

Syrian Jihadist Groups Take Conflict To Lebanon

By: [Jean Aziz for Al-Monitor Lebanon Pulse](#). Posted on **February 2**.

On Friday, Feb. 1, the Lebanese army lost two soldiers, a sergeant and a captain, who were part of a strike force unit that belonged to Lebanese Army Intelligence. The two soldiers died during a clash between the army unit and armed Sunni fundamentalists in Arsal, which is near the Syrian border in the Bekaa Valley. That incident has many political and security dimensions and it confirms, as *Al-Monitor* has been reporting, that [Jabhat al-Nusra](#) is now in Lebanon and that the group's activities are about to become public.

About This Article

Summary :

Friday's deadly clash in Arsal, Lebanon, signals a dangerous escalation in confrontations between the Lebanese Army and Sunni Jihadist groups connected to those fighting in Syria, writes Jean Aziz from Beirut.

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A Sunni Awakening in Lebanon

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Arsal.

Several press reports said that the town's mosques issued calls for all gunmen to pursue the army unit and block its escape. In a short period of time, the Lebanese army unit found itself surrounded by hundreds of [fundamentalists and jihadists](#). The long gunfight resulted in the killing of the army sergeant and captain and the wounding of eight soldiers. Although the jihadists knew that they were fighting Lebanese army soldiers, they captured the bodies of the two dead soldiers, as well as the wounded and the remaining soldiers and took them to Arsal's main square in what looked like a jihadist ceremony that involved celebratory gunfire and other practices, according to Lebanese press reports.

Similar jihadist celebrations over the bodies of dead Lebanese army soldiers happened on at least two previous occasions. The first time was on the night of Dec. 31, 1999, in the mountainous region of Dinniyah in northern Lebanon, near the city of Tripoli. Back then, a jihadist group attacked a Lebanese army post in an attempt to start a Sunni fundamentalist insurgency in the region. The second time was on May 21, 2007, when a group of jihadists belonging to the Sunni organization Fatah al-Islam attacked a Lebanese army checkpoint at the entrance of the Nahr al-Bared [Palestinian refugee camp](#) near Tripoli. Seven army soldiers were literally slaughtered in that incident.

Because of several factors, what happened on Friday in Arsal marked a dangerous turn in the confrontations between the Lebanese army and Sunni jihadist forces. First, the jihadist forces today have strategic depth that provides them with support, supplies and sanctuary. That strategic depth is represented by the Sunni jihadist groups that are fighting in the Syrian civil war against Bashar al-Assad. Second, the area where the incident took place is geographically linked to several dangerous areas. It is connected to the Damascus and Homs countryside, which is where an *Al-Monitor* research report predicted will be the main area of a Lebanese-Syrian war. It is also connected to the tense demarcation line between pro-Hezbollah Shiites in Baalbeck and Hermel and certain Palestinian armed locations. Those factors were not present during the incidents in Dinniyah and Tripoli, because they are not linked to the Syrian depth nor to Lebanese Shiite areas.

Another important factor is that the incident coincided with a series of Lebanese crises that were caused by a Sunni fundamentalist "awakening" in Lebanon, as a result of the Syrian events and [Middle Eastern developments](#) over the past two years.

Last week, just before the Arsal incident, the personnel of a Lebanese TV station were threatened with death if they didn't cancel the planned showing of a

comedy skit making fun of [Salafist Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir](#), who is from Sidon, southern Lebanon. The TV station and those responsible for the skit backed down and complied. Near Assir's headquarters in Sidon, jihadist Palestinian groups are solidifying their presence in Ain al-Hilweh camp, which is adjacent to Sidon and is Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp. Meanwhile, the northern city of Tripoli is still reeling from the recent [attempted assassination of Youth and Sports Minister Faisal Karami](#) by Sunni jihadist elements.

According to Lebanese cabinet ministers, those who tried to assassinate Karami have threatened Lebanese security forces about trying to arrest any of their members. Thus, the Lebanese authorities have been unable to arrest suspects involved in an incident that happened in broad daylight and in front of the cameras. In addition, the top mufti of the Sunnis in Lebanon recently [issued in Beirut a fatwa](#), or religious edict, deeming any Muslim who supports the passage of a civil marriage law to be an apostate and outside of Islam.

So it seems that the four dimensions — the South, the Bekaa, the North and Beirut — forming a perfect storm for Sunni jihadism in Lebanon are now set. What will be the result of that development? We are passing through a very dangerous phase, which should be closely monitored by Lebanon, the region and the West.

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