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Under pressure, Palestinian groups take on Al Qaeda

A firefight in a Palestinian refugee camp this week left at least two people dead.

By Nicholas Blanford | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

AIN AL-HILWEH REFUGEE CAMP, LEBANON - The US war on terror has won some unlikely – and unintentional – allies in this teeming Palestinian refugee camp. Several Palestinian groups, including some classified as terrorist organizations by the United States, have agreed among themselves to confront a tiny band of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist rebels.

In the wake of the worst fighting this volatile camp has seen in 10 years, fighters from the Fatah faction of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are set to storm the rebels' stronghold in Ain al-Hilweh unless the Islamists hand themselves over to the Lebanese authorities. It will be the first time that Fatah has directly taken on Al Qaeda terrorists since the "war on terror" began.

The 10 to 15 Islamist rebels have been hiding in Ain al-Hilweh since the Lebanese Army crushed an Islamic rebellion in the mountainous Dinnieh district of northern Lebanon in January 2000.

The so-called Dinnieh insurgents, who face lengthy prison sentences and possibly the death penalty at the hands of the Lebanese, have so far refused to surrender themselves, and a showdown looks imminent.

The crisis peaked Tuesday when a group of Dinnieh rebels attacked a checkpoint manned by Fatah fighters. The 45-minute gun battle left at least two people dead and seven wounded.

For Khaled Aref, the head of Fatah in the camp, this was the last straw. "We have no choice but to get rid of these people," he says. "The nationalist and Islamic forces in the camp are united in condemning the attack and in wanting these people turned over to the Lebanese authorities." He adds that Arafat has given instructions that force should be used against the Dinnieh rebels if they refuse to surrender.

The confrontation between the Palestinian groups and the Dinnieh insurgents shows how some Islamic groups have reassessed their priorities and loyalties since Sept. 11. In the months following the attacks, Mideast states, including Lebanon, have been under pressure from the US to combat Al Qaeda militants operating within their borders.

Thus, under pressure from the Lebanese government, the camp's Palestinian factions have concluded that there is no alternative but to deal with the Dinnieh militants once and for all, even if it means bloodshed.

Five of the 13 Palestinian groups represented in Ain al-Hilweh are Islamic. Though they have little reason to aid the US in its international hunt for members of Al Qaeda, Islamic organizations recognize that it does not serve their interests to defend the Dinnieh rebels.

The group Esbat al-Ansar, however, once supported the Dinnieh rebels and follows the same Islamic ideology as Osama bin Laden. But the new realities brought about by the fallout from the "war on terror" appear to have persuaded the group's leaders to switch sides to save themselves from the destruction faced by their former Islamist allies.

With some 70,000 residents, Ain al-Hilweh is the largest of 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The Lebanese government has no jurisdiction over the Palestinian camps.

Instead, Lebanese troops man tightly controlled checkpoints at the entrances. "Until now, sending the Army into Ain al-Hilweh is not a possibility," says Lebanese Defense Minister Khalil Hrawi. "We hope we will not arrive at a military conflict between the different Palestinian factions, because this situation will only serve Israel."

In fact, the Lebanese government stands to gain either way. Few tears will be shed by the Lebanese if the insurgents are killed in a showdown with the Palestinian factions. On the other hand, if the Dinnieh rebels are turned over to the Lebanese authorities, intelligence on Al Qaeda may be gathered which could help curry favor with the US.

"This is an opportunity for the government that they won't want to miss," says Michael Young, a Lebanese political analyst.

Lebanon and Syria disagree with the US on what constitutes terrorism. Both countries support hardline anti-Israel groups, which appear on American terrorist lists, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Lebanese Hizbullah organization, arguing that they resist Israeli occupation.

But the Lebanese and Syrians have no sympathy for the extremist brand of Islam practiced by Mr. bin Laden and his followers. The Syrians, in particular, have earned some guarded praise from Washington for passing on intelligence information on Al Qaeda.

The Jamaat al Nour group, which is offering sanctuary to the Dinnieh rebels, has vowed to transform "not only the camp but the whole of Lebanon into a pool of blood" if the insurgents are killed or arrested. The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli is a stronghold of extremist Sunni Muslims, some of whom would sympathize with the plight of the Dinnieh insurgents. Analysts, however, say the violence would probably be contained by Lebanese and Syrian forces.

Key factions in the Ain al-Hilweh conflict

Fatah. Headed by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. It is the most powerful faction in Ain al-Hilweh, and seeks an independent Palestinian state.

Esbat al-Ansar. A radical Sunni Muslim group that once received funds from emissaries of Osama bin Laden. Supported the Dinnieh rebels in their confrontation with the Lebanese Army. A leadership change appears to have moderated the group's tone. The group's goal is to spread its version of Islam.

Jamaat al Nour. The Group of the Light, a hard-line splinter from Esbat al-Ansar that is protecting the Dinnieh insurgents. Considers Fatah and other groups seeking to hand the Dinnieh rebels over to the Lebanese to be infidels and has sworn to fight any attempt to oust them from the camp. The group has no formal goal or agenda beyond supporting the militant Islam of bin Laden.

Other groups in the camp include Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and the Al Aqsa Brigades.

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