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THE ISLAMIC STATE AND JABHAT AL-NUSRA; NEW ACTORS IN LEBANON?

Abstract

From a historical perspective, Lebanon's social context has long been conducive to the emergence and development of Sunni jihadism, but the movement was too weak to challenge the status quo. However, the Syrian Civil War has changed the balance of power, putting Hezbollah on the defensive and weakening the Future Movement´s Sunni leadership. This has allowed the Lebanese jihadists to cooperate with the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, who see the Lebanese crisis as an extension of the Syrian war. As a result, they are playing an increasingly prominent role in the neighbouring country in a bid to spread violence and overstretch the military capabilities of the Lebanese army and Hezbollah.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2014, the rapid expansion of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq allowed it to exercise its authority in large parts of the two countries. The same can be said for Jabhat Al-Nusra (linked to Al-Qaeda), which controls different parts of Syria. Both organisations are examples of Salafi-inspired transnational Sunni jihadism, whose political struggle focuses on the global level, as is reflected in the diverse origins of their militants[1]. A salient feature of this territorial expansion is that it was not always achieved through military conquest, but often through the recruitment of local insurgent groups to either of the two organisations.

The strong ties between the people of the Near East lead us to believe that Lebanon cannot remain oblivious to the creation close to its borders of extensive spaces of authority in the hands of transnational jihadists who have declared their desire to destroy the map of the region that emerged following World War I. In fact, in recent years, these groups have shown increased activity on Lebanese soil, causing numerous acts of violence. This article aims to assess the extent to which the Islamic State and Jabhat Al-Nusra are likely to become new actors in Lebanon's political scene, with the ability to impact the country's ever precarious balances of power and create increased instability. And, given the traditional presence of local jihadist groups in Lebanese territory, it is quite possible that some of them will join the ranks of one of these transnational organisations.

In this article, I will first review the historical and sociological bases of Sunni jihadist groups in the Lebanon up to 2011. Later on, I will study what I call the first phase of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra's presence in Lebanon, which involved the forging of links with local jihadist groups in a context of prevailing confessional tension and the Syrian Civil War. I will then analyse the second phase, characterised by their active military presence and increased clashes with Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), before going on to draw a number of conclusions.

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1   The term Salafism refers to the quest to return to a society based on the practices that existed in the time of Muhammad and his successors. However, the quest does not entail the use of violence, which *is* considered acceptable by Salafi jihadism. AL-RASHEED, Madawi, "Contesting the Saudi State. Islamic Voices from a New Generation", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 3-4. ROUGIER, Bernard, "Introduction" in ROUGIER, Bernard (Ed.), "Qu´est-ce que le Salafisme", Paris: PUF, 2008, pp. 1-21.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BASES OF SUNNI JIHADISM IN LEBANON

The commitments that gave rise to the independence of Lebanon led to a confessional system that left the bulk of administrative and political activity in the hands of the Maronites[2]. Political representation of the Sunni (primarily present on the coast, but also in the north of the country and in some parts of Bekaa) was exercised by the *zu´ama* or local figures who established a system of clientelism, whereby the Sunni electorate was granted a number of services or advantages in exchange for its vote. Economic and social changes in the 1950s and '60s led to increased political instability, while the tension created by the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflict was also felt on Lebanese soil (including the influx of Palestinian refugees), thus upsetting the existing balance of power. This led to the outbreak of a protracted civil war (1975-1990), during which the Sunni tended to join the existing left-wing or Pan-Arab organisations, although some of them later turned to religion as a means of political mobilisation[3].

The shift towards Islamism was more pronounced in the north of the country, particularly in the city of Tripoli, which became a refuge for Syrian fighters opposed to President Hafez al-Assad. Here they made contact with local political and religious leaders, taking advantage of the Sunni majority in the area, within which Salafi movements had already begun to emerge[4]. This is how the Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami organisation came about in 1982, led by Sheikh Shaaban, who sought to impose a strict legal system and social customs. The city also provided a refuge for the PLO fighters, given the proximity to Nahr al-Bared and al-Beddawi refugee camps which were being harassed by Syrian troops. Following the departure of the PLO from Tripoli in December 1983, the Islamists filled the power vacuum it left, and the Alawite Arab Democratic Party and Syrian Social Nationalist Party (allies of Assad) responded by taking up arms. The ensuing clashes became quite intense at the junction where the neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh (largely Islamic militants) and Jabal Mohsen (a stronghold of the Alawite Arab Democratic Party) meet. Indeed, al-Tawhid gained control of most of the city for more than a year, expelling or shooting residents who did not share the organisation's principles. The instability ultimately led to

2   These commitments stem from the National Pact of 1943 and the Constitution of 1926, and their subsequent reform.

3   GILMOUR, David, "Lebanon: The Fractured Country", Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983, pp. 34-49. WINSLOW, Charles, "Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society", London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 159-264.

4   Tripoli, the home of Rashid Rida, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and, most especially, Salim al-Shahal, has historically been the cradle of Lebanese Salafism.

Assad's occupation of Tripoli and members and sympathisers of jihadist groups were subsequently murdered, particularly in Bab al-Tabbaneh[5].

Following the civil war (1990), the consolidation of Syria's hegemony led the representatives of different communities to seek the protection of Assad. This included the main Sunni politicians, among whom Rafik Hariri, a millionaire with close ties to Saudi Arabia, occupied a pre-eminent position, and used his resources to build an extensive clientele network. At the same time, Assad treated the rebel factions with an iron fist, including many Palestinian and Lebanese jihadists. Some of these decided to join the wars in Afghanistan, Chechenia or Iraq, and their return was treated with extreme caution by the authorities in Damascus and Beirut[6].

Islamist discontent with Assad was primarily manifested in the cities of Sidon and Tripoli. In the former, the arrival of a number of Salafi clergymen coincided in the 1980s with the formation within the Palestinian refugee camp, Ain al-Hilweh, of armed groups opposed to the PLO. The most prominent group was Asbat al-Ansar, which managed to consolidate its position and spread to other camps[7]. Meanwhile, Tripoli was under the tight control of the Syrian and Lebanese authorities, although high levels of poverty in different Sunni neighbourhoods prompted many to join Salafi groups. At the same time, these groups were divided into several factions that competed to attract sympathisers and to control the mosques, one of the few places where they were allowed to meet. In addition, the proximity to Palestinian refugee camps further fuelled the tendency towards radicalisation. In fact, Asbat al-Ansar gained a significant foothold in Nahr al-Bared and al-Beddawi under the leadership of Abu Mohjen, who forged ties with fighters in northern Lebanon that had moved to jihadi grounds such as Afghanistan and Bosnia. Some of these, led by Bassem Kanj, set up an armed group in the Al Dinniyeh region in 1998 (hence its name, Miniyeh-Danniyeh), and began to have a degree of contact with Al-Qaeda. The new organisation launched an attack against the Lebanese army in December 1999 in what has sometimes been regarded as an attempt to establish an Islamic emirate in northern Lebanon or as a symbolic act to mobilise the public against the governments of Beirut and Damascus. The organisation disappeared after its defeat, but some of the militants remained in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp[8].

5   WINSLOW, op. cit., p. 244. SEURAT, Michel, "Le quartier de Bab Tebbané à Tripoli (Liban). Étude d'une asabiyya urbaine", in Michel Seurat (Ed.), L'état de barbarie, Paris: Seuil, 1989.

6   GAMBILL, Gary C., "Islamist Groups in Lebanon," MERIA, vol.11, no. 4, 2007, pp. 46-47. ROUGIER, Bernard, "The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to ISIS", Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, Chap. 2.

7   ROUGIER, Bernard, "Le yihad au quotidian", Paris: PUF, 2004, pp. 75-95.

8   SAAB, Bilal and RANSTORP, Magnus, "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, vol. 30, 2007, pp. 832-833. ROUGIER, "Le yihad", op. cit., pp. 111-131 and 207-223.

Resentment against Syrian hegemony came to a head following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, who was succeeded by his son Bashar. Moreover, the succession crisis coincided with adverse international sentiment towards Damascus, with the U.S., Saudi Arabia and France demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (2004) triggered a wave of nationalism in the country, calling for the immediate withdrawal of Assad's troops, which ultimately occurred in 2005. However, Assad used his allies (Hezbollah and Amal) to exert their influence on the neighbouring country, which split into two coalitions: the March 14 and March 8 Alliances. The former was in favour of a rapprochement with Washington and Riyadh, while the latter advocated cooperation with Damascus and Tehran. National politics were taking on an increasingly confessional tone, with the March 14 Alliance dominated by the Sunni Future Movement (led by the Hariri family), the March 8 Alliance supported primarily by Shiite forces and the Christians divided between the two coalitions. Consequently, coexistence between the two has been extremely fragile in recent years, with regular outbreaks of violence and the fear of another civil war[9].

Tension over the distribution of power has been ongoing since the departure of the Syrian troops. However, the resort to force has always been contained by Hezbollah's enormous superiority in this field. This political, social and paramilitary organisation emerged in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when a faction split from the Shiite Amal Party and settled in Bekaa, where the members received training from Iranian military experts. After demonstrating its prowess in combat, the organisation managed to forge an identity as the resistance movement against Israel and a defender of Lebanese sovereignty, which is Hezbollah's main source of legitimacy. Unlike other paramilitary groups that were largely disarmed following the Taif Peace Treaty (1989), Hezbollah's continued retention of weapons was tolerated by Syria and remains a source of tension in Lebanese politics[10]. The weapons supplied by Iran and Hezbollah's extensive experience in warfare against Israel explain its military superiority, even with respect to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The latter institution has traditionally garnered greater popular support because of its neutral stance in political disputes. In recent years, however, it has been the target of growing criticism from Islamic groups and some members of the Future Movement, who believe it is collaborating with Hezbollah, and for its overly harsh treatment of the Sunni population[11].

9   CHEMALY, Rita, "Le printemps 2005 au Liban. Entre mythes et réalités", Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009. FAKHOURY MÜHLBACHER, Tamirace, "Democracy and Power-Sharing in Stormy Weather. The Case of Lebanon", Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, pp. 261-300.

10   PALMER HARIK, Judith, "Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism", London: Tauris, 2004.

11   NERGUIZIAN, Aram, "The Lebanese Armed Forces. Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon", Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, pp. 23-26. BELONCLE, Edouard, "Prospects of SSR in Lebanon", Journal of Security Sector Management, vol. 4, no. 4, 2006, pp. 3-6.

Most Lebanese Salafi saw the assassination of Rafik Hariri as a personal attack and felt that the Sunni in the region were being oppressed by the Shiites and their allies. Accordingly, they reached more or less explicit agreements with the Future Movement for the 2005 elections in exchange for supporting the latter. Let us not forget that the Hariri family has a huge influence in areas such as West Beirut, but not so much in the north, a region that is extremely poor and which has been somewhat overlooked by successive governments. Here, Islamic clergymen and their followers play a decisive role in election results, which explains why some leaders of the Future Movement have resorted to religion to mobilise the Sunni electorate. This has facilitated their collaboration with the more radical Islamists at the cost of undermining coexistence in the country[12].

Many jihadists felt affronted by Hezbollah in the second war against Israel in summer 2006 because the Shiite militia decided to maintain control of the conflict. In fact, this monopoly has caused serious tension because it gives Hezbollah the role of the indisputable defender of the Arab world, thus depriving the radical Sunni of the position[13]. Another salient feature of these years was the arrival in Tripoli of jihadists with links to Al-Qaeda, intending to make contact with local groups. As the Iraqi Civil War unfolded, the Lebanese scenario attracted the interest of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, because it became a recruitment ground and an occasional refuge for its militants, particularly the north of the country. Moreover, some of the organisation's acts suggested that it had more ambitious goals, such as the attempted attack on the Italian Embassy in Beirut (foiled by the security forces in September 2004) or the launch of rockets against Israeli settlements in December 2005, which were an attempt to demonstrate its contribution to the self-proclaimed objective of fighting against the West and Zionism. Indeed, this objective would explain the organisation's interest in expanding its links to southern Lebanon and southern Bekaa. Another possible target was the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which sometimes received threats from the Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri[14].

In autumn 2006, news began to emerge that a new jihadist group known as Fatah al-Islam and led by Shakir al-Absi had been created. It was comprised of several hundred fighters, not just from Palestine and Lebanon but from the entire Middle East, many of whom had previously fought in the Iraq War. The organisation gained a paramount position in Nahr al-Bared. Its mission was to turn Lebanon into a jihad region; it regarded the LAF as a "Crusader army" and was hostile towards the United States, Israel and Hezbollah[15]. On 20 May 2007 the security forces began to conduct

12   NERGUIZIAN, op. cit., pp. 9-11. ABDEL-LATIF, Omayma, "Lebanon´s Sunni Islamists: A Growing Force", Carnegie Middle East Center Papers, no. 6, 2008, pp. 1-6.

13   GADE, Tine, "Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Yihad", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, FFI Rapport 02727, 5/12/2007, pp. 47-49.

14   GADE, op. cit., pp. 54-56.

15   ALAGHA, Joseph E., "Ideological Tensions Between Hezbollah and Jihadi Salafism", in MARÉCHAL, Brigitte et al. (eds.), "The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine,

searches in Nahr al-Bared and the Islamists retaliated by murdering 25 soldiers while they slept, thus unleashing a major conflict. However, the army's limited resources and the jihadists' strong positions resulted in the battle becoming a protracted siege that lasted until early September, when the last strongholds in the hands of Fatah al-Islam were taken over by the LAF[16].

Many theories have been put forward to explain the rapid rise and activity of this organisation. Some authors have pointed to Syria's tolerance in allowing the fighters to cross its territory, which suggests a degree of complicity by Damascus in the desire to destabilise Lebanon. Others have pointed out that the internal security forces (close to the Future Movement) showed clear permissiveness in allowing the jihadists to settle in Nahr al-Bared and maintaining close ties with them, while Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement provided financial support to strengthen the Sunni jihadists' position with respect to Hezbollah. Finally, there are suspicions of contact between Fatah al-Islam and Al-Qaeda in an attempt to find a new space for the jihad in northern Lebanon or simply to use the region as a support base for its activities in other countries. In any event, it would appear that different Lebanese and foreign actors tried to exploit Fatah al-Islam for their own ends[17].

The risk of another civil war resurfaced in May 2008, when Hezbollah saw a number of decisions made by the Lebanese government as an attempt to deprive it of its military power[18]. In response, it occupied West Beirut, the stronghold of the Hariri family, and defeated armed groups of the Future Movement, which was a huge humiliation for the Sunni. However, it was again possible to dissipate the tension and a commitment was reached (the Doha Agreement). This gave the March 8 parties real powers of veto within the government, which many Sunni saw as a sign that the Future Movement was incapable of protecting the interests of their community[19].

Jihadist groups tried to challenge Hezbollah's military hegemony in an area where the Shiite organisation did not have a presence - the city of Tripoli. Here they were able to take advantage of their position in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood to harass the Alawite Muslim residents of Jabal Mohsen. From this point on, there were regular attacks and reprisals, which forced the LAF to intervene to prevent the fighting from spreading to other areas, while at the same time trying not to get directly involved

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Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media", London: Hurst & Co., 2013, pp. 61-66. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Nurturing Instability: Lebanon´s Palestinian Refugee Camps", Middle East Report, no. 84, 2009, pp. 28-9.

16   GADE, op. cit., pp. 28-32.

17   ABDEL-LATIF, op. cit., pp. 18-9. ROUGIER, Bernard, "The Sunni Tragedy", op. cit., pp. 82-170.

18   These decisions were an attempt to control Hezbollah's telephone network and the dismissal of the head of security at Beirut airport, who was close to the organisation.

19   ABDEL-LATIF, op. cit., pp. 21-22. RABIL, Robert G., "Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Yihadism", Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014, pp. 191-210.

as this would have compromised their neutrality. Another problematic aspect was that many detained Salafi militants were sent to overcrowded prisons which became recruitment grounds for jihadist organisations. Upon their release, many of them were determined to take the path of violence, while others formed "dormant cells" waiting to strike when the time was right[20].

Following the fall of the Future Movement government in 2011, a new government headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati was formed, thus depriving the Hariri party of much of its power to control the Sunni (coupled with their own financial problems). In this new context, the alliance with Islamist groups was considerably weakened and the balance of power within the community began to tip towards the latter, which was further aided by the unfolding of events in the region[21].

THE IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War (2011), Lebanon became increasingly embroiled in the events taking place on the other side of the border, which resulted in the radicalisation of religious tensions. Therefore, while many Lebanese Sunni were sympathetic to the uprising against the Assad family, whom they believed to be responsible for the grievances suffered by their community, many Shiites saw it as an attempt to overthrow an ally regime[22].

Mikati's government sought to avoid the risk of internal confrontation by promoting an extensive agreement on the disassociation from Syrian issues, which was crystallised in the Baabda Declaration (11 July 2012). In fact, it took an extremely cautious approach in an attempt to avoid tension. However, the problem was that both the Sunni and Shiite parties were secretly helping their respective allies in Syria. Hezbollah initially supported Assad with intelligence and training, later going on to organise Shiite militia in Shiite towns on the Syrian side of the border[23]. On the other hand, the Sunni, through the different political parties (including the Future Movement), sent all kinds of aid to the Syrian opposition militia, either across the

20   LEFÈVRE, Raphaël, "The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon", Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014. pp. 16-20. SAAB, Bilal, "Beware of radicalism in Lebanese prisons", The Daily Star, 23/08/2010.

21   VLOEBERGHS, Ward, "The Hariri Political Dynasty after the Arab Spring", Mediterranean Politics, vol. 17, no. 2, 2012, pp. 245-246. KHASHAN, Hilal, "The Political Isolation of Lebanese Sunnis", Middle East Quarterly, vol. 20, no. 3, 2013, pp. 70-71.

22   LION BUSTILLO, Javier, "Siria y Líbano: entre la disociación y el desbordamiento", Revista CIDOB d´AfersInternacionals, nº 108, 2014, pp. 218-221.

23   INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Lebanon's Hezbollah Eastward to Syria", Middle East Report, no. 153, 2014, pp. 3-10.

Syrian-Lebanese border or from Turkey. In addition, in some arenas, it promoted the recruitment of fighters for the conflict in the neighbouring country[24].

The Syrian situation was characterised by the progressive growth of Sunni Islamist militia, some with links to international jihadist networks. Thus, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, saw the civil war in the neighbouring country as an opportunity and sent Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani and several members of the organisation to take advantage of the war situation to enable its expansion[25]. In early 2012, this group (which adopted the name Jabhat al-Nusra) launched a bombing campaign in a number of the country's largest cities. The group's experience in combat later allowed it to make a significant contribution to the defeat of Assad's forces in different areas. In spring 2013, al-Baghdadi announced that his organisation was merging with al-Nusra to form the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was later denied by al-Jawlani, who preferred the inspiration of Al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had always had a difficult relationship with al-Baghdadi, which ultimately led to Al-Qaeda's decision in January 2014 to split from ISIL[26].

The result of all of this was a conflict during which the ISIL spread throughout Syria by attracting fighters from al-Nusra and other factions to its ranks, thus earning it the hostility of those actors. Curiously enough, while in some regions the opposition militia joined forces against the Baathist regime, in others they acted individually, even engaging in fierce armed clashes with one another. The different stances were due to a number of factors, such as tactical and strategic considerations, temporary alliances to achieve a shared goal and the influence of international actors who put pressure on their respective allies. However, there was also the human element, including the local perspective, given that family, tribal, religious and clientelistic considerations play a key role in understanding the - often - complex alliances in the Syrian conflict. Finally, the ISIL managed to gain control of a large part of eastern and northern Syria, obtaining remarkable territorial continuity, while al-Nusra was much more powerful in the north-west of the country, where it controlled the area between Aleppo and the Turkish border. The latter organisation differed from the ISIL in that it did not demand that other groups join its ranks, but preferred to exert a more subtle influence over them through the use of military cooperation. Thus, a confusing conglomerate

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24   ROUGIER, "The Sunni Tragedy", op. cit., pp. 171-215. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon", Middle East Report, no. 141, 2013.

25   The origins of the Islamic State of Iraq can be found in the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad organisation (led by Abu Musab al-Zarqaw until his death and also known as "Al-Qaeda in Iraq"). After merging with other groups, it took its new name in 2006. In 2010 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader, after which it spread to western Iraq. HASHIM, Ahmed, "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate", Middle East Policy, vol. 21, no. 4, 2014.

26   LISTER, Charles, "Profiling the Islamic State", Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13, 2014, pp. 6-13. CAFARELLA, Jennifer, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda", Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report, no. 25, 2014.

of opposition militia (which included ISIL and al-Nusra) made important advances close to the Lebanese border (in the Qalamoun Mountains), particularly in the M-1 motorway that connects Tartus and Homs, and in the south of the country, in Dera´a and Quneitra[27].

Opposition control of the town of al-Qusayr, very close to the Lebanese province of Akkar, allowed the latter to help supply fighters and food, which was further facilitated by the presence of numerous Syrian refugees. The death of the Islamist Sheikh Ahmed Abdul Wahid at an army checkpoint in May 2012 caused major social unrest in the region, forcing the LAF to reduce its troops and surveillance activities and enabling jihadist action to go largely unchecked. However, the climate of insecurity that ensued made it evident that the withdrawal of the LAF had been a mistake and once again intense efforts were made to control the border. This sparked strong criticism from many sectors of the Sunni community against Prime Minister Mikati whose government was, in turn, being pressured by Hezbollah to take a more sympathetic stance towards Damascus. This growing isolation led to Mikati's resignation in March 2013 which again led to a complex, almost year-long negotiation before the new Prime Minister, Tammam Salam, was able to form a government[28].

Given the military difficulties experienced by Assad's regime and the capability of opposition militia to control some parts of the common border, Hezbollah became increasingly willing to support the Baathist leader from early 2013 onwards. This prompted Assad's forces to target the M-1 motorway and the cities of Homs and al-Qusayr, where it launched major attacks that were successful, largely thanks to the decisive intervention of Hezbollah. As a result of the pressure exerted by the LAF, the Shiite militia and Assad's troops, the activities of Sunni jihadist groups in Akkar and the Homs region were greatly reduced[29].

Hezbollah's intervention sparked major criticism from the March 14 Alliance, which believed that Hassan Nasrallah's party was putting the country at risk in order to protect its allies in Damascus. In response, the Lebanese Sunni community met Assad's repression of the majority-Sunni opposition with increased feelings of frustration and helplessness. However, anything that causes inter-religious tension in a country such as Lebanon is likely to trigger strong reactions from other communities, whose support is vital for the country's government. This therefore placed the Future Movement in a very delicate position. If it allowed itself to be carried away by the anti-Shiite rhetoric, it might win the support of the more radical Sunni; albeit at the price of being linked, in the eyes of other communities, to Salafist Jihadism, which was greatly feared by

27   At the time, ISIL was only present in Qalamoun, but not in the south. Since then, it has established links in the area. CAFARELLA, op. cit., pp. 27-36.

28   RIFI, Gassan, "Chaos Reigns in North Lebanon, Where Military Has Lost Control", Al Monitor, 15/06/2012.

29   LEIGH, Karen, "State of the Battle: Fighting Tooth and Nail for Qalamoun", Syria Deeply, 05/12/2013.

the latter. However, if, on the other hand, it failed to respond appropriately, it ran the risk of losing a large space to Islamist groups, who would have greater leeway to disassociate themselves from the March 14 Alliance, thus jeopardising its electoral base. It therefore pursued a mixed policy whereby the principal leaders reaffirmed their commitment to Lebanon's multi-denominational system and denounced any form of hostility towards the Shiite community; although some of the local leaders spoke the language of denominational dispute[30].

With regard to the Salafi, the TV theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi called for a jihad against both Assad and Hezbollah, and Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, living in Sidon, travelled to the neighbouring country with several dozen armed men. Indeed, al-Assir gradually became a very influential figure, denouncing the weakness of the Hariri family in confronting Hezbollah. From then on, there was speculation that al-Assir would compete with the Future Movement for leadership of the Sunni. However, his political career was severely damaged by the actions of some of his followers against the LAF, such as the 23 June 2013 attack on an army checkpoints in Sidon, which triggered a major confrontation that was won by the army, after which al-Assir disappeared from the political scene[31].

Similarly, some of the clergymen in Tripoli have openly called upon their followers to join the fight in Syria, such as Sheikhs Zakaria Abdel Razzaq al-Masri, Salem al-Rafei and Hussam al-Sabbagh, the latter of whom has his own military forces, which have played a very active role in the conflicts that have taken place between the neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, and who is regarded as being very close to Jabhat Al-Nusra. On the other hand, this rhetoric may have played a key role in the numerous assassinations of political and religious leaders close to the March 8 Alliance in the city in recent years. Indeed, the situation in Tripoli became so alarming that on 2 December 2013 the Lebanese authorities decided to place the city under military control for six months[32].

The Sunni community has shown huge support for the Syrian refugees (most of whom are of the same denomination). However, the huge number of refugees has created greater inter-denominational tension, particularly as they have been there for a considerable amount of time and there is the fear that their presence will become permanent, thus altering the demographic balance. Furthermore, the refugees are not uniformly distributed throughout the country, but tend to be concentrated in the cities of Arsal and Akkar. And it is precisely because these cities are predominantly Sunni that there are growing fears that they will become jihadist recruitment grounds. Indeed,

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30   LION BUSTILLO, op. cit., pp. 229-231.

31   CAILLET, Romain, "Le phénomène Ahmad al-Asir: un nouveau visage du salafisme au Liban", Les Carnets de l'IFPO, 2012. Al-Assir was later arrested by the authorities.

32   Armed fighting in Tripoli took place primarily in May and from late November to early December 2013, claiming forty lives. LEFÈVRE, op. cit., p. 14. CORBEIL, Alexander, "The Syrian Conflict and Sunni Radicalism in Lebanon", 9/01/2014.

some refugees have shown a tendency to get involved in the country's contentious politics, in addition to providing their support to Syrian insurgents[33].

The area where these activities are most apparent is the city of Arsal, one of the few parts of the Bekaa Valley with a majority Sunni population. As the Syrian insurgents controlled the other side of the border (the Qalamoun Mountains), Arsal became an extremely important route for their communications and supplies as of 2012, given that they were looked on favourably by the March 14 politicians and Islamists in the region, and the network of paths between the mountains allowed them to avoid LAF checkpoints. This route has also enabled Lebanese and Palestinian jihadists to travel to Syria to join the fighting. As a result, the composition of these types of organisations on both sides of the border has become very diverse, with individuals from a great variety of countries travelling through the area. The Mikati government and Hezbollah reacted to these developments by strengthening their control over the border and particularly the majority Sunni areas close to it. This pressure consequently created problems with the locals and heightened the perception that the LAF were allies of Hezbollah and Assad in what the locals regard as a denominational struggle. The jihadist response triggered a number of violent incidents that put the country on the edge of a precipice[34].

Therefore, since May 2013 there has been a number of attacks targeted at the Hezbollah militia and neighbourhoods of the capital with large Shiite populations, and there has even been a suicide attack against the Iranian Embassy in Beirut[35]. Other attempted attacks were foiled by the militia itself and security bodies, who managed to intercept several car bombs that were ready to be detonated, apparently from the Syrian city of Yabroud and smuggled into Lebanon through Arsal[36]. Nobody claimed responsibility for many of these attacks, or responsibility was claimed by virtually unknown organisations, which suggests that the perpetrators did not want to appear to be openly responsible for this type of violence. However, evidence suggests that they were the joint effort of Syrian and Lebanese jihadists. Hezbollah's public reactions to

33   INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 2013. LAVENDER, Linda and PETERSEN, Jeppe, "Lebanon at Risk: Conflict in the Bekaa Valley", March 2013.

34   INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Arsal in the Crosshairs. The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Town", Middle East Briefing, no. 46, 2016. Although the leader of the LAF is a Maronite Christian, the army has a uniform denominational composition. However, there are several Christians close to Michel Aoun and this has caused a certain degree of tension in the Sunni community.

35   Responsibility for the attack on the Dahiyeh district of Beirut in August 2013 was attributed to Omar al-Atrash, a resident of Arsal, who was killed by a missile during an attack the following October. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades linked to Al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility for the attack on the Iranian Embassy. ALAMI, Mona, "Minding the Home Front. Hezbollah in Lebanon", WINEP Research Notes, no. 21, Washington D.C., 2014, p. 4.

36   On 14 October 2013, the LAF intercepted a car bomb in Beirut, which had been prepared, seemingly, by militants of al-Nusra from Arsal. Another car bomb was stopped near Baalbek on 22 November. Finally, on 17 December, Hezbollah militia intercepted a similar vehicle in Labweh.

attacks on the organisation or Shiite neighbourhoods oscillated between attributing them to jihadist groups (on occasions pointing out the proximity of these groups to Saudi Arabia and the March 14 Alliance) and to Israel in an attempt to reduce inter-denominational tensions[37]. In addition, in August 2013 two Salafi mosques in Tripoli were attacked, killing 47 people and further exacerbating the confessional conflict.

For its part, the Syrian government made the Qalamoun Mountains the primary focus of its attention in the second half of 2013 and in early 2014, and fought fiercely against opposition forces (particularly against groups associated with ISIL and al-Nusra in the districts of Qara and An-Nabk). Assad's troops launched a major offensive in November 2013, while Hezbollah deployed forces on the Lebanese side of the border in an attempt to prevent an infiltration and the dispatch of supplies to the jihadists. Indeed, the latter carried out a series of manoeuvres, such as the ambush near Nahle on 21 December, which claimed the lives of 32 al-Nusra members. They also operated on the other side of the border, offering support to the Syrian army in operations of the magnitude of the conquest of Qara, Deir Atiyah and An-Nabk. The latter offensive significantly improved Assad's fate because it reduced insurgent pressure on the M-5 motorway connecting Damascus and Aleppo and cut off the opposition's line of communication between Arsal and the Qalamoun Mountains[38].

To summarise, during this first phase (from the start of the civil war to late 2013), the most important jhadist organisations in Syria preferred to keep a low profile in Lebanon while developing important connections with radical Lebanese and Palestinian Sunni groups to try to get them under their influence. During this time, both parties collaborated in attacks against the LAF, Hezbollah and Shiite civilians[39].

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND JABHAT AL-NUSRA AS NEW ACTORS IN LEBANON

The end of 2013 ushered in a new phase in ISIL and al-Nusra's involvement in Lebanon, when they began to play a much more prominent role. This role was deliberately linked to the action of Hezbollah in the Syrian Civil War and an attempt to send out the message that its attacks were simply a reaction to the role of the Shiite militia as an ally of Bashar al-Assad. In practice, the violence was targeted more at unarmed civilians (mainly Shia and Alawi Muslims) than the Hezbollah militia, which were a more difficult target. A clear example of this was the attack against the

37   DAKROUB, Hussein, "Jumblatt: Blaming Saudis for Embassy Blasts Dangerous", The Daily Star, 6/12/2013.

38   NASSIEF, Isabel, "Hezbollah and the Fight for Control in Qalamoun", Institute for the Study of War, 26/11/2013.

39   RIZK, Sibylle, "Liban. Une nouvelle terre de Jihad?", Politique Internationale, no. 145, 2014.

majority Shia district of Dahiyeh in Beirut on 2 January 2014, for which the ISIL claimed responsibility[40].

This organisation and Jabhat al-Nusra began to publicly regard the LAF as a legitimate target, claiming that the latter was pursuing a policy of collaboration with the Shiite parties. This posed a serious problem for Sunni political leaders because, although the jihadist militia had been harassing the LAF in the preceding months, openly placing them in the crosshairs of their attacks would create a hugely complex situation in the country. Moreover, if the Future Movement continued to blame Hezbollah for the clashes with jihadist groups, pointing to the role of the Shiite militia in the Syrian Civil War, much of Lebanese society would see this move as coming dangerously close to the approaches of these groups, thus sounding alarm bells in communities like the Christian and Druze and forcing their leaders to distance themselves from the Hariri family. Furthermore, as many LAF recruits are Sunnis, it was quite possible that attacks on these would claim the lives of a significant share of its electorate. However, if it opted to openly support the army in its fight against jihadism, it would alienate the more radical Sunni[41].

The growing threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Syria made it possible for an agreement to be reached in February between the Lebanese factions and their international allies for the formation of a national unity government headed by Tammam Salam. Ministerial appointments for key security posts were filled by March 14 members who became directly responsible for managing the fight against jihadism. Hence, their previously critical approach of the LAF was gradually replaced with a willingness to reach a compromise, as evidenced by their support of the Security Plan launched by the General Staff in March, which involved a greater direct involvement of the military in the fight against Sunni fundamentalism. Nevertheless, local leaders of the Future Movement and their allies did not take such a clear-cut approach, and combined lukewarm support for the LAF with wide criticism of its conduct on the terrain when the latter's operations affected their areas of influence[42].

When what is now known as the Islamic State (IS) attacked northern Iraq in the spring/summer of 2014 and a caliphate was formally established[43], the organisation gained control of large regions of Syria and Iraq, including areas close to Lebanon, such as the Qalamoun Mountains. At the same time, while al-Nusra and IS may have had significant disagreements in other areas of Syria, close to the Lebanese border

40   CORBEIL, op. cit.

41   AL-ALI, Misbah, "Worrying reports emerge of ISIS plans to wreak havoc in Lebanon", The Daily Star, 3/09/2014.

42   MIDDLE EAST ONLINE, "Lebanon seeks to quell deadly violence with new security plan", 30/03/2014. For instance, the Future Movement's elected MP Khaled Daher accused the Chief of Staff, Jean Kahwaji, of conspiracy against the Lebanese Sunni. THE DAILY STAR, "Hariri won't return to a Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon: Fatfat", The Daily Star, 12/10/2014.

43   ISIL changed its name to the Islamic State when the caliphate was established.

they showed a high level of cooperation, even launching a number of joint attacks[44]. In addition, the effects of the Iraqi events in Lebanon must also be pointed out. While, on the one hand, some radical Salafi sympathised with the actions of IS in its attack on Mosul, Christians and Shia saw these events as a lesson they did not want to see repeated in their own country, which prompted them to take a more active role in defending their territories against any kind of jihadist threat and led to the creation of self-defence militia. Hence, Hezbollah set up people's protection committees comprised of Sunni and Christian fighters living close to the border. On other occasions, the different denominations set up their own independent militia[45].

The presence of global jihadism in Lebanon has primarily been concentrated in three main areas: northern Bekaa (particularly in the city of Arsal); the North Governorate (including Tripoli) and southern Bekaa (especially in the areas close to Golan). With regard to the first area, the line of communication between northern Bekaa and the Qalamoun Mountains has been under huge pressure from the Syrian army and its allies since the spring of 2013 in a bid to recover the main cities in the area and to cut off the supply of arms and troops to the opposition. On the Lebanese side, Hezbollah and the LAF have exerted similar pressure, albeit in a different way, given that, although the latter has played an essentially defensive role (with checkpoints around Sunni towns, roads and the border), Shiite militia have focused more on launching ambushes on armed groups crossing the border[46].

From a military perspective, the offensive in the Qalamoun Mountains in early 2014 was a success for the Damascus regime and its allies because, by conquering the key city of Yabroud, they were able to hinder cross-border activities. Nevertheless, the political price that had to be paid was high, given that indignation among part of the Lebanese Sunni population grew considerably. The jihadists on both sides of the border responded to the pressure (reflected in the capture of one of their leaders, Imad Ahmad Jomaa) by attacking army checkpoints around the city of Arsal and occupying the city itself, in doing so killing around twenty soldiers and taking more than thirty hostages. The government reacted by driving the jihadists out of Arsal (a mission completed by the army, while Hezbollah focused on keeping watch over the adjacent areas), although the jihadists then took refuge in the mountains separating the two countries[47]. In early October, major fighting broke out again when militants of

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44   Clashes between al-Nusra and IS reached epic proportions between June and July 2014 in areas such as the province of Deir ez-Zor. RIDA, Nazeer, "Nusra Front weakened in Syria by ISIS Islamic State: Analysts", Asharq Al-Awsat, 06/07/2014.

45   THE DAILY STAR, "Hezbollah recruiting non-Shiites for ISIS fight: report", The Daily Star, 12/11/2014.

46   RAINEY, Venetia, "Analysts forecast stormy winter on Lebanon's border", The Daily Star, 15/10/2014. REUTERS, "Hezbollah kills four al-Qaeda-linked militants in north Lebanon", Reuters, 03/02/2016.

47   And to increase the pressure, several hostages were executed. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Arsal", op. cit., pp. 9-10. SAAD, Hwaida and GLADSTONE, Rick, "Border fighting

al-Nusra attacked several Hezbollah checkpoints near Brital, close to the border, but were ultimately defeated. However, new jihadist attacks were waged, such as the one launched near Ras Baalbek in early 2015[48].

Indeed, Arsal and the surroundings have become extremely dangerous for the inhabitants of the area, with groups affiliated with IS and al-Nusra exercising a degree of de facto control over part of the territory. However, the Beirut authorities do not want to take the confrontation too far so as not to lose their influence over the Sunni in the area. The Syrian refugees have also been affected by the instability, sometimes collaborating with jihadist groups and sometimes being the target of violence by the security forces or even Lebanese civilians. Furthermore, the existence of this area outside the control of the authorities continues to pose a clear threat to Lebanese security, as evidenced by the attack on the Burj al-Barajneh neighbourhood of Beirut in November 2015 (claimed by IS), which appears to have originated in the vicinity of Arsal[49].

The second zone of jihadist instability is the North Governorate, including the city of Tripoli. However, it should be pointed out that most Lebanese and Palestinian jihadists have traditionally tried to avoid open confrontation with the LAF and have confined their actions in Lebanon to firing at Jabal Mohsen, after which they have always taken a cautious approach. Their experiences in Al Dinniyeh and Fatah al-Islam have demonstrated the risks of a clash with the State and they have therefore chosen to confine their violent activities to more favourable environments, such as Syria at the moment. Nevertheless, since the departure of the Syrian troops in 2005, there has been a security vacuum in the area due to the ambivalence of the Future Movement, which has chosen to avoid restraining the more violent Salafi for fear of losing a share of their civilian support. In addition, they suspect that there are "dormant cells" with links to the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda that would be willing to confront the authorities when the time is right. Furthermore, some members of traditional jihadist groups (such as Asbat al-Ansar) appear to be getting closer to the Islamic State or al-Nusra, which tend to be seen as strong allies that could change the balance of power in the country[50].

Tensions rose in Tripoli in August 2014 when a group of Sunni clerics organised a demonstration to protest against the conduct of the LAF in the city and several

intensifies between ISIS and Lebanon", The New York Times, 04/08/2014. Hezbollah did not take part in their expulsion to avoid giving the impression of a denominational conflict.

48   MALOUF, Carol and SHERLOCK, Ruth, "Islamic State fighters mass on Lebanon border and threaten to launch attacks across it", The Daily Telegraph, 18/01/2015. L´ORIENT LE JOUR, "L´armée a repoussé au prix de lourdes pertes (8 morts) une ataque des jihadistes à Ras Baalbek", L´Orient Le Jour, 26/01/2015.

49   INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Arsal", op. cit., pp. 10-12.

50   BERTI, Benedetta, "Tensions in Tripoli: The Syrian Crisis and Its Impact in Lebanon", INSS Insight, no. 336, 2012, Tel Aviv, p. 2. RABIL, op. cit., pp. 213-224.

soldiers were injured. These events evidenced the growing discontent with the army and the belief that it was taking its surveillance duties a step too far; a complaint that has been raised time and time again by local Future Movement politicians. However, the resort to direct confrontation with the LAF was a new development, leading the military leaders to believe that IS and al-Nusra were collaborating with each other to bring about inter-denominational instability to enable the creation of an emirate in the north of the country, and the army responded by strengthened its policy to dismantle their support. It was precisely this action that gave rise to serious clashes in late October, in which 40 people were killed, thus demonstrating that the climate in Tripoli and the surrounding areas was far from calm[51].

The third conflict zone was southern Bekaa, which borders with the occupied territories of Golan and Israel and is a very unstable region. Many of the towns in the region are Shiite, Druze or Christian, but there also predominantly Sunny areas, some of which (Arqoub and Qarun, for instance) have been known in the past for building jihadist strongholds[52]. Moreover, political problems have become intertwined with disputes between local clans, exacerbated by the effects of the Syrian crisis. This has resulted in greater denominational tensions that have often culminated in violent clashes that it has been difficult to contain[53]. This space was of considerable strategic importance to the jihadists because it would enable them to send aid and fighters to the other side of the border where the opposition militia were grappling with Assad's forces for control of the territory. Among these were fighters from very diverse organisations, although in recent months the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra has grown as it acquired a predominant position in Dera´a and around Golan Heights. Furthermore, control of this strategic space would bring them closer to the positions of the Israeli defence forces in Golan and Shebaa farms, as well as to those of the UNIFIL, thus allowing them to cause incidents on the ground.

For many years the Golan border remained peaceful, patrolled by the UNDOF peacekeepers. However, in Shebaa farms territory, Hezbollah had waged frequent operations against the Israeli troops, causing numerous incidents. These were brought to a halt, however, after the war of 2006, when the UNIFIL was reinforced and the Lebanese army was deployed in the south. Nevertheless, following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, there were a number of Israeli attacks against what the Netanyahu government regarded as arms convoys to supply Hezbollah. The presence of Hezbollah militia in the north of Golan was seen as a threat by Israel, although this may have

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51   SIDDIQ, Nazih, "Guns fall silent in Lebanon's Tripoli as army moves in", Reuters, 27/10/2014.

52   SAAB and RANSTORP, op. cit., pp. 833-836.

53   A clear example of this were the armed conflicts between the Janbayn (Sunni) and Chouban (Shiite) families in the town of Suweiri (December 2013), where personal disputes led to several shootings and casualties, increasing denominational tension in the area and making it necessary for Sunni and Shiite politicians to intervene. AL-FAKIH, Rakan, "Army prevents Western Bekaa clash spiraling out of control", The Daily Star, 23/12/2013. With regard to the role of clans in Bekaa, LAVENDER, Isabel and PETERSEN, Jeppe, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

been in connection with anti-Israeli activities or the Syrian Civil War. For its part, the Syrian army became lax about controlling its border, which led to a number of incidents provoked by the Damascus authorities[54].

Since 2014, opposition militia (primarily al-Nusra) have been putting increasing pressure on the area, mainly through the harassment of local resident Druze communities that are unsympathetic to Assad's regime, but neither are they willing to collaborate with the jihadists. During the summer of that year, the militia advanced through Golan territory controlled by Syria; after reaching Quneitra, they continued northwards to the town of Jubata al-Khashab, close to Mount Hermon, and under the direction of Sheikh Abu Hassan al-Ramlawi. However, other towns in the area fell into the hands of the Syrian army and its Druze allies in the National Defence Forces (a self-defence militia). Widespread fighting between the two sides ensued in an attempt to take control of this highly strategic space. This further fuelled the fears of the Lebanese Druze in the Rashaya district that the jihadists would try to cross the border and settle in their area[55]. In response, the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, travelled to the region, to Wadi al-Taym, to coordinate defence operations against the threat of ethnic cleansing[56]. The escalation in fighting on the Syrian side of the border has placed the Lebanese Druze in a delicate situation, given that if they decide to set up self-defence groups like those established by the Christians in the north of the country, their Sunni neighbours might see this as a threat, thus creating instability in interdenominational relations. However, refusing to rearm would place them in an extremely vulnerable position.

This situation suggests that, since 2014, global jihadist groups such as IS and al-Nusra have clearly decided to become the main players in Lebanese territory, which can be interpreted in several ways. Politicians of the Future Movement insist that the jihadist assault is simply the result of Hezbollah's involvement in Lebanon and the unfair treatment afforded to many Sunni. Consequently, a solution to the crisis would require the withdrawal of the Shiite militia from the neighbouring country, in addition to a commitment on their part to disarm. For its part, Hezbollah claims that the jihadist threat existed before its militia got involved in Syria, and that it did so precisely to try to block this danger, in which case it would be necessary to strengthen national unity by supporting the Resistance and the LAF. In other words, while the Future Movement wants to exploit the jihadist threat to get Hezbollah to disarm, the Shiite party is using the same threat as a motive for rebuilding its image as the defender of the nation, thus providing justification for retaining its weapons[57].

54   MIDDLE EAST UNDOF (GOLAN HEIGHTS), March 2015 Monthly Forecast, 27/02/2015.

55   BLANFORD, Nicholas, "Druze on edge over jihadi incursion fears", The Daily Star, 15/11/2014.

56   AL-ALI, op. cit.

57   EINAV, Omer, "The Problem that is Also a Solution: Lebanese Fears Play into Hezbollah Hands", INSS Insight, no. 642, Tel Aviv, 14/12/2014.

http://revista.ieee.es/index.php/ieee

When assessing jihadist expansion, a distinction must be drawn between areas such as Tripoli and Akkar, where the movement's social bases have a historic tradition, and others like Arsal, where factors such as the disinterest of the Future Movement, the presence of a large number of Syrian refugees and the area's privileged strategic location are intermixed; all of these encouraged the arrival of foreign jihadist fighters and the spread of organisations such as IS and al-Nusra. In all regions, public policy has little or no influence, and the social bases depend largely on the private intervention of certain political leaders and their respective groups. However, this intervention is usually guided by self-interest and the regions' inhabitants are therefore often deprived of effective assistance that could alleviate the serious problems that exist[58]. In addition, whenever violence breaks out, the authorities respond by using the resources at their disposal to prevent the conflict from spreading to other regions, but no effort is made to facilitate the integration of the Sunni population or to improve inter-denominational relations, which have seriously deteriorated in recent years. In the absence of government action that is capable of promoting greater social cohesion and a multi-denominational identity, Salafist Jihadism grows stronger, facilitated by developments in the international arena and the existence of transnational organisations with a regional political strategy.

However, another striking feature is the tendency towards factionalism which not only affects Lebanese Salafist Jihadism, but also transnational groups. An example of this were the violent clashes between IS and al-Nusra in early 2016 near Arsal; a clear indication that transnational jihadism is a long way from achieving united military action of a scale that would allow it to pose a real challenge to the LAF and Hezbollah[59].

CONCLUSIONS

In recent decades, Lebanon has been fertile ground for the emergence of Sunni jihadist groups that have made occasional forays into national politics and created inter-denominational radicalism and tension. However, their political objectives have generally not led them into open conflict with the State, given that they were aware of their weak position within a multi-denominational society (accepted mainly by a large part of the Sunni community) and with respect to armed actors with greater military capability (particularly Hezbollah). Therefore, they were content to make a few demonstrations of power at the local level, but without taking confrontation too far, instead preferring to act in other parts of the world.

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58   PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE INTERNATIONAL, "Community Conflicts in Northern Lebanon", Brussels, 2013, pp. 12-20.

59   THE DAILY STAR, "Clashes reignite between ISIS, Nusra on Lebanon-Syria border", The Daily Star, 08/02/2016.

The civil war in neighbouring Syria has rekindled political rivalries in Lebanon, with Hezbollah and the Future Movement collaborating with their respective allies on the other side of the border, thus making it difficult to put together a coherent government policy. In addition, with the rise of organisations such as IS and al-Nusra, the balance of power in the region has changed. Hezbollah and the Damascus regime have been put on the defensive and the Future Movement has had serious difficulties maintaining its control over the Sunni community in Lebanon. The setting was therefore conducive to small Lebanese and Palestinian jihadist groups seeking support against Hezbollah and the establishment of links with IS or al-Nusra, for whom the Lebanese territory was key if they were to pose a threat to the backbone of the Syrian regime in the west of the country. On the other hand, because of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War and the LAF's efforts to seal the border, both IS and al-Nusra sought to operate inside Lebanon, forcing their rivals to spread themselves too thin with the consequent shortage of resources preventing them from being successful in their mission. It is unclear whether their short-term objective is to create an emirate in the north of Lebanon or whether this is, rather, a longer term goal. What does appear to be clear, however, is that they intend to exacerbate tensions in the country, thus making it difficult for the authorities to control Lebanese territory. Hence, the harder the LAF or Hezbollah try to reinforce that control, the more likely it is that jihadist organisations will resort to violence inside Lebanon, especially through attacks that heighten inter-denominational tensions and exhaust the resources of their adversaries.

However, Lebanon's multi-denominational character is an obstacle to the spread of transnational jihadism, given that the different parties tend to form tactical alliances in order to deal with the more dangerous threat. In this sense, Hezbollah could use the jihadist threat to take on the role of protector of denominational minorities in the country. While such a move would likely produce results in the short term, it would further undermine the trust between the Shiite and Sunni communities, heighten religious tensions and put the country at risk of another civil war. At the same time, the divisions between Lebanese and transnational jihadist groups place severe constraints on their military capability and ability to influence.

Moreover, even if Hezbollah were to leave Syria, this would not eliminate the problem of Salafist jihadism, given that the latter phenomenon existed prior to the Syrian Civil War, although it has been reinforced by the loss of influence of the Sunni community, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and denominational tensions in the region. Therefore, any formula aimed at containing the spread of the movement would require a combination of long-term measures (such as addressing poverty and the marginalisation of many Lebanese and Palestinian Sunni) and more immediate measures (such as the standardisation of the functioning of the country's institutions), which should aim to legitimise the security forces' actions against Salafist jihadism[60]. To effectively combat this threat, a certain degree of consensus is required between the Future Movement and Hezbollah, which, in turn, requires that other actors, such

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60   INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Arsal", op. cit., pp. 13-15.

as Saudi Arabia and Iran, reach a compromise and pressure their respective allies if they wish to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State from consolidating their presence in Lebanon[61].

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61   The election of Michel Aoun as President in October 2016 may be a first step in this direction.

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Glossary

Abdullah Azzam Brigades: Salafist organisation linked to Al-Qaeda that has been carrying out attacks both in Lebanon and neighbouring countries since 2009.

Islamic State of Iraq: name adopted by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in 2006 from Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. It became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2013 and the Islamic State (IS) in 2014.

Fatah al-Islam: group of jihadist fighters of different nationalities that emerged in the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in 2006.

Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami: Salafist organisation that emerged in Tripoli in the 1980s and became a militia under the leadership of Sheikh Shaaban.

Jabhat al-Nusra: name adopted by the ISIL fighters that were sent to the Syrian Civil War in 2012 under the leadership of Muhammad al-Jawlani. It subsequently came under the intellectual leadership of Al-Qaeda.

Miniyeh-Danniyeh: group of jihadist fighters that emerged in North Lebanon in the 1990s.

Asbat al-Ansar: Palestinian armed organisation of Salafist ideology created in Lebanese refugee camps.