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New unrest rocks Ain el-Helweh



Over 16 people were injured and one person killed in the southern Palestinian camp of Ain el-Helweh since clashes began

Monday. The fighting pitted members of Palestinian Fatah and a new extremist group, accused by some Palestinian sources of having ties with the Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra.

“I am worried about the camp’s new turn of events, things are going the wrong way,” an Islamic source told NOW last week. Tensions have been rising in recent months between factions within the secular Palestinian Fatah and a new extremist organization comprised of members of Fatah al-Islam, Osbat al-Ansar, and Jound al-Cham. Both the Jound al-Cham faction and Fatah al-Islam are terrorist organizations, the first having fought an armed conflict with the Lebanese army in the Taamir area in 2007, the second a deadly war that same year with the Lebanese army in the Nahr el-Bared camp which resulted in the death of 170 Lebanese soldiers, at least 120 militants and more than 200 civilians.

Fatah sources have accused this newly formed radical group of being allied with the Syrian Salafi Jabhat al-Nusra, which has been blacklisted as a terrorist group by the US. The newly formed group has also been linked to the 18 Palestinian fighters who were recently sent to fight in Syria, of which 8 died two months ago alongside Syrian rebels.

Hajj Maher Oueid, head of the Islamic group Ansar Allah, told NOW that the fighting started when a member of the Saadi family shot Bilal Badr and three others who were standing guard in the vicinity of the Safsaf mosque. Fatah sources denied this version of the story, alleging that Badr had attacked Saadi. “Yesterday and today’s clashes were an attempt by the new radical group to impose themselves on the camp’s scene. It failed miserably,” said the Fatah source. Islamic sources stressed that Saadi was close to the Fatah faction led by Mahmoud Issa, also known as al-Lino. In the past few years, a violent feud has pitted Issa against Islamists belonging to either Jound al-Cham or Fatah al-Islam, resulting in the killing of several Jound al-Cham members as well as an assassination attempt on Issa himself.

The gunmen used machine guns and mortar shells in the clashes on Monday and Tuesday, and bombed one house, located next to the Farouk mosque. Fatah sources said that six groups, one of which is led by Bilal Badr, were engaged in battles against Fatah. Last month sources within the camp mentioned the formation of five new jihadi groups, each comprising about 25 fighters. These new radical groups include fighters from the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (a transnational militant organization), Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham, as well as the Haraka Islamiya Moujahida. The new nebula is led by Majed Majed (aka Abu Qatada), who, according to one Fatah source, is a Saudi national.

The source added that additional Osbat al-Ansar fighters had augmented the ranks of the new radical group in recent weeks.

During previous interviews, camp sources aligned with Fatah acknowledged that some fighters from Osbat al-Ansar and the Islamic Jihad Movement (Haraka Islmiya Moujahida) had defected due to disagreements with their leadership's new ties with the Lebanese army, which they consider as "apostate".

Oueid told NOW that the camp was once again peaceful, adding that a multi-factional force had intervened on the recent clashes. "The force includes Fatah fighters and various Islamic forces," he underlined. "We are hoping that it will be able to enforce a truce". Given the current polarization in Ain el-Helweh, this statement seems perhaps overly optimistic.