



THE ROOTS OF CRISIS IN NORTHERN LEBANON

Raphaël Lefèvre



CARNEGIE
MIDDLE EAST CENTER

THE ROOTS OF CRISIS IN NORTHERN LEBANON

Raphaël Lefèvre

© 2014 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Middle East Center or Carnegie Endowment. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
P: +1 202 483 7600
F: +1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Middle East Center
Lazarieh Tower, 5th floor
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, Emir Bechir Street
P.O. Box 11-1061 Riad El Solh
Beirut
Lebanon
Carnegie-MEC.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at Carnegie-MEC.org

Contents

About the Author	v
Summary	1
Introduction	3
Growing Disaffection With the State	5
A Fragmented Political Leadership	7
Risk of Islamic Radicalization	9
Political Polarization Turns Violent	13
A Political Struggle Turning Sectarian?	15
Controversy Over the Role of the Army	18
Pulling Lebanon Back From the Brink	21
Notes	25
Carnegie Middle East Center	28

About the Author

Raphaël Lefèvre is a visiting fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center, where his research focuses on Sunni Islamist movements in Lebanon.

A Gates Scholar and a PhD candidate in politics and international relations at the University of Cambridge, Lefèvre is also an associate at the university's Center for the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa.

Lefèvre is the author of *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and co-author of *State and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-Optation?* (Lynne Rienner, 2012). His publications on Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa have appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *Sada*, and the *Journal of North African Studies*.

Summary

Syria's civil war is having a dramatic impact on its neighbors, particularly Lebanon. The spillover is glaring in the northern city of Tripoli, where street violence is rising, sectarianism is at unprecedented levels, and Sunni extremism is flourishing. This instability threatens to spread to other areas of the country. Yet, Lebanon's problems have as much to do with domestic dynamics as with the unrest in Syria. Lebanese policymakers must address a number of issues that have long been ignored.

Domestic Polarization and Marginalization

- The Lebanese Shia party Hezbollah provides active military support to the Syrian regime and has unparalleled influence in Lebanon, which fuels a Sunni-Shia divide in the country.
- Poverty rates are high in northern Lebanon, and Tripoli is broadly divided between poor neighborhoods and richer suburbs.
- The presence of Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon has exacerbated socioeconomic tensions. A popular sense of disaffection is growing, particularly among Sunnis.
- Mainstream political parties and official religious institutions, such as the Sunni Dar al-Fatwa, have failed to channel rising discontent. Some Sunnis are radicalizing and turning to Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups.
- The majority of Tripoli's population is Sunni. The Sunni area of Bab al-Tabbaneh is engaged in a long-standing struggle with the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen.
- Most Alawites are seen as supporting the Syrian regime, which many Sunnis strongly oppose. This tension has driven Tripoli to the brink of war.
- The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are supposed to guarantee security and stability in the country. But, despite improvements stemming from the implementation of a security plan, the dynamics on the ground have not fundamentally changed.

Challenges Ahead for Lebanon

Empowering Dar al-Fatwa. The religious body has the institutional capacity to help combat radicalism by providing state-sanctioned religious education to disenfranchised Sunnis. But to be effective it must be reformed.

Easing tensions between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh. The state needs to support civil society efforts to calm tensions between rival neighborhoods and to provide a platform for dialogue.

Improving socioeconomic conditions. The state should increase its investment in education and local infrastructure while accelerating the pace of administrative decentralization to reinforce the capacity of municipalities to tackle local issues.

Enhancing security. The LAF leadership must do more to address the grievances of the Sunni community because no security plan to calm tensions in the north will succeed unless it is accompanied by a plan to win hearts and minds. The government must also decide whether Hezbollah should maintain its weapons.

Introduction

As the conflict in Syria enters its fourth year, it continues to spill over the borders of neighboring countries and alter local dynamics, sometimes with significant consequences.

Lebanon, in particular, has been greatly affected by the Syrian civil war. An influx of Syrian refugees, now exceeding 1 million in a population of 4.4 million, has impacted the country's local socioeconomic and religious fabric. The ongoing stalemate in Syria has also further polarized Lebanon's already-tense domestic political situation, which is shaped by a schism between the March 8 coalition, broadly sympathetic to the Syrian regime, and the March 14 alliance, which is opposed to the government in Damascus. Most recently, the rise of Sunni extremism in the Syrian conflict has unleashed disturbing religious and security dynamics in Lebanon, with al-Qaeda affiliates that are fighting in Syria, such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, launching Lebanese chapters.

Nowhere is this spillover starker than in the northern port of Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, where local sectarian and political tensions have been severely exacerbated. This should come as no surprise.

The city—long known as Tarablus al-Sham, or Tripoli of Syria, because of its social and geographic proximity to the Syrian hinterland—has deep connections to Syrian society. Even Tripoli's own religious makeup is reminiscent of that of nearby Syrian towns, with an overwhelming majority of Sunnis living alongside a minority of Alawites who inhabit the hilltop of Jabal Mohsen that overlooks the rest of the city. Political disagreements between the two religious communities are long-standing and rooted in various grievances, but the fact that most Alawites are seen as supporting the Syrian regime, to which many Sunnis voice strong opposition, has driven the city to the brink of war.

It could even be argued that Tripoli has become an integral part of the Syrian conflict. Both the regime in Damascus and the rebels have gained a foothold in the city through local proxies. In addition, more than one-tenth of Tripoli's population is now made up of Syrian refugees. Street violence is on the rise, sectarianism has reached unprecedented levels, and Sunni religious extremism has flourished—all factors now threatening to spread to other areas of Lebanon.

These developments have earned Tripoli the nickname of "Lebanon's Kandahar,"¹ a reference to the hotbed of the Taliban insurrection in Afghanistan.

The rise of Sunni extremism in the Syrian conflict has unleashed disturbing religious and security dynamics in Lebanon.

Yet the quip is undeserved. In Kandahar, social conservatism and radical religious ideology were the primary drivers of extremism. The process of radicalization currently taking place in Lebanon's northern port city is more complex and should not be dismissed as the mere product of religious fanaticism. The roots of this phenomenon run deep—sometimes local or national, sometimes regional—and extremism's reach extends far beyond the walls of Tripoli to include whole segments of Lebanese society.

The rise of Sunni extremism in Lebanon, and particularly in Tripoli, is also often explained away as a product of the Syrian crisis. However, although the radicalization of elements of the Syrian opposition undeniably has an impact, this trend has at least as much to do with national, and sometimes even local Lebanese dynamics as well.

The past decade has borne witness to a growing feeling of socioeconomic and political marginalization on the part of Lebanon's Sunni community. This leads many Sunnis to turn away from the state and look for alternative sources of support and protection, including joining certain Islamic groups that provide services or working with criminal networks in exchange for money. And this comes at a time when the Shia Islamist party Hezbollah seems to be at its military and political apex.

This trend is alarming, especially when combined with the inability of official Sunni religious bodies to provide sound leadership to pious Muslims. A sense of marginalization opens the door to more radical, sometimes even anti-statist, interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, which calls for a return to the practice of the *salaf*, or the great ancestors and companions of the Prophet Muhammad. The real danger is that blossoming on the fringes of this conservative shift are radical currents recruiting disenfranchised young men to wage jihad in Syria—many of whom may return to Lebanon further radicalized.

Ultimately, the Lebanese army is supposed to be the neutral guarantor of security and stability in the country. But the force, given its historical ties to Syria, is viewed as a politicized institution by Lebanese Sunnis. And so far, it has not been able to quell fighting. In fact, some radical Sunni groups have begun to target the army and the military's weakness has fostered the proliferation of local militias.

The influence of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon is very real. But ultimately, whether the country is able to weather the storm and avoid falling into another civil war will depend on the ability of Lebanese policymakers to address significant issues that have long been ignored.

Whether the country is able to weather the storm and avoid falling into another civil war will depend on the ability of Lebanese policymakers to address significant issues that have long been ignored.

Growing Disaffection With the State

Northern Lebanon has long been one of the country's most deprived areas. There, poverty is reaching alarming levels. Statistics from the United Nations Development Program showed that in 2008, the north was home to 20.7 percent of Lebanon's population but 38 percent of the country's poor and 46 percent of its extremely poor.²

Tripoli itself is broadly divided between disaffected poor neighborhoods and rich suburbs with access to quality infrastructure. The variation in poverty levels between these areas shows the depth of such socioeconomic gaps. For instance, according to an unpublished United Nations survey from the end of 2011, while poverty struck 19 percent of the inhabitants of the suburban area of Basatin-Tripoli, it touched 75 percent and 87 percent of the people living in the urban neighborhoods of Abu Samra and Bab al-Tabbaneh, respectively.³

The Sunnis seem to be the primary victims of these socioeconomic inequalities. Research carried out by the International Poverty Center in 2008 suggested that significant disparities exist in northern Lebanon between areas mostly inhabited by Christians, where poverty struck 25 percent of the inhabitants, and cities that are mainly Sunni, such as Tripoli, where 57 percent of the population was considered poor.⁴

This persistent gap is increasingly leading to a resurgence of a discourse based, first and foremost, on sectarian identity that emphasizes the discrimination suffered by the Sunni sect at the hands of the Lebanese state. A popular Muslim cleric in Tripoli complained that the 1989 Taif agreement, which helped end a decades-long civil war in the country and regulates the distribution of power among sectarian groups, gave Sunnis political rights but “never addressed the socioeconomic inequalities the Sunnis are victims of.”⁵ Such discourse is increasingly common on the streets of Tripoli, especially given the ongoing conflict in Syria. The city has become a safe haven for mostly impoverished Sunni refugees from Syria, who as of March 2014 numbered 71,310 registered refugees out of 500,000 inhabitants—or over a tenth of a local population already living under strain. In northern Lebanon more broadly, there were 258,013 registered Syrian refugees as of that date.⁶

Of course, the Sunni population is not monolithic. Socioeconomic disparities within the Sunni community itself are also growing, which is particularly worrying because it leads to a high level of urban segregation and leaves many on the margins of society—and that can fuel radicalism. Often those who find themselves on the margins of society are more likely than their wealthier co-religionists to turn to a brand of Sunni populism that advocates extremism either against other Sunnis or against Shia and Alawites.

The passivity and sense of detachment displayed by richer sections of Tripoli when fighting erupts in the city deepens the divide. An armed leader active in

Bab al-Tabbaneh explained his frustration, saying that “rich people here call us ‘gangsters’ but they don’t understand that, by defending the honor of the Sunnis, we are also defending them!”

Such bitterness occasionally translates into symbolic violence against richer and more Westernized areas of Tripoli. Civil society activists in the city report that, when fighting erupts, some armed militants tour wealthier areas while firing up in the air and take people out of restaurants to “force” solidarity with their cause. However, such actions only further the poorer areas’ reputation for violence and extremism—thus marginalizing them even further from society’s and the state’s reach.

Bab al-Tabbaneh has emerged as a symbol of these trends. Once a vibrant commercial area nicknamed “the gate of gold” (*bab al-dahab*) for the quality of the handicrafts its market sold to the rest of the region, it has come to embody the decline of the Sunni middle class. It has turned into a pocket of extreme poverty, and it now hosts in a relatively small space over 50,000 inhabitants hailing from both nearby rural areas and Syria.

In Bab al-Tabbaneh, access to the most basic state-provided infrastructure or services is virtually nonexistent. For example, 77 percent of the respondents to a 2009 survey carried out in the neighborhood confessed to not being covered by either private or public social security.⁷ Thus, when it comes to paying the bills, such as rent, medical expenses, or school fees, many inhabitants are left with two options: asking a political leader or joining a religious charity. The leader of the military wing of a powerful Islamic group in Tripoli explained that organizations like his “fill the void which used to be occupied by the state: providing security, running hospitals, and even giving education to the kids.”

Ideally, the frustration of these disaffected Sunnis should be contained and channeled through institutions such as city councils, which are theoretically meant to mediate conflicts and serve as local relays of the state. However, the municipality of Tripoli faces challenges that prevent it from seriously tackling the severe local socioeconomic issues, as do many other Lebanese cities. Tripoli’s city council has been mired in political conflicts for years that have to a large extent paralyzed its activities, mirroring the path of Lebanon itself.⁸ A local politician bluntly stated that “the issue with Tripoli is that it has many leaders but lacks leadership.”

In addition, Lebanese law is ambiguous with regard to the extent of the city council’s prerogatives and budget. Concretely, these challenges mean that Tripoli lacks local investment in the most basic public infrastructure. A member of the Tripoli municipality complained that “the city is treated as a mere village by the ministries in Beirut—they interfere in our local affairs on a daily basis and don’t grant us any budget whatsoever even for the most critical domains such as social affairs.”

This disengagement of the public sector, including of its local institutions, is fueling a dangerous dynamic. Increasingly, residents of poorer neighborhoods are giving up entirely on the state and resorting to alternatives—Islamic organizations, militias, or criminal gangs. This shift may be treacherous. Similar situations in the past provided breeding grounds for the emergence of anti-statist ideologies, such as communism or pan-Arabism.

Residents of poorer neighborhoods are giving up entirely on the state and resorting to alternatives—Islamic organizations, militias, or criminal gangs.

A Fragmented Political Leadership

It may be surprising, on the face of it, that some within the Lebanese Sunni community are indeed attracted to anti-statist political alternatives—after all, a popular Sunni leader, former prime minister Rafik Hariri, was key in rebuilding and strengthening institutions destroyed by the country’s 1975–1990 civil war. But his assassination in 2005 dramatically changed that equation. With Hariri’s death, the Sunnis were left without a charismatic leader with influence at the top of the state. The subsequent ascendance of Shia Hezbollah only served to reinforce the anti-statist trend among Sunnis. Unlike the other militias involved in the Lebanese civil war, which were integrated into the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and required to disarm in the early 1990s, Hezbollah was exempted from giving up its weapons because of its role as a “resistance movement” against Israel. Since then, Hezbollah has risen to a position of overwhelming political and military dominance.

Today, a growing number of Lebanese Sunnis feel marginalized by the political process. Some are even starting to dismiss the Future Movement, a moderate party traditionally popular among Lebanese Sunnis that was set up by Rafik Hariri and is now led by his son, Saad, who has not been in Lebanon since 2011 because of threats to his life. The Future Movement is criticized for not doing enough for the Sunni community. This argument resonates particularly strongly in Lebanon because the country is a consociational democracy, based on an association of communities in which the patron of each sect, the *zaim*, generally gets elected in exchange for his ability to provide services to his community. The Future Movement has always preached these kinds of ideals, from strengthening the state security apparatus to state building. But in recent times, it has not been able to effectively fulfill that role. One of the Future Movement’s leaders acknowledged that “we have had financial issues since 2009 which have hampered our ability to provide scholarships and free medical care to many of our voters.” Even the party’s own employees are now only paid intermittently.

These financial difficulties stem from the reluctance of Saudi Arabia, long the financier of the Lebanese Sunni community and of the Hariri family in

particular, to continue bankrolling the party. Riyadh objects to the fact that the Future Movement failed to forcefully resist Hezbollah, which is backed by Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Iran, when the Shia party sent its fighters to take control of the streets of West Beirut in May 2008.

Today, a growing number of Lebanese Sunnis feel marginalized by the political process.

After Rafik Hariri's assassination, there were efforts on the part of officials within the Future Movement to set up a security team, the Afwaj al-Mustaqbal, that could transform into a full-blown armed group if Hezbollah's domestic activities became too aggressive against the Sunni community. Soon, however, the enterprise collapsed

after it became clear that the majority of Future Movement officials were not prepared to endorse such a move for fear of inciting further confrontations with Hezbollah. A political adviser of Saad Hariri summed up this reluctance by quipping that "in Lebanon, Sunnis win elections but they lose civil wars." Other Future Movement members pointed to the contradictions that would have emerged if the party driven by Rafik Hariri's state-building legacy had formed its own militia.

Although abandoning plans to form a military wing has earned the Future Movement praise from other Lebanese actors as well as the international community, a growing number of Sunnis seem disillusioned by what some see as the party giving up on its struggle against Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon—one of the platforms upon which it was founded. Such disappointment with the Future Movement only increased following Saad Hariri's decision to join a national unity cabinet alongside Hezbollah in early 2014. A video released in January 2014 featured alleged militants in Bab al-Tabbaneh accusing the Future Movement's leader of having "sold the blood of martyrs" and betrayed Rafik Hariri. The militants threatened to burn the party's offices in Tripoli.⁹

Despite the rising disenchantment, the Sunnis have not fully backed Islamists in the political sphere. In other Arab countries, similar disillusionment with secular parties seems to have translated into a surge in the popularity of their Islamist rivals. This trend impacted Lebanon's Shia in the early 1990s, when Hezbollah progressively took over the community's leadership role, but it has not affected Sunni politics quite yet. For years, the electoral ambitions of Sunni Islamists have been hampered by internal divisions between those broadly sympathetic to Syria's rulers, gathered in parties such as the Islamic Action Front and al-Ahbash (a Sufi movement close to Syrian intelligence), and those fiercely opposed to Damascus, including many Salafists and the Jamaa al-Islamiya—Lebanon's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Jamaa al-Islamiya was established in Tripoli, and the city is the group's main stronghold. But since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the Jamaa al-Islamiya has become the most influential Islamist actor in all of Lebanese Sunni politics. Now, the question is whether it can swiftly become an alternative to the Future Movement.

The organization certainly wields influence among Lebanon’s conservative Sunnis. It has successfully developed, over the years, a sophisticated nationwide network of schools, clinics, and charities that provides much-needed services to impoverished rural and urban Sunni communities, and it is very active in coordinating the local response to the Syrian refugee crisis. In northern Lebanon, the Islamic Education Association and the Islamic Medical Association, both affiliated with the Jamaa al-Islamiya, run eight large high schools and twelve medical centers as well as an entire hospital, respectively. In addition, some of the Islamist group’s leaders are renowned religious scholars, such as Sheikh Ahmed al-Omari, a respected member of the International Union for Muslim Scholars. The Jamaa al-Islamiya’s radio station, al-Fajr, broadcasts nationally, and the organization also boasts many “martyrs” from successive confrontations with Israel in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet, for all its legitimacy and achievements, the Jamaa al-Islamiya has not yet managed to translate its influence over Lebanon’s conservative Sunni street into success at the ballot box—not even in Tripoli. None of its candidates from Tripoli were elected during the 2009 parliamentary election.

Critics often point to the gaps between the idealistic aspirations of Lebanon’s Sunni Islamists and the Jamaa al-Islamiya’s pragmatic discourse with regard to domestic political issues as a reason for its failure to gain political traction. Even its stance on the conflict in Syria—the organization rhetorically supports the revolution but refuses to let its members go fight—is criticized by those who would like to see the Jamaa al-Islamiya take a more proactive approach mirroring Hezbollah’s involvement in the crisis. It is precisely those critics who may well find radical interpretations of political Islam more appealing.

For all its legitimacy and achievements, the Jamaa al-Islamiya has not yet managed to translate its influence over Lebanon’s conservative Sunni street into success at the ballot box.

Risk of Islamic Radicalization

The lack of viable, visible political organizations for Lebanese Sunnis is dangerous because it is combined with an absence of sound leadership at the institutional religious level. In this void, the pan-Islamic doctrine in all its variations, including Salafism and Salafi jihadism, is best placed to welcome the growing Sunni resentment of society and the state.

Dar al-Fatwa is the official body meant to represent Lebanon’s Sunni community and provide Islamic guidance on a range of issues. But it has been mired in recurring scandals that have severely tarnished its image. An official in the body argued that the crises Dar al-Fatwa has undergone in recent years have hampered its ability to deliver sound, state-sanctioned religious training to pious young Sunnis. One of the organization’s officials, Ibrahim Bashir, is

The lack of viable, visible political organizations for Lebanese Sunnis is dangerous because it is combined with an absence of sound leadership at the institutional religious level.

currently standing trial for corruption, and the body's own head, Grand Mufti Mohamed Rashid Qabbani, is accused by sources in the Future Movement's leadership of having stolen \$6 million from the institution since 2009. The grand mufti has also come under fire for tacitly allying with Hezbollah. His popularity, as a result, has considerably dropped in the Sunni community—to the extent that he was physically assaulted by mourners during a funeral service for victims of a bombing in December 2013 in Beirut.¹⁰

Sunni disaffection with Dar al-Fatwa runs deeper than the grand mufti's unpopularity and trickles down to local branches of the institution. In Tripoli, this hostility has taken the form of opposition to the head of Dar al-Fatwa's regional branch, Mufti Malek al-Shaar, who spent a year in exile in Paris before returning to Lebanon in October 2013 and making statements regarding the positive role of the army that were controversial in the local Sunni community. A prominent Sunni politician from the north commented that al-Shaar "should have stayed in Tripoli regardless of the threats made on his life—during his absence, extremism rose to dramatic proportions." An official in Dar al-Fatwa acknowledged that the body "should invest more in education to combat extremism."

More informal, and more radical, religious bodies have indeed progressively replaced Dar al-Fatwa's role in providing leadership to the Sunni community, such as the League of Muslim Scholars (Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin). Set up following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the league is a gathering of Sunni religious personalities who vocally support the revolution and whose leadership rotates to a different Islamic leader every year. Its first head was Ahmed al-Omari from the Jamaa al-Islamiya. His successors, Salem al-Rafei from Tripoli and, currently, Adnan Imama from the village of Majdal Anjar in the Beqaa Valley, are more radical. As a prominent member of the league explained, "we may have diverging views on many issues, but we are all united in our enmity toward the Syrian regime." The cleric was very clear regarding the goals the new body had set up for itself, claiming that "the league is trying to fill the void left by Dar al-Fatwa nationally but also locally—and its views are in resonance with the Sunni street."

It remains to be seen whether the League of Muslim Scholars has the institutional capacity to sustain itself as a relevant actor on the national stage. What is certain, however, is that its members are gaining in popularity day after day and that, in many cases, their actual authority supersedes that of state-sanctioned religious figures.

In Tripoli, most of these popular sheikhs are Salafists, whose ideology increasingly seems to resonate with local Sunni conservatives. Salafism has a long history in the city. It was first imported as a religious doctrine by Sheikh Salem

al-Shahhal in the 1950s and then spread as a puritanical way of life during the brief military rule of the Islamic Unification Movement (Harakat al-Tawheed al-Islami), a staunchly conservative Sunni political party that controlled Tripoli from 1983 to 1985 and imposed strict social norms on the local population, banning alcohol and requiring Muslim women to wear headscarves.

By 1985, however, Tripoli's Islamists had been crushed by Syrian troops as part of a war Damascus was waging on the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Lebanon. Some prominent clerics, such as Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, were even forced to flee the city after fighting erupted again between armed Salafists and Syrian security services in the mountains of Dinniyeh to the east of Tripoli in 2000.

The U.S. war in Iraq, which began in 2003, prompted the Syrian regime to rethink its policy on Islamists. Syria allowed some Salafi groups to operate again and even encouraged a few of them to wage jihad against the American troops in Baghdad. The Salafi revival was further strengthened after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, which allowed the groups to expand their activities much more freely.¹¹

Ever since, harsh Salafi critiques of Shia Islam have reinforced the appeal of the movement among the growing number of Sunnis who want to do more to counter the disproportionate weight that Hezbollah has acquired in Lebanon's political system. A prominent Tripoli Salafi shared his views regarding the movement's growth: "In Lebanon, Sunnis started to feel existentially threatened after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005, Hezbollah's takeover of West Beirut in 2008, and the resumption of fighting with the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli—the Syrian regime's local agents were attacking us, and we needed to go back to the roots of our religion to find the strength to defend it."

Beyond ideology, there are also socioeconomic underpinnings to the rise of Salafism in Lebanon. The movement primarily recruits followers among Sunnis of low socioeconomic status who are often living in deprived neighborhoods. Their situation makes them sympathetic to the Salafi critique of the modern state system, which argues that the current Lebanese state is beholden to the interests of other sects, such as the Christians or the Shia, and thus does not serve the interests of Sunnis. In many cases, Salafism channels a Sunni populism that has emerged in the disenfranchised Tripoli neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh, Mankoubin, and Qobbe, as a result both of the thirty-year-long struggle against the Alawite hilltop of Jabal Mohsen and of the state's virtual absence from these areas. There, through generous donations coming from shadowy networks originating in Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, Salafi groups have established powerful local charities that provide for many needy residents.

For now, and despite its growing popularity, Salafism still remains a minority trend. Sources in the local branch of Dar al-Fatwa suggest that there are no

more than 3,000 Salafists among Tripoli's 500,000 inhabitants. Yet even such figures should be viewed with caution because it remains difficult to gauge the exact degree of the movement's influence.

By and large, the Salafi spectrum is not homogeneous—it contains a wide array of opinions, groups, and figures without ultimate political or religious authority. As a Salafi cleric in Tripoli explained, “we are united around similar political goals but our reading of the meaning of the Quran often differs—and the arguments we have amongst ourselves are sometimes heated.” Even on topics that should, in theory, be consensual for Salafists, such as the Syria crisis, it is difficult to pinpoint one Salafi voice; some sheikhs encourage young Tripoli men to go and fight alongside the rebels while others discourage this.

On the fringes of this Salafi spectrum, some groups and individuals have become radicalized by the militarization of the Syrian uprisings. Tripoli witnessed the growth of Salafi-jihadi currents in the mid-2000s with the emergence of Fatah al-Islam, an extremist organization then active in the Palestinian camps near the city that was eventually crushed by the Lebanese army after fierce battles in September 2007.¹² The Syrian uprising, and in particular Hezbollah's growing involvement in it, has revived the appeal of Salafi jihadism. When Salem al-Rafei, a prominent Salafi cleric in Tripoli, called on his followers to join the battle against the Syrian regime in April 2013, many young men came to sign up for jihad. A well-informed Salafi source suggests that, by November 2013, some 200 Tripoli Salafists had already fought alongside the rebels, with an estimated 40 men still active in Syria. The source added that “the lingering crisis in Syria is definitely strengthening the local Salafi-jihadi current.”

These young men from Tripoli generally join radical Syrian groups that welcome foreign fighters, such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The risk is great that they will return home further radicalized by the sheer violence and naked sectarianism they may have witnessed in these brigades. A Salafi figure who is used to interacting with the Lebanese fighters commented that “they certainly come back to us tougher and stronger.”

Another prominent Salafi cleric in Tripoli made a distinction between two categories of such militants and concluded that “they all return hardened but, there are those who go back to their sheikh, who will calm them down, while others think their sheikh has become too moderate and that only infidels support the existence of the Lebanese state—the latter are *takfiris* who pose a real danger” (*takfiri* is a term for Muslims who accuse their coreligionists of apostasy). He added, “personally, I feel even more threatened by these men than by Hezbollah!”

Some of these *takfiris* may be behind the announcement last January that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is inaugurating a Lebanese chapter in Tripoli.

Political Polarization Turns Violent

In the framework of Lebanon's heavily polarized politics, Salafi jihadists have often targeted other Sunnis who may be aligned with the pro-Assad March 8 coalition. Contrary to popular assumption, an array of Sunni groups in Lebanon has over the years supported the agenda of the Hezbollah-led, Shia "resistance," some motivated by generous donations from Hezbollah, others by political pragmatism.

Despite Tripoli's history of enmity with the Syrian regime, March 8 groups are even present in the northern port city, where, according to an informed source, "they are unpopular but have military strength." Most of these relatively small organizations and local figures have long had a presence in some Tripoli neighborhoods, but Hezbollah reinforced their financial and military capabilities by integrating them into a broader strategic map in the mid-2000s.

In the north, by the time the Syrian revolution started in 2011, Hezbollah had the support of paid Sunni fighters active in Tripoli's most strategic locations and estimated to number over 1,000. These militants included the partisans of Sunni cleric Hashem Minqara, who controlled the port area of Mina, and those of his counterpart Bilal Shaaban, who oversaw the city from the hilltop of Abu Samra. Another cleric, Mustafa Malas, held sway over the neighborhood of Miniyeh to the north of Tripoli. And three large clans, the Mori, Nashar, and Aswad families, wielded influence in the popular area of Zahriyeh, the old city's souks, and the Sunni stronghold of Bab al-Tabbaneh, respectively.

Many of these militants continue to back Hezbollah, which can also count on the political support of prominent local politicians such as Faisal Karami, the heir of a prestigious family, and Najib Mikati, a businessman who has long been close to the Assad family and who served as Lebanon's prime minister between January 2011 and March 2013. The party can also depend on non-Sunni groups such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in the central Gemmayze neighborhood and the Arab Democratic Party (ADP) in the Alawite hilltop of Jabal Mohsen.

Popular resentment toward these groups and figures has been growing. Tensions between pro-Syrian March 8 and anti-Assad March 14 forces have been rising in Tripoli.

Partisans of the March 14 coalition have felt threatened and vulnerable since the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri. The 2012 assassination of Wissam al-Hassan, a Sunni intelligence figure close to the March 14 coalition, and Hezbollah's military support to the embattled Assad regime added much fuel to the nascent fire. And as a senior security figure in northern Lebanon explained, "Hezbollah's weapons and those of its March 8 allies in Tripoli are effectively giving a justification to Sunni militants in Bab al-Tabbaneh to also have weapons—it's a deadly circle."

Raising tensions further, Tripoli became a rear base for the arms smuggling and fundraising activities of many Syrian rebels, leading some March 14 supporters and Syrian opposition members to accuse local March 8 figures of spying on these rebels, providing information to Hezbollah and Damascus, and even carrying out attacks against the Syrian opposition and its supporters. Some of these March 8 Sunnis were accused of having cooperated with Syrian intelligence and the ADP to bomb two Salafi mosques in Tripoli in August 2013, killing 47 worshippers, injuring 800 others, and causing significant material damage.¹³ The military leader of a powerful local Islamist group warned that the “Party of Satan”—a reference to Hezbollah, which translates to “Party of God”—“is trying to control Tripoli through proxies, but we will not let that continue for much longer.”

Some residents of Tripoli seem to have taken matters into their own hands. The past two years have witnessed the mysterious assassinations of a number of prominent March 8 Sunnis in Tripoli, while many others have been the targets of gunfire. Among those assassinated were cleric Abdel Razzaq Asmar in October 2012, clan leader Hussam al-Mori in August 2013, and cleric Saadeddine Ghiyyeh in November 2013. Gunfire and grenades have been directed against the Syrian Social Nationalist Party headquarters in Tripoli, members of the Aswad family, the offices of cleric Bilal Shaabam, and members of the group of Hashem Minqara—who was forced to flee the city over a year ago.

A Sunni cleric who is part of the March 8 coalition criticized the “lack of political pluralism” in Tripoli and admitted to feeling personally threatened, saying “yes, we are with the Syrian regime, for reasons that have to do with our desire for political stability and, sadly, that makes us a target in Tripoli—bombs and grenades are regularly thrown at our areas.” This increasingly violent political polarization provides a glimpse into some of the chaos that has taken place over the past two years in Tripoli and that has earned the city a reputation for insecurity.

While some of these attacks have been carried out by jihadi groups, these organizations may not be the only ones to blame for the recurring political violence in Tripoli. In fact, the finger should sometimes be pointed at more mainstream actors. A prominent March 8 figure explained his reading of the events, saying that “Sunnis in the Future Movement have bet everything on Tripoli, where they dream of establishing their little kingdom to face the ‘Shia threat’—but they haven’t fully succeeded, so the battle is turning violent.”

Security sources point to the controversial role of former Lebanese army officers close to the Future Movement who are said to fund and arm groups of young men to carry out sporadic military operations in Tripoli. Incidentally, the targets of these groups are often located in densely populated and very poor communities, such as the souk areas, the slums of Mina, or the area of Bab al-Tabbaneh, all of which represent major pools of potential voters. A leader in the Future Movement commented on the sensitive activities of these former

army officers, explaining that “they are merely trying to organize militants and to discourage them from going to Hezbollah proxies or to Sunni extremist groups for weapons and money.”

The rhetorical and physical violence that increasingly characterizes Lebanon’s political conflicts is setting up a dynamic that risks spiraling out of control. Indeed, in Tripoli, figures associated with the March 8 coalition have so far responded to threats made against their lives not by switching political allegiances but, instead, by arming themselves. When, for instance, Tripoli native Mikati was nominated as prime minister in the Hezbollah-dominated government that succeeded Saad Hariri’s cabinet, he faced violent protests in his hometown that pushed him to take a more proactive approach to his security than he had in the past. A figure close to him gave further details: “Najib Mikati started feeling physically threatened, so he tasked an adviser with forming and arming a group to protect him—it’s a sort of preemptive self-defense.”

Now, virtually all of the city’s militias, including some Salafi groups, receive partial funding from Mikati. The leader of a medium-size militia active in Bab al-Tabbaneh explained that “there are two reasons why Mikati supplies my group with money and weapons—to help with the re-election and to protect himself.” But such a way of seeking protection also has security consequences of its own because it helps fuel another dangerous conflict: the long-standing struggle between the Sunni area of Bab al-Tabbaneh and the Alawite hilltop of Jabal Mohsen.

The rhetorical and physical violence that increasingly characterizes Lebanon’s political conflicts is setting up a dynamic that risks spiraling out of control.

A Political Struggle Turning Sectarian?

Over the past few years, the conflict between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen has often been portrayed in the media as a “sectarian spillover” from the Syria crisis that is pitting the city’s Sunni majority against the Alawite minority.¹⁴ But, even though the struggle between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh is unquestionably expressing itself in an increasingly sectarian way, its essence is first and foremost political.

Tellingly, the front line separating the two areas is frequently nicknamed by militants on both sides a “PO Box” for antagonist political forces to send political messages to each other, most often within the broader framework of the long-standing struggle between Saudi Arabia, on the one side, and Iran and Syria, on the other. It is undoubtedly rare to witness this sort of large-scale political polarization in such a small space—especially one in which fault lines so neatly match national and regional cleavages.

This conflict has deep roots. In the late 1970s, Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen had clashing political agendas. Back then, local Sunnis overwhelmingly

supported Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization in its struggle against the troops of then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, which were welcomed in the streets of Tripoli by Jabal Mohsen's Alawites. The emergence in 1982 of the Islamic Unification Movement briefly rolled back Syrian influence, but the movement's short rule over the city further exacerbated political and religious tensions between the two communities.

After the Syrian troops crushed the Islamic Unification Movement in 1985, the neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh became the theater of a large-scale massacre in December 1986. Hundreds of families were summarily killed by militiamen from the ADP, the main Alawite paramilitary group ruling Jabal Mohsen.¹⁵ Because of the lengthy military presence of the Syrian regime in Lebanon, no serious investigation was ever carried out into the events, leaving many families in search of answers—and, in some cases, revenge—decades later. A Salafi cleric with ties to groups fighting in Bab al-Tabbaneh argued that “the memory of these atrocities continues to fuel, and even intensifies, the current conflict.”

Today, the struggle that was once between partisans and adversaries of Palestine's Arafat is now between supporters and critics of Syria's Assad. The flames of the confrontation were reignited in 2005, with Rafik Hariri's assassination, and in 2008, with Hezbollah's incursion into West Beirut, but the fire spread more quickly after the beginning of the Syrian uprising.¹⁶ Those living in disadvantaged Sunni neighborhoods such as Bab al-Tabbaneh, Qobbe, and Mankoubin overwhelmingly support the uprising, while Jabal Mohsen's ADP belongs to the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition. The ADP's leader, Rifaat Eid, has repeatedly stated that he would be “honored” to be a “small foot soldier in the service of Bashar al-Assad.”¹⁷ And posters of the Syrian president and flags of the Syrian Arab Republic can be found all around Jabal Mohsen. An armed street leader in the area of Qobbe with ties to a March 14 politician explained the current conflict as “a struggle between two political lines—the ADP's choice of allying with the Syrian regime against our popular support for the revolutionaries.”

The enmity between Jabal Mohsen and its surroundings reached new heights after the Lebanese judiciary accused high-level ADP officials of having cooperated with Syrian intelligence to foment the August 2013 bomb attacks on the Salafi mosques in Tripoli.¹⁸ In the eyes of many in the city, the ADP showed its true face with those actions. According to the leader of a powerful Sunni militia, “the ADP is not just a political ally of Assad anymore—it's become a total part of the Syrian regime, and it blindly implements the regime's security agenda in Tripoli.” This change in thinking fuels a dangerous dynamic: the struggle in Syria is gradually being played out on Lebanese soil. As the militia's head proudly concluded, “by battling the ADP in Jabal Mohsen, we are fighting for the Syrian revolution—but from home.”

This trend has been reinforced by the arrival of tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in Tripoli over the past few years—most of whom now live in the city's impoverished Sunni neighborhoods.

Refugees are not necessarily fueling the fire by taking up arms themselves. Contrary to popular assumption, there is little evidence to suggest that these Syrians are active in the current fight against Jabal Mohsen. According to the head of an influential network of Syrian nongovernmental organizations in Tripoli, most of the refugees “escaped Syria precisely because of the war and the destruction” and are “looking to rebuild their lives and find jobs rather than resume the fight.”

But, even if the refugee community is not involved in clashes against Jabal Mohsen, the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees are certainly sympathetic to the local struggle against the ADP. And that reinforces the narrative of Lebanese Sunni fighters that targeting Jabal Mohsen is part of the struggle against Damascus. A refugee who was active in the opposition Free Syrian Army argued that “the people of Tabbaneh are fighting for us Syrians—they have our suffering in mind when they hit Jabal Mohsen.”

The real danger of this gradual importation of the Syria crisis to Lebanon is that it carries with it the perils faced by Syria’s own revolution, including the sectarianization of the political struggle. Mistrust between Sunnis and Alawites may be long-standing in Tripoli, but it has recently assumed alarming proportions. In some cases, the naked sectarian nature of the violence has become unquestionable. The shops of some Alawite traders have been burned, a growing number of Alawite workers have been shot at while commuting between Jabal Mohsen and other parts of Tripoli, and even a few school buses carrying Alawite residents have been targeted.¹⁹

A few Salafi-jihadi groups may be behind some of these still-limited attacks, but there is a real danger that the violence could spread to a broader community effort. As the Syrian conflict drags on, it will become a popular assumption that all Lebanese Alawites encourage the ADP’s deeds and entirely share its political line—which could mean that the frequency and severity of attacks increase.

But making that assumption would be a mistake. The ADP is both a political party and a paramilitary group and has been ruled by the Eid family since the 1970s. The party is highly influential in Jabal Mohsen mainly because its militia, the Red Knights, is well-funded and distributes weapons and ammunition to Alawite residents who fear for their safety. Yet, Lebanese Alawites fiercely criticize the ADP’s socioeconomic record on the hilltop, and they increasingly question the appropriateness of the party’s uncompromising pro-Assad stance.²⁰ A prominent figure in the community argued that “we need to prepare Jabal Mohsen for the post-Assad era: even if Bashar al-Assad stays, things will never be the same anymore in Lebanon and Tripoli—we need to get ready for this new configuration.”

Still, given the precarious security situation, Alawites feel that they need the ADP’s militia to protect them. As a result, there can be no political

The real danger of the gradual importation of the Syria crisis to Lebanon is that it carries with it the perils faced by Syria’s own revolution, including the sectarianization of the political struggle.

alternative to the ADP until the community is more secure. The emergence of any new Lebanese Alawite political force will therefore have to go hand in hand with an improvement of the security situation between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

To date, government-led progress toward easing tensions has been negligible. There have been virtually no state-sponsored initiatives to set up a public space through which residents of both areas could launch a formal or informal dialogue to improve mutual understanding and address each other's grievances. Even the Tripoli municipality has been quite inactive on this front—its only initiatives have consisted of paying some youth from both neighborhoods to draw paintings on the front line of Syria Street, which separates Jabal Mohsen from Bab al-Tabbaneh, and to rebuild portions of the stairs linking the two areas. A member of the city council claimed that “the municipality cannot resolve the conflict—it’s a political issue.”

Civil society has tried to fill this gap and bridge the divide between neighborhoods. One local nongovernmental organization, Ataouna, has launched a training series on social mediation that will provide street leaders with the necessary skills to first negotiate their way out of conflicts within their own areas before, perhaps, using this training to mediate between wary neighborhoods.

Another civil society group, We Love Tripoli, organized a summer camp in 2012 that gathered 38 young men and women equally split between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen to spend three days in a conflict resolution workshop. Participants attended the summer camp free of charge and participated in a variety of activities, including intensive sessions on social media, peace building, and art therapy. One of the organizers explained the goals of this initiative: “The truth is that most of the youth in Bab al-Tabbaneh and in Jabal Mohsen are tired of the conflict—we gave them the space to better accept each other, and we provided them with tools to raise their voice against violence whenever it emerges.” The experience seems to have been positive. “At the very beginning the group was split, but ice broke after the youth from both sides realized that they actually share much—especially things as down-to-earth as common musical tastes or a similar suffering from the conflict.”

Due to a lack of funds, the camp could not be held in 2013, but its success, even on such a small scale, shows the need for any sort of public space to be set up in order to gather the many voices that do not feel represented either by Bab al-Tabbaneh's militias or by Jabal Mohsen's ADP. Just such a development could then encourage the emergence of political alternatives.

Controversy Over the Role of the Army

In theory, the violence of the conflict between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen could also be contained through the intervention of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Yet, despite a presence in the city, the LAF has so far been

unable to calm the fighting. This is largely due to the wider state of paralysis that has affected virtually every Lebanese institution since the country's politics became heavily polarized in 2005—a trend further exacerbated when Mikati's cabinet resigned in March 2013, leaving Lebanon without a working government for nearly a year.

But the LAF's inability to resolve the fighting in Tripoli also stems from an unwillingness on the part of its leadership to take a firm stance that could endanger the army's cohesion. The LAF, like other Lebanese institutions, recruits its officers according to both skills and religion, with a proportionally equal share of the top jobs attributed to members of the country's eighteen officially recognized confessions. The LAF's base membership, however, is overwhelmingly made up of Sunni Muslim foot soldiers, many of whom originate from the region of Akkar bordering Tripoli. In 1975, a disagreement between Muslim and Christian officers over the LAF's policy toward the Palestine Liberation Organization led to a major split that greatly contributed to plunging the country into civil war.

It is thus no surprise that today the LAF leadership is especially wary of dragging its foot soldiers into the kind of military operation that could reopen the wounds of the past. And taking a strong stance either for Bab-al Tabbaneh or Jabal Mohsen could do just that by igniting Sunni-Shia strife within the army itself.

Calls are already mounting for Sunni officers to defect from the LAF and set up a "Free Lebanese Army" aligned against the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen and Hezbollah's influence over all of Lebanon.²¹ These demands have so far had little popular appeal, but they still represent a major development for Lebanon—especially because a growing number of Sunnis perceive the LAF leadership as suffering from a serious pro-Hezbollah, Shia bias, a view that largely stems from the Syrian regime's historical influence in Lebanon.

From 1976 to 2005, when Syrian troops were stationed in Beirut, Damascus held sway over local Lebanese political and security dynamics. Then, a number of LAF officers underwent training in Syria, allowing their counterparts in Damascus to build a powerful network of influence in Lebanon. Some critics argue that, when the Syrian army and intelligence apparatus formally withdrew in 2005, their basic networks remained and Hezbollah stepped into the void. A former high-ranking LAF officer went as far as arguing that Hezbollah's security chief, Wafiq Safa, has now replaced the powerful former Syrian army commander in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan.

This perception, whether accurate or not, is certainly growing among Lebanese Sunnis. The Sunni critique of the LAF used to be confined to extremist corners of that community, but it is slowly becoming more common.

Some Sunnis feel they have been treated in an unfair way in comparison to the Shia in general and Hezbollah in particular. Accusations of double standards have multiplied in the wake of the Syria crisis, especially following

Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict and recurring attacks by Syrian army jets on Lebanese Sunni villages in the border areas of Akkar and Aarsal. Both developments have so far failed to draw any strong response or condemnation from the LAF. The leader of an Islamist militia in Tripoli summed up the Sunni frustration by exclaiming that "the Sunnis are handcuffed" and going on to explain that "the LAF is letting Hezbollah militants go and fight in Syria alongside the regime while Syrian jets strike our areas; yet it arrests us if we join the rebels to defend ourselves and protect our extended families on the other side of the border."

So far, moderate Sunnis belonging to the Future Movement and the Jamaa al-Islamiya still stress that their criticisms target the army leadership rather than the whole body. But there is a risk that a growing number of radicalized young men are not prepared to make this distinction anymore. A jihadi source warned that "Lebanon in general and Tripoli in particular are mere provinces and villages for Damascus—it has now become clear that the Lebanese state is part of the Syrian regime." Such thinking could translate into an increase in Salafi-jihadi activities targeting the LAF—an institution considered by networks close to al-Qaeda to be a "crusader army supported by Hezbollah."

In Tripoli, the LAF has responded to the deteriorating state of civil-military relations and the persistent violence by announcing a "security plan" to restore order. In November, the government sent in more troops and declared the entire city a "military zone"—thus placing all security agencies under the overall command of the LAF and allowing Lebanese troops to deploy. The formation in February of a new Lebanese government enabled the LAF to go one step further by intervening more forcefully when a new round of fighting erupted in March. Even though it did not go as far as detaining the heads of major militias, the LAF nonetheless seized weapons caches and arrested a number of Sunni and Alawite militants.

But despite a respite in fighting, security dynamics on the ground have not fundamentally changed. A senior security figure, recognizing the limits of the army's latest move, said "you could compare the security plan to anesthesia—it calms the pain temporarily but it does not cure the disease."

It is possible to envision more concrete steps to improve the LAF's image on the ground in order to give it the popular backing it needs to take strong action. One of these steps could be the relocation of army bases away from their current positions, which are in the football stadium and the historical citadel, where they negatively impact the city's economic and tourism potential. Another could entail pursuing a debate Mikati started in November 2013 on the possibility of incorporating Tripoli's militias into the security services—thus mirroring what was done to dissolve the militias active in Lebanon's civil war. Many immediately criticized Mikati's proposal, including some militia heads who claimed that such a step "would not make [them] forget all of the blood that has now been shed," but it may nonetheless be worth discussing in greater depth.

Pulling Lebanon Back From the Brink

Lebanon's geographical proximity and socioreligious ties to the Syrian hinterland have made it particularly vulnerable to the dynamics unfolding on the other side of the border. This is especially true because the schism between forces opposing and supporting the regime in Damascus has been a feature of Lebanese politics since long before the Syrian uprising erupted. The events taking place in Tripoli best encapsulate this intertwining of local and regional factors, yet the trends there also hold wider significance for the rest of the country—and should be seen as a warning sign.

Reflecting awareness of the dangers, in June 2012 political leaders issued the Baabda Declaration, named after the presidential palace where it was signed, committing by consensus all Lebanese parties to disassociate themselves from the strife in Syria. Yet the provisions of the declaration have so far been largely ignored by its very signatories, who have become more, rather than less, polarized as a result of the ongoing crisis in Damascus.

The risk is great that this political divide will increasingly take on a religious coloration, pitting Sunnis against Shia, which may eventually fuel sectarianism and violence on a national scale. In particular, there is a danger that the militarization of the conflict in Tripoli may only reflect the tip of the iceberg. Momentum is growing in all corners of Lebanon's Sunni community to get armed and reach a balance of power with the Shia in Hezbollah. Salafi cleric Ahmed al-Assir, for example, attempted to arm his followers in the southern port city of Sidon before his group was wiped out in fighting with the LAF nearly a year ago. And this dynamic may also be affecting the more moderate Sunni parties, such as the Future Movement, some of whose members have called for the establishment of "self-defense forces."²² This threat has become all the more real since April 2013, when Hezbollah officially upgraded its own support for the Syrian regime to a large-scale military intervention.

A sound debate must be launched as to whether Hezbollah is a "resistance movement" or a "militia"—and what consequences the distinction entails for the party's possession of a large stock of sophisticated weapons.

Opposing parties need to recognize that the existing polarization can only be resolved effectively by starting a new national dialogue that includes the most important issues, such as Hezbollah's weapons. Each side will have to compromise, keeping in mind the certainty that any alternative to dialogue will lead to a far more costly and protracted domestic conflict—something that could, in the long term, affect the country's promising economic prospects in the oil and gas sector.

In the short term, all of these tensions will be further exacerbated by the growing wave of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Given that Turkey will go to

Momentum is growing in all corners of Lebanon's Sunni community to get armed and reach a balance of power with the Shia in Hezbollah.

the polls in August 2014 for a presidential election, that Iraq faces a Sunni extremist insurgency in Anbar, and that Jordan is confronting growing socio-economic challenges of its own, each of these countries will likely tighten its border restrictions—leaving the porous Lebanese borders as the only safe way out of Syria for refugees fleeing intensified fighting between the rebels and the government. So far, there is little evidence to suggest that Syrian refugees have become involved in local Lebanese political conflicts. Yet, as their stay

may extend indefinitely given the absence of any prospect for a settlement in Syria, the socioeconomic and security consequences of their presence will continue to be felt and to polarize Lebanese parties.

The existing polarization can only be resolved effectively by starting a new national dialogue that includes the most important issues, such as Hezbollah's weapons.

The international community seems aware of these risks. According to World Bank estimates, the financial help Lebanon needs to tackle the refugee crisis amounts to around \$2.6 billion. Still, a meeting of the Friends of Lebanon group, an informal gathering of governments

that support Lebanon's stability, held last March in Paris failed to translate pledges of support into concrete help, mostly due to concerns regarding the ineffectiveness of Lebanese institutions.

It is indeed alarming that the lack of political consensus has prevented to such a great extent some of the Lebanese state's most important institutions from carrying out their duties properly. In certain cases, the very legitimacy of these institutions is now being questioned. The Lebanese Parliament, for instance—which postponed to November 2014 the general election that had been scheduled for June 2013—has not been able to convene on a sufficiently regular basis to pass the most critical legislation or appointments in the civil service.

More concrete and practical solutions must be found to overcome the persistent constitutional and institutional paralysis that is infringing upon the state's credibility. Given the extent to which power, decisions, and resources are centralized in Lebanon, the long-dormant process of decentralization could for instance be revived. This would not only give local actors the means to mediate conflicts and to address more directly the concerns of their citizens, it would also strengthen public confidence in Lebanon as an entity—albeit in its most local embodiments.

Since early 2014, the political and sectarian violence shaking Tripoli has begun to spread to parts of the Beqaa Valley and is now threatening to engulf other parts of the country. To prevent all of Lebanon from falling into the abyss of civil strife once again, Lebanese decisionmakers must urgently come to terms with a series of challenges that have not been sufficiently addressed in past decades. These challenges have plagued Lebanon since long before the beginning of the Syrian uprising. The most obvious of these issues is the need to reverse the neglect and underdevelopment of Tripoli as well as other areas.

These conditions provide the backdrop for radicalization. Sunni politicians should also reactivate Dar al-Fatwa to make sure that their medium- and long-term plans for economic development are accompanied by efforts to contain religious extremism.

In order to break the current cycle of deteriorating socioeconomic and security issues, Lebanese actors will have to move from passively acknowledging the need to dissociate from the Syria crisis to a more proactive approach. They will need to tackle head-on the country's most significant challenges in innovative and unconventional ways.

Notes

The author would like to thank Ali el-Yessir and Marie Kortam for their kind help and research assistance. He is also grateful to the Gates Cambridge Scholarship and the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) for their support.

- 1 “Security Official: Tripoli Fast Becoming Like Kandahar,” *Daily Star*, June 4, 2013, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-04/219354-security-official-tripoli-fast-becoming-like-kandahar.ashx.
- 2 United Nations Development Program, *Millennium Development Goals: Lebanon Report 2008*, 13, www.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/2008%20en.pdf.
- 3 Unpublished study obtained by the author by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (UNESCWA) regarding the construction of a new poverty index to measure poverty levels in Tripoli in December 2011.
- 4 International Poverty Center, *Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon*, Country Study no. 3, January 2008, 9, www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCCountryStudy13.pdf.
- 5 Unless stated otherwise, this paper draws from interviews carried out in Tripoli by the author between September 2013 and January 2014.
- 6 Figures gathered from a study of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis in northern Lebanon carried out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in March 2014. See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Syrian Refugees in Lebanon—22 March 2014” and “Syria Refugee Response—Lebanon North Governorate,” March 2014.
- 7 Bruno Dewailly and Catherine Le Thomas, *Pauvreté et conditions socio-économiques à al-Fayha’a: diagnostics et éléments de stratégie* (Paris: Agence Française de Développement, December 2009), 142.
- 8 For an excellent overview of the Tripoli municipal elections and the political conflicts that emerged from them see Bruno Dewailly, “La municipalité de Tripoli: entre pouvoirs locaux et services de l’État,” *Les Cahiers du CERMOC* no. 24, 2001.
- 9 “Lebanon: Tripoli Gunmen Threaten Hariri,” *Al-Akhbar*, January 23, 2014.
- 10 “Angry Mourners Accost Mufti Qabbani at Funeral,” *Daily Star*, December 30, 2013.
- 11 For an excellent history of Salafism in Tripoli see Tine Gade, “Return to Tripoli—Battle Over Minds and Meaning Amongst Religious Leaders Within the Islamist Field in Tripoli (Lebanon),” Norwegian Defence Establishment (FFI), March 2009.

- 12 For an excellent study of Fatah al-Islam and the rise of jihadism in Northern Lebanon see Bernard Rougier, *L'Oumma en Fragments—Controller le Sunnisme au Levant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).
- 13 “Pro-Assad Sheikh Detained Over Tripoli Blast,” *Daily Star*, August 30, 2013.
- 14 “In Lebanon, a Worrying Sectarian Spillover From Syria,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 3, 2012.
- 15 Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Calls for Inquiry Into Reported Massacres by Syrian Military and Syrian-Backed Forces in Lebanon,” March 12, 1987.
- 16 For an excellent overview of the evolution of the conflict from 1976 to 2010 see International Crisis Group, “New Crisis, Old Demons: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab al-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen,” Middle East Briefing no. 2914, October 2010, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/lebanon/B29-new-crisis-old-demons-in-lebanon-the-forgotten-lessons-of-bab-tebbaneh-jabal-mohsen.aspx.
- 17 “Avec l’appui du Mufti alaouite, Ali Eid refuse la convocation des enquêteurs,” *L’Orient Le Jour*, November 1, 2013.
- 18 “Report: Seven Members of Arab Democratic Party Behind Tripoli Bombings,” Naharnet, October 13, 2013.
- 19 Human Rights Watch, “Lebanon: Sectarian Attacks in Tripoli,” December 20, 2013.
- 20 For more details on the Arab Democratic Party and its influence in the Lebanese Alawite community see Raphaël Lefèvre, “Power Struggles Among the Alawites of Lebanon—Parts 1 and 2,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis blog, January 2, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54058>.
- 21 “Assir Faces Death Penalty, Aimed to Establish Free Lebanese Army,” *Al Akhbar*, March 1, 2014.
- 22 “Lebanon MP Suggests Self-Defence Force Against Syria Shelling,” *Daily Star*, August 11, 2012.

Carnegie Middle East Center

The **Carnegie Middle East Center** is an independent policy research institute based in Beirut, Lebanon, and part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The center provides in-depth analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and security issues facing the Middle East and North Africa. It draws its scholarship from a pool of top regional experts, working in collaboration with Carnegie's other research centers in Beijing, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington. The center aims to impact policymakers and major stakeholders by offering fresh insight and ideas that cultivate a deeper understanding of the region and by developing new approaches to the challenges of countries in transition.

The **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

BEIJING

BEIRUT

BRUSSELS

MOSCOW

WASHINGTON

THE GLOBAL THINK TANK



CARNEGIE
MIDDLE EAST CENTER

Carnegie-MEC.org