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Policy Brief

The impact of terrorist kidnappings: lessons from Arsal, Lebanon

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Purpose

Kidnapping is a well-established terrorist tactic, whether for ransom, to secure the release of prisoners, or pressure for changes in political strategy. However, its effects on its victims and their families are often overlooked. How does the kidnapping of their loved ones affect victims' families and their attitudes towards the state, justice, and revenge? This paper examines these issues by drawing on interviews with 30 families who had loved ones kidnapped in 2014 in Arsal, Lebanon, and held hostage by the Islamist groups Jabhat Al-Nusra and Islamic State (IS). The Arsal hostage crisis allows for a granular look at the traumatic impact of terrorist kidnappings on its victims: it involved hostages who were released, executed, and disappeared (with their remains found three years later). Given the likelihood of further kidnappings in the region, lessons must be learned. This briefing note contains insights into how the families' perspectives can inform policy and practice when responding to such crises. Such analysis also lays bare existential Lebanese problems, such as the failure of the State to control its borders, the spillover of the Syrian conflict, radical Salafist extremism, Hizbullah's unilateral engagement in Syria, the capability and capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and the weakness of the state and its reliance on regional actors.

Key findings

- **Victims' families feel just as aggrieved by the Lebanese government as they do by the terrorists who kidnapped their loved ones.** The families blame the Lebanese state for its complacency in the build-up to the kidnappings, its botched military response, and prolonged negotiations. They view the state's inaction as causing unnecessary and avoidable suffering.

- **Perceiving the government as lethargic and inactive, families filled the vacuum and acted as go-betweens with the hostage takers.** Families took it upon themselves to be in direct contact with the Islamists and relay their demands to the Lebanese authorities, essentially conducting do-it-yourself conflict mediation.

- **The words and actions of politicians during a crisis had longstanding adverse effects on victims.** Families described how abandoned, humiliated, and wounded they felt after a senior minister accused the hostages of being defectors, suggested they should not receive a pension, and ordered the repression of the families' protests at the government's handling of the hostage crisis.

- **Symbolic concessions were used to positive effect when interacting with the Islamist militant group Jabhat Al-Nusra.** The Druze political leader, Walid Jumblatt, made a public statement declaring that Nusra were not terrorists but revolutionaries. The statement had no apparent material benefit for Nusra. Yet, it profoundly impacted how they treated their Druze captives: the hostages were granted greater contact with their families and their conditions improved.

- **Despite being a regional and national crisis, many of the conflict's dynamics were local and personal.** Nusra's decision to execute one hostage was partly driven by personal revenge: the Shia captive, Ali Bazzal, had eloped with a Sunni woman from Arsal. Her brothers were members of Nusra who disapproved of the marriage; when Bazzal was captured, they saw it as an opportunity to settle the score. This reasoning was absent from Nusra's public justifications for his execution. Furthermore, the sister of a Nusra commander was imprisoned in Syria; her potential release was crucial leverage, allowing the hostage negotiation deal to be concluded.[1]

- **In the absence of the state's enforcement of justice, some victims engaged in vigilante justice.** Several families reported how they took their revenge during the crisis by carrying out reciprocal kidnappings; one family also murdered someone they held to be responsible for the execution of their son. Regardless of their level of involvement in vigilante justice, interviewees broadly supported revenge in the absence of state justice.

- **Victims want greater material support as well as recognition of the suffering and trauma they endured.** One major grievance against the authorities was how abandoned they felt in the aftermath of the hostage crisis; financially, the compensation was considered pitiful, and the psychosocial support was seen as a box-ticking exercise.

Policy implications

- **Create comprehensive and holistic support programmes for the victims of kidnappings.** The short-, medium-, and long-term effects of the kidnapping crisis show the need for dedicated and tailored support for the victims of terrorism. There is a need for psychological, emotional, spiritual, financial, and material support. Each family's situation is unique and requires tailored interventions; support should be extended to the hostages' family members, who are also victimised. Similarly, support should also be offered to children directly affected by hostage events to mediate and safeguard against generational trauma and psychological damage.

- **Analysis of events should also include a localised, contextual understanding.** The hostage crisis was simultaneously regional, national, and local. Without knowledge of the local context, various developments would otherwise appear as a surprise – though with local knowledge, they are logical and even probable. In the Arsal hostage crisis, local dynamics influenced the execution of hostages, the granting of visits to families of the captives, and the negotiations. A granular understanding of the personalities, families, and locations involved affords analytical clarity and supplements the national and regional perspectives.

- **When interacting with violent non-state actors, it may be important to make tactical symbolic concessions.** To do so, it is necessary to understand antagonists' motivations, rationale, and grievances, and the symbolic concession may only take the form of public statements. While this may cost political capital for those granting the concessions, it can provoke conciliatory gestures. In Arsal, this proved successful when dealing with Islamist militants from Jabhat Al-Nusra. Symbolic concessions were not attempted with IS.

- **It is essential to establish a centralised, coordinated state response to hostage crises.** This must involve close coordination and briefing with hostage families, precise and targeted negotiations with the hostage takers, and minimising family interaction with the hostage takers to safeguard them from coercion, manipulation, and abuse. A more proactive and state-centric approach will allow for greater clarity in media messaging and news briefings and avoid political statements that have not been collectively agreed upon or signed off on.

- **Political leaders should be mindful of their words and actions when interacting with the media or directly with victims.** During the hostage crisis, families were especially aggrieved with how some politicians spoke about their loved ones and the prospects for their release.

1 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022

The families' welfare was not solely dictated by receiving proof of life or positive news regarding the hostages: even for those hostages who were returned alive, the comments of one government minister have had a longstanding negative effect, leaving a feeling of bitterness and resentment. In short, authorities must let victims know they are on their side, which should influence all aspects of any communications strategy.

- **There is a need for an official Lebanese public enquiry into the Arsal hostage crisis** to establish factual accounts of the events, hear testimonies from hostages and their families, and acknowledge State failings. It can also be used to establish best practices for the Lebanese authorities to follow in hostage scenarios. As the Arsal kidnappings were but one crisis in a cascade of political, social, and economic crises that Lebanon has experienced in the past two decades, it can be an opportunity to address widespread mistrust and ongoing communal grievances against the Lebanese state.

Background and context

The Battle of Arsal was a five-day conflict between various Islamist militant groups (such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and IS) and the LAF and Internal Security Forces (ISF), the country's national police/military force. Following the battle, it emerged that the militants had kidnapped over 38 personnel from the LAF and ISF. A protracted and often stalled negotiation process ensued. Nusra initially released eight of its 26 captives, ostensibly as a goodwill gesture. It then executed two hostages (Mohammed Hamieh and Ali Bazzal), with footage broadcast on social media. After almost 500 days, negotiations concluded with the release of its remaining 16 hostages in a deal brokered by Qatar. In return, Nusra received money and the release of Islamist prisoners and their children from Roumieh. IS, meanwhile, executed two of its hostages (Ali Al-Sayyed and Abbas Medlej), with images also shared on social media). The fate of its remaining ten captives was unknown until their remains were discovered three years later in August 2017.[2] Interviewees for this research shared their recollections and perspectives of the Arsal hostage crisis, emphasising their feelings of state and institutional failure, state abandonment (both during the crisis and after), and how the kidnappings affected their lives.

This briefing note is based on interviews conducted with 30 families across Lebanon who were affected by the August 2014 kidnappings in Arsal. All had family members (i.e., sons, husbands, brothers) kidnapped and held hostage by one of two groups: Jabhat al-Nusra or IS. Their loved ones were then either executed (in 2014), released in a negotiated exchange (in December 2015), or died at an unknown date with their remains found in a ravine by the Syria-Lebanon border (in August 2017). During this period, many of the families were in direct contact with the Lebanese authorities and jihadist militants. Most were even able to visit the hostages in captivity. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2022 with adult family members. Due to personal and political sensitivities, all respondents have been anonymised and identifying information kept to a minimum.

Victims' families feel just as aggrieved by the Lebanese government as they do by the terrorists who kidnapped their loved ones.

The families shared two major grievances about the Lebanese state's actions. The first concerns the government's complacency in the build-up to and during the kidnappings, with interviewees unanimously believing the Lebanese government and military should have anticipated an Islamist uprising in Arsal. Instead, they believe the authorities left their loved ones unprepared and unsupported in a dangerous environment. As one father of a Nusra hostage asked: "Was the government asleep? There were battles for three to four months prior to the kidnapping, and the LAF soldiers were dying, yet the government wasn't taking any action".[3] Families were equally critical of the decision to curb the military response to the Battle of Arsal, seeing the decision as an example of politics interfering in military affairs.

Another major grievance the families have relates to the government's lethargy and inaction during the hostage negotiations. Its inaction was seen as directly causing and prolonging needless suffering, both among the hostages and their families.[4] Given that the (mis)treatment of the Nusra hostages varied

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

according to the seriousness of the negotiations, the inaction was considered particularly harmful.[5] In turn, the families perceived the government as both incompetent and careless about its own soldiers or police officers, thus breaking whatever confidence they had in the state institutions.[6]

> *I don't understand why the negotiations that happened later on couldn't have happened after one week of [the] kidnapping? The politicians were incompetent, unskilful, and inept to negotiate. They didn't take matters seriously. The result was people dying and losing their lives like [Mohammad] Hamieh and [Ali] Bazzal. If there were serious negotiations and if the Lebanese government cares about its soldiers and police, we wouldn't have reached this. Hamieh was 19 years old when he died. Bazzal had a young baby. Even those that survived paid the price for this as they were subjected to lots of trauma and suffering.*
>
> - **Family member of a Nusra hostage[7]**

Perceiving the government as lethargic and inactive, families filled the vacuum and acted as go-betweens with the hostage takers.

The government's inaction led to families taking it upon themselves to contact and negotiate with the militants, often at great personal risk. Many were in direct contact via phone calls, WhatsApp, and Telegram, allowing the militants to relay their demands. These lines of contact remained active when the negotiations between the government and militants stalled. Families described dangerous journeys into the Lebanon-Syria borderlands controlled by Nusra and secret rendezvouses with IS militants or contacts.[8]

Many families were even able to visit their loved ones while they were in captivity, in visits coordinated with the militants.[9] Militants used these visits as propaganda and opportunities to resupply with medicine, clothes, and food. They also generated media attention and increased pressure on the government to negotiate. Given that the families would pass through LAF checkpoints to reach territory controlled by Nusra and IS, there was a widespread belief that the authorities knew where the hostages were being held but chose not to mount a rescue operation.[10]

The Lebanese authorities' approach seemed uncoordinated and ineffective. For many families, it took over two weeks before the authorities confirmed that their loved ones were kidnapped. Rather than acting as the sole point of contact for the militants, they were often unaware of the latest developments. At times, the families knew better about the situation on the ground than the Lebanese government.

> *I know someone from the families who paid money [to the militants] to release his son. If he had any confidence in the Lebanese authorities he wouldn't have negotiated with the militants. The government failed in dealing with the hostage crisis.*
>
> - **Father of an IS hostage[11]**

The words and actions of politicians during a crisis had longstanding adverse effects on victims.

One major grievance relates to the words and actions of the Lebanese authorities. Numerous interviewees singled out then Interior Minister, Nohad Al-Machnouq, as particularly egregious. While the hostages were in captivity, he implied that they should have fought to the death in the Battle of Arsal and were thus traitors. This was especially wounding for the hostages' families, as their superiors had told those kidnapped at the ISF station

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 For example, see: "« Au beau milieu de nulle part, j'ai pu voir, pendant 12 minutes seulement, mon frère otage de Daech »", *L'Orient-Le Jour,* 22 November 2014.

10 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022.

11 Ibid.

in Arsal not to shoot at the militants who had them surrounded.[12] On another occasion, he said that the government could only memorialise the hostages by placing their photos on the wall – as if they were already dead.[13]

Some of the hostages were distrusted as potential defectors; the authorities were seemingly oblivious that hostages were forced to appear in "defection" videos. The authorities arrested relatives of a captive who appeared in one such video; they were beaten and interrogated.[14] Even after receiving an apology, the feeling of betrayal and abandonment persisted.[15] Upon the release of the Nusra hostages, Machnouq stated that some of them may be spies for the Islamists and suggested that they should not receive a pension, causing further moral injury to the families.[16]

The parents of IS hostages inadvertently saw the rehearsals for the funerals of their loved ones who IS had killed. At that point, they were unaware that their sons had died. The heartbreak was enormous. They saw photos of their loved ones on the walls, reminding them of Machnouq's earlier comments. Eight years on, those comments continue to sting the families.[17]

> *This didn't just offend me but also insulted us as families and every soldier who died. As an Interior Minister I think any kind word would morally encourage us, the families, especially mothers who were crying the whole time. This felt as if we got stabbed in the back by the Lebanese government.*
>
> **- Father of an IS hostage[18]**

Symbolic concessions were used to positive effect when interacting with the Islamist militant group Jabhat Al-Nusra.

Nusra would go to great lengths to communicate and justify its motivations, actions, and goals. In its communications with the families – whether over the phone or in person – they emphasised the legitimacy of their cause and the suffering and trauma of the Syrian refugees who had been victims of the Syrian regime's suppression of internal dissent.[19] When the families visited the Nusra hostages, they showed them videos of Syrian refugees who suffered at the hands of Hizbullah and justified their actions as defending Sunnis.[20]

Nusra was also highly attentive to public discourse about the group. The Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, was able to take advantage of this. In late 2014, he stated that Nusra were revolutionaries and not terrorists.[21] His comments may have cost him some domestic political capital. The words gave no material or tangible benefits to Nusra. However, this symbolic concession – designed to acknowledge Nusra's rationale and struggle – led to a tangible change in how Nusra's Druze hostages were treated.[22] They were granted more contact with their families, and their overall conditions improved.[23] Nusra made public statements, positively acknowledging Jumblatt's words.[24]

The IS militants similarly wanted status and respect. For instance, after kidnapping one hostage, they called his mother's phone and introduced themselves by saying: "This is Islamic State. Respect

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 "ولي جنبلاط في المشهد : لن أقول عن جبهة النصرة أنها إرهابية", *BBC News,* 19 March 2015, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6jKcCE_bPI&t=1312s

22 For more on symbolic concessions, see: Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod & Richard Davis, "Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution", Science, Vol 317, Issue 5841, 2007, pp. 1039-1040; Scott Atran & Robert Axelrod, "Reframing Sacred Values", *Negotiation Journal,* Vol 24, Issue 3, 2008, pp. 221-246.

23 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022.

24 "النصرة تشيد بتصريحات جنبلاط لمتفهمة لجهادها وتنتقد "كتائب عبد الله عزام"", *Rai Al-Youm,* 17 November 2014.

me". It is unclear whether symbolic concessions could have helped influence the IS captors (such as affording greater leniency to the hostages), given the group's hyper-partisan ideological positions. No political or communal leaders attempted symbolic concessions with IS.

> *Jumblatt did the right things ... [he] said that Jabhat al-Nusra are revolutionaries ... This word, to them, it was very helpful to them ... this helped them a lot, their treatment of the guys changed a lot, going from beating and torture, it became the opposite, they told them 'you have a big leader who understands [the situation] ... request what you'd like', you know? It changed a lot.*
>
> - **Sister of a Nusra hostage**[25]

Despite being a regional and national crisis, it is crucial to understand the conflict's local dynamics.

The Arsal hostage crisis was multi-scalar, with regional, national, and local dimensions. Regionally, the kidnappings were significantly linked to the Syrian Civil War and Hizbullah's military intervention there and enabled by Lebanon's porous borders. The resolution of the crisis, therefore, relied on the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and the shifting balance of power amongst Islamist groups, Hizbullah, Syrian forces, and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar. Nationally, the conflict mediation process again revealed Lebanon's national weakness, especially regarding the LAF (one of the most important national institutions) and the ISF. In contrast, the crisis revealed the oversized influence of internal actors (Hizbullah) and external states (Qatar).

However, a local understanding is needed to explain some events. For instance, Nusra's decision to execute one ISF hostage was partly driven by personal revenge: the Shia captive, Ali Bazzal, had eloped with a Sunni woman from Arsal. Her brothers were members of Nusra who disapproved of the marriage; when Bazzal was captured, they saw it as an opportunity to settle the score.[26] This reasoning was absent from Nusra's public justifications for his execution.

Similarly, Nusra's decision to execute Mohammed Hamieh may have been partly provoked by the comments of Hamieh's father, in which he threatened Nusra.[27] Additionally, as Nusra's only Shia LAF hostage,[28] he was uniquely positioned as a sectarian scapegoat for their grievances against the LAF, and being from one of the largest clans in the Beqaa Valley, his execution may have suited Nusra's goals of inciting a broader sectarian conflict.[29]

> *[My husband] told me that Nusra showed them videos about how Hamieh's dad was threatening Nusra on television. It was a reaction to what the father said publicly on television ... I even told many victim families not to publicly criticise Nusra because this would impact the hostages negatively. Instead, let us only criticise the government. One time [my husband's] uncle criticised Nusra on television and then they started beating [my husband] in retaliation.*
>
> - **Wife of a surviving Nusra hostage**[30]

In the absence of the state's enforcement of justice, and due to tribal customs, some victims engaged in vigilante justice.

Several families recalled how they carried out reciprocal kidnappings during the hostage crisis.[31] Their targets were either the relatives of Nusra members, people from Arsal, or Syrians (presumably refugees living in Lebanon) as a way of getting revenge and gaining leverage over the militants.[32] The tactic often backfired, as in response, Nusra punished the hostages from those families. All those taken were eventually released:

25 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Nusra's other LAF hostages were Christian or Druze, while the other Shia hostages were from the ISF.

29 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

After we heard that [my son] was kidnapped, his brothers kidnapped two people from Arsal … My sons even wanted to kill them … When the militants knew of the kidnapping, they tortured [my son] and beat him. They broke the bone of his nose. Due to the brutality [my son] received, my [other] sons released the two men from Arsal.

- Mother of an IS hostage[33]

In addition to blaming the Lebanese state, almost all families hold Mustafa Hujeiri (an Islamist sheikh, also known as Abu Taqiye) and Ali Hujeiri (then Mayor of Arsal, also known as Abu Ajina) responsible for the kidnappings. Both were seen as working with Nusra. One family targeted the Hujeiris for revenge. In May 2016, Maarouf Hamieh – the father of the executed hostage Mohammad Hamieh – killed 18-year-old Hussein Hujeiri, the nephew of Abu Taqiye. He dumped the body on the grave of his son, Mohammed Hamieh, and took responsibility for the killing.[34]

The lack of effective action by the Lebanese authorities was seen as creating a vacuum that needed to be filled by vigilante justice. After the murder, Maarouf Hamieh said he "will not rely on the State" to enforce justice; he will take revenge himself.[35] Another interviewee echoed those words: "If the government was serious about achieving justice, why didn't it do anything for two years? Taking revenge ourselves is the only solution because the government is incompetent to do that".[36] Tribal customs of taking revenge to restore family honour and dignity were often cited as motivations.[37]

Regardless of their level of involvement in vigilante justice, interviewees broadly supported revenge: 11 of the 30 families stated their desire for it.[38] This desire had no gendered aspect; the women were just as vocal proponents as the men.[39] Only interviewees from four families explicitly disapproved of revenge killings.[40] Maarouf Hamieh was often cited as an example to follow, with some even saying he did not go far enough.[41]

My sons are not waiting for the government to achieve justice. They are searching around every day to try to serve justice with their own hands … I demand the death penalty for Abu Taqiye … The same way Maarouf Hamieh took justice with his own hand, we will do the same. We won't let our rights go away.

- Mother of an IS hostage[42]

Victims want greater material support as well as recognition of the suffering and trauma they endured.

Among all interviewees, there was disappointment in how the state treated the hostages and their families, both during and after the crisis. Indeed, the post-release period is a sore point for many, with two main grievances. Firstly, they consider that the government, LAF, and ISF did not properly recognise the suffering, trauma, and sacrifices that the Nusra hostages and their families had endured after almost 500 days in captivity. Most went back to work, but the released hostages were not promoted within the LAF or ISF or guaranteed deployments close to home. While they were no longer required to serve in armed roles, many interviewees felt they should have been retired.[43] There was a widespread belief that the authorities wanted to forget about the Arsal kidnappings. For instance, one father of a killed LAF soldier wanted to put up a public poster commemorating his son but received no response from the municipality.[44]

33 Ibid.

34 "مقتل الشاب علي أبو طاقية ابن شقيق قاتل جميع حمية الهيدوس وابن عرسال تُوفّي بعد إصابته بالرأس", *An-Nahar,* 25 May 2016.

35 Ibid. Maarouf Hamieh remains on the run at time of publication.

36 Family interviews with the authors, Spring 2022.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

The second grievance concerns the lack of material support the released hostages received. Interviewees from ten families stated their disappointment at the level of financial compensation received. Multiple families scoffed at the five million lira (approximately $3,333 USD at the time) given to released ISF hostages, with some stating that they paid more than that in baklava for their friends and family who came to celebrate their release.[45] Psychological support was similarly lacking, even though the hostages had endured months of psychological torture, including mock executions, and the risk of death was ever-present.[46] The families felt that the support given was a simple box-ticking exercise; the appointed psychologist asked superficial questions and did not prescribe any medication.

The Lebanese government covered the first session, but families had to pay for any additional treatment.[47]

> *Justice in Lebanon is fake. I only saw how the government made a small celebration for the hostages, they cut cake and gave them five million lira each. What kind of justice is this? Ridiculous.*
>
> **- Father of a Nusra hostage**[48]

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

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About XCEPT

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