Lebanon is a place where the intermeshing of contentious and politically divisive domestic and regional issues has been a prevailing trend, often causing negative reverberations throughout the country, long before the collapse of the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the American invasion in 2003 and the eruption of the Syrian war in 2011. Since then, the prospect of Lebanon’s “Finlandisation” has progressively faded away due to the non-observance by rival political coalitions of Beirut’s wary policy of “disassociation” from regional conflicts. Instead, its contending proclivities towards competing regional powers – notably Iran and Saudi Arabia – have resonated, with the fault lines (tainted with sectarian pronouncements) widening across Arab Levant, making Lebanon teeter more than once on the brink of breakdown.

However, the ability of its plurastic and resilient society – with strong Shia, Sunni, and Christian components – to thus far steer clear of disruption has struck outside observers. This tour de force has come despite incisive developments, such as: the gradual deployment of up to 7,000 Hezbollah fighters alongside the al-Assad regime since the end of 2012 and the far less decisive but no less meddlesome presence of nearly a thousand Lebanese nationals (many of whom hail from predominantly Sunni Tripoli) in the ranks of Syrian rebel groups, including Jihadist ones;\(^1\) the string of Jihadist bombings chiefly targeting bastions of Hezbollah between July 2013 and November 2015; the bombing of two crowded mosques in Tripoli in August 2013 (masterminded by Syrian intelligence\(^2\)); the intermittent clashes between the cross-sectarian Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Sunni firebrands in Tripoli, Sidon and the Beqaa valley; and last but not least the influx of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, giving Lebanon (saddled with record debt) the highest share of refugees per capita in the world.

The fact that Lebanon has managed against the odds to maintain relative stability stems from several key considerations, including the military supremacy of Hezbollah (preventing opposing Sunni groups to engage with it in a symmetrical confrontation), the meaningful Western economic and military assistance provided to Beirut, the international concern in keeping the country immune from turbulence,\(^3\) and the power-sharing political system enhanced by the formation in December 2016 of a national accord government led by Saad Hariri – the son of late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri – with the blessing of Tehran and Riyadh (curtailing to some extent feelings of marginalisation among Sunnis). Against this backdrop, this contribution examines the strategic implications entailed for Lebanon by the defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Mosul, by the imminent fall of its de facto capital of Raqqa in Syria, and ultimately by the loss of all its significant territorial gains.

**I. The LAF and Hezbollah: Uncomfortable partners in rolling back IS and Nusra**

IS no longer represents a territorial threat to Lebanon as a large proportion of its commanders and fighters are expected to concentrate on their final major stronghold in Syria’s eastern Deir al-Zor province in the wake of their forthcoming defeat in Raqqa. Furthermore, the eviction of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, spearheaded by the formerly Al Qaeda-affiliated group previously known as

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Nusra Front) and IS from swathes of territory in northeast Lebanon in summer 2017 – successively and respectively at the hands of Hezbollah and LAF – has sent a strong message out to those Salafi Jihadist fighters who might be tempted at some point to turn toward Lebanon that they will have no safe haven there. Even if they were to pass through the Syrian Army and Hezbollah’s lines (separating their most westerly positions in Syria from the Lebanese territory), it would be highly unlikely for them to break through the defence lines erected by the LAF – with British assistance\(^4\) – along the border with Syria.

This represents a major turnaround considering the situation that was prevailing in August 2014 when several hundred IS and Nusra Front insurgents forged a temporary alliance of convenience and briefly overran the border town of Arsal, inflicting severe losses on the LAF before retreating to the town’s rugged outskirts. One has also to bear in mind that IS was, by the end of 2015, drawing dangerously close to the Damascus-Homs highway, and was thus in a position to contemplate reinforcing its militants that were still entrenched in pockets along the Lebanese-Syrian border.\(^5\) In addition, in March 2016, the “media office of the Raqqa emirate” was still confident enough to release a video in which two Lebanese members of IS warned the “dictators of the Lebanese statelet” that they will not stop its “arrival”, calling on the Sunnis to “revolt”.\(^6\)

I.1 Hezbollah seizing the momentum to clear HTS from Arsal’s outskirts

The occupation of enclaves in north-east Lebanon by HTS, IS and Free Syrian Army-linked rebels came as a result of their fleeing the Hezbollah-led offensive in Syria’s Qusayr and Qalamoun in 2013-2014. Since then, Hezbollah has repeatedly urged the Lebanese government to give the LAF the go-ahead to drive out the Jihadists and other rebels from these enclaves. As well as being embroiled in other military priorities in Syria, Hezbollah was dis-inclined to engage in battle with these groups on Lebanese soil, especially in Arsal’s outskirts, a Sunni town that was supportive of the Syrian rebellion (including logistically) and hosting tens of thousands of refugees in its environs. But the LAF lacked the fully-fledged political backing to conduct a military offensive in the area, at first due in all likelihood to the reluctance of senior Sunni decision-makers to run the risk of appearing hostile to the Syrian rebellion,\(^7\) and more recently due to their unwillingness to place the LAF in a situation where they find themselves compelled to coordinate with Assad’s operatives and Hezbollah in order to expel the insurgents from the border area.\(^8\) This largely explains why the LAF have been resorting to a containment strategy towards the Jihadist threat in north-east Lebanon for the last three years, despite having eight servicemen – whose fate had been unknown – in IS captivity since 2014.

This stalemate lasted until July 2017, when Hezbollah seized the post-Mosul battle momentum (and the growing aversion of Arsalis toward Jihadists) to launch an attack (backed by Syrian air cover) against HTS in Arsal’s surroundings and western Qalamoun. Meanwhile, the LAF’s role was confined to strengthening their defensive positions around Arsal in order to prevent Jihadist infiltration, placing particular emphasis on protecting civilians and refugees.\(^9\) The fighting ended as

\(^{5}\) Blanford, *ISIS on the Move in Lebanon?*, 2016.
\(^{6}\) Naharnet, *Islamic State Threatens Hizbullah*, 2016.
\(^{7}\) What pleads in favour of this assumption is the fact that some high-ranked Sunni officials went as far as granting political cover to Jihadist returnees in 2012, indicating the inability of the LAF to prevent Hezbollah’s military involvement in Syria. See Naylor, *Lebanese Sunnis who Fought in Syria’s War*, 2014.
\(^{9}\) The LAF were keen to bolster their image in light of allegations of torturing to death four Syrian terror suspects in custody after troops staged a preemptive raid in refugee encampments near Arsal on 30 June 2017, during which they faced attacks by suicide bombers. Rose, *Syrian-Lebanese Tensions*, 2017.
the warring parties reached a deal for the relocation of the remaining 120 HTS combatants (in addition to thousands of their supporters and relatives living in camps in the Beqaa and several inmates jailed for terror-related charges in Syria and Lebanon) to the rebel-held Idlib province in exchange for the release of five Hezbollah fighters held by HTS. Hezbollah’s decision to take the offensive into its own hands was prompted by strategic interests such as: the need to secure the land corridor that Iran “aims to carve to the Mediterranean coast” (and which is projected to pass through Qalamoun); the assertion of its self-proclaimed pose as the nation’s hedge against external threats, acting in complementarity with the LAF (thus challenging the previous statements that not only Prime Minister Hariri but also top American officials had made, according to which the LAF are the sole legitimate defenders of Lebanon’); and the attempt to enhance its national credentials, especially among Christian audiences profoundly alarmed by the rise of Salafi Jihadism.

I.2 Pulling the rug out from under the army’s feet, or how to avert an outright victory over IS

After cutting a separate deal with Free Syrian Army-linked rebels, aimed at relocating them from Arsal’s outskirts to Qalamoun, Hezbollah was gearing up to strike the final blow against IS militants embedded in contiguous highlands straddling Lebanon and Syria when the LAF expressed their resolution to exclusively handle the liberation of the remaining Lebanese occupied enclave, located in the outskirts of the Christian villages of Al-Qaa and Ras Baalbek. The government had meanwhile given the long-awaited green light for the army to fulfil such a mission, suddenly aware of the pressing need for the state and military institutions to restore their domestic credibility and avoid the risk of deceiving their international backers. In August 2017, the LAF managed to restate their role as defenders

10 Chulov, Iran Changes Course of Road to Mediterranean Coast, 2017.
11 Tellingly, when Hariri carried out a long-planned visit to the White House on July 2017, one of the main goals of which was to ensure continued US support for the LAF (amounting to more than one billion dollars since 2008), Hezbollah was already on the verge of concluding its campaign against HTS.
13 General Joseph Votel, Commander of the US Central Command, had stated before the House Armed Services Committee on March 15, 2017, that Lebanese “ground forces offer one of the greatest returns of investment in the region”. Testimony available at: bit.ly/2em4lLp (p. 41).
of the homeland by swiftly taking back most of IS-held positions in northeast Lebanon.

Hezbollah was not pleased with the turn of events, especially as the LAF were publicly praising the crucial US and British military assistance while denying any coordination with the Shia group (classified as a terrorist organisation by Washington) and the Syrian Army (both of which were simultaneously waging their own offensive against IS positions on the Syrian side of the border). Moreover, the LAF’s feats were overshadowing Hezbollah’s early achievements against HTS, not to mention that they were undermining its long-standing efforts to justify its weapons under the pretext of ensuring national defence amidst the feeble resources of the military.14

Against this backdrop and just as the LAF were about to assault IS’s last line of defence, Hezbollah managed to recapture the initiative by brokering a controversial deal with the cornered fighters. Accepted half-heartedly by Damascus amidst Beirut’s strange self-effacement, the deal involved the transfer of the 308 remaining combatants, along with their relatives, to Deir al-Zor province in exchange for the uncovering of the fate of the abducted Lebanese soldiers (and the location of their bodies when it turned out that they had been murdered), the return of the bodies of Hezbollah operatives as well as the remains of an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps officer who had been beheaded in Syria, and the release of a Hezbollah captive held by IS. In its resolve to have the final say, Hezbollah failed to foresee the outrage the deal would provoke, both domestically and internationally.15

Conversely, and despite a campaign ending on a disappointing note, the LAF have emerged from this situation with clear benefits in terms of reputation, but also operationally, especially as they will be in sole charge of ensuring security along the eastern border (with Hezbollah’s consent, keen as it is to alleviate the international pressure exerted on it).

II. Lurking threats

After suffering a wave of terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2015, Lebanon has witnessed a relative lull in the last two years.16 This has come as a result of the success of Hezbollah in preventing the Qalamoun Mountains from serving as a rear base for Al Qaeda-linked attacks, the LAF’s implementation of security plans in Tripoli and the Beqaa since April 2014, the efficient intelligence collaboration among different state security services and with foreign counterparts,17 and the shutting down in January 2015 of the surreptitious communication capability established by IS and Nusra Front detainees inside Roumieh jail (benefiting hitherto from lax security measures) in the wake of twin suicide operations in the Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighbourhood of Tripoli that had been planned from within the prison.18

Notwithstanding these achievements, the increasing number of elaborate terrorist plots foiled lately by the Lebanese security agencies (including simultaneous and coordinated bombings in three cities19) through the dismantling of organised IS and HTS sleeper cells is a stark signal that the subversive threat facing Lebanon is far from over. This menace is immediately heightened by a potentially vengeful IS in the aftermath of its ouster from

15 At time of writing, the US-led coalition was using airstrikes to prevent the IS bus convoy from reaching Deir al-Zor province. The deal also angered the Iraqi authorities since the convoy’s original intended destination had been the town of Bukamal, close to the Iraqi border. Nordland, Islamic State Convoy, 2017.
16 With the notable exception of suicide bombings carried out on 27 June 2016, allegedly by IS in Al-Qaa.
17 A collaboration that has proven to be fruitful overseas as well, as illustrated by a Lebanese-Australian joint intelligence effort that led to the foiling of an IS plot (involving dual nationals) to blow up a plane from Sydney to Abu Dhabi in July 2017. Al-Arabiya, Lebanese-Australian Operation, 2017.
18 Van Tets, Lebanon’s ISIS prison, 2015.
northeast Lebanon, and in light of the battle of Raqqa (from where most of IS’s militants in Lebanon receive their instructions20). But it is also part of a wider pattern of Salafi Jihadist attempts to retaliate against Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria and to instigate sectarian strife in Lebanon.

II.1 Keeping a watchful eye on Ain al-Hilweh

Located in a cramped area adjoining the southern city of Sidon, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon has proven to be an Achilles’ heel of counter-terrorism efforts in the country. Ain al-Hilweh is being used as a hide-out by a few hundred militants loyal to IS and HTS in addition to dozens of the most wanted Lebanese Jihadists, taking advantage of Palestinian factional divisions, of the Palestinian Authority’s hesitation to crack down on them (for fear of causing civilian casualties)21 despite repeated appeals made by the Lebanese security agencies, and of the non-interventionist policy generally followed by the LAF in Palestinian camps. The camp – which remains marked by sporadic clashes – is being kept under the close scrutiny of the Lebanese security services, which have proved effective in thwarting terrorist attacks planned from within their walls, arresting some of the plotters in cooperation with Palestinian factions.22 While all parties seem keen to avoid a second Nahr al-Bared,23 the risk is clearly present as there is still no resolution in sight to root the Jihadists out from their last major sanctuary in Lebanon, sparking fears that they might even expand their influence throughout the camp, potentially making it attractive to dispersed IS fighters looking for a new lair following their reverses in Syria.

II.2 The ideological dissemination of Salafi Jihadism

Considering that IS has broadened its appeal in the wake of the striking victories it achieved in 2014 (even overriding other Jihadist groups in Lebanon according to some observers24), one might think that the severe defeats it has recently suffered in Syria and Iraq would overturn its efforts to spread its ideological tentacles in Lebanon. However, the extent to which IS’s dwindling Caliphate will damage its ideological influence is uncertain, especially with the increasing civilian toll of anti-IS airstrikes and IS’s reliance on the digital arena to propagate its narrative.25 Even assuming that IS’s ability to inspire followers were to collapse, the Salafi Jihadist ideology would continue to be carried out by similar groups as long as the regional convulsions and sectarian grievances on which they thrive are not settled. With respect to Lebanon, there is a clear need to defuse the rising rift between host communities and Syrian refugees at a time when Syrian Jihadists (some of whom have infiltrated refugee ranks) are seeking to gain the backing of their displaced compatriots.26 There is also a need for Beirut to turn from sole reliance on repression in dealing with radical Sunni activists and focus on improving the socio-economic conditions of the population living in disadvantaged areas. Lastly, further dissociation is necessary between the intelligence activities of the LAF and Hezbollah. The behind-the-scenes cooperation between both sides, while highly effective in cracking down on Jihadist cells, has in fact damaged the army’s image among Sunni fringes receptive to victimisation narratives, making some veer towards Salafi Jihadism.27

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20 See the interview of Lebanon’s Director General of General Security, Major General Abbas Ibrahim, with Al-Mayadeen website on December 29, 2016, available (in Arabic) at: bit.ly/2v2HIxK
23 In reference to the three-month battle in 2007 between the LAF and the Al Qaeda-inspired Fatah al-Islam militants that were holed up inside that Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon.
26 Lund, Lebanon’s Dangerous Downward Spiral, 2014.
III. Hezbollah trapped in aporia while climbing to the heights

In its endeavour to thwart the spread of Salafi Jihadism in Lebanon, Hezbollah finds itself caught up in a series of contradictions. First of all, in its quest for dominance over its rivals, Hezbollah did not hesitate to humiliate or even crush the Lebanese Sunni moderate leadership (whether by allegedly having members involved in the killing of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, briefly seizing Beirut’s Sunni neighbourhoods in May 2008, or instigating the fall of the Saad Hariri-led government in January 2011) only to realise afterwards the latter’s relevance in allaying the growing Sunni grievances and countering the dissemination of Al Qaeda’s and IS’s ideology among disaffected Sunnis.

Secondly, while Hezbollah has been elevated to the status of a regional army, it finds itself, paradoxically, in no position to dislodge the armed groups affiliated with IS and HTS that are ensconced inside Ain al-Hilweh camp, despite its location just a few miles from the party’s redoubt in Beirut’s southern suburb. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible for a movement concerned with presenting itself as the standard bearer of the Palestinian cause to bear the political costs of such an intervention, as it could easily be depicted by its foes in sectarian terms. Thirdly, Hezbollah’s military might admittedly constitutes a bulwark against any Jihadist territorial advance on Lebanon. However, on the ideological front, its involvement in the Syrian war fuels the extremism it seeks to contain “as it deepens the regional sectarian rift” (even though rising sympathy for Salafi Jihadism in Jordan underlines its ability to flourish regardless of any direct challenge posed by Shia militancy). Fourthly, Hezbollah’s campaigns in Qusayr and Qalamoun in 2013-2015 have been successful in ensuring contiguity between its heartland in the Beqaa and territories relevant to ‘useful Syria’, yet these campaigns wrought a major demographic shift in the Beqaa, where Shias turned into a minority as a result of the flow of mainly Sunni Syrian refugees fleeing nearby conflict zones. As Hezbollah seems determined to address this issue by guaranteeing their “safe” repatriation to their hometowns, it remains unclear how this situation could be resolved amidst the refugees’ general reluctance to return and Hariri’s disposition to coordinate this matter only with the United Nations (unwilling as he is to grant the Syrian regime legitimacy for the time being). Meanwhile, and critically, refugees exposed to intimidation might become more amenable to Jihadist propaganda. Finally, Hezbollah’s expansion at the expense of Syrian rebel groups (including HTS) in areas approaching the annexed Golan Heights might ignite an Israeli war not only against it, but also against Lebanon as a whole.

29 Choufi, Hariri Returns to Lebanon, 2014.
30 Atrache, How Hezbollah is Changing the War, 2014.
33 Harel, Israel’s Main Goal in Syria, 2017.
IV. Shifting of emphasis in Syria, gathering storm over Lebanon?

“The counter-Islamic State campaign always served as an imperfect cover for regional conflicts and contradictions. With the Islamic State increasingly in the rear-view mirror, these will be laid bare.”34 Of all the regional conflicts mirrored within the Syrian arena, the covert war pitting Israel against Iran presents the greatest danger to Lebanon. Indeed, Israel has repeatedly warned that it will not tolerate the presence of Iranian or Iranian-backed forces (be it Hezbollah or Iraqi Al-Nujaba movement) nearby the Golan Heights, nor will it tolerate the underground missile production factories that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps have been building for Hezbollah in Lebanon – according to unverified reports35 – in a move to strengthen their dissuasion capacities and outflank the multiple Israeli airstrikes launched in Syria against advanced weapons convoys destined for Hezbollah. In this regard, Israel has been conveying hawkish sentiments, not just to Hezbollah but also to the Lebanese government and citizens, about the risks of a new war that would be more destructive than that of 2006 should Israel’s “red lines” be crossed. Such messages have been voiced by key security figures, such as former defence minister Moshe Ya’alon, in spite of their deep conviction that “the decisions in Lebanon are made by the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and not by the Lebanese President or Hezbollah leader”.36 The latter also engaged in deterrent narrative when he asserted that an Israeli attack on Syria or Lebanon “would open the door for hundreds of thousands of fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic World to participate in this fight”37, proving how little say the Lebanese authorities have in this regional trial of strength.

While a successful implementation of the US-Russian ceasefire agreement for southwest Syria (aimed notably at keeping Iran and its proxies away from Israeli and Jordanian borders38) might contribute in no small measure to the relaxation of tensions, it has not until now curbed Israel from conducting pre-emptive strikes in Syria, with questions remaining as to whether similar strikes will be conducted inside Lebanon as well – with unpredictable consequences – in an attempt to degrade Hezbollah’s military assets. This precarious uncertainty is due to Israel’s dissatisfaction with the truce agreement in southern Syria, and more widely with the post-Raqqa order, narrowing its room for military manoeuvre in Syria as a result of expanding Russian influence while failing to meet its aim of preventing a lasting Iranian presence in Syria and blocking Hezbollah’s efforts to acquire precision missiles.39 Moreover, in a context fraught with the temptation of the Trump administration to derail the nuclear deal with Iran, further escalation in the region cannot be ruled out, as Tehran will no doubt be tempted in turn to “use all means at its disposal, including its assets in (…) Lebanon (…), to beef up its deterrence and retaliatory capabilities”.40

Seen in this light, the US President’s assertion during a press conference with Hariri in July 2017 that the continuous growth of Hezbollah’s military arsenal “threatens to start yet another conflict with Israel” should be of great concern to Lebanon.

34 Malley, The War After the War, 2017.
35 Qassemi, Iran tunshi’ masani’, 2017.
40 Harrison, Why Killing the Iran Deal Could Start the Next War, 2017.
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