

Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town

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I. Overview

Weakened by deepening inter- and intra-communal rifts, the Lebanese state has gradually abandoned its primary role in governance and as manager of representative politics and relies increasingly on security measures to maintain stability and the political status quo. The remote border town of Arsal in the north east is emblematic of this security-centric method of tackling unrest. The approach, which escalated after the Syrian war began next door, is short-sighted and dangerous, as it fights symptoms while inadvertently reinforcing underlying factors that drive instability. If the government were to address Arsal's plight in a more balanced manner that takes those factors into account by folding its security component into an overall political strategy, it could yet turn a vicious circle into a virtuous one, preventing the town's downward spiral and providing a model for tackling such problems in the country overall.

Arsal combines many of Lebanon's woes: economic erosion and poor governance at its fringes; sectarian fault lines shaping the fate of a Sunni enclave within a majority-Shiite governorate (Baalbek-Hermel) in the Beqaa Valley; the weakening of Sunni national leadership and growing assertiveness of Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shiite movement whose militia is actively fighting in Syria; and the spillover of the Syrian conflict. The latter has turned the town into a rear base for anti-regime fighters, a trans-shipment point for explosive devices, and – for both these reasons – a threat for Hizbollah and Lebanon's security apparatus. It has also turned the town into an initial haven for waves of refugees, adding to severe pressures on both the Lebanese state and individual localities throughout Lebanon.

A five-day battle between Syrian jihadis and the Lebanese army in August 2014 put Arsal on the map as a national threat in the minds of many Lebanese. The army then cordoned off the town, its checkpoints making it extremely difficult for ordinary Arsalis to travel, outsiders to visit, aid to reach tens of thousands of refugees hunkered down in the area and even local peasants to access their lands. The economy collapsed, while Syrian armed groups stayed put, seemingly enjoying a *modus vivendi* with the army provided they kept a low profile. In this festering stalemate of social disruption and popular resentment, radical Syrian groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra benefit the most, as they can mobilise local anger and harness it to their worldview.

Violence in and around Arsal has decreased as a result of the army's cordon but not ended. Lebanon's military response might be understandable. The country's brittle stability does not leave room for much leniency or political risk taking, especially in today's highly dangerous regional environment. The state's dysfunction gives carte blanche to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) by default, because it is one of the country's rare functioning institutions. Moreover, the massive refugee influx, amounting to more than one quarter of Lebanon's population, has aggravated pre-existing problems and strained already scarce resources, making it very difficult for even an effective government to cope with socio-economic needs.

Nevertheless, the state's heavy reliance on security to solve all manner of political and social ills offers no durable solution. If anything can explain more specifically how the situation in Arsal spun out of control, it is a long track record of central authority neglect; and if there is anything its inhabitants truly want, it is a greater presence of the state's non-security parts: improved basic services, economic opportunities, better political representation, a solution to, or at least mitigation of, the refugee crisis and effective policing instead of collective punishment.

Beyond the Arsal case, which is troubling in its own right, lies the bigger story of the state's gradual abdication of its duties. As its performance on governance and representative politics grows more dismal by the day, it increasingly falls back on security measures devoid of any serious political, humanitarian or developmental component. This approach has proven dangerously seductive, by maintaining an appearance of stability while catalysing the state's further decay in a self-reinforcing loop in which the measures the government takes to compensate for its shortcomings make matters worse. Over the years, such behaviour has become a pattern in Lebanon; beyond its borders, the same logic has been taken even further in Iraq, the progressive disintegration of whose state should be a cautionary lesson. Rather than suppressing the symptoms wherever instability metastasises, Lebanese authorities should be treating the causes.

Arsal would be a good place to start. To arrest the downward spiral, the authorities should reduce army security measures in and around it in ways that would still be security-effective. For instance, nothing prevents them from either abolishing the permit required for outsiders to visit, or granting it by default, except when there is clear evidence of ill-intent. Allegations of human rights abuse by security officers should be promptly and vigorously investigated and proven offences punished. Procedures are needed that would enable local farmers to cultivate their land. Authorities should facilitate adequate humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees and relieve Arsal by relocating some of them to other areas in Lebanon, an idea discussed by the government but not acted upon.

If this comprehensive approach can succeed in Arsal, perhaps the government and donors could then apply the lessons to the country's other multiplying trouble spots. In that case, donor countries would have to significantly increase their support to Lebanon to help it address the refugee crisis and its impact on host communities. The Lebanese government would then need in turn to allocate adequate funds to other areas like Arsal that are hosting high numbers of refugees, with the aim to set up viable and sustainable economic and infrastructure projects.

II. The Curse of Being Peripheral

State policy (or the absence thereof) in large swaths of Lebanon is exacerbating fragmentation and a sense of disenfranchisement among many residents. This has been a pattern for a long time and has affected a number of places and people, even if in each case the dynamics have differed. What these cases share is the security-heavy containment approach as the sole solution to the problems being tackled.

For decades, for example, the state has enforced Palestinian refugees' alien status for fear of absorbing them into Lebanese society, to the point of relegating sovereign functions, such as the provision of security, to Palestinian factions controlling the refugee camps, and leaving it to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to provide basic services and social welfare. This has turned the camps into pockets where the state has shunned both the means and ambition to rule its own territory.¹ The government initially flaunted the reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared camp in northern Lebanon, largely destroyed in a showdown between the army and a violent transnational jihadi movement in 2007, as an opportunity to reassert state sovereignty, but follow-through has been conspicuously absent.²

The same logic applies to constituencies integral to Lebanese society. After the 1975-1990 civil war, the state partially relegated responsibilities to political parties, Hizbollah in particular, in predominantly Shiite areas of Beirut's southern suburbs (called Dahiye), the south and the Beqaa Valley. In the wake of the devastating 2006 conflict with Israel, it renounced its duty to compensate victims and rebuild, letting the Shiite movement orchestrate recovery, to its political advantage.

Though such abandonment is frequently interpreted through a sectarian lens, central authorities have engaged in equal-opportunity neglect. When, in April 2014, on-and-off fighting subsided between Tripoli's respectively Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods of Bab el-Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, the state left both to their own devices.³ Seemingly satisfied with a "security plan" that froze this local conflict while doing nothing about its root causes, it came across on both sides of the sectarian fault line as seeking to cut off troubled areas from the rest of the country instead of protecting residents and reintegrating them into society.

Arsal, a town of approximately 30,000 in an area of 317 sq km surrounded by the vast barren Jouroud Arsal Mountains in the remote north east, is another notable casualty of this destructive practice, in which central authorities quarantine growing segments of territory.⁴ For decades an unremarkable border town, with an ambivalent identity (torn between a distant central state and neighbouring Syria) and a distorted economy (partly dependent on smuggling), it has become an epicentre of a political crisis triggered by the 2011 Syrian uprising that turned it into a nexus of local and national problems. Not the least of these is the dramatic influx of tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who have dwarfed its native population.

¹ Sari Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon as a Space of Exception", *Revue Asylon(s)*, no. 5, September 2008. See also, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°84, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, 19 February 2009.

² Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 117, *Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle over Nahr al-Bared*, 1 May 2012. The camp has still not been fully rebuilt. *Al-Modon*, 11 January 2016.

³ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°29, *New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, 14 October 2010; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°160, *Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies*, 20 July 2015.

⁴ Al Jazeera, 17 January 2014. Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Arsal, October 2012.

A. *A History of Neglect*

Arsal's strained relationship with the Lebanese state has evolved over a century of mistrust and neglect fuelled by a combination of geography and demography.⁵ With the exception of sporadic, predominantly military involvement, the state displayed little interest in it throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century. Not much changed following the civil war, when Rafic Hariri's program of reconstruction – which hinged on investment, banking and tourism – further entrenched wealth in the centre but did little to empower peripheral localities like Arsal that relied heavily on agriculture and the sale of produce on local and regional markets.

The post-civil war political equilibrium likewise worked to Arsal's disadvantage. In a political landscape increasingly defined by sect, the small Sunni enclave has had little to offer electorally to either Sunni or Shiite political groups.⁶

Without state services and political representation, Arsalis have pursued self-sufficiency by gradual diversification of a herding-based economy into one incorporating agriculture, rock quarries and a smuggling network (for fuel, food and electrical appliances) that remained active despite crackdowns.⁷ Beyond finding new local revenue streams, they invested in their children's education as a means to access state institutions – chiefly the army and Internal Security Forces (ISF) – that had otherwise largely abandoned them. As a soldier from Arsal put it, "you could hardly find a family that doesn't have at least one member enrolled in the security forces. Take our family, for instance: out of four boys, two are in the military and a third is in the ISF".⁸

Notwithstanding these self-preservation mechanisms, Arsal has remained neglected to the extent that it still lacks basic infrastructure and is saddled with below-grade

⁵ Arsal is 135km from Beirut – a significant distance by Lebanese standards, given winding two-lane mountain roads – and is at the eastern border with Syria. After creation of modern Lebanon in 1920, many residents in the Sunni village of Arsal regarded the new state warily, as a Christian entity, so pushed for the village's annexation by Syria. Their estrangement deepened in 1958, when the government of Camille Chamoun crushed a rebellion, deploying heavy forces against flashpoints, including Arsal. An anthropologist with extensive experience in Arsal said, "Arsalis will never forget that the army shelled their village in 1958. This incident left deep scars on the villagers to this day". Crisis Group Skype interview, Michelle Obeid, October 2015. The political defeat of a prominent local family in the 1963 municipal election, which many in Arsal attributed to manipulation by central authorities, led to tit-for-tat violence involving local tribes. Subsequent clashes between residents and police were suppressed by the military. Obeid, "Between One State and Another, Always on the Margins", *Bidayat*, no. 6, Summer 2013.

⁶ With no electoral law based on proportional representation, Arsalis have been unable to elect their own representatives, since Shiites are the majority in the Baalbek district electorate. In the post-war years, however, two deputies from Arsal were elected due to an alliance with Hizbollah. Historically, Arsalis and neighbouring Shiite communities had warm relations. Most Arsalis who migrated to Beirut in the 1960s and 1970s or after the civil war chose the majority-Shiite Dahiye neighbourhood as their destination. As a result, a quarter in Bir Hassan, a Dahiye sub-section, is known as Hay al-Arasileh ("the Arsalis' quarter"). Nationalist and leftist affiliations pushed many, until recently at least, to support Hizbollah's resistance against Israel. Crisis Group interviews, residents, analysts, local figures, Arsal, Baalbek, Beirut, October 2012–November 2015.

⁷ Michelle Obeid, "Uncertain Livelihood: Challenges Facing Herding in a Lebanese Village", pp. 463–495, in Dawn Chatty (ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (Leiden, 2006). In a bid to control Lebanon's post-war weapons smuggling, Syrian authorities, who from 1990 to 2005 exercised a form of hegemony over their neighbour, tightened their grip on the border, causing a number of deadly incidents involving smugglers. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Arsal, Baalbek, October 2012, May 2015.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015.

services: no proper sewage system; poorly maintained and often unpaved roads; schools that are too few, badly outfitted and lack qualified personnel; and a single, under-equipped medical facility.⁹ This has bred bitterness, not least toward Sunni politicians who appeared indifferent to the town's well-being even as much of the country was being rebuilt, in particular the Future Current Rafic Hariri established in the early 1990s.¹⁰ A resident commented: "Whatever one might say, in post-war Lebanon power and shares were distributed among the main sects so they could tend to their communities' need. We were not in anyone's calculus, so we were left out of this equation".¹¹

Just as importantly, the absence of a strong political leadership in Arsal left residents with little protection against the heavy-handed presence of Syrian troops and security services. The international community condoned that presence as the best way to preserve post-war peace, particularly in the Beqaa throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.¹² Arsalis felt exposed to intimidation, extortion and humiliation by Syrian soldiers and intelligence (Mukhabarat) agents more than their Shiite neighbours as a result of the Syrian regime's tumultuous relationship with Islamists among its own Sunni community. A resident said, "we have endured more than other villages at the hands of Syrian security services because of our Sunni affiliation. It felt as if the regime, by maltreating us, was seeking revenge on the Syrian Muslim Brothers following their uprising [in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in the 1982 Hama massacre]".¹³

B. *Falling Between the Cracks*

Arsal's marginalised status within Lebanon's political system and its location mere kilometres from the Syrian border have made for a volatile relationship with its Syrian neighbours. Proximity to Syria provided additional, much-needed avenues for securing basic needs; many benefitted from health care and access to cheaper goods and services across the border. Partly as a result, cross-border ties have flourished through intermarriage, participation in social occasions and smuggling. At the same time, Syrian repression in the 1990s and early 2000s created significant resentment among defenceless Arsalis. Such bitterness, coupled with tensions over land issues, produced

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, officials, Arsal, Baalbek, Beirut, October 2012–November 2015; see also Khaled al-Hujairy's blog, "Arsal and its Worries", www.ersal.yoo7.com/t61-topic, 21 January 2008.

¹⁰ See www.almustaqbal.org. Following Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005, his son Saad took the helm of the Future Current. It holds the largest bloc in the parliament. See Crisis Group Report N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, 26 May 2010. The then-prime minister showed little interest in expanding his political power into peripheral areas, Sunni and non-Sunni alike. However, many Arsalis and Future Current officials believe Syria forbade Rafic Hariri to extend services to many Sunni areas, especially along the border. *Ibid.*

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, local leader, Arsal, October 2012.

¹² Arsal never generated families of notables to represent its interests in the centre. Traditionally, communal leaders (*zu'amaa*) of Sunni descent in particular have hailed from the main coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli and Saida. Nor did the town produce much wealth that could have financed a leadership role for its representatives, as it has for other Lebanese politicians.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Arsal, October 2012. In February 1982, the Syrian regime crushed a Muslim Brotherhood uprising, destroying parts of the city of Hama and reportedly killing tens of thousands of civilians and rebels. Reuters, 7 July 2011.

an ambivalent dynamic in which Aarsalis mostly submitted to the “Pax Syriana”, but resisted it just enough to provoke retribution.¹⁴

The assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005 – which many in Lebanon and elsewhere attributed to the Syrian regime and precipitated the withdrawal of Syrian troops – was a major turning point for the town. Many Aarsalis were keen to believe the government would finally deliver better governance, thus lessening security abuses and tackling social and economic needs and inequalities.¹⁵ Many also viewed their own massive participation in the anti-Syrian demonstrations in downtown Beirut as an opportunity to close ranks with broad cross-sections of society, thereby breaking with the history of isolation and marginalisation.¹⁶

Yet, whatever solidarity Aarsalis achieved within the Sunni community was matched if not surpassed by increasing tensions not only with Syrian neighbours supporting Assad, but also, more importantly, with their predominantly Shiite surroundings. Many Shiites felt threatened by Syria’s withdrawal, fearing it would leave Hizbollah, Syria’s protégé that had become synonymous with Shiite representation in Lebanon, exposed and vulnerable. Aarsalis recount how, as they returned from demonstrating in Beirut, many were injured, when neighbours in the nearby Shiite village of al-Labweh threw stones at their cars.¹⁷ “Hostility went so far that, on several occasions, al-Labweh residents put up a sign pointing toward Aarsal that read, ‘Israel this way’”, said anthropologist Michelle Obeid.¹⁸

In subsequent years, as Lebanese and Lebanese-Syrian political dynamics congealed around two poles – the pro-Syrian “March 8” bloc led by Hizbollah and the anti-Syrian “March 14” coalition headed by the Future Current, now led by Rafic’s son Saad¹⁹ – Aarsalis had little choice but to back the latter, though they criticised it for offering them little concrete in return.²⁰ Yet, even while not gaining much from Hariri, this

¹⁴ A journalist explained: “Aarsalis looked down on fellow villagers who collaborated with Syrian agents in Lebanon. Many tried to go about their business without cooperating with them”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015. In 2004, growing resentment and defiance among Lebanese toward Syria reached Aarsal. Many saw the election of independent and anti-Syrian representatives to the municipal council as resistance to Syria’s hegemony. Crisis Group interviews, anthropologist, residents, local officials, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

¹⁵ For detail, see Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon’s Politics*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Aarsal residents, Aarsal, Baalbek, Beirut, October 2012-November 2015. As Michelle Obeid put it, Aarsalis were “searching for the ideal face of the state”. “Searching for the ‘ideal face of the state’ in a Lebanese border town”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol.16, 2010, pp. 330-46.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Aarsal residents, Aarsal, Baalbek, Beirut, October 2012-November 2015.

¹⁸ Crisis Group Skype interview, October 2015.

¹⁹ The heightened sectarian tensions that followed Israel’s 2006 war with Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Hizbollah-led sit-in (December 2006-May 2008) to topple the Siniora government and the May 2008 clashes between the “March 8” and “March 14” militias that led to the latter’s humiliating defeat all deeply resonated with the town’s population. A social activist said, “for decades, we enjoyed good relations with our neighbours and never worried about sectarian affiliations. However, the growing polarisation between Hizbollah and the Future Current radicalised both Sunnis and Shiites. Today, any incident between residents of Aarsal and nearby Shiite villages, even one driven by social or economic considerations, takes on sectarian tones and increases sectarian tensions”. Crisis Group interview, Aarsal, October 2012.

²⁰ Many Aarsalis complain that, despite Future Current’s strong support in the town, it has given it little development. One said, “the medical facility stopped functioning properly when the Future Current took control of it. Now, people affiliated with the Current get services cheaper or free of charge”. Crisis Group interview, Aarsal lawyer, Baalbek, September 2015. Another said, “our affiliation

affiliation forced by political circumstance and a new communal identity heightened tensions with Hizbollah and the Syrian regime.

By 2010-2011, things had started to change dramatically: Hariri's waning leadership and Hizbollah's growing assertiveness left a majority of the Sunni community rudderless and in disarray.²¹ On the eve of Syria's cataclysmic transformation, Aرسال felt more abandoned and besieged than ever.

III. War in Syria: Aرسال Takes Centre Stage

A. Military Build-up

1. A marginal role (2011-2013)

Initially, Aرسال, like many Lebanese Sunnis, viewed the Syrian uprising as a strategic turning point, with potential to weaken the Syrian-Iranian axis in the Middle East and reverse Hizbollah's growing power inside Lebanon. They also hoped the developments next door would help Aرسال break out of its isolation. They participated in demonstrations in support of the uprising, and a number of local officials and sheikhs gave fervent speeches and sermons against the Syrian regime.²²

Despite their enthusiasm, Aرسال gave the Syrian opposition little material support in the revolt's early stages. This may have been because they believed the uprising enjoyed sufficient momentum not to need it. Moreover, whatever help they were prepared to extend was blocked by the Syrian regime's crackdown on the city of Homs and its control over the Qalamoun Mountains, across the border to Aرسال's east, and by Hizbollah's massive presence in the Beqaa Valley.

Yet, the town's geography and political inclination all but guaranteed that it would end up at the centre of the storm. As early as December 2011, Lebanon's pro-Damascus defence minister, Fayez Ghosn, publicly accused the townspeople (without presenting proof) of sheltering al-Qaeda members.²³ Nevertheless, even Hizbollah appears to have deemed the nexus between Aرسال and Syrian rebels, Islamists in particular, initially weak.²⁴ Violent jihadism had yet to take root inside the Syrian opposition, and Salafism, in all its forms, was a marginal phenomenon in Aرسال, whose population

with Hariri has only brought hardship to us. It put us against all our surroundings. Moreover, the Current propelled local political figures who were pursuing their own agendas at the expense of our collective interest". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015.

²¹ Saad Hariri's political shift – his late-2009 visit to Damascus, reconciliation with Bashar Assad and renewed dialogue with Hizbollah – and Future Current's money problems, which led it to reduce health and social services and financial aid to its constituency, hurt his stature as Lebanese Sunnis' pre-eminent leader. In January 2011, his government collapsed following the resignation of cabinet members affiliated with Hizbollah and its allies in protest of "March 14" 's cooperation with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which was expected to indict Hizbollah members for complicity in Rafic Hariri's assassination. In the wake of Najib Mikati's nomination as prime minister in 2011, Hariri went into self-imposed exile. *Al-Hayat*, 20 December 2009; *Al Jazeera*, 13 January 2011. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°132, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, 22 November 2012.

²² Crisis Group interviews, residents, local officials, Aرسال, October 2012.

²³ He also said Aرسال was a centre for weapons smuggling to Syria. *Al-Akhbar*, 27 December 2011.

²⁴ Aرسال "plays only a minor role in supporting the Syrian opposition, and we do not think its role can grow significantly". Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, June 2012.

counted only a few quietist Salafis.²⁵ Things began to change when the Syrian war dragged on beyond the early expectations of many that President Bashar al-Assad would be overthrown, and especially once it descended into all-out violence, threatening to drag Lebanon down into the vortex.

2. The Qusayr watershed (2013)

The May-June 2013 battle for Qusayr, a small town in Homs province along Lebanon's northern border, in which the Syrian army, bolstered by Hizbollah fighters, scored an important victory against a surging rebel movement, became a major turning point in the conflict, also for Lebanon. In addition to giving Damascus a desperately needed morale boost, it was Hizbollah's first overt military involvement. After a year of downplaying rumours about its role, the group publicly claimed credit for the success and committed itself to more sustained involvement.

The military turnaround dramatically affected Lebanon's internal politics, reinvigorating Hizbollah supporters previously concerned by Damascus's successive defeats.²⁶ The rebels' defeat dealt a major psychological blow to opposition backers, Sunni Islamists in particular, reversing their sense of ascent and empowerment.²⁷ Animosity between the Syrian opposition – and its supporters in Lebanon – and Hizbollah reached unprecedented levels. From June 2013 onward, armed groups that grew out of the Syrian crisis launched dozens of attacks against Hizbollah fighters and Shiite neighbourhoods inside Lebanon.²⁸

Qusayr brought Arsal much closer to the war's centre of gravity. Hizbollah's intervention, which aimed to draw Syrian fighters away from the border, intensified their presence, as defeated rebels withdrew south, making the Qalamoun Mountains a primary opposition stronghold.²⁹ This turned Arsal into a rear base and safe haven for Syrian armed groups, for whom Hizbollah and the local Shiite community became the primary target. A number of Arsalis, resentful of Hizbollah's military role in Qusayr,

²⁵ Salafism is a puritan form of Sunni Islam that invokes the founding fathers, the "venerable ancestors" (*al-Salaf al-Salih*, whence the current's name), notably the Prophet Muhammad and the first four "rightly guided" Caliphs, to identify Islam's fundamental principles. It insists on literalist readings of Islamic scripture and denounces as illicit all innovation (*bid'a*). Quietist (or missionary) Salafism concentrates on preaching and proselytising as means of reinforcing or reviving faith and preserving the cohesion of the community of believers, whereas jihadi Salafists believe they are engaged in the military defence (or, in some cases, expansion) of Dar al-Islam ("House of Islam" – that area of the world historically subject to Islamic rule) and the *umma* (community of Muslims) against infidels. For a more in-depth analysis of Islamist currents, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

²⁶ Journalists close to Hizbollah and Damascus predicted Qusayr would change the war's course. One wrote: "The fall of Qusayr will have a domino effect [that will allow] the Syrian army to retake control [of other cities]". *Al-Manar*, 8 June 2013. *Al-Nour*, 26 November 2013; *Al-Akhbar*, 29 June 2013.

²⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit.

²⁸ A Syrian journalist, who until the uprising was a staunch Hizbollah supporter, said, "Hizbollah's full-fledged intervention in Syria is very provocative and will have an irrevocable impact on its relationship with important segments of the Syrian population. In opposition circles, hatred toward Hizbollah has become even greater than that toward the regime". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013. Now (Beirut website), 10 June 2013. See also fns. 31 and 40 below.

²⁹ From Hizbollah's perspective, its intervention in Syria aimed to prevent the spread of Salafi-jihadis into Lebanon: "If we didn't fight in Syria, we would now be fighting in Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, November 2013. See also, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°153, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, 27 May 2014.

alarmed at the Syrian regime's recovery and partially motivated by sectarian solidarity, stepped up cooperation with the rebels. An Arsal journalist explained: "For many, the fall of Qusayr revived memories of the Sunnis' defeat in May 2008 [when Hizbollah's militia took over parts of Beirut]. They saw Hizbollah going all the way to defend the regime and felt they couldn't stay idle".³⁰

3. Arsal in the spotlight (2013-2015)

The Qusayr battle occurred against an ominous backdrop: the weakening of the Free Syrian Army (the name taken by an array of armed rebel groups to gain visibility and legitimacy) and the rise of violent Salafi-jihadis with greater funding, strong military capabilities and – in the eyes of their supporters – superior governance and moral standards. Just as the Syrian opposition was radicalising, Arsal began to emerge as a critical support zone for Syrian militants, with some residents starting to lean toward extremist groups. The result, according to Lebanese authorities and Hizbollah sources, was that Arsal became a staging ground for retaliatory attacks against Hizbollah, Shiite neighbourhoods in Beirut and the Beqaa, Lebanon's army (the LAF) and Iranian assets in Lebanon.³¹

Arsal's connection to the insurgency intensified after the Syrian army's March 2014 victory (with Hizbollah help) at the town of Yabroud in the Qalamoun range, which pushed rebels, including members of the most radical groups, IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, deeper into the mountainous border area with Lebanon. Tensions peaked in August, when soldiers at an LAF checkpoint on Arsal's outskirts arrested a rebel commander accused of allegiance to IS, sparking heavy clashes in the town between the LAF and Syrian rebels coming from the Qalamoun area through the Jouroud Arsal Mountains.³² In response, Syrian militants from IS, al-Nusra and other smaller groups, attacked Lebanese checkpoints surrounding Arsal, killing several soldiers and police; overran government and security buildings in the town, taking dozens of hostages; and attempted to gain control of parts of Arsal.

This was the first rebel incursion into Lebanon from Qalamoun, so the first direct external challenge to Lebanese security forces. The LAF responded with a quick counteroffensive, while the Syrian air force attacked fighters in Jouroud Arsal inside Lebanon. After a five-day battle and mediation by the Lebanese Committee of Muslim

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015.

³¹ Separate twin suicide bombings struck the Iranian embassy and cultural centre in Beirut, November 2013 and February 2014 respectively. *The Daily Star*, 19 November 2013; Reuters, 19 February 2014. To cite but a few such attacks, authorities linked to persons from Arsal an August 2013 car bombing in Beirut's Bir al-Abed that injured at least 53 and a suicide attack in Ruweis, another neighbourhood, that killed at least 25 and injured over 200. The then-defence minister attributed roadside bombings targeting Hizbollah convoys in June-July 2013 to Arsal-based militants. In October 2013, the LAF defused a car rigged with 50kg of explosives in Hizbollah's al-Maamoura stronghold south of Beirut. Thirteen persons, a majority from Arsal, were indicted and allegedly confessed to affiliation with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Salafi-jihadi faction operating in Syria. The next week, a leaked security memo alleged that al-Nusra had sent four explosives-rigged vehicles into Lebanon through Arsal to be blown up in "Hizbollah strongholds" (and often home to ordinary civilians with or without political affiliations). Now, 20 October 2013; Naharnet, 16 August 2013; *The Daily Star*, 26 August 2013, 29 October 2013 and 4 December 2013.

³² According to several reports, Abu Ahmad Jumaa, commander of the Dawn of Islam Brigade (Liwa Fajr al-Islam), was previously affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra and pledged allegiance to IS shortly before his arrest. See *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 3 August 2014; Al Jazeera, 4 August 2014; and *an-Nahar*, 26 December 2014.

Scholars (Hay'at al-Ulemaa al-Muslimin), militants withdrew to the Qalamoun Mountains. Subsequently, the LAF set up additional checkpoints around Arsal, imposing a virtual siege.

The showdown caused heavy material destruction and dozens of casualties among civilians, LAF troops and Sunni militants, and left 29 soldiers and police in IS and al-Nusra hands.³³ It also had a longer-term effect on Arsal. Jihadis and their supporters inside the town had in effect entrapped an overwhelming majority of Arsalis, who disapproved of both their violent means and hardline agenda. A resident said, "initially we supported Syrian militants who resembled us and with whom we shared the same objectives of toppling a dictator and restoring political, social and economic rights, not Islamists who want to establish an emirate". Another echoed widespread anger: "A handful of Arsalis dragged the whole town into a battle that wasn't ours. They put us up against the army and the entire Lebanese population. We paid a heavy price because of them".³⁴

Though the threat is contained, IS and, to a lesser extent, Jabhat al-Nusra continue to pose a substantial challenge to Lebanon's security, with Arsal a focal point. The LAF's intensified presence in the town significantly reduced but did not end rebel access from Syria. Fighters still find ways into the area via the mountain roads linking Arsal to the Qalamoun region. Trying to avoid a second battle and not wanting to appear as acting on behalf of Hizbollah, the LAF has largely refrained from going after Syrian fighters in the town or at its outskirts, who, in what resembles a tacit agreement, have kept a low profile.³⁵

Moreover, armed groups maintain a presence in Jouroud Arsal, now a sort of no-man's land where IS has reportedly set up parallel judicial structures inside some informal Syrian refugee camps.³⁶ In December 2015, a Qatar-brokered arrangement between Lebanese authorities and al-Nusra that inter alia created a safe zone in Wadi Hmayed, on Arsal's outskirts, seemed to consecrate the group's de facto presence.³⁷ Residents tell of gunmen, widely believed to be members of jihadi groups, executing Syrian refugees and Arsalis accusing them of being informants or to settle personal scores.³⁸

Measures around Arsal have helped contain security threats, as bombings in Lebanon have tapered off. However, Arsal's situation remains highly volatile: fighting continues on its outskirts and in the Qalamoun area, involving Hizbollah, the LAF, Syrian government forces and rebels, including extremist groups such as IS and al-Nusra.³⁹ A particularly deadly November 2015 bomb attack in a densely populated street of

³³ Each group executed two of their prisoners, IS by beheading. In December 2015, a Qatar-brokered deal led al-Nusra to release its sixteen prisoners and Lebanese and Syrian authorities to free thirteen Islamist-leaning prisoners, including the ex-wife of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The exact terms are unclear but include, according to media reports, a humanitarian corridor to allow aid to refugees on Arsal's outskirts; transferring wounded from Arsal to Turkey for medical treatment; and legal status for other injured who have indicated a wish to remain in Lebanon. "Lebanese army and al-Nusra Front conduct prisoner swap", Al Jazeera, 2 December 2015.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Baalbek, May 2015.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents, journalists, Lebanese soldier, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Baalbek, May 2015. "Lebanese army and al-Nusra Front", op. cit.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

³⁹ In February 2016, IS and al-Nusra fighters clashed over a failed prisoner exchange deal in Jouroud Arsal. Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI), 3 and 8 February 2016.

Bourj al-Barajneh in Beirut's southern suburbs was a reminder that the problem is far from resolved.⁴⁰ Nor has the hostage crisis been ended. IS still holds nine of those seized during the August 2014 clashes. At best, the situation is frozen, with problems left to fester, not least those related to the massive influx of Syrian refugees that accelerated after 2013.

B. *The Refugee Factor*

Just as Arsal's demography and proximity to the border have made it a flashpoint for military spillover, the same factors have rendered it especially vulnerable to Lebanon's challenges in absorbing Syrians fleeing the conflict. By the end of 2015, refugees were more than a fourth of the country's population. Staggering though this figure may seem, conditions in Arsal are more dramatic still: what in 2011 was a town of 30,000 has absorbed, by most counts, 80,000 to 90,000 refugees, quadrupling its population.⁴¹ Between the start of the Syrian events and November 2013, Arsal sheltered approximately 30,000 refugees, but the fighting between regime forces and rebels in the Qalamoun area since late 2013 has vastly increased those seeking refuge there. As fighting has continued in the Qalamoun area, very few Syrians believe they will be able to return in the foreseeable future. Many have settled inside Arsal, while thousands have taken shelter in informal camps on the outskirts.⁴²

The magnitude of this crisis increasingly strains the initially warm relations between refugees and residents, many of whom from the outset hosted Syrians in their homes and shared essential goods. As fighting in Syria intensified, international organisations and the Lebanese government failed to meet burgeoning humanitarian demands that placed extreme pressure on a town already lacking adequate resources, basic services, infrastructure and job opportunities. Gradually, hospitality gave way to stress. Arsalis felt alarmed and alienated by the radical demographic shift and pressure on their scarce resources, blaming refugees for growing economic hardship and deteriorating security. A mother echoed widespread feelings: "Life has become unbearable. I don't recognise my [town] anymore. I am afraid to let my children play outside or walk alone. Every day we hear about robberies, assaults, street fights. It has become

⁴⁰ At least 40 were killed and more than 200 injured when a suicide bomb and a separate device detonated in the predominantly Shiite neighbourhood. IS claimed responsibility, triggering renewed fears of jihadi groups' ability and intent to expand in Lebanon and target civilians. Since April 2014, a "security plan" had checked a trend of attacks. The January 2015 suicide bombings in Tripoli's predominantly Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighbourhood, like the Bourj al-Barajneh attack, were a rare instance of jihadi violence breaking the calm. Both highlighted the plan's major shortcoming: reliance on security measures while ignoring root causes: Sunni and Shiite radicalisation fuelled by political parties and regional sponsors; horrific refugee conditions; the deteriorating socio-economic situation of Lebanese; and eroding state institutions and services. According to media reports, the group affiliated with IS that planned the Bourj al-Barajneh attack was based in Arsal's outskirts and smuggled the two perpetrators to Beirut via the town. *As-Safir*, 16 November 2015; *al-Anwar*, 16 November 2016.

⁴¹ Around a million refugees were formally registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in December 2015. At the Syria Donors Conference in London in February 2016, Lebanese Prime Minister Tamam Salam put the total at around 1.5 million. "Syria Regional Refugee Response", UNHCR, www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122; *an-Nahar*, 4 February 2016. Some interlocutors place Arsal's figure as high as 120,000. Crisis Group interviews, Arsal local figure, army official, Baalbek, Beirut, May-October 2015.

⁴² *The Daily Star*, 18 November 2013. Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, local figures, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

chaos". Many families have reportedly left in search of more stability, relocating to other Beqaa towns or Beirut.⁴³

Especially detrimental to relations between Syrian refugees and their Arsali hosts (and Lebanese more broadly) were allegations that, during the August 2014 battle, refugees had joined ranks with IS and al-Nusra against the LAF. Many Arsalis felt betrayed, blaming their guests for the destruction and loss endured during the fighting, exacerbating wariness and tensions between the two communities.⁴⁴

These dynamics have spurred and provided popular legitimacy for a security-based governmental approach toward the refugee crisis in Lebanon. A senior army official expressed an increasingly prevalent sentiment: "Refugee camps are hotbeds for terrorists. In the long term, they constitute a genuine risk to Lebanon's stability".⁴⁵ The LAF has repeatedly raided camps in and around Arsal and elsewhere, with soldiers allegedly committing human rights violations.⁴⁶ More broadly, the Arsal case is increasingly used to justify harsh, discriminatory measures against Syrians across Lebanon.⁴⁷ Defending a curfew specifically targeting Syrians, a mayor of a northern village said, "we prefer to enforce a curfew rather than put our village at risk. We don't want to go the same way as Arsal".⁴⁸

Such stigmatisation and the policies that flow from it risk turning fears into self-fulfilling prophecy. The refugees, like their hosts, feel increasingly insecure; many recount assaults and abuse from both Lebanese security services and civilians. Some have turned to jihadi groups for protection; others have become informants for the security services, trends that feed further distrust and alienation.⁴⁹ A social worker explained: "In Arsal, refugees feel without any protection. They are perceived as either terrorists or informants".⁵⁰ This leaves little in between and pushes more people toward the extremes as they feel increasingly excluded. The potential long-term costs of this vicious cycle should not be underestimated: extremist groups feed best on feelings of resentment, injustice and abandonment. As grievances and isolation accumulate among refugees, therefore, no one but IS and al-Nusra is likely to benefit.

IV. Can the Problem Be Contained?

Today, more than 4,000 LAF soldiers guard the entrances to Arsal, checking individual IDs to prevent infiltration by Syrian militants. Many Crisis Group interviewees claim to have been intimidated or harassed at these checkpoints.⁵¹ While the massive

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, Beirut, Baalbek, May-November 2015.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, Lebanese journalists, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2015.

⁴⁶ "Lebanese army raids Syrian refugee camps in Arsal", BBC, 24 September 2014; "World Report 2015: Lebanon", Human Rights Watch, January 2015; "Above criticism: Lebanon's army and the national media", Middle East Eye, 17 April 2015.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese citizens across the country, local and national officials, Beirut, Tripoli, south Lebanon, Baalbek, May-October 2015.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Akkar, September 2015.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local figures, residents, social worker, human-rights worker, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Arsal residents, journalists, social worker, human rights worker, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

military presence may yet succeed in bolstering security by significantly reducing fresh jihadi incursions, the one-dimensionality of Beirut's response is short-sighted. The government has taken no measure to address long-simmering social, political and economic grievances. The same is true of other areas in the Beqaa, as well as Akkar, Tripoli, Saida, the Palestinian camps and certain sections of Beirut, all scenes of previous clashes.

The government's approach, while effective militarily and understandable given state paralysis and depleted resources, is unsustainable. In most of the above-mentioned regions and locations, the LAF has been one of the rare active and functioning state institutions present. In Tripoli for instance, sectarian violence in the downtrodden neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen has been tackled solely through military and security measures, though the sources of violence are unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and marginalisation – and the radicalisation these spawn.

Cracking down on Sunni extremism will fail to eliminate the problem if not accompanied by a political strategy aimed at reversing growing Sunni disenfranchisement by ending repressive tactics. It will also not succeed as long as the ruling parties, Hizbollah and the Future Current in particular, continue to engage in sectarian rhetoric and practices.⁵² The enmity between their respective regional backers, which often assumes a sectarian dimension, exacerbates the radicalisation that has taken place. Aarsalis may have played a role in the deterioration of their relationship with the state, but they have also, proactively and repeatedly, appealed to it to re-engage. In 2012, Beirut ignored their demands for protection against recurrent Syrian air raids that allegedly targeted Syrian opposition sites on the town's outskirts. In June 2013, one such attack hit the town centre, injuring several civilians.⁵³

By August 2014, when the full-fledged IS and al-Nusra incursion finally prompted a muscular LAF response, that intervention fell short of popular expectations. "We were the ones who initially called for the army to enter Aarsal", a resident said. "Long before [IS and al-Nusra infiltrated Aarsal], we wanted the state to impose its sovereignty by deploying in the town and ensuring security. If they had listened to us, we would not have ended up in this deplorable situation".⁵⁴

The security-heavy containment policy has deepened Aarsal's isolation, while exacerbating longstanding socio-economic grievances. To gain access, visitors now require a permit that military intelligence issues⁵⁵ so sparingly many are dissuaded from trying. Such measures have bred new forms of resentment: "Our own state is dealing with us as if we were living on enemy soil", said a resident. Another lamented: "We are victims twice. Not only have we suffered from the presence of extremist groups that brought war to the town, we also have to endure mistreatment and humiliation at the hands

⁵² Hizbollah intervened militarily to support the Syrian regime, while the Future Current has backed the Syrian opposition. They adopted diagonally opposite stances on the conflicts in Iraq and Yemen as well, and their respective leaders have been fighting a war of words. All this has deepened the Sunni-Shiite divide.

⁵³ Agence France-Presse, 16 June 2013. A rare exception was in December 2013. As resentment about Syrian regime attacks grew, the LAF fired anti-aircraft missiles at planes raiding Aarsal's outskirts, the first such use of force since the end of the Lebanese civil war.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Aarsal resident, Beirut, October 2015.

⁵⁵ One can obtain a permit at either the LAF headquarters in Beirut or the military intelligence branch in Ablah, a few kilometres from Baalbek.

of our own army”.⁵⁶ The security crackdown has further stretched Aarsalis’ scarce economic resources, preventing many from accessing the farmland and rock quarries on which their livelihoods depend. “We are becoming impoverished”, said a worker. “We are losing the means to feed our children. If I can’t harvest my land this year, I will lose my crop for the next decade”.⁵⁷

Equally troubling are the fresh sentiments of marginalisation these efforts at containing the problem fuel. Many Aarsalis view fellow Lebanese as complicit in the indiscriminate raids, arrests and other ill-treatment to which both they and refugees encamped in and around the town have been subjected. Expressions of support to the army by officials and private citizens have associated Aarsal’s residents with extremist groups and referred to the town as becoming a terrorist hotbed.⁵⁸ “The whole of society has turned against us”, a resident complained. They are fighting us at all levels. If we apply for jobs, we are rejected because we are from Aarsal. When the ID of an Aarsali man was found at a bombing scene, he was immediately accused of being the terrorist. It turned out he was one of the victims”.⁵⁹

The result is that Aarsalis have begun to question the LAF’s agenda and loyalties, despite its reputation among many Lebanese as a rare, truly national, cross-sectarian institution. Resentment toward the army has become so entrenched that, according to some, military avoid entering the town in uniform for fear of reprisals.⁶⁰ The leader of a moderate Islamist group who said the army in Aarsal “has become the police working on behalf of Hizbollah” was voicing increasingly widespread suspicions among Hizbollah foes, bred by its repeated crackdowns on Sunni Islamists while leaving the Shiite party’s militancy in Lebanon and intervention in Syria unchecked.⁶¹

Because the LAF sees Sunni extremists, who have repeatedly attacked its personnel, as an existential threat to Lebanon,⁶² its objective of fighting them has converged with Hizbollah’s. However, the two have diverged on how forceful the army should be in its approach. Hizbollah has pushed for a more robust intervention in the area surrounding Aarsal than what the LAF has been willing to conduct. In June 2015, its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, declared: “We have repeatedly said [Aarsal] is occupied [by Syrian Islamist groups], and it is the army and the Lebanese state’s responsibility to liberate it.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Aarsal residents, Baalbek, May 2015. Army officials have denied these allegations. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2015.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Aarsal peasant, Baalbek, May 2015.

⁵⁸ In the wake of the August 2014 battle, criticism of the army became a taboo, provoking insults and threats on social media in response. See, www.facebook.com/supportingthelebanesearmy/?fref=nf; and www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndvirYqAfow; also, “Above criticism”, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Aarsal resident, Baalbek, May 2015.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aarsal soldier, Baalbek, Beirut, May-November 2015.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Jamaa Islamiya (the Muslim Brothers’ Lebanese branch), Beirut, October 2014. Many other Sunni Islamists, as well as Aarsalis, allege that Hizbollah fought beside the LAF in the August 2014 clashes; others, including an analyst with close LAF ties, maintain that the army refused any cooperation with Hizbollah during those events. Crisis Group interviews, local residents, Sunni militants, military expert, Baalbek, Tripoli, Beirut, October 2014-October 2015. Some interlocutors consider that the LAF-Hizbollah relationship might eventually change. LAF deployments in the Beqaa, an area on which the Shiite party relies heavily for smuggling weapons into (and from) Syria, could cause significant tensions. An expert on the LAF said, “the army is expanding its presence all over Lebanon. It is getting better arms and equipment and gaining military expertise. Ten years from now, it might be in a position to take a more robust stance toward Hizbollah”. Crisis Group Skype interview, October 2015.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, army officials, June-November 2015.

The Lebanese people are hopeful the army would bear this great national responsibility".⁶³ In Arsal, the army has managed a difficult balancing act, refraining from being dragged into the Syrian war while responding to the impact of a war that is getting ever closer to the border. It confined its role to "protecting the Lebanese border and territories. The army does not and will not get involved in the Syrian conflict", said a senior LAF official.⁶⁴

V. Conclusion

Arsal reveals the depth of the Syria-Lebanon interconnection. Developments on the Syrian side of the border have been detrimental to the town and are likely to continue to have a profound impact there. Arsal's security situation remains highly volatile because of fighting on its outskirts and in the Syrian Qalamoun Mountains. The war and resulting refugee influx have, moreover, strained residents' economic resources to the limit, and it is legitimate to ask how long the current situation can be sustained from their perspective.

It might sound optimistic to say that Arsal's future could still turn for the better, but even a few small steps might significantly improve the living conditions of both residents and refugees, so should be urgently considered. The Lebanese authorities should first of all reduce LAF measures in and around Arsal in ways that would still be security-effective. The permit outsiders require to enter the town should either be abolished or granted by default, keeping out only those about whom clear evidence exists that they seek to destabilise the situation. Allegations of human rights abuse by security officers ought to be promptly investigated and any proven offences punished. The authorities should also institute procedures enabling local farmers to access their lands; facilitate adequate provision of humanitarian aid to refugees; and relocate at least some refugees concentrated in Arsal to other areas in Lebanon, an idea the government has discussed but not implemented.

Donor countries should step up their support to Lebanon to help it better address the massive refugee influx and its consequences. The Lebanese government should prioritise allocating additional funds to Arsal for viable, sustainable economic and infrastructure projects. More broadly, it should change its approach to the country's many hotspots, addressing home-grown socio-economic and political grievances while adopting a policy toward Syrian refugees that both minimises security threats and ensures respect for their dignity and rights. If it instead continues its security-centric approach while ignoring the basic demands and obvious suffering of Arsalis and others, problems will likely deepen and multiply, gradually building to the point where they could all too easily spin out of control.

Beirut/Brussels, 23 February 2016

⁶³ *Al-Manar*, 5 June 2015.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2015.

Appendix A: Map of Lebanon

