

# The Lebanese Jail That's a Jihad Incubator for the Islamic State

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## A prison holding hundreds of jihadists has become fruitful recruiting ground for ISIS, and a potential prisoner swap could eventually lead to ex-inmates taking leadership roles in the group.

Lebanon's notorious Roumieh Prison, home to 500-600 mostly foreign hardline Islamists awaiting trial or already convicted, is the latest target of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State. In a move that might defy belief in the West, ISIS, together with Syria's largest al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra, is initiating a proposed prisoner swap in exchange for Lebanese Army soldiers abducted for that express purpose. ISIS has even dubbed its demands for the inmates' release to a catchy tune on YouTube: "O brothers, the situation of prisoners in Roumieh has saddened me," the lead vocalist chants. The chorus follows: "The jihadist brothers are countless and they yearn to break Roumieh's doors."

Earlier this summer the Lebanese Interior Minister himself called Roumieh "a base for terrorism" after it was discovered that Islamist groups were planning a jailbreak to free their comrades-in-arms by driving a car bomb through the prison gates. He acknowledged that his and the government's writ was only partially implementable in the prison thanks to the prisoners' extensive privileges: They "have access to all means of communication and the Internet, and are in contact with whomever they want."

Roumieh Prison is where the next Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the top cadre of ISIS may come from. The Lebanese jail proves that security officials can lock up a dangerous person, but they can't lock up a dangerous mind. Inmates affiliated with the Nusra Front have reportedly organized terrorist operations from their computers and smart phones from inside. This summer, Nusra's emir (warlord) in Qalamoun, a flashpoint in the Syrian conflict, vowed that it would only be a "matter of time" before he would free the mujahedeen (fighters) from Roumieh.

This is no empty threat. The release of some prisoners may in fact be imminent, as the jailbreak plot and the

proposed prisoner swap indicate. Nusra and ISIS are currently holding a number of hostages, including members of the U.S.-backed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). They were captured during violent clashes in Arsal, a Lebanese town near the Syrian border. Although Lebanese authorities are still downplaying the possibility of swapping prisoners for hostages, they may soon be forced to reconsider. ISIS has already beheaded a Sunni Lebanese soldier (the group views fellow Sunnis who serve in the LAF, a so-called "crusader" army, as apostates) and slain another Shia one.

In response, some of the soldier hostages' families have held protests demanding the release of their captured sons. They have blocked roads with burning tires and declared that the protests will continue daily until all of the captives are freed. The mounting pressure on the street is likely to force the Lebanese government to cave in to the demands of the Islamist militants. This month, Armenian Orthodox MP Shant Janjanian said that his government should negotiate with the militants and swap some of the Islamists in Roumieh for the kidnapped security personnel.

But if Janjanian believes that releasing Islamists from Roumieh in a prisoner exchange deal "could be a way of getting rid of them," because they've become a burden to the state, he is highly mistaken. ISIS head al-Baghdadi himself was considered a "low level" threat to the Pentagon when he was arrested and released in 2004 from Camp Bucca, an American detention center in Iraq. The *New York Times* cited an anonymous Pentagon official as saying that the current leader of ISIS was "a street thug when we picked him up."

Some candidates for release from Roumieh include individuals already implicated in terrorist attacks. For example, the Palestinian Naim Abbas was charged with belonging to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which claimed responsibility for bombings in Beirut in November 2013, including two simultaneous attacks on the Iranian embassy compound that killed at least 23 people, among them an Iranian diplomat. Salafi Sunni cleric Omar Bakri Mohammed, deported from the U.K. in 2005 and who has been described as al-Qaeda's top man in Lebanon, was accused of seeking to establish an Islamic emirate in the country, a vision that ISIS shares. He has reportedly supported ISIS and Nusra in their confrontation against the pro-Assad Hezbollah (There are conflicting reports as to whether he is indeed in Roumieh; the Lebanese *Daily Star* newspaper has located him there, but there are also reports that his wife is making efforts to force the government to move him to Roumieh from another Lebanese prison called Rihanieh because of the preferential prison conditions.)

And, perhaps most dangerous of all, there's Imad Jomaa, a former Nusra commander who recently pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Jomaa's arrest in August 2014 sparked the violent clashes in Arsal in which the Lebanese soldiers were seized. Other candidates include Islamists incarcerated for participating in the 2007 clashes that pitted the LAF against Fatah al-Islam (an al-Qaeda affiliate on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations) in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared.

It's clear that ISIS's hostage-taking tactic to free those of like minds who are in prison has become one of its most dangerous weapons. Yet Roumieh's inmates, without ever having been released, are already becoming champions of the caliphate. ISIS has shown that it is possible to get individuals who have already joined the Islamist camp to join its ranks from behind bars -- in effect, to further radicalize them and buy their loyalty. The group is literally singing its own praises as "liberators" to prisoners already disposed to its ideologies. And it's working: Some prisoners have begun shifting their allegiance to ISIS from other groups, even from the Nusra Front, thanks to the impression that ISIS is the leading force both in the prisoner swap deal and the soldier beheadings.

ISIS is seeking to awaken radical Sunni sleeping cells and communities in Lebanon, a country already infamously plagued by a delicate sectarian balance. Indeed, the recent beheading of a Shia soldier led some Lebanese to direct their anger at Syrian refugees living in the country. Some Syrian refugees have reportedly been beaten and their tents set on fire. Thus ISIS's horrendous crimes are not only straining relations between some Lebanese and Syrian refugees, but are also fanning Sunni-Shia tensions, which have already been aggravated by Hezbollah's intervention

in Syria.

While ISIS is grooming its future loyalists, security officials are stalled in their own denial. A government source told the Lebanese *Daily Star*, "These fundamentalists who are staying in Roumieh are in an environment that is safe for them, where they can [maintain] control over their terrorist activities [outside]."

The truth is that whether or not they are prisoners or free men, the radicalization process has begun and promises to continue. "Street thugs" today, as the Pentagon once called ISIS's leader, are already poised to become the al-Baghdadis of tomorrow.

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*Haaretz*

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