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Responses to Information Requests

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Lebanon: Asbat al-Ansar, including leaders, areas of influence, recruitment, and activities; relationship of the group with the government (2011-April 2014)

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1. Background

Asbat al-Ansar is also known as "Osbat Al Ansar, Usbat Al Ansar, Esbat Al-Ansar, Isbat Al Ansar, Usbat-ul-Ansar, Band of Helpers, Band of Partisans, League of the Followers" (Canada 20 Nov. 2012), and "the Partisans League" (*Al Akhbar* 25 Nov. 2012). Sources indicate that Asbat al-Ansar allegedly has links to Al-Qaeda (US 3 Oct. 2013; START n.d.a; Canada 20 Nov. 2012). In 2002, Asbat al-Ansar was designated a terrorist entity in Canada (*ibid.*). The United States also designated the group as a "foreign terrorist organization" in 2002 (28 Sept. 2012).

According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a university-based research centre at the University of Maryland funded by the US Department of Homeland Security (n.d.b), Asbat al-Ansar is a Sunni "extremist" group that was formed in the "late 1980s or early 1990s by Sheik Hisham Shreidi, a Palestinian refugee and preacher" (START n.d.a). The undated START profile of the organization indicates that the group has "less than 300 members" (*ibid.*). Undated information on the website of the UN Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee similarly indicates in its description of Asbat al-Ansar that the group has 290 members (UN n.d.). The START website also indicates that, "[a]lthough Asbat al-Ansar is relatively small, the group can be considered very dangerous and very active" (START n.d.a).

The START website indicates that Asbat al-Ansar

bases its ideology on Salafism, a branch of Islam whose adherents believe in a pure interpretation of the Koran and Islamic law. The group is virulently opposed to Israel, the West, and other religious sects in Lebanon such as the Shia, Christians, and Druze. In total, the group hopes to set up a Sunni Islamic state in Lebanon. (*ibid.*)

Similarly, according to Public Safety Canada's description, Asbat al-Ansar's

main objective is to promote the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon and it is opposed to Christian, secular, and Shia institutions in the country. Past targets have included the Lebanese state, as well as elements within the country AAA [Asbat al-Ansar] considers un-Islamic. For example, two AAA members attacked a Sidon court in 1999 and killed four people. The group has twice been involved in plots to assassinate the US Ambassador to Lebanon. (Canada 20 Nov. 2012)

The UN Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee website similarly stated that,

[i]n the mid-1990s the group assassinated Lebanese religious leaders and bombed nightclubs, theaters and liquor stores. It was involved in clashes in northern Lebanon in December 1999 and carried out a rocket-

propelled grenade attack on the Russian Embassy in Beirut in January 2000. In September 2004, operatives with links to the group were involved in planning terrorist operations against the Italian Embassy, the Ukrainian Consulate General and Lebanese government offices. (UN n.d.)

Sources indicate that Asbat al-Ansar is based in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp (ibid.; START n.d.) in southern Lebanon (ibid.). *The Daily Star*, an English-language newspaper based in Beirut, reports that Asbat al-Ansar is one of Ain al-Hilweh camp's "most prominent" Islamist groups (4 June 2012). The International Crisis Group reported in 2009 that, in Ain al-Hilweh, Asbat al-Ansar was considered "by all Palestinian factions - including Fatah" to be a "full-fledged participant in the camp's security structure" (19 Feb. 2009, 27).

START indicates that the group is "chiefly made up of Palestinian refugees" (n.d.a). The Jamestown Foundation, a Washington-based think-tank whose mission is to "inform and educate policy makers and the broader community about events and trends in those societies which are strategically or tactically important to the United States" (n.d.), reports that Asbat al-Ansar's membership includes some native Lebanese, in addition to Palestinians (6 Jan. 2011).

2. Leaders

The International Crisis Group indicated in a March 2012 report that Abou Tarek Saadi was the "head" of Asbat al-Ansar (1 Mar. 2012, 21). *Al Akhbar* indicated in a November 2012 article that Abu Tareq al-Saadi was a "prominent leader of Asbat al-Ansar" (*Al Akhbar* 25 Nov. 2012). *The Daily Star* reported in June 2012 that Sheikh Jamal Khattab is the "spiritual leader of most of the [Ain al-Hilweh] camp's Islamist groups," including Asbat al-Ansar (*The Daily Star* 4 June 2012). Further information on leaders of Asbat al-Ansar could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Recruitment

START reports that, "[w]hile Hamas, Hezbollah, and al-Fatah generally dominate, smaller, more extreme groups, such as Asbat al-Ansar, operate on the fringes and draw membership from individuals alienated by the larger outfits" (n.d.a). On 6 July 2013, the *Washington Post* reported that "'sympathies and support'" for "hard-line Islamist forces, including Asbat al-Ansar" had increased in Ain Hilweh camp. Further information on recruitment by Asbat al-Ansar could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Activities

Public Safety Canada states that, "[s]ince at least 2005, [Asbat al-Ansar] has been sending recruits into Iraq to fight against Coalition forces" (20 Nov. 2012). *Al Akhbar* reports that, according to Abu Tarek al-Saadi, ten members of Asbat al-Ansar died while "resisting the US occupation in Iraq" (4 May 2013). The UN similarly indicates Asbat al-Ansar has been involved in fighting against multinational forces in Iraq "since at least 2005" (n.d.).

According to an article published on the Al-Sharq al-Awsat website, Asbat al-Ansar's "activities and influence have receded compared with the past" and camp residents say the group has "'become quieter' due to their focus on political action," although this does not "negate" the presence and control of some areas by Islamist groups (Al-Sharq al-Awsat 1 May 2013). This source also states that "sources pointed out the absence of Usbat al-Ansar from the scenes of continuous differences inside the camp, and sometimes it interferes to press for resolving the disputes between factions" (ibid.). In August 2012, *Al Akhbar* indicated that Asbat al-Ansar played a role in "mediating" the end to a month-long sit-in led by Ahmad al-Assir (*Al Akhbar* 14 Aug. 2012), a Salafist preacher who had aimed to launch an armed wing to fight against Hezbollah (ibid. 25 Nov. 2012). *The Daily Star* reports that, in reference to clashes in Taamir, a neighbourhood next to Ain al-Hilweh, between supporters of Salafist cleric Sheikh Ahmad Assir and Hezbollah during the fall of 2012 and fears of sectarian violence spreading to the camp, Asbat al-Ansar officials in Ain al-Hilweh camp stated that, "they would only ever intervene in local events in order to restore peace" (15 Nov. 2012).

According to a 2013 commentary authored by Mona Alami, a journalist who writes about Middle-Eastern politics and who has conducted research on Islamic movements in Palestinian refugee camps (Carnegie Endowment n.d.a), and appearing in *Sada*, an online journal about "political, economic and social issues in the Arab world" produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (ibid. n.d.b),

[s]ources have reported that former members of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham - as well as some former members of Asbat al-Ansar and the Islamist Jihad Movement - have regrouped into five factions, each comprised of five to 25 members. These groups are currently training in the Basatin region with light to medium weapons. Many of these fighters recently split from Asbat al-Ansar and Islamist

Jihad because they objected to the groups' newfound "moderation" and collaboration with "apostates" - that is, the Lebanese Army and the intelligence services. (Alami 28 Feb. 2013)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

START indicates that, "shortly after" Sheik Hisham Shreidi was killed in 1991, "Asbat al-Ansar split into three factions, Asbat al-Nour, Jama'at al-Nur and Jund as-Sham" (n.d.a). Two sources indicate that Jund al-Sham is a splinter group of Asbat al-Ansar (Jamestown Foundation 6 Jan. 2011; International Crisis Group 1 Mar. 2012, 20) that the International Crisis Group says has engaged in violence (ibid.). In its 2011 report, the Jamestown Foundation indicated that Asbat al-Ansar "participated in campaigns to disarm and dismantle the Jund al-Sham organization" (ibid.), while International Crisis Group indicated that Asbat al-Ansar met with the government to strategize an end to the activities of Jund al-Sham (1 Mar. 2012, 20).

5. Relationships with Various Actors

5.1 Lebanese Government and Hezbollah

In the 3 October 2013 "Lebanon Travel Warning," the US Department of State indicated that Asbat al-Ansar "has been outlawed by the Lebanese government," but is still present in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp within which it operates "largely autonomously" (3 Oct. 2013). In 2009, the International Crisis Group indicated that, despite their "radical orientation," Asbat al-Ansar engages with the Lebanese state and army, so as to avoid "state interference" in the camps (19 February 2009, 1, 27-28). *The Daily Star* reports that, according to a "security source inside the [Ain al-Hilweh] camp," due to efforts undertaken by Lebanese army intelligence officials, "the military has been able to build bridges with various factions in Ain al-Hilweh including its fiercest opponents, Usbat al-Ansar" (*The Daily Star* 4 June 2012). The same source reported that an Asbat al-Ansar spokesman stressed the importance of "keeping tension at bay in the [Ain al-Hilweh] camp" (ibid.).

In November 2012, Intelligence Online, a Paris-based publication that reports on and analyzes intelligence agencies internationally (Intelligence Online n.d.), indicated that "[t]o take on the movement of Lebanese Salafi Sheikh Ahmad Al-Assir, which has been defying it in Saida for months, Hezbollah is ready to make any alliances, even the least expected ... [Hezbollah] has teamed with Asbat al-Ansar" (ibid. 15 Nov. 2012). Without providing details, on 6 December 2012, the *Jerusalem Post*, a newspaper based in Israel, indicated that Hezbollah had "started to cultivate ties" with Asbat al-Ansar.

On 13 February 2013, Intelligence Online reported that

[t]he growing number of Sunni radicals in Lebanon has raised the spectre of clashes with the pro-Syrian Hezbollah.

The gun-battle on February 1 and subsequent stand-off between Lebanon's military intelligence and residents of the Lebanese town of Aarsal, on the border with Syria, is a consequence of the regrouping in the region of an array of radical Sunni groups fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime. The groups - Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham, Asbat al-Ansar, the Brigades Abdallah Azzam Brigades and the al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida - have established their headquarters in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp to the east of Sidon, in southern Lebanon, and are now in the process of merging under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra, the movement currently leading the fight against the Syrian Army.

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5.2 Fatah

On 19 February 2009, the International Crisis Group indicated that Fatah officials had been targeted by Asbat al-Ansar, among other groups, and that Fatah was considered Asbat al-Ansar's "traditional foe" (19 Feb. 2009, 7, 27). The International Crisis Group also indicated that Asbat al-Ansar reportedly "engage" with Fatah on camp security issues (ibid., 1). The US Department of State reports that, on 15 February 2010, fighting between members of Fatah and Asbat al-Ansar in Ain el-Hilweh refugee camp "involved rocket propelled grenades and automatic gunfire," and resulted in four deaths (US 18 Aug. 2011). On 16 February 2010, the Associated Press reported that an Asbat al-Ansar gunman "shot a Fatah member," which ignited clashes.

According to a 28 March 2014 article in the *Daily Star*,

[t]he Fatah Movement has agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding aimed at insulating Palestinian refugee camps from Lebanese conflicts and the crisis in neighboring Syria, after the Islamist Jund al-Sham and Fatah al-Islam factions agreed to stop assassinating Fatah members.

The memorandum is the outcome of an initiative put forth by Islamic Jihad and will also be signed by Hamas, the Osbat al-Ansar group and Sheikh Jamal Khattab, the spiritual leader for Islamist groups inside Ain al-Hilweh. The memorandum is an effort to quell escalating tensions between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement on one side and Palestinian Islamist factions on the other, as both groups hold conflicting stances toward the conflict in Syria and the terrorist attacks that have targeted areas associated with Hezbollah.

Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A professor of political studies at the American University of Beirut could not provide information within the time constraints of this Response. The following individuals and organizations were unable to provide information for this Response: Lebanese Center for Human Rights; professor of Middle East politics, University of London; visiting lecturer at St. Joseph University.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Council on Foreign Relations; ecoi.net; Human Rights Watch; *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*; Lebanon – Government of Lebanon, Official Website of the Lebanese Army, Presidency of the Republic of Lebanon; *Political Handbook of the World*; Small Arms Survey; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Congressional Research Service.

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