



Tackling Sunni Radicalization in Lebanon

Raphaël Lefèvre

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SUMMARY The roots of the recent surge of Sunni extremism in Lebanon are local and deep. Pragmatic steps are needed to protect the country from the fate of Syria and Iraq.

Fighting between Sunni extremist groups and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in Lebanon's northern port city of Tripoli in late 2014 was a stark reminder that the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization extends well beyond Iraq and Syria. In 2013, the Islamic State and the Nusra Front inaugurated their Lebanese chapters, which have since been responsible for a string of terrorist attacks in the capital Beirut as well as in the Beqaa Valley. Both groups have appealed to a growing number of Lebanese Sunnis, some of whom have gone to fight amid their ranks in Syria and Iraq and returned to wage attacks in Lebanon.

Lebanese policymakers have struggled to come to terms with the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization in a country where Sunnis make up roughly a quarter of the population and for decades have lived side by side with Christians, Shia, and other Muslim sects. Local analysis often stresses that the growth of Sunni extremism in Lebanon is the product of foreign interference and represents a temporary spillover of the fighting taking place in Syria and Iraq. Such thinking has led a number of policymakers to argue for the complete eradication of the extremists. But far from being a foreign phenomenon imported onto Lebanese soil, the roots of Sunni radicalization are local and run deep, thus making it unlikely that a military solution alone will reduce the appeal of extremist groups.

Instead, there is an urgent need for politicians, policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society activists—from within and outside of the Sunni sect—to address the problem of radicalization head-on and identify strategies for tackling the grievances that are fueling Sunni disaffection in Lebanon. While some key demands of the Sunni community, such as the withdrawal of the Shia party Hezbollah from Syria, are unlikely to be satisfied in the near term, a series of pragmatic measures are needed to protect Lebanon from the fate of neighboring Syria and Iraq.

The Roots of Sunni Radicalization

An array of factors lie behind the recent surge of Sunni extremism in Lebanon. Most prominent among them is the growing Sunni resentment of Hezbollah, which is a powerful political and military force. This animosity reached a new peak in 2013 when the Shia party announced a military intervention in support of the troops of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

But Sunni bitterness toward Hezbollah runs deeper. Many accuse it of being behind a string of

assassinations that has targeted key leaders of the Lebanese Sunni community in the past decade and significantly weakened the political leadership of the anti-Assad camp in Lebanon.

In addition, by using its status as a resistance movement against Israel, Hezbollah was able to build a formidable arsenal of weapons and a powerful militia, which have repeatedly proved crucial in shaping the outcome of domestic politics to its advantage—and to the detriment of Sunni politicians. The Shia party's significant financial and military capabilities also enabled it to set up sophisticated networks of Sunni militants who support its resistance agenda, prompting accusations that it is seeking to sow division within the Sunni community.

Hezbollah's wide range of activities and its overwhelming domination of Lebanese politics have led to a growing sense of Sunni marginalization from the centers of power. So far, the Future Movement, a secular party long popular with many Sunnis, has proved unable to change the outcome of this equation. And its standing among Sunnis declined in early 2014, when it entered into a coalition government with Hezbollah and supported a crackdown on the Sunni militias active in Tripoli that it had until then partially sponsored.

But there are few alternatives to the Future Movement in the Sunni community, creating a risk that popular disappointment with the party could prompt a growing number of its former supporters to opt for more radical and violent options to express their political frustration. The situation is particularly worrying because the majority of Lebanon's Sunni community lives in areas that are socioeconomically marginalized from the rest of the country. The city of Tripoli has emerged as a symbol of these trends. Long considered the jewel in Lebanon's crown, Tripoli has recently lost much of its economic and political firepower and is now struggling with recurring violence, poverty, and pockets of Islamic radicalism.

The rise of religious extremism has also been facilitated by the absence of sound religious leadership at the helm of the Sunni community. Dar al-Fatwa, the institution officially tasked with providing state-sanctioned Islamic guidance and religious education to Lebanese Sunni Muslims, has been marred by a string of scandals in recent years that badly damaged its credibility.

The resulting decrease in Dar al-Fatwa's influence and capabilities had a deep impact on the Sunni community. It limited the body's capacity to run the country's many mosques, leaving a growing number of places of worship in the hands of unqualified preachers, some of whom are extremists. It also facilitated the emergence of several more radical and informal Islamic bodies, such as the League of Muslim Scholars (*Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin*), which claim to represent the real mood of the Sunni street.

Dar al-Fatwa attempted to make a fresh start in the summer of 2014 when its members elected a new mufti, Abdel-Latif Derian. But it remains to be seen whether he will have enough popular legitimacy to counter the extremist narrative and reclaim Dar al-Fatwa's moderating influence within the Sunni community.

The Lebanese government's current refugee policy is also helping to fuel Sunni radicalization. In late 2014, Lebanon's social affairs minister called the presence of over 1 million refugees "a real threat to internal security" and went as far as suggesting, without evidence, that 100,000 of them had received prior military training. But, paradoxically, by viewing the refugee issue through the lens of national security—and focusing on restricting entry to refugees, arresting those who entered illegally, and tightening border controls—Lebanese policymakers are setting up the kind of environment in which a growing number of mostly Sunni Syrians residing in the country may actually become radicalized. A recent wave of arrests of refugees who entered the country illegally is pushing many Syrians underground and deepening the mistrust between refugee communities and the LAF, which is responsible for cracking down on Syrians living illegally in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the economic hardship brought on by their precarious situations is increasing the vulnerability of a growing number of Syrians. This sense of insecurity is reinforced by the impunity enjoyed by some host communities that impose curfews, use violence, and evict refugees.

The multiplication of informal settlements, the deterioration of the socioeconomic situation, and the absence of a short-term prospect for the creation of safe refugee camps may push a number of Syrians toward militant groups, which often provide financial incentives, care for families, and offer a temporary sense of security.

Toward a Realistic Approach

Ultimately, the Lebanese government as well as the country's main political actors and civil society organizations should launch a series of ambitious initiatives to tackle the roots of Sunni radicalization. This should be done on the premise that the phenomenon, far from being simply a Sunni issue, is at least partially a symptom of the dysfunction of some Lebanese institutions that are in severe need of structural reforms.

In the medium and long term, countering the growth of extremism in Lebanon will require improving the state of public infrastructure and the economy in marginalized areas such as the Beqaa Valley and northern Lebanon, where the bulk of the country's Sunni population lives, as well as kick-starting the process of administrative decentralization in order to empower local communities. Dealing with the roots of Sunni radicalization in Lebanon also implies that Hezbollah's weapons and its military involvement in the Syria crisis will have to be addressed.

However, given the current degree of polarization among Lebanese politicians and in the broader public, all of these will remain sensitive domestic issues on which little political consensus can realistically be expected for the foreseeable future. In addition, the November 2014 decision to postpone parliamentary elections as well as the absence of a president since Michel Suleiman's term expired in May 2014 effectively mean that the current Lebanese government has only limited room to maneuver to undertake such contentious and wide-ranging reforms.

Instead, there are a series of consensual and pragmatic measures that the Lebanese government, political parties, and members of the clergy and civil society can take now to limit, in the short term, the radicalizing impact of the crises engulfing Syria and Iraq.

In parallel, a serious discussion should be held within the Sunni community on the types of methods and discourse that are needed to reduce the appeal of religious radicalism for, ultimately, it will be up to Sunnis themselves to counter the extremist narrative.

Strengthening Dar al-Fatwa

Dar al-Fatwa's restructuring is key to the body securing more financial resources, regaining its moderating influence in the Sunni community, and better controlling the network of mosques nominally under its supervision.

Sunni politicians and leading religious figures should agree on the best ways to reform the institution and increase its legitimacy and visibility within Lebanon's Sunni community. On the one hand, Sunni lawmakers should come to the recognition that past political meddling in Dar al-Fatwa's internal affairs—including the central role that politicians have sometimes played in the selection of the mufti of the republic, who heads the body—has led to leadership struggles that severely infringed upon its credibility. On the other hand, clerics must find ways to render their management of Dar al-Fatwa more accountable, transparent, and efficient.

In parallel, Dar al-Fatwa should be made more representative of the geographical and religious diversity that characterizes Lebanon's Sunni community. Current rules—according to which the mufti must hail from Beirut—are effectively hindering the body's capacity to enhance its influence in northern Lebanon. In addition, the institution's leaders should appeal to those Sunni clerics who, in recent months, have been critical of the body's working, and convince them to participate in its reform process and make detailed recommendations for change.

If properly and consensually carried out, Dar al-Fatwa's restructuring could give it new avenues and opportunities for action. It could, for instance, take a leading role in setting up religious deradicalization programs for former Lebanese jihadi fighters and in launching a mass education effort involving outreach programs in the country's marginalized Sunni areas. And it could launch new initiatives benefiting Syrian refugees in order to reduce the appeal of Islamic extremism in vulnerable communities.

It is also important for state institutions to continue to engage with other prominent voices in the Sunni community that can act as a bridge between Sunni militants and Lebanese authorities, such as the League of

Muslim Scholars. The league, a young, more radical group that has quickly established itself as an influential political and religious actor, has the ability to channel some Sunni frustration while building an awareness of Lebanon's special status as a hub of religious diversity and attempting, through its vast networks, to bring about peaceful solutions when conflict escalates.

Enhancing the LAF's Capabilities

The LAF, whose members come from all of Lebanon's religious sects, has long been considered a unifying force in the country. But Sunni defections from the LAF in 2014 and the eruption of fierce fighting between Sunni gunmen and servicemen in Tripoli and Aarsal, near the Syrian border, should come as a serious warning that ties between the LAF and the Sunni community are deteriorating. Lebanese lawmakers across sects should certainly continue to stress the unifying nature of the LAF and give it additional resources to help improve its relations with the public, particularly the Sunni community.

But, to be effective, a measure of transparency and accountability will have to be introduced. Frequent accusations that the LAF has committed human rights violations and tortured and abused refugees have undermined many Sunnis' trust in the institution at a critical juncture. In addition, recurring allegations that Hezbollah controls the LAF's chain of command and weighs heavily on decisions made by military intelligence have weakened the perceived legitimacy of the armed forces in corners of Lebanese society. Lawmakers from all parties should agree to grant greater oversight power to the parliament and more access to civil society organizations. Making the LAF decisionmaking process and operations more transparent would also help alleviate fears that it is acting under the influence of Hezbollah and other political parties.

Lebanon's participation in the international coalition against terrorism means that more fighting between LAF units and extremist groups can be expected. The LAF must adjust its tactics, methods, and matériel to this new counterinsurgency configuration. By providing more financial and human resources to help the LAF upgrade its training and adapt to this new approach, foreign patrons can accelerate this shift and help to significantly decrease the number of civilian casualties and material damage to infrastructure—both key in winning the hearts and minds of local populations. Lebanon's High Relief Commission, which has been tasked with compensating the victims of collateral damage, must also be reformed in order to increase its transparency and efficiency.

Reforming Lebanon's Justice and Prison System

Lebanese lawmakers should agree on a mechanism for streamlining the country's justice system and giving civilian and military judges the means to conduct fair and speedy trials. Similarly, the rehabilitation of the country's eight prisons and 23 detention facilities must be accelerated in order to match their capacity with the growing number of terrorist convicts.

The Roumieh prison has emerged as a symbol of the failures of Lebanon's prison and justice system. Many of the inmates held there have been waiting for trial for several years, human rights violations are rife, the infrastructure is badly managed and in poor condition, and cells are so overcrowded that the facility currently holds more than double the number of prisoners it was designed for—all factors that are helping to make the prison a breeding ground for recruitment into the extremist organizations that are active there.

Lebanese authorities should seek the advice of experts and activists so that they may take steps to ensure that Lebanon's prison system can deliver on its promise of rehabilitating convicts rather than become an additional hub for radicalization. This process should lead to a significant improvement of living conditions inside prisons and to the introduction of greater surveillance inside cells through the systematic installation of video cameras. State-sanctioned religious institutions such as Dar al-Fatwa should also be granted greater access in order to prevent radical inmates from monopolizing religious teaching and guidance. Civil society organizations, for their part, should be encouraged to conduct regular evaluations of prison conditions, dynamics within cells, and inmates' relations with prison personnel.

Coping With Lebanon's Refugee Issue

Authorities' anxiety over the socioeconomic and security costs of the approximately 1.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon is understandably growing in a country that is also home to 400,000 Palestinian refugees. But lawmakers should refrain from undertaking shock measures that are destined to appease the Lebanese public in the short term while having counterproductive effects in the medium and long run.

The LAF must be given the logistical capacity to tighten its control over Lebanese borders and monitor illegal crossings in order to make sure that those entering the country do so purely on humanitarian grounds. In parallel, however, the LAF should seek to create bridges with Syrian refugees already present on Lebanese soil. Reducing the growing mistrust between the two will be a key element in ensuring the LAF's ability to detect and marginalize destabilizing elements within the refugee community. Lebanese authorities should also do their utmost to investigate, try, and unequivocally condemn all human rights abuses that host communities commit against Syrian refugees.

In addition, lawmakers should review the government's current policy of imposing a \$200 fee on Syrian refugees who wish to renew their stay in Lebanon for a year. This is increasing the level of vulnerability of impoverished refugees and it may push a significant number to remain illegally in the country and forge ties with underground actors such as criminals and extremists.

Breathing Room for Reforms

In a context already marked by a deteriorating economic situation, Lebanon cannot be expected to cope alone with all of these challenges. So far, financial assistance from the international community, and in particular from the International Support Group for Lebanon, has not been significant enough to enable the government to formulate a coherent and compassionate policy toward Syrian refugees. With the specter of Sunni radicalization and political instability looming large over Lebanon, international donors must take their responsibilities seriously and move quickly to provide the country with a safety net for humanitarian relief.

This would give the Lebanese government enough breathing room to undertake much-needed reforms that could be carried out consensually, such as reforming the prison system and enhancing the LAF's counterinsurgency capabilities. For, ultimately, the radicalization of Lebanon's Sunnis reflects broader issues that are not specific to Sunnis—and that have been overlooked for decades.

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