

Who or What Is Fatah al-Islami?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

When the hitherto little-known Fatah al-Islami group unleashed irregular warfare in Lebanon a few weeks ago, *EIR* launched its own investigation as to its origins. All indications are that the creators of this operation are Vice President Dick Cheney and his long-term henchman, Elliott Abrams, working in cahoots with Prince Bandar bin-Sultan of Saudi Arabia.

It was investigative journalist Seymour Hersh who laid out the parameters in the March 5 *New Yorker*. According to his account, based on discreet interviews with U.S. political and military personnel, Cheney, Abrams, and Bandar conspired to redirect U.S. foreign policy, towards an unprincipled alliance with militant Sunni forces, like the Fatah al-Islami, to wage war against any and all Shi'ite forces in the region, key among them, Iran.

The plot was to organize Saudi funding for anti-Shi'a activities. As Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told Hersh, "The Saudis have considerable financial means, and have deep relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis," extremist Sunnis, who consider all Shi'ites to be apostates. Nasr compared the operation, correctly, with the late-1970s Saudi-U.S. operations in support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan, some of whom later became al-Qaeda.

Depending on whom you ask, the answer to the question, Who is Fatah al-Islami?, will vary. For the State Department, the Israelis, as well as complicit Lebanese political figures, the group is an extension of Syrian intelligence. However, this standard line is challenged by facts on the ground, specifically that, according to *EIR*'s sources in the region, the group has systematically been opposing the Syrian military.

In clashes in May, Syrian security killed four Fatah al-Islami militants who were trying to enter Iraq, and, in the conflict, lost five soldiers. Some Syrian soldiers are reportedly being treated in German hospitals for injuries sustained in these battles. Although the propaganda line has it that the terrorists entered Lebanon from Syria, implying Syrian compliance, the fact is the Syrian authorities are eager to be rid of the menace. On June 7, Fatah al-Islami leader Shahin Shahin told Reuters that the group planned to extend its attacks to "Greater Syria."

Active in Northern Lebanon

According to several qualified *EIR* sources from the region, the militias which were to become Fatah al-Islami, had been active in northern Lebanon years ago, in Dinneyeh, where they engaged in attacks against the Lebanese Army. Many of them were jailed, and later, through the good graces of Saad Hariri, son of murdered former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, were released. This was documented by the International Crisis Group in a report issued Dec. 5, 2005. Later, after the Lebanese elections in 2005, Hariri managed to get the parliament to grant amnesty to 22 of the militants, as part of a deal whereby Samir Geagea, the Christian militia warlord from the 1975-90 Civil War, was also released from prison. He said his intervention on behalf of the terrorists and multiple murderer Geagea, had been "humanitarian."

In 2006, the Dinneyeh group organized the demonstrations against the Danish Embassy, and other sites, to protest the infamous anti-Mohammad cartoons. In October-November of 2006, the Fatah al-Islami suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and had among its elements these Dinniyyeh types, i.e., elements that were protected by Sunni forces around Hariri in Lebanon. Hariri financed the group, providing funds for them to purchase apartments in Tripoli. They then entered the nearby Palestinian refugee camp at Nahr al-Bared, and set up shop. The Dinneyeh elements merged with militias from a splinter group called Fatah al-Intifada, and started calling themselves Fatah al-Islami.

Its profile shifted notably toward al-Qaeda. Its leader, Shaker Abssi, has had links to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, known as the al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, who was reportedly killed in 2006 by U.S. forces. In 2002, Zarqawi and Abssi were sentenced to death *in absentia*, for having killed Lawrence Foley, an American diplomat, in Amman. Abssi spent three years in a Syrian jail, then fled to Lebanon. Abssi seems to have studied his role quite well; in an interview last March to the *New York Times*, Abssi claimed he had worked for the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat as a pilot, and that he had also worked with Zarqawi. This information serves to bolster the line—spread by the pro-Cheney press—that the group is "Palestinian," and once associated with the Fatah of President Mahmoud Abbas. In reality, as confirmed by regional sources, the group is made up of fighters from Yemen, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

A Dangerous Gamble

The funding for the group was carried out apparently with the approval of the Sunni forces in the government and parliament. Journalist Alastair Crooke reported: "I was told that within 24 hours they were being offered weapons and money by people presenting themselves as representatives of the Lebanese government's interests—presumably to take on Hezbollah," the Shi'ite political group and militia led by Hassan Nasrullah.

Funds from Hariri's Saudi friends, especially Prince Bandar, flooded in. *EIR*'s sources report that the Fatah al-Islami forces, which had numbered from 50 to 200 when they first appeared last November, suddenly grew to hundreds more; they had piles of money, and were armed to the teeth. November 2006, it should be remembered, was the time that Cheney made his quick visit to Saudi Arabia, arranged by Bandar.

Problems arose for the Fatah al-Islami in March 2007, when Saudi King Abdullah and visiting Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad struck an historic agreement, to hinder any Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Lebanon (and elsewhere). All the religious leaders issued orders to the effect that sectarian conflict was forbidden, given that there was one God, and Mohammad was his prophet. At this point, Hariri reportedly cut off funding to Fatah al-Islami, whereupon the group retaliated by bombing sites in Beirut near his residence and that of the Mufti. The group also robbed a bank, the Bank al-Bahr al-Muttawasi which is owned by Hariri. After the bank robbery (which later prompted some calls for bank transparency to see if funds were being channelled to the group), the Lebanese internal security services, led by a Rafiq Hariri man named Wissam al-Hassam, moved—without consultation with the army—to attack the Fatah al-Islami, killing several. This was May 20, 2007. The group, in predictable retaliation, attacked the army, killing 27 and decapitating 7. This was the detonator for the government to order the army to attack the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp where the Fatah al-Islami terrorists had holed up.

Since then, the fighting has escalated, as reported widely in the media. At the same time, the U.S. government, which had already pledged \$1 billion to the Lebanese government in aid, since last Summer, began sending over planeloads of military equipment, weapons, and ammunition to help the Siniora government “fight terrorism.” Why so many weapons? Three sources told *EIR*, independently and unprompted: This is to prepare for Phase II of the operation, which is civil war. That is, the Cheney scenario anticipates that, once the political pressures generated by the current conflict reach the point of creating a split in the army along sectarian lines (as in 1975-76), then the troops will be quite well equipped, for waging civil war.

The great danger now is that the continuing fighting will further fuel the intra-Palestinian conflict. The Hezbollah and its allies are calling for a negotiated solution with Fatah al-Islami (which they denounce), knowing what the Cheney scenario is. The Hariri majority and government say no, and seem determined to try to eliminate the group militarily, and in the process unleash civil conflict. Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader and Hariri ally, has been fueling the conflict, with repeated provocations against Hezbollah, as allegedly controlled by Syria and Iran. Jumblatt, according to Hersh, met with Cheney last Autumn, to discuss ways and means of destabilizing the Syrian regime.