

In the Wake of the Islamic State Threat: Repercussions on Sunni-Shi'i Competition in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appointed caliph of the 'Islamic State' proclaimed in 2014 over territories in Iraq and Syria, did not hide the expansionist aims of his organization, Da'esh (also known as ISIS), in the Levant. Going beyond the alarmist excesses of some analyses, the menace of radical Islam for Lebanese sovereignty in particular sounds credible. Da'esh has more than one reason to be interested in Lebanon and to achieve a breakthrough there, even if only a partial one. Moreover, its infiltration would seem to be facilitated by the presence of 1.2 million Syrian refugees as much as by the infatuation with the cause of the Islamic State by certain components of the Lebanese Sunni community. But what are the real risks of a successful invasion by the Islamic State's fighters? And, most importantly, what resources can Lebanon bring to bear in order to prevent it? Faced with these undeniable sources of destabilization, two armed forces can take to the field: the Lebanese army and Hezbollah. But neither can pursue any sort of protection of the borders and national territory successfully without both political will on the part of Lebanon's ruling parties and international assistance and cooperation on several levels.

KEYWORDS: Lebanon, ISIS, Hezbollah, Lebanese army, Sunnism, Shi'ism, Syria

Introduction

In early August 2014, the sudden, massive attack by two jihadi Islamist organizations – Jabhat al-Nusrah (JN) and Da'esh (also known as ISIS) –

on the town of ‘Arsal in Lebanon’s northeastern Biqa‘ sent a wave of panic through Lebanon. Just a month before, the ‘Islamic State’ had been proclaimed by ISIS in recently conquered territories of western Iraq and northeastern Syria. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the designated ‘caliph’ of that latest political creation, presented it to the world as an empire under construction destined eventually to encompass the entire Levant. The interpretation put by local observers on the assault against ‘Arsal a few weeks later is widely shared: visibly encouraged by its seizing of strategic parts of two of the largest states in the Middle East, ISIS had put Lebanon at the head of the list of future countries to win.

The situation indeed seems favourable, if only for the establishment of a first embryonic Islamicized space in Lebanon. For some years now, several radical movements have been developing within the country’s Sunni community. They seem determined to ‘return’ to this branch of Islam the political prominence that it enjoyed in the 1990s and 2000s, which it felt deprived of by the meteoric rise of the Shi‘i Hezbollah on the national scene. Gradually, frustrations and the need to ‘get even’ resonated increasingly among some Sunnis, so that some today see ISIS as a credible champion of the community. Security breakdowns have been a regular occurrence, especially since the late 1990s, in the country’s two main Sunni areas – Tripoli in the north and Sidon in the south; because of this, various networks of Islamist radicals became well established in the country, and their capacity to harm was not trivial.

The current regional context, through the impact of the large-scale tragedy unfolding in neighbouring Syria since 2011, further heightens the sensitivity of much of the Sunni community to the growing power of ISIS. Beyond the antipathy that much of the Lebanese Sunni community harbours toward the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, accused, among other things, of having sponsored the assassination in February 2005 of former prime minister, Rafic Hariri, the steady influx of Syrian refugees at an unprecedented level seems to open Lebanon’s doors a bit wider to radical Islamist fighters. Because of the anti-ISIS international military coalition led by the United States to battle the Islamic State, Lebanon was weighed down in 2014 by fears that strikes against the ISIS ranks in Iraq and Syria would have the jihadist fighters surging into the Lebanese hinterlands.

The threat that ISIS constitutes for Lebanon is undeniable. Beyond the alarmist discourse, however, three things remain to be analysed: (i)

the objective range of possibilities that exist for ISIS in Lebanon, (ii) the leverage that Beirut's political and security forces have for securing the national territory, and (iii) the role that Hezbollah, seen by some as responsible for the increasing Sunni-Shi'i tension in Lebanon, can play in keeping ISIS's threat over Lebanon under control.

Lebanon, new home of Islamic radicalism in the Levant?

Regional Sunni Islamic networks in Lebanon²

Until the eruption of popular protest against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Syria's descent into throes of violence, and its destabilizing impact on neighbouring countries, Lebanon had succeeded well enough in looking like a country immunized against the various temptations of political Islam.³ To be sure though, militant Islam has never been completely absent from the Lebanese social and political scenes. Starting in the 1930s, the Muslim Brotherhood, the first genuine incarnation of Middle Eastern political Islam in modern times, branched off rapidly from its Egyptian breeding ground to the rest of the region and officially landed in Lebanon in 1964 as al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah, the Islamic Group.⁴ But from the time it appeared on the Lebanese scene, it struggled to position itself in the already very structured and rigid makeup of the country's political life. Indeed, it was given its first notable political role by the regime of Hafez al-Assad after the entry of Syrian troops in Lebanon in 1976. Choosing to steer clear of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Ba'ath protests and refraining from reacting to the bombardment of the latter's positions in Aleppo and Hama in 1980 and 1982, the Islamic Group was co-opted by Damascus. During the years of Syria's tutelage over Lebanon (1990-2005), and for some years after Syria withdrew its troops, the Islamic Group hence functioned as an auxiliary force for Assad's allies in Lebanon.

The significant turning point the region experienced in the late 1970s with the fall of the Shah of Iran is not without its profound impact on Lebanon. For the country's Shi'i community, it meant – amongst other things – the appearance in 1982 of al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah fi Lubnan, the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon (IRL), followed soon by the creation of its socio-political wing Hezbollah.⁵ However, despite the many contemporary analyses invariably denouncing Tehran's aspirations

to 'export its revolution',⁶ the Lebanese Shi'i militancy gave ultimate priority to the armed struggle against the occupation of the South by Israel and its local proxy to the detriment of creating an Islamicized regime in Beirut.⁷ The fact is that, for its more than thirty year existence, Hezbollah's leadership has not changed its position on the issue, regularly reiterating, since the signing of the Ta'if Accords⁸ in 1989, its acceptance of state institutions. Hezbollah thus remained committed to continued participation in domestic politics on the basis of a 'consensual' management of national affairs.⁹ Better yet, in 2013, it officially gave its support to the 'Civil State of Believers' project developed by the Maronite religious leadership.¹⁰ The Shi'i Islamist option eventually only survived in a small militant group active in the late 1970s and 1980s called al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah, the Islamic Movement.¹¹

The first initiatives associated with contemporary Islamism-inspired groups seeking to destabilize Lebanon's social and political life through violence made themselves felt in the 1990s. Their distinctive feature is that they remain, on the whole, the prerogative of small Palestinian groups based in refugee camps in the Sunni south and north. These include 'Usbat al-Ansar (the League of the Partisans) and al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah al-Mujahidah (The Islamic Fighter's Movement) in the 'Ayn al-Hilwah camp in the Sidon area; and Jund Allah (The Soldiers of God); and then, from the second half of the 2000s, Fatah al-Islam (The Conquest of Islam), in the Nahr al-Barid camp in Northern Lebanon.¹² Few and far between, highly contextualized and small scale, their operations drew little attention from the authorities and public opinion, particularly since they were carried out by non-Lebanese elements. The Islamist menace thus seemed to be a distant threat.

However, at the end of December 1999, the 'events at Danniyah' revealed the existence of Lebanese Sunni Islamist networks in the north of the country,¹³ and in 2003, during the American war against Iraq, there was some talk of Lebanese Sunni elements having gone off to fight for Saddam Hussein's regime. But this, again, the public viewed these as isolated phenomena.¹⁴ On 5 February 2006, following the publication of cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, protests were held in Beirut, and the demonstration soon turned into a riot.¹⁵ The government tried to restore calm by portraying the agitators as 'external elements' infiltrating Lebanon from Syria at the behest of the Syrian regime. The conspiracy theory was thus invoked to insist that no radical network

existed in Lebanon. A second episode of Islamist violence in the spring of the following year once more put the authorities on the spot when Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army clashed for more than three months in the Palestinian camp at Nahr al-Barid.¹⁶ Once again, a majority of the fighters belonged to non-Lebanese nationalities (Palestinian, Syrian, and Saudi), and Fatah al-Islam was said to have very close ties to the Syrian regime's intelligence services.¹⁷ The only repercussions on Lebanese territory remained within the confines of the Palestinian refugee camps: contained within the camp perimeter by the national armed forces, they hence had a limited impact.

The eruption of protests in Syria in the spring of 2011 no longer let the ostrich keep its head in the sand. The first Lebanese showcase of an unaccommodating Islam was embodied for a short but charged time by Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir. A Sunni cleric based in Sidon's 'Abra suburb, starting in 2012, he posed a dual competitive challenge to the Sunni political leadership and the Islamic religious leadership in Lebanon in general. Not only did his mobilization discourse try to turn the Syrian revolution to his advantage – that the Future Current (FC), the main Sunni party, already intended to stand up for on behalf of the community – but Assir also tried to pose in the first instance as a matter of religious morality by reference to Islam. His group of Lebanese and Palestinians, for the most part, was as hostile toward Hezbollah as the institutions of the Lebanese state – particularly the army, accused of being Hezbollah's subcontractor. The group hence undertook a series of attacks against army posts, the last of which, in June 2013, had the firebrand cleric go into hiding after clashes that left 16 dead and a hundred wounded among the military's ranks.¹⁸

In early August 2014, in an unprecedented scenario, several thousand JN and ISIS fighters launched a first-ever assault on Lebanese army positions in the town of 'Arsal, in the northeast region bordering Syria.¹⁹ The initial explanation given by the jihadists justifies the attack as retaliation for the arrest on 2 August of Imad Jomaa, the Syrian rebel and radical Islamist leader,²⁰ by Lebanese security forces. The assault was ultimately repulsed, but it ended with more than fifteen Lebanese soldiers and police taken hostage.

What has to be grasped is how the attack by Da'esh and JN in August 2014 stands out against this background of the more or less serious, sporadic tremors caused by radical Islam in Lebanon. For ISIS and JN,

it was not their first destabilizing action in the country. By the time the assault took place, the northern Biqa' and the southern suburbs of Beirut, two of the three great Lebanese Shi'i strongholds, had been rocked several times for two years by car bombs and suicide attacks by the two organizations.²¹ The ones responsible for these suicide operations, Arab nationals in the great majority of cases, justified their actions as punishing Hezbollah for its involvement in the Syrian conflict on the side of Bashar al-Assad's forces.

But with the attack on 'Arsal, four factors would cause real concern among the Lebanese population and part of its political class. The first is that the form taken by the attack was that of an invasion in force led by an organization that, a month earlier, had just proven its credibility by defeating both the Syrian and Iraqi armies. The second is that the aforementioned Jomaa would soon confess under interrogation that the attack had been planned for some time and aimed at establishing a first Islamicized political entity in the Lebanese hinterland.²² Several articles and eyewitness accounts disseminated in the Lebanese media had already reported on the actions and methods of several JN and ISIS armed elements in the town, suggesting steps to take over its management and administration.²³ Third, reactions in support of ISIS and hostile to the Lebanese army would manifest themselves even within the Lebanese Sunni community. These would multiply and become progressively more daring, suggesting that radical Islam was no longer a 'foreign conspiracy outside Lebanese society', but that ISIS was metastasizing in the Lebanese body politic. Finally, the offshoots of Da'esh in Lebanon seem even more difficult to uproot in the short and medium term now that they are fed by the presence of more than one million Syrian refugees. Radical Islam, perceived in the Lebanese imagination not too long ago as a phenomenon peculiar to Palestinian refugee camps, thus appears much more threatening today, now that it has made its bed in the tents of the Syrian refugees – much more numerous than their Palestinian counterparts and spread more widely across the country's geography.

Syrian refugees: favoured vectors for ISIS and JN in Lebanon

By the end of August 2014, the number of registered Syrian refugees outside the borders of their country reached a record three million.²⁴ Of the three million, 1,175,500 are in Lebanon, a country of four million people. In other words, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon represents more

than 25% of the host population. Some forecasts estimate the number of Syrian refugees who will be registered by the end of December at 1.5 million, which means that once the number of 400,000 Palestinians already living in Lebanon is added, by the year's end, there will be one refugee for every two Lebanese in Lebanon.

Number of Syrian Registered Refugees in Lebanon 2011-2014

Apr 2011	Apr 2012	Apr 2013	Apr 2014	Aug 2014	Dec 2014 (estimated)
2,058	17,817	355,719	1,000,000	1,175,504	1,500,000

Source: <www.unhcr.org> August 2014

The presence of such numbers of Syrian refugees scattered throughout Lebanon poses a number of problems for this small country and its very fragile socioeconomic infrastructure.²⁵ Amongst other things, the Lebanese population has found it increasingly difficult to live on good terms with the new Syrian residents. The principal grounds for resentment are mainly socioeconomic: refugees are accused of posing a sizeable competitive force in the labour market. The issue of Syrian refugees also feeds debate at the political level, just as the Palestinian refugees did before them. Among Christians – especially Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Current – the fear is that the refugees will never return to Syria. Eventual naturalization, given their majoritarian adherence to the Sunni confession, raises fears that the balance of power between religious groups will be jeopardized.

The main fear, however, is that Da'esh and JN will use this huge pool of Syrians – willingly or not – to infiltrate and start up sovereign networks in Lebanon. The talk today is of nearly 3,000 sleeper cells of Salafist jihadists in Lebanon that are very difficult to identify.²⁶ For one thing, it is impossible to recognize the destabilizing elements among border-crossing refugees. Beyond that, some Lebanese communities even constitute comfortable rear bases for the jihadists, (i) be they Sunni, hence sympathetic as a group to the Syrian revolution and the rebels, and/or (ii) where the refugees outnumber the residents in such proportions, sometimes triple or quadruple, that local authorities feel – and *de facto* are – deprived of any authority over their community. It is not by chance that the jihadists selected 'Arsal as priority terrain to take, for example. The city is strategically located on the border at a point that makes it

a prime gateway for the rebels into Lebanon. The refugees are thought to outnumber residents by 100,000 to 35,000,²⁷ the latter mostly Sunni, largely won over to the cause of the Revolution and harangued every Friday by a radical cleric, Shaykh Mustafa Hujayri, aka Abu Taqiyyah.²⁸ ‘Ali Hujayri, the mayor, was himself implicated several years earlier in attacks by anti-Assad elements against Lebanese army positions in the region.²⁹ Reports, articles in the press, and eyewitnesses have for several months flagged initiatives by jihadists living in the ‘Arsal camp designed to bring the refugee and local populations under their Islamic heel and make themselves the reference authority in the town.

The potential threat associated with some of the refugees combined with the socioeconomic situation of the Syrians in Lebanon has had the unfortunate effect of strengthening the power of Da‘esh and JN over a segment of this population. It took place in a process of radicalization through a feedback loop of negative interactions: the need for Lebanese authorities to check the identity of refugees in order to identify and control troublemakers led to army and police procedures that the refugees chafe under. The suspicion that is then engendered toward them by the host population, the socioeconomic rivalries, and, more recently, the yearning to exact revenge after the ‘Arsal incidents, has led more and more Lebanese to react with disdain and hostility. These have produced aggression against Syrian workers, court orders to move tents within 48 hours, or even outright setting makeshift camps on fire.³⁰ Syrian refugees, put under surveillance by Lebanese forces of law and order and abused daily in the public and professional space by the locals, have been increasingly tempted to turn to Da‘esh for protection and social advantage. They have been consequently less and less likely to keep radical Islam from moving in among them.³¹ Their doing so in turn has encouraged the Lebanese authorities as well as the population to cling to, if not raise, their suspicion – and their animosity. As an illustration of such a scenario in action, Syrian refugees organized a demonstration in late September 2014 after the end of a Friday sermon in front of ‘Arsal’s city council building to protest alleged mistreatment by law enforcement in the aftermath of the attack by Da‘esh and JN. Among the slogans chanted, those by the two jihadi organizations struck a belligerent tone: the protesters put the Lebanese army on notice, sang the praises of Da‘esh, and invited JN to ‘invade Beirut.’³²

The Syrian crisis and the domestic inter-Lebanese situation

For the record, Lebanon's political scene has been split since 2005 between the 14 March Alliance – an essentially Sunni and Christian coalition of parties and individuals opposed to the Syrian regime that consists mainly of the Future Current (FC) of Saad Hariri and the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea – and the March 8 Coalition, which has favoured maintaining close ties with Damascus and is led by Hezbollah with the support of the Free Patriotic Current of Michel Aoun.

It has been assumed by the 14 March movement that Assad's ouster and the advent of real democracy in Syria would result almost automatically in a decisive victory over March 8 in Lebanon, and thus the marginalization of Hezbollah. In this view, the changing balance of power between the Syrian regime in Damascus and its opposition would logically and necessarily replicate itself between the two coalitions in Lebanon. In reality, however, the belief in such a direct relationship between the politics of the two countries ignores the kind of leverage exerted by Hezbollah on Lebanon's political stage, just as it wrongly assumes that any successor to the Assad dynasty is bound to act kindly towards anti-Assad Lebanese forces. The ramifications in Lebanon demonstrate, contrary to the popular adage, that the enemy of one's enemy is not necessarily one's friend. Indeed, the major role played by the radical Islamic groups in the Syrian opposition hardly strengthens the 14 March movement; rather, it simultaneously weakens the two major Sunni and Christian sectarian factions within it.

A Sunni community in crisis

If the threat posed by Da'esh and JN for Lebanon is real, it is not however so much because it is posed by thousands of refugees scattered throughout the country, but because the two jihadi organizations appear to have created many partisans and sympathizers within the Lebanese Sunni community itself who are willing to serve as their enablers if not actual troops.³³ There is also a well-founded fear that the country's two main Muslim communities, Sunni and Shi'i, will resort to force of arms to settle the dispute over the Syrian question and thus countenance the risk of plunging Lebanon into the throes of a civil war.

For several years now, Sunni Lebanon has gone through both a political and identity crisis, which, in view of ISIS's power in the region,

makes it dangerously susceptible to the cause of radical Islam. Most analyses of a general Sunni *'ibbat*, or disenchantment, try to explain the phenomenon as the 'absence of a strong and credible leadership' of the community, particularly in its confrontation with Hezbollah. The reality of this disenchantment, however, is more complex than that. Of all the Lebanese confessions, the Sunni community has been the prime beneficiary of the redistribution of powers established by the 1990 Ta'if Agreement. The Executive is primarily represented and reinforced by the Council of Ministers chaired by the – obligatorily – Sunni Prime Minister. Since the end of the war, he has therefore been the country's top politician, to the detriment of the President of the Republic, a Maronite, who was stripped of many privileges at the war's end. In addition, the efforts undertaken during the tutelage (1990-2005) by the Syrian regime to maintain Christian conservatives under control, which the Sunni forces had opposed during the war, and to shut the door to Hezbollah entering the government despite its already being the primary representative of the Shi'ite community, thus allowed the Sunnis to settle into being the country's pre-eminent political community. The IRL's military victory over the Israeli army in southern Lebanon and the end of 22 years of occupation wrested from Israeli troops by the Shi'ite fighters has created mixed feelings within the Sunni community. The admiration for the IRL triumphs where all the Arab regimes had invariably failed for the past fifty years was shot through with discomfort... 'and jealousy'.³⁴ The position Hezbollah then occupied as the best on the Levantine front in the promotion of the Palestinian cause undercut, for the first time, the Sunni community whose main warhorse had been the fight against Zionism. No longer in the forefront of the fight against the latter, it disparaged the invitation by militant Shi'ism to Sunnism for a joining of ranks and so continue to fight for the cause. Instead, a lot of Lebanese Sunnis began to withdraw from the national paradigms in favour of more communitarian-centred narratives.³⁵ This 'detaching' of the Lebanese Sunni imagination from the anti-sectarian ideal that had been its credo since the 1950s gradually came to favour a new *'patriotisme de communauté'* (to quote Maxime Rodinson)³⁶ narrowly focused on the faith community. Undoubtedly, the end of the Syrian tutelage gave Hezbollah, kept in check by Damascus on the domestic scene until then, a new and appreciable flexibility that had it join the government for the first time in 2005 after having been an effective presence in Parliament since 1992.

Faced with the various successes of Hezbollah on the same domestic scene since,³⁷ the Sunni community's narratives establish a causal link between their community's weakening political position and the meteoric rise of Shi'i power. The retreat into community became more radical, to the point where, when Saad Hariri's cabinet was ousted in January 2011 by a blocking minority of its Shi'i and Christians opponents, and he was replaced by Najib Mikati, a moderate, the community turned its back on the new prime minister, accusing him of 'treachery'.

In addition, Saad Hariri's self-imposed exile following the fall of his government and his prolonged absence from Lebanon have left his community feeling 'abandoned,' hence 'vulnerable' – and more susceptible to new discourses that, especially beginning in 2012-2013, trend toward an identification of its fate with that of the Syrian protests.³⁸ Ahmad al-Assir incarnated for a time a window into this Lebanese Sunnism tired of waiting for action by the FC against Hezbollah, and tempted by the Salafist and regional jihadist options. Profiting from Saad Hariri's absence, Assir aspired to become the new leader of the community, in which communitarian pride and religious reactionary conservatism would be joined. The alternative that he offered to Hariri's Sunnism gained adherents within the community to the point where he had sympathizers even inside Future Current, causing some of the party's MPs to openly contradict the positions taken by its own leadership.³⁹

Thus, a dissident form of Sunnism that makes victimization its preferred political stock in trade appeared in some regions. It accused the government, particularly the army, of being a Hezbollah subcontractor, of being used primarily to hunt Sunni Islamists rather than keeping the IRL from fighting them in Syria. Moreover, the military successes racked up by the IRL on Syrian territory since its overt involvement on the side of the regime antagonized the Lebanese Sunnis who generally back the Syrian revolution. These victories are experienced as so many slaps in the face by the Lebanese Islamists. After al-Assir was defeated in June 2013 and the majority of his acolytes arrested, participation by Lebanese elements in armed terrorist actions was seen on the domestic scene in the car bomb attacks that shook mainly Beirut's southern suburbs and the northeast Bīqa', two of the three principal Shi'i strongholds in Lebanon. While most of the suicide bombers were not Lebanese, investigations show that they have largely operated with the support of Lebanese agents, including several clerics.⁴⁰ Since the first week of August 2014, there has

been a succession of incidents where Da'esh flags and graffiti glorifying it and JN have been spotted in public places, on tunnel walls, and in large passageways in Sunni regions. After JN and ISIS slaughtered several military prisoners taken during the Battle of 'Arsal, the Lebanese were to learn that two of the jihadis who carried out the execution of the first victim, a Sunni soldier from north Lebanon, were themselves Lebanese from the same region.

At the present time, the army and the Lebanese political class in general are on high alert. There is real fear of an invasion by Da'esh and JN from the outside, which could, in the measure that it precipitates chaos and crisis, moreover bring out more Lebanese supporters than imagined. There are in fact other Lebanese locales with the same great features as 'Arsal that favour the establishment of Islamic Da'esh-ian islands in the country. Serious concerns exist about the Akkar region that also sits open on the Syrian border and, by extension, to Tripoli. This largely Sunni, ultra-poor, zone traditionally abandoned by governmental social services, has seen radical networks proliferate within it for more than fifteen years. In Tripoli, a security regimen had finally been put in place in early April 2014 and seemed to yield satisfactory results. However, the events at 'Arsal emboldened radical Sunni networks in the north, and led to a resurgence of violence, especially against the Lebanese military.⁴¹ Finally, the area around Shebaa (Shab'a)-Kfarshuba could in the future have pride of place as a new Lebanese area at risk. It also lies on the Syrian border but this time farther south and just a few kilometres from the border with Israel.⁴² Since the late 2000s the – mainly Sunni and Druze – Shebaa Kfarshuba region has indeed witnessed a proliferation of Salafizing conservatives.⁴³

Paradox of the 14 March Christians

Lebanese Christians of all political persuasions are not happy with the growing role played by the Sunni jihadists at the heart of the anti-Assad networks. Shocked by what their Iraqi co-religionists have suffered in recent years and what has begun to happen to their counterparts in Syria, Lebanese Christians saw the arrival in Lebanon of a similar regime of repression, abuse and, ultimately, forced exile, as their worst nightmare.

Within the Lebanese Christian community, two main political factions have vied for popular support since 2005. While Samir Geagea, the leader of the Christian faction within the 14 March movement,

depends on the moderate and Western-allied Sunni (FC), Aoun's Free Patriotic Current (FPC) in the opposing camp is wary of Hariri's close links with Saudi Arabia and glorify its alliance with a Hezbollah whose behaviour in Islamo-Christian relations has for years been depicted by the FPC as exemplary. Giving it a hand, Hezbollah's media, which diligently covers all abuses committed against Christians by Sunni jihadi groups throughout the region, has taken every opportunity to highlight Hezbollah's strong ties with Christians. Christians who are already favourably inclined toward Hezbollah have hence had no reason to change their position. This is all the more so in light of the position in which their 14 March co-religionists found themselves given the rise of jihadist groups in the Syrian opposition. Indeed, Geagea, who had argued for months after the outbreak of the insurrection in Syria that an Islamist regime in Syria would not prove harmful to Christians, abruptly abandoned that claim by the end of 2012.

The weakening of the Sunnis' position in Lebanon enhances this destabilization of the Lebanese anti-Assad Christians. Syria's turmoil has effectively accelerated the shattering of Sunni unity, which was already under stress in recent years due to a series of setbacks suffered by the FC, as well as by the emergence of pockets of radical Islamists. Faced with the militarization of the conflict next door as in 2012, the temptation to provide reinforcements and logistical support to the insurgents was too strong for the FC to resist. Despite some initial official denials, Saad Hariri said nothing in November 2012 when pressed about the mounting evidence implicating his associates in the supply of arms and funding for the rebels.⁴⁴ This direct involvement in the Syrian conflict as well as the clear support for the rebels provided by the FC's external sponsor, Saudi Arabia, not to mention the overt support voiced by several FC members of Parliament in 2012 and 2013 for the radical Sunni cleric Ahmad al-Assir, fatally undermined the efforts by Hariri's faction to present itself as an effective firewall against extremist groups. All the more so since, when the radical Sunni groups challenged the state's authority even, at times, with violence between 2012-2013, FC MPs from Tripoli defended their actions without any public rebuke from the leadership. Thus, Hariri's pledges of moderation have consistently proved difficult to uphold, as he showed himself unable to rein in these groups. No wonder then that the arrival on the scene of the Islamic State in July 2014 stoked fears, and many are the statements that filter through to the press from supporters

of the Lebanese Forces who have come to prefer good relations or even a formal alliance with Hezbollah.⁴⁵

Why Lebanese Shi'a do not support the fall of Assad

The community that would logically appear most susceptible to changing its political allegiance in light of the Syrian crisis remains the Shi'a themselves. Indeed, IRL's intervention on the side of Assad's forces has reverberated strongly in Lebanon, especially with respect to security. Reprisals by the Syrian opposition have already taken the form of several car or suicide bombings, mainly in two Shi'i strongholds. While it is undeniable that these incidents have spread unease and fear among the Shi'is, any thought that they could trigger a massive political desertion by the community would seem to be delusory.

The Shi'is of Lebanon have three reasons for not supporting the fall of Assad's regime. The first relates to the bipolarity of the political scene. The two camps and their followers hold highly defined views regarding their political, factional, regional, and international allegiances. On the one hand, March 8 is allied to Syria and Iran and regards Russia favourably. On the other, a large part of 14 March followers have no problem dealing with Israel, are friendly toward Saudi Arabia, and, at the international level, consider France and the US their natural protectors. Thus, without necessarily retaining any admiration for the Damascus regime – let alone any endorsement of its policies and behaviour – the strong majority of Shi'a 'naturally' prefer it as the lesser evil compared to one which would upset the regional equilibrium.

Over the past 20 years, the community has also formed very special, very strong, and very complex bonds with Hezbollah. The party's successive victories over the Israeli occupation and its social and political achievements on the domestic front have certainly built up solid confidence in its strategic acuity. But those accomplishments have also sparked a revival of communal identity, based on a new 'Shi'i pride,' the promotion of a collective self-image. In this way, the party has empowered the community to rid itself of inferiority complexes that it has suffered from for decades, if not centuries, thus inspiring a strong, durable feeling of gratitude toward Hezbollah and, accordingly, cementing an enduring political bond between the party and the community.

Finally, the majority of Shi'is are unlikely to desert Hezbollah because of their strong hostility toward the Sunni jihadist groups in the Syrian

opposition. Christians are not the only religious group anxious about the jihadists' growing importance. Shi'is feel much the same fear because they know that the hatred directed by these groups at them is based as much on religious as on political differences. In a country whose state lacks the resources to assure its citizens' security, Hezbollah may appear – as paradoxical as it may seem – as the only group capable of defending its community – and the nation.

What blocking capacities exist?

In theory, the army is the only one fit to challenge extremism

In the context of the threat posed by Da'esh and JN for Lebanon, all eyes turn to the Lebanese army. However, it is far from having the muscle to face its new adversary. Historically, it has never really been a strong institution and has never really had the wherewithal for its mission of protecting the country against external threats. Regional contexts, it is true, have not helped it in this regard, given the imbalance of power against Israeli troops, and the Syrian tutelage that kept the army in a hierarchical relationship with Damascus. But the problem of material capability is also due to the structure of Lebanese political life that refuses to give to the army (hence to whatever faction is in power) the means for reining in a political – or a confessional – group for the benefit of another.

According to experts, the Lebanese army for all intents and purposes is chronically undermanned. The fact is that it has 56,000 arguably under-trained troops today, and it remains underfunded.⁴⁶ At the end of the civil war in the early 1990s, the institution was receiving large subsidies from the state, up to more than 20% of total budget expenditures, but not to modernize, equip, or train it. The aim instead is to cut down on the unemployment of recently disarmed militia members by integrating them into the army.⁴⁷ Moreover, compulsory military service was abolished in 2007. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops and the end of the Damascus tutelage in 2005, American aid increases have been systematically held up or cancelled to refrain from giving the Lebanese army equipment that could be used against the Israeli army, or that, according to Tel Aviv, 'could fall into the hands of Hezbollah.'⁴⁸ The Lebanese army's performance in the field consequently holds no surprise.

In December 2013, Saudi Arabia made an official gift of three billion dollars to the Lebanese army, in the form of military equipment to be ordered from the French by the Lebanese general staff. Ten months later, Lebanon, having already sent its requisition to the Paris government some time earlier, still had received nothing, and Paris had on several occasions assured Tel Aviv that ‘nothing would be delivered to Lebanon that could alter the balance of forces with Israel.’⁴⁹ When the Da‘esh attack on ‘Arsal started, the material that was to have been supplied by France was missing in action, at the moment when it was badly needed by the Lebanese army.⁵⁰

The Lebanese army lacks not only equipment. It also needs more men, according to the government. Hence, after the fighting with Da‘esh was over, the latter decided to add an additional 5,000 soldiers in the short term.⁵¹ But there again, the decision was fraught with complex consequences. On top of the additional pay that will have come out of budget already handicapped by a \$65 billion debt,⁵² the Lebanese army’s system of compensation will require government spending far in excess of the Treasury’s capacity.⁵³ Without significant foreign financial assistance, expanding the military manpower pool, although absolutely necessary, will also mean a large, unavoidable expense too heavy for Beirut’s budgetary to shoulder alone.

Action by government: too little too late

Another obstacle to effective action by the Lebanese army against the jihadist Sunni radicalism in Lebanon is of a political nature. More than clientelism and negligence, confessionalism prevents law enforcement from carrying out its function. It is sometimes difficult to crack down in Sunni areas in pursuit of jihadist elements. Confessional solidarity seems in fact in Lebanon a much stronger attachment factor than adherence to the law. Some of the Sunni politicians of 14 March, especially during the prolonged absence of Saad Hariri, have thus gradually distanced themselves considerably from the official legalistic FC discourse. Consequently, while Tripoli has experienced recurring violent episodes between Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods since the mid-2000s, the army was prevented from actually taking action because of patronage and confessionalism. A security plan was finally implemented in April 2014 that should have worked. But faced with aggressive action by the army, which would put many radical jihadist elements behind bars, many

FC members of Parliament – including all of those from the Tripoli region – attacked the military and portrayed the city as the ‘target of a campaign directed against the Sunni community.’ In July 2014, the Minister of Interior, Nuhad al-Mashnuk (a Sunni), still insisted on the fact that ‘Da‘esh in Lebanon represents no more than a small number of people’ and that ‘the overwhelming majority of the Sunnis, not to say 100% of them [...] remain attached to moderation and civility’.⁵⁴ Even the events at ‘Arsal did not succeed in bringing the entire Sunni political class to a one united stance. In September 2014, Ashraf Rifi, Minister of Justice, former head of police and FC favourite, railed loudly against a group of Christian young people who responded to the events of ‘Arsal by preparing to burn a Da‘esh flag on a public road. Posing as a defender of his community’s values, he accused them of attacking Islam’s religious symbols (including the names of God and the Prophet appearing on the flag) and threatened to prosecute them. A few weeks later, he intervened personally to help two jihadist leaders – Shadi Mawlawi and Ahmad Mikati, who had been surrounded by the army after three days of urban warfare – escaped. During the same period, Khaled Daher, an FC MP of the North, was caught cordially associating with known IS and JN leaders living in the Tripoli region.⁵⁵ He was reported to have ‘coordinated’ with Ahmad Mikati, who sent him video clips of Sunni members of the army who had just deserted to join ISIS/JN. Daher’s answer was that ‘the army was just looking for an excuse to kill us and violate my constituents [Northerners].’⁵⁶ In other words, the Lebanese army’s means, facing ISIS and JN, are all the more limited since both government and Parliament still need to show a more effective unity on the stand to adopt against radical Islam.

Hezbollah: a capacity for resistance limited by confessional logic

Under the shadow cast over Lebanon by Da‘esh and JN, the IRL far more than the army represents the force that has both adequate training and equipment. Establishing with certainty its forces and its weapons inventory is impossible. But what is undeniable is that more than fifteen years spent fighting an effective guerrilla war against the Israeli occupying troops have forged one of the best Arab fighting forces in the Middle East. In 2000, the IRL succeeded where the rest of the regular forces in the region had failed: it forced the Israeli army for the first time in its history to withdraw unconditionally from a territory it occupied.

Despite limited manpower,⁵⁷ the IRL in the summer of 2006 stymied every objective declared by Israel for a 33 day war it launched against Lebanon. The win demonstrated that Hezbollah's parent organization had lost none of its capacity after six years of calm on the southern border, and, so far, the most frequent success of its interventions alongside the Syrian army testifies to the fact that the condition of IRL seems to be quite satisfactory still.⁵⁸

Flashback to an intervention outside national borders

If Hezbollah's leaders have supported – from the very beginning – the Lebanese government's policy of non-intervention in the Syrian crisis, it has not kept them from taking a clear position in favour of Assad's regime, even while calling for a negotiated settlement. It must not be forgotten that cooperation between the Ba'athist regime in Damascus and Hezbollah, which began in the early 1990s, was built on a strategic alliance that has consisted essentially of Syria's facilitating the transfer of arms from Iran to IRL. In its various defeats of the Israeli army, the group became to a certain extent indebted to the Assad dynasty. This explains why, despite Damascus's decades-long avoidance of any armed challenge to Tel Aviv, Hezbollah still considers the Syrian leadership to be a 'regime of resistance against Israel.'

This arrangement would probably not survive in the event that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or the Sunni jihadi groups actually took power. The Syrian opposition factions did not wait for Hezbollah fighters to actually cross the border before declaring their hostility toward and issuing threats against the party. In January 2012, the FSA spokesman, Col. Ammar al-Wawi, even warned that Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, would be 'held accountable for his actions before revolutionary courts after the victory of the Syrian revolution.'⁵⁹ In the following fall, the head of al-Qa'idah in Syria (as it was then known), Majid al-Majid, issued a specific threat, announcing his intention to conduct attacks against tourist sites in Lebanon if the government in Beirut continued to support Hezbollah.⁶⁰ Similarly, the FSA's leadership promised to bring the war into the heart of Hezbollah's southern Beirut stronghold if the party 'didn't end its support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad'.⁶¹ The rhetoric then progressively became more virulent and characterized by a sectarian, anti-Shi'i hostility as the Sunni jihadi groups, making it clear that the conflict went far beyond any ideological

or economic differences.

All of this preceded the IRL's intervention, which actually took place in two stages. The first real appearance of the IRL in Syria dates in all likelihood to the latter half of 2012.⁶² It did not involve sending combatants to fight alongside regime forces. Rather, the first units were members of local self-defence forces that formed spontaneously in the increasingly conflict-riven zone along the border.⁶³ Having never been precisely demarcated, the border between northeast Lebanon and Syria constitutes a large area that is home to some 30 villages actually inhabited by Lebanese citizens – mostly Shi'is, who are however subject to Syrian sovereignty. In view of their sectarian character, these villages were targeted early on by Sunni jihadi groups. In response, small groups of local Lebanese youth (some of which are members of Hezbollah and the IRL) took up arms in self-defence. But at the time no specific orders in that regard seem to have been issued by the Hezbollah leadership.⁶⁴

The second stage of Hezbollah's intervention on Syrian territory came with the battle of Qusayr in the spring of 2013, when IRL combatants fought this time alongside regular Syrian army forces. This intervention resulted from the convergence of interests of both the regime and Hezbollah, and its logic is readily apparent from a glance at Syrian geography. For two years (Spring 2013-2015), the IRL has been confining its zone of intervention mainly to the swath of territory along the Aleppo-Homs-Damascus axis, stretching roughly from the northwest coast of Syria (immediately north of Lebanon) along the border down to the Lebanese Shi'i region of Ba'albak al-Hirmil. The northwest coast is largely Alawite (Shi'i) and Christian; i.e., populated by the two sectarian constituencies most closely allied with the regime. With the IRL's help, the regime has focused on keeping open the major transportation routes that link the capital, Damascus, to the northwest, and on impeding the Syrian rebels' access to safe havens and, above all, a resupply base in the Biqā' provided by Sunni sympathizers. Although a southern front was opened in February 2015 on the Syrian army's initiative and with IRL support, mainly to secure the regime's positions in Damascus, IRL's intervention in Syria is still motivated primarily by the defence of its own interests, reflecting less an attempt to save the Syrian regime than a proactive effort to gauge the potential impact of Assad's fall on its ability to act in Syria. Hezbollah and IRL do not need to be welcome throughout Syria; if Syria breaks up into various zones of influence as

it already more or less has, a stable, defensible sanctuary is sufficient for their main purpose of ensuring that key supply routes remain intact.

Realism and foresight first

But even if the IRL seems to win most of its face-offs with Da'esh and JN in Syria, regardless of its prowess as an armed force in the field, it risks being constrained by two non-negligible factors in its self-assigned role of protecting the Lebanese borders.

The first is the excessive confessional polarization pervading Lebanon at present. Systematic translation into confessional terms of political positions taken by the various Lebanese groups on the national as well as regional stage shuts off all access by the IRL to Sunni areas of the country and to launching any action against Da'esh and JN from these regions. Only in the non-Sunni portions of the country can the IRL theoretically hope to render assistance to the Lebanese army. Crossing that red line would immediately be interpreted as an arrogant move, a condescension by the Lebanese Shi'is toward their Sunni compatriots, a subjection of the latter under hierarchical and security control by the former – and so would stir up a hornet's nest.

The second constraining element remains the repercussions of IRL's involvement in the Syrian conflict on the Lebanese situation. IRL's presence in Syria has always been blamed by the country's Sunnis and part of the Christians, as both an immoral bias in favour of Assad, the reason for the rise of animosity between Sunnis and Shi'a domestically – and the cause for retaliation attacks by jihadist groups backing the Syrian opposition. The Shi'i community certainly supports the Hezbollah intervention in Syria, but it goes against the grain. They understand the IRL's reasons for it but still suffer jihadist retaliation; an increasing number of Shi'i family circles are mourning one or more young people killed in IRL actions in Syria.

Hezbollah's leadership seems entirely aware that the consequences of an engagement stretching over the long term are not without danger for the party, mainly in terms of their relationship with their Sunni compatriots. Regardless of the party's positions on domestic or Syrian issues, it is plain to see that its leadership since 2011 has been acting out of a rather pragmatic sense of realities. Dealing with Lebanese society first, anxious about calming the situation with the Sunnis, it moves closer than ever to a unifying discourse, conveying message after message of conciliation to

the Sunni base. Hezbollah is sending the message that it prefers viewing the trouble-makers as elements from outside the national community over opting for revenge against its Sunni compatriots. Hence, the talk is of '*irhabiiyyin*' and '*takfiriyyin*,' i.e. 'terrorists' and 'excommunicators', but never 'Sunnis'. Intensive efforts aimed at Christians are also being developed. Reassuring statements stressing that the IRL would never abandon Lebanese minorities in case of a jihadi attack, pictures of IRL fighters standing at attention and giving military salutes to Mary's statues in Christian villages in Syria sacked by jihadists, and of Shi'i fighters vowing eternal allegiance and protection 'to the Imam 'Ali and the Virgin Mary' abound on social networks. In September 2014 in Ba'albak, an area where Sunnis, Shi'is and Christians mix, Hezbollah also took the initiative of convening the region's notables for the signing of a pact between the different communities where a plea was made for a sacred, multi-confessional union against 'external threats' and for the preservation of civil peace.⁶⁵

Next, in facing the opposing political class in particular, the party practices skilful flexibility. Hezbollah, in a strong position in parliament as well as the government since January 2011, has seen the rise of jihadists in the Syrian opposition work in its favour among the Christian electorate. Nevertheless, management yielded to the 14 March Alliance several policy levers it had worked hard to monopolize since 2005. In 2013, Hezbollah first accepted that its ally Najib Mikati would be succeeded as prime minister by Tammam Salam, seen as close to Hariri. Next, it gave up key security positions (Interior and Justice portfolios) to the Sunnis of the FC, with the aim both of avoiding potential liability for failures in security matters, particularly in troubled Sunni areas (and so let the FC, i.e. a Sunni party, deal with it), and in facilitating cooperation with the international community in the fight against radical Islam. In the field, finally, Hezbollah and the IRL both are careful not to participate in any heavy-handed operations by the army in Sunni areas (Sidon, Tripoli, and Biqa').

Conclusion

The threat of an annexationist radical Islam is very real for Lebanon, due to both the presence of over one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon and

the sympathy that the jihadism of ISIS and JN appears to engender in a non-negligible portion of the Lebanese Sunni community. To stand up to a possible Da'esh-ian spearhead into Lebanese territory, the Lebanese army is far from being ideally positioned, due to a severe shortage of equipment, training – and coherent and motivated political leadership. At the time of writing this article, the promised French weapons to the Lebanese army are anticipated to be delivered soon. The Lebanese population can hope that this donation, unlike many precedents, will include game-changing weaponry that can significantly elevate the effectiveness of the army in responding to the various threats facing the country. But while waiting for these hopes to materialize, the army can very much use the IRL's help in sharing the heavy burden of protecting the borders. It remains for the political class to work towards preserving civil peace.

Notes

¹ al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fi al-'Iraq wa al-Sham, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

² On Islamic networks in Lebanon see Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) and Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). For a quick overview, see also Rola El-Husseini, 'The Current Status of Lebanon's Sunni Islamists' (Middle East Institute, 2014) <<http://www.mei.edu/content/article/current-status-lebanon%E2%80%99s-sunni-islamists>>. Accessed 2 April 2015.

³ The case of Hezbollah is very particular. Though officially an *Islamic* group, it has never been *Islamist*, in the sense of working on Islamizing the political system in Lebanon. For more details on the subject, see Aurélie Daher, 'Hezbollah as a Political Actor: An Atypical Relationship between Islam and the State' [conference paper presented at MESA, Denver, November 2012]; Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah, Mobilisation et pouvoir* (Paris: PUF, 2014).

⁴ The organization would appear as a reaction to efforts supported by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser toward Arab unity (primarily Levantine) that included Lebanon. See the organization's website at <www.al-jamaa.org>. Accessed 2 April 2015.

⁵ For a history of the IRL and Hezbollah, see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*, chapters 1-3.

⁶ To cite only a few: Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'Allah in Lebanon* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1996); Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah, The Changing Face of Terrorism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

⁷ When the founders of the IRL and then Hezbollah laid the foundation for these

two organizations, the debate raged in militant Shi'a circles about the relevance of establishing an Islamic regime in Lebanon. The Khomeinistic faction, in whose ambit Hezbollah's leadership moved, had already at the start of the 1980s abandoned any idea of Islamization of the region's governments. For more details on Hezbollah's creation and priorities, see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*.

⁸ These Accords put an end to the civil war (1975-1990) and recast the rules of political life toward a fairer sharing of power by the Muslim community.

⁹ Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*, chapter 3.

¹⁰ For more details, see 'Bkirki wa Hizb Allah ma'a al-Dawlah al-Madaniyyah al-Mu'minah', *al-Akbbar*, 3 January 2011.

¹¹ For more information on the movement, see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*, chapter 1.

¹² For more information on Islamist networks in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, see Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad* and Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East*.

¹³ On New Year's Eve 1999, the Lebanese learned of the intense fighting between the Lebanese army and Islamist insurgents in the Danniyah scrubland in northern Lebanon. The fighting would last a week and result in thirty killed: 11 soldiers, 15 fundamentalists, and 5 civilians. For a complete analysis, see Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, the chapter entitled 'Underground Jihad in Sir al-Diniyeh'.

¹⁴ Interviews with Sunni militants from Ba'albak and Tripoli who fought for Saddam Hussein in 2003.

¹⁵ 'Sabeh démissionne, Fatfat assure l'intérim', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 6 February 2006.

¹⁶ Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East*.

¹⁷ Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*.

¹⁸ 'A Saïda, l'armée pourchasse Assir et ses hommes', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 24 June 2013.

¹⁹ The exact number of combatants is difficult to gauge. The sources estimate a range between 3,000 and 7,000. Jomaa's group numbered 400 fighters but would have been reinforced immediately by several thousand JN and Da'esh fighters. 'L'attaque contre l'armée pourrait s'étendre à d'autres régions', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 4 August 2014; 'Ma'rakat al-Imarah', *al-Akbbar*, 4 August 2014.

²⁰ He would lead the *Fajr al-Islam* battalion, composed of the Faruq Brigades based in Homs, an Islamist group fighting in Syria, including in the Qalamun region. Jomaa and his men fled to 'Arsal after the jihadis were defeated by the Syrian army and Hezbollah. Going by the Islamic State proclamation, Fajr al-Islam would pledge its allegiance to ISIS, but Jomaa would deny any attachment to it and claim to adhere to Jabhat al-Nusrah. JN would categorically deny any link with Jomaa. 'Army Vows to Finish Arsal Battle in 48 Hours', *The Daily Star*, 4 August 2014; 'A Ersal, des rumeurs exagérées, mais des otages toujours en détention', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 28 August 2014.

²¹ Tripoli, the Sunni capital of the North, also suffers from civil violence, of which one high point was the attack of August 2013, with almost 50 dead and more than 500 wounded. A lot of people in Lebanon saw this attack as an attempt by the Syrian regime to destabilize Lebanon and hence ignite a confessional war between Sunnis and Shi'is.

²² 'Jomaa Confesses: Jihadists Wanted to Establish "Emirate" with Zureiqat as

Leader', *al-Nabhar* (English), 25 August 2014.

²³ 'Arsal al-Asirah', *al-Safir*, 26 August 2014; 'Ma'rakat al-Imarah', *al-Akhhbar*, 4 August 2014.

²⁴ 'Syrian refugees in Lebanon surpass one million' (UNHRC, 2014) <www.unhcr.org>. Accessed 3 August 2014.

²⁵ On the problems created by the presence of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, see for instance *L'Orient-Le Jour*: 'Le nombre de réfugiés syriens enregistrés au Liban auprès du HCR dépasse le million', 4 April 2014; 'Selon l'ONU, dans certaines localités, les réfugiés syriens sont aussi nombreux que les habitants', 13 May 2014; 'Réfugiés syriens: controverse Salam-Bassil sur la politique de distanciation', 30 June 2014; 'Fin 2014, les réfugiés syriens représenteront plus d'un tiers de la population libanaise', 4 July 2014; 'Le HCR exhorte l'Europe à faire davantage pour aider les réfugiés syriens', 15 July 2014; 'Hakim dénonce un 'exode économique' de certains réfugiés syriens', 26 July 2014; 'Les réfugiés syriens dans une extrême précarité, selon l'UNHCR', 18 August 2014; and the summary report by Nicolas (2014). Leila Nicolas, *Neighboring Insurgency*, presented at the annual meeting of Global Governance: Engaging New Norms and Emerging challenges, 19-21 June 2014 (available online).

²⁶ '3000 IS terrorists hiding in Lebanon, awaiting instructions', *al-Nabhar* (English), 21 September 2014.

²⁷ 'Nouhad Machnouk propose de déplacer les camps de réfugiés de Ersal', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 29 September 2014.

²⁸ *L'Orient-Le Jour*: 'Trois morts et huit blessés dans des accrochages entre l'armée et les habitants de Ersal', 2 February 2013, and 'Ersal: 'crime prémédité' ou 'méprise'? 4 February 2013; also see the report 'L'Armée en première ligne. Ersa, carrefour de l'islamisme', in *Magazine Hebdo*, 8 February 2013.

²⁹ A group of armed men attacked a patrol of the Lebanese army on 1 February 2013, killing two soldiers and wounding several others. A few days later, an amateur video shows Lebanese soldiers wounded but alive in a truck in the centre of 'Arsal where they were then deliberately abused and one died as a result. The mayor of the town, who some say was there, and two of whose sons had participated in the ambush, subsequently attempted to justify the attack.

³⁰ 'La cellule de crise examine les revendications des jihadistes', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 8 September 2014, and 'Les réfugiés syriens personae non gratae dans de localités chiites de la Békaa et du Sud', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 9 September 2014.

³¹ 'By constantly accusing Syrians in Lebanon, singling them out and labelling them a danger to our country, we (Lebanese) are pushing them into a corner. We are making them feel targeted and helpless. In doing so, we are making them more aggressive and hostile toward Lebanon.' International Crisis Group, *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, Middle East Report no. 141 (May 2013), 16.

³² 'La drapeau de l'EI brandi par les réfugiés à Ersa', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 26 September 2014; 'Mutadhahirun fi 'Arsal li-Amir Jabhat al-Nusra: Fut Fut Badna Nusil la-Bayrut', *al-Nabhar*, 26 September 2014.

³³ One can mention for instance that Lebanese Sunnis helped JN carry out several bombings in the southern suburbs of Beirut and Tripoli in 2013-2014. In addition,

Lebanese JN members were responsible for the beheading of Lebanese soldiers in Fall 2014. At the same time, political figures from the Sunni community have been accused of implicit support for the same radical elements, including assisting key suspects in evading capture by the Lebanese army in Tripoli (see below).

³⁴ See among others a minutely detailed and rich explanation by Bernard Rougier.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Maxime Rodinson 'La dimension religieuse du conflit libanais ou qu'est-ce qu'une communauté religieuse libanaise?', in Bassma Kodmani-Darwish (ed.), *Liban, Espoirs et réalités* (Paris: Travaux et Recherches de l'IFRI, 1987), 75.

³⁷ One could mention amongst other things: the liberation of South Lebanon from 22 years of Israeli occupation in 2000, a half dozen highly praised prisoner exchange operations with Israel (the most spectacular ones occurring in 2004 and 2008), a firm grip on the main levers of Lebanese political life since 2005 (e.g. insisting on and obtaining a blocking third within the government from 2008 to 2013, and maintaining sympathetic persons in sensitive security positions such as the head of the army).

³⁸ See for example the popular reaction and comments in the press of Hariri 'taking the community in hand, ending its sense of abandonment and putting it back on the path of moderation' when Saad Hariri returned to Lebanon for a few days to distribute a Saudi donation of one billion dollars in August 2014. See, for example, 'Des petits pas pour initier un déblocage', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 12 August 2014.

³⁹ One could mention MP Mouin Merhebi who came to the defence of Ahmad al-Assir against the Lebanese army (see interview in Saudi newspaper *al-Sharq*, 27 March 2013). A month before, together with MPs Muhammad Kabbara and Khaled al-Daher, Merhebi also sided against the army when attacked in 'Arsal by a jihadist group.

⁴⁰ Cf., for instance, the Omar al-Atrash affair and the positions of the support of Hay'at al-'Ulama al-Muslimin, the Committee of Muslim Ulema, a Salafi group in Tripoli, of some of the terrorists.

⁴¹ 'La nouvelle gifle contre l'Etat libanais', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 26 September 2014.

⁴² A few kilometres away, in early September, walls in the town of Gaza (West Biqa') were defaced with pro-ISIS slogans and in Sa'adnayil (Central Biqa'), the giant portrait of Saad Hariri was replaced during a moonless night by that of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. See 'Tamziq Surat Sa'd al-Hariri wa Raf' Surat Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi fi Sa'adnayil' <www.timesoflebanon.com>. Accessed 8 September 2014. See also 'Al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah Qadimah', <www.lebanonfiles.com>. Accessed 9 March 2014.

⁴³ Thus, an Egyptian cleric holds victimization and confessional discourses in the village mosque of Shebaa. Interview, Shebaa, Lebanon, January 2014.

⁴⁴ See Robert Worth, 'Citing US Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid', *The New York Times*, 6 October 2012, and the phone conversations between Okab Sakr, Hariri's representative with the Syrian opposition groups, and leaders of those groups; those conversations were published in 'Hariri and Sakr Caught Red-Handed', *al-Akhhbar* (English), 30 November 2012.

⁴⁵ For example, 'Before the arrival of jihadists in Syria and the appearance of Da'esh, I thought that Hezbollah was a bunch of savages. Today I thank God they are there, and it tells me that God really blessed Lebanon with their presence. I'm lighting candles in

church every Sunday for their fighters. They are the only ones who really protect us, especially us Christians, against the Da'esh crazies.' Interview, militant cadre retired from the Lebanese Forces, September 2014. But after 'Arsal, it was none other than the Maronite patriarch himself, Beshara al-Rahi (who previously criticized the IRL's fighting in Syria and refusal to disarm), who best summarized the views of most Christian Lebanese on the issue: 'If the Christians of Lebanon were asked today about their point of view on current events, they would all say that without Hezbollah, IS would have reached [the Christian coastal city of] Juniyah [Jounieh].' 'Al-Ra'i: Law la Hizb Allah lakana Da'ish fi Juniyah', *al-Safir*, 7 October 2014.

⁴⁶ Nayla Moussa, 'L'armée libanaise, un état des lieux' (27 May 2009) <www.affaires-strategiques.info> (available for download from <http://dandurand.uqam.ca>); Nayla Moussa, *Armée, communautés et Etat au Liban (1990-2012)* [doctoral dissertation] (Sciences Po, 2014).

⁴⁷ Close to 6,000 militia would thus join the military.

⁴⁸ The argument is objectively fragile, since Hezbollah via its own weapons networks and Iranian mentors has access to more sophisticated, more effective, and probably greater quantities of equipment than is available to the Lebanese army. Further, the Israeli government's fear of the Lebanese army using modern American or French equipment against its troops is unfounded, since the Lebanese army has traditionally been prevented from actually going up against the Israeli army for ideological or political reasons (e.g. stalemates in the Ministry of Defence). This was particularly evident during the War of 2006 or the way the Lebanese army 'responds' (little or not at all) to regular Israeli incursions into Lebanese territory. One example among others of Tel Aviv's attempts to obstruct American aid to the Lebanese army was a freeze on \$400 million in June 2008 ('Israël tente de bloquer une aide américaine de 400 millions de dollars à l'armée', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 23 June 2008). In November of the same year, the American government, at Israel's request, held off providing the Lebanese army with 'heavy weapons, missiles, sophisticated tanks, aircraft and Apache attack helicopters' (Philippe Abi-Akl, 'Kahwagi sous peu à Damas pour discuter coordination antiterroriste', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 27 November 2008).

⁴⁹ 'Pourquoi la France et l'Arabie saoudite fournissent-elles trois milliards de dollars d'armes au Liban?', *Slate*, 27 February 2015; 'Taharrarat Trablus wa ma'ha al-Makramah al-Sa'udiyyah', *al-Safir*, 4 November 2014. Grounds cited for the delayed deliveries were suspected kickbacks on the French side.

⁵⁰ At the end of the week of fighting, the Saudi kingdom made another gift – direct this time – of a billion dollars to the Lebanese armed forces and police and for the general security. The distribution of the funds to the different security organs was left to Saad Hariri, leader of the FC. \$500 million was slated for the army, \$400 million for the internal security forces (police) and \$100 million for the General Security.

⁵¹ 'Le gouvernement décide le recrutement de 5000 nouveaux soldats', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 8 August 2014.

⁵² Lebanon's sovereign debt amounted to 53 billion dollars as of 2014; its public debt is as high as 65 billion dollars (<www.finance.gov.lb>).

⁵³ 'A recruit costs the state about \$1,000 per month (including a \$200 salary).' Nayla Moussa, interview, September 2014.

⁵⁴ 'Machnouk: L'environnement social au Liban n'est pas propice aux jihadistes', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 11 July 2014.

⁵⁵ 'Al-Tafasil al-Kamilah li-'Amaliyyat al-Bazzah al-'Askariyyah fi al-Dinniyyah', *al-Safir*, 24 October 2014. See Daher's refutation of these accusations in 'La 'Ilaqah li bi-Miqati wa ana fi qalb al-Mustaqbal', *al-Siyasah* (Kuwait), 26 October 2014, and 'North Lebanon MP Khaled Daher denies terror links', *Daily Star*, 26 October 2014.

⁵⁶ 'North Lebanon MP Khaled Daher denies terror links', *Daily Star*, 26 October 2014.

⁵⁷ The IRL would have had a maximum of 5,000 fighters engaged in ground combat in the final days, according to the best estimates, against 40,000 Israeli soldiers in the field. For more detail on the 2006 war and each side's tactics see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*, chapter 8.

⁵⁸ In all probability, this explains the regular avowals by the Iranian Pasdaran command that, after years spent training Lebanese fighters, their erstwhile trainers often consult Hezbollah on points of military strategy or combat tactics.

⁵⁹ 'Nasrallah sera tenu responsable de ses actes "devant les tribunaux révolutionnaires" syrien, avertit l'ASL', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 1 February 2012.

⁶⁰ *al-Joumbouria*, 9 March 2012.

⁶¹ *L'Orient-Le Jour* (online version), 9 October 2012.

⁶² The IRL is normally presented as the military wing of Hezbollah. In reality, it antedates Hezbollah and originally helped create it. The relationship is thus the opposite: Hezbollah is the civil extension of the IRL. On the IRL's intervention in Syria and when it started exactly to fight on the regime's side, see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah*, chapter 10.

⁶³ Field work, fall 2012. See also Hassan Nasrallah's speech of 11 October 2012.

⁶⁴ In many Syrian villages and towns, some of those self-defence committees would rapidly become '*shabbihah*' groups (pro-regime thugs). However, those in Lebanese villages inside Syria appeared only after those villages were first attacked by Sunni jihadis. Interviews with Hezbollah members, summer 2014.

⁶⁵ 'Ba'alabak Tasta'iddu li-Mithaq Sharaf Yahfadh al-Ta'ayush', *al-Safir*, 13 September 2014.

