

Lebanon and the Rise of the Islamic State

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Situated at the very heart of *bilad as-sham* – often translated as “the Levant” or “Greater Syria” – Lebanon is clearly part of the Islamic State’s ideological, political, and territorial state-building project. Indeed, with the announcement of the caliphate in 2014, the group declared itself to be the only legitimate political system, thereby rejecting pre-existing states and their borders in the Levant and insisting that all Muslims are obliged to accept the religious and political authority of “Caliph Ibrahim” (referring to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).¹ The Islamic State sees Lebanon as part of its caliphate project, with the group’s long term ambitions with respect to the small Mediterranean nation inherent in its battle cry, *aqiya wa tatamadad* – “lasting and expanding.” Lebanon’s particular geostrategic significance is not lost on the Islamic State, nor is the importance of Lebanon’s main armed group, Hezbollah, in its support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.

In this context, it is not surprising to note the growing impact of the self-proclaimed Islamic State on Lebanon’s security, social cohesion, and political stability, adding to the already dire economic, political, and social effects of the Syrian civil war.

The Islamic State and Domestic Security: Strengthening the Salafi Jihadist Camp?

The Islamic State represents a security challenge for Lebanon, exacerbating the general rise in activism by domestic Salafi jihadist groups unleashed by the Syrian civil war.

Closely monitored and repressed during the so-called “Syrian tutelage” of Lebanon between the end of the civil war in 1989 and 2005, both Islamist groups in general as well as Salafi organizations more specifically expanded

their domestic role and visibility following Lebanon's "Independence Intifada" and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. After 2005, these groups benefited from what was generally a more accommodating attitude displayed by the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition and its leading party, the Sunni Tayyar al-Mustaqbal (Future Movement).² In the same period, Salafi jihadist groups with ideological and/or operational links to al-Qaeda – including Asbat al-Ansar, Jund al-Sham, and Fatah al-Islam – also increased their activism, operating primarily in the areas around Lebanon's second largest city, Tripoli, and the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in the north, and in Sidon and the Ain al-Hilweh camp in the south.³ The conflict between the small Salafi jihadist camp and the Lebanese state eventually escalated in May 2007, leading to a bloody confrontation between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese Army, which claimed over 400 lives.⁴ Thereafter, even though sporadic clashes between Sunni Salafist factions and pro-Hezbollah Alawite residents in northern Lebanon continued, the overall threat posed by radical Salafist groups subsided.

The Syrian civil war reinvigorated the Salafist camp in general, including its more radical and violent manifestations, and exacerbated an existing sectarian-political cleavage between the Sunni and Shiite communities in Lebanon, now split between anti- and pro-Assad supporters. This trend has led to growing clashes between these opposite camps, with violent exchanges localized primarily in the historically troubled areas around the northeast border city of Tripoli.

Fueled by rage over Assad's bloody response to the Syrian uprising and angered by Hezbollah's alliance with and assistance to the Assad regime, inter-sectarian clashes have been followed by direct attacks against Hezbollah, including rocket attacks against the Dahiye neighborhood, Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut; suicide bombings against Shiite, Hezbollah, and Iranian targets; and operations targeting the Lebanese Armed Forces.⁵ The main actors behind these attacks have been the al-Qaeda-affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades – responsible also for the high profile bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut in November 2013⁶ – and the al-Nusra Front in Lebanon claiming responsibility for a series of sectarian attacks, including a bloody suicide bombing in the Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighborhood in Tripoli in January 2015.⁷ The Islamic State itself claimed responsibility for a January 2014 car bombing attack against Hezbollah's political office

in the Beirut neighborhood of Haret Hreik and for a major terror attack in Dahiye in November 2015, and many other attacks were allegedly foiled.⁸

Yet despite reportedly discussing the appointment of an emir and the stepped-up domestic activities in Lebanon, the Islamic State's rise in Lebanon—along with that of the broader Salafi jihadist camp⁹—remains contained and closely monitored by the Lebanese security and intelligence apparatus. In this sense an important recent success of the Lebanese security sector against emerging Salafi jihadist forces has been the arrest of fugitive radical Salafist cleric Ahmad al-Assir, accused not only of engaging in a bloody confrontation with the Lebanese army, but also responsible for inciting sectarian strife and violence within Lebanon.¹⁰ Hezbollah has also been closely watching the “takfiri threat,” as described by Secretary General Nasrallah, taking the rise of hostile groups in Lebanon extremely seriously. In response, Hezbollah has boosted its own internal and community security, increased cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces, and lobbied at the political level to address the rise of Salafi jihadist forces in Lebanon as a top national security problem.

At the same time, there is a real concern over the growing political influence of Salafism within the Sunni community. Although not powerful or significant enough to challenge the political dominance of the Future Movement, these groups have been gaining more followers within Lebanon as a reaction to the Syrian civil war and Hezbollah's role fighting alongside Assad.

The Lebanese-Syrian Border and the Battle for Arsal

A related way through which the jihadist camp and the Islamic State in particular threatens Lebanon is more closely connected to the war raging in Syria and its direct spillover to Lebanon and the border areas. Indeed, the assessment over the danger posed by jihadist elements rose substantially after the August 2014 dramatic cross-border attack of the Lebanese border town of Arsal by al-Nusra and the Islamic State fighters, in response to the arrest by the Lebanese Armed Forces of a pro-Islamic State rebel commander who had turned not long before. In the Arsal confrontation, the jihadists directly attacked the Lebanese Army and police forces, kidnapping over 30 members of the Lebanese security sector—25 of whom remain in captivity to this day.¹¹

Following the armed confrontation on Lebanese soil, the Lebanese Armed Forces, in tacit coordination with Hezbollah, increased their presence and engagement on the ground, directly confronting the Islamic State and al-Nusra-affiliated groups operating in the border region.¹² Rebel groups had themselves sought refuge in the mountainous border area between Lebanon and Syria after engaging with the Syrian regime and Hezbollah in a long battle for the strategic Qalamoun region. Their eventual retreat from late 2013 resulted in the porous and barren lands surrounding Aarsal becoming an operational base for roughly 3000-4000 fighters, mostly militants belonging to al-Nusra and, since mid-to-late 2014, the Islamic State. While these groups initially seemed able to coordinate and even achieve ad hoc cooperation, eventually inter-group rivalry and inner fighting emerged.¹³ Despite the Islamic State presence on the ground, however, al-Nusra remained the most significant armed faction in the area, with the group better able to broker alliances with other factions, attract support from within Lebanese border towns, and access resources.¹⁴

Yet regardless of group affiliation, the presence of the Islamic State and al-Nusra fighters not only represents a direct security threat but also risks destabilizing inter-sectarian relations as well as relationships between local residents and Syrian refugees residing in the Bekaa governorate.¹⁵ It is therefore not surprising to note that the uneasy predicament at the border has continued to impact on Lebanon. This is especially the case since early in the summer of 2015, when Hezbollah further stepped up its campaign against the takfiri threat by conducting, in coordination with the Syrian army, extensive military operations to destroy the last remnants of anti-regime opposition in the broader Qalamoun region. The confrontation extended further following the Islamic State attack against Hezbollah posts on June 9, 2015 around the town of Ras Baalbek just north of Aarsal, expanding the battlefield on both sides of the border.¹⁶ The Lebanese Army has also been tackling the takfiri threat, with the international community recognizing this role in the larger confrontation against the Islamic State and supporting it with increased military aid and military equipment.¹⁷

Lebanon and the Islamic State

Lebanon is definitely one of the regional actors that has been most affected by the events of the Syrian civil war and its broader implications. The post-

2014 rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and its transformation into the Islamic State also spells trouble for Lebanon.

Domestically, the country has seen a modest but still worrisome rise in activism of Salafi jihadist groups, reacting to the Syrian civil war and Hezbollah's support for the Bashar al-Assad regime and emboldened by the rise of the Islamic State project. This has led to a string of domestic terrorist operations targeting Hezbollah, the Shiite community at large, and the Lebanese security sector. Although these groups are small and fail to hold significant political clout within Lebanon's Sunni community, they nonetheless reflect a larger sense of frustration and powerlessness over the status quo. As such, concerns over the potential of more individuals becoming radicalized and joining the ranks of the Salafi jihadist camp are not unfounded. In the long term, this trend can also worsen an already delicate and frail sectarian-political balance within Lebanon.

In addition, the direct spillover of the Syrian civil war and the presence of the Islamic State and al-Nusra militants along the Syrian-Lebanon border represent a further source of instability, as reflected not only by the ongoing hostage crisis – itself the product of a jihadist attack on Lebanon – but also by the repeated and continued clashes between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces on the one hand, and the Islamic State and al-Nusra on the other.

Notes

- 1 The video announcing the creation of the caliphate “This is the Promise of Allah” (*Hadna wa'd Allah*) was released in June 2014.
- 2 Omayma Abdel-Latif, “Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Center (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2008/02/04/lebanon-s-sunni-islamists-growing-force>.
- 3 Bilal Y. Saad and Magnus Ranstorp, “Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007).
- 4 Tine Gade, “Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad,” Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 2007, <http://www.ffi.no/no/rapporter/07-02727.pdf>.
- 5 Yoram Schweitzer and Benedetta Berti, “The Bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut: Hitting Two Birds with One Stone,” *INSS Insight* No. 488, November 21, 2013, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=5999>.

- 6 Martin Chulov, "Lebanon 'Captures Iranian Embassy Bombing Mastermind,'" *The Guardian*, January 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/01/lebanon-captures-iranian-embassy-bombing-mastermind>.
- 7 Nour Samaha, "Twin Suicide Bomb Attacks Rock Lebanon," *al-Jazeera*, January 11, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/01/twin-suicide-bomb-attacks-rock-lebanon-2015111113944330224.html>.
- 8 "Qaeda-linked ISIS Claims Beirut Suicide Blast," *al-Akhbar*, January 4, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18116>. See, for example, Anne Barnard and Mohammad Ghannam, "Lebanon Detains 17 Said to Be Islamist Militants," *New York Times*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/world/middleeast/a-dozen-men-reportedly-islamist-militants-detained-in-beirut-hotel.html>.
- 9 "Report: ISIL Names 'Emir' for Lebanon, Sets Up Suicide Bombers Training Camp," *Naharnet*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/136872>.
- 10 "Lebanon Arrests Fugitive Cleric Ahmad al-Assir," *al-Arabiya*, August 15, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/08/15/Lebanese-authorities-detain-hardline-leader-Ahmed-al-Assir.html>.
- 11 Benedetta Berti, "Lebanon's Growing Fragility," *INSS Insight*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9877>.
- 12 See Lizzie Dearden, "Lebanese Soldiers Killed during Border Battle with Islamist Militants from Syria," *The Independent*, January 24, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanese-soldiers-killed-during-border-battle-with-islamist-militants-from-syria-10000144.html>; "22 Dead in Hezbollah Clashes with ISIS on Northeast Lebanon Border," *Daily Star*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jun-09/301207-isis-attacks-hezbollah-posts-in-north-of-arsal.ashx>.
- 13 Radwan Mortada, "Jihadi militants in Lebanon establishing 'Islamic State of Qalamoun' near Eرسال," *al-Akhbar*, January 8, 2015, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23129>.
- 14 Mario Abou Zeid, "The Emerging Jihadist Threat in Lebanon," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 28, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/01/28/emerging-jihadist-threat-in-lebanon/i0s2>.
- 15 Nicholas Blanford, "Lebanese Christians Next in Line for Islamic State," *The Times*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4221655.ece>.
- 16 *Ad-Diyar*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.addiyar.com/article/899799>; "Hezbollah Repels IS Attack on Lebanon-Syria Border," *AP*, June 9, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-repels-attack-lebanon-syria-border-090543560.html>.
- 17 "US Delivers \$25m Weapons to Lebanon for Fight against Islamic Extremists," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/us-25m-weapons-lebanon-islamic-extremists>.