

# American Foreign Policy Council

## LEBANON

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,882,562

Area: 10,400 sq km

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

Religions: Muslim 54% (27%  
Sunni, 27% Shia), Christian  
40.5%, Druze 5.6%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):  
\$64.31 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of  
the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated December 2014)



*Islamism in Lebanon is sui generis in a multitude of important respects. The cohabitation of large Sunni Muslim and Shi'a Muslim populations in relatively close proximity, with neither constituting a national majority (and alongside a comparably sized multid denominational 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 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 Shi'a Islamist group in Lebanon, has carved out a heavily armed state-within-a-state in Shi'a-inhabited areas of southern Lebanon, the eastern Bekaa 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 ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria in 2011 has drawn both Shi'a 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, and granted full independence in 1943, the new state of Lebanon 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 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 Shi'a 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 sects.

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, severe political oppression by autocratic governments, poor economic growth, and gross wealth disparities.

Shi'a 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.

### *Shi'a Islamism*

Shi'a 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 Shi'a leader at the time was Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian-born scion 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 Shi'ite 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 Shi'a 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 crack Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or *Pasdaran*) to train and indoctrinate local Shi'a. 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 and the West.

Radical Shi'a fundamentalists from the Beqaa Valley, the south of Lebanon and the Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh flocked to the emerging network, among them a break-away 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 Shi'a and both subsequently withdrew from the capital under the weight of the assault.

In 1985, these disparate underground groups issued a manifesto calling themselves *Hezbollah* (Part of God) and calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 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. The accord also recognized Syria's "special relationship" with Lebanon, a trusteeship subsequently cemented by the May 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination and the September 1991 Lebanon-Syria Defense and Security Agreement.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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,<sup>4</sup> preferring instead a secular appeal for national unity and resistance to oppression that appealed to non-Shi'a. 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 "Shi'a crescent" extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon,<sup>5</sup> 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—though no one knew it yet. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 Shi'a 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.

### *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, *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.<sup>8</sup>

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 Mus-

lim 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 with 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.<sup>9</sup> *Al-Jama'a* supported Lebanon's post-Ta'if political system and participated in municipal and parliamentary elections, with modest success.

After the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005, *al-Jama'a* was 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."<sup>10</sup>

*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)<sup>11</sup> and of the small Alawite community in the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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. The August 2013 bombings of two major Salafi mosques in Tripoli known for supporting Syrian rebels, which killed 48 worshippers, were linked by Lebanese investigators to Ahmad Gharib, a key Minqara aide close to Syrian intelligence.<sup>14</sup> At least two IAF-affiliated clerics have been assassinated: *Tawhid* preacher Abdul-Razzaq al-Asmar in October 2012 and Saadedine Ghiyyeh, a leading cleric in the IAF, in November 2013.<sup>15</sup>

### *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.<sup>16</sup> His school of thought emphasizes Islam's pluralistic nature and mixes elements of Sunni and Shi'a theological doctrines with Sufi spiritualism. It opposes the use of violence against the ruling authorities and accepts the legitimacy of many Shi'a and Sufi beliefs typically condemned by Islamists as heresies.<sup>17</sup> During the Syrian occupation, however, the movement adopted thuggish tactics to intimidate opponents.<sup>18</sup> Its influence has sharply diminished since the withdrawal of Syrian forces.

### *Hizb ut-Tabrir (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,<sup>19</sup> and members of the group have gone on to become involved in al-Qaeda-linked *jihadist* organizations.<sup>20</sup> Judging from the number of attendees at the party's annual conferences and public demonstrations, *Hizb ut-Tabrir* 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" (*bid'aa*) 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.

The Salafi movement in Lebanon can be traced back to the 1950s to Salem al-Shahal, whose youth movement once included Fathi Yakan and many Tripoli natives who later moved on to more politicized endeavors. Shahal had very close ties with the head of Saudi Arabia's Council of Senior Islamic Scholars, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz ibn Abdallah ibn Baz, who brought hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian Sunnis to study in the Kingdom.

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,<sup>21</sup> a Saudi charity later linked to Al-Qaeda<sup>22</sup> and closed under American pressure, and Kuwait's *Jama'iyat Ihya' Al-Turath Al-Islami*

(Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, RIHS). Through Dai al-Islam al-Shahal's charity, *Jama'iyat al-Hidaya wa al-Ihsan al-Islami* (Islamic Guidance and Charity Association), Salafi mosques, schools, and social welfare institutions throughout the country were funded.

Although Shahal does not appear to have explicitly advocated violence during this period, many of the *ihadists* who ran afoul of the 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, the 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.

In part because of a multiplicity of new funding sources—notably the Qatari Shaykh Eid Charity Association—the Salafi movement is highly disjointed, centered around prominent preachers and their local followings. The most notable of these are Dai al-Islam al-Shahal, Rafei, Hassan al-Shahal, and Zakaria al-Masri in Tripoli; Ahmed al-Assir in Sidon; Adnan Imama in the Beqaa.<sup>23</sup>

The Salafi current 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,<sup>24</sup> the Salafi movement has grown more radical. Abu Bakr al-Shahal (another son of Salem al-Shahal) said that *ihad* is permissible "under the banner of legitimate defense" and that "a reenactment of the May 7 events could certainly prompt a new *ihad*."<sup>25</sup>

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-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."<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

Assir, a favorite of the Lebanese media, went several steps further still, instructing his armed supporters to challenge Hezbollah. In June 2013, his forces attacked a Lebanese Army outpost, killing several soldiers. His men were decimated in the ensuing crackdown and Assir was forced into hiding.

### *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 *ji-had* has operated in under-developed and poor Sunni areas there,<sup>29</sup> 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-Abbash* 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 *ji-had* against coalition forces there.<sup>30</sup> The group is estimated to command the loyalty of between 100 and 300 fighters.<sup>31</sup> An offshoot of *Isbat al-Ansar* known as *Jund al-Sham* also operates in the camp.

A second, short-lived *ji-hadist* group was started by Bassam Kanj (aka Abu Aisha), a Lebanese Afghanistan veteran. In 1999, he and a small core of other Arab *mujahideen* established a group in northern Lebanon calling itself *Al-Takfir wal-Hijra*, but popularly known as the Dinniyeh Group, after the mountainous region east of Tripoli where it originated. In December 1999, the group ambushed a Lebanese army patrol sent to arrest them, touching off days of fighting in which Kanj was killed and more than two dozen other members of the group either killed or captured. In all, 120 men were indicted for their alleged connection with the Dinniyeh group.<sup>32</sup>

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 *ji-had* 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 it 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 *jihadi* 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

Syria's two leading Salafi-*jihadi* 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> That same month, *Al-Nusra* claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings in the predominantly Shiite border town of Hermel that left eight people dead.<sup>37</sup>

## 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 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*

Though Lebanon's Shi'a 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 Lebanon descended into civil war in 1976. Barred from the nation's two highest political office and apportioned less than a fifth of parliamentary seats, most Shi'a came to view the confessional system as fundamentally unfair to Muslims in general, and Shi'a in particular.

The 1989 Taif Accord slightly amended this imbalance by modestly expanding the speaker's powers and increasing Shi'a parliamentary representation to 21 percent of the seats. But Sunnis gained the most from the Saudi-brokered accord through a strengthened premiership, and 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,<sup>38</sup> invited an influx of unregulated Syrian labor, and spawned systemic corruption. So brazen was the state's failure that former Hezbollah Secretary-General Subji Toufaily broke with his compatriots and launched an ill-fated "revolution of the hungry" in the late 1990s.

State failure made Hezbollah's Shi'a constituency easier to co-opt. With Iran providing around \$200 million to the group annually,<sup>39</sup> Hezbollah built an expansive social welfare network to provide the country's Shi'a 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 Shi'a (and many non-Shi'a) as having "clean hands." The fact that most Shi'a 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 Shi'a community was at a 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 Shi'a in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan during the mid-2000s, even many secular Shi'a came to think it unwise to surrender their community's one point of leverage when the future was so uncertain. The horrific sectarian violence taking place in Syria and Iraq today only reinforces the view that Hezbollah was wise to remain armed.

### *The Sunnis*

Tragically, Hezbollah's path to Shi'a 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.<sup>40</sup> 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-Jam'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.

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).<sup>41</sup> 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 mostly Sunni Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, who live in squalid, overcrowded camps and are barred by law from owning property and working in many professions.<sup>42</sup> 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 here first.

Outside of the camps, the most underprivileged areas are Tripoli and the nearby Akkar region. According to one widely cited study, 53 percent of the population in the North was living below the poverty line in 2008, while the poverty rate was less than 6 percent in Beirut; just under 20 percent in Mount Lebanon and Nabatieh; 29 percent in the Beqaa; and 42 percent in the South.<sup>43</sup> 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 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" (*bid'aa*) 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."<sup>44</sup>

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 Islamists group 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.<sup>45</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Although nearly all Islamist movements in Lebanon advocate abolishment 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 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 Shi’a 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 Shi’a 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

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 are currently set to postpone them again, possibly until 2017).<sup>48</sup> Though President Michel Suleiman's term in office came to an end in May 2014, a new president has not been elected because the factions cannot agree on a successor.<sup>49</sup>

The shocking advance 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.<sup>50</sup> In December 2013, Saudi Arabia pledged to give the Lebanese Army \$3 billion over five years.<sup>51</sup>

In late 2013 the Army deployed in force in Tripoli to halt the three-year old intermittent clashes in the city between fighters in the Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood

and the adjacent, predominantly Alawi Jabal Mohsen neighborhood. The city was declared a “military zone,” making all security personnel subordinate to the Army.<sup>52</sup> Scores of combatants were arrested.

In February 2014, Hariri addressed his followers by video link on the ninth anniversary of his father’s death and vowed to “confront incitement and dubious calls to drag Lebanese, particularly the Sunnis, into crazy wars with no use other than to pull Lebanon into a sectarian holocaust.”<sup>53</sup> Along with the long awaited formation of a new government, this gave the Army the political cover it needed to crack down more forcefully in April, when it arrested the heads of warring militias on both sides for the first time.

Notwithstanding the shocking seizure of Aarsal by *Nusra* and ISIS in August, expanded Army operations in the north appear to have averted the kind of worst-case scenarios many feared were on the horizon a year earlier. But the measures necessary to impose order in the North aren’t likely to defuse the threat of Islamic radicalism, and the chronic political stalemate in Beirut has undercut any hope of implementing the kinds of political and economic reforms that will undercut its appeal in the long term.

## ENDNOTES

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[16] Habashi literally means “the Abyssinian.” Harari migrated to Beirut from Ethiopia in the 1950s and became a lecturer at al-Azhar University’s Lebanese campus.

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[18] See Daniel Nassif, “Al-Ahbash,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 3, no. 4, April 2001, [http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0104\\_ld1.htm](http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0104_ld1.htm).

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