

Lebanon

Confronting Extremism: Lebanon's "War on Terror"

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Lebanon's government and security forces are struggling to confront the threat of extremism. In the face of the continuing conflict in Syria and the rise of groups such as ISIS across the region there is a risk of enflaming deep sectarian tensions across the country.

During the worst spillover of violence since the start of Syria's civil war fighters briefly took control of the border town of Aarsal in Lebanon's Beqaa valley. The arrest of a Syrian rebel leader, Imad Ahmad Jomaa, on 2 August sparked clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Jomaa's supporters who reportedly included members of both ISIS and al-Nusra. The Lebanese security forces were eventually able to retake the town, but at great cost – 19 soldiers were killed and up to 20 members of the security forces were captured. In a grim repeat of recent atrocities in Iraq, one captured soldier was reportedly beheaded by ISIS militants.

While the immediate security threat seems to have been contained, these events point to a wider issue of Sunni extremism in Lebanon. As with the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Sunni radicalism in Lebanon has not appeared in a vacuum, but is a multifaceted problem that reflects a complex array of political and socio-economic issues. It is important to look beyond the cliché of simple Syrian "spillover"; the Syrian conflict has undoubtedly had an important effect on Lebanon's security but a number of challenges now facing the security forces reflect decades old sectarian and political tensions.

Attacks perpetrated by Sunni extremists in Lebanon have not been restricted to the wave of suicide car bombings targeting Beirut's southern suburbs and the Beqaa Valley over the last year. In 2007 the LAF fought a lengthy battle with members of Fatah al-Islam, a militant jihadist group, within the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared, and was engaged in fighting against another Sunni extremist movement in the summer of 2013. Clashes broke out in Saida, a southern coastal city between supporters of Hezbollah and those of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, an outspoken anti-Hezbollah Salafist cleric based in Abra, a suburb of Saida. The LAF eventually moved in and launched a crackdown on Assir and his followers with heavy

casualties among both the army and Assir's own militia. This confrontation remains controversial because of accusations that the LAF acted with the backing of Hezbollah forces.

The northern city of Tripoli has also seen sustained violence, particularly centered around the Sunni neighbourhood of Bab al-Tabeneh, which is embroiled in conflict with the mainly Alawite area of Jebel Mohsin. Militants have repeatedly attacked LAF patrols in Tripoli.

In turn, the LAF and the country's security forces have gone on the offensive, initiating a series of "security plans" across the country. After the chaos of the period November 2013 to February 2014, which at one point witnessed almost one suicide bomb attack a week, the country's security situation appeared to improve. Encouraged by its foreign backers, including the US, UK and Saudi Arabia, on which the LAF largely relies for funding, the Lebanese security forces are increasingly talking of the need to "fight terrorism". When in June 2014 the campaign of bombings threatened to restart, the security agencies acted swiftly. Despite three suicide bomb attacks in June 2014, there were no civilian fatalities.

This Lebanese war on terror has come at the cost of alienating some members of Lebanon's Sunni community who feel disproportionately targeted by the army's actions. Tripoli, in particular, has seen significant demonstrations after the arrest of suspected Sunni militants, with protestors carrying banners decrying Sunni persecution. Tensions are also running high in Saida. The army has failed to capture Sheikh Assir and he continues to taunt and criticise the LAF through a series of videos in which he has accused the army of using "death squads".

Such accusations risk compromising the independence of the army which has often been praised as the only truly national institution in a country divided along sectarian lines. In spite of claims of anti-Sunni bias, Sunnis make up an estimated 40% of the LAF's rank and file. Lebanon's Sunni majority regions, particularly the north, are also some of its poorest. Therefore in some areas the army is both a major job provider and a potential source of ideological opposition. Some Sunni

extremist groups have attempted to capitalise on this dichotomy with calls for soldiers to defect to al-Nusra and ISIS. In June 2014 an LAF soldier did purportedly defect to al-Nusra claiming that he was motivated by the army's alleged discrimination against Sunnis.

Feelings of socio-economic deprivation have been exacerbated by a lack of leadership. After Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005 the Sunni community has been left without a charismatic figurehead. The traditional influence of the Hariri family and its associated political party, the Future Movement, has continued to wane in some parts of the country, particularly in the wake of Hezbollah's brief seizure of West Beirut in May 2008 from Future Movement militiamen and the resultant Doha Agreement which saw Hezbollah granted power of veto in the new cabinet. In 2011 Hezbollah were able to oust Rafik Hariri's son Saad who was then serving as the country's Prime Minister. Hariri junior subsequently fled to Paris. This leadership vacuum is accompanied by a growing anti-establishment trend amongst the followers of more radical preachers such as Sheikh Assir in Sunni majority towns including Saida and Tripoli who accuse the security forces of anti-Sunni bias.

Some in Lebanon have questioned why the Lebanese security services are cracking down on Sunni militants while seemingly turning a blind eye to Hezbollah's activities in Syria. Local media outlets have reported complaints that LAF have prevented Syrian refugees from passing through the checkpoints leaving Arsal, yet there has been no public effort to prevent Hezbollah fighters from reaching Syria.

Accusations that Hezbollah fighters fought alongside LAF against Sheikh Assir in Saida have only served to increase tensions. Whilst the Lebanese government has strenuously denied Hezbollah's involvement in Saida, it has admitted to limited collaboration with the organisation, although Interior Minister Nuhad Machnouk stressed that this was only in relation to one specific operation in Tfail, a besieged village on the Lebanese-Syria border. Machnouk went on to state that "there shouldn't be any embarrassment over coordination between security and military agencies and any Lebanese party to secure the application of the law." Whether or not the government's denial is truthful, the very perception of LAF-Hezbollah collaboration is

itself indicative of a breakdown in confidence in the army's sectarian independence.

Hezbollah's claim that it is involved in Syria in order to protect the Lebanese population as a whole from the threat of Sunni militants has further complicated the relationship between the party and the security forces. This is accompanied by a common sense of victimhood in the face of attacks by Sunni extremists; the vast majority of the victims of attacks in the past year have either been Shia civilians or LAF soldiers. Between November 2013 and March 2014 Hezbollah supporting Shia areas of Lebanon were struck by 11 car bombs, with dozens of LAF soldiers killed or injured in the same period. The army has been attacked in ambushes as well as IEDs and car bombs, although it is not always clear if the soldiers themselves were the intended targets, or simply had the misfortune to stop the bombers en route. This narrative has consequently allowed Hezbollah and the Lebanese state to identify a common enemy.

In contrast to the Iraqi army, the LAF is a reasonably competent fighting force, which in general enjoys broad domestic support. Whilst the immediate risk of an Iraq-style military takeover by Sunni militants appears to be limited, recent events highlight the danger of Sunni radicalism making ideological inroads in Lebanon. A lack of leadership coupled with a perceived anti-Sunni bias could risk pushing some members of Lebanon's Sunni community into the hands of more radical preachers. In a country with such a delicate sectarian balance it is particularly important that the army retains its neutrality – both from internal political factionalism and international pressures.

The outlook for business in Lebanon remains unstable. Coupled with the continuing threat of political and sectarian violence the future of the country's government is uncertain. Prime Minister Tammam Salam was eventually able to form a "government of national interest" in February 2014, over ten months after fall of the previous government. But Lebanon remains without a president since the end of Michel Sleiman's mandate in May 2014, with no prospect for an imminent resolution to the impasse in sight.



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