance to the future security and stability of the country. As yet, the Lebanese government's short term

measures have been deficient at best. They have not only failed to prevent the occurrence of additional assassinations and security incidents in the country, but have also fallen short of a wider security reform approach. However, given how sensitive and politically loaded the task of Lebanese security restructuring is, the process could take forever. To efficiently start curbing the spread of al-Qaeda in Lebanon today, the Lebanese government should efficiently use the military aid it is receiving from the United States and the international community to supplement the budget of the MID. Despite its limited funds, small staff, and very old technical equipment, the MID is the most experienced and capable counter-terrorism public institution in the country. Trained by the Syrian military intelligence services since 1976, the MID has been able to foil numerous terrorist plots in Lebanon over the years. In sum, the MID, which falls under the authority of the Minister of Defense, himself supervised by the collegial body of the Council of Ministers, should be at least temporarily at the forefront of any local counter-terrorism campaign.