Lebanon

Quick Facts

Population: 6,229,794 (July 2017 est.)
Area: 10,400 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1%
Religions: Muslim 54% (27% Sunni, 27% Shia), Christian 40.5% (includes 21% Maronite Catholic, 8% Greek Orthodox, 5% Greek Catholic, 6.5% other Christian), Druze 5.6%, very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons
Government Type: parliamentary republic
GDP (official exchange rate): $52.7 billion (2017 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (June 2018)

Introduction

Islamism in Lebanon is sui generis in a multitude of important respects. The cohabitation of large Sunni Muslim and Shia Muslim populations in relatively close proximity, with neither constituting a national majority (and alongside a comparably sized multidenominational Christian community and smaller minority groups) has meant that few Islamists of either sectarian persuasion have aggressively pursued the establishment of a theocratic state in Lebanon, or even sought the wholesale downfall of the existing political order. Rather, Islamists have typically sought to advance transnational aims of, and secure patronage from, powerful co-religionists abroad, often at the expense of Lebanese stability.

Hezbollah, the dominant Shia Islamist group in Lebanon, has carved out a heavily armed state-within-a-state in Shia-inhabited areas of southern Lebanon, the eastern Beqaa Valley, and suburban Beirut, while commanding sufficient electoral strength to block encroachment by the central government. Though once revered across the predominantly Sunni Arab world for its armed "resistance" to Israel, its blind obedience to Iran and willingness to turn its guns on other Muslims in recent years have increasingly made it a pariah outside of its own constituency.

Sunni Islamist groups are more numerous and ideologically varied, far more politically marginalized, and surprisingly unwilling to work with one another in pursuit of common objectives. Radicalization in impoverished Sunni areas of northern Lebanon has been growing steadily for years, but has not been effectively channeled by Islamist leaders.

The start of the civil war in neighboring Syria in 2011 has progressively drawn both Shia and Sunni Lebanese Islamists into direct combat with each other across the border, and increasingly at home, while instigating an influx of 1.2 million mostly Sunni Syrian refugees into Lebanon.

Notwithstanding the troubling proliferation of terror attacks in Lebanon by local branches of the

Nusra Front and the Islamic State group—and the first ever Lebanese-on-Lebanese suicide bombing of civilian targets—a renewed regional and international commitment to support the Lebanese Army appears likely to prevent the country from collapsing further into civil war.

Islamist Activity

Established in 1920 by the French mandatory authorities after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon gained full independence in 1943. The new state combined the predominantly Maronite Christian and Druze Mount Lebanon region with the largely Sunni coastal cities of Beirut, Sidon, and Tripoli, as well as the predominantly Shia hinterland to the south and east. Under the terms of the 1943 National Pact between Muslim and Christian leaders and subsequent formal and informal adjustments, fixed shares of political power are distributed by sect, with a Maronite Christian as president, a Sunni as prime minister, a Shia as speaker of the National Assembly, and other specific offices falling to various smaller sects. Fixed shares of legislative power are divided among the various groups. While Lebanon's sectarian system (*al-nizam al-ta'ifiyya*) provided for a modicum of democracy and political stability in the decades following independence, it also impeded the development of a shared national identity, limited the power of the state, and facilitated intervention by outside parties sharing ethnic, religious, and cultural ties to particular sectarian groups.

The growth of Islamism in Lebanon is partly rooted in the same regional crisis conditions that fueled its growth throughout the Middle East—the humiliating Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, severe political oppression by autocratic governments, poor economic growth, and gross wealth disparities. Shia Islamism and Sunni Islamism both emerged as a challenge to the existing political order and to secular leftist and nationalist ideologies then prevalent in opposition circles. However, they have followed very different trajectories.

Shia Islamism

Shia Islamism began emerging as a strong socio-political force in Lebanon during the 1970s, under the influence of Lebanese clerics who were radicalized studying in the religious seminaries of Najaf, Iraq (alongside many Iranian students who would play leading roles in their country's 1979 revolution). The most prominent Shia leader at the time was Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian-born child of a prominent Lebanese family that had produced many religious scholars over the years. Upon settling in Lebanon during the 1960s, Sadr assumed leadership of the state-sanctioned Supreme Islamic Shiite Council and created a political movement called the Movement of the Dispossessed, which preached a form of moderate Islamism focused mainly on the pursuit of Shiite socio-economic advancement and modest reform of Lebanon's constitution.

With the onset of civil war in 1975 and Sadr's disappearance (and presumed murder) three years later while on a trip to Muammar Qadhafi's Libya, the Sadrist movement was corrupted (and noticeably secularized) by the need to arm itself and accept Syrian patronage, so much so that it has since been popularly known as Amal, the Arabic acronym for the name of its wartime militia.

A more revolutionary wave of Islamism centered around Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a distinguished Najaf-trained cleric who called on Shia to fight not for their own communal advancement but on behalf of all Muslims against Israel. Though Fadlallah himself did not embrace Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of velayat-e faqih (Guardianship of the Jurisconsult), which forms the basis for Iran's post-1979 Islamic Republic, many younger clerics who followed his guidance did, whether out of genuine conviction or in pursuit of Iranian patronage.

In the early 1980s, Iran saw Lebanon as a vehicle through which to increase its regional influence. Tehran consequently deployed its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or Pasdaran) to train and indoctrinate local Shia. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, whose army maintained a considerable troop

presence in eastern Lebanon, facilitated the infiltration, as he was eager to prevent Lebanon from falling under the orbit of Israel (which had invaded Lebanon in 1982 to eliminate the threat from Palestinian terrorists dominating southern Lebanon) and the West.

Radical Shia fundamentalists from the Beqaa Valley, the south of Lebanon and the Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh flocked to the emerging network, among them a breakaway faction of *Amal* led by Hussein Mussawi. Using aliases such as the Islamic Jihad Organization and the Organization of the Oppressed on Earth, from 1983 to 1985 they carried out a series of deadly suicide bomb attacks against Israeli forces and the Western Multinational Force in Lebanon (MFL) later deployed to assist President Amine Gemayel in restoring government authority in Beirut. Both had incurred the animosity of most Shia and both subsequently withdrew from the capital under the weight of the assault.

In 1985, these disparate underground groups united and issued a manifesto, calling itself Hezbollah (Party of God) and calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon.[1] In practice, however, they were concerned first and foremost with advancing more immediate Iranian interests. During the mid-1980s, militants affiliated with Hezbollah kidnapped dozens of Americans and Europeans, allowing Tehran to extract concessions from Western government bargaining for their release. In 1985, they hijacked TWA flight 847. Though the Iranian government denied responsibility, considerable circumstantial evidence pointed to involvement by high-ranking members of the regime in Tehran.[2] Lavish Iranian financing also enabled Hezbollah to build an extensive social welfare network to provide for civilians living in towns and urban neighborhoods under its control.

Under the 1989 Taif Accord that brought most of the Civil War fighting to an end, the Lebanese constitution was amended to equalize Muslim and Christian representation in parliament and transfer most executive authority to the Sunni prime minister. In return for accepting the Taif Accord, Hezbollah was allowed by Damascus to remain armed, unlike other wartime militias, ostensibly for the purpose of "liberating" the border strip in south Lebanon occupied by Israeli forces. Hezbollah also acted as a conduit for Iranian supplies, finance, and training to Palestinian Sunni Islamist groups fighting Israel, notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad.[3]

Hezbollah participated in the electoral process and sent representatives to parliament. In sharp contrast to Sunni Islamists, however, it made only modest efforts to push Islamist socio-political causes in Lebanon and dismissed the viability of an Islamic state,[4] preferring instead a secular appeal for national unity and resistance to oppression that appealed to non-Shia. The withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 2000 left Hezbollah enormously popular in Lebanon and the broader Arab world. Although Arab leaders bemoaned what Jordan's King Abdullah famously called a "Shia crescent" extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon,[5] this kind of sect baiting failed to strike a chord with most Sunnis.

Hezbollah's involvement in the February 2005 car bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a Saudi-backed Sunni billionaire widely expected to challenge allies of Syrian-backed President Emile Lahoud in that year's parliamentary elections, marked a major watershed for the group. So pristine was Hezbollah's reputation as a selfless "resistance" movement that even its fiercest critics had not imagined that four of its operatives helped carry out the killing, as alleged (convincingly) in the 2011 indictments released by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), a special court tasked by the Security Council with prosecuting those responsible for the bombing.[6]

Thereafter, Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon touched off a struggle for control of the state, with the March 14 coalition of Saad Hariri attempting to leverage strong Western support in effecting Hezbollah's disarmament (see below). Hezbollah's self-proclaimed "divine victory" in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war appealed broadly to Sunnis in Lebanon and across the Arab world. As recently as March 2008, polling showed Nasrallah to be overwhelmingly the most popular public figure throughout the Arab world.[7] This changed in May 2008, when Hezbollah responded to an attempt by Prime Minister Siniora to close its private telecommunications network by briefly seizing control of predominantly Sunni West

Beirut.

Though initially reluctant to get involved in Syria's ongoing civil war, strategic necessity forced Nasrallah's hand. A rebel victory in Syria would cut off Iran's ability to resupply the group with weapons (which are flown to Damascus and driven overland across the Syrian-Lebanese border), leaving it vulnerable to Israeli attack and eventually crippling its capacity to resist the Lebanese Army. When the fortunes of war began turning against the Assad regime in 2012, Hezbollah deployed its forces to help retake territory captured by the rebels and to man defenses in important sites such as the Sayyida Zeinab shrine near Damascus or Shia villages east of the Beqaa valley. Importantly, Hezbollah proved vital in the retaking of Qusair, a major point of entry for supplies heading to Syrian rebels.

Hezbollah's engagement is Syria has only deepened since. The group has sent thousands of fighters, who have frequently played a key role on the battlefield, often leading military operations. Hezbollah saw the need to support Syria both to ensure its logistical base, but also out of a recognition that the Islamist violence against the Assad regime would almost certainly strike the Lebanese Shia as well. Current deployments are estimated to be 7,000 at any time. Hezbollah's total forces are believed to be 30,000 to 50,000, with about of them half full-time fighters. The other half are believed to be new recruits, reservists and village guard members.[8]

During the conflict in Syria, Hezbollah's conflict with Israel has, on the whole, been dormant. In January 2015, Israel killed a group of Hezbollah leaders on the Golan Heights. Later that month, Hezbollah fired on IDF troops near the Israeli-Lebanese border, killing two soldiers. But, preoccupied in Syria, Hezbollah has had little energy to confront its primary adversaries. Nonetheless, Israeli strategists are concerned of the potential future effects of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, since the group has obtained enormous battlefield experience in Syria, more advanced weapons, and has become a mentor to a panoply of Shia militias throughout the greater Middle East.[9]

Sunni Islamism

Broadly speaking, Sunni Islamists in Lebanon fall into two categories. The first consists of various offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood. The second consists of Salafis.

Political Islamists

Although Sunni Islamic revivalist movements in Lebanon date back to the 1920s, they were largely focused on renewing religious faith through educational, cultural, and social activities, while operating squarely within the existing political system.

The first Islamic group to directly challenge the country's political order was al-Jama'a al-Islamiyah (Islamic Association), the Lebanese chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Established in Tripoli in 1964 by Fathi Yakan and Faysal Mawlawi, al-Jama'a called for the establishment of an Islamic state through peaceful means.

After the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, al-Jama'a took up arms alongside the leftist National Movement against the Maronite Christians. Following the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon in the summer of 1976, Yakan and most other al-Jama'a leaders reached an accommodation with the Assad regime, and later with the Iranians. In the early 1980s, al-Jama'a founded a new armed force in Sidon, known as Quwat Fajr (the Fajr Brigades), to fight against Israeli forces in Lebanon. Yakan's pro-Syrian sympathies went so far that he recommended Lebanon merge with Syria as a solution to its confessional problems.[10]

In contrast, breakaway factions of al-Jama'a in the predominantly Sunni northern port of Tripoli, a deeply conservative city home to numerous exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood fighters, defied the Syrian occupiers. Most of these merged in 1982 to form Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (the Islamic Unification Movement). Led by the popular preacher Said Sha'ban, Tawhid imposed sharia law there and enforced

strict Islamic behavior in the city, regardless of sect. Christian women were forced to wear the veil, while liquor stores, clubs, and churches were vandalized or bombed. In the fall of 1985, the Syrian army entered Tripoli and crushed Tawhid. Sha'ban and most Tawhid commanders reached an accommodation the Syrians; those who didn't were hunted down and killed or imprisoned in Damascus.

Thereafter, al-Jama'a and Tawhid both operated squarely within the Iranian-Syrian orbit. Though barred from directly fighting the Israelis after the war ended, they embraced Hezbollah's vision of a society of resistance.[11] Al-Jama'a supported Lebanon's post-Taif political system and participated in municipal and parliamentary elections, with modest success.

After the withdrawal of Syria forces in 2005, al-Jama'a split over political loyalties. Mawlawi and most of its leaders favored the March 14 coalition, while Yakan remained loyal to Syria. After the 2006 war, Yakan resigned and, together with Tawhid leaders Hashem Minqara and Bilal Sha'ban (the son of its late founder) and other pro-Syrian Sunni Islamists, formed Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami (the Islamic Action Front, IAF). In its founding statement, the IAF described its mission as "an affirmation of Islamic and national unity, protecting the Resistance and defending the unity of Lebanon... confronting sectarian and ethnic strife... and rejecting Western and American threats to Arab and Muslim countries."[12] In contrast, Al-Jama'a was rewarded for its allegiance by inclusion in the March 14 electoral coalition for the 2009 elections, which netted the group one seat in parliament. Now led by Ibrahim Masri, it has avoided entanglement in the Syrian Civil War and maintains only a limited armed presence in Lebanon.

IAF factions, on the other hand, have established a significant armed presence in Tripoli, with money and arms provided by Hezbollah. They are closely aligned with the militias of pro-Syrian Sunni clans in Tripoli (especially the Mouri family)[13] and of the small Alawite community in the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood,[14] altogether about 1,500-strong. The Sha'ban wing of Tawhid is said to be financed by Iran, while the Minqara wing is closer to Syria.[15]

During the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime's Islamist allies have been linked to a number of attacks against its enemies in north Lebanon. In August 2013, two major Salafi mosques in Tripoli that supported Syrian rebels were bombed, killing 48 worshippers. Lebanese investigators linked the bombings to Ahmad Gharib, a key Minqara aide close to Syrian intelligence.[16] At least two IAF-affiliated clerics have been assassinated to date: Tawhid preacher Abdul-Razzaq al-Asmar in October 2012, and Saadedine Ghiyyeh, a leading cleric in the IAF, in November 2013.[17]

Al-Ahbash

The Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects (Jam'iyyat al-Mashari' al-Khairiyya al-Islamiyya) is a comparatively moderate Sufi movement long supported by Syria as a counterweight to radical Islamist forces in Lebanon, and very much corrupted in the process. The movement devoutly follows the teachings of its founder Abdallah al-Harari, popularly known as Abdallah al-Habashi.[18] His school of thought emphasizes Islam's pluralistic nature and mixes elements of Sunni and Shia theological doctrines with Sufi spiritualism. It opposes the use of violence against the ruling authorities and accepts the legitimacy of many Shia and Sufi beliefs typically condemned by Islamists as heresies.[19] During the Syrian occupation, however, the movement adopted thuggish tactics to intimidate opponents.[20] Its influence has sharply diminished since the withdrawal of Syrian forces.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation)

Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-denominational Islamist movement founded in Jordan in the early 1950s, has had an active branch in Lebanon since 1959. Although sharing with hardline Salafis (see below) the goal of restoring an Islamic caliphate across the Muslim world, it believes this can be achieved through non-violent persuasion, and its activities in Lebanon (and elsewhere in the Arab world) have been largely peaceful and apolitical. Nevertheless, the group's rhetoric is deeply unsettling to many non-Sunni Lebanese

and Westerners alike,[21] and members of the group have gone on to become involved in al-Qaeda-linked jihadist organizations.[22] Judging from the number of attendees at the party's annual conferences and public demonstrations, Hizb ut-Tahrir in Lebanon appears to have several hundred active members.

Traditional Salafis

Salafism is an ultra-orthodox Sunni Islamist current that preaches literal interpretation of the Koran, a return to early Islamic traditions, and the rejection of "innovations" (bidaa) that have taken root in the centuries since—particularly those practiced by non-Sunni Muslims and Sufis, who are viewed as heretics. In sharp contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, Salafis have traditionally avoided involvement in politics, focusing instead on missionary work (da'wa) to convert Muslim societies to their way of thinking.

Salafism spread rapidly among poor Sunni communities during the 1990s, due in part to the influx of funding from Islamic charities in the Arab Gulf. One of Salem al-Shahal's sons, Dai al-Islam, was the primary recipient of this largesse, notably from the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation,[23] a Saudi charity later linked to al-Qaeda[24] and closed under American pressure, and Kuwait's Jama'iyat Ihya' Al-Turath Al-Islami (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, RIHS). Dai al-Islam al-Shahal's charity, Jama'iyat al-Hidaya wa al-Ihsan al-Islami (Islamic Guidance and Charity Association), funded Salafi mosques, schools, and social welfare institutions throughout the country.

Although Shahal does not appear to have explicitly advocated violence during this period, many of the jihadists who ran afoul of authorities during the Syrian occupation (see below) were educated and indoctrinated within his circle. These links led RIHS to cut off most funding to Shahal. In 2000, Lebanese authorities closed his charity and arrested many of his followers, forcing Shahal to flee the country for Saudi Arabia. After this, RIHS directed funding to more quietist Lebanese Salafis, notably Safwan al-Zu'bi, Hassan al-Shahal (a cousin of Dai al-Islam), and Saad al-Din al-Kibbi.

Following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, Dai-Islam al-Shahal returned to Lebanon, as did other notable Islamists. Selim al-Rafei, a Salafi preacher who has eclipsed Shahal in influence, returned to Lebanon for the first time since the fall of Tripoli to Syrian forces in 1985.

The Salafi movement became involved in politics following the 2005 Hariri assassination and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces. While al-Jama'a boycotted the May/June 2005 parliamentary elections, Salafi preachers in Tripoli roundly endorsed Saad Hariri's Future Movement and its allies, which proved critical to their defeat of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in mixed Sunni-Christian districts of north Lebanon. Now controlling a parliamentary majority, Hariri designated his father's former finance minister, Fouad Siniora, to head the new government.

In the wake of Hezbollah's May 2008 seizure of West Beirut and widespread disillusionment with Saad Hariri,[25] the Salafi movement has grown more radical. Abu Bakr al-Shahal (another son of Salem al-Shahal) said that jihad is permissible "under the banner of legitimate defense" and that "a reenactment of the May 7 events could certainly prompt a new jihad."[26]

By 2013, a number of Salafi preachers were calling for Lebanese citizens to go fight in Syria. Echoing the views of his peers, Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal told the BBC that people must "sacrifice money and life" to confront what he described as a Shia plan to take over the Middle East. "They will move on to besiege Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Gulf, to control the sacred places and the riches of that region, to rule the Islamic world, if they can, and become a world superpower."[27] The most notable exception to this trend is Imama, who has urged his followers to support the rebels by donating money and sheltering their families, but not by going to fight there.[28] A number of Salafi figures have gone further, however, and sent their sons to fight in Syria. Shahhal's son Zayed fought with the rebels, later bragging to the BBC about killing captured Hezbollah fighters.[29]

Salafi-jihadis

While traditional Salafis have eschewed violence (with the exception of that aimed at Syria), a more radical Salafi current identifying with al-Qaeda's global jihad has operated in under-developed and poor Sunni areas there,[30] drawing members from among Lebanese Sunnis, Palestinian refugees, and various Arab expatriates resident in the country. The return home of Arab mujahideen who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) was the critical catalyst for the development of this trend.

The first of these groups, Isbat al-Ansar (Band of Partisans), emerged in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh near the southern city of Sidon. Led by Muhammad Abd al-Karim al-Saadi (aka Abu Muhjin), Isbat al-Ansar initially gained notoriety for carrying out a number of attacks on Christian religious targets and liquor stores. In 1995, members of the group assassinated Al-Ahbash leader Nizar al-Halabi. Lebanese authorities publicly executed three members of the group for their participation in the plot. In June 1999, the group took revenge by assassinating three Lebanese judges and the chief prosecutor for southern Lebanon at the Justice Palace in Sidon. Following the 2003 U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, several members of the group took part in the jihad against coalition forces there.[31] The group is estimated to command the loyalty of between 100 and 300 fighters.[32] An offshoot of Isbat al-Ansar known as Jund al-Sham also operates in the camp. The Palestinian groups in Ain al-Hilweh have continued to clash both within the camps and without. In May 2015, a Hezbollah member was killed in the refugee camp.[33] In the end of 2016 there were clashes between Isbat al-Ansar and other Palestinian factions that left several dead. Hamas brokered a ceasefire.[34]

In 2006, Shaker al-Absi, a Jordanian-Palestinian best known for organizing the 2002 assassination of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley in Amman, infiltrated Lebanon and raised a force of Lebanese, Palestinian, and other Arab fighters who had returned from jihad in Iraq. In November of that year, they seized control of the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli and declared the establishment of Fatah al-Islam (Conquest of Islam). The Lebanese government subsequently linked the group to deadly bus bombings in Ain Alaq that killed three people in February 2007. In May 2007, Lebanese troops stationed outside of Nahr al-Bared were ambushed in retaliation for a police raid against suspects in a bank robbery. The Army laid siege to the camp. The fighting lasted until September and claimed the lives of over 160 Lebanese soldiers.

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a jihadist terrorist group with branches in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, has been active since 2009-2010, initially claiming responsibility for sporadic acts of violence against the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and firing Katyusha rocket attacks into Israel.[35] Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, its operations in Lebanon have focused on Hezbollah and Iranian targets. The group claimed responsibility for the November 2013 double suicide bombing outside the Iranian embassy that left 22 dead and a February 2014 attack on the Iranian Cultural Center in suburban Beirut that killed 11, both ostensibly in retaliation for Iran's support for the Assad regime. Its emir, Sirajeddine Zureiqat, has called for open war against Hezbollah inside Lebanon and urged Sunni soldiers to desert the military.[36]

Syria's two leading Salafi-jihadist groups, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, have both built networks of operatives in Lebanon to ferry supplies and men across the border. Two young militia leaders in Tripoli, Shadi al-Mawlawi and Osama Abu Mansour (the nephew and son, respectively, of local Salafi preachers) have pledged loyalty to ISIS. Both were indicted by a military judge for their involvement in an August 2014 bombing that wounded 11 people.[37] ISIS also claimed responsibility for an earlier January 2014 bombing that killed four people outside a Hezbollah office in Beirut. The bomber was believed to be the first Lebanese Sunni to carry out a suicide bombing against fellow Lebanese civilians.[38] That same month, Al-Nusra claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings in the predominantly Shiite border town of Hermel that left eight people dead.[39] In addition, ISIS and al-Nusra have been recruiting in Lebanon, particularly

in the Palestinian and Syrian refugee camps.[40]

As the Syrian Civil War has continued and Hezbollah's involvement has deepened, Syrian Salafists have continued to target Hezbollah in its home territory. On September 20, 2014, an al-Nusra suicide bomber struck a Hezbollah checkpoint in the Beqaa, killing three along with the bomber. In Tripoli, in Lebanon's Sunni heartland, a pair of suicide bombers struck a café in the predominantly Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen, killing nine (including the two bombers) and wounding 36, on January 10, 2015. Al-Nusra claimed responsibility, calling it retaliation for the August 2013 bombings against Sunni mosques in Tripoli (see above) that were attributed to the Syrian regime, which is predominantly Alawite. Later that month, full-blown fighting broke out between the Lebanese Army and the Islamic State on the Syrian-Lebanese border in the Beqaa Valley.

Lebanon was relatively quiet for the rest of 2015, until November 12, when a pair of suicide bombers struck the predominantly Shia neighborhood (and Hezbollah stronghold) of Burj al-Barahneh in Beirut. Over 200 were wounded and forty were killed in the attack. The Islamic State claimed credit, stating that it was undertaken in revenge for Hezbollah's actions in Syria. Although there have been several smaller scale attacks, including a series of suicide bombings in June 2016 targeting a Christian village near the Syrian border that killed five, Lebanon was spared continuing spillover violence from the Syrian Civil War.[41]

Islamism and Society

Shia and Sunni Islamist movements in Lebanon, as elsewhere, have been fueled by acute socio-economic, political, and sectarian grievances. But the success or failure of Islamist movements in channeling grievances into action in the Lebanese arena has depended on a range of factors, including availability of outside financing, the strength of secular rivals, and doctrinal flexibility.

The Shia

Though Lebanon's Shia community had grown to become the country's largest sect by the early 1970s, it was by far the most impoverished and the most politically disenfranchised when the country descended into civil war in 1976. Barred from the nation's two highest political offices and apportioned less than a fifth of parliamentary seats, most Shia came to view the confessional system as fundamentally unfair to Muslims in general, and Shia in particular.

The 1989 Taif Accord slightly amended this imbalance by modestly expanding the speaker's powers and increasing Shia parliamentary representation to 21 percent of the seats. But Sunnis gained the most from the Saudi-brokered accord through a strengthened premiership, and Shia arguably gained the least from the Beirut-centered laissez-faire post-war economic order, which neglected the agricultural sector in which most Shia still worked,[42] invited an influx of unregulated Syrian labor, and spawned systemic corruption. So brazen was the state's failure that former Hezbollah Secretary-General Subhi Toufaili broke with his compatriots and launched an ill-fated "revolution of the hungry" in the late 1990s.

State failure made Hezbollah's Shia constituency easier to co-opt. With Iran providing around $200 million to the group annually,[43] Hezbollah built an expansive social welfare network to provide the country's Shia with education, healthcare, low-interest loans, and myriad other benefits. In a country where it is often impossible to secure government services without paying a bribe, Hezbollah came to be seen by most Shia (and many non-Shia) as having "clean hands." The fact that most Shia continued to support Hezbollah's "resistance" to Israel even after the latter withdrew from Lebanon, and despite having no major territorial disputes with the Jewish state, is a measure of how secure Hezbollah's stature as communal guardian had become.

Hezbollah's political hegemony within the Shia community was at its peak when Syrian troops departed Lebanon in 2005, and it remained unshaken throughout the bruising battle with the March 14

forces for control of government. With the dramatic upsurge in Sunni Islamist violence against Shia in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan during the mid-2000s, even many secular Shia came to think it unwise to surrender their community's one point of leverage when the future was so uncertain. The Hezbollah's involvement in the sectarian violence in Syria and Iraq started to influence the dynamics between the Lebanese Shia community and Hezbollah. Today, the Shia feel more isolated from Sunni Arab states, but more importantly, Hezbollah was forced to sacrifice the social services that had formerly benefited the Shia community for increased military operations in the region, due to budgetary restraints.[44] Hezbollah and Amal won Lebanon's parliamentary elections in May 2019, in part for want of a significant alternative.[45]

The Sunnis

Tragically, Hezbollah's path to Shia empowerment was part and parcel of Syria's brutal subjugation of Lebanon, which in many respects was felt most acutely by Sunnis.

The pre-war years were not a time of prosperity for all Sunnis, the vast majority of whom inhabited one of the country's three largest cities: Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. The latter two declined in prosperity relative to Beirut after the establishment of an independent Lebanon severed their trade routes to the Syrian interior.

Moreover, the Sunni community was dominated politically and economically by a handful of powerful families.[46] The latter also unduly influenced the Sunni religious establishment, known as Dar al-Fatwa, and its vast network of mosques, schools, and other institutions by manipulating its internal elections.

Efforts by Al-Jama'a and various secular Sunni opposition groups to channel growing public resentment of the above into effective political mobilization during the 1960s and 1970s were greatly impeded by demography. Though comprising 25-30 percent of the population, Sunnis are concentrated in three noncontiguous urban centers, with substantial cultural and socio-economic differences among them.[47]

No Sunni political party has ever developed strong public support in all three of these areas. Even when the power of traditional elites was broken during the 1976-1990 civil war, each city fell under the sway of Sunni militias with little or no national reach (e.g. the Murabitoun in Beirut, the Popular Nasserite Organization in Sidon).[48] The Syrian occupation created a new sectarian underclass in Lebanon, this time among Sunni Palestinian and Lebanese constituencies.

Most impoverished are the 350-400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, primarily Sunnis, who live in squalid, overcrowded camps and are barred by law from owning property and working in many professions.[49] For decades, Lebanese authorities have, with few exceptions, declined to enter the camps, for fear of enflaming sectarian tensions. It is no surprise that the Salafi-jihadist current took root there first.

Outside of the camps, the most underprivileged areas are Tripoli and the nearby Akkar region. According to one widely cited study, about 36 percent of the population in the North was living below the poverty line in 2012, more than double the poverty rate in Beirut; more than 20 percent in Mount Lebanon and Nabatieh; about 38 percent in the Beqaa; and 31 percent in the South.[50] Those Sunnis who have risked life and limb fighting the Assad regime in Syria or punishing its supporters in Lebanon come disproportionately from such poor urban neighborhoods and underdeveloped rural areas.

But the proliferation of Salafi networks in recent years masks extraordinary divisions. Sunni Islam lacks the rigid hierarchies linking followers to the clerical establishment that are prevalent in Shi'ism, a major factor accounting for Hezbollah's internal cohesion and public legitimation. In fact, Salafis loathe organizational hierarchies, viewing them as "innovations" (bidaa) that encourage loyalty to the group, rather than to God. "Almost without exception, Salafi groups lack sophisticated organizational strategies," notes scholar Zoltan Pall. "Members are connected to each other through informal networks, and there is no clear, formal hierarchy between them."[51]

The result is that Salafi organizations tend to work at cross-purposes. Some want to convert other

Sunnis to their austere doctrines, while others focus their attention on discrediting Shi'ism and other heterodox beliefs. Among the activist (haraki) wing of the jihadists, some think that focusing on the conflict in Syria is the right path, while others want to shake up the system in Lebanon. The former are themselves divided over how to help the rebels (e.g. whether to actively recruit Lebanese volunteers), the latter over whether the Army or just Hezbollah is the enemy.

This same phenomenon was often evident among Salafi-jihadist groups sharing similar aspirations during the 2000s. Isbat al-Ansar, for example, handed over to the Army a Dinniyeh Group fugitive who fled into Ain al-Hilweh in July 2002 and openly disavowed the 2007 Fatah al-Islam uprising (Jund al-Sham expressed support for the latter, but did not join in). Tawhid, though not properly Salafi, succumbed in Tripoli during the mid-1980s in part due to the failure of local "emirs" to consolidate their forces.

Even if Islamist groups in Tripoli were to unite under one banner, it's unlikely that they could build a substantial base of popular support in north Lebanon, let alone in Beirut and the south. "Few Sunnis of any other class or region would join their ranks or accept their leadership," notes scholar Yezid Sayigh.[52]

Islamism and the State

Although nearly all Islamist movements in Lebanon advocate the abolition of the state's confessional system in principle, in practice they have all accommodated it in one way or another. However, Shia and Sunni Islamist movements have had very different experiences interacting with the Lebanese state.

Hezbollah's fortuitous choice of patrons during the 1975-1990 Civil War translated into effective immunity from government interference for the next fifteen years. Year after year of continuous hostilities against Israeli forces in south Lebanon transformed its wartime militia units into an elite fighting force stronger in nearly every respect than the national army. Syrian vetting of appointments to the military-security apparatus ensured that it enjoyed cooperative relations with Hezbollah.

Hezbollah was obliged by the Syrians to maintain rough parity with *Amal* in parliamentary representation, civil service appointments, and other political spoils and pointedly did not join any of the coalition governments that ruled from 1990 to 2005. However, this bolstered Hezbollah's image as rising above partisanship for the good of the nation.

Hezbollah has not found it difficult to preserve these prerogatives since the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005. Its electoral clout alone was sufficient to fend off most challenges to its sprawling paramilitary apparatus. Recognizing that Shia votes would likely decide the outcome of the 2005 legislative elections in several important mixed districts, both the Aounists and Saad Hariri's Future Movement gave Nasrallah assurances that they would not seek Hezbollah's disarmament.

Under the Lebanese constitution, a "one-third-plus-one" or "blocking" minority of seats in the cabinet and parliament is sufficient to veto decisions by the majority (either by not showing up to vote or resigning, preventing the necessary two-thirds quorum). Hezbollah's effective monopolization of Shia representation in parliament (since the Syrian withdrawal, *Amal* deputies are squarely subordinate to Nasrallah) and its durable alliance with the FPM and assorted pro-Syrian groups is more than sufficient to veto the formation of any government. This leverage which enables it to demand a blocking cabinet minority up front.

Moreover, the parliamentary and cabinet representation of Hezbollah and its allies enabled them to prevent the Siniora administration from reforming the security apparatus; the Army and military intelligence are still dominated by personnel who rose through their ranks during the Syrian occupation. Hariri and his allies took over (and still hold) key posts in the Internal Security Force (ISF), especially its intelligence branch.[53] Reclaiming these assets is a high priority for Hezbollah leaders.

Hezbollah's May 2008 seizure of West Beirut was necessary only because shifting alliances had left it without a blocking minority in the cabinet—an unusual circumstance that is unlikely to repeat itself now that post-occupation alignments have solidified. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and his parliamentary bloc gravitated away from March 14 after this, leaving neither Hezbollah nor Nasrallah with reliable majority

support in parliament.

In sharp contrast to Hezbollah, Sunni Islamist groups have not come anywhere near exerting decisive influence over the state. Distrusted by both the Syrians and Sunni political elites, and lacking a state sponsor committed to their empowerment, they had little opportunity during the Syrian occupation to gain representation in government or substantially influence its policies.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Lebanon's chronic political deadlock has gotten steadily worse. In January 2011, the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition pulled its ministers out of government when Prime Minister Hariri refused to disavow the "special tribunal" ahead of its expected indictment of Hezbollah operatives. Hariri was replaced by Najib Miqati, a wealthy Sunni businessman friendly to Hezbollah. In March 2013, Hezbollah forced Miqati's resignation to prevent the extension of the term of Major General Ashra Rifi, a close Hariri ally, as head of the ISF.[54]

Lebanon was without a functioning government from March 2013 to February 2014 because the opposing sides could not agree on the composition of Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam's cabinet. Unable to agree on an electoral law, lawmakers postponed the 2013 legislative elections until 2014 and then postponed them again, until they finally took place in May 2018. Although President Michel Suleiman's term in office came to an end in May 2014, because the Lebanese factions could not agree on his successor, Michel Aoun was only chosen as president in late 2016.[55]

The shocking regional advances of ISIS in 2013 and 2014 led to a strong regional and international consensus in favor of bolstering the Lebanese security forces. American and European states have increased aid and provided unprecedented intelligence cooperation with Lebanese security agencies.[56] In December 2013, Saudi Arabia pledged to give the Lebanese Army $3 billion over five years.[57] But Saudi Arabia has become concerned about increasingly close relations between the Lebanese government and Hezbollah (and its Iranian masters). When Lebanon did not condemn an Iranian mob sacking the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in January 2016, the Saudis froze payments. [58]

In May 2018, Hezbollah and its allies secured a majority of 70 seats out of 128.[59] The group has also managed to entice a significant number of Sunnis to its parliamentarian blocs. Hariri, the current Prime Minister, lost a third of his bloc. Though he retained his position as Prime Minister, he will be more inclined to compromise with Hezbollah, given his smaller bloc and the loss of the March 14 alliance.[60]

In July 2017, Hezbollah launched an offensive along the Lebanese-Syrian border against militants in the Arsal and Qalamoun mountains. The group coordinated its attack with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which used artillery to target militants during the assault. The coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah caused significant concerns in Washington, especially given that U.S. assistance to the LAF in 2016 topped $150 million.[61]

In April 2018, Lebanon received aid pledges of over $11 billion at a Paris conference. The pledges included $10.2 billion in loans and $860 million in grants, plus $4 billion in loans from the World Bank, and a $1 billion line of credit from Saudi Arabia.[62] Donors indicated that they wished for Lebanon to recommit to its long-postponed reform efforts, and Hariri promised to reduce the budget deficit as a percentage of GDP by 5 percent in the next 5 years. However, given the significant political deadlock and persistent corruption Lebanon faces, such reforms may be difficult to implement.

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