

# Tense siege continues at Lebanon's Nahr al-Bared refugee camp

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The Lebanese army siege of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp outside of the northern city of Tripoli is now in its tenth day. Thousands of Palestinian refugees have flooded out of the camp after a shaky ceasefire was negotiated last Tuesday between the military and the Al Qaeda-linked Fatah al-Islam fighters entrenched inside the camp. Many residents, however, have refused to leave, despite the danger of a bloody showdown.

The US and several Arab states have scrambled to bolster the Lebanese military with supplies of arms and ammunition. Since last Friday, at least eight planeloads have arrived at Beirut international airport—four American transports, two from Jordan and two from the United Arab Emirates. No details have been officially released, but the materiel reportedly includes ammunition, body armour, helmets and night-vision equipment.

Both sides at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp are digging in. The Lebanese army has tightened its noose, bringing in more troops and armoured vehicles. Fatah al-Islam, which espouses a form of Sunni Islamic extremism and has links to Al Qaeda in Iraq, is estimated to have 150 to 300 fighters there, including Syrians, Saudis, Yemenis, Algerians and Pakistanis.

On May 20, 33 soldiers died in the fighting that erupted, while the army claims to have killed 60 militants. Since the truce, sporadic exchanges of fire have erupted—the latest yesterday evening when the military bombarded the northern end of the camp. Aid workers report that the army's indiscriminate shelling of the densely populated camp has killed dozens of civilians and wounded hundreds.

The UN Relief and Works Agency reported on Sunday that about 25,000 of the camp's officially registered 31,000 residents had left. Conditions are appalling for those remaining and also for those who have flooded into the nearby Beddawi refugee camp, which was already overcrowded.

The British-based *Sunday Times* described conditions in the Beddawi camp: "Some were taken in by families who found themselves living 20 to a room; others slept on the floors of mosques and schools, or in dirty courtyards under tin shelters. Everyone seemed filthy and exhausted; few places had water or sanitation.

"Even if they had no injured or dead among their relatives, the Nahr al-Bared refugees were in dire straits. The extended al-Jundi family were typical of about 1,500 refugees camped in a

school on the floor or dirty pallets. They had not bathed in days, and had just been delivered their first food, a plastic bag of yoghurt, bread and rice. But they had no means to cook it."

As many as 10,000 people, including elderly and disabled, may still be inside the Nahr al-Bared camp, dependent on intermittent aid supplies. Sheikh Mohammed Hajj, a member of a Palestinian committee seeking to negotiate an end to the siege, told the *Financial Times* that the situation was disastrous. "There's no electricity, there's no water, there's a lack of medicine and equipment. It's stinking everywhere which means disease could spread and there are bodies still under destroyed houses," he said.

Many of the Palestinians bitterly criticised the military and the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. Radi Abu Radi told the *Sunday Times*: "No one [in the camp] supports Fatah al-Islam. They are not Palestinians. But the Lebanese army is killing us—innocent civilians. They are shelling the camp." Speaking to the *Guardian*, Abu Ali said: "We have never experienced violence like this. Not even the Israelis behaved like this."

Prime Minister Siniora announced on Saturday that negotiations would be allowed to proceed. "This problem is being resolved through the Palestinian factions and we are giving them time, as they have requested, but this does not mean that we are backing off," he warned. While negotiators have raised the prospect of a deal, the government is adamant that the militants must surrender. Defence Minister Elias Murr bluntly declared in the *Sunday Times*: "The army will not negotiate with a group of terrorists and criminals. Their fate is arrest, and if they resist the army, death."

Having rushed planeloads of supplies to Lebanon, the Bush administration is no doubt pressing for decisive action against Fatah al-Islam. While no deadline has been officially announced, several media reports indicate that the government has given the Palestinian negotiators until the middle of this week to end the standoff. The main purpose of the negotiations, apart from allowing the military time to prepare, is to blunt criticism that any confrontation will inevitably provoke.

Under a 1969 accord between Arab states, the Lebanese military is not allowed to enter the country's 12 Palestinian refugee camps, which are administered by Palestinian officials.

But the main Palestinian factions— Hamas and Fatah— have both distanced themselves from the Fatah al-Islam group, giving the army a blank cheque to move against it if negotiations fail.

The Siniora government is clearly concerned, however, that a bloodbath in Nahr al-Bared could provoke an eruption of protest in other Palestinian camps and more broadly. Islamist groups such as Jund al-Sham and Esbat al-Ansar in the southern Palestinian camp of Ein el-Hilweh, which are far larger and better armed than Fatah al-Islam, could be prompted to act.

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, from the Carnegie Middle East Institute in Beirut, warned in the British-based *Sunday Herald*: “If this situation continues and the army continue to shell civilian areas in the [Nahr al-Bared] camp then we could see a domino effect across all of the Lebanon’s refugee camps and we could start a war between the Palestinians and the Lebanese.”

The high political stakes in the Nahr al-Bared siege underscore the fact that more is involved than the fate of a small, isolated group of Islamic extremists. The speed with which the Siniora government and the Bush administration responded to the initial relatively minor clashes indicates that preparations were already well underway. The rapid dispatch of military hardware clearly strengthens the Lebanese military and assists the Siniora government, which has been in a state of crisis since Israel’s war last year against the Hezbollah militia.

Siniora and his ministers immediately blamed Syria for the activities of Fatah al-Islam, claiming it was deliberately destabilising Lebanon to prevent the establishment of a UN tribunal into the 2005 murder of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. The accusations are in line with Washington’s efforts to undermine Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon and throughout the region. Damascus has vigorously denied any links to Fatah al-Islam, whose leader was jailed in Syria for three years.

Moreover, US journalist Seymour Hersh, among others, has pointed out that the US, Saudi Arabia and elements of the ruling March 14 alliance in Lebanon all encouraged Sunni extremist militias, including Fatah al-Islam, as a counterweight to the growing influence of the opposition Shiite-based Hezbollah. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) in its report last December entitled “Lebanon at the Tripwire” noted that the Sunni-based Future Bloc headed by Saad al-Hariri, son of the murdered politician, deliberately inflamed anti-Shiite communal sentiments in Tripoli and the predominantly Sunni and Christian north of the country.

Now the Siniora government, backed by Washington, is preparing to use the standoff with Fatah al-Islam as the pretext for a military intervention into the Palestinian camps for the first time in more than four decades, ending what has been a de facto state within a state. The build up also strengthens the Lebanese army in preparation for any confrontation with Hezbollah, which emerged from last year’s war with enhanced

political prestige in Lebanon and throughout the region.

After remaining quiet for nearly a week, Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah warned the government against allowing Lebanon to be drawn into the US war against Al Qaeda, saying it would destabilise the country. He described the entry of Lebanese troops into the Nahr al-Bared camp as “a red line”, declaring that Hezbollah would “not accept or provide cover or be partners in this”. Nasrallah also questioned the motives of the Bush administration, which fully backed the Israeli war last year, in supplying arms. “I wonder why all this care now for the Lebanese army,” he asked.

Six months ago the ICG report warned: “The convergence of a seemingly intractable political dispute, widening distrust, paralysed state institutions, increased resort to street politics, rampant re-confessionalisation and a highly polarised regional context has created the most volatile crisis since the end of the country’s 15-year internal confrontation.”

Nothing has happened since then to ease political tensions. Hezbollah pulled its five ministers out of the Siniora government last December, demanding either a larger cabinet representation or fresh elections. The political standoff is continuing, with the Shiite party challenging the constitutionality of the government’s decisions, including the planned establishment of the Hariri tribunal. The military show of force at the Nahr al-Bared camp could well be the government’s preparation for a confrontation with its major political opponents, as well as serving Washington’s broader agenda in the Middle East.



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