

Taking up arms: Lebanese Christians get ready for ISIS

by [Wadih El Hayek](#) and [Youssef Zbib](#)

This article appears in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue.



A pro-Christian protest in Beirut, Lebanon, on July 24, 2014. [Some rights reserved](#) by [mariogoraieb](#)

On the terrace of his small apartment in Sin El Fil, east of Beirut, Ghassan sat cradling a Kalashnikov rifle outfitted with a military-grade laser sight and listening to chatter on a military-grade Motorola radio. He is part of a group of Christians allied with Hezbollah who are preparing to fight Sunni extremist groups originating in Syria.

“The rifle is provided by Hezbollah, but we bought the radios ourselves,” he explained. “There are more than 30 groups like mine scattered across Lebanon in Christian areas.”

In Syria’s ongoing civil war, the Shi’a Muslim group Hezbollah has joined Shi’a Muslim Iran in backing President Bashar al-Assad. In August, the Syrian conflict spilled into Lebanon as Sunni jihadists believed to be affiliated with the Nusra Front and the Islamic State (or ISIS) waged an attack on Hezbollah and the Lebanese army. They captured 37 soldiers and executed three of them. Christians in the country were further alarmed when graffiti glorifying ISIS appeared on church walls.

“Most of us are ex-military who used to serve in units loyal to General [Michel] Aoun,” said Ghassan, referring to a Christian who is a former army commander and now a leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, a largely Christian political party.

“We left the army when he was forced into exile. When he came back, we became part of his close-protection security detail, and shortly after that we started receiving light and medium weapons and ammunition directly from Hezbollah through another retired general.” Ghassan declined to reveal the name of the retired general or the name of the Hezbollah contact who is supplying his group with arms.

Hezbollah, a political party with a military wing, emerged during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as a part of the fight against Israel. During the war, Hezbollah also fought several battles against the Lebanese Forces, the major Christian militia, and with the Lebanese army, which was seen as defending Christian interests. Aoun was the head of the army during these battles.

In 2006 Hezbollah forged an alliance with Aoun, calling it an effort to forge unity between Christians and Muslims. Critics dismissed the alliance as a maneuver to break Hezbollah’s political isolation among non-Shi’a forces and to improve Aoun’s chances of being elected president of the republic.

Lebanon has long had a thriving black market in armaments. A veteran dealer whom we’ll call Jimmy said he now restricts his sales to Shi’ites and Christians. “I would never sell my guns to Sunnis now,” he said. “They are all ISIS sympathizers. I sell exclusively to fellow Shi’ites and to Christians, and actually the demand from Christians has increased immensely in the last few months because Christians and Shi’ites are now the primary targets for ISIS. We are in this fight together.”

Jimmy said Christians and Shi’ites do not have any deeply rooted religious or historical conflicts, whereas Shi’a and Sunni Muslims have a history of bloody conflict dating back more than 1,400 years. “We have no issues with the Christians.”

Ghassan too believes that the Shi’ites and Christians of Lebanon need to join forces. “We are the last line of defense here in Beirut. If ISIS and the takfiris [religious zealots] manage to break through the front lines on the border, our area here will be the last line of defense before the capital [Beirut] falls.”

According to Jimmy, ISIS forces might be able to cross the border, but entering Beirut will be much more difficult.

The two agree that no one can rely on the Lebanese state for protection, and that everyone who wants to survive needs to be armed.

“They [ISIS forces] are kidnapping army soldiers and beheading them. What do you think they will do to us?” said Jimmy.

Ghassan said, “I will not let them rape my wife and daughter or sell them in a slave market. I will not flee the country I was born in to become a humiliated refugee in a foreign land.”

According to Ghassan, ISIS and other Sunni fundamentalist groups have infiltrated refugee camps and other areas of the country and have planted sleeper cells. “Just last month we helped the Lebanese army capture two ISIS sleeper cells in Sin El Fil,” he said. “It was never made public in order not to cause any rash repercussions in the streets against innocent Syrians, but ISIS is a serious and present threat all over Lebanon, and we are ready and prepared.”

Over the last six months, Syrian refugees have been chased out of their homes in more than one area, and in some cases Syrians were beaten up and their camps burned to the ground.

According to Jimmy, ISIS has massed fighters from all over the world to kill Shi'ites and Christians in the Levant. “They [ISIS] have gathered Afghans, Chechens, Saudis and Pakistanis to invade our land and cut our throats. The least we can do is stock up on weapons and prepare a warm welcome for them.”

The Lebanese civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 was in part an effort to reduce the power of Christians. The 1989 Taif Agreement, which was brokered under Syrian, Arab, and international patronage, gave more executive power to the prime minister, who is a Sunni Muslim in accordance with Lebanon's sectarian quota. More seats in the parliament were also reserved for Muslims.

Despite the oft-repeated line about factions in Lebanon being “neither vanquished nor victorious,” many Christians believe they were the big loser in the civil war. Major Christian political powers—chief among them Aoun and the Lebanese Forces—were sidelined because they resisted the presence of Syrian forces.

Given these complicated political sensitivities, releasing information about the demographics of the Lebanese population is taboo. The last official census conducted in Lebanon was in 1932, when the country was still under a French mandate. A study released by the Lebanese Information Center, a think tank based in Washington, D.C., and affiliated with the Christian party Lebanese Forces, claims that Christians made up 34 per cent of the Lebanese population in 2011. The major

Christian bodies are the Maronite Church, affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church.