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Aftershocks of the Syrian Revolt Hit Lebanon

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For years, Hezbollah's arms have been on the mind of decision-makers across the world. For the first time since the Arab Spring began in December 2010, those arms are again at the forefront, as the violence in Syria threatens to spill over into Lebanon, bringing the Shiite group into direct confrontation with Sunni extremists emboldened by the two-year old Syrian revolt.

The international community originally tried, with little luck, to force disarmament of Hezbollah through UN Resolution 1559 back in 2005. The group's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah insisted, however, that this would not happen so long as Israel continued to occupy villages in southern

Lebanon.

In 2006, Israel went to war against Hezbollah, pledging to eliminate its military arsenal and political leadership. That too never saw the light, prompting the United States and its allies to back disarming Hezbollah through the Lebanese state, which tried, and failed, to dismantle the party's telecommunications network at the Rafic Hariri International Airport in 2008, leading to clashes between the Shiite group and its opponents in both the capital and parts of the Druze mountains. Now, we are seemingly on the verge of yet another attempt, this time at the hands of Sunni extremists within Lebanon, who are trying to draw Hezbollah into a suicidal domestic confrontation that would likely divert their efforts and focus to Lebanon instead of Syria. A Sunni-Shiite armed conflict in Lebanon would weaken and eventually incapacitate Hezbollah's massive arsenal. As the international community stands by watching tension boil in Lebanon, some officials are raising red flags, claiming that al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front)—a Syrian militia combating the Assad regime—is now establishing a branch for itself in Lebanon.

For months, Lebanese officials have been warning that Syrian rebels might seek to open a new war front in their [neighbouring country](#). If they fail at home, fleeing persecution inside Syria, they would take refuge in one of Syria's neighbours. The Turks would likely not allow defeated Islamists with a vengeance back into their territory. The obvious alternative would be Iraq and Lebanon. The former already has a strong base for Sunni extremism and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, whereas Lebanon is seemingly becoming breeding ground for Salafi thought and practice.

Founded in January 2012 as a direct result of the Syrian conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra became an immediate magnet for extremists from Jund al-Sham and Fatah al-Islam, two Islamist militias that had thrived in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps during [the past decade](#). Both had been initially founded as Sunni militias that aimed to counterbalance Hezbollah's military clout, and legitimize "Sunni" arms in Lebanon. Both were based in Ain al-Hilweh, a condensed and poor refugee camp southeast of the port city of Sidon. Those camps were filled with impoverished families, mosques, powerful clerics, and plenty of arms. According to the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, the Ain al-Hilweh cell of Jabhat al-Nusra's Lebanon Branch currently has [150 members in Sidon](#). Among its top commanders are three Palestinians: Tawfiq Mohammad Taha, Ziad Ali (Abu Na'aj), and Haitham Mahmud Mustapha. Others include the Lebanese Bilal Bader, Usama Shihabi, Naim Ismail Abbas, and Mohammad Ahmad al-Douakhi, [an expert in explosives](#).

According to the same source, they now dominate approximately 70 percent of Ain al-Hilweh, and are increasing in both membership and arms. The second cell is situated in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, consisting of 300 to 400 heavily armed members. Other smaller splinter groups can be found all over Lebanon, affiliated, or in the process of affiliation with al-Nusra. One is Soukour Akkar (Akkar Hawks), founded originally in Baalbek. Its leader is [known by his pseudonym Abu Thaeer](#). Another cell was founded in Aarsal, in Lebanon's Bekaa region, where two Lebanese Army officers were recently killed—while attempting to apprehend a fugitive from the region—reportedly by al-Nusra-affiliated militiamen. Among the rising Sunni extremist figures involved in the operations of al-Qaeda or its proxies in Lebanon are non-Lebanese jihadists Mohammad Douek from Morocco, the Saudi Abdullah al-Hittarand Ashraf al-Ghamidi, the Syrian Mohammad Mahmud Khalaf, the Tunisian Zuhdi Mohammad al-Qawadri, the Egyptian Mohammad Ahmad al-Masri—known as Abu Hudaifa, the Kuwaiti Jihad al-Bayani, the Bahraini Seif Yusuf Bin Seif, and a Chechnyan combatant known by the name of [Aslan](#).

Conversely, the person whose activities are worth monitoring would be the Sidon-based Islamic preacher Ahmad al-Assir, a rising and outspoken Salafist figure in Lebanon. At 44, al-Assir has been Sidon's Bilal Ben Rabah mosque preacher since 1989 but only rose to fame after the outbreak of the Syrian revolt, following his stout positions against the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies, notably Hezbollah. Among other things, he has accused Nasrallah of the 2005 murder of then [Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri](#).

Now that battle lines have been clearly drawn, all it takes is a single event to trigger a confrontation between the [Salafists and Hezbollah](#). Nasrallah is trying hard to avoid, but the same cannot be said for al-Assir, who recently initiated a series of rallies to protest the establishment of armed Hezbollah-occupied apartments in his native Sidon. Any escalation leading to al-Assir's harm or killing, for example, would get squarely blamed on Hezbollah, regardless whether the party is behind it or not. That would automatically generate reprisal attacks that would drag both groups into never-ending clashes and a war of attrition. Ultimately, such a war would drain Lebanese Salafists, al-Nusra, and Hezbollah.

From an Israeli perspective, chaos in Lebanon might be more "controllable" than chaos in Syria. They lived with it for fifteen years, after all, during the Lebanese civil war. The Israelis have already said that they would never tolerate chemical arms in the hands of Islamist rebels in Syria. The recent fall of al-Raqqah in north-eastern Syria shows that the rebels are gaining ground, and might be on the verge of obtaining such sophisticated weapons. As far as Israel is concerned, either Bashar al-Assad has to rid them of al-Nusra, or let somebody else do it. If al-Nusra manages to draw Hezbollah to a battle that either breaks or weakens it, Tel Aviv would certainly be happy. Hezbollah would be too occupied fighting al-Nusra, or the salafis of Lebanon, to carry out the aim for which it was originally established: exporting the Islamic Revolution and combating the State of Israel. The Israelis would wait for one side to eliminate the other, knowing that both would emerge battered and weak. It is similar to how the United States stood by and watched the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, hoping that it would either rid them of Khomeini or Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia would certainly not mind seeing the end of Hezbollah, and Syrian officials would point and shout, 'We told you! See what happens if we part the scene?' A new confrontation in Lebanon would not only divert the world's attention from what's happening in Syria, but perhaps, it might prolong, even if slightly, the life of the Syrian regime as well.

If a confrontation does happen, Hezbollah would first do its best to avoid clashing with the Salafis, so as not to project a Sunni-Shiite feud. It would ward off Salafi attacks through its proxy Sunni allies, but at one point, if the battles drag on, Hezbollah would be forced to coming out an openly responding to Sunni Salafis.

The media war, for now, has already started. Last week, reports circulated that Nasrallah was suffering from cancer and had been flown into Tehran for treatment. Then came a story that Syrian rebels had struck at a convoy carrying Hezbollah figures either in or out of Damascus, and that Nasrallah's deputy Naim Kassem, had been killed in the rebel attack. On February 27, Nasrallah himself came out to challenge the rumours, showing just how worried Hezbollah was with the world that was changing fast around them. He addressed his new opponents, without naming them, saying: "Nobody should have wrong calculations! Don't test us!"

Some, however, are seemingly focused on bringing Hezbollah to a new test and confrontation, one that is unlike everything the Shiite group has ever endured since its creation in 1982.

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