

## A Shadow State in Lebanon for the Syrian Opposition



Lebanese protesters take part in a demonstration lead by Lebanese Salafist figure Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir (unseen) to protest against the Syrian regime in the southern city of Sidon on 7 October 2012. (Photo: AFP - Mahmoud Zayyat)

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**For the Lebanese factions that have chosen to become part of the battle in Syria, the point of no return has been passed. The support they offer to the rebels ranges anywhere from food and medical aid to military equipment and weapons.**

Lebanese factions opposed to the regime in Syria are working tirelessly to provide support to the regime's opponents, even going as far as setting up training camps inside Lebanon, sources told *Al-Akhbar*.

Some of these factions believe this is their chance for revenge, while others are acting on what they see as a religious imperative. Even within these factions, there are different motives for wanting to support the Syrian rebels.

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Representatives from these groups have also been visiting friendly countries, collecting donations and establishing supply lines to garner food, medical and military aid.

Donations "sent from the rebels of Libya to the rebels of Syria" are thus making their way to ports in northern Lebanon, where more than half of these shipments are often seized by war profiteers before the remainder is smuggled to Syria.

Using these weapons and funds, a shadow state for Syrian opposition fighters is being built in Lebanon, with clear support from certain Arab states.

Security sources have revealed that Imams and Islamic educators in Tripoli and Akkar in North Lebanon and Beirut have been recently informed by head of Tripoli's Islamic Endowments Department Sheikh Houssam Sbat of Qatar's decision "to pay their salaries on a monthly basis, for life."

Qatar also funds the Salafi-leaning radio station Tariq al-Irtiqaa (The Path to Ascension) in Tripoli, which is run by Sheikh Khalid Zarour, as part of the Gulf emirate's efforts to extend its influence in North Lebanon.

Although there are many such reports about Arab money coming in, there seem to be several unknown hurdles preventing this cash from reaching the Syrian opposition fighters. This has prompted several Salafi clerics, who have otherwise distanced themselves from arms smuggling, to chip in from their own pockets to provide shelter to Syrian refugees in the North, either in their own private homes or elsewhere.

Meanwhile, according to informed sources, a retired colonel from the Lebanese army has established an office to distribute weapons and recruit young men to fight in northern Lebanon and Syria. These militants, they added, had taken part in the recent clashes in Tripoli.

The sources identified an office in the Talat al-Rifaiya area of Tripoli, where a man identified only by his initials, O.T., commands a group of Future Movement (FM) fighters, distributes weapons and recruits fighters, all at the behest of the retired colonel.

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According to the same sources, the former army officer visits the office in Rifaiya once every three days to inspect the security situation in the area, while O.T. visits the retired colonel on a daily basis in his heavily guarded villa in al-Qalamoun.

Other security sources in North Lebanon revealed that there are four to six groups closely affiliated with a prominent Salafi cleric operating in the area. *Al-Akhabar* sought to contact the cleric, but he did not respond to interview requests. Fighters are also present in the northeast and the Bekaa, especially in the regions of Ersal and its surrounding hills, and in Masharih al-Qaa.

An unprecedented level of militia activity has also been observed in the central Bekaa, specifically in Bar Elias, Qab Elias and Fourzol, which is considered the primary logistical hub for arms procurement.

Syrian opposition sources said that the safety zone of any area is determined by its proximity to the border.

“The closer we get to the border, the less risk there is, seeing as it is an open area that allows us to flee whenever we feel that there is imminent danger,” one opposition source said. These same sources denied reports about the presence of Free Syrian Army (FSA) militants in Aley, Khaldeh and Naameh, but acknowledged the possibility of armed “activists” there.

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These same sources indicated plans exist to establish training camps in the hills of Ersal to train Syrian opposition fighters. The mayor of Ersal is reportedly spearheading efforts to turn the town into a military base where fighters can receive money and weapons.

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## **Abdullah Azzam Brigades and Hezbollah**

On Saturday, the media section of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, an Islamist militant group affiliated with al-Qaeda, [released a video statement](#) <sup>[2]</sup> by Sheikh Sirajuddin Zureiqat.

The Jihadi sheikh warned Shias that the Resistance movement might carry out bombings against its own base to make it appear as though the Sunnis were attacking them. Zureiqat touched on a number of issues, most notably the arrest of MP Michel Samaha, and the assassination attempt on Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Army Commander General Jean Kahwaji. He claimed that if the plot had succeeded, “the Hezbollah media would have blamed it on the Sunni community.”

The Jihadi sheikh went on to warn of Hezbollah plots to bomb Sunni religious communities in order to provoke sectarian fighting. He also warned Shias that the Resistance movement might carry out bombings against its own base to make it appear as though the Sunnis were attacking them.

Zureiqat accused Hezbollah’s media of distorting another message he had delivered to the Shia of Lebanon, in which he had warned them against fighting the Sunni community and given them advice on how to protect themselves. According to Zureiqat, Hezbollah’s media alleged that his brigades threatened to carry out bombings against the Shias to score political points.

These claims, the sheikh said, “Were lies intended to convince the public that the *mujahedeen* were preparing for attacks against targets in Lebanon.”

Sheikh Sirajuddin Zureiqat then turned to the assassination attempts [earlier this year] against Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and MP Boutros Harb, and surmised that “if the [assailants] had succeeded, then the Islamist groups would have been blamed for these acts.”

He then spoke about what he described as “the lie called the Lebanese state,” adding that there is no real government in Lebanon, but rather an instrument controlled by Hezbollah and led by a figurehead, Prime Minister Najib Mikati. Hezbollah, he said, employs this government to persecute innocent individuals opposed to its influence.

Zureiqat also condemned “the acts perpetrated by the Mokdad clan, including the kidnapping of innocent people, done with protection from Hezbollah,” and said that the Resistance movement was recruiting Sunni groups in the name of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades in order to sow discord among the Sunnis.

Finally, Zureiqat accused Hezbollah of assassinating former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, [army] General Francois Hajj and MP Pierre Gemayel, and called on the Sunnis “to take up arms and form military wings to defend themselves.”

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