



LEBANON

Quick Facts

Population: 5,469,612 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 10,400 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1%

Government Type: Parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$54.18 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated October 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Lebanon's unique demographic and political composition has had a profound influence on the trajectory of Islamism in the country. The coexistence of large Sunni and Shi'a Muslim populations (with neither constituting a national majority) alongside a comparably sized multid denominational Christian community and smaller minority groups has meant that few Islamists of either sectarian persuasion have aggressively pursued a theocratic state. Hezbollah, the dominant Shi'a Islamist group in Lebanon, has carved out a heavily armed state-within-a-state. As a result of the country's October 2019 protests, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah now holds a place in society that is de facto parallel and equal to that of the Lebanese government leadership.

Once revered across the Arab world for its armed "resistance" to Israel, the group's blind obedience to Iran and willingness to turn on other Muslims has helped transform it into a pariah. Sunni Islamist groups, meanwhile, are numerous, ideologically varied, politically marginalized, and surprisingly unwilling to work together in pursuit of common objectives. Radicalization in impoverished Sunni areas has been growing steadily but has not been effectively channeled by Islamist leaders.

The Syrian civil war has progressively drawn both Shi'a and Sunni Lebanese Islamists into direct conflict with one another while causing an influx of more than a million (mostly Sunni) Syrian refugees into neighboring Lebanon. In turn, terror attacks in Lebanon committed by local Nusra Front and Islamic State branches—and the first ever Lebanese-on-Lebanese suicide bombing of civilian targets – have served to renewed support for the Lebanese Army.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Established in 1920 by 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 Shi'a hinterland. Under the terms of the 1943 National Pact and subsequent adjustments, fixed shares of political power are distributed by sect (a Maronite Christian acts as president, a Sunni as prime minister, a Shi'a as speaker of the National Assembly). While Lebanon's *al-nizam al-ta'ifiyya* (sectarian system) provided some political stability, it impeded the development of a shared national identity, limited state power, and facilitated intervention by outside parties.

Islamism in Lebanon is partly rooted in the same regional crisis conditions that fueled its growth throughout the Middle East – the 1967 war with Israel, severe political oppression by autocratic governments, poor economic growth, and gross wealth disparities. Shi'a and Sunni Islamism emerged as challenges to existing political order and to secular leftist and nationalist ideologies. However, they have followed very different trajectories.

Shi'a Islamism

Shi'a Islamism emerged as a socio-political force in Lebanon during the 1970s, led by Lebanese clerics who were radicalized while studying in Iraq (alongside many Iranian students who would play leading roles in their country's 1979 revolution). The most prominent Shi'a leader at the time was Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, who was born to a prominent Lebanese family that had produced many religious scholars. Sadr assumed the leadership of the state-sanctioned Supreme Islamic Shiite Council and created a political movement called the Movement of the Dispossessed, which pursued Shiite socio-economic advancement and modest Lebanese constitutional reform.

The onset of civil war in 1975 and Sadr's disappearance (and presumed murder) in 1978 while in Libya spurred corruption and secularization within the Sadrist movement. As a consequence, it armed itself and accepted Syrian patronage – so much so that it became popularly known as Amal, the Arabic acronym for the name of its wartime militia.

Shi'a Islamism centered around Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a distinguished Najaf-trained cleric who called on the Shi'a to fight on behalf of all Muslims against Israel. Many younger clerics who followed his guidance embraced Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisconsult). The relationship with the newly-established Islamic Republic grew from there. Tehran deployed its elite clerical army, the Pasdaran (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC), to train and indoctrinate local Shi'a. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, eager to prevent Lebanon from falling under the orbit of Israel and the West, facilitated this penetration.

Radical Shi'a fundamentalists flocked to the emerging network, including 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, Amal carried out a series of deadly suicide bomb attacks against Israeli forces and the Western Multinational Force in Lebanon (MFL) from 1983 to 1985. As a result, Amal incurred the animosity of most Shi'a and subsequently withdrew from the capital under the weight of the pressure.

In 1985, disparate underground groups united under the name Hezbollah (Party of God) and called for an Islamic state in Lebanon.² In practice, however, these factions were concerned with advancing Iranian interests. Militants affiliated with Hezbollah kidnapped dozens of Americans and Europeans, allowing Tehran to extract concessions from Western governments.

The 1989 Taif Accord brought most of the civil war fighting to an end, and the Lebanese constitution was amended to equalize Muslim and Christian representation in parliament. Executive authority was transferred to the Sunni prime minister. Under the Taif Accord, Hezbollah was allowed to remain armed, unlike other wartime militias, for the purpose of "liberating" the border occupied by Israeli forces. Hezbollah also acted as a conduit for Iranian supplies, finance, and training to Palestinian Sunni Islamist groups in the country.³

Hezbollah participated in the electoral process and sent representatives to parliament. However, it only modestly supported Islamist socio-political causes, and dismissed the viability of an Islamic state; rather, it preferred a narrative of national unity and resistance to oppression.⁴

Hezbollah's involvement in the February 2005 car bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister and possible presidential candidate Rafiq Hariri marked a major watershed for the group. Its reputation as a selfless "resistance" movement blinded even its fiercest critics to the group's participation, as was laid out convincingly in the 2011 indictments released by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).⁵ After years of speculation over the assassination of Hariri, on August 18, 2020, the STL released its final decision. The verdict included a single conviction of Salim Ayyash, *in absentia*, while the other three defendants, Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Hassan Oneissi and Assad Hassan Sabra, were acquitted. All four defendants are known affiliates of Hezbollah to various degrees.⁶

Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon, and the subsequent Israel-Lebanon war, touched off a struggle for state control. Hezbollah's self-proclaimed "divine victory" in the conflict appealed broadly to Sunnis in Lebanon and across the Arab world. At that time, polling showed Hassan Nasrallah was overwhelmingly the most popular public figure in the Arab world.⁷ This changed in May 2008, when Hezbollah briefly seized control of predominantly Sunni West Beirut after Prime Minister Fouad Siniora attempted to close Hezbollah's private telecommunications network.

The start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 provided Hezbollah with a new theater of operations. The group played a key battlefield role in the conflict in support of the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and often led military operations against opposition forces. When the al-Assad regime began ceding territory in 2012, Hezbollah deployed its forces to help retake ground captured by an assortment of anti-regime rebels and defend important regime locations. In all, Hezbollah deployed as many as 10,000 fighters to Syria at the height of its involvement.⁸ This extensive footprint was driven by the need to support the Syrian government and ensure its logistical base, as well as out of a recognition that the Islamist violence against the Assad regime would almost certainly eventually target Lebanese Shi'a. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria provided the regime with much-needed momentum – helping to avert its military defeat, dislodge rebels from border areas, end continued outrages against Shiites, and prevent a significant shift in the regional balance of power.⁹ Most importantly, Hezbollah's role in the retaking of Qusayr, a major point of entry for supplies heading to Syrian rebels, was vital in the shift of the tide of the conflict back toward Assad.

Throughout most of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah's longstanding conflict with Israel, on the whole, remained dormant. In January 2015, however, 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. Preoccupied in Syria, however, Hezbollah has had little energy to confront its primary adversaries anew. However, Israeli strategists are concerned with the possibility of renewed conflict with the group – and with Hezbollah's growing strategic capabilities.

In particular, in the last decade, Iran and Hezbollah have focused on developing precision-guided missiles. Between 2013 and 2015, Iran attempted to transport ready-to-use missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, through Syria, though these efforts were thwarted by Israel-attributed attacks. In 2016, Iran and Hezbollah changed their strategy and began attempting to smuggle parts, instead of complete missiles, to Lebanon, and assembling the munitions there. The parts were transferred from Iran by land via Syria, by air via civilian flights, and by sea via Beirut Port. After two years, however, the program failed to gain much traction. In 2019, Iran and Hezbollah made efforts to produce and build precision guided missiles in facilities throughout Lebanon.¹⁰ In July 2020, the Israeli research center, ALMA, discovered at least 28 missile launching sites belonging to Hezbollah scattered in civilian-populated areas throughout Beirut, and in Hezbollah strongholds.¹¹ Recent estimates calculate that Hezbollah is in possession of between 130,000 to 150,000 missiles.¹² These weapons range from short range anti-personnel and anti-tank munitions designed by the Soviet Union to medium range anti-ship cruise missiles bought from the Chinese government to shoulder-mounted weapons designed by Iran and Russia to target air vehicles.¹³

Sunni Islamism

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

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 by Fathi Yakan and Faysal Mawlawi in 1964, al-Jama'a initially sought a peacefully created Islamic state. After the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, al-Jama'a took up arms alongside the leftist National Movement against the Maronite Christians. When Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976, most 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 known as Quwat Fajr (the Fajr Brigades) to fight Israeli forces in Lebanon.¹⁴

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. These fighters formed Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (the Islamic Unification Movement, otherwise known as "Tawhid"). Led by the popular preacher Said Sha'ban, Tawhid imposed and enforced a strict interpretation of *sharia* law in Tripoli. 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 crushed *Tawhid*; those commanders that did not accede to the Syrian army were hunted down and killed or imprisoned.

Thereafter, al-Jama'a and Tawhid both operated squarely within the Iranian-Syrian orbit. They embraced Hezbollah's vision of a society of resistance.¹⁵ Al-Jama'a supported Lebanon's post-*Taif* political system and participated in elections, meeting modest success.

After the withdrawal of Syrian 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, or 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."¹⁶ In contrast, al-Jama'a was rewarded for its allegiance; it was included in March 14 electoral coalition, which netted the group one seat in parliament. Currently led by Ibrahim Masri, it has avoided entanglement in the Syrian civil war and maintains a limited armed presence in Lebanon.

IAF factions have established a significant armed presence in Tripoli with money and arms provided by Hezbollah. They are closely aligned with pro-Syrian Sunni clans in Tripoli.¹⁷

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 a key Minqara aide close to Syrian intelligence.¹⁸ At least two IAF-affiliated clerics have been assassinated to date: *Tawhid* preacher Abdul-Razzaq al-Asmar in October 2012, and Saadedine Ghiyyeh in November 2013.¹⁹ On November 12, 2015, twin suicide bombings in Beirut's Bourj al-Barajneh district (a known Hezbollah stronghold) killed 44 and wounded 239.²⁰ In 2016, the LAF disrupted an ISIS plot against Western targets in and around Beirut.²¹ In June 2019, during the most recent instance of violence involving the IAF, a Jamaa al-Islamiya official was killed in southern Lebanon by a sniper.²²

Al-Ahbash

Jam'iyyat al-Mashari' al-Khairiyya al-Islamiyya (The Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects), more commonly known as Al-Ahbash, is a comparatively moderate Sufi movement long supported by Syria. The movement devoutly follows the teachings of its founder Abdallah al-Harari, popularly known as Abdallah al-Habashi.²³ He emphasizes Islam's pluralistic nature and mixes elements of Sunni and Shi'a theological doctrines with Sufi spiritualism. The movement opposes violence against the ruling authorities and accepts the legitimacy of many Shi'a and Sufi beliefs typically condemned by Islamists.²⁴ During the Syrian occupation, however, the movement adopted thuggish tactics to intimidate opponents.²⁵ Its influence has sharply diminished since the withdrawal of Syrian forces in the middle of the last decade.

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. It believes an Islamic *caliphate* can be achieved through non-violent persuasion, and its activities have been largely peaceful and apolitical. Nevertheless, the group's rhetoric is deeply unsettling to many.²⁶ Members of the group have participated in al-Qaeda-linked *jihadi* organizations.²⁷

Traditional Salafis

Salafism spread rapidly among poor Sunni communities during the 1990s, due in part to funding from Islamic charities in the Arab Gulf. The Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, a Saudi charity later linked to al-Qaeda, and Jama'iyat Ihya' Al-Turath Al-Islami (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, RIHS), supported Dai al-Islam al-Shahal, the son of the founder of Lebanese Salafism.²⁸ Jama'iyat al-Hidaya wa al-Ihsan al-Islami (Islamic Guidance and Charity Association) funded Salafi mosques, schools, and social welfare institutions throughout Lebanon.

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. The Future Movement defeated Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in mixed Sunni-Christian districts of north Lebanon.

In the wake of Hezbollah's May 2008 seizure of West Beirut and widespread disillusionment with Saad Hariri, the Salafi movement has grown more radical.²⁹ Abu Bakr al-Shahal (another son of Salem al-Shahal) said that *jihadi* is permissible "under the banner of legitimate defense" and that "a reenactment of the May 7 events could certainly prompt a new jihad."³⁰ By 2013, a number of Salafi preachers were calling for Lebanese citizens to go fight in Syria. Dai al-Islam al-Shahal told the BBC that people must "sacrifice money and life" to confront what he described as a Shi'a 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."³¹

By 2014, the strength and numbers of militants affiliated with Salafi-*jihadi* groups had grown to the point of having significant sway in parts of the Beqaa Valley, Sidon and Tripoli. The Lebanese government cracked down; arresting hundreds of suspected militants and using the military to disseminate terrorist cells. As a result of government and military action, the acts of violence greatly diminished.³²

Salafi-jihadis

While traditional Salafis have eschewed violence (with the exception of that aimed at Syria), a more radical Salafi movement has operated in under-developed and poor Sunni areas there, drawing members from among Lebanese Sunnis, Palestinian refugees, and various Arab expatriates.³³ *Mujahideen* fighters who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan returning home were critical catalysts of this trend.

The first of these groups, Isbat al-Ansar (Band of Partisans), emerged in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh. 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. Following the 2003 U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, several members of the group took part in the *jihad* against coalition forces there.³⁴ In 2018, the U.S. State Department estimated that the group was comprised of roughly 650 fighters.³⁵

An offshoot of Isbat al-Ansar, known as Jund al-Sham, also operates in Ain al-Hilweh. In May 2015, a Hezbollah member was killed in the refugee camp.³⁶ In the end of 2016, there were clashes between Isbat al-Ansar and other Palestinian factions that left several dead. Hamas brokered the subsequent ceasefire.³⁷

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a *jihadist* terrorist group with branches in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, has been active since 2009-2010, claimed responsibility for violence against the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and rocket attacks into Israel.³⁸ Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, its operations in Lebanon have focused on Hezbollah and Iranian targets after its *emir*, Sirajeddine Zureiqat, called for open war against Hezbollah inside Lebanon and urged Sunni soldiers to desert the military.³⁹ The group claimed responsibility for the November 2013 double suicide bombing outside the Iranian embassy that left 22 dead, and the February 2014 attack on the Iranian Cultural Center in suburban Beirut that killed 11. Both attacks were ostensibly in retaliation for Iran's support for the Assad regime. In November 2019, the Brigades announced that it had fully dissolved itself inside Syria.⁴⁰

Syria's two leading Salafi-*jihadi* groups, the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, have both built networks in Lebanon to ferry supplies and men across the common border between the two countries. This has led to disruptive activities by both groups in Lebanon itself over the past several years.⁴¹

In August 2017, thousands of *jihadists* and their families relocated to Syria from the Lebanese border as part of a ceasefire deal with Hezbollah.⁴² Lebanon has witnessed a recent, significant rise in Salafi militancy as a result of the spillover from the Syrian Civil War and the growth of sectarian tensions.⁴³ Most recently on June 18, 2020, Lebanese authorities arrested multiple suspected IS members in raids in Aarsal, uncovering a cache of firearms, ammunition and explosives.⁴⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Shi'a 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 these 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 Shi'a

By the early 1970s, Lebanon's Shi'a community had grown to become the country's largest sect. It was also 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 seats in the country's parliament, most Shi'a viewed the confessional system as fundamentally unfair to Muslims in general, and to Shi'a in particular.

The 1989 Taif Accord slightly amended this imbalance by modestly expanding the parliamentary speaker's powers and increasing Shi'a parliamentary representation to 21 percent of the chamber's seats. But Shi'a arguably gained the least from the Beirut-centered *laissez-faire* post-war economic order, which neglected the agricultural sector in which most Shi'a still worked, invited an influx of unregulated Syrian labor, and spawned systemic corruption.⁴⁵

State failure made Hezbollah's Shi'a constituency easier to coopt. Iran provided around \$200 million to Hezbollah annually, which built an expansive social welfare network to provide the country's Shi'a with education, healthcare, low-interest loans, amongst other benefits.⁴⁶ Hezbollah came to be seen by most Shi'a (and many non-Shi'a) as having "clean hands"; most Shi'a continued to support the group's

“resistance” to Israel even after the latter withdrew from Lebanon, and despite having no major territorial disputes with the Jewish state.

Hezbollah’s political hegemony within the Shi’a community was at its peak when Syrian troops departed Lebanon in 2005. Hezbollah’s involvement in the sectarian violence in Syria and Iraq, in turn, influenced dynamics between the Lebanese Shi’a community and Hezbollah. The Shi’a today feel more isolated from Sunni Arab states, but most importantly—due to budgetary restraints—Hezbollah was forced to sacrifice the social services that formerly benefited the Shi’a community for its stepped-up military operations in the region.⁴⁷ Hezbollah and Amal won Lebanon’s 2018 parliamentary elections because they represented a significant alternative.⁴⁸

Hezbollah has successfully enlisted cross-confessional allies as part of its survival strategy. In addition to President Michel Aoun, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Gebran Bassil and their Christian-based Free Patriotic Movement, Hezbollah has cultivated Druze allies such as Wiam Wahab and Christian Marada Leader Soleiman Franjeh. Most surprisingly, due to the country’s deep sectarian divide, the past two Sunni Prime Ministers have been pro-Hezbollah. Both Saad Hariri (resigned in January 2020) and Hassan Diab (resigned in August 2020) have been part of parties that co-formed the March 8 Alliance, which is the Hezbollah-allied, pro-Syrian government parliamentary bloc.

In 2009, Hezbollah released its amended manifesto, which outlined a new approach. The document deemphasized the group’s Islamist background and focused on its interest in Lebanon’s stability and the fight against Israel.⁴⁹ More recently, the group was able to wield significant influence over the Sunni population as a result of Saudi Arabia’s public withdrawal of support for Hariri in 2017 – causing many to question his ability to represent the sect.⁵⁰ As a result, the organization gained control over one-third of Hariri’s constituency, using its many accessible service ministries to serve the country’s Sunni communities.⁵¹ However, due to Lebanon’s current economic crisis and U.S. sanctions against Iran, many of the jobs and services that gained Hezbollah those supporters are being cut, and the group is no longer receiving the financial support it once did.⁵²

The Sunnis

Hezbollah’s path to Shi’a empowerment was part of Syria’s brutal subjugation of Lebanon, which was felt most acutely by the country’s Sunnis.

The pre-war years were not a time of prosperity for all Sunnis, the vast majority of whom lived in Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. The latter two urban centers declined in prosperity relative to Beirut after the establishment of an independent Lebanon severed their trade routes to the Syrian interior. The Sunni community itself was politically and economically dominated by a handful of powerful families.⁵³

Efforts to channel growing public resentment of the above into effective political mobilization during the 1960s and 1970s were 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ The Syrian occupation created a new sectarian underclass in Lebanon, this time among Sunni Palestinian and Lebanese constituencies.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon – who are primarily Sunni – live in squalid, overcrowded camps. They are barred by law from owning property and working in many professions.⁵⁶ For decades, Lebanese authorities have, with few exceptions, declined to enter the camps, for fear of enflaming sectarian tensions. It is in these camps that Salafi-*jihadism* first took root.

The proliferation of Salafi networks in recent years masks extraordinary divisions. Sunni Islam lack rigid hierarchies that link followers to the clerical establishment such as those that exist in Shi’ism – something that serves as a major factor in Hezbollah’s internal cohesion and public legitimacy. In fact, Salafis loathe organizational hierarchies, viewing them as *bidaa* (innovations) 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.”⁵⁷

Salafi organizations tend to work at cross-purposes with one another. 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 *haraki* (activist) wing of the *ihadists*, some focus on the conflict in Syria, while others want to disrupt the system in Lebanon itself. The former are 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.

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, Shi’a and Sunni Islamist movements have had very different experiences interacting with the Lebanese state.

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

Hezbollah was obliged to maintain rough parity with *Amal* in parliamentary representation, civil service appointments, and other political spoils. Pointedly, it did not join any coalition governments that ruled from 1990 to 2005 – something that helped to bolster Hezbollah’s image as rising above partisanship for the good of the nation.

Under the Lebanese constitution, a “one-third-plus-one” or “blocking” minority of seats in the cabinet and parliament is sufficient to veto majority decisions (either by not showing up to vote or resigning, preventing the necessary two-thirds quorum). Hezbollah’s effective monopolization of Shi’a representation in parliament 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 enables it to demand a blocking cabinet minority up front.

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

Lebanon’s chronic political deadlock has gotten steadily worse since the start of the Syrian civil war. 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. Lawmakers postponed the 2013 legislative elections until 2014 and then postponed them again. Elections 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 2016.⁵⁸

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 cooperated with Lebanese security agencies.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ Donors indicated that they wished for Lebanon to

recommit to its long-postponed reform efforts, and Prime Minister Hariri promised to reduce the budget deficit as a percentage of GDP by 5% in the next 5 years. However, given the significant political deadlock and persistent corruption, reforms may be difficult to implement.

Hezbollah and its allies secured a majority of seats in Lebanon's parliament (70 out of 128) in the May 2018 elections. The group enticed a significant number of Sunnis to its parliamentary blocs. Hariri lost a third of his bloc, and while 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.⁶¹

While all eyes were on the political process of elections and government formation, Lebanon's economy was taking many hits. Meanwhile, Hezbollah is facing its own financial crisis due to increased sanctions on Iran. The Trump Administration's maximum pressure campaign on Iran has derailed the country's ability to finance Hezbollah activities. In turn, Hezbollah has been forced to make significant cuts to its spending: fighters are being furloughed or assigned to the reserves where they receive lower pay (if any at all), Hezbollah's television station, Al-Manar, laid off staff, and support to the marginalized Shiite community through free medicine and groceries to fighters, employees, and their families have been reduced or cut.⁶²

On August 4, 2020, two explosions went off at the port of Beirut, injuring or killing thousands while destroying a significant part of the city.⁶³ The explosions came from ammonium nitrate, which had been stored at the port for at least six years to knowledge of the government.⁶⁴ While no formal investigation has as yet been done to determine the responsible party, many have pointed to Hezbollah as the culpable party, because it is well known that the group controls the port and uses it to import and store weapons.⁶⁵ Whether the group faces significant repercussions as a result, however, remains to be seen.

ENDNOTES

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