



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

POLICY ANALYSIS

Arsal

ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit | Nov 2014

Arsal

Series: Policy Analysis

November 2014

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Introduction

Clashes broke out in a small Lebanese border town in the north of the Bekaa Valley, not far from the Syrian border on August 2, 2014. The town, an isolated and under-developed yet historically powerful location, had become the focus of competing and opposed interests in the Syrian crisis and fragile Lebanese politics. What has become known as the Battle of Arsal saw the Lebanese Army face off with Syrian rebel groups including jihadist organizations ISIS, and the Jabhat al-Nusra. After five days of fighting an agreement was reached, overseen by Lebanon's (Sunni) Authority of Islamic Scholars alongside the Life Foundation for Democracy and Human Rights, saw the Syrian fighters withdraw. This paper examines the battle of Arsal, asks how the withdrawal was secured, looks forward at what long-term solution might be found, and in particular questions how the events of the battle's fall-out may help to illustrate the current quagmire of Lebanon-Syria politics. It lays out the background to the eruption of hostilities, examines the needs and motives of the actors involved, and attempts to lay out an authoritative account of what happened in the border town, with an eye to disentangling the interests that maintain the current volatile situation.

The Specificity of Arsal

The town of Arsal lies along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, in sits in what is commonly referred to as the anti-Lebanon mountain range, overlooking the Bekaa Valley. Its municipal boundaries run some 50 kilometers along the Syrian border fence, it is accessible only via a 10km road that winds toward the town stemming off the main artery linking Baalbek, Labwa and Hermel, and its steep surrounding mountains mean Arsal is largely isolated from other nearby Lebanese towns. The town is not only remote from other towns and villages, but it is also a long way from Lebanon's hubs; it is 38 kilometers from Baalbek, 75km from the Bekaa provincial district of Zahle, and a full 120km away from the capital Beirut.¹ Despite its remote location, the town is significant within the country; covering 316.9 km² it accounts for nearly 5% of Lebanon's landmass.² In a region characterized by a harsh and arid climate, its estimated 40,000

¹ "Arsal: A Lebanese Town in Support of the Syrian Revolution," *Al-Jazeera Net*, January 17, 2014, <http://goo.gl/lwCtL0>

² "Arsal, The [Canaanite] God El's Throne Embodied in Flesh and Stone." *Army Magazine* No. 276, June, 2008, http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/news/?18473#.U_NK-vmSy-0

inhabitants rely primarily on stone quarrying, agriculture, and commercial industries like carpet making, but only 10% of the population is involved in regular employment in the public or private sector.³ Beyond its fame as the home of the carpet trade, Arsal is also known as the home-town to many of the members of the Lebanese security and military forces.

Like other towns in the Baalbek region, Arsal is economically and socially marginalized. Beyond its low employment rate, the signs of this deprivation can be seen in the poor state of the town's health and educational facilities, as well as in its slow pace of development. Its isolation, harsh climate, poorly developed industry, and proximity to the Syrian border have exacerbated the deprivation faced by the town, and lead to the development of a smuggling industry. Before 2010, when fuel subsidies were lifted in Syria, the town gained particular renown for the smuggling of heating oil. With a consistent demand for cooking oil, and a high margin of profit given the subsidies in Syria, the smuggling industry was highly profitable.⁴ The smuggling industry created networks between Arsal and Syrian towns like Qalamoun; networks that changed the character of the majority Sunni town in the largely Shi'ite Bekaa. With increased intermarriage and the growth of family networks between the two sides of the frontier, Arsal's character quickly changed to become a Syrian town on the Lebanese side of the border.

The contemporary character of the town as a location of independence with a culture of resistance is reinforced by the town's historical resistance to the Ottoman Turkish occupation near the fall of the Ottoman Empire; records indicate that 40 residents from Arsal's al-Bustan neighborhood were hanged by the Ottomans, while others were executed in Baalbek and Damascus.⁵ This independent streak was also manifest in the town's reluctance to be included in the "Grand Liban" project, the Lebanese Republic-to-be, instead, residents demanded to be included as a part of Syria. The folk tradition of Arsal tells of how residents took part in the Syrian Revolution of 1925, especially in the battle at Jiwar al-Naqqar, at which 13 French soldiers were killed.⁶ Later on, during

³ "Arsal: A Lebanese Town," *Op. cit.*

⁴ Hussain Sultan, "Smuggling Between Arsal and Syria.. Returning the Favor," *al-Modon*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.almodon.com/economy/e128a4c5-01a6-40fe-bc35-9ff47aa2125e>

⁵ "Arsal, The [Canaanite] God El's Throne," *Op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

the tumultuous events of 1958 in Lebanon, the townspeople of Arsal would raise the Syrian flag over the police station and public school, as a way to challenge the two sites of state power present in the town.⁷

Although it had deep connections and loyalties to Syria, Arsal played a very limited role at the outset of the Syrian revolution. During the peaceful protests of 2011, Arsal played host to number of Syrian families who had fled across the border, and, in a reversal of the established smuggling routes, provided a number of Syrian villages in the environs of Qalamoun with foodstuffs and heating oil. The economic reverberations of the political crisis in Syria, however, meant that this flow of goods quickly declined. From about the beginning of 2012 to the middle of 2013 as the conflict in Syria became increasingly militarized, Arsal took on increased importance, becoming a gateway for arms going to Syrian locales near Qalamoun and Homs. It was at this point that Arsal became one of at least 17 illegal smuggling outposts stretched across the Lebanese-Syrian border, second in importance to Qusayr, and thus escaped attention from both the Syrian regime and the opposition.

Developments in the Syrian revolution during the first quarter of 2013, and maneuverings of interested state and political actors left their mark on Lebanon, and especially on Arsal. Principal among these developments was the decision of Syrian regime allies, who had kept a close eye on the situation along the border. The conclusion was that the National Defense Army (a pro-regime citizens' army) had succeeded in halting the opposition's military advance, after the latter had threatened the very heart of Damascus. Iran, the Assad regime's primary regional ally, also impacted the region when it decided to leverage its military power for the benefit of the Syrian regime, and send military support from Hezbollah and the Iraqi militia. These factors helped put an end to the military advancement of opposition forces, and helped tip the balance in the regime's favor. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanof put the order of events succinctly when he told the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* that Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's decision to support the Assad regime militarily was came because the opposition was at the edge of Damascus.⁸ The entry of Hezbollah, allied Iraqi militia and other foreign fighters aligned with the regime into the

⁷ Saoud al-Mawla, *Lebanese Shiites in the Crystallization of the National Consciousness*, Dar al-Jadid, Beirut, 2007, p. 37.

⁸ "Bogdanov: Nasrallah Told Me that He Intervened to Prevent the Fall of Damascus," *al-Hayat*, June 20, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/525592>.

battle in Syria had consequences for the region's military balance of power, and had a direct impact on Arsal.⁹

Once the pro-regime forces had halted the opposition's advance on Damascus, they besieged the opposition in the twin towns of East and West Ghouta and cut off the supply lines leading to the rebel strongholds from the Syrian Desert and Jordan at Utaiba and Abbada. It was these maneuvers that put focus on the region surrounding Qalamoun, situated in the mountains along the Mediterranean coast northwest of Beirut. Qalamoun became the last lifeline of the rebel forces. This, in turn, gave unofficial border crossings with Lebanon added significance, and principal among these was Arsal.

As part of their continued effort to cut off the supply lines to the armed opposition pro-regime forces attacked Qusayr. It was at this point at which Nasrallah first openly acknowledged the participation of Hezbollah fighters in the conflict on the side of the Syrian regime, citing the need to protect the villages populated by Lebanese Shi'ites that dotted the area around Qusayr. Later justifications differed from the first, and included the need to protect Shi'ite holy sites, such as the Shrine of Zeinab in Damascus; pre-empting the threat from *takfiri* groups against Lebanon; and the need to protect the supply lines of the Lebanese resistance movement. Regardless of what the motives were, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime would eventually take control of Qusayr and the villages in its environs. The opposition, meanwhile, had lost its most important supply lines through Lebanese territory. Arsal, which had already received large numbers of Syrian refugees, thus became the Syrian opposition's only supply artery along the frontier with Lebanon.

The battle for Qusayr ushered in a new military reality that saw Syrian armed opposition forces suffer a string of failures in vital areas including Homs and its southern countryside, Qalamoun, East and West Ghouta and Aleppo.¹⁰ Building on these gains and boosted morale, the regime and its allies launched the Battle for Qalamoun at the

⁹ Foreign fighters on the side of the regime are estimated to number around 30,000. For more see: Hamza al-Mustafa, "The Jihad of Reluctant Resistance and Superstition: Foreign Fighters with the Syrian Regime," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/cea40a90-8793-4e2a-8f68-0b1ffdcef0e3>

¹⁰ On the repercussions of the battle for al-Qusayr, see: "The Battle of al-Qusayr: Implications and Consequences," *The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/23f50d5e-ec95-48d6-8cca-90d73030af6f>,

end of 2013. This multi-staged operation aimed to recapture areas dubbed by the regime as "Useful Syria," including those tracts of land that join Damascus to the Assad family strongholds on the coast; these cut through the cities of Qalamoun and Homs. Coming in the prelude to a series of what were expected to be political breakthroughs, including the Geneva II Conference and the presidential elections, these tactics faced limited opposition in what were at this point peripheral areas.

At the time, an ACRPS Assessment Report that looked at the vital nature of the Qalamoun region (see, "[The Qalamoun Battles: Calculations and Stakes](#)" published on December 22, 2013) and outlined how the régime went about putting a decisive end to the Qalamoun battles by staging separate confrontations in key areas successively. These battles began in October and November of 2013, and launched what would eventually allow the Syrian regime to secure the areas surrounding the international highway to Damascus, including towns like Nabk, Qara, Deir Attiya and Maaloula. The second phase took place in March of 2013, and allowed the regime to regain control of Yabroud. This made room for the third stage, which conclusively ended the Qalamoun battles in March of 2014, and saw the regime retake control of the triangle around Assal al-Ward, Zabadani and Rinkous outside of Damascus. The fourth stage of military operations saw the regime retake the countryside surrounding Homs, and took place over the first six months of 2014. The fifth and final stage of this operation was the sortie into the Lebanese town of Arsal.

The losses suffered by the Syrian opposition during these staged battles in and around Qalamoun spurred their retreat into the arid countryside and a war of attrition with the combined forces of the regime and Hezbollah. In this context, and given the demographic composition of the Baalbek District, Arsal became a refuge point which, due its proximity to the Syrian border, also allowed opposition fighters to remain in contact with their displaced relatives on either side of the border. With unofficial estimates of refugees fleeing to Arsal at 100,000 to 120,000 (more than three times its population), the town had effectively become a Syrian city in Lebanese territory, as far as all relevant parties were concerned.¹¹

¹¹ "Border Town Arsal Benefits Medically from the Presence of Syrian Refugees.. and Loses Economically and Financially," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.com/home/article/147631>

Arsal as a Lebanese Security Concern

Despite its deep connections to the economic and social life of Syria, Arsal was never a high priority for the Lebanese government. As is the case with other towns and villages in the Baalbek district, Arsal has been ignored and marginalized by the central government. Aside from a few military checkpoints on the road to Arsal, the presence of the Lebanese authorities is generally absent.

Attitudes began to change as the Syrian revolution became entrenched and militarized, with Lebanese attitudes towards the conflict becoming polarized. In Lebanon, clearly defined camps formed around those supporting the revolution, those opposed it, and those who wanted Lebanon to remain uninvolved. As part of an effort to spare Lebanon the fallout of the Syrian crisis, leaders from across Lebanon's political spectrum convened in Baabda (the seat of the Lebanese presidency) on June 11, 2012. The congregants issued a communiqué stressing the need for Lebanese neutrality in the Syrian conflict. In Articles 12 and 13, the *communiqué* stated:

- Lebanon must remain neutral in overarching conflicts that pit different camps of countries against each other, and must be protected from the negative consequences of regional crises and tensions.
- Security must be maintained along the entire length of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, and no part of Lebanese territory may be used as a buffer zone. Nor should any portion of Lebanese territory be used as a corridor for the smuggling of arms or for the movement of armed groups.

However, given the zeal with which Lebanese politicians were taking sides in the Syrian crisis, this self-declared policy of Lebanese neutrality and self-isolation was never going to be effective. In fact, the determination of some Lebanese political factions to provide support—in various guises—to their chosen partisans in Syria led rather to the intensification of political and sectarian conflagrations within Lebanon itself. Nowhere was this more apparent than the Sunni Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir in Sidon in November 2012, when his Salafist supporters clashed with Hezbollah fighters; the lethal skirmishes between residents of Alawite and Sunni neighborhoods in Tripoli; or the killing of 16 Lebanese soldiers in armed skirmishes between different neighborhoods of Tripoli, in Northern Lebanon, in June of 2013.

Given the political scene, stopgap measures like the communiqué were of no value in ending Lebanese entanglement in the Syrian crisis. This state of affairs was punctuated when Hezbollah's Nasrallah confirmed on May 1, 2013 that his party's fighters were in Syria. Though his speech only confirmed suspicions, the announcement muddied the political waters and Prime Minister Miqati's efforts toward Lebanese self-isolation from the Syrian conflict were shown to be moot. After Nasrallah's speech, Lebanon entered a new period in which security and politics in the country were dictated by events as they unfolded in Syria. A string of suicide bombings and car bombings were the prelude to the explosion of the conflict in Arsal:¹²

- July 9, 2013: Beirut's southern Dahiye District
- November 19, 2013: Iranian embassy
- January 2, 2014: Beirut's southern Dahiye District
- January 16, 2014: Hermel area of the Bekaa
- January 21, 2014: Beirut's southern Dahiye District, Harat Hreik neighborhood
- February 3, 2014: Choueifat area of Mount Lebanon
- February 19, 2014: Bir Hassan neighborhood at the edges of Southern Beirut
- On June 20, 2014: village of Dahr al-Baydar, Bekaa region

This series of explosions destabilized Lebanon, particularly the areas dominated by Hezbollah. This led to accusations by some Lebanese that the Shi'ite group was responsible for provoking jihadist groups, which were said to be behind a number of car bombings across Lebanon. It was in response to this that Hezbollah prepared itself for the March, 2014 battle over Yabroud, aiming to bring those bombings to an end. The group's operating assumption was that the explosives used in the car bombings were manufactured in the Syrian town of Yabroud before being smuggled into Lebanon via Arsal. Working on the premise that victory in Yabroud would bring the bombings in Lebanon to an end, Hezbollah readied its cadres for a decisive battle with the *takfiris*. The propaganda campaign that accompanied the military operation also made allusions to the need to deal conclusively with the "troublesome" role played by the town of Arsal, and the necessity of neutralizing it.

So long as explosions continued in Lebanon and the flow of refugees from Syria poured in, the town of Arsal would become a focus point, and an urgent security concern for the Lebanese government led by Tamam Salam. The government, formed after the

¹² "News of the Bombings in Lebanon," *Sky News Arabia*, June 26, 2014, <http://goo.gl/FCNvdq>

failure of the Geneva II Conference to resolve the Syrian crisis,¹³ Salam's cabinet felt forced to act after a number of other incidents served to underscore the extreme importance of Arsal to the security of Lebanon. From the bombing of a number of sites in Arsal by the Syrian air force, to the prisoner exchange overseen by Director General of the Lebanese General Security Force (a paramilitary police force) Abbas Ibrahim, in which a number of nuns from the Syrian town of Maaloula captured in Arsal were released in return for the freedom of, amongst others, Saja al-Dulaimi, the wife of a jihadist leader. The freed prisoners were handed over to Jabhat al-Nusra in Arsal in March of 2014.¹⁴ Similar incidents include the February 26, 2014 assassination of two Syrian nationals, Ali and Mohammed al-Koz, for the allegedly collaborating with the Syrian regime—an act that Jabhat al-Nusra has also been accused of. On July 8, another Syrian national, Najib Izzedine and his son were also killed in Arsal, following shelling that ISIS was widely believed to have been behind.¹⁵

Hezbollah's interference in Syrian affairs clearly dragged the rest of Lebanon into the crisis. Moreover, it gave Syrian jihadist groups a pretext to infiltrate Lebanon, or at the very least the excuse for the activation of existing sleeper cells to activate. Even in the face of a public and official outcry and demands that it extricate itself from the Syrian crisis, Hezbollah persists in its involvement in the battles surrounding Qalamoun. The group has leveraged the fragility of Lebanese authorities and its army's ambiguous attitudes—indeed, the Lebanese military is often biased in favor of Hezbollah. These compounded the international community's tacit approval of Hezbollah's armed intervention in Syria, and ultimately led to the bombing in Arsal.

The Bombing of Arsal

Two distinct narratives exist that explain the unraveling of events in Arsal. The first, widely accepted in both official Lebanese circles and on the Lebanese street (excepting swathes of the Sunni population) is that the crisis in Arsal was part of a wider ISIS plan

¹³ "Lebanon: Government Anticipates Presidential Vacuum," *The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, February 25, 2014, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/0a2e352f-7081-450b-b3cf-6cc894bc8bf7>

¹⁴ To see the exchange process, see: "The Exchange of the Maaloulah Nuns," *YouTube*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf9dZw0nC9s>

¹⁵ "ISIL Executes a Person in his Home in Arsal," *al-Joumhouria*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.aljoumhouria.com/pages/view/151856>

to conquer Lebanon and turn it into part of the Caliphate declared by ISIS on June 29, 2014. A second narrative, promulgated by the Syrian opposition, is that the bombing of Aarsal was the result of a conspiracy whereby the Lebanese military worked in coordination with Hezbollah. The ostensible aim of such a scheme would have been to draw Syrian factions into battle, thereby distracting them from the war of attrition with Hezbollah, particularly after the battles in Qalamoun. The proponents of this narrative also claim that the decision by Syrian opposition forces to enter Aarsal was taken only after the families of Syrian rebel fighters had asked for help amidst the random shelling and bombardment of their refugee camps.

Both of these narratives are rooted in verifiable facts, but the truth is that the actual context for these facts is starkly different from what either side suggests. There can be no doubt that for armed Syrian opposition groups taking the battle to Lebanon, and specifically to those villages loyal to Hezbollah providing the party with a reservoir of volunteers for its battles in Syria, would have been attractive. Yet, these groups deferred such a plan both because of their success in the war of attrition against Hezbollah, and because of the potential negative fallout of their entry into Lebanese territory. Instead, the group opted to continue its hit-and-run tactics against Hezbollah positions in Qalamoun, and targeting the group's convoys going to and from Syria. Thus, armed Syrian factions cannot be sad to have wanted to instigate an armed conflict or to take control of a town which, in practical terms, was always effectively outside of the Lebanese state's control.¹⁶

A reading of the finer details surrounding the August bombing of Aarsal gives one pause, particularly around Lebanese Army's detention of Imad Jumaa. A leader of the Fajr al-Islam group, Jumaa is also known as "Abu Ahmad," and pledged to ISIS on August 2, 2014. Jumaa was captured by the army at a checkpoint ambush on the outskirts of Aarsal after which he was interrogated at the army station about his alleged intent to plan an attack against the Lebanese Army and its bases.¹⁷

¹⁶ Anonymous testimony from a Jabhat al-Nusra field commander at the Qalamoun front.

¹⁷ Contrary to some accounts in the Lebanese media, Imad Jumaa had not been armed when, conveying a person wounded at the Battle of Qalamoun to Aarsal, he was detained in an ambush that took place beyond the army checkpoint. Alternative narratives say that the ambush was carried out without shots fired and indeed without any resistance at all (Communication from Syrian Activist Muhammad Abu Yasir in Aarsal on August 2, 2014). See also: "Terrorist Plot Seeks to Embroil Lebanon in the Region's War," *Radio al-Nour*, August 5, 2014, <http://www.alnour.com.lb/newsdetails.php?id=69504>

Jumaa's declaration of loyalty to ISIS, in particular coming after ISIS had threatened the Lebanese Army and called on its Sunni soldiers to mutiny, was the putative reason for his detention. For small Syrian rebel groups, however, which were subject to fluid and dynamic political and military leadership, the arrest of Jumaa was not an important development, and they did not stand to lose any material or military support. This position is supported by the story of Jumaa and the formation of his military group Fajr al-Islam. Rising to prominence as the Syrian war became increasingly militarized in 2012, Jumaa was initially based near the Syrian town of Qusayr where he founded a group known as the Abi al-Khabab Brigade, made up of small groups of villagers from the surrounding countryside. As its membership expanded and as the area broke free of the stranglehold of the regime, Jumaa decided to rename the group "Fajr al-Islam" (lit: "Dawn of Islam"). The same group would later become part of the joint Control Room operated by the Revolutionary Council and tasked with overseeing military operations in and around Homs. Jumaa would eventually become a part of multiple, similar operations carried out by the armed wing of the Syrian revolutionary forces after his departure to Qalamoun, and before his eventual joining up with ISIS in July of 2014.¹⁸

Members of Fajr al-Islam interpreted the army's detention of Jumaa, in connection with that group's massive losses in the battles around Qalamoun, as part of a ploy to carry out the work of Hezbollah. Fajr al-Islam, along with other groups, threatened to attack Lebanese Army positions unless Jumaa was released by 5:00 PM of the same day of his arrest.¹⁹ No clear explanation for the detention of Jumaa has yet been offered by the military. Hours after his detention, the Lebanese media carried a report attributed to the Lebanese Army that Jumaa had confessed to membership in Jabhat al-Nusra, and to implementing a plan to carry out a string of military attacks in Lebanon. However, that version of events does not stand up to scrutiny. To begin with, Jumaa's supposed loyalty to ISIS would have put him at odds with Jabhat al-Nusra. Further to this, Jumaa had continued to visit Arsal on a weekly basis even his pledge to ISIS, in light of which detaining him would not have required a special ambush.

¹⁸ Abdul Rahman al-Arabi: "Imad Jumaa, Commander of the 'Fajr al-Islam', Sparked Confrontation in Arsal," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 3, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/b861a8d0-880e-46cc-984a-3ba2befce8d6>

¹⁹ Interview with Muhammad Mahmoud Saryoul, known as Muhammad Abu Yasir, former combatant at Qusayr, resident in Arsal.

The day before Jumaa's detention, Lebanese Army Chief Brigadier-General Jean Kahwaji, had declared at the morning's Lebanon's Army Day celebrations that "nobody will be allowed to create a buffer zone outside of the state's control." He added that the military's response to any such action would be "swift and effective."²⁰ Once the 5 O'clock deadline set by Fajr al-Islam had passed, members of the group alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and other factions launched a series of attacks against checkpoints manned by the Lebanese Army. During the attacks a number of soldiers were taken hostage with the aim of exchanging them for Jumaa and other Islamist prisoners held by the military.²¹ The military responded by declaring a state of alert; Brig-Gen. Kahwaji said his army would not "remain silent as strangers in our midst turn our country into a crime scene and a free zone for terrorism, kidnap and murder."²² The Lebanese Army was quick to dispatch armed units to Arsal and, by the end of the first day of hostilities, 11 Syrian Islamist militants and eight Lebanese soldiers were dead.²³

With so many dead, all sectors of Lebanese society including supporters of the Syrian revolution, rallied to support the Army. This meant adopting the army narrative of Jumaa's arrest, and helped to polarize the political arena, leading to institutional paralysis. The Army was left as the single national institution accepted by a majority of the country's political forces, and was generally viewed as the guarantor of the country's stability and even existence. The special status accorded to the Lebanese Army in the country's politics and its grassroots support bolstered the Army leadership, whose ambitions grew in tandem with the country's presidential crisis. By this time it had become a tradition for the office of the president in Lebanon to be handed over to the chief of the country's army in the aftermath of a victory over an existential foe. With this tradition in mind, it is easy to understand how the military's leadership had seen in the battle over Arsal a means through which to figure itself as the savior of the nation

²⁰ "General Kahwaji: We Will Not Allow the Establishment of a Buffer Zone," *Radio al-Nour*, March 7, 2012, <http://www.alnour.com.lb/newsdetails.php?id=35332&searchstring=%C7%E1%DA%E3%C7%CF>

²¹ The kidnapped soldiers included Nahi Bu Khalfoun, Mohammed Himmich, Mohammed al-Qadiri, Ibrahim Shaban, Wael Darwish, Ahmad Ghayeh, Rayan Salam, and Sergeant George Houry. See: "By Names: the Lebanese Army Prisoners Kidnapped by Terrorists," *al-Hadath News*, August 4, 2014, <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/131777>

²² "Jabhat al-Nusra Overruns Arsal," August 3, 2014, <http://goo.gl/pdDbRq>

²³ Thaer Ghandour, "The Arsal Front Erupts in Lebanon: a Tally of Dead, Wounded and Abducted," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 2, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/7f25f964-fd1a-4d4e-b990-dc61b518460c>

by doing battle with “fundamentalists and extremists”—a group which it defines as including exclusively Sunni Muslims in cities like Tripoli and Sidon.²⁴ The position is one that the Army has been carving out for itself since the 2007 conflict in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp.

With their families in Arsal under random shelling—the precise origin of which it is impossible to ascertain—and with fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS and other Syrian groups entering the town, the Lebanese Army intensified its random shelling of the outpost, even though they were aware that an outright military victory would be difficult. At the time, the Lebanese Army ignored the fact that Arsal was also being shelled by the nearby, pro-Hezbollah town of Labwa. The behavior of the Lebanese Army in Arsal during early August stood in stark contrast to the way it reacted to the aerial bombardment of the town by the Syrian Air Force only a few weeks before, on June 26.²⁵ When attacked by the Syrian army, the Lebanese Army did not seek to use its soft power to contain the situation in Arsal, opting instead to wage a propaganda campaign and declare an all-out war against jihadists and *takfiris*. A short-lived humanitarian ceasefire brokered by the Authority of Muslim Scholars, which took effect on the fourth day of fighting (August 5), was quickly violated.²⁶

All of the armed Syrian factions, however, believed that the Lebanese Army’s involvement in Arsal was the unfortunate inevitability of protecting Syrian refugees and certainly had no intention of expanding the confrontation with the Lebanese Army. Those groups were, then, all too eager to accept the truce proposals made by the Authority of Muslim Cleric’s Sheikh Salem al-Rafi’i and the LIFE Foundation’s Nabil Halabi. The truce agreement stipulated the withdrawal of armed Syrian groups from Arsal in exchange for assurances of the safety of the Syrian refugees in the town. Jabhat al-Nusra, which was represented by its “Amir” in the Qalamoun district known as “Abu Malek” during the talks leading to the truce, released three detained members of

²⁴ Hamza al-Mustafa, “Syrian Arsal, Lebanese Trap,” *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/3230ddd7-e1f2-49e7-a13b-a795100493c9>

²⁵ Compare events in the town of Tufayl: Thaer Ghandour, “A Syrian Occupation of Lebanese Territory,” *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, June 26, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/891ad969-f6bb-4af9-b883-cf58e3f42de2>

²⁶ “Collapse of Truce and Resumption of Clashes in the Lebanese Town of Arsal,” *BBC Arabic*, August 5, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2014/08/140805_lebanon_ersal

the Lebanese Internal Security Forces as a gesture of goodwill.²⁷ Although the Lebanese Army initially violated the ceasefire and insisted on its right to enter Arsal and stating its refusal to abide by a truce with the armed groups, it, too, eventually acquiesced to the terms of the agreement. These included:

- The formation of a committee composed of the citizens of Arsal and a number of Syrian human rights defenders, which would work under the auspices of the two mediating bodies—the Authority of Muslim Scholars and the LIFE Foundation—to oversee the implementation of the truce agreement and security affairs in general.
- All parties to the armed conflict were to guarantee a withdrawal from Arsal and hand over their positions to the Committee.
- As a goodwill gesture, the Syrian rebels were to release three detained Lebanese soldiers. In return, the media and relief agencies were to be allowed access to Arsal.
- The committee defined above was to have responsibility for the transfer of the wounded, and the treatment of those who cannot be carried out of Arsal, as well as the return of civilians.
- All medical and food relief was to be allowed into Arsal.

On August 7, 2014, and pursuant to the terms of the agreement, the Lebanese Army assumed positions in Arsal again, following the withdrawal of armed Syrian rebels groups.²⁸ By this time, 20 Lebanese soldiers and 17 General Security personnel had been killed,²⁹ along with more than 43 Syrians—including both combatants and civilians—and 15 civilians from the town of Arsal.

²⁷ Interview with Mohammed Abu Yasir, *op. cit.* See also: "Intervention of the Ulama Yields Release of 3 Detained Members of the Security Forces and Rafi'i Confirms Militants' Desire to Withdraw," *al-Hayat*, August 6, 2014, <http://goo.gl/24s1jm>

²⁸ "Gunmen Withdraw from Arsal, Evacuation of Wounded Begins," *Al-Jazeera Net*, August 7, 2014, <http://x.co/5NgPj>

²⁹ "Kahwaji: 20 Lebanese Army Soldiers Went Missing in Arsal During their Confrontation with Terrorists," *SANA*, August 14, 2014, <http://x.co/5NgVp>

A Reading of Events

The complex events surrounding the Arsal crisis demonstrate that the bombing and withdrawal were not the result of some rapid development, but rather were natural consequences of the involvement of Lebanon's political forces, particularly Hezbollah, in the Syrian conflict. In fact, it is possible to view the events of Arsal as premeditated. The crisis created by the fleeing of tens of thousands Syrian fighters from the countryside surrounding Homs and from Qalamoun to Arsal alongside their families was not remedied by Lebanon's expedited and improved response. Brig-Gen. Kahwaji's statements on the day preceding the attack on Arsal, and a press statement made by the Mayor of the nearby Hezbollah-aligned town of Labwa on July 30, all indicate that the military operation of August 2, 2014 was a pre-planned operation.³⁰ A majority of Lebanese had even been expecting a battle in Arsal for months. Indeed, a July 2014 ACRPS Policy Analysis predicted that a conflict in Arsal was imminent, following the capture of the Syrian areas adjacent to it.³¹

On the Syrian opposition side, groups believed that Arsal was the Syrian revolution's only avenue to the outside world. In contravention to the narrative adopted by the Lebanese media, all of these groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, agree that their involvement in Arsal was a mistake that cost them dearly.³² Armed Syrian groups neither entered Arsal for strategic reasons, nor as a tactic to secure the release of

³⁰ The Mayor of Labwa stated that "data in our possession indicates that an operation will be carried out jointly between the Lebanese and Syrian armies (and Hezbollah) armies to put an end to potential terrorism on the border," emphasizing that "the Syrian army would act within its territory, while the Lebanese army and the resistance would undertake operations within Lebanese territory." He added: "the time has come to settle matters, as what is taking place in our region, on the border, can no longer be justified. It is unacceptable to endanger the security and lives of our people, who at any moment are exposed to rockets fired helter-skelter by militants running wild." See: "Clashes and Ambushes on the Lebanese-Syrian Border, Two Members of Hezbollah Killed," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 30, 2014, http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=13028&article=781285&feature=#.U_HtyfmSy-0

³¹ See: Saoud al-Mawla, "Lebanese Salafists in their New Manifestations," *the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, July 15, 2014, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/724d58d9-f37d-48e0-93ec-d9db12ca8abb>

³² In the aftermath of the crisis Jabhat al-Nusra issued an apology for its intervention, but qualified its action, in the context of responding to shelling by the army and Hezbollah, as an effort to preserve the lives of civilians through obtaining assurances for their safety. See: "Al-Nusra Clarifies the Circumstances of the Events of Arsal: Neither in Intervening nor in Withdrawing Did We Betray You," *Zaman al-Wasl*, August 7, 2014, <https://zamanalwsl.net/news/52324.html>

Jumaa. This was made explicitly clear by Sheikh al-Rafi'i of the Authority of Muslim Scholars, who indicated that the groups that remained in Arsal at the time of the negotiations were motivated only by concern for the civilian families who had sought refuge there.³³ It can be said, then, that the Lebanese Army exploited the consensus across the authorities and the Lebanese public, which demanded a military escalation in Arsal. In some sense, this also appeared to be a show of force by Brig-Gen. Kahwaji in his efforts to accrue political capital in preparation for a presidential bid. It also seemed that Kahwaji was prepared to overtly take sides in a political conflict in order to achieve this.

A number of Lebanese factions, primarily among them Hezbollah, sought a prolonged conflict for which they had prepared a propaganda campaign. This was apparent not only in statements made by Hezbollah officials, but also in the blatantly sectarian tone of a song released by the party's official crooner, and the way in which Hezbollah failed to prevent its supporters from blocking the arrival of the Authority of Muslim Scholars delegation and medical and other forms of relief from entering Arsal.³⁴ A mortar attack on Syrian refugee camps in Arsal led to the renewed displacement of hundreds of the refugees after their camp was burned, and a group of unknown assailants attacked the convoy of Sheikh al-Rafi'i. All the same, however, the sheikh gave a statement to the press in which he discounted the idea that Syrian armed rebels had attacked his convoy.³⁵ The Hezbollah-aligned media had initially adopted the Army's explanation of events, but the same media later spoke of the "humiliation" felt by soldiers and officers of the Lebanese military about the "shameful conciliation."³⁶

As far as the Syrian refugees were concerned, the Arsal crisis served to underscore the level of enmity and racism towards them within Lebanon. This was revealed through official media channels and on social media throughout Lebanon, and during the crisis agitation against Syrian refugees reached the point where demands were being made

³³ "Intervention of the Ulama Yields Release," *Op. cit.*

³⁴ Jad Shahrour, "Singer Calls on Hezbollah to Take Control of Arsal," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 4, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/miscellaneous/8d5b7088-19b8-4828-86a1-a5f16192f9ff>; See also: "Al-Labwa: People's Wrath Prevents Relief to Arsal," *al-Modon*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.almodon.com/politics/40035408-e804-47b3-ba26-a291cd3afb8a>

³⁵ "Intervention of the Ulama Yields Release," *Op. cit.*

³⁶ "Arsal Beyond Reach of Sovereignty: the Humiliating Settlement," *al-Akhbar*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/213139>

that some be killed. Certain Lebanese political factions that were predisposed to discrimination against Syrian refugees—such as the Hezbollah-aligned Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by Gen. Michel Aoun—took advantage of the situation in Arsal to demand heightened attacks against them. The crisis thus served the aims of these parties indirectly, but was another reason to lend support to its outbreak.

Hezbollah was also a beneficiary of the crisis in Arsal, which served to retroactively legitimize its involvement in the Syrian conflict as an ostensibly preemptive measure to protect Lebanon from the dangers of *takfiris*. One specific gain was Walid Jumblatt's recanting of his earlier statement accusing Hezbollah of drawing terrorists into Lebanon. While this may have been purely tactical maneuver by the Druze parliamentarian to secure Hezbollah support for his presidential acceptable to Jumblatt's allies in the Hariri-led Future Movement while denying the presidency to his foes in the FPM or within the Army's General Staff, it cannot be denied that Hezbollah came out on top. For its part, the Future Movement was in disarray over the best way to respond; while obliged by its commitments to the US and Saudi Arabia to stand with the Army in its battle against "terrorism," the Movement's Sunni grassroots had serious reservations about the confrontation in Arsal. Some were even overtly opposed. Equally, the possibility that the mediation efforts by the Authority of Muslim Scholars might succeed would have embarrassed the Future Movement, which was battling with the Authority for control of the Sunni Street.³⁷ Future Movement officials have even accused the Authority of receiving funding from Qatar, and have stated their aim of destroying the group,³⁸ giving the party an extra incentive to gain on the back of Arsal. The Future Movement made the most of the Arsal crisis by presenting itself as the representative of moderate Sunnis. Its leader Saad al-Hariri, son of founder member Rafic, has returned to Lebanon for the first time in three years in order disburse a US\$ 1 billion grant given by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia to be used to bolster Lebanon's military and security services.

³⁷ Such competition can be seen, for example, in the recent elections with the Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's officially sanctioned representative body for Sunni Muslim communal and theological affairs.

³⁸ Thaer Ghandour, "The Challenges of Preventing the Lebanese Sunni Street from Slipping into 'Extremism'," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/73cb15ce-516b-4ce3-88f7-708b270ae69a>

Conclusion

While the armed confrontations in Arsal have ceased, and armed Syrian rebels have withdrawn from the town, no clear resolution to the crisis is evident. Jabhat al-Nusra continues to hold a number of Lebanese soldiers, some of whom have appeared in video messages demanding the withdrawal of Hezbollah from Syria. These video messages are a further indication of the failure of mediation efforts by the Authority of Muslim Scholars, which had tried to secure the release of the detained troops.³⁹ Ultimately, any military-police approach to resolving the crisis in Arsal must tackle its underlying roots, and closely examine the interests, causes, and motivations of each of the parties involved in the August bombing of Arsal. In particular, the increasing entanglement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict must be addressed; otherwise efforts to spare Lebanon the fallout of the conflict will continue to fail.

³⁹ "Lebanon: The Story of the Negotiations to Liberate the Kidnapped Soldiers," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/0083eaea-50d5-4f3c-ae8-3db79085e2b1>