



Asir Rejects to Withdraw Jihad Call, Urges Clerics to Support Fatwa

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Controversial Salafist cleric Sheikh Ahmed al-Asir stressed that he will not withdraw his call for jihad in Syria, urging scholars and clerics to approve his fatwa to aid “the oppressed” in the town of al-Qusayr, southeast of Homs.

“We should establish secret defense cells to defend ourselves in case (Hizbullah chief Sayyed Hassan) Nasrallah decided to start battles in Lebanon similar to what's happening in Syria,” Asir told reporters.

He pointed out that the creation of the “Free Resistance Brigades” began in the southern coastal city of Sidon and “we won't back down.”

“Jihad in Syria is a must, in particular in Qusayr, and anyone capable of doing so in Lebanon must join us,” Asir said.

On Tuesday, around two dozen men lined up in his office in Sidon, signing up to join the jihad.

"We were opposed to any side getting involved in the Syrian revolution. But Hizbullah's insistence to support the despot Bashar Assad has left us with no choice," Asir, one of Hizbullah's harshest critics, said.

Asir noted that he has previously warned, since the revolt in Syria kicked off in March 2011, from the repercussions of any military interference in the neighboring country.

“Unfortunately the state failed to act responsibly and its incapable. We will not remain mum,” the Salafist cleric added.

He pointed the number of people who so far signed in are more than 300.

At the beginning of the week, another Salafist cleric called on members of his community to wage "holy war" in Syria to defend their brethren.

Salafist cleric Sheikh Salem al-Rafehi and Asir accused Hizbullah of sending fighters to attack Syrian Sunnis, who make up the backbone of that

country's rebellion.

However, Rafehi informed caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel on Tuesday that he is ready to withdraw his call for jihad if Hizbullah ended its involvement in Syria's civil war.

Fighting has flared in Syria's Homs region in recent weeks as the government has pressed its campaign to stamp out rebel-held pockets in the area.

Much of the heaviest fighting has raged near the Lebanese border around al-Qusayr, where activists said government troops backed by gunmen linked to Hizbullah captured the villages of Radwineyeh and Tel al-Nabi Mando.

Lebanon is sharply split between supporters and opponents of Assad, a legacy of decades of Syrian political and military dominance over its smaller neighbor. The split largely falls along sectarian lines, with Sunnis opposing Assad and Shiites backing him. That mirrors the divisions within Syria itself, where mainly Sunni rebels are battling Assad's regime, dominated by the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiism.

Since it began in March 2011, Syria's conflict has fueled local tensions between the communities in Lebanon, with bouts of street fighting and kidnappings.

Hizbullah denies taking part in the civil war. But top Hizbullah official Nabil Qaouq said Monday that his group is "performing a national duty" toward Lebanese Shiites living in Syrian border towns and villages by supporting the "popular committees."