



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

April 2015

#### LEVANT

##### Lebanon's security

The Syrian conflict and the presence of ISIS are gradually but increasingly changing the equation of Lebanon's security, based on a complex and very delicate balance, in which various dynamics play out.

First of all, the political standoff persists: Lebanon has been without a President since May 2014 missing 22 elections; the next is scheduled for the 13<sup>th</sup> of May. The Sunni Future bloc is still in conflict with Hezbollah but its leader, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, seems still willing to engage in a political dialogue, possibly thinking that the alternative, confrontation in the streets, would mean handing over the Sunni leadership to extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The cabinet currently holds presidential powers, through a consensus mechanism. This complicates every decision and might definitely carry problems as the cabinet will soon be asked to replace a large number of senior officers in the military and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) who are soon going to retire, after several deferments. Those are officers of the calibre of Director-General of the ISF Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Basbous (a Sunni), Army Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Walid Salman (a Druze), Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Jean Kahwaji (a Maronite). Filling these posts will be a very difficult task, especially

considering that, according to the Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war in Lebanon, they must be distributed equally between Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims and also considering how much these nominations can affect the dynamics of security in a country deeply involved in a sectarian conflict on its borders.

The Syrian conflict only seems to intensify over time. By mid-March, reports based on Western intelligence argued that Syria-based jihadist groups are preparing to resume their attacks on the north-eastern Lebanese border in the next weeks. In fact the Qalamoun region has become a deployment area for jihadist Jabhat al Nusra Front units. These reports prompted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to launch a series of pre-emptive operations along the north-eastern Syrian-Lebanese border. Operationally, LAF is aided by Hezbollah, but probably the Shi'ite militia will take matters in its own hands.

Jabhat al Nusra is present in the rugged mountainous terrain straddling the border between the Tufail promontory and Arsal, while ISIS' stronghold runs northeast from Arsal to the area west of Burayj on the Damascus-Homs highway. A major battle to control the rugged outskirts stretching from Syria's Qalamoun region to Arsal is inevitable and may also happen soon. Sources have reported of dissent and clashes between some factions affiliated with the Nusra Front and others affiliated with ISIS: these controversies may aid a coordinated divide-and-conquer strategy between the LAF and Syrian army.

Meanwhile the fight against jihadist groups has extended to Lebanon's domestic realm. Several brigades, including members of Lebanese nationality, swore allegiance to ISIS in the past few months. The Lebanese Security Service has indicated that the Roumieh prison, where all jihadist convicts have been confined, and the Arsal refugee camp are two of the most prominent recruitment pools and operations centres for jihadists in the country.

However, current efforts by the LAF and Hezbollah might still be insufficient to defeat jihadist groups in Lebanon. Indeed, considering the history of civil war and its legacy of inter-sectarian tensions, it is arguable that the fight against ISIS in Lebanon would better serve its purposes if framed as a counter-insurgency campaign. As argued before in fact, ISIS cannot be comprehensively described as a terrorist organization, while it fits better in the definition of an insurgent group: this change in perspective could help better redefining the whole strategy for degrading and defeating the group in the Levant.