

Lebanon and the ISIS Threat

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Aug 28, 2014

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Lebanon is in grave danger of becoming the next ISIS victim, and recent clashes in Aarsal were just a taste of things to come.

The advance of the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS), currently known as the Islamic State, has focused the international spotlight on Syria and Iraq, as ISIS has taken control over huge swaths of the two countries. Although Lebanon has managed to stay off the international radar, instability and sectarianism leave the country equally vulnerable to this growing threat in the region.

The lack of national unity has been disastrous for Lebanon. The country has yet to overcome the damaging consequences of its bloody civil war (1975-1990), during which regional actors capitalized on Lebanon's sectarian divides for their own political interests. For example, the Syrian army entered Lebanon under the initial pretext of aiding the Christian Maronites, and Iran took advantage of the disenfranchisement of Shiites and the Israeli occupation to create the Shiite militia Hezbollah. ISIS is very likely to exploit the Lebanese state's failure to resolve the deep sectarian divides just like it did in Iraq and Syria.

Sunni grievances have been growing in Lebanon mainly due to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war and the government's double-standard policies. For example, some Sunnis have voiced their objections over the "arbitrary arrests" of Sunnis in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli. MP Muhammad Kabbara, who is affiliated with the Future Movement, went as far as to say that "the continuous security oppression of the Sunni sect will lead to unexpected reactions."

Lebanon also has two massive refugee populations, the Syrians and Palestinians, both predominantly Sunni. The Palestinians have suffered from abuse and disenfranchisement under the Lebanese political system, and as a result they have become increasingly susceptible to Islamist doctrine. The clashes in 2007 between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Fatah al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared gives an indication of the Islamist movements' ability to take hold in the camps. Moreover, the Palestinians are exhibiting a greater hostility toward Hezbollah as it fights alongside the Syrian regime. My own conversations with some young Palestinians, who are routinely harassed by Hezbollah, revealed a growing sense of hatred toward the Shiite party and, more generally, resentment toward Lebanese Shiites. It would be naive to think that ISIS has not taken note of

these attitudes, and it will surely exploit them to its advantage. This may already be underway.

Furthermore, there are more than one million Syrian refugees currently living in Lebanon. The Lebanese government has neglected -- or is incapable of providing -- their basic needs. They, too, provide a strong recruitment base for ISIS, and some reports have indicated that the radical group chose in early August to attack Aarsal, a Sunni-populated town along the Lebanon-Syria border, because it shelters many refugees. Though Hezbollah has pledged support to the LAF, helping to push back militants affiliated with ISIS and al-Nusra Front in the border town, this might aggravate sectarian tension that will play into the hands of Sunni militants. The commander of the LAF, Gen. Jean Kahwaji, said that had the army lost Aarsal, Shiite-Sunni tension would have flared and ISIS would have continued to the coast and declared its state.

The alarming clashes in Aarsal will surely not be ISIS's last attempt to enter Lebanon. If its next move is successful, ISIS will likely reach a military stalemate with Hezbollah along the existing confessional borders -- as seen in Iraq and Syria -- and, in the process, it will take over certain Sunni enclaves. Consequently, Lebanon will fracture along sectarian lines, with each sect falling back into its traditional areas to resist the onslaught. This would likely be the unfortunate end of Lebanon as a state.

It is unlikely that Lebanon's Sunnis and their leaders will submit to ISIS out of true ideological conviction, but practical needs might overshadow ideology. Shortages in supplies and ammunition have pushed many Syrian rebels to switch allegiances, and others have said that their desperation on the battlefield might force them to join ISIS. Driven by despair and sectarian violence, some of Lebanon's Sunnis might soon succumb to a similar trend. If Lebanon continues to disenfranchise Sunnis, ISIS will repeat Hezbollah's approach to the Lebanese Shiites. It will take advantage of the absence of the Lebanese state and provide armed protection and a wide array of social services to some Sunnis in exchange for their obedience. In short, Lebanon is in grave danger of becoming the next victim of ISIS, and the clashes in Aarsal were just a taste of things to come.

David Daoud holds a juris doctorate in international law and, aided by his native fluency in Arabic, has worked in Lebanon and Egypt. This article was originally published on [Fikra Forum \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=5292\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=5292). ❖

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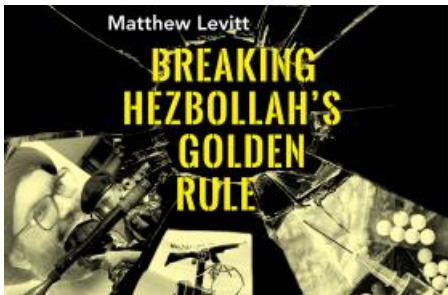
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