

## CHAPTER 4

### **Lebanon's Salafis: Opportunities and constraints in a divided society**

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#### **Introduction**

Lebanon's relatively open political system offers ample opportunities for ideological movements. However, as ideological movements battle to achieve their political goals, they get caught in the country's sectarian divisions and its exposure to geopolitical rivalries.<sup>1</sup> Lebanon has proved to be a forbidding terrain to the Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Leftist movements of the 1970s, and Islamists (both Sunnis and Shias) of the 1980s. Syria's control of Lebanon in 1990-2005 imposed limits on political actors; however, its withdrawal after the assassination of former PM Rafic Hariri in 2005 unleashed various political forces, especially its ally Hizbullah, its former ally Hariri's Future Current (FC), and facilitated the return of Christian leaders after many years of political marginalisation<sup>2</sup>. Syria's withdrawal also activated the Lebanese Salafi movement. Under Syrian control the dispersed Salafi movement's activity was, with some exceptions, limited to the social and educational spheres. But since 2005, Lebanese Salafis have become politically vocal and militant. In the predominantly Sunni cities of Tripoli and Sidon, Salafis have expressed concern about the political 'marginalisation' of Lebanese Sunnis and the rise of Hizbullah in Lebanon and its military involvement in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> Lebanon is composed of and recognizes 17 religious sects. According to CIA World Factbook, Muslims form the majority with a 60 percent and Christians are around 40 percent. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>. The three most influential communities are the Shi'a, Sunnis and Maronites who hold the House Speaker, Prime Minister, and President posts respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Christian leaders include Michel Aoun, Amin Gemayel, and Samir Gagaa.

The increasing political salience of Lebanese Salafis raises crucial questions about the movement's nature and (potential) influence in Lebanon. Whilst some observers believe that the Salafi movement is politically ineffective<sup>3</sup>, others have underlined its political and military influence in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> This chapter aims to assess the political influence of Lebanese Salafis and to identify the conditions that have motivated their increased political saliency. It divides into two main sections.

In the first section, I contextualise and conceptualise the Salafis by locating them within the Lebanese Sunni community; this will help identify the socio-political constraints the Salafis face in seeking to achieve their politico-religious goals. I argue that whilst the Salafis do not possess a unified political front, they can be conceptualised as an emerging protest movement. In the second section, I examine two interrelated factors that have provoked Salafi political mobilisation. First, the increasing Sunni perception of political marginalisation in Lebanon, which came after the assassination of Rafic Hariri and which is associated with Hizbullah's rise and its increasing political—and sometimes violent— influence in Lebanon. Second, the Syrian civil war, which deepened Lebanon's political

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<sup>3</sup> According to Radwan Al-Sayed, Professor of Islamic Studies in the Lebanese University and member of the Political Bureau of the Future Current, 'it is nonsense to believe that there is a Salafi movement in Lebanon; there are Salafis—around 300-400 poor fellows—but there is no Salafism as such'. Interview, Beirut 20 October 2013. Sheikh Nabil Raheem, a Salafi preacher, also shares a similar view. Interview, October 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Saab, Bilal Y., and Magnus Ranstorp. 2007. "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (10) (September 18): 825–855; Gambill, Gary C. 2008. "Salafi-Jihadism in Lebanon." *Mideast Monitor* 3 (1); Haddad, Simon. 2010. "Fatah al Islam in Lebanon: Anatomy of a Terrorist Organization." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (6) (May 17): 548–569; Khashan, Hilal. 2011. "Lebanon's Islamist Stronghold." *The Middle East Quarterly* (Spring): 85–90.

fragmentation, not least the Sunni-Shi'a divide, and formed an opportunity for some Lebanese Salafis to mobilise.

In assessing these factors, I find that whilst the Salafis do not have a strong, unified political movement—similar to, say, Hizbullah—they have exploited the transforming domestic and regional politics to make their presence felt. But the Salafis' influence in Lebanon is constrained by their minority status within the Lebanese Sunni community, the absence of a clear politico-religious ideology, their financial dependence on the Gulf, and their direct or indirect association with the extremist Islamist movements, such as al-Qaeda. As such, they remain a reactive protest movement that is susceptible to political manipulation by the more established Lebanese and regional actors.

### **Contextualising and conceptualising Lebanese Salafis**

Understanding the political mobilisation of Lebanese Salafis requires their contextualisation within Lebanon's multi-sectarian society. Like their Arab counterparts, Lebanese Salafis have to compete with Islamist movements, mainstream politicians and the official Islamic establishment. But in Lebanon, the Salafis face additional challenges given the presence of significant and strong Shi'a and Christian communities. As such, the diffusion of Salafi Dawa and the opportunities for using it as a vehicle for political and military mobilisation is limited to Lebanon's Sunni community (around one-third of the population). Within Lebanon's Sunni community the Salafis face three traditional loci of power.

#### *The Sunni Community: sites of political and religious power*

First, are the lay Sunni leaders who—like their counterparts from other sectarian communities—compete to represent the Sunnis at the state level. The National Pact of 1943,

which is an unwritten agreement among Lebanon's Christian (primarily Maronite) and Muslim (primarily Sunni) leaders, distributed the main official positions among Lebanon's communities, preserving the prime minister portfolio for the Sunnis. Traditionally, main Sunni leaders came from politically and economically influential families, such as the Solh from Sidon, Slam and Yafi from Beirut, Karami, Jisr, and Ahdab from Tripoli, and competed for official seats. These leaders initially opposed the idea of an independent Lebanese state truncated from Syria or the Arab world. However, as the idea of the Lebanese state crystallised, Muslim leaders began to socialise in the nascent country's institutional and political spheres.<sup>5</sup> The appeal of official positions, the political power these generate, and the patronage networks they (re-) produce, became a focal area of contention among Sunni leaders. One main outcome of this process has been the Lebanonisation of Muslim leaders. Though they continued to foster Arab unity ideas, and indeed clashed with their Maronite counterparts regarding Lebanon's foreign policy, Sunni leaders accepted Lebanon's 'consensus democracy' and the limitations this imposed on their power. The last and most influential of these leaders was Rafic Hariri, who, unlike his predecessors, came from a poor family in Sidon, but thanks to his wealth and Saudi patronage became the Sunnis undisputable leader in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

The second site of power is *Dar al-Fatwa* (House of religious edicts). Like its counterparts in the Arab world, *Dar al-Fatwa* represents Sunni Islam's official body, which houses the country's Grand Mufti. *Dar al-Fatwa* is one of the most influential Sunni institutions. It manages the community's *waqfs* (religious endowments, which include real

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<sup>5</sup> See Raghid El-Solh, *Lebanon and Arabism: National identity and state formation in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> For Hariri's rise and limitations within the Sunni community, see 'International Crisis Group. 2010. *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current* .No.96-26. Brussels.

estates), issues fatwas, and appoints and dismisses religious and administrative personnel, including mosque preachers and provincial Muftis. More importantly, *Dar al-Fatwa* is the official religious representative of Lebanon's Sunnis, who perceive it as the guardian of their community's interest in Lebanon. Historically, *Dar al-Fatwa* had close links to powerful Sunni leaders and prime ministers; it not only confers religious legitimacy on Sunni leaders, but it has played influential roles in protecting Sunni prime ministers from political dissent within and outside the Sunni community.<sup>7</sup> But similar to other official religious bodies in Lebanon, *Dar al-Fatwa*, and especially the Mufti, who is elected by religious and political leaders, have been influenced by domestic and regional political dynamics. *Dar al-Fatwa's* political stands have echoed those of lay Sunni leaders; the religiously moderate body has accepted Lebanon's independence, its religious pluralism, and consensual democracy. According to a Lebanese Islamist, *Dar al-Fatwa* has the capacity to:

[S]pread a more moderate vision of Islam and encourage religious actors to respect redlines –including rejection of takfir [the practice of accusing others of infidelity or impiety], acceptance of the nation's pluralism, recognition of the and respect for the state an its institutions, as well as tolerance of others.<sup>8</sup>

The third locus of power in the Sunni community is the Islamists, namely the *Jamaa al-Islamiya* and its offshoots<sup>9</sup>. Originally conceived in the 1940s as *Ubad al-Rahman*, the

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<sup>7</sup> For example when the March 8 alliance protested against and demanded the resignation of prime minister Fouad Saniora, Sheikh Muhammad Rasheed Qabani refused the demand and supported Saniora's political stand in 2008. This was also true when Qabani rejected March 14's call for Prime Minister Najeeb Miqati to resign in 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in ICG, Lebanon's Politics, p.23

<sup>9</sup> Other Islamist movement include Hizb al-Tahrir (Liberation Party). For a detailed list of Sunni Islamist movements, see Abdul Ghany Imad "A Topography of Sunni Islamic Organizations and Movements in

*Jamaa al-Islamiya* is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. One of its founders, Sheikh Fathi Yakan, was influenced by the political thought of Hassan al-Banna and Sayed Qutb. Initially, the movement called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon; however, the difficulties facing such a project in Lebanon led the movement to develop and moderate its theory.<sup>10</sup> The party, whilst theoretically maintained the goal of establishing an Islamic state, called for the abolition of the confessional system and for Lebanon's fusion into an Arab or Islamic entity. During the Lebanese civil war, the movement fought alongside leftist and Pan-Arabist organisations, and it resisted the Israeli occupation in 1982.

Although the *Jamaa* is the most organised Sunni Islamist movement, its political influence is limited. Historically the dominance of lay leaders in the Sunni community and the influence of Arab nationalist ideals, dear to many Sunnis, eclipsed Islamist political norms through to the 1980s. In the 1990s, the dominance of the FC in the Sunni community left limited political opportunities for the Islamist movement. In 1998, Yakan split from the movement and established *Jabhat al-Amal al-Islamiya* (The Islamic Action Front), which would later become a Sunni ally of Hizbullah and the March 8 coalition. After Hariri's assassination and the emergence of a Sunni-Shi'a rift, the *Jamaa* walked a tightrope in trying to maintain a balance between its support for Hizbullah's resistance to Israel and the Sunni communal anger with and fear of Hizbullah.

### *The Salafi trend in Lebanon*

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Lebanon." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2 (1), 2009, pp. 143–161.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the revolutionary thought of Qutb, Yakan adopted an evolutionary approach to the establishment of an Islamic state based on the theory of *Fiqh al-marhaliya* (Jurisprudence of gradualism), for an analysis of Yakan's political thought see, see Elsässer, Sebastian. 2007. "Between Ideology and Pragmatism: Fathi Yakan's Theory of Islamic Activism." *Die Welt Des Islams* 47 (3-4): 376–402.

The above sites of political and religious power form major constraints for Salafi political mobilisation. Lay politicians, especially the FC, continue to attract Sunni support; Dar al-Fatwa provides for their religious needs. The Islamists, on the other hand, have attracted a small minority of Sunnis. Before we examine the factors that have politicised Lebanese Salafis, it is important to ask questions about the nature and role of the Salafi movement: What is their approach to politics in general and Lebanese politics in particular? Who are the main Salafi figures and associations? And, finally, can the Salafis be defined as a social or political movement?

Lebanese Salafis can broadly be divided into two groups, which have two contrasting approaches to politics. The first, defined by Salafis as *al-Salafiya al-Ilmiya* (literally scholastic Salafism), believes in socio-political stability; it encourages the spreading of *Dawa* (call for Islamism) without the confrontation of political regimes and societies. This group usually supports and legitimates incumbent rulers<sup>11</sup>. Despite the focus on missionary activities, this variant may participate in the political process if it believed that this would contribute to the preserving of the *Dawa*. The second group is defined as *al-Salafiya al-Jihadia* (Salafi Jihadism), which believes in revolutionary and violent approaches to politics. It seeks to preserve and promote Islamic *Dawa* by confronting despots, conservative Islamic forces, and non-Muslims in the aim of establishing *Shari'a* by force<sup>12</sup>.

According to Al-Mawla, the origin of the Lebanese Salafi movement goes back to 1932 and to the spread of Saudi Wahabism to Lebanon, especially Tripoli, the predominantly Sunni city which for long resisted Lebanon's independence from Syria and which would become centre for Sunni Islamism. It was, however, in 1946 that the first Salafi movement

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<sup>11</sup> Sheikh Omar Bakri Fustuk, Interview, October 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., see also, Haitham Mouzahem, 'Al-Haraka al-Salafiya fi Loubnan: min al-dawa ila al-jihad' [The Salafi Movement in Lebanon: from *Dawa* to Jihad], *Al-mesbar*, no. 83, November 2013, pp. 71-100.

was established in Lebanon by Sheikh Salem Shahal, initially under the name of ‘Muhammad Youth’ and later ‘*Muslimoun*’ (Muslims).<sup>13</sup> But the rise of Arab nationalist ideologies, the emergence of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiya*, and the crystallisation of the Lebanese state, as mentioned above, overshadowed Lebanese Salafism. During the civil war *Harakat al-Tawhid*, which was founded by one of Shahal’s disciples, attempted to establish an Islamic state in Tripoli, but Syria and its Lebanese and Palestinian allies in the city prevented this.<sup>14</sup>

Under the Syrian-controlled Lebanon of the 1990s, missionary Salafi group established many educational, religious, and social associations. Most of the founders of these charities had studied in Saudi Arabia, including Sheikh Da’ie al-Shahal, son of Sheikh Salem. In 1988, Shahal, who is now perceived as the ‘founder of the Salafi movement’ in Lebanon, established *Jamaiyat al-Hidaya wal Ihsan* (The Assembly of for Guidance and Benevolence), which aimed to address ‘Sunni socio-religious needs’. With Saudi funding, Shahal built mosques, orphanages, and established the ‘Holy Koran’ radio station.<sup>15</sup>

As of 2003, and especially after the assassination of Hariri and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Kuwait and the UAE began to fund a younger generation of Salafi figures and groups.<sup>16</sup> One such example is Sheikh Radwan Al-Zoughbi, who collaborates with Kuwaiti Salafis and heads The Sunni Centre and Sunni Heritage Endowment. Most of these

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<sup>13</sup> Saad Al-Mawla, ‘alsalafiyoun fi loubna: alta’argouh bayna al-dawa wa al-jihad [Salafis in Lebanon: Fluctuations between Dawa and Jihad, 2012, found at <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/11/2012111593541563647.htm> accessed on 21 October 2013.

<sup>14</sup> See Imad, A topography; Haitham Mouzahem, ‘Al-Haraka al-Salafiya fi Loubnan.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Mawla, al-salifiyoun fi loubnan

<sup>16</sup> US pressure on Saudi Arabia after the September 11 attacks might explain the kingdom’s withdrawal of funding for Salafi groups. Now there are more than 23 associations, assemblies and centres in Lebanon, For a long list of Salafi established charities and religious and educational associations see, Imad, A topography, pp. 150-1.

associations focus on missionary activities; they stress that ‘*salafism* is not a party but a thoroughly scholastic school that calls for holding steadfast to the Qur’an and *sunnah* according to the “correct” understanding of *al-salaf al-salih*’.<sup>17</sup> However, as we shall see below, the rise of Hizbullah and the Syrian war would increase the politicisation of these groups.

The missionary work and reputation of this group of Salafis is affected by the activities of Jihadi Salafis. Jihadi Salfis have several origins. Some are Lebanese militants who fought in the Afghan and Iraq wars; some are Palestinians from the refugee camps in Lebanon who defected from secular movements and joined Salaf-Jihadist groups; others still, of whatever origin, are imbued with Al-Qaeda’s politico-religious thought. Poor Sunni cities, especially in the North and Beqaa, and Palestinian refugee camps, especially Nahr al-Bared and Ein-Helwe, have formed breeding centres for these groups. Examples include *Usbat al-Ansar*, which was established by Hisham Shreidi, an Islamist, and Jamal Sulayman, a former Fatah member, in Ain al-Helwe Palestinian refugee camp; *Jund al-Sham*, inspired by Al-Qaeda and also emerged in Ain el-Helwe in 2004, before it was dissolved and joined *Usbat al-Ansar*; and *Fatah al-Islam*, which emerged from the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp in 2007.<sup>18</sup>

In 1995, a Salafi Jihadist group assassinated the leader of a pro-Syrian (Sunni) Islamic association on the basis that it was heretical<sup>19</sup>. As a result, Lebanese and Syrian security forces began to crackdown on Salafi groups disregarding whether they were Dawa-oriented or jihadist. In 1996, Shahal’s assembly was disbanded after allegations that the curricula used

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<sup>17</sup> Imad, A topography, p.151.

<sup>18</sup> Saab and Ranstorp, Securing Lebanon; Gambill, Salafi-Jihadism; Haddad, Fatah al-Islam in .

<sup>19</sup> ICG, Lebanese Politics, p.26

in his religious institutes considered Allawis as heretics.<sup>20</sup> This move by the Lebanese-Syrian authorities deprived the Salafis of their social and educational network, and contributed to the fragmentation of the nascent movement. In December 1999, a group of Jihadi Salafis, led by Bassam Kanj, a former fighter in Afghanistan, clashed with the Lebanese Army in the northern Dinniyeh area, leading to the death of around 30 people. Although the group claimed to be training to fight Israel and to protect their *Dawa* from Lebanese authorities, Lebanese authorities accused the group of terrorism and of aiming to establish an Islamic state in the North.<sup>21</sup> The Dinniyeh incident led to further repression of Lebanese Salafis, including the prosecution of Shahal, who was held in custody until the Syrian withdrawal in 2005.<sup>22</sup> In 2004, the security forces arrested militants connected to another Afghan veteran, Mostafa Ramadan, who allegedly was recruiting volunteers to fight US troops in Iraq. The bloodiest confrontation, however, took place in 2007 when the Lebanese army clashed with Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in North Lebanon, leading to the deaths of 450 civilians, soldiers and Islamists and to the destruction of the camp.<sup>23</sup>

As we can see, Lebanese Salafis have engaged in varying forms—missionary as well as jihadist—in the Lebanese socio-political arena. But do they constitute a political or social movement? If so, what are the main politico-religious goals of the Salafis in Lebanon? Lebanese Salafis do not constitute an organised social movement, and certainly not a political party with common ideological and political goals.<sup>24</sup> Despite their increasing political

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<sup>20</sup> Radwan al-Sayed, Interview

<sup>21</sup> ICG, *Lebanese Politics*, p. 26

<sup>22</sup> Imad, *A topography*, p.152.

<sup>23</sup> ICG, *Lebanese Politics*, p. 27. For an analysis of the national and socio-economic profiles of Fateh al-Islam fighters, see Simon Hadad, *Fateh al-Islam in Lebanon*.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of various definitions of social movements, see Nick Crossley, *Making sense of social movements*, (Open University Press: Buckingham and Philadelphia, 2002) pp. 1-7.

salience, especially in the wake of the Syrian war, their activities do not always resemble a collective action, understood here as a ‘sustained campaign’, which extends beyond a single event and which involves a demarcated group of ‘self-designated claimants’.<sup>25</sup> Also, as I will illustrate below, Lebanese Salafis do not have a common political agenda for Lebanon. However if we understand the emergence of a social movement to be when ‘groups of disparate and ever changing individuals sense they are united and moving in the same direction’,<sup>26</sup> then Lebanese Salafis qualify as an *emerging* social movement. The potential success of such a movement, nevertheless, is contingent on socio-political conditions, which I will examine below. At this stage, Lebanese Salafis constitute a minority Islamist trend that is composed of disparate figures and associations within the Lebanese Sunni community. According to Sheikh Nabil Rahim, the social base of the Islamist movement in the North is about 4 to 5 percent; the Salafis form a minority of this percentage.<sup>27</sup>

Although Lebanese Salafis share broad perceptions about Lebanese politics, according to Sheikh Dai al-Islam Al-Shahal, ‘there do not seem to be a clear identification of political goals’.<sup>28</sup> All Salafis call for the protection of the Sunni community in Lebanon, of curbing the rise and increasing influence of Hizbullah, and of ‘purifying’ and spreading Islam through *Dawa*.<sup>29</sup> They also ideologically foster the principle of establishment of an Islamic state, but

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<sup>25</sup> See Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 184-185.

<sup>26</sup> Eyerman R. ‘Performing opposition or, how social movements move’ in J. C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and J. L. Mast (eds.) *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.193.

<sup>27</sup> Sheikh Nabeel Raheem, Interview, October 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Dai al-Islam, Interview, October 2013

<sup>29</sup> Several interviews with Salafi figures, October 2013

acknowledge that this is ‘almost impossible’ in a multi-religious country like Lebanon.<sup>30</sup>

Notwithstanding the consensus about the broad political goals, why have the Salafis failed to articulate a clear political agenda or to organise a political party?

Lebanese Salafis and scholars of Islamist movements attribute this to several factors.

According to al-Shahal, the Salafis are still in the phase of justifying the true nature of their mission and defending it against political accusations.<sup>31</sup> Sheikh Nabil Rahim attributes this to

major disagreements among the main figures in the Salafi trend. But Rahim adds that the

failure to articulate clear goals is also due to the multiple sources of funding coming from

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE.<sup>32</sup> Radwan Sayed goes further to argue that there

is no actual ‘Lebanese Salafi school’ of thought to theorise on politico-religious questions.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the *Jamaa Islamiya* or Hizbullah, who managed to adapt their politico-religious

ideologies to the Lebanese context, Lebanese Salafis have so far failed to outline a clear

ideological stand on political participation in Lebanon. For example, al-Zoghby argues that

‘Salafism, as advanced by al-Albani, Ibn Baz, and Ibn Othaiman, should not encourage

participation in politics, at least in the modern sense of the word.’<sup>34</sup> According to several

Salafis, political parties cause social and religious sedition and divisions.<sup>35</sup> But despite these

ideological constraints, other Lebanese Salafis, as we shall see below, have clearly been

crawling into the political arena. For al-Shahal (who ran for but failed to win a parliamentary

seat in 1992) if the broad goals of the Salafi movement required participation in the political

process, ‘we shall work towards this end’. For him, although the Lebanese context does not

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<sup>30</sup> Sheikh Safwan al-Zoughbi, Personal Interview, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Sheikh Dai al-Islam Al-Shahal, Personal Interview, 2013

<sup>32</sup> Sheikh Nabil Rahim, Interview

<sup>33</sup> Radwan Sayid, Interview

<sup>34</sup> Sheikh Radwan al-Zoghby, Interview, October 2013.

<sup>35</sup> See Mouzahem, *al-Haraka al-Salafiya fi Loubnan*

encourage the founding of a Salafi party, the movement's development may lead him to directly establish, or encourage others, to form a political party.<sup>36</sup>

### **Political transformations, perceived opportunities and Salafi protest**

As such Lebanese Salafis remain politically weak.<sup>37</sup> So far they have failed to establish a solid socio-political base within the Sunni community or to promote a clear politico-religious framework for Lebanon; additionally, they remain both politically fragmented as a movement and financially dependent on multiple Gulf donors.<sup>38</sup> Lebanese Salafis have been politically reactive, not pro-active. They protest in the face of political changes in the hope of expanding their politico-religious presence. Given their conservative, and in some cases extremist, politico-religious attitudes, Salafis have failed to mobilise Lebanon's Sunnis during politically stable conditions. However, missionary and jihadist Salafis become more salient under specific conditions, two of which are particularly important. The first is under circumstances of deep political, and specifically sectarian, divisions in Lebanon and the region; and second when mainstream Sunni leaders appear in the eyes of Sunnis as 'failing' to 'protect' the community against others. Under these conditions, Salafi figures, for ideological reasons or mere political opportunism, protest. Interestingly, as we shall see below, it is also under these conditions that rival political actors manipulate or exploit Salafi discourse and action for their own political purposes.

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<sup>36</sup> Sheikh Shahal, Interview

<sup>37</sup> Sheikh Rahim believes that the Salafi have politically 'failed'. Interview, October 2013.

<sup>38</sup> ICG, Lebanon's Politics, pp. 24-27; Interviews with Salafi figures.

Political transformations in Lebanon and the region since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and up to the Syrian civil war have generated these specific conditions.<sup>39</sup> This section will examine two conditions that have increased Salafi political salience: the rise of Hizbullah and the concomitant perception of Sunni weakness in Lebanon and the Syrian war.

*The rise of Hizbullah and perceived Sunni marginalisation*

For a decade and a half (1990-2005) Syria directly controlled Lebanon. Syrian interests in Lebanon and the Middle East formed the framework of Lebanese domestic and international politics and discourse; the country's chronic political divisions were regulated by and funnelled through Damascus<sup>40</sup>. The conducive regional and international orders in the 1990s, centring on a Syrian-Saudi agreement and a Syria-US understanding driven by Hafez Asad's strategic choice to enter negotiations with Israel, made Syrian control of Lebanon possible. This regional order had two main implications for Lebanon. First, the Saudi-Syrian understanding facilitated Hariri's dominance of the premiership, providing him with relative political autonomy to focus on the economic sphere—despite Syria's attempts to curb his influence. Second, this regional order enabled Hizbullah, the Shia's most influential political and military actor, to concentrate its efforts on resisting the Israeli occupation, which ended in 2000. But this Syrian-regulated division of labour between the leaders of Lebanon's largest communities began to erode in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Syria

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<sup>39</sup> For the geopolitical transformation Bassel F. Salloukh 'The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East', *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 48:2, 2013, 32-46, DOI:10.1080/03932729.2013.787830

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of post-war Lebanon, see Rola El-Husseini, *Pax Syriana: Elite politics in Postwar Lebanon* (Syracuse University Press: 2012).

opposed<sup>41</sup>. Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, after a year of intense international pressure in the wake of Hariri's assassination in February 2005, unleashed Lebanese political and sectarian forces. Until 2005, the Sunni-Shi'a division in Lebanon was latent; but Syrian withdrawal coupled with Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry activated this sectarian cleavage.

The security and political vacuum left by the Syrian withdrawal exacerbated Hezbollah's strategic vulnerability; to mitigate this potential liability, Hezbollah enhanced its political integration in Lebanese institutions and joined the government in 2005.<sup>42</sup> It believed that the assassination of Hariri aimed to shift the balance of power in Lebanon, to turn Lebanon against Syria, and to isolate Hezbollah and Iran in the region. The first indicator of Hezbollah's new strategy came on March 8 when the Islamist movement and other pro-Syrian forces organised one of Lebanon's largest demonstration to curb pro-Western attempts to alter the Lebanese domestic political balance. However, Hezbollah's attempts to flex its muscles in Lebanon generated fear and anxiety for other communities in Lebanon, especially the Sunnis, who formed the backbone of another large protest on March 14 to counterbalance Hezbollah's. The two protests generated two political camps, March 8 and March 14, respectively led by Hezbollah and the FC<sup>43</sup>.

The period 2005-2011 saw various bids by both camps to reorder Lebanon's politics to their own advantages. March 14 exploited Hariri's assassination to weaken Syria's influence in Lebanon and to extract concessions from Hezbollah: namely by demanding that

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<sup>41</sup> For a theoretical and empirical treatment on the domestic-regional nexus and its effect on Lebanon's stability, see Adham Saouli, 'Stability Under Late State Formation: The Case of Lebanon', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.19 No.4 (December, 2006) pp.701-717.

<sup>42</sup> See Adham Saouli, 'Hezbollah in the Civilising Process: Anarchy, self-restraint and violence', *Third World Quarterly*, 32 (5), 2011, pp. 925-42.

<sup>43</sup> In 2006, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah, which paved the way for FPM to become an ally of Hezbollah, see Ibid.

the armed movement surrender its weapons to the Lebanese state. This domestic strategy was conducive to Western regional and international attempts to isolate Syria and weaken the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah camp. But March 14's behaviour heightened Hizbullah's fears and corroborated its perception of a pro-western strategy aiming to subdue its resistance against Israel. The mutual suspicions and the underlying interactions between the two camps aggravated the sectarian Sunni-Shi'a cleavage in Lebanon. Three main episodes have, however, led to an increased perception and feeling of Sunni weakness.<sup>44</sup>

The first involved Hizbullah's impressive military and political performance during the 2006 war with Israel, which aroused fears among many Sunnis who 'worried that the now more politically active and far better armed Shiites would be tempted to impose their rule'.<sup>45</sup> In December 2006 and January 2007 Sunni worries increased when March 8, which now was in alliance by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, organised a huge protest which was followed by a sit-in in Beirut's—predominantly Sunni—city centre. The protest came after Shia ministers and a March 8 Christian ally walked-out of the government of Prime Minister Fouad Saniora (FC), deeming it unconstitutional.<sup>46</sup> The March 8 sit-in and the political and institutional paralysis it caused heightened the sectarian divisions. The unwillingness of the army and security forces to clear the demonstrations led many supporters of the Future Current to demand weapons for 'self-protection'.

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<sup>44</sup> Whether the perception of Sunni marginalization is real or not requires a different analysis, which goes beyond the scope of this study. After the assassination of Hariri, the FC and March 14 made important advances in Lebanese politics, including the Syrian withdrawal, the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate Hariri's assassination, a triumph in the 2009 parliamentary elections, and urged Syria to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon.

<sup>45</sup> ICG, Lebanon's Politics, p.12.

<sup>46</sup> The major disagreements between the two centred on the legality of establishment an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of Hariri.

The second episode came in May 2008 when Saniora's government called for the dismantling of Hizbullah's telecommunication network, which Hizbullah considers indispensable in its war with Israel, and the ousting of the Beirut airport security chief who has close ties to Hizbullah. As a reaction, Hizbullah and its allies stormed west Beirut, overwhelming the FC's unprepared and ill-motivated private security and placing Saad Hariri (Rafic's son and leader of the Future Current) under siege.<sup>47</sup> Despite Hizbullah's exercise of restraint and its endeavours to prevent a sectarian civil war, its Beirut offensive reflected the movement's commitment to its strategic goals, especially those associated with the war against Israel.<sup>48</sup>

Hizbullah's offensive, which March 14 framed as the 'invasion of Beirut', exposed the FC and Hariri's political and military weakness; it imposed a political settlement in Lebanon, facilitating the election of a new president, Michel Suleiman. Despite March 14's victory in the 2009 parliamentary elections, which revealed a strong Sunni communal support for Hariri, the politico-military balance in Lebanon gave Hizbullah an unofficial veto at the level of national decision-making. Saudi-Syrian rapprochement in 2009 led Saad Hariri to visit Nasrallah in Beirut and President Bashar Asad in Syria; whilst these visits reflected political pragmatism, reiterating Lebanon's vulnerability to regional shifts in power, they symbolised weakness in the eyes of many Sunnis.

Thirdly, in January 2011 March 8 and FMP withdraw from the national unity government, causing the collapse of government led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri.<sup>49</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> See *International Crisis Group Briefing*, Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapon Turn Inward, Middle East Report, No.73, 15 May 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Saouli, Hizbullah in the Civilising process

<sup>49</sup> This came after two years of deepened division between Hizbullah and March 14 regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). The STL leaked information indicating Hizbullah's alleged involvement in

resignation—which was humiliatingly timed and announced during Hariri’s meeting with President Barak Obama—and the coming to power of Najib Miqati, a former Hariri ally with close ties to Syria, reinforced Sunni perception of a Hizbullah-Assad conspiracy to marginalise their leader and community. As a result of Hariri’s dismissal, Sunni areas and towns throughout Lebanon revolted by blocking streets and organising sit-ins. In the eyes of his supporters, the constitutional coup that drove Saad Hariri out of power and sent him to exile presented a ‘political assassination’, which followed Rafic’s killing.

Rafic Hariri’s influence in Lebanon, his regional and international connections, and strong leadership provided many of Lebanon’s Sunnis with a feeling of security in Lebanon’s multi-sectarian society.<sup>50</sup> Although most Sunnis rallied behind Saad after the assassination of Rafic, the young and politically inexperienced successor failed to meet the challenges of post-Syrian Lebanon. He failed to interpret the major socio-political transformations that have characterised Lebanon since 1990, not least the emergence of Hizbullah, which possesses a strong demographic and socio-economic base, a disciplined organisation, and a regional strategic depth (Iran, Iraq, Syria). Saad’s strategy, which attempted to balance Saudi interests and Lebanese political calculations, publicly framed aims that were both unrealistic and threatening to its domestic rivals. One such goal was the constant demand made to Hizbullah to relinquish its weapons; the FC used this as a political weapon to curb Hizbullah’s influence and to challenge its domestic legitimacy. But this demand has had its adverse effects; not

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Hariri’s murder. Hizbullah raised doubts about the legality and legitimacy of the STL, see Saouli, Hizbullah, pp. 937-9.

<sup>50</sup> Hariri represented the leader many Sunnis desired in post-war Lebanon: a leader who managed to overcome the fragmentation and marginalisation of the community, which prevailed during the civil war when several of its figures were killed and its cities were controlled by non-Sunni militias. During the war several influential Sunni figures were assassinated, including Sheikh Sobhi Saleh, Nazem al-Qadri, Prime Minister Rachid Karame, and Mufti Hassan Khaled.

only was it nonviable (weapons are sacred in Hizbullah's eyes), but also it exacerbated Hizbullah's fears that its domestic rivals were conspiring to extract political concessions. Moreover, the failure of the FC to realise these goals and to manage the political expectations of its political base have aroused frustration in the Sunni community.

It is under these conditions—sectarian fragmentation and a perceived weakness of Sunni leaders—that Salafis began to mobilise politically. Salafis began to express publicly what many Sunni hitherto conveyed in private. For Sheikh al-Shahal, the FC's political performance is 'weak and unstable', for it wants to present itself as a 'secular and national' movement when most of its power emanates from the Sunni community, which is now targeted from its sectarian rivals.<sup>51</sup> Sheikh Bakri Fustuk goes further to contend that the FC is loyal to Saudi Arabia and 'it is a mere tool to execute the Saudi agenda in Lebanon'.<sup>52</sup> Sheikh Rahim, on the other hand, argues that the FC is a main representative of the Sunni community—'it is a reality which we have to accept'—whilst it is not a 'tool' for the US in the region, its policies are conducive with the 'Americanisation' of the Middle East, 'which we disagree with'.<sup>53</sup> For Sheikh Zoghby, in reality the FC 'does not represent the Sunnis; for you could be Shi'a, Maronite, or Druze in the FC and gain political favours'. Because of the absence of a clear developmental strategy for poor Sunni areas, the community feels marginalised under FC representation.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst the FC attempted to delegitimise Hizbullah by accusing it of being an Iranian tool, endangering Lebanon's state and sovereignty and of aggravating the sectarian division, Salafis framed their struggle with Hizbullah in sectarian terms, accusing Hizbullah of

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<sup>51</sup> Interview, October 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, October 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, October 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Sheikh Zoghby, Interview; see also ICG, Lebanon's Politics, pp.2-7

‘repressing the Sunnis and giving access to the Safavid empire, now represented by Shi’a Iran’. To mobilise support, Salafis have tried to represent themselves as the protectors of the Sunni community. It is very common for Salafi figures to speak in the name of ‘*ahl al-Sunna*’ (Sunni community) in Lebanon, when, as already mentioned, the Salafi trend represents a tiny minority of the community.<sup>55</sup> During the May 2008 clashes between Hizbullah and the FC in Beirut, al-Shahal called for jihad.<sup>56</sup> In another event, Shahal threatened to issue a fatwa calling upon Lebanese Sunnis to defect from the army because of the latter’s failure to protect the Sunnis. It was, however, Sheikh Ahmad Asir, a salafi figure from the southern city of Sidon, who managed to articulate the Salafi message through political and violent means of protest. To mobilise Sunni support, Asir politically concentrated his efforts on attacking Hizbullah’s (and the Shi’a) increasing political clout in Lebanon by specifically targeting its leader, Hassan Nassrallah. Asir represented himself as a Sunni liberator against Hizbullah’s ‘plan’ to turn Lebanon into an Iranian satellite. In one conference he contended that:

the Iranian agenda is dominating our country...the Iranian agenda is killing us... Our men are being imprisoned by the military intelligence, which is loyal to Hizbullah and Iran...they killed Rafic Hariri...and humiliatingly brought down his son...In May 7 [2008] and its aftermath...they placed the government headquarters under siege.<sup>57</sup>

In a fiery speech he directly threatened Hizbullah’s leader by reiterating the FC’s demand for Hizbullah to surrender their weapons to the state: ‘I challenge you directly

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<sup>55</sup> See for example, Omar Barkri Fustuk, interview with Al-Jadeed television, aired on 24 November 2013.

<sup>56</sup> ICG, Lebanon’s Politics, p. 21

<sup>57</sup> see Ahmad al-Asir press conference <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYGKBP5m90U> accessed on 17 December 2013

Nassrallah, if you don't hand over your weapons, I will not let you sleep at night...until the [political] balance is restored in Lebanon'.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike Salafis of Tripoli, Asir's protests involved persistent attempts to block roads (including in some cases the strategic Beirut-South highway, which mostly Shi'a Southerners use) and occupy squares in Sidon. It was apparent that the Salafi preacher was emulating Hizbullah by trying to establish a Sunni counter movement; his mobilising speeches and press conferences, with modern posters in the background, tried to resemble those of Nasrallah's; but more importantly, signs of an armed movement began to become apparent. In 2013 he established his own 'security quarter' (Lebanon has many so-called security quarters, which aim to maintain the security of political figures and parties; but the best known one is Hizbullah's in Beirut's southern suburb, which Israel demolished in the 2006 war) around his mosque with armed men protecting the area.

With some exceptions (in one case leading to the killing of two of Asir's supporters), Hizbullah and its supporters within Sidon and those travelling the Beirut-South road exercised restraint and did not react to Asir's provocations. In Hizbullah's perception, the Asir protest movement is politically orchestrated by regional (especially Gulf countries) and domestic rivals with the aim of agitating sectarian divisions and curbing Hizbullah's influence in Lebanon.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the FC's response to Asir's protest, and broadly to the Salafi trend, can be described as one of deliberate ambivalence. The FC and the March 14 alliance

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<sup>58</sup> See the speech at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1MZ7ra75HU> accessed on 19 December 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Hizbullah signed an agreement with Salafi figures in order to defuse sectarian tension, but this agreement was aborted under pressure from the FC. For an analysis of Hizbullah's relations with Lebanese Salafis, see Alagha, Joseph. 2013. "Ideological Tensions Between Hizbullah and Jihadi Salafism: Mutual Perceptions and Mutual Fears." In *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media*, edited by Brigitte Marechal and Sami Zemni, 61–82. London: Hurst & Company.

exploited the Salafi protest to defuse tension within the Sunni community. On the other hand, March 14 harnessed the rise of Salafi groups to threaten Hizbullah of an ‘extremist’ alternative in the Sunni community. In its discourse March 14 wanted to delegitimise Hizbullah by presenting it as an ‘extremist’ armed movement that is fomenting the rise of Sunni extremism. But Some FC members would refuse such a conclusion, arguing that Asir was their rival and worked for Qatar, targeting specifically the FC.<sup>60</sup> Whilst the FC did not directly support Asir, it did not clearly condemn his movement; the FC allowed Asir to express his views, but given its influence and the support it garners, especially in Sidon, the FC did not want Assir to grow beyond certain limits that it perceives as threatening.<sup>61</sup>

In June 2013, Asir committed a mortal mistake and attacked an army checkpoint in Sidon leading to the death of several soldiers. As a result the army retaliated by attacking Asir’s quarters. After two days of fighting, which led to the killing of 16 Lebanese soldiers and many others of Asir’s men, the army terminated Asir’s protest movement. Asir went into hiding. March 14 condemned the attack on the army, but accused Hizbullah of supporting the army in its fight against Asir, allegations that Hizbullah has refused. As I will elaborate in the conclusion, the rise and fall of Asir, like other militant Salafis before him, became an issue that is open for political interpretation: some accuse the FC of giving up Asir after he ‘served his purpose’, others contend that he fell prey to a conspiracy orchestrated by Hizbullah and executed by the army.<sup>62</sup>

### *The Syrian war and Salafi Jihadism in Lebanon*

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<sup>60</sup> Radwan Al-Sayed, Interview, October 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Mohammad Aloush, Interview, October 2013. According to Hazem al-Amin, Hariri informed employees of his social charities in Sidon to avoid attending the Friday prayers at Asir’s Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque, see Al-Hayat, 17 December 2013, at <http://alhayat.com/Details/582763> accessed on 24 December 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Sheikh Shahal, Interview

The Syrian uprising in 2011 and its transformation into an internationalised civil war deepened Lebanon's political and sectarian divisions with March 8 siding with Assad and March 14 supporting the opposition. The division, however, was not limited to a political debate about Lebanon's foreign orientation (officially Lebanon announced a foreign policy of 'dissociation'); rather each camp accused its rival of directly supporting its ally in Syria. However, in May 2013, Hizbullah officially announced its involvement in the war.<sup>63</sup> Hizbullah's intervention reinforced perceptions propagated by March 14 and Lebanese Salafis about the Shi'a movement's sectarian orientation, its loyalty to Iran as opposed to Lebanon, and its role in the emergence of a 'Shi'a crescent' in the region.<sup>64</sup> In the eyes of Salafis, Hizbullah was in alliance with an Alawi regime bent on killing Sunnis in Syria as it is doing in Lebanon. Although most of Lebanese Sunnis support the Syrian opposition, it was the Salafis who protested in varying forms ranging from Friday post-prayer demonstrations, to the blocking of vehicles carrying oil to Syria, to sending fighters to Syria. The Syrian war aggravated the already fragile balance between Tripoli's Sunnis and minority Alawis; since the start of the war, the Sunni Bab al-Tabeneh and the Alawi Jabal Mohsen have engaged in more than 20 rounds of sectarian violence.

However, Hizbullah's intervention, which contributed to shifting the military balance in favour of Assad, especially after the battle of Qusair in June of 2013, reactivated Jihadi Salafism. As one Salafi argues, after the battle against Asir in Sidon and the fall of Qusair, many Sunnis were in 'a state of emergency to stop the Farsi-Crusader encroachment', which is represented by groups loyal to Iran (Hizbullah) and other 'so called secular groups' loyal to

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<sup>63</sup> For analysis of Hizbullah's strategic interests in Syria, see Adham Saouli, 'Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Arab Uprisings: Structures, Threats, and Opportunities', *Orient*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2013

<sup>64</sup> For an analysis of the rise of Shia power in the Middle East, see Vali Nasr, *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future* (New York: W. W Norton and Company, Inc., 2006).

the West.<sup>65</sup> It cannot be argued that Hizbullah's military intervention in Syria directly caused the re-emergence of Jihadi Salafism since, as shown above, it was active in the 1990s and the 2000s; however, Hizbullah's military involvement in Syria reactivated jihadi operations in Lebanon, and hastened the attacks against the Shia movement in Lebanon. Five main attacks in the period July to December 2013 revealed a change in Salafi jihadi strategy in relation to Lebanon.

On 9 July a car exploded in Bir al-Abed in the heart of Hizbullah's stronghold in the southern suburb of Beirut, causing 53 injuries.<sup>66</sup> This was followed on 15 August with a more fatal car bomb in a nearby area, killing 22 and injuring over 200. An unknown group ('The Battalions of Ayesha') announced its responsibilities for the two attacks and promised more in the 'Iranian colonies'.<sup>67</sup> On 19 November two suicide bombers targeted the Iranian embassy, which is situated in Hizbullah's stronghold of the Jinah quarter. The attack killed 22 people, including the Iranian Cultural Attaché, and injured 140. This episode marked a major development: the emergence of suicide attacks in Lebanon's turbulent politics. The al-Qaeda-linked Abdallah Azzam Brigades announced responsibility, adding that "the double martyrdom operation [was] carried out by two heroes from the heroic Sunnis of Lebanon".<sup>68</sup> The confirmation of the identity of the attackers came as a shock for many Lebanese, including Sunnis. The first bomber, 21 years old Mueen Abu Zahar is from Sidon. The

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<sup>65</sup> Sheikh Bakri Fustuk

<sup>66</sup> See Nahar net at <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/ar/89884> accessed on 21 December 2013.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Aug-15/227505-explosion-in-southern-suburb-of-beirut-witnesses.ashx#axzz2oCb22jui> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23716271> accessed on 22 December 2013.

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24997876> accessed on 22 December 2013.

second, is a Palestinian refugee, 21 years old Adnan Mohamad, born in and resident of the southern village of Bysariye. Both attackers are purported to have been followers of Asir.<sup>69</sup>

Notwithstanding the Azzam Brigades' announcement, the condemnation of many Sunni religious and political figures and the attackers' own families revealed that a gap continued to exist between jihadi Salafis and the majority of Lebanese Sunnis. On 16 December two more suicide bombers attacked a Lebanese army checkpoint in Sidon. The bombers were Assir's followers from Sidon, and had close ties with *Jund al-Sham*.<sup>70</sup>

Jihadist groups have exploited the deepening sectarian divide in Lebanon, the perceived Sunni marginalisation, Hizbullah's intervention in Syria and the increasing influence of al-Qaeda related groups there, to increase their influence; as in Iraq or Syria, such groups grow and develop in collapsed states where socio-political ties among mainstream political forces have eroded. Some argue that the rise of such groups goes deeper, and represents an intensifying clash between 'revivalist' or 'fundamentalist' forces within and over Islam.<sup>71</sup> Whilst this may be plausible, such a clash can only be understood through the increasing Saudi-Iranian rivalry<sup>72</sup>, which intensified with the Arab uprisings and the Syrian war, as the case of Lebanon reveals.

In Lebanon, various political actors exploit the increased salience of jihadi salafism to delegitimise their enemies. Hizbullah's parliamentary block accused the FC and March 14 of

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<sup>69</sup> *Al-Akhbar*, 21 November 2013, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/195636> accessed on 22 December 2013.

<sup>70</sup> *Al-Hayat* 17 December 2013 <http://alhayat.com/Details/582965>; *As-Safir* 17 December 2013 <https://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionID=2648&ChannelID=64119&ArticleID=1752> accessed on 22 December 2013

<sup>71</sup> See for example Nasr, *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future* and Radwa al-Sayed, *Al-Siraa al Islam* [The struggle for Islam], (Beirut: Dar al-Ketab, 2005)

<sup>72</sup> Salloukh, op cit. 37

creating favourable conditions for the rise and growth of jihadism<sup>73</sup>. Nasrallah directly accused Saudi Arabia of orchestrating the attacks on the Iranian embassy, arguing that the kingdom supervises these jihadi groups<sup>74</sup>. On the other hand, March 14 condemned the jihadist attacks and accused the Syrian regime and its ‘collaborators’ (Hizbullah) of seeking to destabilise Lebanon and drive the Sunni community to political extremism. After meeting in Tripoli, March 14 announced that ‘the Lebanese Sunni Muslims are supporters of moderation, wisdom and the state; they will not be drawn into the Syrian regime’s strategy to flare sedition and divisions [in Lebanon].’ However, to represent and delegitimise Hizbullah as a harbinger of Sunni jihadism, they added: ‘we reject some Shi’a hardliners who have come from Tehran through transnational [ideology of] Wilayat al-Fakih [Consult of the Jurisprudent], which has repressed, excommunicated, bombed, and killed’.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusions: Assessing the saliency of Lebanese Salafis**

In this chapter I aimed to assess the political influence of Lebanese Salafis by exploring the conditions that increase their political saliency. I showed that the Salafis represent a dispersed religio-political minority within Lebanon’s Sunni community. The Salafi trend has been constrained by three power sites in the Sunni community: traditional lay politicians, *Dar al-Fatwa*, and mainstream Islamist parties, such as the *al-Jamaa Islamiya*. The trend has so far failed to articulate a politico-religious ideology for multi-sectarian Lebanon. And, more importantly, despite the political and sectarian divides in Lebanon, Salafis have failed to politically mobilise the Sunni community; as such, the Salafi trend

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<sup>73</sup> For Hizbullah’s announcement, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQw0IEIH34c> accessed on 24 December 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Hassan Nasrallah, interview with Orange Television aired on 3 December 2013.

<sup>75</sup> See Al-Hayat 16 December 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/582462> accessed on 22 December 2013.

lacks the socio-political base to establish a strong political presence in Lebanon. Jihadists exploit sectarian agitation and state weakness or collapse to promote their politico-religious goals. The chapter finds that Lebanese Salafis have been mobilised due two interrelated factors: the rise of Hizbullah and the associated perceived Sunni weakness and the war in Syria, which aggravated the political sectarian divisions in Lebanon. This activation has given rise to an extreme sectarian discourse, political protest, and increasing level of violence, especially associated with Asir's battle with the army and the latest suicide bombings.

However, does the Salafi movement have the potential for growth and development? The answer to this question depends on the ability of the movement to establish a socio-political base in Lebanon and to promote a clear a political agenda. Whilst the latter is possible, given that in theory some Salafis believe this is permissible, the former is more problematic. To establish a social base, Salafis would require a lot of funding. Most Lebanese political forces garner financial support from external actors, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran. So far, the FC and March 14 continue to be Saudi Arabia's main allies in Lebanon. Whether Saudi Arabia, which has played a crucial role in funding Salafi groups outside the kingdom<sup>76</sup>, is willing to transform the Salafis into its main ally in Lebanon is doubtful. The FC, which continues to be the most influential actor within the Sunni community, would constrain the rise of such groups, as this would be threatening to its own interests. On the other hand, the donors from multiple Gulf sources (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait), who may have competing agendas and who fund different groups, continue to contribute to the division of the Salafi trend.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See for example, Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'The minaret and the palace: obedience at home and rebellion abroad', both in Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), *Kingdom without borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008)

<sup>77</sup> Raheem Interview.

As such, and until now, just as Lebanese Salafis exploit political divisions to their own advantage, other political actors manipulate the Salafis in their own battles. It is very common to accuse one actor or another of “fostering” such groups. Commenting on Fateh al-Islam’s battle with the army in Nahr el-Bared, an ICG report concludes that:

‘Known to all, manipulated by many and ultimately controlled by none...Fatah al-Islam lacked a clear vision and perished amid an orgy of nihilistic violence that illustrated the fragmentation, confusion and limits of Lebanon’s salafi jihadism’.<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, in the rise and fall of Asir, different political actors accused him of playing proxy for Qatar, FC, or as indirectly benefitting Israel. Whilst as we saw above some FC members consider him as a rival, others argue that ‘Asir is a phenomenon that was found by some political forces to combat Hizbullah, and when he revolted against his founders his short-lived movement was terminated’<sup>79</sup>.

As a protest movement that lacks a strong social base, Lebanese missionary and jihadist Salafis continue to operate within the broader politico-strategic environment of the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Speaking of missionary Salafis, Fustuk argues that their behaviour is regulated and determined by Saudi-Iranian rivalry or cooperation<sup>80</sup>.

It is not uncommon that Islamist groups are manipulated in political battles of others. President Sadat of Egypt fostered the Islamists to counterbalance the Nasserites; the US and Saudi Arabia funded and trained the Islamists in Afghanistan to resist the Soviets; Israel initially facilitated Hamas’ rise as a counterweight to the PLO. It is also not uncommon that when these groups consolidate their power, they become more independent in their political

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<sup>78</sup> ICG, Lebanon’s politics, p. 27

<sup>79</sup> Zoghby, Interview.

<sup>80</sup> Fustuk, Interview.

behaviour. Amidst unprecedented political conditions in the Middle East, such as regime-society reconfigurations, sectarian violence, and regional and international rivalries to control the region, Lebanese Salafis have become politically salient; but it remains to be seen whether the Salafi protest movement can consolidate its power and transform itself into a social movement with strong roots. Such a prospect might require an ideological innovation, external funding, and a weakening of mainstream Sunni political actors—conditions which Lebanese Salafis do not, yet, possess.

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