

Palestinian Islamist group severs Hezbollah ties

By Mohammed Zaatari

SIDON, Lebanon: The largest Palestinian Islamist group allied to Hezbollah announced Tuesday a “military, security and political disengagement from Hezbollah,” cutting all ties with the group.

In a Tuesday statement, the Ansar Allah Movement, which has been a Hezbollah ally since the mid-1980s, said “in line with our pioneering Jihadist path ... and in line with the interests of our people and nation, the Ansar Allah Movement announces its military, security and political disengagement from Hezbollah in Lebanon and severs all ties.”

Sources connected the rupture to a possible shift toward backing the Syrian uprising on the part of Ansar Allah, as well as a financial dispute.

Ansar Allah said it would “continue on the path of jihad and resistance” as an “independent Palestinian Islamist movement that will continue to uphold the rights [of Palestinians] no matter how great our sacrifice is.”

They said that they would continue to use arms to liberate Palestine and to “defend their people wherever they are to achieve the goals of freedom, return and independence.”

Ansar Allah had its genesis in the 1990, when Amal and Hezbollah were battling over a string of southern villages called Iqlim al-Tuffah. Amal Movement leader Nabih Berri, who later became speaker, asked then-Fatah leader Yasser Arafat for help fighting Hezbollah, despite the fact that Amal and Fatah had just finished the three years of clashes in the Beirut and southern Palestinian refugee camps known as the “War of the Camps.”

After Fatah agreed to help Amal, a Fatah officer named Jamal Suleiman opened fire on the two groups with his brigade from a hill overlooking the southern camp of Ain al-Hilweh. He announced his defection and left the camp, saying he planned to fight with Hezbollah, which eventually took over most of Iqlim al-Tuffah.

In the mid-1990s, Suleiman returned to the camp and announced the formation of the Ansar Allah Movement, with the stated goal of fighting Israel and opposing peace negotiations.

The group gained influence in Palestinian camps in the north, south and Beirut, and established headquarters in Ain al-Hilweh. They opened a small hospital in the camp called Al-Quds [Jerusalem] Hospital.

Ansar Allah, which has hundreds of armed members in Lebanon’s camps, was rumored to be involved in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that killed 85.

They claimed inspiration from Hezbollah, which provided the group with arms, money and training. Ansar Allah is also known for the yearly parades and military demonstrations it holds on the last Friday of Ramadan for Jerusalem Day, a holiday created by Iran's late supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Palestinian sources familiar with Ansar Allah said that their decision could be motivated by a decline in monetary support from Hezbollah or a shift by the Palestinian group toward supporting the 20-month long uprising against the regime of Syrian president Bashar Assad.

Suleiman's son Khaled left Ain al-Hilweh to fight with Syrian rebels two months ago, but his father convinced him to return home, in what was likely an embarrassment for the allies, given Hezbollah's close ties with the Syrian regime.

The sources said that Ansar Allah has been signaling that it would back the Syrian uprising.

Hezbollah previously gave money to Ansar Allah and Suleiman monthly, but they stopped their funding this month. When Ansar Allah's leadership asked about the halt, a Hezbollah official said that a discussion was needed before sending money in light of "changes."

According to the sources, Ansar Allah believes Hezbollah wants to impose new conditions on it in return for continued financial support.

These conditions are still unclear, but other sources who are familiar with the relationship said that ties have cooled recently and Hezbollah has begun to enhance ties with other Islamist Palestinian groups in Ain al-Hilweh such as Ussat al-Ansar and the Islamic Jihadist Movement.

Hezbollah officials have met several times with these groups and are providing them with financial and other support, antagonizing Ansar Allah.