

# The Next Front Line in the Islamic State Onslaught

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## Lebanon's precarious state has worsened as ISIS beheads citizens and holds troops and police hostage.

**T**he Obama administration has responded to the beheadings of two American journalists by launching an air campaign to "degrade and destroy" Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. ISIS, as it is also known, is kidnapping and decapitating Lebanese citizens too, and in recent weeks two Lebanese soldiers were killed. But Beirut is in a state of paralysis, fearing that an assault on ISIS in Syria would result in the execution of about two-dozen other Lebanese troops and police currently held hostage by the group.

Lebanon already hosts nearly 1.5 million Syrian refugees, has a prolonged vacancy in the president's office, and is experiencing increasing civil strife. So the kidnapping ordeal makes a precarious situation worse as Lebanon emerges as the next front line in the Islamist militia's offensive.

A state comprised largely of Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Christians, Lebanon is divided about the war in Syria. Members of Lebanon's Sunni sect sympathize with the Syrian rebels against the government of Bashar Assad, and some are crossing the border to join the militant Islamist groups in the revolt. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah has deployed thousands of troops in support of the nominally Shiite Assad in Damascus.

Arbitrating between these hostile sectarian groups is the Lebanese Armed Forces, or LAF, a historically nonaligned institution with broad popular support. Recently, however, this former bastion of sectarian neutrality has been cooperating with Hezbollah to target Sunni militants in Lebanon like ISIS. This tack has eroded the military's stature and placed it squarely in the cross-hairs of Sunni terrorist groups.

Early this summer, ISIS and the al Qaeda affiliate Jebhat al Nusra occupied the Lebanese border town of Aarsal, in the process snatching dozens of Lebanese soldiers and security officers. In late August ISIS beheaded two of those captives, one Sunni and one Shiite.

According to a report in the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily Al Akhbar, the seemingly counterintuitive decision by the Sunni group to first execute a Sunni was based on its interpretation of Islamic law. To ISIS, which considers Shiites kafir or infidels who must be killed, Sunnis serving in the LAF are murtadin, or apostates, who have abandoned Islam by choosing to serve Shiite interests -- an even more serious transgression.

By killing a Sunni conscript, ISIS hoped to undermine Sunni support for and participation in the Lebanese Armed Forces because it is a critical bulwark against Sunni Islamist militants in Lebanon. It seems that the strategy has backfired, at least temporarily rallying Sunni backing for the army. Nevertheless, on Sept. 12 the Lebanese press reported that "more than 40" ISIS cells were currently operating on Lebanese territory and planning terrorist attacks.

ISIS is demanding the release of Islamist inmates in Mount Lebanon's notorious Roumieh prison in exchange for the military and police hostages. As ISIS awaits a response from Beirut, the frustrated families of the captives have blocked roads and set up a tent city in front of the Grand Surail, the seat of government, demanding action.

Alas, governments in Lebanon are typically neither decisive nor effective, and the current administration deviates little from the norm. Apart from some consultations with Hezbollah, the only visible step Beirut has taken to resolve the hostage crisis has been to seek Qatar's mediation on Lebanon's behalf with ISIS. Prime Minister Tammam Salam's recent announcement that "we have been encouraged by [Qatar's] supportive words, to the extent that the emir was so excited that [he] expressed his desire to personally visit Lebanon" inspires little confidence that a resolution is at hand.

On the current trajectory it's hard to see a happy conclusion to the hostage predicament. The Lebanese government is loath to release prisoners from Roumieh. Meanwhile, the prison -- which confines its inmates in close quarters and has long been a locus of Islamist radicalization -- is believed to be the epicenter of ISIS recruitment in Lebanon.

ISIS is gaining traction in Lebanon because it has proved an effective response to the violence by Shiite regimes against Sunnis. Syria, where the Iranian-backed Assad regime has since 2011 killed nearly 200,000 people, most of them Sunnis, remains a primary mobilizing tool for ISIS. Until the Syria slaughter ends, the ranks of ISIS will likely continue to increase. Worse, U.S. targeting of ISIS and other Sunni Islamist militants in Syria -- but not the Assad regime -- could exacerbate this trend.

All of which is bad news for Lebanon, where in mid-September another Lebanese military officer was abducted near the Syrian border in Aarsal.

Despite car bombs, kidnappings and assassinations, Lebanon has proved remarkably resilient. Washington has responded to the crisis by providing the LAF with an emergency airlift of weapons and ammunition, over and above its \$75 million in annual U.S. military financing. While American military equipment may help the Lebanese Armed Forces contain ISIS territorial gains, it will do little to stem the ideological inroads of ISIS among Sunnis. Even if the current hostage crisis is resolved, the threat to Lebanon's stability from ISIS will continue as long as the Syrian war persists. ❖

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