



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice Lebanon

Lebanon – LBN36323 – Assoun –
Christians – Islamist groups – Al Takfir
Wal Hijra – Ahmed Fatfat
10 March 2010

1. Were there incidents of attacks by Muslim groups on Assoun in 1975 and 1981, particularly driving Christians out of the village?

No reports of attacks on Assoun in either 1975 or 1981 were located. The only reports found of attacks on Assoun were those describing the confrontation between Islamic militant group Takfir wa al-Hijra and the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) in late 1999-early 2000, as outlined in previous research response *LBN36172*.¹

It is noteworthy, however, that in 1975 civil war broke out in Lebanon, resulting in violence between various armed militias spreading throughout the country, including to the Northern governorate in which Assoun is located. The civil war was still underway in 1981. It is thus possible that fighting in the region may have affected the village of Assoun and any Christians living there in 1975 and/or 1981.

The following information is divided into three sections: 1975 and Civil War in Lebanon; Violence in the Northern governorate – 1975; and Violence in the Northern governorate – 1981.

1975 and Civil War in Lebanon

In April 1975 civil war broke out in Lebanon following a series of violent incidents and retaliatory attacks between Christians and Palestinians in Beirut. The violence gradually spread from Beirut to most parts of the country.²

The incidents in Beirut that sparked the 1975 civil war occurred between Phalangist (right wing, predominantly Maronite Christian supporters of the Lebanese Social Democratic Party)³ and Palestinian militiamen.⁴ The groups that came to constitute the two sides of the civil war, however, did not present a simple Christian-Muslim split. The Lebanese Front comprised groups in favour of maintaining the status quo in Lebanon, including the militias of various Maronite clans and religious orders. The Lebanese National Movement included groups desiring change in the country, and included a variety of militias from leftist organisations, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Muslim militias.⁵

¹ Country Advice and Information Services 2010, *Research Response LBN36172*, 2 March – Attachment 1

² US Department of State 2009, *Background note: Lebanon*, January – Attachment 2

³ 'Phalange Party' in Collelo, Thomas (ed.) 1987, *Lebanon: A Country Study*, US Library of Congress website, <http://countrystudies.us/lebanon/85.htm> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 3

⁴ US Department of State 2009, *Background note: Lebanon*, January – Attachment 2

⁵ United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2008, *Lebanon: Country Profile*, 25 November – Attachment 4

Violence in the Northern governorate – 1975

Several newspaper articles were located describing violence in the north of Lebanon in 1975, largely in and around Tripoli and the town of Zgharta, both of which are located adjacent to the district containing Assoun.

A 10 September 1975 article in the *New York Times* reported that for several days a force of 3000 armed Muslims had targeted a force of 2000 Christians holding hills and villages east of Tripoli.⁶ An article in the *New York Times* the following day reports on fighting between Tripoli-based Muslims and Christians from Zgharta. The report states that 100 people had been killed as a result of nine days of fighting between the groups. The article also reports on an outburst of violence close to the Syrian border in the north.⁷

An article dated 14 September 1975 published in the *Chicago Tribune* states that eight people had been killed the previous night in machine gun and grenade fights in Tripoli; 10 more had died in conflicts in the Akkar region (also in the Northern governorate) and 500 families had fled across the border into Syria. The article also mentions the problem of private armies committing acts of violence, such as the murder of three Maronite priests in the north.⁸

An October 20 Article from *Time Magazine* reported on the fighting in Zgharta and a Muslim attack on a Christian village in the north of Lebanon resulting in 15 deaths and the destruction of 40 houses.⁹

The Muslim governor of northern Lebanon was assassinated in December 1975, according to a *Chicago Tribune* article from 21 December; the article also reports on continuing fighting between Christian and Muslim groups in Zgharta.¹⁰ This is corroborated by a December 23 article from the *New York Times* reporting that Muslim militiamen in Tripoli continued to exchange mortar and rocket fire with Christians of nearby villages.¹¹

Searches were also conducted for violence in the Northern governorate in 1976. In 1976 Syria entered the civil war under the pretext of defending the Christian right (however, from 1978 Syrian forces switched sides as the Christian right allied with Israel)¹², marking the addition of 30,000 troops and their artillery and tanks to the conflict.¹³ A number of articles were located that report continuing violence in the north of Lebanon.¹⁴ A 21 January report from the *New York Times*, for example, reports that “Lebanese Moslems and some Palestinian guerrilla forces...besieged or captured a number of towns and villages in the north, east and south”, and that “in the northern Akkar region...Moslem

⁶ Markham, James M. 1975, ‘Shift is Rumoured in Lebanese Army’, *New York Times*, September 10, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 7

⁷ Markham, James M. 1975, ‘Strife Eases in North Lebanon as Army Moves In’, *New York Times*, September 12, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 5

⁸ ‘Gun battles in Lebanon leave 123 dead, 250 wounded’ 1975, *Chicago Tribune*, 14 September, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 6

⁹ ‘Lebanon: Bloody Round 4 in Beirut’ 1975, *Time*, 20 October

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,946564,00.html> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 13

¹⁰ ‘Slaying of Moslem politician perils Lebanon case-fire’ 1975, *Chicago Tribune*, 21 December, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 8

¹¹ ‘Lebanese Leaders Meet With Syrians Over Crisis’ 1975, *New York Times*, 23 December, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 9

¹² ‘Lebanon’s Fifteen-Year War 1975-1990’ 1990, *Middle East Report*, pp. 23-25, RRT Library General Papers – Attachment 18

¹³ See Fisk, Robert 1992, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 81-91 – Attachment 19, for an account of Syria’s entry into the Lebanese civil war.

¹⁴ See ‘Palestinians Move in Lebanese Clash’ 1976, *New York Times*, 7 March, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 10; Sijazi, Ihsan A. 1976, ‘Clashes in North Reported by Christians in Lebanon’, *New York Times*, 22 August, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 11;

gunmen have been seizing government buildings, attacking security police posts and breaking into prisons...”.¹⁵

1975 was a particularly violent year for Lebanon generally as civil war began and conflict spread through the country. The information above demonstrates that fighting did occur in 1975 in various parts of the Northern governorate in which Assoun is located, and that the violence continued into the following year. While reports of attacks targeting Assoun in 1975 were not located, given the context of civil war and the various conflicts taking place in the Northern governorate, it is possible that the village may have been affected by or involved in the fighting.

Violence in the Northern governorate – 1981

Articles located from 1981 on the conflict in Lebanon illustrate continuing pressure from both internal militias and their external, foreign supporters in the Northern governorate (and many other areas). An April 17 article from the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, reports on the prevention of a major Israeli military incursion into northern Lebanon.¹⁶ A December 11 article from the *New York Times* reports that the north of Lebanon had been bombed and raided by gunmen, leaving 21 people dead and 60 wounded. The article also reports on continuing violence in Tripoli and on a raid in a town with a mixed Christian-Muslim population near the Syrian border, in which members of three families were killed and a building was blown up. The article does not identify which groups were responsible for the violent incidents.¹⁷

Searches were also conducted for reports of violence in the Northern governorate in 1982. Articles located indicated that the area continued to experience violence clashes and incidents between the various warring factions taking part in the civil war. An August 18 article from the *New York Times* reports on fears in Northern Lebanon that citizens would be caught in the middle of an anticipated drive by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the north. The article reports that Israeli armoured detachments were “deployed deep in northern Lebanon”. Further, PLO troops were reported to have been stationed in the Zgharta area by Syrian forces without logistical support, resulting in the troops soliciting help from villagers. The article reports that many residents were fleeing, fearing an Israeli attack.¹⁸ A 10 September article, also from the *New York Times*, reported that growing numbers of armed Palestinians were filtering into northern Lebanon from Syria and the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, heightening fears of further violence.¹⁹

The information above demonstrates that as the civil war progressed in 1981 and 1982, so too did violence in the Northern governorate. While reports of attacks directly targeting Assoun were not located, it is possible that the village was affected by the various conflicts in the area in 1981.

¹⁵ Markham, James M. 1976, ‘Strife in Lebanon Worsens as Town Falls to Moslems’, *New York Times*, 21 January, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 12

¹⁶ ‘Israelis pound foes in air, sea attacks’ 1981, *Chicago Tribune*, 17 April, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 14

¹⁷ ‘Around the World: 21 Killed, 60 Wounded in North Lebanon Unrest’ 1981, *New York Times*, 11 December, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 15

¹⁸ Howe, Marvine 1982, ‘North Lebanon Fears Israeli Drive’, *New York Times*, 20 August, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 16

¹⁹ Campbell, Colin 1982, ‘Northern Lebanese Residents Are Fearful of More Violence’, *New York Times*, 10 September, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers – Attachment 17

2. Please provide any information on the group Al Tefkir Wal Hijra and attacks they make on Christians?

Al Takfir Wal Hijra (also *Takfir wa al-Hijra*, *Takfir wal Hijra*)²⁰ is a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist group that originated in Egypt in the 1960s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹ Its name means “redemption and dawn of Islam” or “excommunication and exile”²², and refers partly to the group’s core belief that almost all Muslims are non-believers because society has gone astray.²³ The group adheres to a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam, that requires its followers to purify the world of infidels, and those considered heretics. This includes Arabs and Muslims who are considered not to be living in accordance with true Islam.²⁴ *Al Takfir Wal Hijra* is more a radical ideology than a formal organisation. There is no overarching central structure or single leader.²⁵ The group has factions in Europe and North Africa as well as the Middle East.²⁶

Takfir Wal-Hijra was active in Lebanon in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was based in the Dinnieh area in northeast Lebanon and was accused by the government as being responsible for a series of bomb attacks against western targets in Beirut and Tripoli.²⁷ It was also accused of mounting a number of attacks against the Lebanese army in the early 2000s.²⁸ According the online journal *al Nakhlah*, the group also took credit for the killings of Christian civilians in the Dinnieh area.²⁹

In late 1999 and early 2000 the group clashed with the Lebanese army in the village of Assoun. This incident is described in more detail in Research Response *LBN36172*.³⁰ A Reuters article reports a further clash between the group and the Lebanese army near

²⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *LBN42851.FE – Lebanon: The Islamic group called Takfir wa al-Hijra or Hijra wa Takfir, including its geographical location, its activities and treatment of its members by the government authorities; whether there are factions or members of this group in the Lebanese community in Latin America (2000 – July 2004)*, 23 July – Attachment 20

²¹ Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, ‘National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra’, *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 21. The Muslim Brotherhood was a religio-political organization founded in 1928 in Egypt that advocated a return to the *Qur’ān* and the *Hadith*. For a summary of the group’s aims and history, see ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ 2010, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 9 March <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/399387/Muslim-Brotherhood> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 32

²² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *LBN42851.FE – Lebanon: The Islamic group called Takfir wa al-Hijra or Hijra wa Takfir, including its geographical location, its activities and treatment of its members by the government authorities; whether there are factions or members of this group in the Lebanese community in Latin America (2000 – July 2004)*, 23 July – Attachment 20

²³ ‘Violent “Takfiri” Groups are back’ 2007, *Political Islam Online*, 12 October <http://politicalislam.org/Articles/PI%20511%20-%20Violent%20Takfir%20Groups%20are%20back.pdf> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 22

²⁴ Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, ‘National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra’, *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 21

²⁵ Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, ‘National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra’, *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 21

²⁶ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *LBN42851.FE – Lebanon: The Islamic group called Takfir wa al-Hijra or Hijra wa Takfir, including its geographical location, its activities and treatment of its members by the government authorities; whether there are factions or members of this group in the Lebanese community in Latin America (2000 – July 2004)*, 23 July – Attachment 20

²⁷ Blanford, Nicholas 2003, ‘Lebanon targets Islamic radicals’, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0520/p06s02-wome.html> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 25

²⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *LBN42851.FE – Lebanon: The Islamic group called Takfir wa al-Hijra or Hijra wa Takfir, including its geographical location, its activities and treatment of its members by the government authorities; whether there are factions or members of this group in the Lebanese community in Latin America (2000 – July 2004)*, 23 July – Attachment 20

²⁹ Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, ‘National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra’, *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 21

³⁰ Country Advice and Information Services 2010, *Research Response LBN36172*, 2 March – Attachment 1

Tripoli in 2000, in which 40 people were killed³¹. A number of the organisation's members were jailed subsequent to this incident but, according to a *Socialist Worker* report, were released in 2005 in an attempt by the Lebanese government to counterbalance Hizbollah's growing popularity.³²

As noted in Research Response *LBN36172*³³, *Al Takfir Wal Hijra* target non-Muslims and Muslims alike, both in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries. In Lebanon the group targeted Christian pilgrims but also fought to overthrow Syrian and Lebanese governments.³⁴

3. What information do you have on Ahmed Fatfat and his involvement with Al Tefkir Wal Hijra and attacks on Christians?

Ahmed Fatfat is a Lebanese politician, most recently elected as one of the Future Movement's candidate for the Department of Menyah- El Dannieh. According to his website (accessed at: <http://AhmadFatfat.com>), since 1996 he has served as an MP for the Northern governorate, as a member of a variety of Parliamentary Committees, as interim Minister of the Interior and Municipalities (2006) and as Minister of Youth and Sports.³⁵ Fatfat is a Sunni Muslim³⁶ and has claimed that to have received death threats from Syria in the aftermath of the assassination of several anti-Syrian figures in 2005-2006.³⁷

No information was located linking Ahmed Fatfat with *Al Tefkir Wal Hijra*.

Fatfat was criticised for legalising a pro-caliphate Sunni Islamist organisation while acting as Minister of Interior. The group, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Liberation Party), states its aim as to "lead the ummah [Islamic community] into a struggle with kufr [infidels], its systems and its thoughts so that Islam encapsulates the world".³⁸ It espouses anti-Shiite ideas and is outlawed in nearly every state in the Middle East.³⁹ In an article published in July 2006, David Schenker of the Washington Institute claims that the legalisation of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in Lebanon was part of a trend toward increased Sunni radicalism in the country. However, it is noteworthy that Minister Fatfat legalised the group along with 10 other groups wishing to gain status as legitimate 'political organisations' including the Lebanese Peace Party, Nature Party, and Reform Party. In response to criticisms of his decision Fatfat's press office released a statement, saying "It's not possible for freedom and

³¹ Perry, Tom 2007, 'North Lebanon fertile ground for Sunni militants', *Reuters*, 13 June <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL13858058> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 24

³² Makarem, Ghassan 2007, 'Lebanon crisis: Refugees attacked as right wing militias stalk the streets', *Socialist Worker*, No. 2053, 2 June <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=11790> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 23

³³ Country Advice and Information Services 2010, *Research Response LBN36172*, 2 March – Attachment 1

³⁴ Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, 'National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra', *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 21; see also UK Home Office 2006, *Country of Origin Information Report – The Lebanon*, July, pp.100-101 – Attachment 26

³⁵ 'Dr. Ahmad Fatfat's Political Background' 2009, AhmadFatfat.com <http://ahmadfatfat.com/political-background> – Accessed 10 March 2010 – Attachment 27

³⁶ Hourany, Youssef 2005, *Minister Ahmed Fatfat: Lebanon needs its youths to be reborn*, AsiaNews website, 8 November <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/About-us-127.html> – Accessed 8 March 2010 – Attachment 28

³⁷ 'Anchor gloats at Lebanon killing' 2007, *BBC News*, 15 June

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6755913.stm – Accessed 8 March 2010 – Attachment 29; McLeod,

Hugh 2007, 'Lebanon: Climate of fear after killing of Lebanon MP', *Guardian*, 21 September – Attachment 30

³⁸ Schenker, David 2006, *Lebanon: One Year after the Cedar revolution, the potential for Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 June – Attachment 31

³⁹ Schenker, David 2006, *Lebanon: One Year after the Cedar revolution, the potential for Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 June – Attachment 31

democracy to be partial or discretionary”.⁴⁰ It is possible that Fatfat may be perceived by some as sympathetic to militant Sunni groups because of his treatment of *Hizb ut-Tahir*.

Attachments

1. Country Advice and Information Services 2010, *Research Response LBN36172*, 2 March.
2. US Department of State 2009, *Background note: Lebanon*, January. (CISNET Lebanon CX224649)
3. ‘Phalange Party’ in Collelo, Thomas (ed.) 1987, *Lebanon: A Country Study*, US Library of Congress website, <http://countrystudies.us/lebanon/85.htm> - Accessed 10 March 2010.
4. United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2008, *Lebanon: Country Profile*, 25 November. (CISNET Lebanon CX223766)
5. Markham, James M. 1975, ‘Strife Eases in North Lebanon as Army Moves In’, *New York Times*, September 12, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
6. ‘Gun battles in Lebanon leave 123 dead, 250 wounded’ 1975, *Chicago Tribune*, 14 September, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
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10. ‘Palestinians Move in Lebanese Clash’ 1976, *New York Times*, 7 March, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
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<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,946564,00.html> - Accessed 10 March 2010.
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⁴⁰ Schenker, David 2006, *Lebanon: One Year after the Cedar revolution, the potential for Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 June – Attachment 31

16. Howe, Marvine 1982, 'North Lebanon Fears Israeli Drive', *New York Times*, 20 August, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
17. Campbell, Colin 1982, 'Northern Lebanese Residents Are Fearful of More Violence', *New York Times*, 10 September, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
18. 'Lebanon's Fifteen-Year War 1975-1990' 1990, *Middle East Report*, pp.23-25. (RRT Library General Papers)
19. Fisk, Robert 1992, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 81-91.
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21. Gleis, Joshua L. 2005, 'National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra', *al Nakhlah*, Article 3, Spring http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/aln/aln_spring05/aln_spring05c.pdf – Accessed 10 March 2010.
22. 'Violent "Takfiri" Groups are back' 2007, *Political Islam Online*, 12 October <http://politicalislam.org/Articles/PI%20511%20-%20Violent%20Takfir%20Groups%20are%20back.pdf> – Accessed 10 March 2010.
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26. UK Home Office 2006, *Country of Origin Information Report – The Lebanon*, July, pp.100-101.
27. 'Dr. Ahmad Fatfat's Political Background' 2009, *AhmadFatfat.com* <http://ahmadfatfat.com/political-background> – Accessed 10 March 2010.
28. Hourany, Youssef 2005, *Minister Ahmed Fatfat: Lebanon needs its youths to be reborn*, AsiaNews website, 8 November <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/About-us-127.html> – Accessed 8 March 2010.
29. 'Anchor gloats at Lebanon killing' 2007, *BBC News*, 15 June http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6755913.stm – Accessed 8 March 2010.
30. 'Lebanon: Climate of fear after killing of Lebanon MP', *Guardian*, 21 September. (CISNET Lebanon CX185430)

31. Schenker, David 2006, *Lebanon: One Year after the Cedar revolution, the potential for Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 June. (CISNET Lebanon CX156555)
32. 'Muslim Brotherhood' 2010, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 9 March <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/399387/Muslim-Brotherhood> – Accessed 10 March 2010.