



The Lebanese Sunnis: A Community in Disarray

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Abstract

As Lebanon celebrated its sixty-ninth anniversary on November 22 it also, more ominously, marked roughly one month since the assassination of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) Intelligence Chief, Wissam al-Hassan. In that month, two disconcerting trends have become apparent. First, the traditional board game of Lebanese politics—with strong political chiefs—is becoming a harder game to manage, particularly for the Sunni community. And second, with the Sunni community increasingly in disarray, a leadership vacuum has developed.

Hard-line Salafists are now vying to fill this vacuum. While they have been present in Lebanon for years recent events in Lebanon and Syria have contributed to the militarization of some groups. The most recent manifestation of this trend has been Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir and his followers in Sidon. Although these trends have obvious domestic ramifications for Lebanon, the combination of unchecked Salafist militarism and the collapse of state authority could also destabilize Israel's northern border.

Keywords

Sunni community; Intelligence; Communal; Lebanese government; Leadership

The Sunni “Chess Board”

Since 2005, there has been a tendency by analysts to portray the Sunnis as a monolithic group. This portrayal is an immense over simplification. Although the so-called “Hariri bloc” represents the vast majority, there are other Sunni groups such as the Salafist Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami (Islamic Action Front), Harakat at-Tawhid al-Islami (Islamic Unification Movement), The Popular Nasserist Organization and Najib Miqati's centrist Glory Movement that belong to the Hezbollah dominated March 8th Alliance¹. Even the “Hariri bloc” is an alliance of various Sunni parties, including the moderate Future Movement, Jamaa Islamiya and a number of miscellaneous Salafist factions. The one thing all these groups have in common is that they fall within the established Lebanese “chess board.”

Although in Lebanon the Sunnis have lagged behind other communities on the military front, they have compensated for this—up to this point—in the political arena. The primary political channel for the community has been the March 14th coalition². From 2005

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_8_Alliance

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_14_Alliance

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until January 2011, March 14th was the ruling bloc in Lebanon. This coalition is led by Saad Hariri—the son of the late Prime Minister and Sunni leader Rafik Hariri—and is composed of mainly Sunni and Christian parties.

Arguably the greatest strength of the coalition has been to give a semblance of Sunni unity. Of the parties composing March 14th, the predominantly Sunni Tayyar al-Mustaqbal (The Future Movement) is the largest—holding 26 of the coalition's 48 seats in parliament. This communal unity relied, in part, on faith in the Sunni Future Movement and its leader Saad Hariri. As a result, the Future Movement and Hariri have been seen as the ones controlling the Sunni street. However, this dynamic is changing.

Following the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, the Sunni community, for the first time in Lebanese history, began acting like a minority sect, in that the community felt that its existence was threatened. This mentality was primarily driven by the rising influence of Shiite Iran in the region, a hostile Alawite regime in Syria and the powerful Shia militia, Hezbollah, which has become a strong political force in recent years. It was within that context that the Future Movement and Saad Hariri became the primary guardians of Sunni influence in Lebanon. Although the Sunni community suffered numerous humiliations during the 2005-2011 period—including assassinations and an 18-month protest in downtown Beirut by March 8th opponents designed to topple the March 14th government—the community still saw Hariri and the State (ISF) as the means of protecting the Sunni interest.

For Sunnis, the most vivid humiliation came in May 2008 when Hezbollah and its allies overran predominantly Sunni West Beirut following an attempt by the government to shut down Hezbollah's illegal telecommunications network. Despite this, when Hariri was given the chance in 2008 to call upon armed Sunnis from outside Beirut to counter Hezbollah, he refused, thus, avoiding a sectarian disaster. The event that changed this dynamic was the January 2011 “parliamentary coup” by the Hezbollah dominated March 8th Alliance.

A Community in Disarray

Hezbollah and the rise of March 8th set in motion the trend we are witnessing today, that of a Sunni community in disarray. It has also been amply demonstrated, since the Wissam al-Hassan assassination last month that the community is essentially leaderless. The primary domestic cause for this trend has been the removal of March 14th from power and the subsequent flight of Saad Hariri from Lebanon. In place of Hariri, Najib Miqati became the new Prime Minister with Hezbollah's endorsement.

Although Miqati is a Sunni moderate who has promoted the empowerment of the state, he is seen by many of his fellow Sunnis as betraying his sect because of his tacit alliance with Hezbollah. (Miqati does have some token support from the community in his hometown of Tripoli.) As a result, the highest office held by a Sunni politician in Lebanon is seen as not representing Sunni interests.

On the other hand, the community increasingly sees Saad Hariri, the former face of the Sunni community, as ineffective and

cowardly. This stems from the common perception of many Lebanese that communal leaders should stand their ground, regardless of the threat. Other politicians and leaders, such as Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea and Hassan Nasrallah, have not fled Lebanon. And neither did Hariri's father, who paid with his life. Another factor that has discredited him is that he is seen as being increasingly out of touch; for example, his vehicle for addressing his constituents is his twitter account, which is regularly mocked by critics³.

The Salafist Network

The lack of a credible, moderate Sunni leadership has created a vacuum, which Salafists are filling. Although Salafists have been present in Lebanon—in particular in Tripoli, the Akkar and Ein el-Helweh refugee camp—they have, for the most part, not been militant. (The most notable exceptions have been the al Qaeda inspired Fatah al-Islam and Osbat al-Ansar). Since 2011, however, some Salafist groups have become increasingly militant. This trend, in addition to suffering domestic humiliations, is also a result of recent events in Syria, where Sunni gains have led to renewed sense of empowerment and militancy.

As a result, the Akkar and the city of Tripoli—known as the sister city of Syria's Homs—have been thrown into the international spotlight because of recent violence. In the case of Tripoli, tensions have been acutely felt along "Syria Street," which divides the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the Salafist neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh. In the Akkar (as well as Tripoli), Salafist networks give refuge and send fighters to the armed Syrian opposition. Most of the Lebanese fighters recently killed in the Syrian border town of Tal Kalakh reportedly hailed from Bab al-Tabbaneh⁴.

Historically, another hotbed for Islamic militancy has been the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Helweh. Home to over 75,000 refugees and located on the periphery of Sidon, the camp is reputedly the most radical of the Palestinian refugee camps in the Arab world⁵. In fact, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, it was revealed that the camp already sheltered a sizeable militant Salafist network and it took Israel over 20 days to defeat them.

Early manifestations of this militant trend—such as Hisham Abdallah Shreidi's group Osbat al-Ansar—were seen as being part of Iran's proxy network in the 1980s⁶. The nomination of Abdel Karim al Sa'adi (Abu Mohjen) as leader of Osbat al-Ansar following the assassination of Shreidi in 1991 marked a major turning point within the camp. Iranian influence diminished; Salafist militarism spread.⁷ Adding to this militarism has been the infusion of jihadists returning from Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya.⁸ Thus transforming Ein el-Helweh into an ideological war zone just waiting to spill over into Sidon and the rest of South Lebanon.

3 <https://twitter.com/HaririSaad>

4 Daily Star Lebanon, "20 Lebanese Killed in Syria ambush," <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Nov-30/196719-two-lebanese-killed-several-wounded-near-syria-lebanon-border-sources.ashx#axzz2DqPCYAp8>, 30 November 2012.

5 Saab BY, Ranstorp M (2007) Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30: 825-855.

6 Ibid., 839

7 Gambill GC (2003) Ain al-Hilweh: Lebanon's "Zone of Unlaw". *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 5.

8 Saab & Ranstorp, 838.

A New Sunni Star: Ahmad Al-Assir⁹

The most threatening aspect of this increased militancy is that some of these groups are acting independently of either coalition, thus making the Lebanese sectarian chess board harder to manage. The most recent manifestation of this is Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a Salafist cleric from Sidon who has both berated Hezbollah for its arrogance and criticized March 14th for being ineffective.

Two years ago, a few Shiite Ashura banners in the mostly Sunni city of Sidon would have not been a cause for alarm. This year, however, the sectarian equilibrium, which has been the hallmark of the city, was severely tested when armed Sunni followers of Assir triggered a shootout after tearing down Shiite religious and political posters. The gun battle not only left three dead, it also vividly highlighted how precarious the sectarian divide has become between the Sunnis and Shiites since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. Furthermore, it should be seen as no mere coincidence that the gun battle took place on the outskirts Ein el-Helweh (the refugee camp) in the Taamir neighborhood¹⁰. (On December 4th the Ansar Allah Movement—the largest Palestinian Islamist group in Ein el-Helweh allied to Hezbollah—announced a "military, security and political disengagement from Hezbollah," thus severing all ties with the group)¹¹.

In wake of the gun battle, Assir has threatened to form a "resistance brigade," stating that, "Amid the ongoing Israel threat and (their) attack on Gaza, and since the Lebanese government is unable to agree on a national defense strategy; it has become imperative to form the 'Sidon Resistance Brigade'"¹². He had sharp words for Hezbollah: "instead of defending us (against Israel, Hezbollah) is killing us," he said.

The 44-year-old Assir—"the Sunni Lion" to his admirers—is not a minor figure; in fact, he has cultivated a sizeable following in his hometown and throughout Lebanon. Assir is seen as an instrument of change to many Sunnis who, according to him, "lack a leadership figure"¹³. His popularity stems from his fiery criticism of Iran, Hezbollah and Syria as well as his critiques of the moderate March 14 coalition.

Early this year he charged that Hezbollah "maintained a sectarian monopoly of the resistance [against Israel] in order to divide the Islamic groups and push through the Iranian project." He stressed that "it is a religious obligation to support the oppressed against the oppressors and everyone knows that the Syrian regime is one of the most oppressive there is... it is flattening our homes and mosques"¹³. Thus Assir, who once stressed his opposition to communal fighting, has since become a catalyst for it.

Is There A Future For The "Moderate Sunni Trend"? Yes but...

In the end, the only way to shield Lebanon from regional instability

9 Mohammed Zaatari, "Sidon preacher questions impartiality of judge," 1 December 2012.

10 Mohammed Zaatari, "Palestinian Islamist group severs Hezbollah ties," 5 December 2012.

11 Now Lebanon, "Assir moving to form Sidon 'resistance brigade'" <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=457748>, 1 December 2012.

12 Ahmad al-Assir, "Al-Assir: A New Guardian of 'Sunni Interest' in Lebanon," interview by Radwan Mortada <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4759>, March 2, 2012.

13 Ibid.

and Shiite-Sunni strife is to reestablish a credible moderate Sunni leadership. To do so, Saad Hariri must first return to Lebanon and truly lead. When Walid Jumblatt (often described as the weathervane of Lebanon) was asked by *Now Lebanon* what he thought of Ahmad al-Assir's Salafi movement he responded by saying, "When the moderate Future Movement is absent, any vacuum is filled, so this is why Sheikh Saad [Hariri] should come back and lead what his father did: the moderate Sunni trend"¹⁴.

In addition to Saad Hariri's return, March 14th must stop pursuing the removal of Prime Minister Miqati, which it has done since Lebanon's intelligence chief was assassinated. Not only will this policy backfire and lead to more violence, but it is not supported by any Western country. The policy should rather be one of working with elements within the government who want to empower the state—such as Walid Jumblatt, Najib Miqati, President Michel Suleiman and even Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri.

By promoting the authority of the central government and making it more effective, which was March 14's policy until October, radical groups will be increasingly marginalized. Moreover, it is the only realistic way of addressing Hezbollah's overwhelming military advantage. Although this seems unlikely now, it may become plausible after the fall of the Syrian regime that a politically weakened

Hezbollah might start allowing greater governmental control over its arsenal. This would only be the case, however, if the Shiite community felt it could trust the Lebanese government.

Regional Ramifications

Consequently, if the state remains paralyzed, the euphoria that will hit the Sunni community when Bashar al-Assad falls will lead to further instability if harnessed by the radicals. Moreover, an emboldened Sunni community, encouraged by radicals such as Ahmad al-Assir, would likely confront a politically weakened though militarily potent Hezbollah. The likely result would be that Hezbollah would militarily entrench and increase its reliance on Iran, while the militant Salafist current would broaden.

While tactically, a Hezbollah militarily engaged with Salafists might reduce the threat on Israel's northern border, strategically such an event could be detrimental to Israel's security. Ramifications could include a militarily besieged Hezbollah, which invites greater Iranian influence; a security vacuum in South Lebanon, which could actually lead to an increase of rocket attacks and infiltrations; the collapse of the Lebanese state; and the proliferation of militant Salafist groups—who not only dislike Hezbollah but also hate Israel. It is thus imperative that Israel, like the rest of the West, encourage dialogue, Sunni unity, and strong institutions inside Lebanon.

For Israel and Lebanon the unknown could be dramatically worse than the known.


14 Walid Jumblatt, "Uncertain breeze in Moukhtara," interview by Alex Rowell, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=458843>, November 20, 2012.

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