

SYRIAN JIHADISTS SIGNAL INTENT FOR LEBANON

Both the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) plan to conduct attacks in Lebanon in the near term. Widely presumed to be enemies, recent reports of an upcoming joint JN and ISIS offensive in Lebanon, when coupled with ongoing incidents of cooperation between these groups, indicate that the situation between these groups in Lebanon is as fluid and complicated as in Syria. Although they are direct competitors that have engaged in violent confrontation in other areas, JN and ISIS have co-existed in the Syrian-Lebanese border region since 2013, and their underground networks in southern and western Lebanon may overlap in ways that shape their local relationship. JN and ISIS are each likely to pursue future military operations in Lebanon that serve separate but complementary objectives. Since 2013 both groups have occasionally shown a willingness to cooperate in a limited fashion in order to capitalize on their similar objectives in Lebanon. This unusual relationship appears to be unique to Lebanon and the border region, and does not extend to other battlefronts. Despite recent clashes that likely strained this relationship in February 2015, contention between the groups in this area has not escalated beyond localized skirmishes. This suggests that both parties have a mutual interest in preserving their coexistence in this strategically significant area. In January 2015, JN initiated a new campaign of spectacular attacks against Lebanese supporters of the Syrian regime, while ISIS has increased its mobilization in the border region since airstrikes against ISIS in Syria began in September 2014. Conditions favor a continued limited détente between JN and ISIS past March 2015.

Recent news reports claimed in February 2015 that al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) may be poised to launch joint attacks into Lebanon.¹ This discussion raises the counterintuitive idea that JN and ISIS may selectively cooperate in their operations. JN and ISIS have had a contentious relationship since the Islamic State of Iraq, formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq, retitled itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and announced its expansion into Syria in 2013. Since that time, ISIS has emerged as a competitor to AQ for leadership of the global jihadist movement. Thus, cooperation between ISIS and JN in military operations at even a local level would be surprising and have major implications for jihadist activity in other theaters. It is therefore important to evaluate intersections in JN and ISIS activity in the strategically significant Syrian-Lebanese border region in order to assess the possible courses that the JN-ISIS relationship may take. It is also important to understand what conditions along the Lebanese-Syrian border may be unique and not transferrable to other contexts.

From the Qalamoun mountain region in Syria to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, underground smuggling networks and disaffected Sunni communities provide a logistical opportunity for rebel-sympathetic operations in Lebanon. This growing support zone likely attracts both JN- and ISIS-affiliated elements as an opportunity to support their separate operations in Syria. JN and ISIS may both be pursuing independent objectives to expand into Lebanon additionally, where similarities in their long-term goals result in a notable operational overlap. This overlap begs the question, is there a possibility that JN and ISIS in Lebanon will each act in ways that could benefit both organizations? If so, what conditions give rise to this transaction? Lebanon may

serve as a frontier for greater contact between JN and ISIS in 2015, a divergence from other areas where their standoff and occasionally violent confrontation became the norm in 2014. How JN and ISIS navigate the overlap in their objectives and networks in Lebanon will be an important indicator for how AQ and ISIS will engage or react to each other long term.

This backgrounder will establish the significance of the Syrian-Lebanese border region to the Syrian civil war and discuss previous reporting of JN and ISIS activity in the area. It will further elaborate on notable historic incidents of interaction between these groups in this region. It will also frame what ISIS and JN each mean to accomplish in Lebanon in order to provide context to understand more recent events that suggest degrees of cooperation. Finally it will interpret recent events that indicate the current relationship between ISIS and JN along the Syrian-Lebanese border and analyze the possible implications and future courses of action of JN and ISIS on this front.

QALAMOUN'S STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Jihadist interaction in the Qalamoun border area between Syria and Lebanon reflects the area's strategic significance to the Syrian civil war. The Qalamoun region is a zone north of Damascus that is critical for both regime and rebel supply lines that originate in Lebanon. For the regime, it also houses key logistical terrain along the M5 highway that connects Damascus to northern regime strongholds in Syria's "central corridor." The importance of this terrain became clear in the spring of 2013, when a rebel campaign to seize control of the key hub city of Qusayr on the northern edge of the Qalamoun provoked a major military response led by Hezbollah that culminated in the seizure of another strategic town, Yabrud, in March 2014.²



Figure 1 Lebanese and Syria border region

This spring Hezbollah offensive firmly consolidated regime control from Damascus to Homs along the M5 highway. It also forced surrender of besieged rebels inside of Homs city by May 2014.³ However, pro-regime forces were unsuccessful in fully neutralizing the cross-border smuggling networks supporting rebels in Qalamoun. These networks continue to make the Qalamoun region valuable terrain for both rebel and jihadist groups as of March 2015. The Qalamoun region facilitates rebel operations on other battlefronts in Syria,⁴ to include Eastern Ghouta in Damascus additionally.⁵

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been active in Qalamoun since the beginning of the conflict. FSA-affiliated brigades likely continue to serve as a primary interface between pro-opposition networks in Lebanon's Bekaa region and elements of the Syrian opposition reliant on weapons and supplies from Lebanon. Over 20 FSA-affiliated rebel groups merged on August 25, 2014 in an attempt to bolster moderate ranks against the growing coercive power of jihadist elements. These groups formed the "Gathering of Western

Qalamoun," led by FSA Colonel Abdullah al-Rifai under the umbrella of the Dera'a-based Southern Front.⁶ Rifai is a leading member of the FSA Supreme Military Council's arms committee, and likely plays a large role in maintaining crucial armament pipelines to FSA-affiliated groups in the central corridor region.⁷ These now-united forces are active in a number of locations in Qalamoun, primarily conducting operations against regime and Hezbollah forces in the vicinity of Yabroud and Asal al-Ward since at least November 2014.⁸ The Southern Front released a video in December 2014 claiming to have seized 9 military positions from the regime in Qalamoun over the course of the year, indicating sustained collaboration between this southern umbrella organization and the Qalamoun-based brigades led by Rifai.⁹ It is unlikely that rebels in Qalamoun receive direct support from the south. Nevertheless, the extension of Southern Front influence into the northern Damascus¹⁰ countryside highlights continued efforts to foster connectivity between beleaguered moderate rebel systems.

Islamist rebels such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (HASI) are also active in the Qalamoun border region and facilitate this supply line by maintaining positions east of the M5 highway. Islamist rebels are concentrated on the southern end of the border region in a besieged rebel enclave in the town of Zabadani and in the town's countryside. HASI is currently active in this area, cooperating with JN and other Islamist rebels to target regime and Hezbollah supply lines that pass near Zabadani into Damascus.

Damascus-based Islamist elements consolidated their influence in Eastern Qalamoun near the end of 2014, safeguarding their access to the Lebanese Bekaa rear area. On November 25, 2014 the Ahmed al-Abdo Battalions, Jaysh al-Islam, HASI, Faylaq Rahman, and Jaysh Aswad Sharqiya formed a joint operations room in Eastern Qalamoun that includes a unified command council, a joint military operations room, and a Shari'a Committee.¹¹ JN was an initial signatory to the operations room and associated bodies, but a reported JN statement later indicated that JN withdrew in late January 2015 on orders from more senior JN leadership.¹²

Nonetheless, the JN statement reaffirmed its commitment to continued cooperation with rebel groups against the regime and to protect rebel allies from ISIS aggression. This commitment indicates that this rebel-JN coalition acknowledged ISIS's presence and potential for aggression against rebels in Qalamoun.

Qalamoun is also valuable to rebel and jihadist groups for its proximity to large Syrian refugee populations in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Anti-Assad forces withdrew deeper into the Qalamoun Mountains following their 2013 losses at Qusayr and Yabrud. Along with refugee waves triggered by these regime victories, armed groups increasingly spilled into the Bekaa valley and successfully regrouped near Aarsal by late 2014.¹³ This enabled jihadist groups to come into deeper contact with Syrian refugees concentrated near Aarsal.¹⁴ Displaced Syrians in the Bekaa region have become increasingly restive following harsh measures taken by the Lebanese government in 2014 to

address both the crippling refugee flows and increasing militancy among the under-resourced and increasingly resentful refugee population.¹⁵ A large number of the refugees in this region live in informal settlements, facilitating JN and ISIS outreach.¹⁶ According to a study released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Lebanon recovery fund on January 15, 2015, Syrian refugees in the Bekaa region are increasingly likely to opt into local patronage networks as sufficient international aid has failed to materialize.¹⁷ This form of patronage is a core methodology of JN through which it secures local support in return for providing essential commodities such as security or humanitarian supplies. The additional willingness of JN and possibly ISIS to escalate directly against Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has likely fostered local support for jihadist actors in the border region over more moderate rebel groups. This in turn directly augments jihadi ranks as individual fighters join ISIS or JN. As will be discussed later, the result is a steady attrition of moderate rebels.

LEBANON IN THE SYRIAN WAR

The violent and sectarian effects of the Syrian civil war have therefore spilled into Lebanon. Tensions have increased as waves of Syrian refugees flowed into Lebanon from 2012-2014. In some cases, this has led to direct clashes and other forms of violence between actors on either side of the Syrian conflict within Lebanese territory and between disgruntled refugees and Lebanese security forces in 2014.¹⁸ More importantly, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war on behalf of the Assad regime threatens to draw anti-Assad armed groups including JN and ISIS deeper into Lebanon to target Hezbollah in ways that compromise their resolve in Syria. Hezbollah is one adversary that JN and ISIS have in common, and the potential to achieve asymmetric effects against the Assad regime in Syria by drawing Hezbollah back into Lebanon is one reason to consider JN and ISIS activity in Lebanon to be a genuine threat.

Jihadist activity along the Lebanese border began in late 2013. As rebels continued to suffer defeats in Syria, groups such as JN began to expand their military operations into Lebanon to target Hezbollah and its support base. The most significant escalation in jihadist activity in Lebanon to date was a Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) campaign attributed to JN, ISIS, and the AQ-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades that targeted the LAF and Hezbollah across Lebanon in late 2013 and early 2014.¹⁹ In many cases, these attacks served as retribution intended to punish Hezbollah and its supporters for assistance to the Assad regime. As an Iranian-backed Shi'a force, Hezbollah is also an inherent target for jihadist Sunni groups. The ideology of such groups is sectarian and anti-Shi'a, and calls for armed resistance against the vehicles of power of the Iranian state.²⁰ A joint LAF-Hezbollah security initiative coordinated by the

Lebanese government eventually defeated this network after arresting key members involved in facilitating the attacks in February 2014.²¹ Yet while this crackdown restored security, it fell short of destroying JN and ISIS capability to regenerate their networks in Lebanon from their bases of operation in Qalamoun and the Bekaa Valley. It also failed to ameliorate simmering resentment in some Sunni-majority areas such as Tripoli, where extremist groups continue to find traction.²²

One condition that buffers against Hezbollah's vulnerability is the cooperation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) witnessed over the 2012-2014 time period. The LAF secured additional international support from Saudi Arabia among other sources to bolster its capabilities in 2014, and it has taken the lead in securing restive Sunni areas such as Tripoli in order to dampen sectarian tensions.²³ This strategy bolstered the Lebanese state against Syrian war spillover and largely mitigated jihadist threats in Lebanon until 2014, when notable violent attacks such as the VBIED campaign began to occur. Yet it has also created opportunities for jihadist actors to condemn the LAF for its deepened cooperation with Hezbollah. Jihadist actors such as JN and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades routinely condemn the LAF for its "subservience" to Hezbollah, and therefore to Iran, in an attempt to legitimize wide-scale military action in Lebanon in retaliation for Iran's war effort in Syria.²⁴ Lebanon has maintained a cautious balance, but Lebanon therefore represents an opportunity for jihadist actors to upset the balance and create greater regional effects. Changes in regional posture as Iran became focused upon Iraq in late 2014 increased opportunities for JN and ISIS to make headway in Syria and Lebanon. These factors may combine to produce unique conditions that incentivize ISIS and JN escalation in Lebanon.

In early 2015, both JN and ISIS have exhibited signs of mobilization that suggest a renewed Lebanon campaign. The most prominent were a series of JN-claimed attacks in January and February 2015 targeting Lebanese Shi'a and pro-regime elements in Tripoli and Damascus. JN claimed to have conducted a double Suicide Vest (SVEST) attack that targeted a pro-regime Alawite coffee shop in Tripoli on January 10; an SVEST attack that targeted a bus of Lebanese Shi'a in Damascus on February 1; and a double SVEST attack targeting a Hezbollah-run checkpoint near the Shi'a Sayyida Zaineb shrine in Damascus on February 23.²⁵ Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director Lieutenant General Stewart testified before the House Armed Services Committee on February 4, 2015 that he expects JN "will try to expand its territory in 2015 beyond its Syrian operating areas and enhance its operational capabilities in Lebanon, where it already conducts operations."²⁶ This testimony lends credence to the idea that JN will not confine its operational goals to Syria. In addition,

a buildup of ISIS forces in the Lebanese-Syrian border region began to emerge in news reporting in December 2014, including an expansion of ISIS governance activities, such as a Shari'a court. This mobilization has led some to believe that ISIS intends to establish the equivalent of a wilayat or governorate in Lebanon, possibly even with the support of JN, though the latter idea contradicts many established behaviors of both groups over the last 18 months.²⁷ Nevertheless, there has been a step change in their interaction in the Lebanon-Syria border region, as well as an emerging pattern of attacks deep within Lebanon, and these changes warrant closer examination.

JN'S INTENT IN LEBANON

JN and ISIS may have greater ambitions in Lebanon than to remove Hezbollah from Assad's Syrian defense strategy. Hezbollah, however, is likely JN's primary concern. JN's escalation against Hezbollah in Lebanon emerged in direct response to Hezbollah's announcement of its participation in the Syrian war on behalf of the Assad regime in May 2013.²⁸ Such operations as SVESTS in Tripoli, attacks on Hezbollah positions in Damascus and Qalamoun, and attacks targeting Hezbollah supporters are also military objectives to disrupt Hezbollah's support in order to create tactical opportunities for rebels in Syria. JN's military activity in Lebanon is therefore also a vehicle to achieve popular support for JN inside of Syria by bolstering the credibility of JN's claim to be the spearhead of the Syrian revolution.

JN operations in Lebanon may also be an outgrowth of its envisioned role of defender of disenfranchised Sunni populations. JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani stated in December 2013 "In the past, we had been waiting to know when Hezbollah will ... be forced to announce its allegiance to the regime and provide actual support to it. This is because we had been looking for one way to salvage the Sunni people in Lebanon from the oppression of Hezbollah ...we consider it political foolishness that Hezbollah announced this and, thus, opened the door wide open for us to enter Lebanon and rescue the Sunni people in Lebanon."²⁹ JN immediately capitalized on an increase in sectarian tensions in Tripoli in early 2013, establishing inroads with increasingly mobilized Sunni populations. JN also made contact with radicalizing figures in Lebanon such as Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir in Sidon, reportedly sending men to provide expertise to his network in mid-2013.³⁰ Some expressions of support for JN or ISIS, in some cases both, were noted among residents in Tripoli by October 2014.³¹ JN assumes a protective role towards civilians and refugees in Aarsal, a town in Lebanon's Bekaa valley, and generally seeks to avoid provoking local crackdowns that would alienate the population from JN.³² In a prominent example, JN heavily messaged its role as a "humanitarian" actor during clashes in Aarsal in August 2014 during clashes against the LAF. In statements posted on social media, JN expressed its intent to

de-escalate the situation immediately in order to prevent further suffering and declared its commitment to ensuring the safety of the local civilian population.³³ This commitment to ensuring the safety of the Aarsal population, which may contain family members of JN fighters, is likely to continue to influence JN calculus toward the LAF. Nonetheless, JN has not hesitated to execute captured LAF prisoners after a proposed prisoner swap failed to materialize.³⁴ JN justifies aggression toward the LAF by accusing it of subservience to Hezbollah, and has called on LAF soldiers to defect to JN. On October 20, 2014, JN released a video that claimed to show the confession of a defected LAF soldier, in which the soldier stated he left the LAF because it is a "tool" utilized by Hezbollah.³⁵

JN remains committed to fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon despite the initial defeat of its Lebanon campaign in early 2014. In an interview with JN's Manara al-Bayda Media Foundation in November 2014, Joulani stated "The true battle in Lebanon has not actually begun, and what is coming, Allah willing, is worse and more bitter for Hezbollah. Perhaps in the coming days Hassan Nasrallah will bite his fingers in regret because of what he has done to the Sunni people in Sham, Allah willing."³⁶ In early 2015, increasingly aggressive JN action in confronting moderate opposition groups in northern Syria has begun to fracture JN's image among the Syrian opposition.³⁷ JN's escalation against Hezbollah inside of Lebanon, therefore, could help JN regain support from the Syrian population. While it risks provoking further crackdowns in the Bekaa valley, JN action against Hezbollah forces and possibly the LAF may even generate asymmetric effects inside of Syria that could create opportunities for rebel forces.

ISIS'S INTENT IN LEBANON

ISIS also likely intends to open a new front in Lebanon. Reports of growing ISIS intent to conduct operations in Lebanon follow an increase in ISIS presence in Qalamoun and a steady rise in global ISIS activity outside of Iraq and Syria.³⁸ As a component of "al-Sham," Lebanon is inherently included in ISIS's territorial aspirations in the Middle East. Lebanon is also a potential source of social support, financing, and resources for ISIS that is increasingly valuable as the anti-ISIS coalition continues to target ISIS infrastructure and sources of revenue in Eastern Syria. ISIS expansion into Lebanon in 2015 could serve to bolster the ISIS war effort in Syria and to offset ISIS defeats in Iraq. Furthermore, ISIS is likely to target Hezbollah due to its links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq continue to gain ground against ISIS. ISIS is also overtly announcing its regional expansion to the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, the Khorasan region, and the Caucasus among other places,³⁹ and it is likely that ISIS will seize opportunities to plant a flag in Lebanon as a territorial objective. It is notable however that ISIS has not yet named a wilayat in Lebanon as it has done in other places.

Similar to JN, ISIS likely seeks to capitalize on Sunni disenfranchisement in Lebanon to generate support, an approach that ISIS applies selectively across Iraq and Syria. ISIS is not the dominant military power or social influencer in the Lebanon border region, and this condition may cause ISIS to behave in a more conciliatory fashion toward JN and rebel groups relative to other fronts. ISIS will likely exploit local resentment of the LAF and Hezbollah in majority Sunni areas in order to foster support for eventual expansion of the ISIS caliphate to Lebanon. LAF chief General Jean Qahwagi reported ISIS sleeper cells in Tripoli and Akkar in October 2014, areas with historic friction with both the LAF and Hezbollah,⁴⁰ suggesting that ISIS may be conducting early preparation for future attacks. Clashes that erupted in Tripoli in late October reportedly had links to both JN and ISIS cells,⁴¹ which is conceivable but not by itself proof of ISIS activity in Tripoli. Other local resistance groups such as the shadowy Free Sunnis of Baalbek have also emerged with potential links to ISIS, providing a possible avenue for ISIS to organize a satellite movement in Lebanon.⁴² ISIS may seek to work through such groups to carve out terrain in preparation for the declaration of a formal ISIS wilayat within Lebanese territory. This may be a long-term goal rather than an immediate objective. In the interim, however, ISIS likely seeks to fuel anger toward the Lebanese state and activate sectarian tensions in order to exploit a wider breakdown in government control.

Past ISIS operations in Lebanon leveraged inroads with Sunni populations undergoing radicalization to facilitate attacks against the LAF and Hezbollah. A Salafi Sheikh named Abu Sayyaf al-Ansari, known for inflammatory rhetoric against the LAF, released an audio statement pledging allegiance to ISIS on January 25, 2014.⁴³ Ansari claimed that ISIS in Lebanon received support from the Abdullah Azzam Brigades and would announce an official spokesman named Abu Omar al-Muhajir in coming days.⁴⁴ While ISIS did not officially designate a wilayat in Lebanon in 2014, it appears to have participated in a VBIED campaign that involved the Abdullah Azzam Brigades and JN in late 2013 and early 2014. ISIS claimed at least one attack, and a group with suspected affiliation to ISIS claimed credit for three others.⁴⁵ With multiple groups claiming attacks, and a degree of interconnectivity among cells suspected, it becomes evident that JN and ISIS relate differently in Lebanon than they do elsewhere. The man believed to be the head of the VBIED network, Naim Abbas, was arrested by the LAF on February 12, 2014 and confessed to receiving financial and other support from ISIS and JN in addition to having links to AQ core mediator Abu Khaled al-Suri, according to LAF sources cited by al-Akhbar, a daily Lebanese newspaper.⁴⁶ Abbas was apprehended following the confession of another member of the VBIED network, Sheikh Omar Atrash, who was arrested in January 2014.⁴⁷ According to LAF sources cited by Lebanese news outlet Now Lebanon, Atrash confessed to having ties to

the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, JN, and ISIS and turned over the names of a number of his contacts, including Abbas.⁴⁸ ISIS's role in the 2014 VBIED campaign is thus substantiated by apprehended members of the VBIED cells that confessed to both JN and ISIS linkages.

ISIS's operations in Lebanon appear to have re-emerged alongside JN. On January 28, 2015, a local Lebanese media outlet citing security sources stated that ISIS in Qalamoun requested support from ISIS in northern Syria to resource future military operations in Lebanon. The source reported that ISIS intends to declare Sheikh Ahmed Assir as the ISIS emir for Lebanon, possibly indicating that Sheikh Assir maintains connections to ISIS in addition to JN.⁴⁹ According to a "well informed" security source cited by the Lebanese newspaper as-Safir, ISIS intends to establish a zone of territorial control in the Bekaa region in which it can declare a wilayat.⁵⁰ Older reports of future ISIS intent in Lebanon highlighted ISIS desire to conduct attacks against Hezbollah deep into the Lebanese interior, including South Beirut and South Lebanon in addition to the Bekaa valley.⁵¹ As will be explored later, ISIS could pursue both areas, utilizing the southern areas to create opportunities in the border region. Furthermore, reports have also emerged indicating that the Abdullah Azzam brigades have also begun to mobilize for future operations in Lebanon as of February 2015, potentially facilitating JN and ISIS activity and serving as a vehicle for their infiltration.⁵² These reports highlight an important concern, and a reason to examine JN and ISIS-related events in Lebanon's Syria border region more closely.

ISIS INCREASES ITS PRESENCE IN QALAMOUN

ISIS military presence in Qalamoun has not been widely disclosed by the ISIS media apparatus despite evidence of their presence in the border region. This is likely because ISIS intended to disperse quietly into this portion of Syria's central corridor over the course of 2014. Beginning in December 2014, however, ISIS activated its expeditionary presence into the Qalamoun area and began to expand its foothold along the border, also increasing its external communication from this area. For example, on January 7, ISIS distributed a picture set claiming to show pictures of a snowstorm in the area of Zabadani, a subsequent picture set on January 26 decried a barrel bomb campaign by the regime in this area.⁵³ ISIS also distributed a picture set of ISIS fighting positions targeting the regime in an undisclosed area of the Qalamoun region.⁵⁴ According to the head of Lebanon's General Security office on January 31, 2015, ISIS's immediate objective in this expansion is to secure supply routes and relative safe haven to include a swath of terrain on the Lebanese side of the border.⁵⁵ As it does so, ISIS is increasingly threatening the tacit de-confliction between JN and ISIS by considerably affecting the status quo in the Qalamoun region.

ISIS expansion into the Lebanon border region is made possible through waypoints in the Eastern Homs Desert. The ISIS seizure of the Tabqa military airbase from the Syrian regime in August 2014 opened the eastern Homs desert to ISIS as a support zone.⁵⁶ Taking advantage of this freedom of movement, ISIS arrived in the area of Quraytayn in the Eastern Qalamoun region by at least December 2014. ISIS distributed a picture set of a convoy of at least 12 vehicles arriving in Quraytayn on December 29, 2014 possibly destined for the western border region.⁵⁷ This expansion allowed ISIS to shift resources from eastern Syria to augment emerging efforts in Damascus and Qalamoun. Entry into this sector has also facilitated ISIS reinforcement to the western Lebanese border region, and likely served as a waypoint for ISIS resources sent to Southern Damascus, where ISIS presence and social media messaging increased notably in January 2015.⁵⁸ According to al-Akhbar, ISIS reinforcements arrived in Western Qalamoun in early December 2014, likely transiting from the Homs desert through Quraytayn.⁵⁹ According to FSA Colonel Rifai, these reinforcements aided in the establishment of an ISIS “military zone” near Qarah, where ISIS involvement in smuggling is likely be based.⁶⁰

ISIS also deployed formal instruments of its religious and governance power to augment the ISIS foothold along the border, causing friction with JN in the area. ISIS sent Shari’a judges to the region from Raqqa in early December 2014, including a prominent ISIS religious leader named Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Maqdisi.⁶¹ The newly arrived Shari’a judges may have been involved in establishing early forms of ISIS governance in the Arsal region, including a Shari’a court that emerged in the area in December.⁶² According to al-Akhbar, they also convened a series of meetings with local JN leader Abu Malek al-Shami in December 2014 in an attempt to coerce al-Shami to pledge allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁶³ These reports indicate a significant concern among Lebanese sources of growing ISIS activity.⁶⁴ Clashes between JN and ISIS-affiliated elements on December 5 marked a clear breakdown in these talks, which have not been reported to have resumed by March 2015.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, this instance of ISIS belligerence towards JN does not appear to have triggered wider fighting between the groups, possibly due to a continued rapport between the local ISIS and JN military commanders. Abu Malik al-Shami issued a statement regarding the JN-ISIS relationship in Qalamoun on December 21, 2014, asserting that he does not regard ISIS as infidels or apostates although he strongly denounces the spilling of innocent Muslim blood by any groups.⁶⁶

ISIS acquired allegiance from a number of local rebel brigades despite its unsuccessful effort to subordinate JN in December 2014. Syrian opposition sources began expressing this concern in December 2014. ISIS reportedly sent messages to the headquarters of multiple rebel groups in the region following

the arrival of the ISIS Shari’a officials in December 2014, stating that ISIS intends to establish an emirate within the next two months and demanding that rebel leaders pledge allegiance to ISIS leader al-Baghdadi.⁶⁷ While there are rumors that up to a total of 3,000 FSA fighters have defected to ISIS in the area, the real number is more likely in the hundreds.⁶⁸ Abbas Ibrahim, the head of Lebanon’s General Security office, estimated in January 2015 that 700 fighters have pledged allegiance to ISIS, increasing its total ranks in the area to approximately 1,000.⁶⁹ Individual groups that have defected to ISIS include the Abu Abessalam group, which pledged allegiance to ISIS on December 12, prompting localized clashes between JN and the brigade near Ras al-Ma’ra in Western Qalamoun, near the border.⁷⁰ Then, on December 17, ISIS arrested the leader of the FSA-affiliated Liwa Mughawir al-Qusayr, Uraba Idris, “for selling out al-Qusayr and Yabroud to Hezbollah” and absorbed the brigade into its ranks.⁷¹ These actions reflect ISIS intent to grow its influence in the area not only by transferring resources from other theaters but by gaining local support – they also position ISIS as a direct competitor with JN for influence in the region.

FSA CALCULUS IN QALAMOUN

The absorption of Qalamoun-based rebel groups into ISIS is a dangerous contingency for the Syrian opposition because it increases ISIS’s relative control over supply lines from Lebanon. In coming months, two factors are likely to influence the calculus of remaining FSA-affiliated units in the Qalamoun region. First is the ability of these groups to maintain access to supply networks through the Bekaa Valley. FSA groups claim to be the most affected by the Hezbollah and LAF closure of routes into Arsal that such groups depend upon for food and supplies.⁷² If ISIS uses its position to sever remaining FSA supply lines from the Arsal system, it may be successful in forcing the surrender of increased numbers of FSA units. Furthermore, heightened crackdowns in the Bekaa region by the LAF against refugees and populations with links to armed groups have placed increasing strain on rebels in Qalamoun, thereby increasing the relative attractiveness of better resourced groups such as ISIS.⁷³

The second factor is the ability to sustain the anti-regime war effort in the central corridor. FSA-affiliated groups remain committed to the fight against the Assad regime, and are likely to base decisions regarding partnerships or allegiance on the likelihood of achieving success in this military campaign. The leader of FSA forces in the region, Colonel Rifai, stated that he does not intend to fight any group in the Qalamoun region, asserting that the FSA’s focus remains the overthrow of the Syrian regime.⁷⁴ This commitment is a primary driver of continued rebel support to and reliance on JN, which

remains an essential military ally in the fight against Assad for the desperately under-resourced opposition. Nonetheless, this dynamic may also provide ISIS with an alternate source of leverage if it decides to compete with JN on this plane. If ISIS begins to conduct operations against pro-regime forces in Qalamoun or the central corridor more widely, it may attract a higher level of loyalty and potential allegiance from local FSA groups. FSA-linked forces in Qalamoun may actually act to prevent an escalation between JN and ISIS in the region due to the significance of rebel commitment to their revolutionary war effort. In an example of rebel concern regarding the danger of infighting in this terrain, six FSA-affiliated brigades in the Eastern Qalamoun region announced the formation of a “Mujahideen Shura Council” on December 31, 2014 with a stated intent of preventing Muslim-on-Muslim infighting after the “spread of dissension” in Eastern Qalamoun.⁷⁵ If JN-ISIS tensions continue to rise, FSA forces may seek to provide further opportunities for cooperation rather than choosing to side with ISIS and/or oust JN.

ISIS control over Syrian rebel brigades also represents a dangerous increase in ISIS’s combat power. Yet FSA groups that defect to ISIS do not do necessarily do so for ideological reasons. This suggests that external intervention or a significant change in their fortunes could be successful in fracturing ISIS’s network of allies. Some groups that are absorbed into ISIS appear to maintain their cohesion as discrete units that could potentially be broken away in the future. On November 27, 2014, for example, ISIS severed ties with a group named Liwa Fajr al-Islam after its leader insisted on negotiating the release of captured LAF soldiers in exchange for the release of their former leader Abu Ahmed Juma, who had been arrested in early August 2014.⁷⁶ In addition, Liwa Mughawir al-Qusayr appears to operate independently but under the ISIS banner in the mountains surrounding Ras Baalbek in Lebanon, an area with an historic smuggling route that is natural terrain for FSA-linked forces with deep connections into Lebanon according to al-Akhbar.⁷⁷ These two cases indicate that groups have been allowed to retain their cohesion as discrete units following their pledge of allegiance to ISIS, and thus that ISIS expansion in this area can be disrupted.

JN AND ISIS RELATIONS IN THE SYRIAN-LEBANESE QALAMOUN BORDER REGION

All of these contingencies surround a core observation: ISIS and JN have both been operating in the Qalamoun area on the Syrian side of the border and conducting similar operations there. Particularly during the Syrian regime’s offensive in Qalamoun between November 2013 and March 2014, JN, ISIS, and rebel groups all faced regime aggression, and this likely brought JN and ISIS into closer contact. In fact, JN and

ISIS both participated in the defense of Yabrud, which fell to the regime in March 2014 according to a study conducted by the Carter Center.⁷⁸ This did not necessarily entail direct cooperation between the two groups, but it would have served as an initial point of contact between local JN and ISIS commanders in Qalamoun. As the JN-ISIS high-level schism evolved over the course of 2014, local JN and ISIS commanders may have sustained contact and developed a somewhat insulated relationship in the Qalamoun region. In the context of the joint participation at Yabrud, the Carter Center also reported that JN forces in the Qalamoun region publically declared they will stand with ISIS and continue to collaborate despite the unfolding schism between the two groups across Syria.⁷⁹

The fight for Yabroud and the concurrent VBIED campaign in Lebanon were linked, an extension of the assessed cooperation between ISIS and JN in Qalamoun. These groups likely intended to draw Hezbollah into Lebanon and away from Qalamoun.⁸⁰ While JN and ISIS were unable to achieve their shared operational objective to prevent the fall of Yabrud, or at least to force Hezbollah to deprioritize Syria, this shared focus put them in a unique position, facing a shared fight against Syrian regime forces, the LAF, and Hezbollah. Months of relative quiet followed in the border region, until the arrest of an ISIS-affiliated rebel commander by the LAF prompted a retributive attack on Arsal in August 2014, in which both JN and ISIS forces reportedly took part.⁸¹ During the attack, JN and ISIS forces attacked local security forces, took numerous soldiers and policemen captive, seized government infrastructure, and attempted to gain control of large areas of the city itself.⁸² Their reported joint participation in this escalation in August 2014, if true, demonstrated a persistent form of tactical cooperation. The attacks were reactive rather than deliberate, but they provide another indicator of possible JN and ISIS alignment against shared enemies as a stark contrast to intra-jihadist clashes, the expected outcome. ISIS and JN behavior in Arsal in August 2014 likely reflects the operational relationship they developed in Qalamoun.

Since the fighting in Arsal in August 2014, a standoff ensued that placed ISIS and JN on one side facing off against the LAF and Hezbollah over a proposed prisoner exchange. This standoff resulted in a series of mutually supportive efforts by JN and ISIS. JN and ISIS have each executed a number of captured LAF and Hezbollah members as punishment for the continued refusal of the Lebanese government to deliver a set of prisoners from Rumieh prison in exchange for the JN and ISIS hostages since August.⁸³ JN has taken the lead in this standoff but has continued to support ISIS in Lebanon by executing hostages in retaliation for action taken by the LAF against ISIS elements. For example, on December 5, 2014, JN executed a captive LAF policeman stating explicitly that this action was in retaliation for the arrest of the wives of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

and ISIS military commander Abu Ali al-Shishani.⁸⁴ Qatari mediation in the hostage negotiations in late February 2015 may lead to a prisoner exchange between JN and the LAF, excluding those held captive by ISIS.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the above indicators demonstrate that JN and ISIS in the area of Qalamoun and Lebanon are capable, in a limited fashion, to prioritize shared, local goals over their top-level differences.

This JN-ISIS cooperation did not, however, deepen into a unification of the groups or a merger of their war efforts, even in the Syria-Lebanon border system. JN and ISIS appear to maintain an unofficial non-confrontation agreement in the cross-border region even when they are not cooperating against the LAF and Hezbollah. The observable indicator is geographic de-confliction in Qalamoun, with JN and ISIS forces operating in relatively distinct terrain while interacting with the same pool of local rebel forces. Local sources regularly allude to a de-facto agreement between JN and ISIS to explain local dynamics, referencing the mutual benefit both parties appear to gain by this coexistence.⁸⁶ This unique JN-ISIS dynamic is likely a product of a personal relationship between local JN and ISIS leaders that prevented the high-level ISIS-JN schism from compelling them to prioritize mutual conflict over other adversaries in 2014.⁸⁷ Whereas JN has acted aggressively to counter possible ISIS incursions into Syria's southern Dera'a province, attacking groups that become close to ISIS, the local JN leader in Qalamoun appears not to regard ISIS as intrinsically threatening due to this established pattern of coexistence.⁸⁸

Indicators of how ISIS and JN interact with local rebel groups in the Qalamoun region also give a sense of a coexisting relationship. JN and ISIS have engaged with local groups on at least one occasion to establish common rules of engagement for military operations, even if this falls short of achieving a unity of effort. On October 23, 2014, a joint charter circulated on social media committing signatory groups to refrain from targeting the Lebanese Army or Christians, unless they were supporting Hezbollah. In doing so, the charter appeared to constitute an attempt by Qalamoun rebels to agree on certain parameters for military operations. The version of the charter obtained from social media on October 23 included the seal and signatures of the JN and ISIS entities in Qalamoun, with unsigned spaces designated for ISIS Wilayat Homs in addition to the leaders of Liwa al-Haq, Saraya al-Hussein Bin Ali, the ISIS-affiliated Abu Ali al-Shishani group, and others.⁸⁹ While it remains unclear if the charter ever took effect, the attempt to unify cross-spectrum rebel forces in Qalamoun under common rules of engagement indicates that rebels, ISIS, and JN shared an operating area and attempted to cooperate, at least in a limited geographic area. In addition, the space designated for the ISIS Homs Wilayat is an important indicator of the connectivity between the Qalamoun and Homs systems and of the ISIS system traversing from ISIS-held terrain in Eastern Syria to relatively insular yet

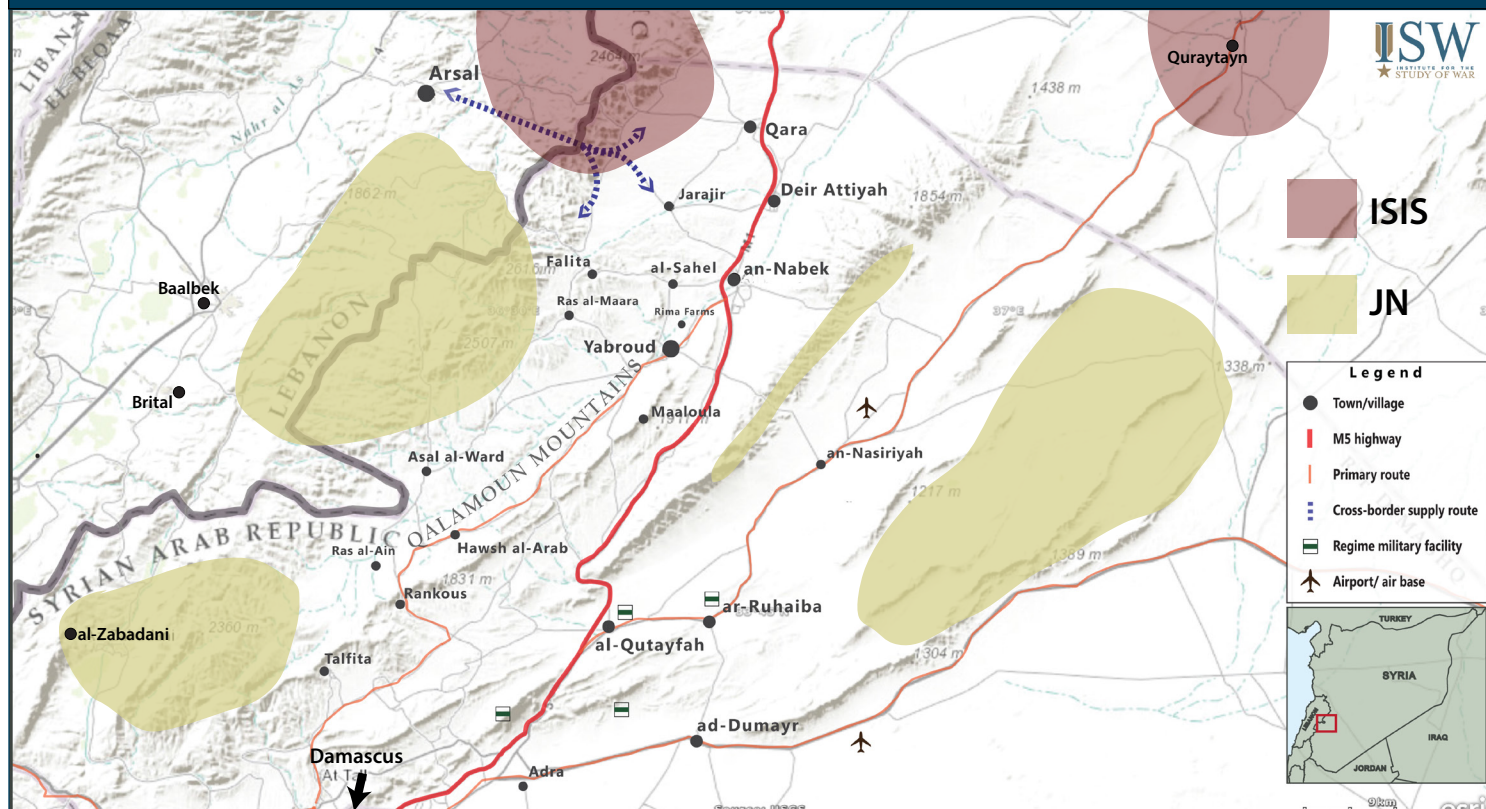
interconnected emerging ISIS systems in Western Syria.

An ISIS build up in Qalamoun beginning in late 2014 has begun to challenge this JN-ISIS relationship by altering the balance of power in the region. However, relatively distinct areas of operation in the border region continue to facilitate continued non-confrontation by allowing JN and ISIS to de-conflict based on geography. According to an unidentified FSA leader in the area, JN's presence in the Western Qalamoun region consists of approximately 600 fighters based primarily in two zones: in the Zabadani – Rankous sector, and in the Yabroud countryside from Asal al-Ward to Aarsal.⁹⁰ Within the latter zone, Colonel Rafai of the Gathering of Western Qalamoun alleges that JN is working to increase its presence in the vicinity of Falita, Ras al-Ma'ra, and Asal al-Ward, from which it can threaten key Hezbollah and regime terrain near Yabrud.⁹¹ JN's self-advertised operations are concentrated in this zone, lending credibility to Rafai's assessment.⁹² Regime forces reportedly conducted tactical withdrawals from this area in September 2014 in order to reinforce positions in southern Syria, likely facilitating greater JN freedom of operation in this zone.⁹³ These JN positions also enable attacks against Hezbollah in the town of Aarsal, west of Asal al-Ward in the Bekaa Valley. JN conducted a number of attacks against Hezbollah positions in this area in late 2014, although this front appears to have quieted entering 2015.⁹⁴

ISIS presence is concentrated farther north, and was likely much smaller than JN's footprint entering 2014. While ISIS had built up as many as 1,000 fighters in Qalamoun by January 2015, it is likely to have had only a few hundred prior to its expansion beginning in late 2014.⁹⁵ In addition to local pledges of allegiance to ISIS, which began in the second half of 2014, ISIS forces in Qalamoun may also have increased in number when members in Damascus were evicted by rebel groups beginning in July 2014.⁹⁶ According to local sources, ISIS's areas of operation in Qalamoun consist of the Halayem mountains from Ajram to Wadi al-Zamrani, including a likely HQ in the Wadi Mira area, which remains under bombardment by the Syrian regime in early 2015.⁹⁷ This zone extends into Lebanon from al-Qaa south through the Ras Baalbek area to the Aarsal outskirts. In particular, ISIS positions in Wadi Rafeq and al-Qaa are under regular bombardment by LAF forces stationed in Ras Baalbek.⁹⁸ ISIS appears to have a force density near Aarsal, with local residents stating that ISIS has five times more followers than JN in the area.⁹⁹ The control of the LAF reportedly halts at the Wadi Hamayid checkpoint east of Aarsal, after which ISIS control begins.¹⁰⁰

As ISIS has built up its presence in Qalamoun, it has begun to alter this geographic balance by expanding its operations. Locals in Aarsal reported on February 7, 2015 that ISIS has established a Shari'a court and maintains mobile checkpoints

MAIN JN AND ISIS AREAS OF OPERATION



in the eastern countryside of the town, indicating a relatively high and increasing level of control exercised by ISIS in the area.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, picture sets published by ISIS in January 2015 also indicated an ISIS encroachment into the Zabadani region, likely as ISIS attempts to deepen further its inroads with Qalamoun-based rebels.¹⁰² If true, and if sustained, this encroachment may challenge the ISIS-JN dynamic in the Qalamoun region by altering the geographic balance that has facilitated their unique relationship.

JN AND ISIS FUTURES IN LEBANON AND QALAMOUN

ISIS's assertiveness in Qalamoun may cement the wider schism with JN despite the established pattern of coexistence and occasional cooperation. JN may be threatened by ISIS's positions in the eastern Qalamoun Mountains, due to the strategic importance of this zone for JN in Homs and Damascus. In addition, ISIS's reemergence in Damascus is seen as highly threatening by Damascus-based rebels, including JN. On January 15, 2015, JN warned residents of the Eastern Ghouta suburbs that those sheltering or aiding members of ISIS will be punished "without mercy."¹⁰³ Rapidly heightening tensions in the capital could therefore alter the JN-ISIS relationship along the Lebanese border.

Furthermore, the JN-ISIS relationship along the Syrian-Lebanese border is exhibiting increased signs of friction despite the commitment of JN leader al-Shami to remain adherent to the past détente.¹⁰⁴ Direct clashes erupted between local JN and ISIS fighters in western Qalamoun on January 28, 2015 after an ISIS vehicle carrying ISIS Shari'a official Abu Walid al-Maqdisi failed to stop at a JN checkpoint, prompting JN forces to fire upon the vehicle. In response, ISIS militants arrested the JN fighters at the checkpoint as well as those present in a nearby JN headquarters, prompting JN to erect numerous additional checkpoints in response.¹⁰⁵ Such early 2015 skirmishes, however, have thus far been limited and do not yet constitute a full campaign by JN to subvert the influence of ISIS in the area, or an effort by ISIS to sideline JN directly. It is possible, however, that these tensions could erupt into full JN and ISIS infighting if local leaders are unable to maintain control over their forces in the medium term. Al-Maqdisi reportedly shot and killed the ISIS in Qalamoun emir, Abu Osama al-Banyasi, on February 23, 2015 because of al-Banyasi's relationship with JN emir al-Shami, indicating intra-ISIS tensions in the border region in the context of the continued de-confliction with JN.¹⁰⁶ However, al-Maqdisi was reportedly summoned before an ISIS Shari'a court following the attack, indicating that ISIS leadership may not have shared his anti-JN feelings. Thus,

Maqdisi's discontent with the JN-ISIS relationship may not force a break in the status quo in the ISIS-JN relationship in Qalamoun in the near term.

ISIS and JN may be able to preserve their unique relationship in Qalamoun by using Lebanon as a vehicle for further cooperation, a reason to lend credence to Lebanese reporting about a possible JN-ISIS offensive in March 2015. Initiating a second campaign deep into the Lebanese interior is likely more difficult in early 2015 due to the increased security prompted by jihadist activity in Lebanon in early 2014. However, shaping operations by JN and ISIS across both sides of the border could weaken the joint LAF and Hezbollah security apparatus and facilitate dormant JN and ISIS-linked cells in Lebanon. Both groups are increasingly incentivized to pursue this course of action by recent developments in the Syrian battle space. A string of regime victories in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus beginning in August 2014 may prompt JN to initiate hostilities in Lebanon in order to offset a direct threat to rebel survival in the capital.¹⁰⁷ In addition, continued losses suffered by ISIS in northern Syria in towns such as Ayn al-Arab/Kobani may prompt ISIS expansion into Lebanon in order to provide a much-needed narrative of continued offense.¹⁰⁸

JN and ISIS have directed recent activity in early 2015 toward Hezbollah and the LAF to produce disruptive effects along two parallel axes: targeting sources of regime and Hezbollah support based in Lebanon, and disrupting security in the Bekaa region. A previously mentioned JN double SVEST on January 10, 2015 targeted a cafe in an Alawite-majority neighborhood of Tripoli in explicit retaliation for the support of the pro-Assad National Democratic Party to the Assad regime.¹⁰⁹ On January 16, the LAF claimed to have foiled a second terror plot near Aarsal. The LAF seized a car loaded with 120 kg of explosive material and arrested a three-man cell reportedly planning several SVEST attacks targeting LAF positions and Alawite residential areas in the same Tripoli neighborhood of the January 10 attack.¹¹⁰ LAF and Lebanese government sources reported ISIS connections in both instances, possibly indicating already re-emerging cooperation between JN and ISIS.¹¹¹ Both events occurred in areas with indicators of ISIS presence, and ISIS participation is therefore plausible. However, it is also possible that elements within the LAF seek to exaggerate the threat of ISIS in Lebanon in order to secure further international assistance in arming and equipping Lebanese forces.¹¹²

While ISIS may not have links to the JN attack in Tripoli or the SVEST cell near Aarsal, ISIS aggression toward the LAF has also shown signs of escalation in the border region. On January 23, 2015, ISIS forces reportedly clashed with the LAF near Ras Baalbek, temporarily seizing control of an LAF base at Tallet al-Hamra.¹¹³ The clashes occurred a day after a visit by Army chief Gen. Jean Qahwagi to the area, and may signify an attempt by ISIS to challenge a narrative of security in the region.¹¹⁴ Conflicting reports suggest

that the ISIS attack on Tallet al-Hamra was unplanned, and that clashes instead erupted when an LAF patrol encountered ISIS militants in the area.¹¹⁵ In either case, the altercation marks the most significant direct contact between LAF ground forces and ISIS in the area since August 2014 and likely indicates a heightened mobilization of ISIS forces in the Bekaa region.

JN escalation has continued following the ISIS-LAF clashes in the Bekaa. JN claimed credit for an SVEST attack targeting a bus of Lebanese Shi'a pilgrims in the Old City of Damascus on February 1, 2015 killing at least nine and wounding nearly twenty.¹¹⁶ Tellingly, the JN commander in Qalamoun, Abu Malek al-Shami, praised the attack in a statement posted to social media the following day.¹¹⁷ In response to the attack, Hezbollah issued a statement banning its supporters from organizing trips to Damascus "until further notice."¹¹⁸ This shift in behavior is likely the objective of these recent JN attacks, and therefore indicates success to date in what may be the start of JN's second mobilization against Hezbollah. Finally, JN claimed to have conducted a double SVEST attack on February 23, 2015 that targeted a joint Hezbollah, National Defense Force (NDF), and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (AFAB) checkpoint near the entrance of the Sayyida Zaineb Shrine in southern Damascus, killing three and wounding at least 14.¹¹⁹ In addition, an SVBIED attack in Assad's hometown of al-Qardaha in Latakia Province two days earlier likely had links to JN.¹²⁰ These JN attacks targeting symbols of regime power and pro-regime support from external actors likely constitute the opening salvo in an upcoming JN military campaign to disrupt sources of regime staying power.

Lebanese security sources cited by Asharq al-Awsat have foreshadowed such an operation by JN and ISIS, predicting a simultaneous JN attack at Aarsal alongside an ISIS push into Qusayr in the March 2015 timeframe.¹²¹ This is a feasible scenario. However, JN forces in Qalamoun are also well positioned to attack the Syrian regime in Yabroud near Syria's M5 highway in the near term, and they are unlikely to escalate against Aarsal due to the risk of alienating the local population and losing a crucial support zone. JN foreshadowed an upcoming assault on Yabroud in its social media coverage of its recent attacks in the surrounding countryside in January 2015, including footage of Yabroud with a banner that stated "patience Yabrud..."¹²² JN likely does not have adequate forces to launch a full assault on Yabroud in the short term without a significant shift in assets from other fronts. However, a relative increase in JN and rebel harassment attacks against Hezbollah near Yabroud has contributed to rising tensions between Hezbollah forces and local pro-regime National Defense Force (NDF) militias in the region, which may generate asymmetric effects over time and produce future opportunities for JN.¹²³ The scenario of a JN ground offensive against Aarsal is therefore not likely in the immediate term. An ISIS offensive at Qusayr, however, is an important contingency to consider.

An attack against Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces at Qusayr would potentially give ISIS a way to ingratiate itself with the Syrian opposition in Syria's central corridor. Since ISIS may have absorbed a number of rebel brigades that fought in Qusayr in 2013, this strategy might secure additional allies for ISIS and consolidate ISIS control over elements already formally under its command. JN may also seize this opportunity to attack critical Hezbollah terrain in the southwestern edge of Qalamoun, where a regime and Hezbollah supply route passes from Lebanon into Damascus. Pro-regime forces increased their bombardment of the JN and rebel-held enclave of Zabadani in early 2015, dropping dozens of barrel bombs in the vicinity.¹²⁴ Following clashes with rebel forces, the LAF closed the border crossing at Jdaydet Yabous and deployed airborne reinforcements to the area on January 23, 2015.¹²⁵ On January 24, however, rebel forces seized control of a regime military base near the crossing.¹²⁶ Rebel forces then successfully repelled a regime attempt to recapture a checkpoint west of Zabadani on January 31, killing dozens of regime fighters, allegedly including regime Brigadier General Ra'id Barbouri.¹²⁷ This continued escalation near a vital regime supply line is likely to be of core concern to both Hezbollah and regime forces. JN could seek to capitalize upon this escalation as it pursues its own agenda in the border region.

CONCLUSION

The LAF and Hezbollah have taken initial steps to increase security in the border region, largely in response to perceived threats of JN and ISIS incursion. The LAF, Internal Security Forces and General Security Forces implemented a security plan in January 2015 following discussions with Hezbollah to emphasize reestablishing state control in the Baalbek-Hermel region.¹²⁸ The LAF and Hezbollah have also taken steps to quell sectarian tensions in western Lebanon, removing all Islamic and political posters from Beirut, Sidon, and Tripoli.¹²⁹ The Future Movement and Hezbollah have begun to discuss a joint national counter-terrorism strategy, which is likely to prioritize Beirut and the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in Sidon according to comments by Lebanese Interior Minister Nouhad Manchnouk.¹³⁰ In addition, LAF commander General Qahwagi attended a set of anti-ISIS coalition meetings held in Riyadh from February 18-19, 2015, although according to a security source the coalition's decisions were not concerned with Lebanon despite his attendance.¹³¹

The threat in Lebanon is not restricted to the border region. According to security sources, dozens of Lebanese youth are actively involved in preparation to conduct suicide attacks, and Lebanese security forces reported the pursuit of nearly 200 individuals with suspected links to JN and/or ISIS in January 2015.¹³² Amid heightened security concerns, reports of an upcoming suicide attack resulted in the closure of the Lebanese University in Sidon on February 6, 2015 and an ongoing search

for five would-be suicide bombers in Aarsal and Sidon's Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp.¹³³ Security crackdowns have also led to further aggravation amongst the Syrian refugee population that is likely to create a more permissive environment for jihadist outreach. In particular, a decision by the LAF in late January 2015 to evict nearly 17,000 refugees in the border region is likely to provide an opportunity for both JN and ISIS to advance their interests in Lebanon.¹³⁴ While a "senior Army source" interviewed by the Daily Star indicated that the forced relocation was an attempt "to prevent terrorists from crossing into Lebanon and hiding in these camps," the action is likely to have the opposite effect by further aggravating the humanitarian situation.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the ongoing security plan in the border region appears primarily to target illicit trade.¹³⁶ According to local reports, jihadist-linked actors have gone to ground in expectation of the raids, which are unlikely to destroy the network.¹³⁷ While Lebanese General Security opened a temporary office in Aarsal to deal with refugee issues, it is unable to provide the resources necessary to address the vast humanitarian crisis in the border region without a considerable infusion of sustained international support.¹³⁸

The Syrian regime has not prioritized the eradication of rebel and jihadist networks along the Lebanese border and has not acted to prevent an expanding ISIS footprint in this region. The regime is more concerned with protecting its strongholds and key supply lines through Qalamoun, which does not require wider operations across the Qalamoun mountain range. The threat that JN and ISIS may pose to Hezbollah and Lebanon, however, could force Assad to respond in ways that support his own alliances. The regime may be forced to deploy assets to the border if the LAF and Hezbollah are unable to disrupt the emerging JN and ISIS networks in Lebanon or to prevent both groups from using the Qalamoun region as a safe haven from which to launch attacks. In addition, indicators of rising tensions between Hezbollah and the NDF in Qalamoun may require the regime to invest more heavily to secure the key terrain proximate to the M5 highway. This would likely require a drawdown of regime forces elsewhere in Syria. JN and ISIS mobilization in Qalamoun will therefore influence the Syrian war more broadly. Qalamoun is critical terrain for every actor in the conflict. While JN and ISIS will create challenges for pro-regime forces there, they will also likely compromise the integrity of Free Syrian Army units in the area over the long term. Expanding JN and ISIS forces have increasingly preyed upon rebel cross-border networks, jeopardizing the ability of rebel forces to maintain independence. Jihadist action against the Assad regime may confer short-term rebel military victories in the Syrian central corridor to the advantage of the wider opposition. Nonetheless, they threaten the viability of a post-Assad Syrian state, making jihadist inroads in Syria's central corridor a strategic threat to all parties.

The broader implications of JN and ISIS activity along the Syrian-Lebanon border extend beyond the ISIS-JN schism, though it is a strong indication that this relationship could take many different trajectories going forward. Lebanon provides a vehicle for both ISIS and AQ to expand their global efforts. ISIS and JN activity there will also likely alter the Iranian calculus for how it frames its regional ambitions and multiple war efforts at a time of great international concern over ISIS and AQ. Furthermore, it erodes U.S. plans to destroy ISIS without influencing the outcome of the Syrian war. It compromises not only the viability of non-jihadist rebel groups in Qalamoun, but also their relationships to rebel groups in Homs, Damascus, and the southern front. As a result, it will also undermine US anti-ISIS strategies that are geographically and politically delimited. By expanding westward into terrain occupied by moderate rebels and Syrian refugee populations and away from the principal zone for U.S. airstrikes, ISIS undermines the successes achieved to date by the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and northern Syria. It also challenges the ability of the coalition to continue its campaign against ISIS without either partnering with the Assad regime or substantially increasing the scope of the intended cooperation with Syrian rebels. The sustained gravity of the humanitarian crisis generated by the lack of sufficient international assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon will further continue to provide opportunities for JN and ISIS in the country, even if the LAF and Hezbollah are able to curb a renewed jihadist campaign in Lebanon in the short term. Countering JN and ISIS along the Syrian-Lebanon border thus requires a tailored U.S. strategy that fully addresses the threat posed by ISIS and JN expansion.

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