

The Regression of the Salafis of Lebanon in Post-2011 Period

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Lebanon and Syria

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◆◆◆◆ Abstract

Since the eruption of the Arab protests in 2011, the Salafis across the Arab region emerged gradually to the political scene. Paradoxically, they were not able to form a coherent and potent political movement or party in Lebanon that is able to run the elections and enter the government. This research attempts to explore why they were not hitherto able to politically emerge though the Syrian conflict temporarily impacted upon their popularity leading to a spiral of political and violent events. It explores the factors that led to their regression.

Keywords: *Syrian Conflict, Lebanon, Salafism, Arab Uprising, Sectarianism.*

◆◆◆◆ Introduction

Following the Arab Revolutions in 2011, the Salafi movement witnessed dramatic developments, having wide influence on the politics of several Arab countries. The rise of Islamic groups in the Arab world has been one of the major ramifications of the 2011 protests. The most prominent was the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 which had implications on the Salafis in Lebanon and the wider region. The rapid developments of the conflict were concomitant with the rise of the Islamic groups fighting the regime in Damascus. Although the political and ideological orientations of these groups have diversified, their eventual goal is establishing an Islamic state replacing the current 'secular' Baath political regime.

The eruption of the Syrian conflict represented an opportunity for these groups to widen their popular support, run the elections, participate in the government and to replace the traditional Sunni leadership in the country. 'It was a mistake not to take an advantage of the rise of the popularity of the Salafi movement following the eruption of the Arab Revolutions'¹. These words of Salem al-Rafie, one of the prominent Salafi figures in Lebanon and the Middle East, summarize the impact of the Arab Revolutions on the Salafi movement in Lebanon. Al-Rafie bemoans the absence of a coherent Salafi political movement or party in Lebanon and substantial funding from regional states to form a potent political party that is able to advance its interests and ideological visions.

This research attempts to explore why they were not hitherto able to politically emerge, run the elections and participate in government, although the Syrian conflict temporarily impacted upon their popularity leading to a spiral of political and violent events. It is structured as follows. The first section will explore the Salafi movement in Lebanon and its ideological and political perspectives. The second section will probe the factors that hitherto prohibited the Salafi movement from playing an instrumental political role in Lebanon in post-2011 period.

◆◆◆◆ Salafism in Lebanon

Salafism is an ideology seeking to 'refine' Islam through purifying it from Bid'a (religious heresy)². It invokes the literal interpretations of the religious text and seeks to return to the traditions of the pious companions of the Prophet Muhammad³ and saves Islam from distortions and forgeries that befallen it over centuries. The figure who laid the foundations of Salafism in Lebanon and formed a religious movement was Sheikh Salem al-Shahhal (1922-2008) from Tripoli, the largest Sunni city in Lebanon. His movement was called Muslīmūn (Muslims) which sought to promote the principles of Islam and employing critical rhetoric against Sufism⁴.

The Salafis conventional typology is as follows: purists, activists and jihadists⁵. The purists emphasize a political focus of their movements denouncing the participation in the political process and employ a non-violent approach. They call for a down-up approach to build an Islamic society and eventually an Islamic state. They emphasize the role of religious missionaries, propagation, purification, and education approaches to raise Muslims' awareness of the need of refining Islam from Bid'a and building an Islamic society that adheres to their religious

¹ Interview with Salem al-Rafie, a leading Salafi figure and former head of Association of Muslim Scholars in Lebanon, March 17, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

² Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism From The Perspective of Conceptual History", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010).

³ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ Abdel-Ghani Imad, *Al-Salafiyya wa-Salafiūn: Al-Hawiyya wal-Moughāyra: Qirā'a fī Al-Tajrowba Al-Lubnāniyya* (Beirut: Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought, 2016), 146-53.

⁵ There are other differences between these groups such as their position toward the Lebanese state, sectarian political parties and other sects. Some of the Salafi jihadi groups reject the existence of the Lebanese state and the contacts with Hezbollah, and accuse their opponents of apostasy.

perspectives⁶. Conversely, activists (harakis) call for participation in the political process. They consider political participation as an important approach to put their religious views in practice and to implement Sharia law. Finally, jihadists take a militant position with the pretext that the ongoing events in the Arab and Islamic world cannot be tapped into their interests without reverting to violence and armed conflict⁷. The main thread that cuts through the three categories is their aim to purify Islam from distortions, forgeries, and Bid'a. They, however, disagree on the strategies to achieve these objectives.

The disruption of the political influence of the traditional Sunni leaders in Lebanon after the war contributed to the emergence of the Salafi groups. 'The defeat of the Sunni militias, the general radicalization of the Sunni left and the upsurge of radical Islamism in the 1980s left the Sunni zu'ama in a much weaker position than at the outbreak of the war'⁸. The defeat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization after the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 weakened the left currents in the country in particular Sunni figures and parties. Two main Sunnis figures were also assassinated during the war, Mufti Hassan Khaled (1921-89) and former PM Rashid Karami (1921-87) who was then the most influential Sunni figure. In addition, the rise of al-Qaeda and Mujahidin in Afghanistan war in the 1980s bolstered the Islamic currents within the community. The successor of Khaled, Shiekh Muhammad Kubhani, was not able to resuscitate the influence of Dar al-Iftā'a, Sunni main religious institution in Lebanon, and extend its authority within the Sunni community⁹. According to Pall, the number of Mosques which are under the control of the Salafis are about 40 out of 110 in Tripoli, all seven mosques in Bab al-Tabbanah, and 15 out of 30 mosques in Wadi Khaled¹⁰.

The Salafi movement in Lebanon witnessed two dramatic developments in recent years. The first dramatic development was the implications of the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 which was followed by the withdrawal of the Syrian armed forces from the country in the same year¹¹. During its military presence, the Syrian security forces quelled the Salafis in the country and imprisoned many of them and placed restrictions on their political and social activities. They faced obstruction from the Syrian army in 1980s when Damascus sought to quell Islamic movements after the armed conflict with Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. Furthermore, many Salafi clerics were either imprisoned or fled the country in 2000 after the Lebanese armed forces crushed their activities in the mountains of Dinniyeh to the east of Tripoli¹². After its military withdrawal in 2005, many of them were released from prison and the restrictions on their activities were left. The Salafi movement flourished and their activities expanded and diversified substantially and their religious and non-for-profit organizations and associations and mosques increased remarkably. According to the Lebanese scholar Saud Al-Mawla, a specialist in the study of the Salafi movement, there is currently more than 25 Salafi organization and association active in Lebanon¹³.

Hariri's assassination was not without repercussions and was followed by several consecutive and tumultuous events. Hariri's assassination 'made him a martyr and a rallying point for all Sunnis because they had a common enemy—Shi'a Hezbollah'¹⁴. Post his assassination, Hezbollah and the Future Movement, the major Sunni party, disputed over the former armed wing (the Resistance) and the diplomatic relations with Syria after it was accused of assassinating him. This conflict culminated when it morphed into an armed conflict in May 2008 between the two parties and their allies¹⁵. The May clashes heightened the communal identity of the Sunni community and the Future Movement cunningly inculcated a sense of fear among its followers about the threat of Hezbollah's accumulation of power to mobilise them¹⁶. These dramatic events were echoed in the speeches of

the Salafi figures who usually employ inflammatory sectarian language. The Salafi movement rhetoric is based on manipulating the grievances of their community and the 'insidious' attempts from the Shiite parties and the West, especially after the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the expansion of Iraq's influence, to undermine the culture and society of the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon and the Arab world in general.

The second development was the Syrian conflict and its significant implications. Two years after the Lebanese parliamentary elections in 2009, Syria witnessed the eruption of an armed conflict between the regime in Damascus and opposition over the nature and the distribution of power in the political system. The Salafi groups expressed their support for the Syrian fighters against the Assad regime since it represented an opportunity for them to topple it which repressed them during its military presence in the country (1976-2005) and to enfeeble its main domestic rival, Hezbollah¹⁷.

The internal implications of this conflict on the Salafi movement were no less significant. The popularity of the *haraki* stream in northern Lebanon flourished significantly since it stood with the protestors in the Arab world. This can be also explained with their ideological peers' position, the purists, who labelled the Arab Revolutions as a civil strife (*fitna*)¹⁸. Purists emphasized the necessity of unconditional obedience to the ruler. Safwan al-Za'abi, a Salafi leader and the former head of the Islamic Heritage Endowment (IHE) in Lebanon, does not consider these revolutions rightful¹⁹. Conversely, Salem al-Rafie, a prominent Salafi leader and former head of the Islamic Scholars Union in Lebanon, denounces the regime in Syria and called for supporting the armed opposition²⁰. Abdel-Ghani Imad argues that their popularity arose not because of the Sunnis conversion to Salafism. It was, however, because of their support of the political positions of the mainstream Sunnis regarding the Syrian conflict²¹.

The cases of Ahmad Al-Assir and Shiekh Da'i Al-Islam Al-Shahhal, son of Shiekh Salem Al-Shahhal, are evident examples of how the Syrian conflict impacted upon their popularity, although they were not able to avail this popularity to improve their political influence. Al-Assir, a Sunni figure from Saida, who voiced his criticism against Hezbollah and its intervention in Syria, called on the Sunnis to protest and organised a sit-in in Saida to force Hezbollah to surrender its weapons. Although he was not a reputable religious figure (Dā'i), he was able to gain popularity because of his independent status and the Sunnis saw him 'a future leader and supporting him and providing him with a religious platform conferred religious legitimacy and an avenue for social mobility in the city's entrenched hierarchy'²². Al-Assir phenomenon reached a conclusion after clashes erupted between his supporters and the Lebanese army which led him to flee his mosque in Saida²³. He was later captured by the Lebanese security forces. The second figure, Shiekh Da'i Al-Islam Al-Shahhal (1960-2020), was considered the head of the Salafi movement in Lebanon. He was known for his opposition to the Syrian regime and accused Hezbollah of targeting the Sunnis in the country and he considered it as a terrorist party²⁴. Al-Shahhal accused Hezbollah of masterminding an 'insidious attempt' to create conflicts and rifts within the Sunni community²⁵. He organised several protests to denounce the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict. He was forced to leave the country to flee the arrest of the security forces after they found weapon stored in his house.

The Palestinian camps in Lebanon harbored many Islamic movements including the Salafis who found in them a sanctuary to flee the security forces. In 1989, Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal took refuge in Ain Al-Hilwi camp in Saida fleeing the arrest of the Lebanese security forces²⁶. Many Salafi jihadi groups, like Usbat al-Ansar, Jund Al-Sham and Fatah Al-Islam, found refuge and incubation in the camps²⁷. Both Usbat al-Ansar and Jund Al-Sham

6 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 208.

7 Abdel-Ghani Imad, *Al-Harakāt Al-Islamiyya Ft Lubnān: Ishkālīyyat Al-Dīn Wa Al-Siyāsa Ft Mujatam' Mutanū'* (Beirut: Dar-Talia'a, 2006), 283-92; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "A Genealogy of Radical Islam", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (2005).

8 Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Sunni Religious Scene in Beirut", *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 70.

9 Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Sunni Religious Scene in Beirut", 71. Although Rafik Hariri was the prominent Sunni leader after the civil war, he was not able to extend his popularity outside Beirut and Saida. The north of Lebanon was abundant of traditional Sunni families, like Karami and Ahdab. Damascus also limited his influence within the community to ensure the weakness of his leadership and political alternatives in case they had a conflict with him.

10 Zoltan Pall, "Salafism in Lebanon: Local and Transnational Resources" (PhD Thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands, 2014), 87.

11 Raphaël Lefèvre, *The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon's Salafi Militancy*, Carnegie-Middle East Center (Beirut, March 27 2018), 3-4, available on: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMCEC_71_Lefevre_Salafi_Militancy_Final.pdf.

12 Raphaël Lefèvre, *The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon*, Carnegie-Middle East Center (Beirut, 2014), 11, available on: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/crisis_northern_lebanon.pdf.

13 Some of these associations are Islamic Association for Guidance and Charity headed by Da'i Al-Islam Al-Shahhal, Islamic Heritage Endowment, AL-Amin Institute for Religious Studies in Tripoli headed by Shiekh Bilal Hadarah and House of Hadith for Islamic Sciences in Tripoli. Saud Al-Mawla, *Al-Salafiūn Ft Lubnān: Al-Ta'rjwh Bayna Al-Da'wa Wa Al-Silāh*, Aljazeera Center for Studies (2012), available on: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2012/11/2012111593541563647.html>.

14 Geneive Abdo, *Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East*, Center for Middle East Policy - The Brookings Institution (Washington, March 26 2015).

15 Hussein Abdallah, "Day 3: Hizbullah, Amal take West Beirut," *The Daily Star*, May 10 2008, available on: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/May-10/48912-day-3-hizbullah-amal-take-west-beirut.ashx#axzz2lxQbVUsk>.

16 Abbas Assi and James Worrall, "Stable Instability: The Syrian Conflict and the Postponement of the 2013 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 10 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1071661>.

17 ICG, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, International Crisis Group (Brussels, 2012), 3, available on: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/132-a-precarious-balancing-act-lebanon-and-the-syrian-conflict.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/132-a-precarious-balancing-act-lebanon-and-the-syrian-conflict.pdf); Saud Al-Mawla, *Salafis in Lebanon: New Manifestations of a Movement*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha, 2015), available on: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Salafis_in_Lebanon_New_Manifestations_of_a_Phenomenon.pdf.

18 Pall, "Salafism in Lebanon: Local and Transnational Resources," 139-40.

19 Interview with the Salafi figure, Safwan al-Za'abi, March 21, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

20 Ibid.

21 Interview with the Lebanese scholar and specialist in Islamic movements, Abdel-Ghani Imad, March 9, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

22 Are John Knudsen, *Sunnism, Salafism, Sheikism: Urban Pathways of Resistance in Sidon, Lebanon*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Norway, 2019), 12, available on: https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2599516/HYRES_Research_Note_Knudsen.pdf?sequence=1&is-Allowed=y.

23 Amal Khalil, "Al-Jayash Yafukkū 'Asrā Saida," Al-Akhbar, June 25 2013, available on: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/185727>.

24 Abdul-Hamid Kutb, "Al-Shahhal lil Al-Sharek: Hezbollah Ikhtatafa Al-Dawwla Al-Lubāniyya... Wa Qarār Tasnifihī Jā' Muta'khran," Al-Sharek Newspaper, March 8 2016, available on: <https://al-sharq.com/article/08/03/2016/الشهال%20للشرق%20حزب%20الله%20اختطف%20الدولة%20اللبنانية%20وقرار%20تصنيفه%20إرهابياً%20جاء%20متأخراً>.

25 Al-Quds Al-Arabi, "Mu'assas Al-Tayyār Al-Salafī Ft Lubanān 'Ala BBC Arabi: Ahmad Al-Assir Kān Mua'tadilān Walākin Al-Dghat Al-Shadīd Youwallidou Al-Tatarrouf," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, August 1 2013, available on: <https://www.alquds.co.uk/الشيخ%20داعي%20الاسلام%20الشهال%20مؤسس%20التيار/>.

26 Mona Alami, "The Impact of the Syria Conflict on Salafis and Jihadis in Lebanon," Middle East Institute (Washington, April 18 2014), available on: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/impact-syria-conflict-salafis-and-jihadis-lebanon>.

27 Al-Mawla, *Al-Salafiūn Ft Lubnān: Al-Ta'rjwh Bayna Al-Da'wa Wa Al-Silāh*.

were founded in Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in Saida. The former is 'considered one of the most important Islamic forces in Ain al-Hilweh camp, and the most organized and widespread in terms of numbers and supporters' while Jund Al-Sham declares its strict adherence to al-Qaeda ideology²⁸. Another group was Fatah Al-Islam which is a salafi group took refuge in the Palestinian refugee camp in Nahr Al-Bared, northern Lebanon. This group reverted to violence to protect its military presence within the camp. The conflict between this group and the Lebanese army erupted in 2007 after the group robbed a bank in Tripoli²⁹. It caused massive destruction to the camp and the death of about 500, among them 226 militants and 179 soldiers³⁰ and led to dismantling the group military wing and the flee of its leader, Shaker Al-Absi.

Political Role of Salafis in Lebanon in Post-2011 Period

More than sixty years have passed since laying the foundations of Salafi movement in Lebanon and as yet it was not able to develop itself to potent political movement. At the regional level, the rapid developments in the Arab world in post-2011 period were followed by the rise to power of a wide array of Islamic groups from extreme to moderate. The Islamic groups which were oppressed under the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria were able to rise to power after their fall or the eruption of a civil war. The most prominent are the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups which emerged in states like Egypt and Tunisia. The organization of parliamentary elections in those two states resulted in their victory and therefore consolidating their influence in state institutions. In Syria, they emerged due to the ongoing conflict and many of the Salafi groups became militarized to fight the regime³¹.

The Salafis' political role in Lebanon in post-2011 period was eccentric, however. Although the Salafi movement caught the attention of the media and widely covered its activities and protests and enjoyed wide sympathy from the Sunni community, it was not able to woo Sunni followers and form a robust political movement like their fellows in the region. Several factors can elucidate why these groups were not able to rise and play a leading political role analogous to the role of Sunni Future Movement or Hezbollah within their respective communities. Firstly, these groups lack the organizational structure that can enable them to recruit followers and mobilize popular support. Although the Salafi clerics employ extensively sectarian rhetoric to turn the public opinion against their opponents³² and informal networks to mobilise followers, they lack an organizational structure with robust ideological foundations. The diversity within the Salafi movement has always incapacitated their ability to promote their political agendas. As will be discussed below, the conflict between them has undermined their ability to tackle the relations with essential parties, like Hezbollah, and how to develop their political position toward the unfolding Syrian conflict. Thus, a political party has two main advantages:

1. A political party can help the Salafis build an organizational structure which can persist unlike the current situation where the Salafi movement is based on the popularity of the Salafi leaders.

²⁸ Al-Mawla, Al-Salafiūn Fī Lūbnān: Al-Ta'rjwh Bayna Al-Da'wa Wa Al-Sīlāh.
²⁹ ICG, Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr Al-Bared, ed. and trans. International Crisis Group, International Crisis Group (Beirut & Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), available on: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/117-lebanon-s-palestinian-dilemma-the-struggle-over-nahr-al-bared.pdf>.

³⁰ Are John Knudsen, "Decade of Despair: The Contested Rebuilding of the Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp, Lebanon, 2007–2017," *Canada's Journal on Refugees* 4, no. 2 (2018).

³¹ ICG, Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, International Crisis Group (Brussels, 2012), available on: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf).

³² Abdo, *Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East*.

2. A political party that is able to unite the Salafis will strengthen their position toward other sects to promote their political perspectives³³.

There are several Salafi figures who are dominating the front scene nowadays with contradictory political perspectives thus impeding their efforts to form a political party. Salem al-Rafie, for instance, argues that the formation of a political party can create rifts between the Salafis in Lebanon due to their divergent views on political participation³⁴. As discussed previously, the ideological divisions within the Salafi movement are very prevalent. Both al-Rafie, who voiced his support to the Syrian opposition, and Safwan al-Za'abi, who considered the Syrian conflict as a fitna, accused each other of not being 'genuine Salafis'. Al-Za'abi considers Salafism as 'an intellectual, scientific, ideological, [and] intellectual issue, an Islamic doctrine that has nothing to do with political membership or framework. Salem al-Rafie and Da'i al-Islam [Al-Shahhal] consider themselves Salafis but they are not genuine Salafis'³⁵.

Secondly, the impact of external players and bankrollers is significant and can often delimit the Salafis' political orientations. The schism between al-Za'abi and al-Rafie cannot be only interpreted with their incongruent ideological visions. Al-Za'abi considers that Salem al-Rafie support to the Syrian opposition was due to 'pressure' exerted on him from Saudi Arabia which had influence on many Lebanese Salafis. The two main states that usually fund the Salafis in Lebanon, according to Safwan al-Za'abi, are Kuwait and Saudi Arabia³⁶. The Kuwaiti funding institutions, such as the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), are currently supporting the purist current and placing financial restrictions on the haraki branch. 'Kuwaiti purist Salafis effectively contributed to the fragmentation of Salafism in Northern Lebanon. Their financial support was among the crucial factors that led Lebanese purists to dramatically increase their influence and counterbalance the activists'³⁷. The traditional funding party to Salafis in Lebanon is Saudi Arabia which used to open its Islamic universities, especially the Islamic University of Madinah, to educate the Salafis, is seeking to curb the rise of the Salafis because of their strict adherence and bigotry of Islam which run against the political and social 'openness policies' of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman³⁸.

The role of external bankrollers is not limited to financial support. They often manipulate them as 'tools' to achieve their political objectives. As part of their policy in Lebanon, external players usually provide financial support to domestic parties to combat their opponents and secure their influence on domestic politics. The Salafi leaders in Lebanon do not deny the fact that their financial support is contingent upon the political objectives of the bankrollers. Safwan al-Za'abi argues that the absence of funding undermined the ability of the Salafis to widen their popularity and augment their political influence³⁹. Salem al-Rafie admits that if Saudi Arabia provides sufficient funding and political support to Salafis they will be able to increase their political influence and popularity⁴⁰. In the same vein, Radwan Mortada, a journalist specialist in Islamic movements, argues that their temporary rise in post-2011 period was because of Saudi bankrolling⁴¹. He argues that Riyadh financial support to Salem al-Rafie contributed to his popular emergence in post-2011 period. Mortada emphasizes the point that the diverse external bankrollers (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kuwait) with their contradictory political objectives have contributed to their fragmentation and incapacitated their ability to form a coherent political movement⁴².

Thirdly, the majority of the Sunnis in Lebanon adopt al-Shāfi'ī School of Thought while Lebanese Salafism adhere to al-Hanbalī School of Thought⁴³. According to Abdel-Ghani Imad, these ideological differences had undermined their capacity to woo Sunni followers. Those two schools of thought differ in their interpretation of Quran

³³ Association of Muslim Scholars is one of the initiatives to unite the Sunnis in Lebanon. It was founded in 2012 by a group of Sunni scholars including Salafi figures. This Association aims to revive the role of Islamic scholars in public life and strengthen the role of religion within the Sunni community. It did not however seek to run the elections or participate in the cabinet.

³⁴ Hashem Osseiran, "Lebanon's Salafists Poised for Parliamentary Polls?," *The Arab Weekly*, November 27 2016, available on: <http://www.thearabweekly.com/article/7141/Lebanon%E2%80%99s%20Salafists%20poised%20for%20parliamentary%20polls?>

³⁵ Interview with Safwan al-Za'abi, March 21, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Zoltan Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in The Levant*, Carnegie Middle East Center (Beirut, 2014), 1, available on: https://carnegiendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf.

³⁸ Geneive Abdo and Abdallah Hendawy, "Saudi Arabia is Trying to Contain The Spread of Salafism. It Won't Work.," *The Washington Post*, December 20 2017, available on: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/12/20/saudi-arabia-is-trying-to-contain-the-spread-of-salafism-it-wont-work/?utm_term=.ba320011cd00.

³⁹ Interview with Safwan al-Za'abi, March 21, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁴⁰ Interview with Salem al-Rafie, March 17, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁴¹ Interview with Radwan Mortada, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Abdel-Ghani Imad, *Hākimiyyat Allah Wa Sultān Al-Faqīh: Qirā' Fī Khitāb Al-Harkāt Al-Islāmiyya*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar-Talia'a, 2005), 63-73; Tine Gade, *Islam Keeping Violent Jihadism at Bay in Times of Daesh: State Religious Institutions in Lebanon, Morocco and Saudi Arabia since 2013*, Robert Schuman Centre Research Project Reports, European University Institute (Italy, March 11 2019), 4, available on: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2589877>

and Prophet Muhammad sayings. Al-Shāfiʿī School emphasizes the importance of Ijtihād (independent reasoning) in interpreting the religious texts while al-Hanbalīs emphasize their literal interpretation⁴⁴. Imad argues that 'the Salafi movement... could not establish its presence within its community and the culture of the Sunni mainstream is still so far Ash'ari and al-Shāfiʿī and not Salafist and rejects Salafism'⁴⁵. Salem al-Rafie implicitly confirms this point. He confessed that the absence of religious institutions and an Islamic University that promotes Salafism undermined their ability to widen their popularity within the Sunni community⁴⁶.

In addition to the ideological factors, the traditional Sunni leaders in Saida and Beirut will not allow the Salafis to be active in their traditional electoral districts and become their intra-sectarian competitors. Although the Future Movement sometimes manipulates the Salafis to widen its popularity, face Hezbollah⁴⁷, and to secure their votes in the elections, it will not facilitate their leadership and widen their popular support outside Tripoli⁴⁸. During the last parliamentary elections, al-Rafie confessed that none of the Lebanese political parties, including the Sunni parties and figures, contacted him to gain his support for the parliamentary elections⁴⁹. The relations between Future Movement and the Salafis are not stable and subject to domestic and regional conditions. According to Radwan Mortada, the Salafis became temporarily the main Sunni political players in Lebanon in post-2011 period. The presence of Saad Hariri, head of the Future Movement, outside the country and the rapid unfolding developments of the Syrian conflict left a leadership vacancy within his community⁵⁰. Hariri's absence from the country 'has left the Sunni population of Lebanon without its za'im, its leader... [who] is seen as the protector of his sectarian community and commands high levels of loyalty'⁵¹. It is noticeable that none of the Sunni leaders were able to take advantage of Hariri's absence. This can be referred to two main reasons. Firstly, 'Rafik Hariri's martyrdom' had cultivated for him wide popularity among the Sunnis and cannot be replaced from someone outside his family. Secondly, there is a regional decision especially from Saudi Arabia, the most influential foreign player within the Sunni community, that Saad Hariri should remain the leader of the community⁵².

Fourthly, the sectarian system in Lebanon impels the political parties in order to participate in the cabinet to make compromises which usually involves making political concessions⁵³. These compromises might sometimes run against the political views of the Salafis, especially the Lebanese people is composed of multi-sectarian groups and none of them composes the overwhelming majority of the population. It is not possible for the Salafis to make contacts with Hezbollah. This move will stand against their political and religious rhetoric and it will be considered a retreat and concession. For instance, the Future Movement had to make concessions and contacts with the Free Patriotic Movement and recognize implicitly Hezbollah's armed wing as a resistance in the government policy statement⁵⁴.

The Salafis attempt to conclude an agreement with Hezbollah is an evident example. Hasan al-Shahhal and Safwan al-Za'abi concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah in 2008 which denounced terrorism and violence between Sunnis and Shiites. Al-Za'abi argues that they proposed the memorandum with Hezbollah because they felt that they are 'manipulated' by the Future Movement as a spearhead against Hezbollah⁵⁵. Unsurprisingly, the Memorandum was rejected by Da'i Al-Islam Al-Shahhal and the Future Movement and eventually it was frozen⁵⁶. Al-Za'abi was later ousted from his position as the head of IHE under the pressure of the Kuwaiti Salafis⁵⁷. Al-Za'abi admits that Hassan Shahhal was threatened and 'forced' to withdraw from the agreement because Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement stood against it⁵⁸.

The miscalculations of al-Shahhal and al-Za'abi about the potential position of Future Movement and Saudi Arabia can be interpreted by their lack of knowledge about the mechanisms of the Lebanese sectarian system. Firstly, the Lebanese political system cannot persist without foreign tutelage. Each sectarian community is protected and supported by a regional player⁵⁹. It is in the interest of foreign sponsor to have one main leader of the sect which can enhance its ability to manage the issues and political positions of the sect. Both Salafi figures were not sufficiently percipient regarding the potential position of Saudi Arabia and its longstanding conflict with Hezbollah. Secondly, the Future Movement will desperately seek to prevent any of its intra-sectarian rivals to reach agreements with its inter-sectarian opponents. Such agreements will create rifts within the community about its political positions and will allow its opponents to manoeuvre in the communal group internal affairs. This will eventually lead to weakening its leadership position and its ability to claim its sole representation of the sect in the sectarian system.

Fifthly, the rise of militant groups in particular the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) raised the fears of the inhabitants of the region and worldwide about the armed development of these groups and their predisposition to adopt a violent approach in case they felt that their ideology is at risk. Thus, the ISIS faced socio-political resistance from both the governments and the peoples in the region regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliations which undermined their ability to woo support from their sectarian communities in Lebanon. Farid el-Khazen, an academic, ambassador and former MP, confirms plainly that the rise of ISIS and other extreme militant groups in Syria and the region raised the fears of the Christians in Lebanon⁶⁰.

In post 2011 period, the Salafi jihadi groups committed several suicide bombs and terrorist attacks against Lebanese, in particular Hezbollah social milieu. These groups became more militarized and their violent branches became more active and committed several attacks and suicide bombings in Lebanon. The conflict in Syria provided them training, weapons and ideological inspiration. Many of them took refuge in the mountain ridges of Aarsal in northern Bekaa between 2012 and 2017. They were off-shoots of the Salafi movement branches in Lebanon and Syria like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS⁶¹. In collaboration with members settling in the Palestinian camps, these groups committed several suicide bombings and launched rockets against Hezbollah-dominated areas in Bekaa and Southern Suburb of Beirut⁶². For instance, Naim Abbas, a Palestinian and Abdallah Azzam Brigades affiliate in Lebanon, is known as the mastermind behind some of the major bombings in Lebanon⁶³, who was later captured by the Lebanese security forces. These bombings and attacks resulted in the death and injuries of hundreds of Lebanese.

Another remarkable conflict which involved Salafis was the conflict (2011-15) between anti-Assad Sunnis in Bab al-Tabbaneh and pro-Assad Alawites of Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli. This conflict led to the death and maiming of hundreds of Lebanese and had momentous implications. Firstly, the Syrian conflict has significant impact on Sunnis in Lebanon in general and in particular on the Salafis. By November 2013, about 200 Salafis from Tripoli joined the Syrian opposition which consolidated further the Salafi jihadi current in the city⁶⁴. Secondly, the Salafis' resort to violence corroborated further the fears of the sectarian communities about their predisposition to employ violence to obtain their political objectives. The impact of their participation in the civil war in Syria was significant since it entrenched their extreme takfiri (apostasy) position 'that only infidels support the existence of the Lebanese state'⁶⁵.

⁴⁴ Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Uṣūl Al-Fiqh* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31-32.

⁴⁵ Interview with Abdel-Ghani Imad, March 19, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁶ Interview with Salem al-Rafie, March 17, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁴⁷ Seymour M. Hersh, "The Redirection: Is the Administration's New Policy Benefiting Our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?," *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2007, available on: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh?currentPage=all; Fidaa Itani, "Salafiūn Wa Mustaqbalūn Ma'an fi Hubb al-Hayāt Wa-l'unf," *Al-Akhbar*, July 30 2008, available on: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/115215>.

⁴⁸ Omayma Abdel-Latif, *Lebanon's Sunni Islamists - A Growing Force*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Beirut, 2008), available on: http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CMCE6_abdellatif_lebanon_final.pdf; Asad AbuKhalil, "The New Sectarian Wars of Lebanon," in *The War on Lebanon: A Reader*, ed. Nubar Hovespian (Gloucestershire: Arris Books, 2007); Abdo, *Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East*, 14-15. The conflict between Hezbollah and the Future Movement erupted in 2006 over Hezbollah's military wing. The conflict left deep implications on the Sunni and Shia communities.

⁴⁹ Interview with Salem al-Rafie, March 17, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁵⁰ Saad Hariri left Lebanon in 2011 until 2014 due to security reasons.

⁵¹ Josh Wood, "A Void for Sunnis in Lebanon," *The New York Times*, September 19 2012, available on: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/world/middleeast/20iht-m20-lebanon-sunnis.html>.

⁵² Saad Hariri is born in Riyadh and his major businesses are in Saudi Arabia.

⁵³ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 53. Interview with the Lebanese journalist and writer, Sarkis Abou-Zeid, April 12, 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁴ Hussein Dakroub, "Aoun: My Political Pact with Hariri Remains Intact," *The Daily Star*, August 6 2018, available on: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Aug-07/459351-aoun-my-political-pact-with-hariri-remains-intact.ashx>.

⁵⁵ Interview with Safwan al-Za'abi, March 21, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁵⁶ The Daily Star, "Salafist Groups 'Freeze' Agreement with Hizbullah," *The Daily Star*, August 20, 2008, available on: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Aug-20/50435-salafist-groups-freeze-agreement-with-hizbullah.ashx>.

⁵⁷ Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in The Levant*, 16.

⁵⁸ Interview with Safwan al-Za'abi, March 21, 2018, Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁵⁹ Interview with the journalist and media figure, Muhammad Obied, May 1, 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁶⁰ Interview with Farid el-Khazen, December 9, 2014, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁶¹ The Lebanese security forces, Hezbollah and Syrian army were able to dismantle and force these groups to leave the Lebanese territories in 2017.

⁶² Alami, *The Impact of the Syria Conflict on Salafis and Jihadis in Lebanon*.

⁶³ Amal Khalil, "Naim Abbas... Al-Muqāwam Wa Al'irhābi," *Al-Akhbar* 2014, available on: <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/26406>.

⁶⁴ Lefèvre, *The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon*, 12.

⁶⁵ Lefèvre, *The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon*, 12.

Conclusion

This research analysed the predisposition of Salafi groups to politically emerge in divided societies which is sometimes circumscribed by the institutional effects of ethnic or sectarian political systems. Firstly, the absence of organizational structure has undermined the ability of these groups to form robust party or political movement which is able to run parliamentary elections and participate in government. Secondly, the Lebanese sectarian system often induces heavy foreign intervention and external players usually play off the conflict between the leaders of the Sunni community. Thus, their ability to participate in politics often hinges upon the inclination of external players and their funding. Thirdly, the ideological schism within and between Salafis who adopt al-Hanbalī School of Thought and the overwhelming Sunnis who are mostly al-Shāfi'ī undermined their ability to attract supporters. The internal divisions within the Salafi movement have also contributed to their dispersion and ideological divisions between harakis and purists. Fourthly, the sectarian system forces them to use a conciliation approach. Their ideological and political principles often collide with the basics of political process in Lebanon, especially their utter rejection of a multi-sectarian and partially secular political system. Fifthly, the rise of Salafi militant groups undermined the popularity of these groups and created a rift between them and the Lebanese society.

Nonetheless, these groups sometimes have their indirect impact on the political behaviour of the mainstream Sunni political leaders. Their inflammatory sectarian rhetoric can push the Sunni figures to employ extensively sectarian language and to take extreme positions. This will lead to sectarian outbidding, complicate the political process in Lebanon and thus the ability of the Sunni leaders to reach compromises will be undermined.

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