Sectarian conflict and Sunni Islamic radicalization in Tripoli, Lebanon

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Dedication

To my husband, Joe, and my son, Gaby
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Sectarian conflict and Sunni Islamic radicalization in Tripoli, Lebanon
Ana Maria Luca

ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in early 2011, Lebanon has seen a drastic deterioration in security: domestic supporters and opponents of the Syrian government have confronted each other in armed clashes and Lebanese groups also got involved in the war in Syria. The extremist groups that emerged in Syria also found supporters in Lebanon and a series of suicide bombings rocked civilian areas.

Violent conflict affected several regions in Lebanon, but Tripoli, in particular, was called “little Syria” because it seemed to mirror the hostilities in the neighboring country. Many authors have pointed at the Syrian crisis spillover in order to explain the conflict in Tripoli. The thesis aims at explaining the mechanisms that led to polarization and radicalization in the Sunni community in Tripoli. It looks at the conflict through the lens of sectarian identity, explaining how the already existing political polarization turned to sectarian conflict in the presence of the catalysts provided by the Syrian crisis.

Keywords: Islamism, Radicalism, Extremism, Causes, Sectarian, Conflict, Tripoli, Lebanon, Syria, Crisis
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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in early 2011, Lebanon has seen a drastic deterioration in security: supporters and opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime in the country have confronted each other in armed clashes in Tripoli and Bekaa Valley, assassinations of military and political leaders, rocket attacks along the border and some roadside bombings in Shiite areas in the Bekaa Valley (Rowell, 2014).
Since October 2012, Lebanon has also witnessed deadly suicide bombings, many of which were claimed by jihadist groups with links to al-Qaeda, such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon and Abdullah Azzam Brigades, who have declared their intention to continue targeting Shiite civilian population centers until Lebanese Hezbollah fighters withdraw from Syria.
The Northern Lebanese city of Tripoli also witnessed several waves of unrest and clashes, between the Alawite Jabal Mohsen and predominantly Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh, which mirrored the Syrian conflict (Luca, 2012). The conflict was even dubbed “little Syria.” The Alawite fortress of Jabal Mohsen has been hosting armed supporters of pro-regime factions for years. Bab al-Tabbaneh is located down the hill and is separated from Jabal Mohsen by the aptly named Syria Street. The strife goes back to the Lebanese civil war. The Alawite Arab Democratic Party, based in Jabal Mohsen, fought alongside the Syrian army against the Sunni Islamist Tawhid Movement. The fighting peaked in 1986 when the party helped Syrian troops massacre most of the Sunni Islamist fighters. Since then, the fighting always came down to Syrian power in
Lebanon. The influx of mostly Sunni refugees and anti-Assad regime activists fleeing the regions of Homs and Idlib aggravated the skirmishes. Most of the refugees were sheltered in Bab al-Tabbaneh, where anti-Assad regime sentiment was already strong (Luca, 2012).

The sparks of conflict also affected other regions of Lebanon like the Eastern border with Syria, where the refugee-filled Sunni enclave of Arsal was suddenly poised against the neighboring Shiite region of Hermel, which is controlled by Hezbollah (Luca, 2013). The situation worsened because of the porous border areas that allowed not only refugees, but also rebel fighters to cross into Lebanon and find a rather safe buffer zone. The situation worsened also due to Hezbollah’s involvement in fighting alongside the Syrian army against the Sunni rebel factions in Homs and Qalamoun regions (Sullivan, 2012).

Moreover, on the background of the Syrian conflict and refugee influx, radical Salafi leaders such as Ahmad al-Assir in Southern Lebanese city of Sidon garnered popular support by using an anti-Hezbollah, anti-Syrian regime discourse (Rowell, 2012), causing unrest and getting involved in armed clashes with the Lebanese Army and, reportedly, Hezbollah fighters (Rowell, 2013).

Most authors say it was the Syrian conflict that spilled into Lebanon, bringing with it refugees, rebel fighters, political activists and even jihadist organizations to spoil the sectarian sensitive balance of the country and cause violence (Hokayem, 2013). But could the violence and ethnic struggle have affected Lebanon’s Sunni community causing parts of it to become jihadist militants if it didn’t find an already fertile field for mobilization?
After the Syrian uprising against Bashar al Assad and, later on, the armed rebellion against the regime in Damascus, the interdependence and solidarity between the Sunnis in Lebanon and the Sunnis in Syria became obvious. Sunnis in Lebanon not only welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees in their midst, raised humanitarian aid, but also sheltered political activists and supplied the armed rebel groups with fighters (Putz, 2012).

Sunnī fundamentalist groups in Lebanon also got involved in the bombings against Hezbollah, after the Shiite militant group started participating in the Syrian war on the side of the government forces. Many of the 24 bombings that hit Hezbollah-controlled areas in Beirut in Bekaa Valley were claimed by the Lebanese splinter of Al-Nusra Front or the Islamic State (Rowell, 2014). Both groups attracted since 2013, when they inaugurated their Lebanese branches, a growing number of Sunnis in Lebanon.

Many authors limit the radicalization phenomenon in the Sunni community to the temporary effect of the Syrian war. However, this thesis will try to prove that, although the Syrian war was one of the triggers for radicalization in the Lebanese Sunni community, the underlying causes might have been much deeper rooted in the security situation and the political instability in Lebanon. Were the sudden popularity of the Islamic fundamentalist movements and the appearance of Nusra Front and Islamic State Lebanese factions really about their fundamentalist ideology? Or was it more about the need of political representation and security that the Islamic fundamentalists capitalized on?

The thesis explores the causes of radicalization in the Sunni community in Lebanon and the triggers that prompted some of the community’s groups to turn to jihadist
movements, fight against Shiite Hezbollah in Syria and attack its objectives and allies in Lebanon. In other words, the research question is: what pushed some Lebanese Sunnis to associate with jihadist movements in Syria against the Assad government and its Lebanese allies and get involved in a full-fledged ethnic conflict?

The thesis means to explore the perception building process that led to mobilization in the Sunni community in Tripoli on sectarian lines after 2005 and to identify the triggers for its radicalization after the Syrian uprising. The date was chosen because of the drastic change in the political set-up of the country - after the assassination of former Prime Minister and Sunni leader Rafik Hariri, the Lebanese political factions coagulated into two camps, pro and anti-Syrian, and the Syrian hegemon withdrew from Lebanon. Tripoli, as an area of study, was chosen because it was the theater of most security incidents after the Syrian uprising started; it has a rich history in terms of Sunni fundamentalist movements and also radical groups and is, as well, accessible for conducting research. But, most of all, it was chosen because, of all Lebanese Sunni communities, the one in Tripoli shares many common cultural links to its Syrian counterpart and has been over the years most sensitive to the political changes in Syria.

The thesis uses the historical approach to mark the key moments that impacted socially, economically, politically and culturally the Sunni community in Tripoli. Then it employs Michel E. Brown’s theory of proximate factors/catalysts (2001) in order to explain how these key events led to the creation of the perceived existential threats and to polarization/radicalization in the Sunni community in Tripoli and which factors exactly triggered the rise of jihadist groups and implicitly, violent ethnic conflict. In other words, the theory will be used to describe the connections between Sunni Islamic
radicalism and jihadist militantism in Tripoli, North Lebanon. It uses violent sectarian conflict as a dependent variable and political, social, economic and cultural situation in the Sunni community in Tripoli, and respectively the conditions created by the Syrian uprising as independent variables.

The reason for employing a theoretical framework linked to ethnicity is that the Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon is tightly linked to sectarian identity, an important part of the notion of ethnicity: the political system and social context are based on sectarian identity and encourage this division in the Lebanese society and politics. The bones of contention are deeply rooted in the sectarian making of Lebanon, the sectarian balance of power and the perceived inequalities between sects in their access to resources.

In order to support some of the arguments the author employed qualitative research methods. The thesis looks at how the political and religious landscape in the Sunni community in Tripoli was impacted during the key events between the Cedar Revolution in 2005 and the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. It also highlights how the Sunni community reacted to the events linked to the Syrian crisis.

In order to investigate the research question the author used statements, reactions and political speeches publicly available in the three main English language Lebanese media outlets. The author also used personal interviews with Tripoli-based politicians as well as Salafi sheikhs conducted before August 2015 and already published in various media outlets. In order to fill the gaps in the already publicly available information, the author also conducted three long personal interviews with a Sunni community leader, a civil society activist and a Salafi cleric in Tripoli. The interviews took place in Bab al-Tabbaneh and Abi Samra neighborhoods in Tripoli, where Islamic radical groups have
had reported activity. The Salafi cleric explained the evolution of the relationship between the Sunni political establishment, the Lebanese state and the Salafi movement, as well as how the population reacted to the political developments after the beginning of the Syrian crisis; the civil society activist is a Sunni woman from Tripoli’s Abi Samra who has published several reports on Salafism in Tripoli and also has done a lot of work on the social and living conditions in the neighborhoods of Tripoli, the influx of Syrian refugees, the Lebanese state policy towards the security crisis in the Lebanese Northern city and the way they impacted the Sunni community; the political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh was chosen because he is also a fighter, he has good relationships with both Salafi clerics and politicians, as well as armed groups and could explain in detail the dynamics of the relationships between them during the Syrian crisis. The author elaborated two lists of questions - one for Salafi cleric and the other for the Sunni community leaders. The two lists have been approved by the Lebanese American University’s Institutional Review Board and are to be found in the appendices section of the thesis.

Research in Tripoli in the context of very tight security focused on any jihadists-related terrorist activity made the interviews difficult; many subjects refused to speak about such a sensitive topic for fear that their security might be at stake and others did not want to sign the informed consent forms with their real names. However, the fact that the three interviewees who agreed to speak were well informed and provided detailed accounts helped the research. Also, interviews done in Tripoli by the author and already published helped in filling the gaps.

The first chapter sets the theoretical framework of the research; it clarifies the concepts
of ethnicity and identity, ethnic conflict, the relationship between radicalization and ethnic polarization as well as the connection between religion and ethnic conflict. It will also address the emergence of the Sunni-Shiite and Sunni-Alawite conflict in Lebanon. The second part looks at Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, its currents and the emergence of radical jihadist groups in the region and, then, in Lebanon. It also maps the Sunni Islamist movements and the radical groups present in Lebanon until 2005.

The second chapter looks at the key events and issues that impacted the Sunni community politically after 2005: the assassination of Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the emergence of the rival political alliances pro-Syrian March 8 and anti-Syrian March 14, the war between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Al Qaeda-linked Fatah al Islam, the armed conflict between March 14 supporters and Hezbollah supporters during May 2008, the Doha agreement, the fall of Saad Hariri’s government in 2011 and the Syrian uprising. The second section highlights the Syrian uprising’s impact on Lebanon: the influx of refugees, the presence of Syrian political activists in Lebanon, the Lebanese state institutions response to the Syrian crisis, Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war, and the rise of the jihadist movements.

The third chapter looks at the impact of the Syrian uprising on Tripoli and the main events that shaped the security and political framework in the Lebanese Northern city. It identifies the triggers for Sunni-Shiite violence using the framework of Michael E. Brown’s catalysts for ethnic conflict.

The fourth chapter presents the conclusions of the research. It sets out first to explain how radicalization in the Sunni community in Tripoli finds its roots in the perception building process in the Sunni community before the Syrian uprising. Then it explains
how the findings of the research reinforce the idea that Islamic radical militant groups in Tripoli re-emerged on the background of the various catalysts for internal conflict.

Finally, the chapter looks at challenges and lessons learned from the research and set out to assess the importance of the findings within the existing literature.
Chapter One

Theoretical framework: Sectarian conflict and Sunni Islamic radicalism

1.1. Identity, ethnicity and religion

1.1.1. Definitions

There is no widely agreed definition of an ethnic group or ethnic community. But Hutchinson and Smith (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996) believe that *ethnies* exhibit six main characteristics: a common name, a common ancestry, historical memories; elements of common culture (religion, customs, language); a link with a homeland; a sense of solidarity at least within some sections of the population.

Clifford Geertz (1996, p. 43) lists religion as one of the focal points of ethnic discontent, together with assumed blood ties, race, language, regionalism, and custom. He also lists Lebanon as one of the countries where religion is the force undermining national civic sense in favor of sectarian divisions (Geertz, 1996, p. 44). India’s partition is also a case of religion being decisive in terms of ethnic identity.

The concepts of identity and ethnicity, ethnic pluralism and its potential for leading to ethnic conflict have generated a lot of literature and three schools of thought:
Esman (2004), at the intersection of constructivism, primordialism and instrumentalism, believes that all pluralistic societies are exposed to ethnic conflict (Esman, 2004, p. 63). In *Ethnic groups in Conflict*, Horowitz (2000) states that in most countries with pluralistic ethnic composition every issue becomes ethnic; political systems are often aligned along ethnic lines, as are capital and labor.

Lake and Rothchild (1998) highlight that fear is key in the genesis of ethnic conflicts and Esman (2004, p. 72) also acknowledges that the most common precipitator for ethnic conflict is a perceived threat to the interests of a community. Esman identifies the “bones of contention”: political rights or influence, economic aspects – like resources and advantages, culture – language and religion. He points out (2004, pp. 84-85) that religion is often more sensitive than language because it does not only reflect identity, but also a system of beliefs about the role of the community and its destiny set by God. Sectarian conflict is, therefore, more complicated and harder to settle. Most of the time, religion is not the main point of the sectarian conflict, but it makes things more complicated: the battle is holy, while a settlement and the acceptance of the other might be synonymous with heresy or damnation. Lake and Rothchild (1998) point out that in a weak state two catalysts can lead to profound polarization based on identity: activists

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1 The primordialists “look upon ethnic identities as deeply rooted, deeply embedded in people’s culture, based on collective myths and memories, social institutions and practices, perpetuated through education from generation to generation and likely to persist over time (Esman, 2004, p. 31).

2 The instrumentalists, also called “ethnoskeptics”, think of ethnicity as an artificial instrumental creation of social forces, classes or colonial powers, or by individual political leaders in order to manipulate the masses in pursuit of their strife for power (Esman, 2004, p. 33).

3 Constructivists don’t think of ethnicity as an objective reality, but as a matter of perception, a creation of the human imagination (Esman, 2004, p. 34). Hechter (1996) applies the rational choice theory to ethnicity: ethnicity is the interaction of structural constraints and sovereign preferences of individuals. Banton (1996) argues also that identity is an individual, optimized and socialized; one individual can belong to more than one social group, according to his plans and his interests. However, constructivists are too focused on the idea of ethnicity as perception and refuse to acknowledge that ethnic conflict has roots also in historical traumas and experiences, in “ancient hatreds” (Esman, 2004, p. 37).
and political entrepreneurs. They play on political myths, memories and emotions/fear to magnify the polarization.

Michael E. Brown (2001) developed a matrix of factors that lead to polarization of pluralist societies and triggers that lead to mobilization and open internal conflict. He points out that apart from the underlying causes of internal conflicts, there are also triggers or catalytic factors that generate conflict. The roots of ethnic polarization rest in one or more structural, economic, political or cultural factors. As structural factors he identifies weak states, security concerns within the state and ethnic geography; social and economic factors are a bad economy, social discrimination and discrimination in access to resources; the political factors are discriminatory institutions, discriminatory ideologies, inter-group politics, elite politics; in terms of cultural factors he cites cultural discrimination, group history and perception of themselves and the others. But an ethnic group does not mobilize and ethnic conflict cannot appear without being generated or triggered by what Brown calls at least one proximate cause or catalytic factor. He finds several categories of proximate causes by putting them in a matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical Level</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass level</td>
<td>Internal Mass Level Factors</td>
<td>External Mass Level Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad domestic problems: bad economy, political transitions, political instability, insecurity.</td>
<td>Bad neighborhoods: influx of refugees, fighters crossing borders, radicalized politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sweeping the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elite level</th>
<th>Internal Elite Level Factors</th>
<th>External Elite Level Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad leaders: who use ethnic bashing and scapegoating for personal political gains.</td>
<td>Bad neighbors: discrete, deliberate decisions by leaders to cause conflict in neighboring states for political, economic or ideological purposes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Proximate factors that lead to ethnic conflict.

The thesis aims at applying Brown’s roots of ethnic radicalization and proximate factors for ethnic conflict how groups in the Sunni community in Tripoli engaged in violent conflict with the Alawite community in the city but also against Shiite Hezbollah after its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Brown’s causes and proximate factors explain how a given groups builds perceptions of itself and the other groups, as well as how fear grows and is exploited by political entrepreneurs. In other words, it could point to what exactly influenced the fundamentalist elements in the Sunni community to gain ground compared to the moderate voices, why purist Salafism was replaced after the emergence of the Syrian crisis by the jihadist Salafism. Lebanon is one of the most prominent examples of ethnic conflict and ethnic conflict management in the available literature.
1.1.2. Sectarian conflict in Lebanon and Sunni-Shiite polarization after 2005

The period that followed 2005 and the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon is the least studied in the literature addressing the ethnic conflict in Lebanon (Knudsen & Kerr, 2013). The assassination of former Sunni Prime-Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005 changed the face and fate of Lebanon: it sparked the Cedar Revolution, it split the country into two main political camps, pro-Syrian Hezbollah-led March 8 and anti-Syrian Future Movement-led March 14, which led to further ethnic polarization on the Sunni-Shiite line and numerous unity governments gridlocks over Hezbollah’s weapons and the international investigation into Rafik Hariri’s assassination (Knudsen & Kerr, 2013, p. 6).

The period after the 2005 Hariri assassination and the Cedar Revolution also redefined the traditional allegiance of the Sunni community in Lebanon: from supporters of Arabism with Syria and the Sunni Arab homeland to a break with Damascus and support of a stronger Lebanese State. The Lebanese state became a fortification against the Syrian hegemony and asserted itself in security matters at the expense of Syria’s proxy Hezbollah (Knudsen & Kerr, 2013, p. 11). Following this realignment, Saad Hariri’s Future Movement adopted the Christian slogan of “Lebanon first” as well as the discourse on the existence of weapons outside the state’s control – obviously aiming at Hezbollah, which remained entitled to an arsenal after the Taif agreement, as the anti-Israeli resistance. The Future Movement called for a stronger Lebanese state, the rule of law, a national defense strategy and honoring international obligations such as the participation in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The new discourse was entirely aimed at crippling Hezbollah’s legitimacy as a Lebanese resistance and meant to stress
on the Shiite Party of God’s status as an armed militia outside of state control. This led to a conflict between the political factions. However, because both Future Movement and Hezbollah raised support through their respective sect religious institutions (the Sunni Higher Islamic Council and, respectively, the Higher Shiite Islamic Council) the differences translated into a sectarian rift, despite the fact that both groups were allied with non-Sunni and, respectively, non-Shiite groups. However, according to Knudsen and Kerr, Future Movement remained a political umbrella that almost exclusively represented the Sunni community, just as the Hezbollah represented the Shiite community (Knudsen & Kerr, 2013, p. 12).

The fragmentation of Lebanon security forces on sectarian lines also contributed to the re-militarization of the society (Picard, 2013). Private security companies were set up and served the Lebanese national and local zu’ama⁴. The Lebanese Forces in March 14 and the Free Patriotic Movement in March 8 exchanged accusations of rearming and training their militants (Luca, 2010). Future Movement itself began organizing private security companies, such as Future Security Plus, by recruiting young men from the poor regions in Akkar, North Lebanon, and Tripoli (LA Times, 2008). Within this context, Hezbollah decided to set up a parallel telecommunication network; the discovery of this network led to a series of urban clashes between its supporters as well as the supporters of allied political groups and the supporters of March 14 political groups in May 2008 (Picard, 2013, p. 100).

“A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict”, a Crisis Group report, looks closely at how the Syrian uprising impacted the political and sectarian precarious balance of neighboring Lebanon. The report cites as an aggravating factor for the

⁴ Za’im, pl. Zu’ama: Lebanese term for sectarian leader or landlord.
Lebanese crisis the increased support for the Syrian refugees and political activists that fled to Lebanon after the increased crackdown on the rebel areas by the Syrian government forces, the increased support of Lebanese activists offering political support but also ammunition for the Syrian rebels (Crisis Group, 2012). It also points at the increasingly sectarian character of the Syrian uprising and the Sunni Islamist awakening which have been mirrored in Lebanon; the Sunnis in Tripoli and North Lebanon, and especially the Islamist factions, have had a longstanding hostility towards the Syrian regime (Crisis Group, 2012, p. 3). In light of the May 2008 clashes between Hezbollah and Future Movement supporters in Beirut, both factions showed restraint in allowing the fighting to escalate; however, the report shows, “the more serious danger emanates from spontaneous clashes – harder to control and thus easier to spread – between their constituencies as well as between lesser groups nominally belonging to their respective camps (Crisis Group, 2012, p. 6). But the crisis was still there and it surfaced in Tripoli, between the armed groups in predominantly Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh and Alawite Jabal Mohsen.

Moreover, the report also cites the rhetoric of Free Patriotic Movement officials, the entire Christian community’s fear of Islamist movements as well as Hezbollah seizing the opportunity to portray the entire Sunni community and the Future Movement as Islamists in order to garner more support in Lebanon for its involvement in Syrian and to strengthen its political projects in Lebanon. It also highlights that the Future Movement saw in the Syrian conflict an opportunity to deprive Hezbollah of one of its regional patrons (Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 16-20). It also refers to the assassination of the head of the Internal Security Forces intelligence branch Wissam al-Hassan in October
2012 as a possible game-changer: the Future Movement failed in garnering the support it counted on for a series of anti-government protests, it was accused of inducing the idea that “Sunnis are under attack.” However, the report points out the rift between the Sunni street and the Future Movement, explaining that the gap led to the emergence of radical leaders such as Sidon based Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al Assir, who, with support from some of Tripoli’s Salafi sheikhs, managed to gain followers by using the old Future Movement rhetoric against Hezbollah’s arms (Crisis Group, 2012, p. 26). His group clashed in June 2013 with the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah fighters in Abra, a suburb of Sidon (Zaatari, 2013). Many of his followers involved in the armed clashes were detained and Ahmad al Assir’s whereabouts are still a mystery.

In a more recent look at Tripoli’s crisis, Raphaël Lefèvre in “Crisis in North Lebanon” looks at some of the root causes of the conflict in Tripoli after the Syrian uprising (Lefèvre, 2014). Among the causes he cites poverty at alarming levels that has been affecting large parts of the Sunni community in North Lebanon, a sense of marginalization and discontent with the Lebanese state and the perception that it doesn’t cater to the Sunni community in an equal manner with other Lebanese sects, and also the divisions inside the Sunni community that leaves a large part of the population on the margins and leaves it prone to radicalization (Lefèvre, 2014, pp. 4-5). He also looks at the anti-statist trend among the Sunni community in North Lebanon, the lack of a unifying and charismatic political leadership after the death of Rafik Hariri, the criticism towards Saad Hariri and the Future Movement as a moderate political force, the failure of Future Movement to build an organized security force to reassure the community facing Hezbollah’s rise, and the reluctance of non-radical conservative
forces such as Jamaa al-Islamiya to replace Future Movement and garner the support of the Islamist factions (Lefèvre, 2014, pp. 7-9).

Another aspect of the crisis in Lefèvre’s view is the lack of trust in the Sunni religious establishment and the presence of radical Islamic movements that replaced the moderate Sunni Dar al Fatwa in catering to the community (Lefèvre, 2014, pp. 9-13).

Also and important aspect of the crisis is the fact that the Sunni community in Tripoli is politically polarized. Despite the fact that there is a strong anti-Syrian sentiment in Tripoli, there are small groups that are politically allied with pro-Syrian March 8, such as Tawid Movement or groups of supporters of former Lebanese Prime Minister Omar Karami, Hezbollah reinforced them financially and militarily as part of its strategy in mid-2000s (Lefèvre, 2014, pp. 13-15). Lefèvre argues that although the crisis in Tripoli is utterly political, it took a sectarian form; it eventually led to the unwillingness of the security forces to intervene for fear of compromising the sectarian balance of the troops. “The Sunni critique of the Lebanese Armed Forces (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 Arsal” (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 20).

The literature is rich when it comes to ethnicity, minorities and ethnic conflict in the Middle East. Most see Lebanon as an example of management of ethnic conflict through consociationalism. But the problem with most literature on ethnic conflict in
Lebanon is that very little of it refers to the current security dilemma in the conflict between the Shiite and Sunni communities, the underlying causes for polarization and conflict and the catalysts for its escalation in the recent years, after the beginning of the Arab Spring and, in particular, the Syrian crisis.

1.2. Introduction to Sunni Islamic fundamentalism and its currents

1.2.1. Islamic modernism and Islamic revivalism

David S. New (New, 2001) looks at fundamentalism from a pan-religious perspective: the term has come to be applied to all major religions—Christian, Mosaic and Islam. Fundamentalists think it is necessary to take a hard line on the “fundamentals” of a religion—the specific statements of belief that fundamentalists say are the essential propositions of their respective religion.

Islamic scholars in general identify two currents in Sunni Islam, regardless how they call them: moderate and radical. All Muslims believe in the six articles of faith—belief in God, belief in the messengers of prophets of God, belief in the revelations and the Koran, belief in angels, belief in the judgment day, and belief in the ultimate power of God or God’s decree. But they interpret the Koran and the Sharia (the Islamic law) differently (Guidère, 2012).

Authors (Armajani, 2004) divide Islam into modernists—who believe in the inerrancy of the Koran but they interpret it and apply it in a modern context—and revivalists or Islamists—who favor the literal interpretation of the Koran and the return to the traditional Islamic ideas. While the modernists accept secular governments and religious diversity, the revivalists aim at recreating the true Islamic society, imposing sharia, but by establishing an Islamic State through political action. For the revivalists,
Islam is not just religion, but also a political ideology (Haddad, Voll, & Esposito, 1991). Most authors agree that the revivalist current or Islamism is about political order, not faith (Tibi, 2013). Tibi argues that the major creed of Islamism is expressed in Arabic term *din-wa-dawla* (unity of state and religion) under a system of constitutionally mandated sharia. Thus, according to Tibi, Islamism is not faith but rather the imposition of a political system in the name of faith. Or in other words, Islamism is a specific interpretation of Islam, but it is not Islam per se.

For authors like Mansoor Moaddel (2005) Islamic fundamentalism was a departure from the previous Islamic modernism and Islamic nationalism currents. He explains that among the factors that contributed to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism were the economic development, demographic expansion, the rise of a new middle class and the expansion of higher education (2005, p. 196). They were followed by social dislocation. On this background, Islamic fundamentalism gained terrain as opposition to the overly secular nationalist leaders.

Graham Fuller (2012) talks about the same reactionary aspect of Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism: the current came as a reply to the authoritarianism, repression, corruption, incompetence as well as social and economic hardship. But, in the Islamists’ view, the political change has to come based on a set of values that most people in Muslim societies should find in the Koran, not in the secular Western democracy model.

Several authors have looked at the root causes of the rise of radical Islam/Islamic fundamentalism. Charles Hill speaks of the pressure of Western ideas and form of government, colonialism or simply globalization, and, on the other hand, of an internal
problem with the failure of the domestic governments to go by the book in following Islamic principles (Hill, 2007).

Dilip Hiro (2002) looks at Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and or Afghanistan to find out how Islamic fundamentalist movements have risen. The expansion of Islam, the influence of the Turks and Mogul empires, led to the dilution of Islam and the rise of Sufism, which led to the rise of revivalist movements meant to purify Islam. The Islamic society needed to be governed efficiently; therefore the rulers adopted the non-Islamic ways of the Byzantine Empire, which caused the rise of the Islamic revivalist movements as opposition. Among the revivalists was Abdul Wahhab, who in 1744, set out to purify Islam by waging jihad against idolatry, injustice, adultery, and apostates. He also forbade music, dance, and jewelry. Since Western secularism and political models were considered threatening and corrupting for Islam, they lead to the strengthening of the Wahhabi/Salafi view on Islam (Hiro, 2002, p. 28). Hiro also sees strong Wahhabi/Salafi influence in Islamic fundamentalism today: Wahhabi/Salafi doctrine consists of “religious police imparting the Wahhabi doctrine to the faithful and punish those found smoking, drinking, dancing, music and wearing of gold or silk, or failing to perform the Islamic rituals” (Hiro, 2002, p. 128). He also says that the rise of fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia was due to the monarchy’s alliance with the United States and its oil deals with the West. Ossama Bin Laden, the founder of Al Qaeda, was an adept of Salafism and was part of the movement that wanted to overthrow the Saudi monarchy (Hiro, 2002, p. 130).

The other Sunni fundamentalist current, the Muslim Brotherhood was set up in 1929 in Egypt by Hassan al Bana as a response to the Marxist ideas that had influenced
Egyptian intellectual circles [p. 67]. The Brotherhood promoted the idea that the sharia should be the basis for all social, political and economic matters. By 1940, the Brotherhood had grown in size and influence: it had 500 branches with mosques and schools. It soon strengthened itself by recruiting military officers, especially after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

Within the Muslim Brotherhood, radical Islamists such as Sayyid Qutb gained influence by opposing the efforts of Egyptian government of Gamal Abdul Nasser to modernize and secularize education. Due to his incitement to violence – waging jihad to restore pure Islam against the corrupt government, Qutb was executed in 1966 (Hiro, 2002, p. 77). Following the death of Nasser, the new president, Anwar Sadat, tried to co-opt moderate elements of the Brotherhood in the government, but could not keep the radicals under control. His policies led to his assassination (Hiro, 2002, p. 101). His successor, Hosni Mubarak, came with a policy of building a capitalist economy in order to counter fundamentalism and made an alliance with the United States; but the Islamists came back even stronger. The 1990s saw an increase in attacks and bombings in Egypt, and with all the efforts made by the government to curb its rise, the Brotherhood remained the main opposition for the regime until the Arab Spring when the group won the first elections after the ousting of Mubarak by popular protests. The Brotherhood backed President Mohammad Morsi was also deposed in 2013 by a military coup and General Abdel Fatah al Sisi became president.

1.2.2. Salafism

Quintan Wiktorowicz, in his article “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, shows that Salafism is split over practices and beliefs and includes a variety of groups and
factions (Wiktorowicz, 2006). He classifies the Salafi currents into two categories: purist and activist (militant, jihadist). Purists are primarily preoccupied by maintaining the purity of Islam as outlined in the Qur’an, Sunna, and consensus of the Companions (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 217). They prioritize promoting the Salafi creed and combating deviant practices, just as the Prophet fought polytheism, human desire, and human reason. Until the religion is purified, any political action will likely lead to corruption and injustice because society does not yet understand the tenets of faith. The proper method for implementing the creed is therefore propagation (da’wa), purification (tazkiyya), and religious education or cultivation (tarbiya).

The purists also see the jihadists/militant Salafis as modern day Murji’a, those who separate between belief and action, a sect rejected by all Salafi factions. As well, purists portray jihadists as rationalists driven by human desire; they employ non-Islamic means to promote the faith and misappropriate religious evidence to promote the faith (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 220).

According to Wiktorowicz, older scholars dominate the purist faction and attempt to monopolize religious authority in Saudi Arabia, including the Council of Senior Scholars. They enjoy considerable influence over government policy and have used their positions to promote purist interpretations of Islam. But their authority was challenged during the 1980s and 1990s by a group of young, more politically minded Salafi scholars, referred to as “the politicos” (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 221). The new movement was heavily influenced by the literature of the Muslim Brothers who took shelter in Saudi Arabia fleeing Gamal Abdu Nasser’s crackdown in Egypt; the Muslim Brotherhood was more political in principles than the Saudi Salafi purist establishment.
that did not have to deal with a colonial past and secular governments. The rift between the purists and the new “politico” faction became obvious after the Gulf War in 1990-1991, when the activists opposed the Saudi government’s decision to allow a United States military base on the Saudi territory.

However, it was not before the 1990s that the jihadist movement was formed. Wiktorowitz explains that the movement emerged during the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. “This conflict functioned as a dangerous incubator by exposing Saudi Salafis (and others) to the radical and politicized teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and related splinter groups (the Islamic Group, Islamic Jihad, etc.) in a context of military training and warfare. Unlike the politico exposure to Ikhwani [Muslim Brotherhood] analysis at the universities, the jihadists received their political training on the battlefield. As a result, they were exposed first to the idea of war and interpreted the ideology through the cause of their fight; and they took these ideas back to their own countries” (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 225).

Farish Noor, in his essay “The Evolution of ‘Jihad’ in Islamist Political Discourse: How a Plastic Concept Became Harder” (2002) writes that concepts always become plastic tools used for political mobilization, and the concept of “jihad” is one of them. According to Noor, “jihad” can be loosely translated as “struggle” or “effort”; the term was originally used to refer to one’s personal struggle against one’s own mortal failings and weaknesses, including pride, fears, anxieties and prejudices. “The Prophet Muhammad himself was reported to have described this personal existential struggle as the ‘Jihad Akbar’ (Greater Jihad). Alongside this notion of the Jihad Akbar was the concept of “Jihad Asghar” (small Jihad). This refers to the struggle for self-preservation
and self-defense - which has always been regulated by a host of ethical sanctions and prerogatives.”

The concept of jihad was highly regulated in the Koran: Muslims can wage jihad when they are under attack, but not to expand their territory, they cannot engage in acts of terror and indiscriminate violence where civilians are targeted. But he argues that because Sunni Islam is not a religion with a clear clerical hierarchy, the concepts can be high-jacked or perverted for the purpose of political utilitarianism. Within the context of the Muslim world feeling marginalized by the process of globalization, many religious leaders adopted an increasingly defensive stance.

Many authors like Springer (2009) or Brachman (2008) agree that the global jihadist movement started with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and developed as a franchise with groups that joined the same Salafi anti-Western ideology. Schanzer (2002) put it in a nutshell: “the terrorists of September 11, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban all adhere to an ideology we have come to know as militant Islam, a minority outgrowth of the faith that exudes a bitter hatred for Western ideas, including capitalism, individualism, and consumerism. It rejects the West and much that it has to offer (with the exception of weapons, medicines, and other useful technologies) seeking instead to implement a strict interpretation of the Koran and sharia. America, as radical Muslims see it, is the primary impediment to building an Islamic world order. Accordingly, militant Islam directs its venom towards America and the West.”

Most literature on Sunni Islamic fundamentalism uses the historical approach in order to explain the rise of the Islamic revivalist movements. However, some authors tried to identify the roots of radicalism and have correlated radicalism with poverty. Raul
Caruso and Evelina Gavrilova (2012) show in an empirical study that there is a direct link between poverty, unemployment and religious and political violence in the Palestinian territories. Thomas Heggahammer (2006) also finds a link between poverty and radical Sunni Islam. James Piazza (2007) explains terrorism through the social cleavage theory.

Other authors, however, believe that there is more to Islamism and jihadist groups than just poverty and even societies with relatively no social cleavages can host radical groups. The critique for the theory that radical militant Islam finds its roots in poverty and unemployment comes from many authors that studied the emergence of Islamic radicalism in Western societies and observed that many militants in Europe come from middle class Muslim families such as Sarkar (2013), Moghadam (2011) or Phares (2008). However, other authors point out that the roots of radicalism are strictly linked to the local and regional political and social status of the community: if in Europe most jihadists come from the middle class, in other regions “it’s a matter of despair” (Dronzina, 2012). It is the latter framework that the thesis applies in trying to identify the conditions that led to the re-emergence of radical militant Salafism in Tripoli after 2011.

Most reviewed literature pointed out that Islamic fundamentalism in general was born because groups in the Islamic societies felt threatened by Western liberalism and secularism. However, in Lebanon, all recent security incidents, bombings and terrorist attacks did not have Western interest or objectives as targets. They targeted areas inhabited by the Lebanese Shiite community – whether Beirut or Bekaa Valley- as well as Alawite inhabited neighborhood Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli. The jihadist factions in
Lebanon did not rebel against the Western values, but against other Muslim religious groups and their political exponents. In Lebanon, after 2005, but more obviously after 2011, radicalism and militantism in the Sunni community had a lot to do with the Sunni-Shiite sectarian friction. In other words, it was closely linked to sectarian/ethnic identity.

1.2.3. Sunni Islamic fundamentalism in Lebanon

The first Lebanese Salafi movement was founded in Tripoli by Salem Al-Shahhal (Rabil, 2014, p. 63). Shahhal was schooled in Medina where he became a disciple of Nassredin al Albani’s purist/quietist and scientific Salafism. He based his movement on the Wahhabi principle of “commanding good and forbidding wrong.” He believed that Islam can only be Salafi, that polytheism was a form of disbelief (takfir) but never agreed with fatwas sanctioning the murder of the non-believers. His movement spread especially in the poor neighborhoods of Tripoli and poor villages in Akkar region (Rabil, 2014, p. 64). Al-Shahhal established Shabab Muhammad (The Youth of Mohammad) in order to attract the youth to the movement and in 1976, at the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, he attempted at forming a Salafi militia Nuwat al Jaysh al Islami (the Nucleus of the Islamic Army) to fight the Christians in nearby Zgharta. The group failed to mobilize fighters because of the rise of secular movements in Tripoli. Shahhal’s movement was joined by all his three sons, Dai al Islam, Radi al Islam and Abu Bakr, who funded Al Muslimun (Muslims) organization that functioned as an orphanage.

The Salafi movement, however, remained marginal until the 1980s, when the appearance of Jamaa al Islamiya (the Islamic Society) and the emergence of Tawhid
(The Islamic Unity Movement), which controlled Tripoli between 1983 and 1985, helped revive Salafism and gave it an activist character (Rabil, 2014, p. 65). The pioneer of activist Salafism was Fathi Yakan, who left Al-Shahhal’s quietist/purist movement and joined Muhammad Omar al Da’uq, a Palestinian Islamist from Jaffa who had fled to Beirut in 1948. At the same time, in 1952, Mustafa al Sibai, the superintendent of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was also in Beirut. Yakan became an adept of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political Islam ideology and motivated him to go beyond the cultural activities of the Salafism current in Lebanon: Yakan founded Al Jamaa al Islamiyah in 1957 and registered it as a political party in 1964 (Rabil, 2014, pp. 66-67). Faced with the rise of pan-Arabism, Al Jamaa al Islamiyah focused in the 1970s on educational and charity projects in order to garner more support. It had its first candidate, Muhammad Ali Dinawi, for parliamentary elections in Tripoli in 1972. Jamaa al Islamiyah also founded a militia, al Mujahidun, during the first years of the civil war and fought alongside the pan-Arabist leftists against the Christian militias before it dismantled.

Yakan’s activism paved the way for Islamism into the politics of Lebanon and into the society in general, but it was the rise and fall of Harakat al Tawhid al Islami (The Islamic Unity Movement), Lebanon’s first Islamic caliphate, that contributed to the rise of Salafism in Lebanon. Founded by Sheikh Said Shaaban, Tawhid appeared on the background of the decline of pan-Arabist and Nasserist movements in Tripoli in 1982 and it ruled Tripoli between 1983 and 1985. However, Syrian president Hafez al Assad was not friendly to Islamist organizations and the memory of the recent Hama uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood was fresh. The fact that a close relationship was
developing between Tawhid and the PLO, whose leaders had taken refuge in Tripoli’s refugee camps after the Israeli invasion of Beirut, was also not to the Syrian president’s liking. The Syrian army and the Israeli army shelled together the Palestinian camps in Tripoli’s vicinity. In the meantime, Tawhid used the weapons it had acquired from the PLO to clean Tripoli of pro-Syrian factions. Yasser Arafat agreed to leave the city on December 20, 1983. But Tawhid continued to control Tripoli until 1985 under sharia law. But, according to Rabil, the movement became divided, it split twice while opening a new front against the Alawite Jabal Mohsen and the pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party (Rabil, 2014, pp. 76-77). While Shaaban was negotiating with the Syrian army, some of the commanders in Tawhid attacked Syrian army checkpoints across Tripoli; the Syrian army besieged Bab al-Tabbaneh, where the Sunni militia was located, and by dawn killed scores of fighters and arrested dozens. The massacre became one of the roots of Tripoli’s Sunni conservative movement’s resentment towards the Syrian regime, although Shaaban’s Tawhid Movement slowly switched sides and became a Syrian proxy after the civil war (Rabil, 2014, p. 79).

During the 1990s, after the end of the civil war, the quietist/purist Salafism grew in Tripoli. Zoltan Pall (2013), in “Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe: Development, Fractionalization and, Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon”, focuses his research on Tripoli and North Lebanon as the main region where Salafism has found the conditions for success as a doctrine (Pall, 2014). The movement started to grow when Lebanese graduates of the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia returned to Lebanon and started to gain adepts. They had few competitors; leftist and nationalist movements that had been previously dominant in the Sunni lost influence
after the Civil War. Mainstream Islamist movements, such as Jamaa al Islamiya and the Tawhid Movement, were unable to either gain long lasting popularity or were annihilated by the Syrian Army.

Neither did Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Liberations Party) that was set up in Jordan as an international Islamist movement; its ideology reached Lebanon through Jordanian students studying in Lebanese universities. Although its leadership is based in Tripoli and the party obtained a license in 2006, it is seen as an elite party and has failed to garner grassroots support (Abdul Ghany, 2010).

In the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the Salafi movement in Tripoli focused on the da’wa (preaching) rather than political activism. Under the Syrian occupation, asserting an Islamist political ideology would have been risky. The Syrian policy was also to co-opt Islamist organizations in order to counteract any jihadist Salafi movement. It is the case of Al Ahbash, a Sufi sect that opposed political Islamism (Hamzeh & Demekjian, 1996). Founded by Abdallah al Habash, a mufti exiled from Ethiopia who studied in Damascus and then settled in Beirut, Al Ahbash follows a moderate ideology that mixes Sunni and Shiite theological doctrines with the Sufi spiritualism.

Salafism in Tripoli in the 1990s had a different structure from that of the current’s manifestations in other countries: it was not a grass-roots movement with a large follower base that was isolated from the rest of the society, but it was a network of religiously educated individuals, sheikhs who controlled mosques and charities (Pall, 2013, p. 30). The sheikhs had large passive communities that showed up at the mosque every Friday and turned to them for judgments or fatwas. He also emphasizes that what
makes the Lebanese Salafi movement particular was the weakness of the Dar al Fatwa’s authority and the dissolution of the alliance between the clerics and the rich Sunni families involved in politics. Dar al Fatwa was weakened by the assassination of the Charismatic state multi Hassan Khaled in 1987, and is struggling with lack of funding. Therefore, it doesn’t control all the mosques in North Lebanon, not even the majority.

Out of the 110 mosques in Tripoli, only 40 are controlled by Dar al Fatwa, another 40 by Salafi sheikhs (which are not recognized as *ulama* by the Dar al Fatwa) and the rest by other Sunni movements (Pall, 2013, p. 30). In Bab al-Tabbaneh, the most populated neighborhood, all mosques are controlled by Salafi sheikhs, while in North Lebanon 15 out of 30 mosques also have Salafi preachers. “One can guess that a very significant proportion, if not the majority of the majority of the Sunni population in the North go to unofficial mosques and seek advice for their daily religious practices from persons who do not belong to the official religious establishment” (Pall, 2013, p. 31). Moreover, if some Lebanese Salafi preacher graduated from religious educational institutions in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, most of them either studied in Lebanese schools not recognized by Dar al Fatwa or did not study at all. Also, the large majority of people who attend the Salafi mosques do not follow the strict rules of Salafism, they drink, smoke, dance and do not apply the dress code (Pall, 2013, p. 35).

Some segments of the society, such as parts of the religiously committed lower middle class, saw an alternative in Salafism; Salafi clerics and preachers provided religious services for the Sunni population, patronage or space for socialization (Pall, 2014). At the same time they tried to mobilize Sunni youth by turning their attention to the “danger” coming from Hezbollah and the growing political and economic power of the
Shia community in the country. Salafis presented themselves as the vanguard of the Sunnis, capable of resisting the Shia “threat” and saving Sunnis.

Pall also divides the Salafi movements in North Lebanon into haraki (activist/militant/jihadist) movements and purist (who focus on non-violent preaching of Islam, education, and "purification” of religious beliefs) (Pall, 2013, pp. 25-27). At first, during the 1990s, the Lebanese Salafism was predominantly militant under Saudi schooled sheikh Dai al Islam al-Shahhal who also got consistent funding from Kuwaiti activist Salafi circles. But after a battle between jihadists militants and the Lebanese Army in the Dunniyeh region, east of Tripoli, the Shahhal network was dismantled and Shahhal himself had to flee to Saudi Arabia and his charities were closed. This led mainly to the rise of the peaceful Salafi current in North Lebanon with Sheikh Safwan al Zoaghbi and the Islamic Heritage Endowment (Pall, 2014). Among Al Zoaghbi reforms was the establishment of a fatwa council that allowed participating in elections and supporting candidates.

The purist current dominated in North Lebanon until the Arab Spring in 2011 by giving access to education to poor residents of the region, by sending missionaries to remote areas in Akkar, North Lebanon, and by supporting political factions and candidates who protected the community in return for the political support (Pall, 2014). But after the Arab Spring the militant Salafi re-emerged in Lebanon, following the developments across the Arab World. Al Zoaghbi was ousted after he signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Shiite Hezbollah and IHE lost some of its influence, although it remained active and catered to hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees (Coomes, 2014).
The Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis increase the influence of the militant Salafis, supported by Gulf charities. Preachers attract thousands of Sunnis to their mosques for the sermons. The sheikhs exploit Sunni-Shia tensions, which have been further deepened by the civil war in Syria. After the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, al-Shahhal managed to re-establish some of his network. Also, other independent activist Salafi sheikhs gained influence: one of them is Sheikh Salem al-Rafei (Pall, 2014).

The militant Salafis in Lebanon also support the Syrian opposition and many have crossed the border to fight alongside the Syrian Salafi rebel groups. If the activist/militant Salafi sheikhs in Tripoli support the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist rebel brigades, some of the young Salafi fighters are enrolled alongside the Islamic State and the Al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian faction (Alami, 2013).

Robert Rabil in “Salafism in Lebanon – From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism” (Rabil, 2014) uses the same classification as Pall and, before him, Wictorowicz (2006): the purist/quietest ideology versus the activist/haraki ideology and he also addresses the rise of the jihadist Salafism in the context of the Syrian uprising.

Rabil looks at the purist/quietest Salafi movement led by Sheikh Saad Al Din Muhammad Al Kibbi and the Bukhari Institute. A versed cleric, with a PhD in Islamic Law, Al Kibbi established the Bukhari Islamic Law Institute in 1993 in Akkar and the institution is recognized by Dar al Fatwa and the Saudi Council of Higher Ulema. The institute caters for around 300 villages and, besides the Islamic law studies, it also offers technical degrees. But although Kibbi’s ideology overlaps with other Salafi movements, in practice he refrained from excommunicating sinners, dissenters and polytheists
because the sheikh believes it would weaken the *umma* (Rabil, 2014, pp. 98-99). Al-Kibbi also stands at a distance from the jihadist/activist Salafism by promoting an apolitical attitude towards the political authority (Rabil, 2014, p. 103). Unlike other Salafis he did not disparage the Shiites as rejectionists in Lebanon nor did he antagonize the Christians (Rabil, 2014, p. 105).

The activist Salafi Sheikh Zakariya Abdelrazak Al Masri formulates his ideology according to the *manhaj* (methodology) he considers best suited for applying the Prophetic model and implementing the call to Islam, the *da`wa* (Rabil, 2014, p. 109). Like many Salafis of this current, Al Masri supports applying the *sharia* penalties to sinners and, of course, the jihad “by money, tongue and spearheads.” (Rabil, 2014, p. 115). He doesn’t look at jihad as a defensive strategy and supports Al Qaeda as an Islamist organization seeking to establish an Islamic State that includes all Muslim countries, therefore, according to Masri, it is not a *takfiri* or a terrorist organization as it was defined by the West. Al Masri advocates for the unity of the Sunnis and the Shiites, and refrained from excommunicating Shiites. However has spoken often against the Iranian and the Syrian regimes even before the Syrian uprising (Rabil, 2014, p. 127).

Unlike Pall who dwells on the Salafis in North Lebanon, Rabil looks closely at the emergence of Salafi jihadist organization Usbat al-Ansar in Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp and analyzes its ideology (Rabil, 2014, p. 134). Initially, the jihadist ideology did not have much echo in Lebanon and did not appeal to the Salafi movements in North Lebanon until the late 1990s. But it found its way into the Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Ain al-Hilweh, due to a combination of socio-political factors combined with a general disillusionment with Palestinian Liberation
Organization (PLO). The first jihadist movement in Ain Al-Hilweh was the Islamic Jihad Movement established in 1975 and led by Ibrahim Ghunaym, the preacher of Al Noor Mosque. The Movement had as a central creed the jihad against the Zionists, but from a political standpoint it wanted to establish an Islamic society. The movement cooperated during the Lebanese civil war with the Shiite Islamic Resistance that later was controlled by Hezbollah. In the 70s, the Islamic Jihad Movement received support from Iran (Rabil, 2014, p. 137). In 1982, when the Iranian embassy set up the Congregation of Muslim Ulema, the Islamic Jihad Movement joined and for the next decade its leader supported Hezbollah and became the representative of its interests in the camps (Rougier, 2007). Also with Iranian support, in 1986, sheikh Ghunaym and a group of Islamist sheikhs (Jamal Khattab, Muhammad al Najmi, Salim al-Lababedi) formed The Guardianship Council of Religious Affairs (Majlis Ri’ayat al-Shu’un al Diniya, also known as Murshid) which had the main purpose to set up an education system in the refugee camps in order to spread the Islamist ideology. At the same time, the growing perception of the PLO as a corrupt organization and the discrimination of the Lebanese government against the Palestinian refugees reinforced the Islamic activism.

Usbat al-Ansar (the League of the Righteous) was established by Hisham Sharaydi, one of Ghunaym’s disciples, on this political background (Rabil, 2014, p. 139). Sharaydi had rudimentary religious education, but after fighting against the Israeli army in 1982 in Ain al-Hilweh and after his detention in the Ansar camp in Nabatieh for a year and a half, he was appointed imam at the Martyr’s Mosque located at the camp’s northern entrance. His vision of Islam was generally based on the necessity of Jihad as an armed
struggle against the oppressor and establishing an Islamic state under the Islamic law.
The hardline police campaign on religious transgressions such as dress code, drinking put the movement at odds with other Palestinian factions, including Fatah (Rabil, 2014, p. 141). “This jihadi variant, whose seeds were planted by the Islamic Jihad Movement, grew wearing the mantle of Salafism, if only because Salafism offered clear, broad and definite directives that fostered a strong sense of identity, authenticity and empowerment for the refugees...The intellectually unencumbered Salafism provided the link to and continuity of a glorious past and justified jihad against that which afflicted Muslim society in its present weakened and humiliated state” (Rabil, 2014, p. 141). Slowly the movement grew independent from the initial Hezbollah influence and started pursuing its own enemies, such as Sunni sects like al Ahbash or the Lebanese state Army (Rabil, 2014, p. 145).

In 2003, members of the group also travelled to Iraq to participate in the Sunni insurgency there, the names of the “martyrs” were announced at mosques in Ain al-Hilweh. In 2006, The Lebanese authorities arrested an alleged Al Qaeda cell in Ain al-Hilweh. Its members were allegedly planning a series of suicide attacks across Lebanon. In 2008, Usbat al-Ansar fought Hezbollah during the May 7 clashes with pro-Western alliance March 14 supporters. After the clashes, the two groups held a dialogue and the Sunni jihadist group stated that, although it had an ideological problem with Hezbollah, it does not have an interest in attacking it. This raised a current of dissent inside Usbat al-Ansar based on fears that its leadership was heading towards moderation. However, Rabil writes, the group was just being cautious towards all parties in Lebanon (Rabil, 2014, p. 147).
After the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, most Salafi movements rallied around Hariri’s Future Movement and the March 14 anti-Syrian political alliance; at the same time, after the Syrian withdrawal there was an increase in Salafi activism in North Lebanon and an increase in its political engagement (Rabil, 2014, p. 177).

The leader of this political movement was Dr. Hassan al-Shahhal who believed that the most important thing that resulted from the Assassination of Rafik Hariri was a sense of hollowness and the feeling that the Sunni community was being targeted (Qassir, 2005). An Islamic Political Bureau was established in order to promote more political involvement among the Sunni community, mobilizing purist Salafis and activists together. But Shahhal’s movement did not excommunicate the Shiites; on the contrary it resulted in a dialogue meant to prevent sectarian strife and a memorandum of understanding between Hezbollah and the Islamic Heritage Endowment, the purist Salafi movement’s main institution (Rabil, 2014, p. 182). However, the memorandum was met with a vocal dissent from the haraki Salafi sheikh Dai al Islam al-Shahhal who accused Hezbollah of dividing the Sunni community. His reaction reflected the anger of the Sunni street towards Hezbollah, which grew under the Syrian occupation and peaked after the Hezbollah’s takeover of West Beirut in May 2008. The memorandum was frozen. “Actually, the reaction of the Sunni community in general and the non-quietist Salafis in particular had been the outcome of years of marginalization, oppression, and entrapment of many Sunnis in the hermetic crucible of Salafism’s religious-political discourse of mobilization (Rabil, 2014, p. 183).

The Syrian uprising and Hezbollah’s involvement together with the Iranian
Revolutionary guards alongside the Syrian government was also perceived as a threat by the Lebanese Salafis. The paralysis of the international community did not help, especially since the North Lebanon Islamic foundations were the ones most involved in providing humanitarian aid to the Syrian refugees, mostly Sunnis, who took shelter in Lebanese Sunni communities in North Lebanon and Tripoli. Many young activists affiliated with the Salafi movements were arrested or questioned by the Lebanese security forces on charges of helping anti-regime Syrian rebels (Elali, What was behind the Tripoli clashes?, 2012). The arrest of Shadi al-Mawlawi, a Salafi from Tripoli, prompted demonstrations and deadly clashes. The organizer of the demonstrations was Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, whose anti-Syrian and anti-Hezbollah sermons rallied thousands at Al Taqwa Mosque in Tripoli (Elali, 2012). The Syrian foreign policy also did not help: the Syrian regime tried to portray the uprising as the work of Islamists and terrorists since April 2011 and consistently instigated sectarian tensions between Pro-Syrian Alawite Jabal Mohsen militias and the Sunni groups in Bab al-Tabbaneh, already considered a Salafi stronghold. Also, a critical moment was the shooting of an anti-Syrian Salafi sheikh in Akkar in May 2012 by army officers (Rabil, 2014, p. 221).

Salafis increased their support of the rebellion in Syria, portraying it increasingly as a Sunni insurgency, the war of the oppressed Sunni community against the oppressive secular regime. “The rebellion has moved to Lebanon,” al-Rafei said in a sermon. Rabil’s book looks at many key events that also contributed to the radicalization of many young men in the Sunni community in Lebanon, especially in North Lebanon and Sidon, especially after the rise and fall of Salafi sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a charismatic cleric that echoed Tripoli’s Salem al-Rafei’s stances preaching the duty of jihad in Syria.
and standing against Hezbollah. But it fails to look at other Sunni communities in Lebanon, where Salafism was not the dominant religious current like in North Lebanon. He does not take into account the example of the Sunni enclave of Arsal, an initially moderate Sunni community that also turned against Hezbollah during the Syrian uprising, after sheltering tens of thousands of Syrian refugees.

Also, most of the available literature takes the historical approach and doesn’t look at causes and triggers for mobilization, radicalization and militantism in the Sunni community. While the literature dwells around the same events highlighting possible causes for the radicalization and the re-emergence of the jihadist Salafism in Lebanon, there is a lack of theoretical framework that could help identify what triggers Islamic radicalism and militantism in a given Sunni community. The thesis will try to fill this gap by applying the ethnicity theoretical framework, particularly because the ethnic conflict best describes the socio-political and religious context in Lebanon. In other words, it’s what makes Lebanon particular. If it weren’t for the Lebanese Sunni-Shiite rift sidelined and ignored for years before 2011, it is highly unlikely that Jihadist Salafism would have had the right conditions to capitalize on.
Chapter two
The Lebanese Sunnis after the Cedar Revolution

2.1. Political polarization in Lebanon after 2005

2.1.1. The Cedar Revolution

On 14 February 2005 a car bomb exploded next to St. George Hotel in central Beirut killing Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Lebanese Minister of Economy Bassel Fleihan and 21 others. The blame was immediately placed on Syria and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah (Mara, 2011). The reasons were not linked necessarily to outstanding proof of Syria’s involvement; however, the rift between Hariri and Damascus over the term extension of the Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, a Syrian ally, right before Hariri resigned his PM post in October 2004, Lahoud’s hurry to appoint Syrian ally Omar Karami as Prime-Minister the next day, Syria’s tight grip over Lebanon and the presence of 14,000 Syrian troops (BBC, 2004) did not leave room for doubt⁵. Hariri’s death and Syria’s withdrawal were turning points for Lebanon in general, but especially for the Sunni community. The Syrian hegemony had played with and put more pressure on the sectarian rift between the Lebanese religious communities. After the civil war,

⁵ The day after Hariri was killed, The Progressive Socialist Party’s Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who had recently joined the anti-Syrian opposition, stated that he had heard Syrian President Bashar al Assad threatening Hariri in August 2004. If you and [French president Jacques] Chirac want me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon,” Assad reportedly told Hariri (New York Times, 2005).
the Maronite factions were not a challenge anymore. But Damascus had played on the Sunni-Shiite division in order to keep both communities in check. The two communities had already drifted apart after the Shiite displaced from South Lebanon moved into West Beirut (Harris, 2012, p. 258).

During the 1990s and Rafik Hariri’s mandates as prime-minister, his concentrated investment into the reconstruction of Central Beirut and his close ties with Saudi Arabia annoyed the Shiite population. The Syrian occupation played on this animosity and had Hariri’s government and Hezbollah constrain each other and, thus, keep in check both Saudi and Iranian influence in Lebanon. Moreover, Damascus also used the pro-Syrian Maronite president and Speaker of the Parliament to restrain Hariri’s government. This political power-play contributed to the creation of the sectarian rift between the Sunni supporters of Hariri and the Shiite supporters of Hezbollah (Harris, 2012, p. 258).

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Syrian regime depended on Hariri to keep Lebanon’s economy floating, but also needed Hezbollah to curb the Sunni leader’s influence and to keep Iran, its ally in the region, happy with its access to the Levant. Thus, Syria and Iran supported Hezbollah’s arsenal and its turning the southern suburbs of Beirut into fortified enclaves. This is one of the important factors that led to the rift between the Future Movement supporters in the Sunni community and Shiite Hezbollah. Hezbollah benefited from the arrangement with Syria; being the best organized armed group in Lebanon, better organized than the much larger state army, its leaders perceived it as a Middle Eastern force that surpassed the status of Shiite resistance; however, it was still a prisoner of the sectarian Lebanese system, with an almost exclusively Shiite constituency and no real economic solution for Lebanon (Harris, 2012, pp. 265-266).
When Hariri was killed in 2005, he became a martyr, not only for his supporters in the Sunni community who saw him as a leader, but also for other anti-Syrian Lebanese groups (Vloeberghs, 2013). The rise of Rafik Hariri as a symbol of the Lebanese fight for sovereignty started during his political career, but after his dramatic assassination his symbolic martyr figure and his legacy deeply impacted the Lebanese social and political scene (Vloeberghs, 2013, p. 180). His memorial in Martyrs Square became a national symbol for the anti-Syrian resistance and Lebanese independence. The immediate reaction to his assassination combined with the anti-Syrian sentiments was a series of protests that called mainly for the withdrawal of Syria’s troops from Lebanon. The Cedar Revolution, also called the Beirut Spring, started with anti-Syrian activists organizing a sit-in in Martyrs’ Square in Beirut, asking for the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, the resignation of the Syria allied government, an international inquiry into the bombing that had killed Rafik Hariri and parliamentary elections (NOW Lebanon, 2007).

Pro-Syrian Prime Minister Omar Karami announced his resignation on February 28 and called for new parliamentary elections (BBC, 2005). A few days later, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad pledged the withdrawal of the troops from Lebanon (BBC News, 2005). On April 10, 2005, the last Syrian troops left Lebanon. On April 28, 2005, the last identifiable Syrian intelligence apparatus had left Beirut.

2.1.2. Political polarization: March 8 and March 14

Within two months Lebanon went through major political changes. Syrian ally and Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah called for a massive rally in support of Syria on March 8, 2005. The main statement of the rally that brought to the streets hundreds of
thousands of supporters was that Israel and the United States were meddling in Lebanese affairs and that Hezbollah would not submit to the UN Resolution 1559 by giving up its weapons (Washington Times, 2005). Also, on March 13, another large protest organized by Hezbollah in support for Syria was organized in Nabatieh, South Lebanon. Another protest was scheduled for Tripoli, but it was canceled.

The number of supporters Hezbollah managed to gather at the pro-Syrian demonstrations was much higher than what the opposition had been able to gather at the previous protests. However, on March 14, for the one month memorial of Hariri’s assassination, the opposition together with several civil society organizations managed to gather hundreds of thousands of people from across Lebanon after it was called for by the Hariri family as well as the Christian parties.

Two new political poles were born from these two demonstrations, both named after the days the demonstrations took place. March 14, the anti-Syrian alliance, was led by Future Movement now led by Rafik Hariri’s younger son, Saad. It also included the Christian parties - the Lebanese Forces, the Phalanges and, initially, the Free Patriotic Movement led by exiled anti-Syrian general Michel Aoun, the Islamist Jamaa al Islamiyah, two Armenian political factions - Social Democrat Hunchakian Party and Armenian Democratic Liberal Party, the National Liberal Party, and other smaller parties (March 14 website, 2015).

The FPM left the alliance before the May 2005 elections because of a misunderstanding over the number of seats allocated to the party and its leader Michel Aouin’s presidency ambitions (Harris, 2012).

Besides the FPM, the March 8 Alliance included Hezbollah, pro-Syrian Amal
Movement, pro-Syrian Christian Marada Movement, Druze Lebanese Democratic Party, Syrian Social Nationalist Party, but also small Sunni groups in Sidon and Tripoli, such as The Nasserists or Harakat Majd (the Glory Movement) as well as Tripoli based Alawite Arab Democratic Party.

In May-June 2005 elections, the first parliamentary elections outside the Syrian hegemony in post-war Lebanon, March 14 without the FPM gained 72 seats, relying mostly on the Sunni community’s support for the Future Movement. The FPM won the Maronite heartland, gaining 21 seats. The Hezbollah-Amal tandem won in the Shiite districts, getting 35 seats in the Parliament. The FPM signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah in November 2006 and became part of the March 8 coalition (Harris, 2012, p. 270).

However, according to some authors (Hamdan, 2013), the political rift between the two political coalitions, Hezbollah and Future Movement in particular, is much deeper than Syria and has to do with political representation and the Taif Agreement that put an end to the Lebanese civil war in 1989. Taif failed to remedy the political grievances of the Shiites: it increased their participation in the Lebanese power-sharing system, but did not secure them proportional representation. The accord modified the distribution of power among the Muslim and the Christian Maronite communities; it gave more power and influence to the Shiite and Sunni representatives in the state and less prerogatives to the Maronite representative. However, Taif politically elevated the Sunni community by granting the Sunni Prime Minister some of the former powers of the Maronite president. (Hamdan, 2013, p. 44). Therefore, Taif remedied the Sunni grievances, but failed to solve the Shiite grievances.
Hezbollah was not included in the Taif negotiations and Amal Movement was critical of the accord too. Part of the Shiite parties’ grievances is the finance ministry that the Shiites want to be reserved for their community. Future Movement argues that this was never agreed at Taif. This was interpreted by both Shiite parties as being barred from holding a powerful position in the government (Hamdan, 2013, p. 45). Therefore, the political and sectarian polarization after 2005 on the Sunni-Shiite line is not only rooted in the Syrian foreign policy, Hezbollah’s weapons and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, but also Hezbollah and Amal Movement’s desire to redesign Taif so that the executive power would not be concentrated in the prime-minister’s cabinet.

2.1.3 Hezbollah’s weapons

From the Future Movement’s perspective there couldn’t be a compromise on the Shiite representation in the government after 2005 because of Hezbollah’s military arsenal\(^6\).

Emile Lahoud left the presidency in November 2007 and his departure was followed by a six-month vacuum. The March 14 coalition suggested the head of the Lebanese Army, Michel Suleiman, as President. Hezbollah-led March 8 accepted his candidacy, but refused to elect him and demanded a third of the ministerial positions in a new cabinet. Future Movement refused (Harris, 2012, p. 272).

The hostility between the Sunni and the Shiite communities grew even more after the

\(^6\) The main political request of the Future Movement led March 14 after the Syrian withdrawal was Hezbollah’s disarmament (Knudsen & Kerr, 2013, p. 28). Following Syria’s withdrawal Lebanon’s government had reached a deadlock because the March 14 coalition was not willing to accept Hezbollah in the government without dismantling its arsenal. The outcome of the July 2006 war, which resulted in over 1,000 people dead in South Lebanon and destroyed infrastructure across Lebanon, led to the intensification of the rift between March 14 and March 8. March 14 politicians accused Hezbollah of disregarding the Lebanese state by going to war with Israel without consulting the government and putting the entire country at risk (Harris, 2012, p. 271). The UN Security Council Resolution 1701 also blamed Hezbollah for the conflict and called for ending the non-state armed group and boosted the UN peacekeeping force on the border with Israel. However, Hezbollah was able to hold on to the loyalty of most Shiites in South Lebanon, it received more weapons from Syria and Iran financed the reconstruction of the bombed areas.
May 2008 events, when Hezbollah’s fighters and supporters took over Sunni neighborhoods of Beirut during clashes over the Party of God’s parallel telecommunications network. Hezbollah’s invasion of Beirut’s neighborhoods left a lot of resentment among the Future Movement politicians and supporters, especially since Hezbollah had vowed never to turn its weapons against Lebanese factions: for the Sunnis who had supported Hezbollah’s arsenal within the framework of fighting Israel, the Party of God lost its legitimacy of resistance. The swift defeat was perceived as a humiliation by the Sunni community and a demonstration of Hezbollah’s military and political power over Lebanon (Hamdan, 2013, p. 53).

Without Western support, confronted with a better organized military force and facing civil war again, the government reversed its decisions. The Arab League brokered a deal in Doha, and Michel Suleiman became president after March 8 received its blocking third in the Siniora government (NOW Lebanon, 2008).

But the May 2008 events became part of the Sunni consciousness and the Future Movement’s discourse that Hezbollah is willing to use its weapons for political gains. The Doha agreement and its reformed consociationalism stipulated the formation of a new national unity cabinet composed of 30 ministers that would serve until June 2009 elections. The agreement also provided that the March14 parliament majority would get 16 ministerial portfolios, 3 seats would be allocated to the Lebanese Maronite President.

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7 Fouad Siniora’s cabinet decided to confront Hezbollah and refused to sanction the appointment of a Shiite Hezbollah supporter as the head of the Beirut Airport and launched an investigation into the Party of God’s parallel telecommunications network. Hezbollah accused the government of being a threat to the Resistance and its armed supporters, as well as other Syria aligned party supporters invaded mainly Sunni neighborhoods of Beirut (Harris, 2012, pp. 273-274).

8 “Our stance has always been clear on the role of Hezbollah in freeing Lebanon from Israeli occupation… But when their arms are pointed at their fellow Lebanese, we have a problem. We have not and will not declare war on Hezbollah and the proof is that no guns were pointed back at them,” Future Movement PM Fouad Siniora said on May 10, 2008. (NOW Lebanon, 2008)
while the opposition would get 11 seats, which granted it the long-sought “obstructional third” (Salaméy, 2014, p. 74).

March 14 won the elections in mid-2009 and won the majority in Parliament and Saad Hariri was charged with forming another government. The “obstructional third” formula was replicated in the formation of the post-election government, although it was meant only for the interim cabinet. The move constrained any form of majoritarian rule, rendered any form of decision in the cabinet impossible without consensus and the Hariri government plunged into deadlock over almost every issue discussed (Salaméy, 2014, p. 74). Hariri’s new government was crippled when Walid Jumblatt withdrew his bloc from the March 14 coalition in 2010 and reconciled with Hezbollah and Damascus. Saad Hariri was left with no choice as the head of a national unity government and he visited Damascus in December 2009. According to several analysts, the move discredited him across the Sunni community (Harris, 2012, p. 274).

But the final deadlock came over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and March 14 politicians and partisans’ call for justice and ending the impunity in the long line of assassinations that had plagued Lebanon since 2005.

2.1.4 The Special Tribunal for Lebanon

The investigation into the murder of Rafik Hariri and the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon - a hybrid tribunal with international staff and funding, but which applied Lebanese law - to deal with the matter added to the already existing political rift between the Future Movement and Hezbollah.

The United Nations commissioned a preliminary investigation into Hariri’s murder and the first report came out on March 27, 2005. It accused Syria of intimidating Lebanese
political opponents and charged four high-ranking officials in the Lebanese/Syrian security apparatus of negligence and of covering up evidence. It also recommended a full international investigation (FitzGerald, 2005). The UN Security Council authorized the inquiry on April 7, 2005. It was one of the factors that determined Bashar al Assad to give in and to withdraw the Syrian troops and the intelligence apparatus from Lebanon (Harris, 2012, p. 269). The UN International Independent Investigation Commission started the inquiry in Lebanon in June, under German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis. His first report, which came among several assassinations and assassination attempts on anti-Syrian politicians and cultural personalities, pointed at the Syrian intelligence apparatus and its Lebanese proxies for the murder of Hariri (Mehlis, 2005). The development of the investigation put a lot of pressure on Syria and Hezbollah. Moreover, the internal pressure exercised by the March 14 coalition on Hezbollah, questioning the legitimacy of its weapons and asking for justice in the Hariri case, asked for a move that would reinstate the Party of God as the anti-Israeli resistance. The July 2006 war with Israel managed to do just that: it provided Hezbollah with the “divine victory” it needed to garner more popular support, despite the losses. The fact that the group managed to hold on until the August 14 ceasefire and hide its losses provided it with an improvement in its status on the domestic political scene, with many members of other sectarian groups supporting its anti-Israeli cause after the war (Harris, 2012, p. 271).

Hezbollah, Amal Movement and other pro-Syrian ministers resigned from Fouad

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9 The second report came on December 12, the day the main Christian activist in the March 14 coalition and Annahar publisher Gebran Tueni was killed in a bombing in Beirut. The UN Security Council called for establishing an international tribunal to deal with the Hariri case. In January 2006, Mehlis was replaced with Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz and after reviewing evidence he came up with another report pointing at Syrian and a layered murder conspiracy (UNIIC, 2006).
Siniora’s cabinet in order to avoid the approval of the UN protocol for the establishment of the hybrid tribunal; however, the government used the two-thirds quorum to sanction the protocol. Hezbollah declared the government illegitimate, but Siniora’s cabinet held until May 2008. Three more March 14 MPs were assassinated in the meantime.

In June 2007, the UN Security Council established the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, despite the threats coming from Damascus that the security situation in Lebanon would be affected and provoke divisions “between the Sunnis and the Shiites from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea” (Harris, 2012, p. 320).10

Starting with late 2010, Hezbollah-led coalition increased its pressure on Hariri’s government to abolish the STL and this led to fears that the announcement of the indictment might lead to civil unrest. There were many damaging leaks to the Lebanese media from the investigation, names and phone numbers of witnesses were published; local television channels aired recordings of Saad Hariri’s conversations with the UN investigators in which he pointed at Syrian officials for orchestrating his father’s murder (Macdonald, 2010).

The talk about the indictments added to the political deadlock with Syrian and Saudi Arabia trying to mediate the conflict between Future Movement and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah wanted the withdrawal of Lebanon’s participation in the tribunal and the annulment of the memorandum of understanding that ratified it. The mediation efforts failed, a mediation attempt by Turkey and Qatar also failed. Saad Hariri and Future Movement, supported by the United States, refused any form of compromise (Knudsen,

10 The STL started functioning in March 2009 and the investigation of the prosecutor Daniel Bellemare focused on telecommunication data provided two years before by the Internal Security Forces captain Wissam Eid, assassinated in February 2008. In mid-2010, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah announced that he expected Hezbollah members to be indicted by the STL; he denounced the Tribunal as an Israeli and American plot and asked the Hariri government to give up funding it (Harris, 2012, p. 274).
Hezbollah withdrew its support for Hariri and nominated Tripoli businessman Najib Mikati as prime-minister who announced a new Hezbollah-led government on June 13 (Salem, 2011). But by that time, the Syrian uprising had already started and Syrian refugees, as well as political activists had started to make their way into Lebanon.

2.1.5. The war on Fatah al Islam

Fatah al Islam\textsuperscript{11} war with the Lebanese Army started unraveling in Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Tripoli at a time when Syrian and its proxy, Hezbollah, came under intense pressure over Hezbollah weapons, the calls for ending the impunity in the series of assassinations against March 14 politicians and activists and the international support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

The clashes with the Lebanese Armed Forces started on May 20, after a police raid into a house in Tripoli apparently used by the militants. After a shootout, the militants reportedly attacked a Lebanese Army barrack in Tripoli and killed 27 soldiers. The war lasted until September, the camp was completely destroyed, but Al Abssi escaped to Syria (Harris, 2012, p. 272).

But the reality was not as simple. In the months preceding the conflict, the residents of

\textsuperscript{11} The group was formed in November 2006, as a splinter from Fatah al Intifada, a Syrian proxy group that had left Yasser Arafat’s Fatah. Shaker Al Abssi, a senior leader, felt betrayed after Fatah al Intifada leaders handed over two of his men to the Lebanese intelligence and decided to leave the group and move from Shatila camp in Beirut to Baddawi and Nahr al Bared camps in the vicinity of Tripoli (Stanford University, 2014). The Lebanese intelligence officials disputed that it was a real split and allege that Fatah al-Islam is a tool of the Syrian intelligence forces, while Syria denied links with Fatah al-Islam (Bloom, 2007). The group had been under surveillance since February 2007, after two commuter buses were blown up in a village close to Bikfaya and Al Qaeda linked Fatah al Islam was blamed for the attacks (LA Times, 2007). Al Abssi reportedly maintained links with Abou Mussab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq; they were both sentenced to death in absentia in Jordan for the 2002 killing of U.S. diplomat Laurence Foley. Abssi was jailed by Syria for three years in 2003 and fled to Lebanon when he was released (Bloom, 2007).
Nahr al-Bared tried to remove the Fatah al-Islam members from their midst and the Fatah clashed with the militants in March. However, Fatah did not manage to disperse the militants and did not find much support in the Lebanese security agencies, which dismissed the incidents as intra-Palestinian faction skirmishes, although most Fatah al-Islam members were not Palestinians.\(^{12}\)

But it was not the support for Fatah al Islam itself that contributed to even further polarization and mobilization in the Sunni community and especially the conservative Sunni in Tripoli. During the fighting and immediately afterwards, over 200 Salafis from Tripoli were detained by the security forces and held without charge for years. In 2012, the Lebanese prosecutors filed a 400 page indictment against 145 individuals, out of which 80 were still at large. It turned out that 126 detainees had been imprisoned for five year without real evidence against them. Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch also expressed concerns that many confessions used by the indictment had been obtained under threats or torture (Luca, 2012).

The families of the prisoners staged sit-ins in Tripoli every Friday to ask for the release or the resolutions of their relatives’ cases (Naharnet, 2012). In spring 2012, during Islamist protests in Tripoli in support for the Syrian uprising, the issue of the arrested Islamists merged with the support for the rebellion against Assad regime. Protesters, at the call of local sheikhs, called for the release of the imprisoned Islamists and complained that they had been detained without charge for five years and most of their cases were advancing slowly (Amrieh, 2012).

Moreover, some of the Salafi Sheikhs in Tripoli were targeted by the security forces in

\(^{12}\) The faction was made of 69 Lebanese, 50 Palestinians out of which 43 were from Syria, 43 Saudis, one Tunisian, one Algerian, one Yemeni and one Iraqi (Hanafi, 2013).
suspicion of supporting the al-Qaeda linked group. The Lebanese army raided a house in Abi Samra neighborhood of Tripoli, considered al-Shahhal’s stronghold. The building where Salafi sheikh Nabil Rahim and his suspected militants took refuge belonged to al-Shahhal. The sheikh defended Rahim, saying that the fighters had armed themselves to be ready for a possible security vacuum in the wake of the Syrian army withdrawal or to fulfill what they saw as a religious duty to have weapons. He also insisted that they had preferred to fight the army instead of turning themselves in because they did not want to be tortured by the security forces like other Islamists that had been arrested before. (Ghazal & Bathish, 2007).

The grievances of the conservative Sunni and Islamist community in Tripoli against the Syrian regime and the Lebanese state merged after 2011 with those of the Syrian refugees that fled the Syrian security forces crackdown on anti-regime protests. The Syrian revolution also became the cause of the Islamists in Tripoli.

2.1.6. Salafism and political representation in Tripoli

Pax Syriana was a relatively good period for the Salafis in Tripoli, as their declared apoliticism allowed to grow their charity networks and influence in the poor villages in North Lebanon (Rabil, 2014). Syria was wary about Islamist organizations since the Muslim Brotherhood Uprising in Hama in 1982 and since Shaaban’s Tawhid Movement proclaimed a caliphate in Tripoli in the 1980s. Both had ended in a bloodbath. The Syrian intelligence apparatus in Lebanon put a lot of effort in coopting Islamists and Islamist organizations in order to curb Sunni radical movements and prevent them from rising to power (Rabil, 2014, p. 163). That is how former Islamist foes of Syria, such as Bilal Shaaban’s Tawhid and Fathi Yakan’s Jamaa al-Islamiyah turned into Syrian
proxies and Hezbollah allies.

But, the double standards in the Syrian policy of supporting Shiite Islamist Hezbollah as the anti-Israeli resistance while being hostile to the economic policies of Rafik Hariri, who had emerged as the Sunni za’im (lord) contributed to the survival and even the strengthening of the quietist/purist Salafi networks in Tripoli with funds received from Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, but also Kuwait (Pall, 2014) (Rabil, 2014).

After the assassination of Syrian ally Al-Ahbash leader Sheikh Nizar Halabi in 1995 by jihadist militants from Ain al-Hilweh-based Usbat al-Ansar, the Syrian security apparatus cracked down on Salafis altogether, regardless of whether they were politically active or not. After the arrest of dozens of Usbat al-Ansar militants, the Lebanese state under the Syrian hegemony decided to curb the influence of the quietist/purist Salafi clerics in Tripoli. In 1996, Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal’s organization Jamiyat Al-Hidaya wal-Ihsan (The Association for Guidance and Charity) was accused of inciting sectarian hatred and was closed down.

The emergence of a small Al-Qaeda related group in North Lebanon and the clashes between its militants and the Lebanese Army in Dunniyeh, North Lebanon, in 2000 made it even harder on the Salafi movement to be active in Lebanon. Al Takfir wal-Hijra (Anathema and Exile) was established in Lebanon by a former Al Qaeda fighter in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bassem al Kinj and set up two annual camps in the Dunniyeh area in the vicinity of Tripoli where the militants were taking courses in the teachings of Islam and were taught how to use weapons (Sakr, 2003, pp. 6-7). The group took the name of an Egyptian jihadist Muslim Brotherhood splinter in the 1960s. The Lebanese organization also received support from Usbat al-Ansar, at the time the main jihadist
faction in Lebanon. After the clashes in Dunniyeh, which started with the militants taking shelter in a building of Sheikh Al-Shahhal’s charity, the Salafis in North Lebanon, especially Sheikh Al-Shahhal, were blamed for creating the background for the rise of the jihadist organization. Several followers of Al-Shahhal, including his grandson, were arrested in connection with Al Takfir wal-Hijra and the sheikh himself had to flee to Saudi Arabia (Rabil, 2014, p. 167).

The 9/11 attacks also impacted negatively the Salafi movement in Lebanon, as the funds coming from Saudi Arabia dried up under the US pressure (Pall, 2013, pp. 52-54). The Salafi movement in Lebanon found new sponsors in Kuwait and Qatar and thus it was split: the quietist Salafis received funding from Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage as well as wealthy individuals from Saudi Arabia; the haraki Salafis found support in Qatar’s Sheikh Eid Charity Organization. The new developments led to the fractioning of al-Shahhal’s quietist movement into a network of smaller charities, but it also marked his shift from the quietist ideology to activism (Rabil, 2014, p. 169).

The US invasion of Iraq and the Sunni insurgency marked another landmark in the development of the Lebanese Salafism’s ties with the international networks: Lebanese Salafi fighters fought in Iraq alongside the insurgents under Syria’s covert protection, while Al-Qaeda set up a recruiting network in Lebanon’s Majdal Anjar (Itani, 2008). This covert policy of Syria benefited the apolitical Salafi organizations in Tripoli and Akkar who focused on charity and education; although they kept away from the political framework of Lebanon, they also gained influence over a large portion of the population in the poor neighborhoods of Tripoli, especially Bab al-Tabbaneh.

The vote of the large conservative groups in Lebanon’s biggest city became vital for the
Sunni bloc in the Lebanese Parliament (Rabil, 2014, p. 171). The relationship between the Salafi movements in Tripoli and the Sunni moderate politicians in town was forged on political interests and the Salafis’ need to have political protection.

This was the convention in Tripoli’s Salafi circles at the beginning of 2005, when Rafik Hariri was assassinated and the Cedar Revolution forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Salafism reemerged in the wake of Hariri’s assassination: some apolitical Salafis in Tripoli and North Lebanon found in the perceived marginalization of the Sunnis a good reason to return to politics while the Salafi leaders who had been exiled during the Syrian occupation, such as Dr. Hassan al-Shahhal, returned to Lebanon (Rabil, 2014, p. 178). After Hariri’s assassination, Shahhal said that “the most important thing that came out of the assassination of Rafik Hariri was the feeling of emptiness among the Sunni Muslims and that they are targeted. This is not the first time a Sunni dignitary of such magnitude has been assassinated. This has led the Sunnis to summon each other to find a way to gather their ranks and unify their word at the level of the whole country, from its north to its south” (Qassir, 2005). Hassan al-Shahhal set up the Islamic Political Bureau, also saying that the Salafis want to participate in Parliamentary elections, making alliances with whom they see in harmony with their views (Rabil, 2014, p. 179). A political party in the set-up of the Lebanese system was not possible, but the Salafi sheikhs were willing to support the politicians from the Sunni community whose programs were congruent with the Salafi ideology.

Therefore, the Salafis emerged as a way to garner political support of Tripoli’s Sunni community, and the Future Movement renewed the alliance with the Salafi sheikhs, who shared the hostility towards Syrian and Shiite Hezbollah (The Crisis Group, 2010,
Some of the Salafi sheikhs often received financial assistance from the political leaders, while The Future Movement asked the clerics to moderate their discourse. The deal was acknowledged by both Salafi sheikhs such as Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal and politicians in Tripoli.

At the same time, the political deal between the sheikhs and the political establishment was not well received by parts of the Salafi community. However, the Future Movement’s moderate elders asked the Salafi sheikhs to place their movements under Dar al-Fatwa’s authority and abandon the takfir teachings; this never happened and the relationship between some of the moderate Future Movement politicians and the Salafis worsened (The Crisis Group, 2010, p. 25).

The Salafi community itself was not a unified monolith. The sheikhs were split over political actions. The Kuwait-funded quietist school, represented by Dr. Hassan al-Shahhal and Sheikh Safwan al Zoghbi, saw danger of increase in sectarian clashes between the Sunni conservatives and Hezbollah after the Fatah al Islam war in Nahr al Bared and the May 2008 takeover of Beirut by Hezbollah. The also felt that the Salafi community was portrayed as takfiri and was blamed for the tense security situation. Therefore, the two Salafi leaders sought a rapprochement with Hezbollah and signed a memorandum of understanding on August 18, 2008 (Rabil, 2014, pp. 181-183).

However, the political move of the quietists was slammed by Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, who called for abolishing it; he accused Hezbollah of trying to divide the Sunni community, to turn the moderates against the Salafis. He also criticized the memorandum because it did not put any conditions on Hezbollah’s arms and it did not solve the situation between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen (The Daily Star, 2008).
His rhetoric expressed the wider range of anger on the Sunni streets, after militants, moderates and conservatives alike, felt towards Hezbollah after it had attacked Sunni Tariq al Jadideh neighborhood in Beirut. The Sunni streets were so irritated, that Future Movement decided not to adhere to the memorandum; the initiators, Dr. Hassan Al-Shahhal and Sheikh Al Zoaghbi decided to freeze it (The Daily Star, 2008). The activist Salafism appealed more to the streets because it remained consistent with its initial political stance: fighting Hezbollah and its influence over Lebanon. It didn’t matter that it was not consistent with the traditional ideas of the Lebanese Salafi school (Rabil, 2014, p. 183). After the events of May 7, 2008, the activist branch of Tripoli’s Salafism re-emerged as a voice for the Sunni streets concerned with Hezbollah’s political and military rise as the dominant political force in Lebanon. Moreover the sheikhs also became the voices of discontent with Saad Hariri’s Future Movement. “We have the right to defend ourselves and this does not make us a radical group like some of the media and politicians are saying,” Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal said (Ghaddar, 2008).

2.2 The Syrian crisis spillover to Lebanon

2.2.1 The Syrian uprising

At the beginning of 2011, Syrians found themselves at the crossroads of political, strategic and society trends in the Middle East and the entire Arab World: the breakdown of the existing relationship between governments and society and revolts in many Arab states; the regional struggle for dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran; the growing Sunni-Shiite division in Iraq and Lebanon; the reemergence of political
Islam; the ethnic balance of minorities and majorities was challenged by minorities asking for more rights as well as, in other states, the majorities trying to topple minority regimes (Hokayem, 2013, p. 12). The fact that Syria was affected by the wave of unrest that was named the Arab Spring surprised many authors and policy makers, because Bashar al Assad’s takeover from his father in 2000 had gone smoothly and the internal mechanisms of consolidation of power had convinced many that the Syria government was not to confront an uprising. The intelligence apparatus kept most political and civil society under severe and intimidating surveillance. But it was also because Syria was not a majority system, any organized opposition was banned and lacked resources to mobilize, while Bashar al Assad as a young leader that enjoyed support from part of the reformist youth (Luca, 2011).

Before the uprising, the Syrian political opposition was fragmented and weak. It was made of ageing Muslim Brothers, liberals, leftists and nationalist personalities. Few opposition members remained in Syria. Most, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and several former Baath party members as well as liberals operated from exile and could not make up for the distance between them and the grievances of the Syrian youth that took to the streets in several cities in spring 2011 (Hokayem, 2013, p. 68). It led to the establishment of a politically uncontrollable network of civil activists that set up in April 2011 the Local Coordination Committees, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Higher Council of the Syrian Revolution among other structures. Realizing the potential of these small local groups, the security apparatus focused on hunting their members down. Most of the initial liberal organizers of the anti-regime protests in Syria were arrested or killed in the early stages of the uprising (Luca & Elali, 2011).
This, together with the lack of cohesion between the opposition in exile and the opposition on the ground, were the determining factors that led to the shift from the peaceful demonstration-based uprising to an armed, radical rebellion and a full-fledged sectarian civil war (Hokayem, 2013, p. 69). The Free Syrian Army (FSA), the umbrella military organization of the opposition, however, faced disorganization, power struggles, lack of control over the different rebel groups that adhered to it and also lack of funding and supplies that were supposed to be ensured by even a less cohesive political opposition. By late 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross counted 1,000 armed groups operating in Syria. Only half proclaimed their adherence to the FSA (Hokayem, 2013, p. 85). A dividing factor was also the fact that Saudi Arabia and Qatar competed over which rebel factions to control and support financially and militarily (Abouzeid, 2012).

Salafism already had a base of support in the conservative rural areas where the uprising began in Syria. Its most significant structural weakness was balanced out by regime repression: the Salafis lacked leadership and organization, but so did everyone else after the arrests and executions performed by the security forces and allied militias (Lund, 2013, p. 10). Syrian Islamic Liberation Front formed in mid-2012, including brigades as Farouq or Tawhid, but it had little influence. Early 2013 marked the birth of the Syrian Islamic Front, comprising Salafi factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Liwaa al-Haq and Suqur al-Sham (Lund, 2013).

Salafism grew in influence during the Syrian uprising because of its increased sectarian character. Many fighters, even outside of the Salafi groups adopted a pseudo-Salafi discourse, although they had no formal Islamic education. The reason was that they
were not drawn to Salafism not by the doctrine, but, apart that they attracted funding from the Gulf countries who financed Salafi groups, also because that is how they manifested their Sunni identity in the most radical way possible. Salafism also provided a theological explanation for the war against Shia Muslims, a sense of belonging, and spiritual security (Lund, 2013, p. 10).

The rise of the jihadist groups in Syria has a different genesis; it has been heavily influenced by foreign factors. The process started in mid-2011, when the Abou Bakr al Baghdadi, Al Qaeda in Iraq’s leaders since May 2010, began sending Syrian and Iraqi veterans into Syria in order to set up cells across the country (Abouzeid, 2014). The leader of the group was a Syrian, Abou Mohammad al Jolani, who had been once part of slain AQI leader Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi’s circle of jihadists that followed him in exile to Herat, Afghanistan, and back to Iraq after the invasion in 2003. Jabhat al-Nusra was created in January 2012 and started asserting its presence by suicide bombings targeting government officials and government troops. It did not join any other rebel organization. The group never hid its al-Qaeda links, pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, but Jolani, the group’s leader refused to acknowledge that his group was part of Baghdadi’s AQI (Naharnet report, 2013). Jabhat al-Nusra’s pledge of allegiance to Al Qaeda caused a stir in the Syrian National Coalition, the exiled opposition representatives, and created divisions in the Local Coordination Committees over the recognition of the strong jihadist group as a legitimate part of the Syrian opposition military forces. According to a member of the Syrian National Coalition based in Aleppo, the statements made by both Jabhat al-Nusra leadership and the Iraqi al-Qaeda were worrisome for the rest of the Syrian opposition. “Al-Qaeda never fought
against regimes, it always had its own agenda [the establishment of an Islamic State].

Al-Qaeda represents neither the revolution, nor the Syrian people. The Syrian people do not sympathize with Jabhat al-Nusra. We are religious, not fanatic. This is not part of our culture,” he pointed out (Luca, 2013). The move also raised new concerns from Western governments that had been considering arming the Syrian rebels (NOW Lebanon, 2013).

According to a study of London-based Quilliam counter-extremism think-tank, Jabhat al-Nusra had in 2013 around 5,000 members and another few thousand non-member affiliated fighters across Syria (Quilliam Foundation, 2013). However Jabhat al-Nusra’s military successes – such as the assassination of Syrian Interior Minister Assef Shawkat, the occupation of several military bases in Idlib and Aleppo – contributed to the groups’ acceptance as an anti-Assad rebel force by other rebel factions.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) officially appeared in April 2012 and, in less than a year, it was already ruling the city of Raqqa, northern Syria. After Zawahiri expelled ISIS from Al-Qaeda, the group became virtually unstoppable. In a little more than a year, by mid-2014, it managed to become the strongest faction fighting in Syria’s civil war controlling a vast area inhabited by an estimated 7 million people (Luca, 2014). The group quickly recruited thousands of fighters from all over the world to fight in Syria and Iraq, receiving more money than its former Al-Qaeda counterparts and gaining regional and international popularity (Jocelyn, 2013). But in terms of popular support, ISIS had many difficulties in Syria: the communities where it enforced its rule
disagreed with the group’s practices 13. All these developments in Syria found a deep
echo in Lebanon’s vulnerable sectarian political system that was so tied to Syria. Even
after its withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Damascus remained an important factor in
Lebanon’s domestic politics through its Lebanese proxies and allies. When the Syrian
uprising started, the political developments in Beirut were not really peaceful:
Hezbollah, Syria’s proxy, and its March 8 political allies had withdrawn their ministers
from Saad Hariri’s national unity government, causing it to collapse.

2.2.2. Lebanon’s policy of disassociation

After Saad Hariri’s government fell, the March 14 coalition refused to participate in the
new government, the new PM appointee had to choose ministers from the March 8
coalition, although he had shown his intention of forming a national unity government.
Even so, it took almost five months for him to form a new government due to the
differences between the March 8 factions over the ministerial posts. The final line-up of
the cabinet included 18 March 8 ministers and 12 that were close to Mikati, president
Michel Suleiman and Jumblatt’s PSP (NOW Lebanon, 2011). The ministers appointed
for key portfolios such as Amal Movement Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour, Marada
Movement Defense Minister Fayeza Ghosn, FNB Justice Minister Shaskib Qortbawi
were pro-Syrian politicians.

Mikati declared an official “disassociation” of Lebanon from the events in Syria (Daily

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13 A secular activist in Raqqa, the Syrian capital of Baghdadi’s proclaimed caliphate, said that “people are now more
scared of [ISIS] than the Assad regime bombardments.” “Women are afraid to go out of the house for fear that they
might be whipped in public squares for not wearing the right clothes. Men’s hands are cut off. Every day we wake up
to the news that someone has been slaughtered by ISIS,” he said (Luca, 2014). Moreover, the idea that ISIS was, in
fact, allowed by the Syrian government to impose its strict Islamic rules in Syria in order to scare the population off
from supporting the uprising was widely spread among the inhabitants under the jihadists’ control (Cordall, 2014).
Star, 2012). The March 14 opposition criticized this policy because they said it was beneficial for the Assad regime.

In the UN assembly Lebanon stood away from the international community condemnation of the violence in Syria in August 2011 (Naharnet, 2011) and voted against the Arab League decision of suspending Syria’s membership in November 2011 (Batty & Shenker, 2011), and did not recognize the Syrian National Council (SNC) while most Arab and Western states did in February 2012 (Naharnet, 2012). Also, the government tolerated Syrian incursions into Lebanese territory that resulted not only in capturing and killing regime opponents, but also in damaging property and killing Lebanese citizens (Luca, 2011). The Mikati government did not deploy additional troops at the northern border with Syria until July 2012, when Interior Minister Marwan Charbel and other officials requested it in January 2012 (The Daily Star, 2012). In September, Mikati officially sent a memo to the Syrian ambassador to Beirut informing him of the Syrian army incursions into Lebanon and the shelling of Lebanese territory, but government and security agencies in Lebanon continued to deport Syrian opposition activists and ignore the calls of international human rights organizations to investigate the possible involvement of Lebanese security agency employees into the disappearance of Syrian political opposition activists (Houry, 2011).

The Mikati government’s policy towards the Syrian conflict was generally marked by accommodating measures towards the Syrian regime, mainly because of its members’ political orientation - the March 8 Coalition identified itself with Syria and shaped its policies in accordance (Osoegawa, 2013, pp. 177-178).

However, despite the increasing rift between March 8 government and March 14
opposition over the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition and the treatment of Syrian
refugees and political activists as well as over the reactions towards the Syrian army
operations on Lebanese territory, the political factions visibly made efforts to avoid
direct confrontation at home (Hokayem, 2013, p. 133). But the actual implementation of
this disassociation policy that seemed to have garnered consensus at the political level
depended a lot on the control the Lebanese political factions had over their supporters.\textsuperscript{14}

On 22 March 2013, Mikati resigned from office over the refusal of the pro-Assad
March 8 majority in his own government to prolong the term of the director general of
the Internal Security Forces, General Ashraf Rifi, an official close to March 14, and the
refusal to appoint members of the Supervisory Commission for Election Campaigns
(Salem, 2013). The conflict between the two political factions had deepened after the
assassination of Major General Wissam al-Hassan in October 2012, when March 14
accused Syria and its allies of murdering him (Chulov, 2012). The assassination came
after the arrest of former Lebanese Information Minister Michel Samaha, a close ally of
the Assad family, on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks in North Lebanon in order to
cause sectarian strife. The ISF Information Branch headed by Al Hasan made the arrest.
Rifi was seen by his supporters as the last man standing against attempts by March 8 to
cripple or take over the internal security institution. Both al-Hassan and Rifi were Sunni
Muslims and from Mikati’s home town, Tripoli (Salem, 2013).

\textsuperscript{14} The Syrian uprising found enthusiasm among grass root activists and supporters of the March 14 factions, but
especially in the Sunni community, regardless of their political orientation. Sunnis across Lebanon, but especially in
North Lebanon vocally supported the Syrian uprising (The Daily Star, 2011). It was quite clear that Lebanon could
not stay away from the crisis next door for long. Syria and Lebanon share a porous border and communities on both
sides share close tribal ties; the Syrian regime had a history of destabilizing Lebanese regions when it felt under siege
and sometimes violently interfered in Lebanese domestic affairs; large segments of Lebanese population, especially
the Sunnis in North Lebanon, still held deep resentments over the Syrian occupation and recent history violent
clashes and felt solidarity with the Syrian uprising (Crisis Group, 2012).
On 6 April 2013, Tammam Salam was tasked to form a new government (BBC, 2013). On 15 February 2014, Salam announced a national unity government of 24 ministers, including March 8 and March 14 alliances (Al Jazeera English, 2014). Salam began his mandate with a vow to "strengthen national security and stand against all kinds of terrorism" and deal with the challenge of a million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Irish Independent, 2014).

2.2.3 Lebanese support for refugees and dissidents

The first refugees reached Lebanon northern region Wadi Khaled in Akkar at the end of April 2011, when the Syrian regime forces and Alawite militias besieged the border town of Talkalakh. Most of them women and children, they evacuated the town and ran over the border to their Lebanese relatives through the fields, avoiding the official border crossing in Arida for fear of the Syrian army. The area became soon crowded with refugees hosted in schools as well as local houses.

One local municipality member said that every family in his village had taken 10-12 refugees and people continued coming through the border. “We’re sending them to Tripoli,” he said. Political activists from Talkalakh and Homs started to cross the border regularly into Lebanon in order to secure support and also reach out to the media and express their political views. Also, the sectarian character of the crisis was obvious, as many refugees blamed the government-sponsored Alawite militia shabiha.

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15 According to interviews done by the author with Syrian refugees and local elected officials on April 30 2011 in Moukaibli, Wadi Khaled.
16 Personal interview with an activist from Homs in Wadi Kahled, in May 2011.
17 “They detain only Sunnis in our region. They get only men between 17 and 40 and they keep them in closed schools or stadiums. We didn’t even know how they can tell they are Sunnis,” an activist from Homs said in Wadi Khaled, in an interview in 2011. “They [the regime] are also arming the Alawites, who formed these community watch groups. They know each other because they wear distinctive bracelets,” he added.
In October 2011, the Lebanese security forces arrested several people across Lebanon for smuggling light weapons destined for the Syrian opposition (NOW Lebanon, 2011). The Lebanese security forces also arrested several Syrian men trying to cross into North Lebanon and interrogated them in Tripoli, but because of the pressure of the human rights organizations and the Lebanese media, they were released.

The aid reaching the Wadi Khaled area was scarce and came mostly from Islamic organizations such as the Qatari Red Crescent, Tripoli based Islamic NGOs, such as the Organization for Islamic Education and local Salafi sheikhs (Luca, 2011).

The influx of refugees and dissidents into north Lebanon increased as a result of the Syrian regime’s increasing brutality and the siege of Homs in February 2012; the Lebanese border areas became more involved in supporting the Syrian uprising, aid for the rebels (medicine, food, and even light weapons) (Crisis Group, 2012). The number of refugees also increased exponentially and many of them depended on Islamic organizations for aid and housing. The estimated number of Syrian taking shelter in Lebanon was higher, because refugees were reluctant to declare their presence because their feared the Lebanese security forces would deport them (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

An active fundraising network progressively emerged, with money coming chiefly from Gulf Arab states and individuals as well as from wealthy Syrian expatriates and Islamic

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18 According to personal interviews with the families of the arrested men done in Arida, North Lebanon, in May 2011.
19 The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees counted by December 2011 nearly 5,000 Syrians officially registered. In June 2012, during the siege of Homs, the number reached 29,000. By August, it stood at 36,000; in mid-October, by which time the civil war had reached Damascus and Aleppo, Syrians who were either refugees or applying for refugee status in Lebanon exceeded 101,000 (Crisis Group, 2012). Among registered refugees, 56 per cent resided in the north and Tripoli, 41 per cent in the Bekaa Valley and 3 per cent in Beirut and the south (Crisis Group, 2012)
charitable organizations. Lebanese militants and NGOs played an intermediary role between donors and recipients, among them combatants. (Crisis Group, 2012, p. 3).

Because of the increasing number of people and dissidents fleeing Homs to North Lebanon through smugglers roads, the Syrian Army mined the passages in the winter of 2011-2012, forcing the refugees to head to the Sunni enclave of Arsal in North Bekaa Valley (Naharnet, 2012). The town received refugees from all regions in the vicinity of the Lebanese border that witnessed violent confrontations between the Syrian government forces and Syrian rebels: the siege of Homs in 2012, the battle of Qusair in 2013 and the villages in the Qalamoun region in 2014-2015.20

Just as Wadi Khaled had witnessed shelling and Syrian army incursions after the refugees and dissidents found refuge in the villages along the border, Arsal was also exposed to shelling, air raids of the Syrian air force, Syrian troop incursions and shootings, while Syrian rebels found a hostile buffer zone in the farmlands between El Qaa and Arsal (Luca, 2012).

The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon jumped over 1 million in 2014, amounting to a quarter of the country’s population before the crisis.21

The presence of such a high number of Syrian refugees was also a reason for polarization in Lebanon. The economic and social pressure caused by the refugee crisis led Lebanese officials and authorities to curb the influx of refugees and even create a strategy to entice them to return to Syria (NOW Lebanon, 2014).

The rhetoric of several ministers in the Lebanese government led to increased anxiety

20 The town became overwhelmed with refugees, despite local efforts to accommodate them in several camps scattered around the area, local houses and also mosques. The number of refugees the UNHCR assisted in the region was 50,000, but the real number was closer to 80,000 (Gebeily & Haines-Young, 2014).

among large parts of the Lebanese population. In several locations in Lebanon, Syrian refugees were harassed or beaten by residents affiliated with March 8 parties (NOW Lebanon, 2014), and many reported arbitrary arrest and intimidation (Zaman al-Wasl, 2014). Several municipalities imposed curfews on refugees (The Daily Star, 3014). The presence of a high number of Syrian refugees concentrated in Sunni host communities in North Lebanon, Tripoli, Bekaa Valley and Beirut also contributed to the polarization of the Lebanese society on the Sunni-Shiite line, even indirectly. Over 80 percent of the refugees hailed from the Sunni community. Most of them were located in Sunni host communities in Akkar, South Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and Arsal area (Alami, 2013).

Also most of the refugees originated from regions and cities close to the Lebanese border, where Hezbollah had fought against the Syrian rebels alongside the Syrian army. The anti-Hezbollah sentiments of the refugees merged with the already existing political rift between Future and Hezbollah and affected supporters exposed to both parties’ rhetoric.

2.2.4 Involvement of Lebanese factions in the Syrian crisis

The Syrian crisis quickly diffused into Lebanon and escalated – Hezbollah, as well as Lebanese Sunni fighters got involved in the conflict across the border, often fighting each other on Syrian soil, but avoiding to directly fight each other at home, in Lebanon (Atassi, 2014). Hezbollah’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah called Syria the “backbone” of the anti-Israeli resistance in a speech in May 2013\(^\text{22}\), when he openly

\(^{22}\) The Assad regime also played an important role in Hezbollah’s logistics transit from Iran to Lebanon, allowing the group to transfer weapons, equipment, and money. Some of Hezbollah’s supplies remained in Syria and the war torn
acknowledged Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria alongside the Assad regime forces (BBC, 2013).

Given the tight relationship between the government in Damascus and its Lebanese proxy, even in the early stages of the Syrian demonstrations against Bashar al Assad the opposition activists expected an involvement from Hezbollah. Dissidents who made it across the border to North Lebanon were voicing fears that Hezbollah would send its troops to crackdown against the protesters.

By June 2011, videos of protests in Syria, in Douma and Homs especially, showed demonstrators chanting slogans against Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Hezbollah, while protesters burned posters of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary-general (France 24, 2011). On May 25 2011, Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech that Assad had his “everlasting friendship and support” (Al Manar, 2011). In the same speech he also denied rumors about Hezbollah’s involvement in the crackdown on the Syrian protests, arguing that opposition members and protesters claiming on media channels they had seen Hezbollah snipers in Homs were either lying or were misinformed.

However, during the summer of 2012 several Hezbollah members killed in Syria were quietly buried in Lebanon. (Chulov, 2012). But the funeral of a senior Hezbollah commander in October attracted large crowds to a village in Eastern Bekaa Valley (Blanford, 2012). According to Free Syrian Army fighters and opposition activists, the commander was killed in the vicinity of Qusair, a town close to Lebanon’s eastern country is still vital for its operations against Israel (Rubin, 2009). Syria’s importance to Hezbollah is not limited to its role as a route for financial and material support; Syria provided safe haven for Hezbollah training camps and weapons storage (Levitt, 2014).

23 “I remember well in Damascus, in the Saqba district, I saw people demonstrating” and “with my own eyes I saw snipers positioned on upper floors, Iranian and Hezbollah snipers who fired at the crowd,” a Syrian deserter told Agence France Presse in June 2011 (Naharnet, 2011).
border, by an improvised bomb targeting his convoy (Chulov, 2012).

The public funerals of Hezbollah members put the organization in a difficult position. In Beirut it was facing growing scrutiny from March 14 officials, especially Future Movement politicians who were supportive of the Syrian uprising, over its role in Syrian role in Syria - (Dakroub, 2012). Nasrallah denied that Hezbollah as an organization was fighting in Syria in a speech on October 11, 2012 (Khraiche, 2012), but he acknowledged that Hezbollah members were fighting in Syria, but that they were there of their own accord to defend Lebanese Shi'ite villages in the vicinity of the border (Barnard, 2012).

Hassan Nasrallah admitted\(^24\) to Hezbollah’s influence in Syria for the first time in April 2013, two months after the assassination of Iranian general Hassan Shateri in Syria, close to the Lebanese border (Dehghan, 2013).

Starting with the spring of 2013, Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria expanded with the siege of Qusair, a rebel stronghold since mid-2012, located in the vicinity of the Lebanese border and used by the rebels to smuggle weapons, logistics and fighters from Lebanon\(^25\).

Qusair was a turning point in the way Hezbollah’s leaders in Lebanon justified their involvement. Nasrallah portrayed the struggle in Syria not only as an extension of the resistance against Israel and the West, but he also cast the conflict in an increasingly sectarian light, as a fight against the takfiri (Sunni extremist) threat (NOW Lebanon, 24 “Hezbollah is giving a hand in Syria,” and that it “will not let Syria fall into the hands of America, Israel or takfiri groups,” Nasrallah announced in one of his speeches on April 30 (Hashem, 2013).

25 The town was also very close to Hermel, a region inhabited by a majority of Shiites in the North Bekaa Valley, and was also located in the vicinity of the highway that connects Damascus with the Alawite Mediterranean coast (Blanford, 2013). The victory in Qusair dealt a major blow to rebel forces and began a new phase of overt and substantial Hezbollah involvement in Syria (Hashem, 2013).
This portrayal was an effort to garner more support of the campaign in Syria its Shiite followers in Lebanon, but it also antagonized the Lebanese Sunnis, especially those in North Lebanon, where the support for the Syrian uprising was strong. Clashes between the Sunni fighters in Bab el Tabbaneh and the Alawite snipers in Jabal Mohsen were raging, and Salafi sheikhs were boosting their political speeches in support of the rebellion (el-Khawli, 2013).

Hezbollah got involved with training Syrian government militias in the battle for Aleppo in the summer of 2013 (Loveday, 2013). In late June, regime forces captured the border town of Tal Kalakh, on the border with northern Lebanon and not far from al-Qusair and at the end of June, the Syrian army, with Hezbollah troops providing communications support, sniper fire, and special forces launched an offensive to regain control of Khaldiya and Bab Hud neighborhoods of Homs, the last rebel positions in Homs (Prothero, 2013).

Hezbollah played a vital role in two campaigns against the rebels in the Qalamoun Mountains on the Lebanese border approximately a year apart. In the fall of 2013, Qalamoun’s villages and hilltops were used by the Syrian rebels to attack Syrian army positions in North Damascus and also to shell Shiite areas in the East Bekaa Valley and to transfer supplies and fighters from Lebanon through Arsal (Sullivan M., 2012, pp. 20-21). The offensive started in November 2013, and Qara, a town in north Qalamoun was the first to fall, with thousands of refugees fleeing the fighting to Arsal, Lebanon (Reuters, 2013). The anti-Hezbollah and anti-Assad sentiments of the refugees were mirrored not just by local Lebanese population but also by local authority
representatives (Luca, 2013).

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria had dramatic effects on Lebanon’s security and its fragile sectarian balance. Politicians from Lebanon’s March 14, Christians and Sunni, were very vocal in their criticism of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria (Naharnet, 2013). Lebanon’s Sunni community viewed Hezbollah as choosing sides in a sectarian conflict, killing fellow Muslims, and losing sight of its role as a force of resistance to Israel. Salafism and support for al-Qaeda linked rebel groups increased in Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee camps, such as Ain el-Hilweh, as well as North Lebanon and Bekaa Valley. The local anti-Hezbollah sentiments exploited by rising Islamist factions and leaders led to fighting and tit-for-tat kidnappings in the Bekaa Valley, Sidon and Tripoli.

Scores of Sunnis from Lebanon, especially from Tripoli, went to Syria to fight alongside the rebels in Qusair and Qalamoun (Atassi, 2014). "It was an ideological battle, a holy war. Hezbollah invaded Syria as part of the Iranian-backed plan to form the Shia Crescent," a Salafi from Tripoli who fought in Qusair said. About 30 fighters from Tripoli died fighting in Qusair, according to a prominent cleric in the Lebanese northern town. Initially, Lebanese who sympathized with the rebels went to Syria on their own, but as the war advanced the smuggling of fighters to Syria became organized. Salafi clerics from Tripoli and Akkar region as well as Sidon and other Sunni majority regions called on people to cross the border to fight Assad's forces and Hezbollah (Al Arabiya, 2013). The phenomenon was much older. In fall of 2012, during the battle for Damascus, the Syrian Army announced it had ambushed two dozen Lebanese Sunni jihadists after they crossed the border (McFarquhar, 2012).
At the same time, the Eastern border region had become a new front. The Syrian rebels shelled Shiite villages of Hermel from the peaks of the Qalamoun Mountains across the border, while residents in the area engaged in hostilities against the residents of nearby Sunni Arsal, where the Syrian uprising, refugees, dissidents and rebels had found support (Daily Star, 2013).

Supporters of the Syrian uprising from the Sunni enclave of Arsal and Hezbollah supporters from the Shiite region of Hermel engaged in a series of tit-for-tat kidnappings over the fighting in Syria and Hezbollah’s involvement in the conflict. Residents of both sides were killed in fights and kidnapped.

2.2.5. Sectarian spillover and security threats

Growing sectarian tensions have directly impacted security elsewhere in Lebanon. A series of attacks rocked Shiite neighborhoods, Hezbollah objectives in Beirut southern suburbs and in Hermel, as well as and the Iranian Embassy in Beirut. On the other hand, in Tripoli, al Taqwa Mosque and Al Salam Mosque, known for the pro-Syrian uprising activism were bombed on August 23, 2013 (CNN, 2014) and, also, another bombing in central Beirut killed Future Movement official and former Finance Minister Mohammad Chattah on December 27, 2013 (Yeranian, 2013).

The series of bombings and attacks against Hezbollah started in May 2013, right after the party’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, declared his group’s full commitment to fighting

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26 In the Sunni community of Arsal the anti-Hezbollah sentiments were rising. “People from Arsal pass through Hezbollah-control areas every day,” a local official said. “We don’t know what is happening within Hezbollah, but we are citizens and we have the right to go wherever we want - and this right should be protected by the Lebanese state. [If the state doesn’t protect the people] we will choose to defend ourselves and we don’t want to choose that option, neither against Hezbollah nor against any other party,” he stressed (Luca, 2013)
for the Assad regime\textsuperscript{27}. In response to all the security incidents, Hezbollah and the Lebanese security forces tightened the control in Beirut’s southern suburbs (AFP, 2013). But the attacks did not stop; they intensified in 2014\textsuperscript{28}, and the Lebanese security forces were also targeted together with Hezbollah-linked military and political objectives. Most of the attacks during 2013 and 2014 were claimed by the Lebanese branch of the Syrian al-Qaeda faction Jabhat al-Nusra.

As the Lebanese Army and security forces deployed in Hezbollah-controlled areas in Beirut and Hermel and also around the Sunni enclave of Arsal in east Bekaa Valley, soldiers became targets in bombings claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra affiliated militants throughout 2013 and 2014.

The attacks were motivated by the fact that the Lebanese Army intervened in several locations in Lebanon in order to keep the jihadist threat under control and to keep the fighting from spilling into Lebanon. However, many Sunni militants perceived it differently: they accused the Lebanese Army of targeting the Sunni community while allowing the Shiite militants of Hezbollah to move freely between Lebanon and Syria (Williams, 2014). Moreover, militant jihadist leaders such as Jabhat al-Nusra head

\textsuperscript{27} Two rockets struck Beirut’s southern suburbs on May 26, 2013 (Barnard, 2013). Over 50 people were wounded in a car bomb in Beirut’s southern suburbs on July 2013 (Bassam & Karouny, 2013), and on August 15, another bombing in the same area killed 18 and wounded over 300 (LA Times, 2013). Car bombs also targeted the Iranian Embassy in southern Beirut in November and December 2013 (Joshi, 2013). In December, a senior Hezbollah commander, Hassan Lakkis, was assassinated by 2 gunmen in Beirut (The Daily Star, 2014).

\textsuperscript{28} During 2014, the number of attacks and bombings increased (Rowell, 2014). On January 2, 2014, a bomb exploded in front of the political office of Hezbollah in Haret Hreik; four people were killed and 77 were wounded (The Daily Star, 2014). On January 16, a suicide car bomb killed five people and wounded 42 others in Hermel (The Daily Star, 2014). Only 5 days later, another suicide bombing killed four and wounded 46 in a second Haret Hreik bombing. The Lebanese supporters of Al Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra claimed it (Naharnet, 2014). On February 1, another bomb went off in Hermel killing four and injuring 23. The attack was also claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra (The Daily Star, 2014). A van exploded in the south of Beirut on February 3 (The Daily Star, 2014). The Iranian Cultural Center was also targeted in February 2014 by a twin suicide bombing, which killed six and wounded 129 (Wall Street Journal, 2014).
Mohammad al Jolani seized the opportunity and called for the Sunni soldiers to defect from the Lebanese Army (Naharnet, 2014).

2.2.6. Cross-border fighting in the Bekaa Valley

The safe haven in Eastern Lebanon was not only used by refugees, but also by Syrian rebels. The Free Syrian Army used the farmlands of Arsal and El Qaa as a base against the Syrian Armed forces in 2011 and 2012, in spite of the Lebanese government’s policy of neutrality (NOW Lebanon, 2012). The Syrian army attacked the area on several occasions, also damaging residents’ houses, bombing civilian targets and killing Lebanese residents of the border villages (Luca, 2012).

In 2013, during the battle of Qusair, Syrian rebels also launched rockets against civilian areas in Shiite majority Hermel (The Daily Star, 2013).

Starting with 2013, jihadist fighters that had joined Jabhat al-Nusra and, after the fall of Iraqi city of Mosul June 2014, even ISIS, mobilized in the Qalamoun area, in the vicinity of the Lebanese border. Islamist and jihadist rebel groups used the farmlands of the Sunni enclave of Arsal to stage attacks against Hezbollah areas in Lebanon, including staging terrorist attacks on Shiite neighborhoods in Beirut (Prothero, 2014), and ended up clashing with the Lebanese Army. On August 1, 2014, jihadist fighters who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State tried to take over Arsal and attacked local institutions in town, taking two dozens of Lebanese policemen and army soldiers as hostages (Brog, 2014). The move came in retaliation for the arrest of Ahmed Jomaa, the leader of self-proclaimed ISIS brigade Fijr al-Islam. The Lebanese government refused to release him, and two army officers were beheaded, one Sunni and one Shiite (Human Rights Watch, 2014).
Sunni and Shiite clans in the region escalated the incidents. The Shiite clans and Shiite residents of villages in eastern Bekaa located in the vicinity of Arsal retaliated by kidnapping alleged ISIS sympathizers (Naharnet, 2014) and also attacked Syrian refugee camps (Al Akhbar, 2014). A Hezbollah MP stated that the party was ready to defend Lebanon against ISIS and that the presence of Syrian refugee camps exerted "negative effects" on the country's stability (Al Monitor, 2014). On the other side, Future MPs accused the Lebanese Army of siding with Hezbollah and only targeting Sunni areas in the Bekaa Valley (Hajj, 2013).

2.2.7. The rise of the Salafism as a political force

After March 2011 and the beginning of the protests against the Assad regime in Syria, North Lebanon became a base for protestors, refugees and, later, even rebels; this movement was spearheaded by Salafi sheikhs in Akkar and Tripoli and Salafi charity organizations in the area due to the non-intervention policy of the Lebanese government (Rabil, 2014, p. 219). In 2011, when the first few thousand refugees arrived in Wadi Khaled, Salafi Sheikh Abdallah Doueik’s mosque in Moukaibleh was the hub of aid distribution for those who had fled the towns in Syria and his sermons were the motivation engine for the community in Wadi Khaled to support the Syrian uprising despite the danger – Syrian Army shelling and snipers (Luca, 2011).

In May 2012, the Lebanese General Security arrested Shadi al-Mawlawi, a young Salafi from Tripoli’s poorest neighborhood, Bab al-Tabbaneh, under the accusation that he was providing aid for Syrian anti-Assad activists and rebel fighters. His arrest led to a sit-in led by one of Tripoli’s most acclaimed Salafi sheikhs, Salem al-Rafei (Rabil, 2014, p. 219). Moreover, Mawlawi’s arrest sparked an intense round of fighting
between Bab al-Tabbaneh armed groups and pro-Syrian Alawite militiamen in Jabal Mohsen; youth in Bab al-Tabbaneh saw the arrest of Mawlawi by the Lebanese General Security - perceived as an institution close to the Assad regime – an attempt of Hezbollah to prevent them from supporting the revolt against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (Elali, 2012). “There has been a coordinated attempt between the Syrian regime and its allies in Lebanon to create a rift among Sunnis in Tripoli and to lead the Lebanese army into a direct confrontation with the people. The aim, in his opinion, is to create strife in an area that supports the Syrian uprising and that has acted as a refuge for Syrian dissidents,” Salafi Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal said (Elali, 2012). Faced with the security pressure in Tripoli and the escalation of violence, the Mikati government decided to release Mawlawi (NOW Lebanon, 2012).

Two and a half years later, Shadi al-Mawlawi became one of the most wanted men in Lebanon, he had been indicted for several bombings and attacks on the Army in Tripoli not to mention his alleged membership in a Lebanese cell of al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and was believed to be hiding in Ain al-Hilweh (Luca, 2015).

Salafi sheikh Salem al-Rafei imposed himself as a charismatic leader for the haraki Salafi community in Tripoli: his sermons against the Syrian regime, against Hezbollah but also criticizing the Sunni political leadership were mobilizing the youth in Tripoli’s Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood (Rabil, 2014, p. 219). His activism and rhetoric against the injustice committed by the Lebanese authorities against the Salafi community after Nahr al Bared and during the Syrian crisis contributed to his rise as a leader of the Salafi community in Tripoli. His populist rhetoric and activism found echoes in other haraki Salafi sheikhs such as Zakaria al-Masri and Rael Hlayhel and created a charged
The atmosphere on the streets of Bab al-Tabbaneh, Qobbe, or Zahriyeh, Tripoli’s poorest neighborhoods (Rabil, 2014, p. 219).

The fact that the Syrian regime framed the uprising as the work of terrorists and always portrayed the opposition as Islamist did not help: when the Syrian crisis started to spill into Lebanon, this led to tensions between the Salafi community and the Lebanese authorities, including the Lebanese Army (Rabil, 2014, p. 221). The killing of Salafi Akkar Sheikh Ahmad Abdel-Wahed in May 2012 at an army checkpoint in North Lebanon brought the country to the brink of conflict: Future Movement politicians and Sunni clerics criticized the government and the security forces, while Salafis from Akkar and Tripoli staged protests and blocked roads (Elali, 2012). PM Mikati ordered the arrest of the army officers who had shot the sheikh in order to avoid further strife, but this only reinforced the Salafi leaders in their efforts to support the Syrian uprising and legitimized their influence over the state’s policies (Rabil, 2014, p. 221).

Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al Assir, imam of the Bilal bin-Rabah Mosque in Abra, a suburb of Sidon, became the exponent of the Salafi anti-Syrian regime and anti-Hezbollah stance. In August 2012 he staged a sit-in in Sidon, blocking an access road to South Lebanon in order to protest against Hezbollah’s arsenal, which led to several clashes with the March 8 Popular Nasserist Organization (Naharnet, 2012). In November 2012, Assir’s supporters clashed with Hezbollah militants in Sidon (Naharnet, 2012). Assir also formed an armed group to counter Hezbollah’s weapons (Naharnet, 2012) and issued a fatwa calling on Lebanese Sunnis to fight in Syria’s Qusair and Homs against Hezbollah (Al Arabiya, 2013). On June 23, 2013, Assir’s gunmen attacked a Lebanese Army checkpoint in Abra, killing 16 troops. The battle that followed dismantled Assir’s
militia and forced him to flee (Zaatari, 2013). In the wake of the fighting, the Lebanese army intelligence office arrested scores of young men in Abra under suspicion of having participated in the fighting against the army. One detainee died in custody after being tortured, there were several testimonies accusing the security forces of torturing the Salafi detainees, but the allegations were never investigated (NOW Lebanon, 2013). The crackdown of the authority forces against Assir’s supporters and the fact that the presence of Hezbollah militants was reported during the clashes created an even more charged atmosphere in the Salafi community. Eventually this resulted in the rise of jihadist Salafi groups that antagonized the Lebanese security forces. Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian al-Qaeda franchise gained many more supporters in the Lebanese Salafi community than the Islamic State. While clerics and residents of Sunni neighborhoods said that there is no real official presence of the Syrian jihadist faction, many youth sympathized with their cause in Tripoli and Sidon’s Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp (Rowell, 2013). In Tripoli itself, the adepts of jihadist Salafism had established a network sympathizing and supporting the jihadist factions in Syria, under the alleged guidance of Salafi sheikh Nabil Rahim, who was imprisoned after the war against Fatah al Islam in 2007, and Sheikh Hussam Sabbagh, a well-known Tripoli-based Lebanese jihadist, former member of Tawheed Movement during the civil war, who is said to have fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya but kept a low profile (Rabil, 2014, p. 220).
Chapter three

Roots of radicalization and catalysts of conflict in Tripoli

3.1. Conflict in Tripoli during the Syrian crisis

Many of the residents of the majority Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh still remembered the massacre of the Tawhid Movement fighters in 1986 and still held a grudge against the Alawite militiamen of Arab Democratic Party located in neighboring Jabal Mohsen. During May 2008, when Hezbollah sent its militants to fight Sunni gunmen in Beirut, the conflict between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen reemerged (Al Arabiya, 2008).

The violence persisted after the signing of the Doha Agreement, despite a "non-aggression pact" between the city's Sunnis and Hezbollah, ADP's political ally. It had claimed 40 lives in four months (Williams D., 2008). On September 29, a military bus bombing killed five people and wounded 24 (Wander, 2008). But after 2008, despite several attacks on Jabal Mohsen in 2009 (NOW Lebanon, 2009) and the discovery of a bomb next to the house of the ADP leader Rifaat Eid in 2010 (The Daily Star, 2010), the security incidents never escalated into rounds of clashes.

The beginning of the Syrian protests against Assad reignited the conflict. The Sunni gunmen in Bab al-Tabbaneh battled the Alawite snipers of Jabal Mohsen in monthly rounds between 2011 and 2014. The conflict slowly started to encompass also the Lebanese Army. In May 2012, the clashes started after the arrest of Salafi activist Shadi
al-Mawlawi under the suspicion of aiding Syrian rebels. Lebanese soldiers exchanged fire with a group of young Salafis who were asking for his release and tried to attack the offices of the Syrian-allied SSNP (Al Arabiya, 2012). By June 2012, the front had expanded: Jabal Mohsen was attacked from Bab al-Tabbaneh, Shaarani, Baqqar, Riva, Mankoubin and Malouleh neighborhoods and several shops owned by Alawites in Tripoli were burnt (Hodeib, 2012).

In August, a standoff between Sheikh Hashem Minqara, a Hezbollah ally, and his men clashed with rival Salafis during a bid of the Islamists to “clean” the neighborhood of Hezbollah allies (Al Ali, 2012). The rise of the Salafi fighter groups in Bab al-Tabbaneh was also obvious later in August 2012, when, during another round of fighting with Jabal Mohsen, Salafi Sheikh Khaled al-Baradei, a commander of a Sunni Islamist brigade, was killed by a sniper (LBC News, 2012).

In September 2012, as a reaction to a Youtube movie ridiculing Prophet Mohammad that originated in the US and sparked protests across the Middle East, Salafis from Tripoli burned down a KFC restaurant (The Daily Star, 2012).

In December 2012, the clashes in Tripoli were sparked by an ambush in Talkalakh, a Syrian town in the vicinity of the Lebanese northern border; 22 Lebanese Salafis from Tripoli who were on their way to join the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad were attacked by the Syrian army and killed (Elali, 2012). Only two of them survived.

The clashes between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh continued throughout 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The security situation was worsened by a series of bombings, assassinations of local politicians and attacks against the Lebanese army. On August 23, 2013 two suicide bombings targeted Taqwa Mosque of Salafi Sheikh
Salem al-Rafei and the nearby Salem Mosque, killing 47 people gathered for the Friday prayer (Reuters, 2013). The bombings were never claimed by any group, but the Salafi community as well as other Sunni conservatives in the area perceived them as an attack on their community, the retaliation of the Syrian regime and its ally, Hezbollah, for their support for the anti-Assad rebellion (Morris & Jaidamous, 2013). The Lebanese security forces arrested Hezbollah allied Sunni sheikh Ahmad al-Ghareeb for organizing the attacks (Lucas, 2013). Abdul Rahman Diab, Alawite ADP official and father of one of the suspects in orchestrating the bombings in August 2013, was assassinated in February 2014 (Naharnet, 2014). The leader of the ADP Ali Eid and his son Rifaat fled Lebanon after being summoned for interrogation in the case of the twin bombings on the Tripoli mosques (Naharnet, 2015).

After years of clashes and amid concerns of the rise of militant groups in Tripoli, the Lebanese government inaugurated the Tripoli security plan in April 2014, meant to curb militantism in the city and confiscate weapons (Al Bawaba, 2014). However, despite the Army arresting scores of militants and armed groups members and commanders, jihadist militantism was still a problem in Tripoli six months after the launch of the security plan. Two young jihadist Salafis, Shadi al-Mawlawi and Osama Mansour, emerged as new leaders of armed groups seeking to avenge their fellow militants arrested by the army in 2014 (NOW Lebanon, 2014). The two young jihadists denied that they were officially affiliated to either the Islamic State or al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch Jabhat al-Nusra. “We are close to Jabhat Al-Nusra in terms of policy, ideology, and practice. We love Jabhat al-Nusra, but we have not pledged allegiance to it or to the Islamic State,” Mansour told LBC television station on September 12, adding that his
group was imposing *sharia* in Bab al-Tabbaneh (NOW Lebanon, 2014).

The Lebanese army patrols and checkpoints throughout Tripoli were attacked several times during 2014 and 2015 (The Daily Star, 2014). The attacks were claimed by jihadist militants who accused the Lebanese army of arbitrary detentions and of imposing the security plan only on the Sunni community, sparing Hezbollah.


“We will spare no effort to strike you in your heartlands and you will pay the price of your continuous crimes against the Sunni community and your attacks against their holy sites in the land of Sham (Syria and Lebanon),” a statement published on the Twitter account of Jabhat al-Nusra’s Qalamoun branch, addressing its threat to Lebanon’s Alawites, Hezbollah and “their allies” (Naharnet, 2015). Fugitive Shadi al-Mawlawi and Osama Mansour were among the 28 people indicted for the bombing (Naharnet, 2015). Osama Mansour was killed in Tripoli in April 2015, at a police checkpoint as the officers mistook him for another wanted Salafi jihadist sheikh (The Daily Star, 2015).

### 3.2. Catalysts for Sunni mobilization in Tripoli

This section of the thesis addresses the research question: what pushed some Lebanese Sunnis to associate with jihadist movements in Syria against the Assad government and its Lebanese allies and get involved in a full-fledged ethnic conflict? In order to answer it, it will apply the matrix of proximate factors that lead to internal conflict elaborated by Michael E. Brown (2001). The section will explore internal mass level catalysts such as economic conditions, political transitions or weak state institutions influenced the conflict. It will also look at elite level domestic factors such as lack of moderate
leadership and the rise of sectarian entrepreneurs, it will also explore how the regional neighborhood influenced the Sunni community: the mass level external factors such as the war in Syria, the influx of refugees and the porous borders and the movement of fighters; as well as the elite level external factors, such as leaders and governments provoking sectarian strife in Lebanon for political reasons.

3.2.1. Internal mass-level factors: inside the Sunni community in Tripoli

a. Poverty, unemployment, lack of access to higher education

North Lebanon has battled poverty for a long time; it is one of Lebanon’s poorest areas. The North has 20.7 per cent of Lebanon’s population but 46 per cent of the extremely poor and 38 per cent of the entire poor population, according to a UNDP’s Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon study dating from 2008 (Laithy, Abu Ismail, & Hamdan, 2008).

Tripoli itself is nicknamed “the mother of the poor” (Ayyoub, 2015). The percentage of poor families in Tripoli amounted at 51 percent in 2011, according to the national poverty income index. The last time it was calculated nationally in 2005 it stood at 28 percent (Nehmeh, 2015). There is a strong sense of inequality in access to infrastructure and education in Tripoli, between the poor city’s neighborhoods and the much richer suburbs. A UNDP survey done at the beginning of 2012 showed that 51 percent of the city’s residents lived with under $4 a day; in Bab al-Tabbaneh poverty rose to 76 percent, in Jabal Mohsen to 63 percent, while in Maarad/Mina, perceived as the middle class neighborhoods, it was at 15 percent. Up to 78 percent of the inhabitants of Bab al-Tabbaneh and 65 percent in Jabal Mohsen live with under $500 a month, and none of
the inhabitants in either neighborhood earn more than $2000 a month. In Maarad/Mina neighborhood, only 20 percent of the people earn less than $500 and 25 percent of the inhabitants actually make more than $2000 per month (Elali, 2013). The Sunnis seem to be the primary victims of these socioeconomic inequalities (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 5). The study carried out by UNDP in 2008 pointed at the inequalities between areas mostly inhabited by Christians in North Lebanon, 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 (Laithy, Abu Ismail, & Hamdan, 2008, p. 11). These inequalities deepened the perception that the Sunni community suffered discrimination at the hands of the Lebanese state. Such discourse is increasingly common on the streets of Tripoli as it has become the home of mostly poor Sunni refugees, the majority of which are farmers coming from the poor regions of Homs, in the vicinity of the Lebanese border (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 5). The Sunni population itself is also divided economically with many poor Sunnis living on the margins of society. The situation is visible in the access to higher education. According to the UNDP study released at the beginning of 2012, only 1 percent of the population in Bab al-Tabbaneh and only 3 percent in Jabal Mohsen had access to higher education, compared to 25 percent in Maarad/Mina (Elali, 2013). According to several politicians and moderate local community leaders in Tripoli the lack of access to education in Tripoli’s Bab al-Tabbaneh and the surrounding neighborhoods is what also leads to the increased vulnerability of the youth to radical religious discourse. “They have no hope for more; no ambition, and they have no access to free higher education.
With this atmosphere, all these ideas circulating, some of them decide that it’s better to go to heaven,” a politician in Tripoli said.²⁹

Often the poor and uneducated youth are more likely than the middle class or rich Sunnis to turn to Sunni populism or extremism (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 5). “As long as they are poor and jobless, the men will fight,” a political activist and fighter from Bab al-Tabbaneh explained.³⁰

Another fighter in Tripoli, in his mid-20s, said that he had learnt to fire a gun when he was 15 and was trained by shooting at Alawite Jabal Mohsen just to “have fun”; but he understood the cause when he became an adult. “We are Sunnis and they are Alawites. We could hear them saying bad words about us and our religion on their walkie-talkies. Yes, it’s all sectarian. We have to defend our land. We are all fighting there together, people like me who are not religious, Salafis or Islamists. It’s our home,” he pointed out.³¹

The division between the middle class or rich Sunnis and the poor population in Tripoli also deepens the perception of marginalization in the poor neighborhoods; the residents of the latter feel their richer fellow Sunnis do not support their grievances. 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!” (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 5). A Salafi sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh also said that “Tabbaneh is the pole of poverty in Tripoli. Other Sunnis in Tripoli are

bourgeois, close to the politicians. They only get near the community when they need us to vote. It’s the religious institutions that are breaking the barriers and keeping the connections between the two. People always meet at the mosque.”

In Bab al-Tabbaneh, inhabitants have little access to state-provided social security, healthcare or education. A survey carried out by the French Agency for Development and The Federation of Municipalities in Tripoli in December 2009, 77 percent of the inhabitants of Bab al-Tabbaneh said they were not being covered by either private or public social security (Le Thomas & Dewailly, 2009). Therefore, in terms of paying medical expenses, education or rent, the inhabitants depend on political leaders or religious charities, which strengthens the patron-client relationships between political and religious leaders and the masses (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 6).

In May 2012, the security forces arrested Salafi Shadi al Mawlawi under suspicion of being part of a network that smuggled weapons and fighters for the Syrian rebels by luring him at the office of a Tripoli politician where he was supposed to receive aid for an ill daughter (Elali, 2012). His relationship with the politician was never investigated by the security forces.

A Salafi sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh lamented the corruption of the political circles.

“Everything goes to the politicians’ pockets. The municipality divides the job it has to do in two categories: clear jobs and unclear jobs. They pick up the garbage – that’s a clear job. But they don’t renovate schools or provide other services because they know it provides the politicians with an opportunity to gain support,” he said.

The patron-client relationship between the political establishment and the local

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32 Interview with a Salafist sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh on August 1, 2015.
community leaders, as well as the fact that this relationship is based on charity has become a double-edged sword. On the one side the large majority of the population is kept in a financially vulnerable status quo that permits its political manipulation through charity; on the other hand, when the political charities run out of funds, the Salafi charity organizations replace them. 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” (Lefèvre, 2014).

b. Fragmented political leadership

The evolution of Lebanon’s jihadi Islamism toward a bloody, although generally controlled violence reflects the ambiguous and contradictory approach of the nation’s authorities and political actors (The Crisis Group, 2010, p. 27).

Many Sunnis in Tripoli feel marginalized, unrepresented in the political process. Even moderates feel that they have no say in the policy making of the government in Beirut. “[The Sunni community] has no role in policy making in Lebanon, although they are politically involved in terms of affiliations; they have no capability of exerting any kind of pressure on their representatives; they tend to follow what their representatives suggest and not the other way around,” a civil society activist said. She also said that she believes that the lack of proper political representation is a factor that leads part of the youth to Islamic radicalism because this is the available means for the youth to feel empowered. “It’s either money, or God. That’s the choice that they have,” she said.

In the Salafi community the concern remains, but the discourse is more activist. “The

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33 In a personal interview done in Tripoli on August 3, 2015.
Sunnis cannot affect at all the policies of the government because they are not a united force. Even during the battles here in Tabbaneh they couldn’t make a decision because even here the factions were divided. A lot of people simply follow politicians and they are being used for different political purposes,” said a Salafi sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh.34

There has also been a lot of disenchchantment with Future Movement after the 2009 elections which has grown under the effects of the Syrian crisis. Much of this sentiment has to do with the fact that the political faction stopped its charity activities after the elections and also with the fact that, at least in Bab al-Tabbaneh, it could not offer a military strategy against the better armed March 8 forces in town and the perceived Hezbollah threat.35 “Around 800 people in Tripoli—not counting the pro-Syrian Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen—are on Hezbollah’s payroll and attend training camps. The number has been increasing because Hezbollah controls the cabinet,” a politician explained. “People in Bab al-Tabbaneh are poor, and they are seduced by the money. Future can’t offer them money and weapons, we have none. So they choose to accept Hezbollah’s offer just to feel safe,” he added. A political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh who said used to work for Future Movement as an aid officer before turning to a Salafi charity explained that Hezbollah financed small charities were slowly taking the place of the Future Movement aid network. He also said that “the Salafis are the most organized in the Sunni community here. They are not offering anything in terms of weapons; they only gave a fair speech to the people. There is nobody to protect this area

34 In a personal interview in Tripoli in August, 2015.
or its people. Today Hezbollah is a Shia ideological party with a welfare system, with a health care system. The Sunni community in Tripoli needs an ideological party to confront it,” he pointed out in an interview in August 2015.

Approximately two years later, in January 2014, these sentiments towards Future Movement made way into a video signed by “Tripoli’s Sunni Youth” showing masked gunmen slamming the former Lebanese Prime Minister and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri: “You sold the blood of martyrs; you sold the blood of your own father just to reach power!” They warned of “a day of anger” and said “if Sunnis were to be harmed” they would burn down the Future Movement’s offices in Tripoli (Samad, 2014).

The Future Movement was criticized for not doing enough for the Sunni community and in a consociational democracy where the political system is based on a patron-client relationship, where the za’im, the sectarian leader, is responsible of providing services for his community in exchange for getting elected, these concerns have cost the party a lot in terms of political support (Lefèvre, 2014). Also, the constant criticism of Hezbollah’s weapons and the fear that the Party of God might use its weapons to take control of Lebanon reinforced by the take-over of Beirut in May 2008 combined with the inability of Future Movement to set up its own militia due to internal opposition from inside the party deepened these concerns (Lefèvre, 2014). This contributed to the rise of small armed groups that pledged allegiance to whoever paid more and provided the arms.

In this context, when Tripoli native billionaire Najib Mikati was nominated as prime minister in the Hezbollah-dominated government that succeeded Saad Hariri’s cabinet
in 2011, he faced violent protests in his hometown, especially since he had been elected on the anti-Hezbollah March 14 lists. Mikati started feeling threatened, so he tasked an adviser with forming an armed security force to protect him (Lefèvre, 2014).

As a result, in 2012, a year after Mikati had become Prime minister, almost all the armed groups in Bab al-Tabbaneh were believed to be on his payroll and many of them included Salafi fighters (Elali, 2013).

Sheikh Houssam al Sabbagh, a former Al Qaeda fighter in Afghanistan, and who followed the preaching of Haraki Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, had around 300 fighters and worked for Mikati. Saad al-Masri, Sheikh Kamal al-Boustany, Amer Arish or Ziad Allouki, all haraki Salafi, led armed groups that worked both for Mikati and the Future Movement (Elali, 2013).

But most fighters, despite their political feelings, chose to stick to the same front against the Alawite ADP militia in Jabal Mohsen. According to a fighter in a group in Bab al-Tabbaneh, in many rounds of fighting supporters of Mikati fight shoulder-to-shoulder with him, a Future Movement supporter, against the pro-Syrian Alawites entrenched in Jabal Mohsen. Regardless of religion and political affiliation, people in Bab al-Tabbaneh supported the Syrian revolution and hosted the refugees and found a common ground in fighting the pro-Syrian forces that were perceived as being armed by Hezbollah. Moderates, conservatives or Salafis and even non-religious residents fought in the same armed groups in 2012-2013.

The small groups affiliated with March 8 also played a provoking role in Tripoli, 36 According to an interview with a local political activist and fighter in Bab al-Tabbaneh, in August 2015. 37 According to a young fighter interviewed in August 2012, his armed group was positioned in Souk al-Qameh, was made up of 13 people, including Salafists and Islamists and non-practitioners. “We are fighting together because this is our land and we have to defend it. We are Sunnis, they are Alawites,” he explained. The interview was published in Egypt Independent on August 31, 2012 http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/deadly-clashes-lebanon-reflect-syrian-divisions, retrieved on August 2 2015.
especially after 2011, during the Syrian crisis. Armed groups at the time loyal to Future Movement clashed several times in 2011 and 2012 with members of the pro-Syrian Tawhid Movement as well as pro-Syrian Sunni politicians Omar Karami’s supporters. Several March 14 politicians as well activists in Bab al-Tabbaneh accused hezbollah of arming Tawhid supporters and members in order to provoke the Sunnis, create strife and portray them as radicals (Farrell, 2011).

In August 2012, Salafi supporters of sheikh Salem al-Rafei besieged Issa Ibn Maryam Mosque in Tripoli’s Al-Mina district, where Sheikh Hashem al Minqara, a March 8 figure in Tripoli, preached; the clashes developed into a standoff with Minqara camping in the mosque (Al Ali, 2012).

A month later, another small group of fighters affiliated with Tawhid Movement were raided by the Lebanese Army, their weapons were confiscated only to be released a day after and their weapons returned. The incident angered some of the young Salafis, which interpreted it as the government not standing up to Hezballah and only hunting down Sunni Islamists.

On the background of the perceived security threat and the rivalry with Hezballah, Sheikh Salem al-Rafei echoed the pulse of the Sunni street in Tripoli and in August 2012 called during his sermon for the set-up of a Sunni militia in North Lebanon to oppose Hezballah’s military arsenal. A popular slogan in Islamist circles in Tripoli summed it up: “The northern suburbs to oppose the southern suburbs” (Crisis Group, 2012). However, the opposition of most of the politicians and clerics in Tripoli convinced Rafei to tone down his call to arms (Rowell, 2012).

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The political Islam movement was also divided, even after the Arab Spring (Lefèvre, 2014). March 8 rallied under its umbrella Fathi Yakan’s Islamic Action Front, Al Ahbash and Tawhid; March 14 included many Salafis and the Jamaa al-Islamiya, Lebanon’s branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Jamaa al-Islamiya had been established in Tripoli which remained the main stronghold of the organization; also, with the beginning of the Syrian uprising and the reemergence of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as part of the Syrian opposition, its influence among the conservative Sunnis also increased (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 8). Largely funded by Qatar, the organization has set up a network of schools, clinics and charities across Lebanon that provides services to poor Sunni communities and it had been very active in providing aid to the Syrian refugees since the very beginning of the crisis. The Islamic Medical Association has its own ambulance service and a hospital in Tripoli where many wounded rebels were transported from the Syrian border (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2012). However, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Lebanese branch hasn’t translated its humanitarian influence into politics because its leaders haven’t been politically vocal.

Salafism also failed to garner the popular support it needed to become a true political force. In 2012, Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei announced the intention to set up a political party and participate in elections: “The party will not be confined to Tripoli,” he said. “It will include Salafis from all over Lebanon, and it will make alliances with other political coalitions just like in any normal political process” (Elali, 2012). However, the initiative did not find an enthusiastic response on the ground, given the fact that the Lebanese legislative elections were postponed until 2017.
The reason can be found in the mobilization structures of the Salafi movement in Lebanon. The Salafis do not believe in hierarchy and bureaucracy as a form of organization. Many Salafis had this attitude towards the Lebanese state institutions before the Syrian uprising, even when the Future Movement had coopted some of the sheikhs to support it politically. For instance, when the military service was compulsory in Lebanon, young Salafis deserted from the army because, by ideology, they did not recognize its authority as a state institution.39

The Salafi movement in Lebanon, therefore, does not have a pyramid-like organization, but is an informal network (Pall, 2013, p. 64). But in Lebanon, Salafism as a social movement has several layers of popular support. The majority is made of passive followers; they pray at the mosque and attend sermons, but they are not active, committed followers: they shave their beards, smoke, they might have tattoos. But patronage is often very important in the poor regions of Tripoli; in the absence of other patrons, large parts of the population depend economically on the charities of Salafi mosques, which dominate the religious landscape, especially in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Thus, Salafi sheikhs play an important social role, and with the absence of any moderate Islamic authority, they also play an administrative role: many residents call on the Salafi sheikhs to resolve disputes or legal matters (Pall, 2013, p. 65).

A Tripoli-based independent politician40 recalled an anecdote about a Syrian rebel group that had become more radical all of a sudden: "Why did you grow a beard?" the Free Syrian Army commander was asked. "Have you become a Salafi?" "No," he

39 According to an independent civil society activist interviewed in August 2015.
responded, "but that’s how we get money." The politician explained that the situation was mirrored in Tripoli’s neighborhoods. “Even though they dress like jihadists or Salafis, they are, in fact, moderate Muslims with tolerant ideas about community.

“[Right now] money is coming [to Tripoli] to finance these types of groups. If you have a group that looks like it’s formed of Salafis, you get money.”

Another layer of support is made of the practicing Salafis, who do not surpass 3,000 people among Tripoli’s 500,000 inhabitants (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 12). They are educated and they do not only attend the sermons of one preacher, but they consult several.

Salafism lacks organizational structures, therefore the recruiting also follows informal channels; most members are recruited through friends and family; people from secular families also come in contact with Salafism via television or radio channels, and decide to attend Salafi preacher’s sermons. (Pall, 2013, p. 67).

Because the principle of leadership contravenes the basic principles of Salafism, the relationship between the Salafi preachers in Tripoli is also a horizontal; the current is split between the quietist, apolitical sheikhs and the very vocal haraki sheikhs not only by the methods of expressing their faith, but also by sources of funding: while the quietists receive funding from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the harakis receive finance from Qatar (Pall, 2013, pp. 67-77).

Weak moderate Sunni institutions also contribute to the increased influence of the fundamentalist Islamic currents in Tripoli. Dar al-Fatwa, the official religious authority which represents Lebanon’s Sunni community, has been underfunded for years and has also been mired in recurring scandals that have severely affected its image in the community it represents. Dar al-Fatwa was perceived for a long time as under complete
influence of Lebanon’s high-ranking political officials: mufti Mohammed Tawfiq Khalid was a close ally to PM Riadh el-Solh, Hassan Khalid supported president Fouad Chehab, Mohammad Rashid Qabbani shifted between March 14 and March 8 and was accused of stealing $6 million from the institution since 2009 (Lefèvre, 2015). 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. The animosity between the local Salafi clerics and Dar al-Fatwa are obvious. “I have never seen them coming around this neighborhood trying to reach out to the people, help in any way. They have no presence here, no projects. None of them, from the leadership, ever visited Tabbaneh. The employees there are closer to politicians than to the people,” a Salafi sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh said in an interview. In order to express their disagreement with Dar al-Fatwa, several Islamist sheikhs set up the Muslim Scholars Committee after the Syrian uprising broke out; its leadership rotates yearly. Its first leader was Ahmad al Omari from Jamaa al-Islamiya, the second was Tripoli-based haraki Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, succeeded by Sheikh Adnan Imam from Majdal Anjar, a Salafi stronghold in eastern Bekaa Valley (Lefèvre, 2014). The Muslim Scholar Committee has played an important role in mediating the conflict between the Lebanese Army and the armed groups in Tripoli in 2013-2014 and the hostage crisis in Arsal in 2014-2015 (Mroue, 2014).
c. Weak government and divided state institutions

The divisive structure of the Lebanese state institutions, the sectarian repartition of the high-ranking official positions in the government and the security forces, combined with weak policies of the governments also had an impact on the radicalization in the Sunni community, the emergence of jihadist groups in conservative regions and the break out of rounds of violent conflict on sectarian, but often also anti-state lines.

The Mikati government and its weak policy of “disassociation” with the Syrian crisis reflected the Prime Minister’s position: elected as an MP on an anti-Syrian March 14 list in Tripoli, he then became the head of a Hezbollah-led March 8 government. Being a local of Tripoli put him at additional responsibility because of the anti-Hezbollah sentiments on the Sunni Streets. “If he thinks he can get away with his constituency just by making positive speeches, while the implementation would be exactly what Hezbollah wants… it won’t work,” a politician in Tripoli said. 41

Mikati’s difficult position was visible in two security incidents that I’ve mentioned in the previous chapters: the arrest of Salafi Shadi al Mawlawi in 2012 (Luca, 2015) and the shooting of Akkar Salafi sheikh Ahmad Abdul Wahed (Naharnet, 2012). In both cases it was Mikati himself who, under pressure of violent clashes in Tripoli, decided to release Mawlawi and, faced with security threats and the muftis’ call to protests across Lebanon, to arrest the officers involved in the shooting of Abdul Wahed.

The inability of his government to impose the policy of “disassociation” on all its security agencies, the perception that some of these agencies were controlled by agents...

of Damascus, as well as the harassment and arrest of Syrian political activists in Tripoli also contributed to the deepening of feelings of victimization in the Sunni community. The arrests and interrogations of Syrian Sunnis who took shelter in Tripoli and tried to raise support for the rebellion in Lebanon deepened the sense of persecution that many Salafis already felt. Many Salafis, for instance were convinced the charges against militants in connection with the Dunniyeh clashes in 2000 were fabricated (The Crisis Group, 2010, p. 27). Moreover, the arrest and arbitrary detention of hundreds of Salafi from Tripoli in connection to the 2007 clashes with Fatah al Islam worsened the situation.

But it was the Lebanese Army that felt the mistrust of the Islamists in Tripoli during the Syrian uprising, especially after the twin bombings of the Taqwa and Al Salam Mosques in August 2013. Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, the preacher of Taqwa Mosque, called his followers to the arms, and not only the practicing Salafis responded, but also many of the formerly passive followers. “Tripoli will be the only city in Lebanon that has security provided by its people,” Rafei said to a crowd gathered outside near a large crater that marked the center of the blast after the bombings. Several of the city’s Salafi clerics blamed the Lebanese state for not being able to ensure security in the city. In the wake of the bombings, the Lebanese army only cordoned Al Salam Mosque, which was located in the safe middle class neighborhood of Al Mina; the security at Taqwa Mosque in Bab al-Tabbaneh was taken care of by armed gunmen from the neighborhood (Morris & Jaidamous, 2013).

Six months earlier, Lebanese army troops had been attacked and killed by the armed relatives of an Islamist with connections to Syrian rebel groups in Arsal. The man had

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42 According to interviews conducted in August 2015.
been ambushed by unknown gunmen - that the locals identified as Hezbollah fighters - and his angry relatives attacked the security forces when they arrived at the scene of the crime. The Lebanese 34 residents of the town were charged with murdering two soldiers, attempting to kill more and seizing an army vehicle (Naharnet, 2013). However, despite many witnesses to the incident, the official press releases of the Army did not mention anything about the ambush and pointed at an intelligence operation to apprehend a wanted terrorist (Luca, 2013).

The incident had a dramatic echo in Tripoli. The disaffection with the Lebanese Army had increased even more after the battle in Abra, Sidon, in June 2013, when the Lebanese troops fought with armed supporters of vocal anti-Hezbollah critic and self-proclaimed Salafi sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. The reports that Hezbollah fighters also participated in the skirmishes, the arrest of scores of young men in the neighborhood and the death of a detainee due to torture in custody (Human Rights Watch, 2013) deepened the perception that the army was being used as an instrument by Hezbollah and its Syrian patron (Badran, 2013).

Many voices in the Sunni community in Tripoli, both politicians and clerics, expressed concern over the double standards of the Lebanese security forces, accusing them of turning a blind eye to Hezbollah’s involvement in the fighting in Syria and targeting the Sunnis for doing the same43.

After the enforcement of the security plan in Tripoli in April 2014, the army troops were bombed and attacked by gunmen several times. According to a Salafi sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh44, it was because the security forces had been on an arrest spree and

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43 According to interviews conducted in Tripoli in August 2015.
44 Interviewed in August 2013.
had detained the old armed groups leaders that kept radicalism under control. That is why, he explained, a new wave of young men with jihadist sympathies such as Shadi al Mawlawi and Osama Mansour had the opportunity to grow into group leaders. “These are not real Salafis, they are young men who haven’t even read the books. Only uneducated people become jihadists and start groups like this. And now it’s the sheikhs who are trying through sermons to keep the people calm and show them that this is not the way,” he said.

Hezbollah’s political ascension and its involvement in Syria, but especially the Lebanese state inability to prevent the political and military faction from intervening in the hostilities alongside the Damascus government forces also impacted negatively the perception in the Sunni community. It also made it vulnerable to sectarian discourse from different political and religious leaders, either from inside the Sunni community or from the outside. The fact that Hezbollah’s fighters were allowed to cross the border into Syria unrestrained by the Lebanese security forces, while in several Sunni communities the Lebanese army clashed with armed groups, the raids in Tripoli’s neighborhoods, the Salafis who were arrested and detained indefinitely without proper charges, also helped increase the sentiments of victimization. “The government is taking people to jail; those people are unjustly arrested because the government can’t arrest more important people and they need to show they are doing something. Meanwhile, Hezbollah can create a state whenever they want, set up checkpoints, control the airport and the harbor, etc. The best thing we, as Sunnis, can do is to find employment for people,” a political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh explained45.

45 In an interview in August 2015.
3.2.2. Internal elite-level factors: lack of legitimate moderate leadership and the rise of Salafi sectarian populism

During the first few months after Rafik Hariri’s assassination, his death had a trans-confessional dimension; the former prime-minister was a national hero. However, the sectarian differences in Lebanon after 2006 led to the loss of Hariri’s national martyrdom. He became the martyr of the Sunnis (Vloeberghs, 2013, p. 169). This did not only translate into his grave becoming part of the Sunni legacy together with Mohammad al Amin mosque built under Hariri’s patronage. It also meant that Martyrs Square also became a place for Sunni discontent, and later, even for Islamist/Salafi discontent.

Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al Assir’s day of anger in Martyrs Square was organized in that location on purpose. Haraki Salafi sheikh Omar Bakri was also present at the rally together with his supporters bussed from Tripoli. The black flags of the jihadist Salafis were held next to the blue flags of the Future Movement at the rally. Saad Hariri had already left Lebanon and did not cater to his community anymore; and the Salafi sheikhs were already asserting themselves as the defenders of the Sunni community’s rights.

Tripoli mirrored these developments especially after the beginning of the Syrian uprising. According to one community leader from Bab al-Tabbaneh, the population that had made the Future Movement’s electoral success possible in the past was manifesting distrust towards the local Future Movement politicians. But the discontents of the Sunni community towards Future Movement are deeper than Hariri’s exile. They have to do more with Hariri and Future Movement’s politicians
ambivalence in their relationships with the Salafi sheikhs and their supporters. On the one hand, Hariri reached out to the Salafis in order to co-opt them as Future Movement supporters and undermine its political opponents; while Fathy Yakan’s Islamic Action Front and Bilal Chaaban’s Tawhid remained loyal to Syria and supporters of Hezbollah, Hariri had to reach out to the Salafis and financed their organizations and events. In February 2006, for instance, he provided transportation for the supporters of Salafi Sheikhs Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal and Raed Hlayel to participate in a rally against the Danish newspaper that published cartoons of the Prophet. But, at the same time, he kept the relationship discreet (Rabil, 2014, p. 199). After the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Salafis, under the patronage of religious institutions in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, held meetings to come up with a plan to protect the Sunni community and reinforce the Sunni leadership under Hariri’s Future Movement. Even after the 2009 elections, when the Future Movement’s financial aid stopped for the people in the poor neighborhoods of Tripoli, they still largely supported Saad Hariri as the Sunni leader: “We understand him. He is a politician and does not want to get involved in gun fights. But what bothers me and many others around here is that most Lebanese politicians work for their sects; but we, the Sunnis, are always forgotten by our representative.”

These sentiments were reinforced after 2011, when Saad Hariri’s national unity government collapsed and he left Lebanon. The Future Movement leader only returned to the country in 2014, after the siege of Arsal and the clashes between Syrian rebels and the Lebanese Army (The Daily Star, 2014). He also made consistent donations for the reconstruction of Arsal and Tripoli’s neighborhoods. However, this did not bring

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46 According to a Future Movement social worker in Bab al-Tabbaneh, interviewed in August 2015.
him back the legitimacy of a Sunni za‘im. The main reason was, according to a political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh, that he did not finance armed groups, the main pillar of leadership legitimacy in Tripoli’s neighborhoods. “The gap between us and them started from 2008 when some of us had to carry weapons, especially after seeing what happened to our friends and family in Beirut, how the Future TV building was burned. However, Saad Hariri did not want guns and weapons of any type and he did not want to get involved in it,” a political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh explained.

Hariri’s government was replaced by a Hezbollah-dominated cabinet led by Tripoli businessman and politician Najib Miqati, who also had a base of supporters in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Miqati’s supporters fight shoulder-to-shoulder with Hariri supporters and Salafis against the pro-Syrian Alawites during the Syrian crisis. The Syrian uprising had started and Syrian refugees were pouring into Lebanon and Tripoli by the thousands. Regardless of religion and political affiliation, people in Bab al-Tabbaneh supported the Syrian revolution and hosted the refugees.

The dialogue between Future Movement and Hezbollah which started in December 2014 (Nassif, 2014) was also received with mistrust, especially after almost a decade of harsh rhetoric of the Future Movement politicians against Hezbollah’s weapons and its criticism for Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria. These sentiments found an echo in the Salafi sheikhs’ statements. According to a Salafi sheik in Bab al-Tabbaneh47 the political cover for the armed groups in Bab al-Tabbaneh disappeared when the Future-Hezbollah dialogue started. Thus, the Lebanese army was able to do what it had been impossible to do before: arrest many of the armed group leaders and members hunting

47 The Salafist sheikh is part of the purist/quietist current and disagreed with the political involvement of other Salafist sheikhs in the neighborhood. Interviewed in August 2015.
them down in the neighborhoods and seizing them at checkpoints. Militiamen and suspected jihadists weren’t the only ones hunted down in Tripoli during 2014 and early 2015. Over a thousand people were detained because of the telecommunications data released by the government to the security forces: if you had made a phone call to a suspect, you got arrested. Other people were simply detained at checkpoints: the security forces just looked through the pictures on their phones. Also, they would automatically accuse them of being Daesh/ISIS supporters,” the sheikh said.

Without a legitimate za’im to carry their interests, the Sunni community in Tripoli found representation in different Salafi sheikhs who immediately identified themselves with the Sunni grievances and were very vocal in expressing them. As a civil society activist from Tripoli put it, “religious leaders turned into political representatives”

They emerged as the most powerful mobilizing forces in Tripoli and North Lebanon, contesting Saad Hariri’s leadership, especially after his exile (Rabil, 2014, p. 207). The sectarian populism they exhibited after the beginning of the Syrian revolution also led to the radicalization of many of their followers. In the opinion of the community leaders interviewed in Tripoli, it was one of the factors with the most impact on the population. Some of the Salafi sheikhs, namely that haraki Salafis, managed to mobilize many of their followers politically without even convincing them of becoming proper practicing Salafis. In other words, a large part of the passive followers were mobilized because of the political charge in the sheikhs’ rhetoric rather than the religious aspects in their

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48 In an interview conducted in August 2015 in Tripoli.
49 According to Imad Salamey, in The Government and politics of Lebanon, sectarian populism has very old roots in Lebanon’s history and comes from the feudal organization of a community around a za’im. Because of the sectarian nature if the political system, all populist movements in Lebanon took sectarian lines. See pages 170-172.
teachings. Many people felt unrepresented, economically marginalized, disenfranchised and perceived the security forces actions as supporting Hezbollah’s policies and its efforts of portraying the Sunni community that supported the Syrian uprising as extremist.

A look at the rhetoric of the main haraki Salafi sheikhs in Tripoli offers an insight into the sectarian populism used to mobilize the community, whether it was the religiously passive followers or the practicing Salafis, and to set up networks to aid the Syrian rebellion and send in fighters.

Sheikh Salem al-Rafei is one of the most vocal supporters of the Syrian uprising and also the most vocal Hezbollah critic. He is seen by Tripoli residents as the strongest Salafi voice. Rafei reportedly fought alongside Tawhid Movement against the Syrian troops and studied in Medina, Saudi Arabia. He has a doctorate earned in Germany, where he lived until 2005. He co-founded al Nour Mosque in Berlin and only returned to Lebanon when the Syrian troops withdrew. He was arrested in Germany in 2002 for alleged links with Al Qaeda, but was released for lack of evidence. He also was refused a visa to Germany in 2006 because of his support for the jihad against the Israeli occupation of Palestine (Elali, 2012). Rafei is the imam of the al Taqwa Mosque in Bab al-Tabbaneh. From the beginning of the Syrian uprising he rallied against the local backers of the Assad regime and offered aid to Syrian refugees. His calls to jihad started with Hezbollah’s open involvement in the Syrian conflict on the side of the Assad regime.

His rhetoric started to refer to jihad in Syria as a duty for Lebanese Sunnis towards the

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50 Interviews were conducted with a political activist in Bab al Tabbaneh, a Salafist sheikh in the same neighborhood, and a civil society activist in Abi Samra neighborhood.
51 Ibidem.
end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013. During the battle of Qusair in spring 2013, the Salafi cleric called on his followers to join rebels fighting in Syria in response to Hezbollah’s fighters aiding the Syrian army troops in besieging the town in the vicinity of the Lebanese border. “I called for jihad in Syria primarily to contain Hezbollah’s intervention in Qusayr. The party’s implication in the Syrian war should be put to a stop, as it will draw Lebanon in the nearby conflict, by forcing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to bomb Lebanon,” explained Rafei (Alami, 2013). His calls to jihad and confronting Hezbollah in Syria were never veiled. “We also have our people who are Lebanese Sunnis in Qusayr and Tal Kalakh,” he said (Al Arabiya, 2013). “Our calls for jihad will stop once Hezbollah withdraws from Syria,” Rafei added.

Rafei also challenged the Sunni political leadership, attacking Saad Hariri’s reluctance to arm the Sunni community and face Hezbollah. “When our people were slaughtered in Beirut, what did you [Saad Hariri] do? You sat crying like a woman. You said the United Nations and America failed us... If you are unable to protect yourself, then how will you protect the Sunnis?”

He also promoted, at least for a while, the idea of establishing what he called a Sunni defense council formed by fighters in Tripoli who would protect the community when the Lebanese army was unable to (BBC, 2012). The idea raised the opposition of other clerics, as well as politicians and did not come to life. But this type of discourse contributed a lot to the sentiment that the Sunni community in Lebanon and in the region was under attack and needed to defend itself against the Shiite crescent whose exponents were Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. It also legitimized the idea of jihad in Syria as a duty, especially coming from a cleric with a doctoral degree, which is quite rare in

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52 April 26, 2013 in a Friday sermon at Taqwa Mosque in Bab al-Tabbaneh, Tripoli.
the jihadist Salafism.

According to a Salafi Sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh, Rafei’s mosque was a hub for Syrian rebel recruitment. Scores of young men from Tripoli left to Syria through al-Rafei’s network to fight against Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, also seen as an oppressor of the Sunni community both in Lebanon and in Syria. Among those who made this network possible were Sheikh Nabil Raheem, who was imprisoned for links with al-Qaeda linked Fatah al Islam and self-taught Sheikh Hussam al Sabbagh, who is said to have fought alongside Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq (Mortada, 2012).

Sheikh Dai al Islam al-Shahhal, the son of Salem al-Shahhal, the founder of the Salafi movement in Lebanon, studied in Medina and was influenced by the political Islam that was sweeping through the Saudi universities. Al-Shahhal heads the Islamic Association for Guidance and Charity, which was set up by his father. During the late 70s, he tried to establish a Salafi militia meant to defend the community during the Lebanese civil war, but the group was short-lived; it was dismantled after the Tawhid massacre in 1986. Shahhal preached in Beirut, Sidon and South Lebanon for the rest of the civil war and returned to Tripoli after the Taif agreement. He was also forced to flee Lebanon in 2000, after the Dunniyeh incident, when a group of jihadist fighters took shelter in one of his buildings and clashed with the army. He came back to Lebanon after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops (Elali, 2012). In 2008, after the clashes between Hezbollah and March 14 supporters, Hassan al-Shahhal, Dai al-Islam’s cousin, signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah. The sheikh slammed the document and technically killed it in its crib. Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal is considered the second most influential Salafi cleric in Tripoli. He also supported the Syrian uprising and warned

53 In an Interview in August, 2015.
that Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria would bring more violence to Lebanon.

Contrary to Rafei, Al-Shahhal never openly incited to jihad, considering himself part of the purist or quietist current. However, his speeches and statement have been anything but apolitical. “If I wanted to back the Syrian revolution with men, I could have issued a jihad fatwa to send thousands of men from Lebanon and outside to fight in Syria,” he said in an interview with Al Joumhouria newspaper. “We never harmed anyone. Those who are responsible for the damage done must be held accountable and not us [referring to Hezbollah]. We are confronting a dangerous plot run by Iran” (Naharnet, 2013).

The sheikh was active in staging numerous protests in support of the Syrian uprising in Tripoli and he also participated in a protest in Arsal, in February 2013, after clashes between the army and the relatives of an Islamist killed in strange circumstances left two army officers dead. “The Sunnis in this country are at the forefront of the fight against the oppression and tyranny of the Syrian-Iranian axis,” Shahhal said after calling for a protest against the army raids in Arsal (The Daily Star, 2013). A clash with the army followed and three soldiers were wounded. Shahhal often criticized the Lebanese government and military, accusing them of turning a blind eye to Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria and targeting only Sunni communities. “Double standards in the implementation of security leave our areas in a state of despondency as perpetrators run free. In fact, there is an official state in Lebanon and one of hegemony [Hezbollah], which aims to exemplify the barbaric Syrian regime,” he said (Garret, 2013). “The knife has reached our neck, and we will not wait until we are slaughtered anew. If the state does not immediately carry out its duty to deter Hezbollah from intervening in Syria and using its influence in the state and the army in its own interest, it should declare its
inability to protect our sons and itself. The party has killed the legitimacy of the state. We declare the necessity to prepare to confront the occupation of Lebanon by the Safavid project through the readiness of every Sunni family and Sunni youth to defend our targeted creed and our homes and honor,” he told Al Mustaqbal newspaper (Rabil, 2014).

Al-Shahhal doesn’t preach in a particular mosque, but gives occasional speeches. Because of his reputation and his high education, he gathers quite a crowd for his speeches and was able to mobilize the Salafi community and not only for several protests in Tripoli. In May 2013, young followers of al-Shahhal closed roads in Tripoli to protest against the army’s arrest of one of the sheikh’s bodyguards in Majdal Anjar for carrying a weapon (Kataeb, 2013). His son, Jaafar, was arrested by the security forces in December 2014 during a raid in Zahriyeh, also a poor neighborhood in Tripoli. He was wanted in connection with what was believed to be an armed jihadist group that clashed with the Lebanese army in October 2014. Sheikh Shahhal himself was wanted for illegal possession of arms (Amrieuh, 2014). The sheikh’s response to the situation was that by attacking a religious leader of the Sunni community, the Lebanese authorities offended the entire Sunni community. He also blamed Hezbollah for harassment: “Hezbollah has a lot of influence on many measures and decisions and the way these decisions are carried out in Lebanon. The warrant [for my arrest], if it meant anything, signified the low level of treatment that institutions in Lebanon are stooping to, including discrimination.” Shahhal left Lebanon because of the warrant (Amrieuh, 2014).

Sheikh Zakaria al-Masri is the imam of Hamza Mosque in Qobbe, Tripoli, and was also
a very vocal critic of Hezbollah and Iran and their help for the Assad regime. Among Tripoli’s Salafi scholars, al-Masri is the most successful in terms of academic work: he studied in Mecca, taught Islam in Lebanon and wrote over 30 books. He also was the mentor of Sidon based haraki sheikh Ahmad al-Assir who fled Abra after his supporters clashed with the army in June 2013. Masri organized protests in mid-2011 against the Syrian crackdown on protestors and managed to gather 700 people every Friday (Elali, 2012). He is not as influential and radical as Salem al-Rafei or Dai al Islam al-Shahhal, but he is well known for his anti-Hezbollah political stances.

“Hezbollah wants to govern the whole country, but I can assure you that it will not happen because we have an Islamic revolution in Syria right now, and this will bring Hezbollah down…” (Blanford, 2012).

Al Masri’s rhetoric is also more rooted in the political Islamism and its historical motivations. Many of his statements are far from being populist and are motivated by Islamist ideology, which originated from the wish of many Islamic scholar to stand up to the Western secular influence and Arab nationalism current in the Arab world in the mid-20th century. “I support the blessed uprising of our brothers in Syria against the Baath party and regime, which has killed children, women, the elderly and did not even show mercy for the wounded in hospitals” (The Daily Star, 2011). But he has also stressed on the discrimination the Sunni community faces in Lebanon compared to Hezbollah: “The Lebanese Army’s arrest our people for bearing light arms while they let Hezbollah members who were arrested in Al-Zahriyeh go free. Although the Hezbollah members were arrested with trucks of weapons and ammunition, and they were arrested after firing at the Army patrol, they were released two days after their
arrest,” Masri said at a Friday sermon in September 2012, referring to an incident involving Tawhid Movement members. The Lebanese Army had raided their weapons depot in Zahriyeh, mistaking them for Salafis, but released them the next day after realizing their weapons were sanctioned by Hezbollah (The Daily Star, 2012).

Sheikh Raed Hlayhel was not as vocal as some of his counterparts in Tripoli. He was known as a haraki Salafi since 2006 when he staged the protest against the Danish cartoon depicting Prophet Mohammad. Hlayhel had been the imam of Grimhojvej Mosque in Brabrand, Jutland, until 2006, as he had been granted political asylum due to the Syrian occupation (Elali, 2012). Hlayhel was not as vocal and inciting during the Syrian uprising, but he is a member of the Muslim Scholars Committee, and was a key mediator at the bequest of Prime Minister Tammam Salam at the beginning of the hostage crisis Arsal, in 2014. He made statements in support of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters: “Nusra were positive in the negotiations. They wanted a secure place for refugees in Arsal. And they were asking if they could visit their families, meaning, for their supply route to be secure” (Murray, 2014). “The army and Hezbollah may try to go against ISIS and Nusra, but it will show the Sunni community they are against them, and it might turn the community against them. Although there is none of their representative here, people will feel angry,” Hlayhel said.

Although less renowned, several other sheikhs in Tripoli, some with a record of jihadist activity, have also had an impact. Sheikh Nabil Rahim, for instance, has also been a supporter of jihad in Syria and confronting Hezbollah, and his rhetoric followed that of Sheikh Salem al-Rafei. Sheikh Bilal Dokmak has also been vocal against Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria and a supporter of jihadist factions in Syria. He voiced concerns
that the rivalry between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State was taking its toll of the cause (Alami, 2013).

While most sheikhs in Tripoli favored Jabhat al-Nusra or other jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa al-Islam, Sheikh Dokmak showed willingness to support the Islamic State. “We are not happy with the rivalry between the two factions [ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra], nor with some of the extreme practices adopted by ISIS. However, our priority is the fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and ISIS is doing the job,” he said (Alami, 2013). Rahim, on the other hand, explained that “we see more and more people from the younger generation taking the side of ISIS.”

3.2.3 External mass-level factors: refugees, Syrian political activism and smuggling fighters

The Syrian refugees started to reach Tripoli very early during the Syrian uprising, in April 2011. Many people who reached the northern area of Wadi Khaled continued their journey to Tripoli and the city became the largest host of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Berneis & Bartl, 2013, p. 16). The particular nature of the security situation in the North hampered many agencies from developing their programs, leaving many refugees without access to humanitarian programs (Hourani & Van Vliet, 2014).

The Lebanese state policy to not set up refugee camps for the Syrian refugees like Turkey and Jordan did. Most political factions in Lebanon rejected the alternative because of the Lebanese experience with the Palestinian refugee camps (Al Jazeera, 2015). The Syrian refugees in Lebanon surpassed 1.5 million at the end of 2014 according to UNHCR.

But the number did not impact the community as much as the political and sectarian
background of the refugees impacted the political and sectarian situation in Tripoli. According to a civil society activist from Abi Samra, the Syrian refugees in Tripoli were hosted in the poor neighborhoods. Most of them came from the rural area in the vicinity of the Lebanese border. There were several waves of refugees, some came to Tripoli and stayed, others tried to make it back to their homes when the hostilities ended in their region. First, the residents of Talkalakh crossed into Lebanon, to Wadi Khaled and reached Tripoli; then the activists and refugees from Homs and Qusair and even Aleppo made their way to the north Lebanese city and were accommodated by its poorest neighborhoods. During the sieges of Homs and Aleppo in 2012, the population in Bab al-Tabbaneh alone increased dramatically. Tripoli’s residents welcomed the Syrian refugees; many of them consider the Syrians distant families especially given the intermarriages 54. They also sympathized with the cause of the Syria uprising, given that both communities suffered from persecution by the same Assad regime.

Most of the refugees that reached Tripoli were coming from mixed Sunni and Alawite areas in the vicinity of the Lebanese border. The Syrian government had set up pro-regime Alawite militias called the shabiha in order to crackdown on protests in the Sunni towns. In many cases, the stories told by the refugees resembled sectarian cleansing. According to a teacher from Talkalakh, interviewed in April 2011 55, while the Sunnis in town were organizing protests against Bashar al-Assad, the regime was arming the Alawites in the villages surrounding Talkalakh. “People from the Alawite villages blocked all the roads except for the one leading to the Homs-Tartous highway. They wanted us to empty the town,” he explained.

54 According to a civil society activist interviewed in August 2015.
The *shabiha* Alawite militia was reportedly founded by the Assad family in order to crackdown on protests in 2011. According to UN reports, the militia is responsible for destroying entire villages by setting fire to homes or looting them, and raping, torturing and slitting the throats of inhabitants suspected of opposing the regime (Amor & Sherlock, 2014). Testimonies about the crimes against the Syrian Sunnis committed by the Alawite *shabiha* especially in Homs governorate had an impact on the Lebanese Sunnis who already held a grudge against their Alawite neighbors from Jabal Mohsen after the Lebanese civil war and the Syrian occupation.

In Bab al-Tabbaneh, for instance, fighters believed that they were also protecting the Syrian refugees from the attacks of the Alawite snipers. “They are our friends and we need to protect them,” a young fighter from Bab al-Tabbaneh said during a round of fighting with Jabal Mohsen in 2012. “They don’t fight with us. There are no Syrians fighting in Tabbaneh. If they want to fight they go to fight the Assad regime in Syria. But we protect our friends and their families while they are here.”

The welcoming environment in Tripoli also attracted many political opponents of the Damascus regime. Many Syrian opposition bodies, such as the Syrian National Council or The Syrian National Coalition had offices in Bab al-Tabbaneh and Zahriyeh were very active in raising aid for refugees and funds for the rebellion. The same activists recruited fighters from the large number of refugees for the rebel groups.

There was also crackdown on the Syrian activists, some of the interviewees said, and many Syrian opponents of the Assad regime were harassed, arrested, followed and sometimes kidnapped and handed over to the Syrian authorities. For instance

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56 The author witnessed on several occasions in 2012 until the end on 2013 how in a Syrian National Council aid office in Zahriyeh several young Syrian men were given money and supplies in order to cross the border and join the Free Syrian Army.
Mohammad Inad Sulaiman, a Syrian activist and a member of the Syrian Revolution Supreme Council, had fled the Damascus suburb of Al Kiswa to avoid being arrested by the Syrian government and took refuge in Tripoli. He was attacked by two unidentified men who tried to kidnap him, but was rescued by Tripoli residents near-by (Atassi, 2011).

These cases did not affect the security situation in Tripoli overall, but it did affect the perception the population formed of the Lebanese security forces, especially the Army intelligence bureau, which they perceived as affiliated with pro-Syrian forces in Lebanon. In 2013, a mob nearly lynched a man accused of being a Syrian intelligence agent (Naharnet, 2013).

But there was also a sense of solidarity with the Syrian refugees coming from the Salafi leaders; many Islamic charities picked up the humanitarian efforts very fast in 2011, before the Lebanese state and the international organizations paid attention to the crisis. The Syrian uprising strengthened the relationship between Syrian and Lebanese Islamists, as both of them had suffered during the years of Syrian control (Crisis Group, 2012). A wide range of Islamic charitable organizations raised funds and partnered with counterparts at the international and local levels in the Gulf countries. Federation of Relief Organizations for the Support of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon gathered over 70, mostly Islamic, associations from Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the Palestinian occupied territories, Turkey and even the UK. They include, among others, the Saudi International Islamic Relief Organization, the International Islamic Charitable Organization of Kuwait, Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid- Great Britain (The Crisis Group, 2013).
Also, the fact that the international organizations worked with the Lebanese government and were restricted by rigid sets of rules and bureaucracy, the Islamic charities were active in areas that other humanitarian organizations were restricted from: they provided aid for fighters, deserters, political activists and refugees reluctant to share their information and location with the Lebanese authorities, they provided education for Syrian children and youth in Islamic schools and, overall, the Lebanese Salafi mosques have also attracted many refugees, many of them politically active (The Crisis Group, 2013). The mosque and educational institutions are two important spaces for the Sunni community in Tripoli to socially interact; they are also where youth forms opinions and become exposed to ideas and ideology.57 That is how in mosques in the poor neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh sheikhs and their followers have been able to set up networks to smuggle fighters in and out of Syria.

The porous Lebanese-Syrian borders that allowed smuggling of goods and Diesel fuel before the uprising, have been used by the rebel factions for smuggling wounded militants, treating them in Tripoli and Akkar, smuggling weapons and even fighters. Salafis from Tripoli joined the fight in Talkalakh and Qusair, eager to fight Hezbollah in Syria, because in Lebanon they did not have the opportunity. In November 2012, 22 Salafis from Tripoli were ambushed by the Syrian regime forces in the vicinity of Talkalah. Only two made it to Lebanon. The Salafi sheikhs blamed the Hezbollah agents on Tripoli’s streets (mainly the Tawhid Movement supporters) for notifying the Alawite ADP in Jabal Mohsen and the Syrian government of the young men’s intention (Elali, 2012). The groups of Lebanese Salafis were supposed to meet a man who had been involved in the clashes of Dunniyeh in 2000, between the Lebanese army and the

57 According to an interview with a Salafist sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh interviewed in August 2012.
jihadists of Takfir wal Hijra and was also detained during the war with Fatah al Islam in 2007. The leader of the group of fighters was a follower of sheikh Salem al-Rafei.

Another groups of Salafis from Tripoli fought in Qusair to support the rebels in battles against Hezbollah in 2012. A Salafi from Tripoli told several media outlets that he had crossed the border with 16 of his friends. "When Hezbollah openly declared they were supporting the criminal Assad regime in butchering Sunnis, I thought it was my duty to help my brothers in Syria," the fighter said (Atassi, 2014).

A Salafi sheikh in Tripoli confirmed that between 200 and 300 young men from the city crossed into Syria to fight against the Assad forces and Hezbollah58. Harakat Ahrar as-Sham al-Islamiya, a Syrian Salafi coalition that fought in Qusair and Qalamoun, posted a YouTube video in which it thanked the people of Tripoli for their help59. In April 2013, when Hezbollah announced in a statement that its members were fighting in Syria to defend Lebanese Shiites, Lebanese Salafi sheikhs called for jihad to protect Sunni shrines against Hezbollah in Syria. Sheikh Salem al-Rafei was among the clerics who advocated for the jihadist duty in Syria“ (Al Arabiya, 2013). ”

Assessing the precise extent of Lebanese Sunni Islamist involvement in the conflict is difficult, but it is relatively limited and the militants in Tripoli are young locals, who have found the means to fight for their cause under the Salafi and jihadist flag. Unlike jihadist groups from Ain al-Hilweh, such as Osbat al-Ansar, Jund al-Sham or Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the jihadist Salafis from Tripoli have focused mainly on attacking Jabal Mohsen and clashing with the Lebanese army when the security forces attempted to arrest group leaders such as Osama Mansour or Shadi al-Mawlawi. But the suicide

58 Interviewed in August 2015.
59 The video can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPs59qKFuHM&feature=player_embedded#.
bombings in two cafes in Jabal Mohsen showed that young radicalized men were being trained and were willing to blow themselves up, which is not a usual thing for Tripoli. Young men have been carrying guns and have been fighting rounds of clashes against Jabal Mohsen, but they had never masterminded suicide bombings before the fighters returned from Syria with experience gained on the battlefield alongside Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham.

The jihadi influx strengthened the militias of Bab al-Tabbaneh, as the veterans bring valuable urban warfare expertise and equipment back home from Syria. Recent reports confirm that sophisticated new weapons have been spotted in the Sunni neighborhood, including mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers (Lefevre, 2014).

Jabhat al-Nusra has indeed more supporters and sympathizers among the young Salafis and radicals in Tripoli than the Islamic State, mainly due to the Syrian refugee and political activists who see ISIS as a new oppressor rather. After the Islamic State set up its rule in Raqqa and later engaged in the offensive in Iraq in 2014, committing massacres and summary executions of Syrians who did not adhere to the ISIS practice of Islam, both Syrians and Lebanese in Tripoli, including Salafi sheikhs and moderates, expressed disagreement with the ISIS practices. The idea that the Islamic State has been created by the Syria regime in order to discredit the Syrian uprising and label it as terrorist seems to be shared by both Syrians and Lebanese in Tripoli, according to a civil society activist.

There have been reports of young men from Tripoli who were killed in Syria fighting

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60 A Salafist Sheikh and a political activist in Bab al Tababneh interviewed in August 2015 both spoke of how “despair leads young men from the neighborhood to do reckless acts.

61 According to interviews in Tripoli in August 2015.

62 Interviewed in August 2015.
alongside ISIS. Khaled Ahmed Ahdab, aka Abu Hamza, also believe to be Sheikh Zakaria al Masri’s nephew was reportedly killed while fighting in Iraq alongside the Islamic State against the Shiite militiamen of Asaib Ahl Al-Haq. On August 26, Tripoli man Hisham al-Hajj detonated a booby-trapped car carrying 300 kilograms of explosives against a gathering of the Shiite militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq in Baghdad (Naharnet, 2014).

Also, a clash between militants and the Lebanese army in March 2015 shed some light on a group of suspected ISIS supporters in Bhanin, North Lebanon (Rowell, 2015). The group was allegedly led by Sheikh Khaled Hoblos, a haraki Salafi with Jabhat al-Nusra sympathies who hailed from Tripoli, and who held numerous sermons attacking the Lebanese army and Hezbollah. However, he denied having any links to any foreign groups or intending to establish an ISIS-like caliphate in Lebanon.

According to Tripoli-based activists and politicians the sheikh was allowed to gather his group and use inflaming rhetoric in order to give the security forces a reason to point at the ISIS threat. According to both activists and politicians he was not the only one; Shadi al-Mawlawi and Osama Mansour also were allowed to operate, stage theatrical fights and clashes, and pose a threat in order to be used as scapegoats. The perception that the Lebanese security forces are playing a dangerous game in order to portray the Sunni residents as extremists seems to also be a common ground between moderate and conservative circles. “They destroyed Bab al-Tabbaneh […] and arrested 400 guys in

63 A sermon of sheikh Hoblos was filmed by a follower and during his address jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra flags were waved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6H7LF74Ah2Y, retrieved on August 5, 2015.
order to get 30 fighters that they never found. And the army was surrounding Tabbaneh when all these guys disappeared,” a Tripoli based independent politician said.66

Another politician expressed concerns that most of the suspected terrorists blamed by the security forces for the rise of the jihadist groups in Tripoli and its suburbs had been in custody before; he also hinted that the security forces let the suspected terrorists escape as long as they could serve a purpose to portray Tripoli as the cradle of extremism.67 The same conviction was expressed by a Salafi Sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh who said that “these young men were obviously affiliated [with jihadist groups], but they did not have the resources to pose a security threat without being backed by someone.”68 The reasons that these groups are able to garner support form young Tripoli residents, as stated by a civil society activist in Tripoli, are the sense that there is a conspiracy against them, than they are persecuted by the Lebanese state and Hezbollah.

3.2.4. External elite-level factors: the Syrian leadership, Hezbollah and the regional Sunni-Shiite power struggle

a. Syria’s foreign policy by proxy

Lebanon’s political fate has long been intimately tied to Syria and the sectarian developments in the Syrian crisis had their direct effects in Lebanon. Tripoli has long been seen as Syria’s mailbox in Lebanon by its residents.69 “Whenever [Syria] has a

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68 In an interview in August 2015.
69 According to interviews with political activists, civil society activists and Salafist clerics in Tripoli, in August 2015.
message to send to the international and regional players, they cause problems here,” a politician in Tripoli explained. “The whole security situation was provoked on purpose in order to brand the city as a radical community. Tripoli is paying the price of the war in Syria.”

The Syrian government, although challenged at home, managed to keep its allies and proxies in Lebanon. The regime’s political allies helped keep the Syrian opposition exiled in Beirut in check and security agencies controlled by the regime’s allies helped intercept several weapon shipments that were destined for the Syrian rebels. A ship that was intercepted in April 2013 by the Lebanese navy on its way from Libya to Tripoli, Lebanon, carrying military aid for the rebels in Syria is just one example (Villareal, 2012). Several March 8 politicians blamed a retired colonel from Tripoli, close to Future Movement, for the shipment (Alahed News, 2013).

Following Assad’s narrative of portraying the Syrian uprising as Sunni Islamist, terrorist and al-Qaeda linked (Mertz, 2014), Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah also portrayed it as takfiri. “Armed groups are only hundreds of meters away from the Sayeda Zeinab, and takfiri groups launched clear threats on the internet that they will destroy the shrine should they enter the area …. We are not accusing the Sunnis at all. Our problem is with the takfiri groups, and everyone must stand in their face and prevent them from destroying the shrine,” Nasrallah said in 2013 when he first admitted that Hezbollah fighters are engaged in battle in Syria (Naharnet, 2013). However, none of Hezbollah’s officials, including Nasrallah, has ever accused any of the groups in Tripoli of being takfiri until January 2015, after the twin suicide bombings in Jabal Mohsen (Al Manar, 2015).
But the perception among the Sunnis community in Tripoli was not formed by listening to official statements. After its involvement in the Syrian conflict Hezbollah intensified its support to the March8 armed groups in Tripoli, mainly to Tawhid Movement and the ADP, while the Lebanese army and the security forces cracked down on Salafis in Tripoli’s neighborhoods, ignoring the weapons of the March8 groups. The double standards of the security forces had a dramatic impact on the youth, especially armed group members, who saw their relatives and friends hunted down and arrested. As a political activist in Bab al-Tababneh put it “the Syrian regime is trying to depict us as extremists and Salafis to present an idea: ‘If you get rid of me, these men will take over.”

The assassination of Wissam al Hassan, a Sunni from North Lebanon and the head of the Intelligence bureau of the Internal Security Forces reminded the Sunnis in Tripoli of the death of Rafik Hariri in a very similar bombing in 2005. Al Hassan had the reputation of developing the ISF Information Branch into an independent organization beyond the control of Hezbollah or any of the March 8 Syrian allies; the institution did help uncover several Israeli spy rings targeting Hezbollah, but was also central in providing evidence for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon as four Hezbollah members had already been indicted for the murder of Hariri (Rabil, 2014, p. 218). Al Hassan’s death sparked clashes between Bab al Tababneh and Jabal Mohsen, but its more important effects were much subtler. Al Hassan’s murder reminded the Sunnis of the existential threat. Hezbollah’s weapons and those of its March 8 allies in Tripoli gave a reason to the gunmen in Bab al-Tabbaneh to also hold weapons (Lefèvre, 2014).

The twin bombings of the two Tripoli mosques, including Taqwa, where sheikh Salem

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70 According to interviews done in August 2015.
al-Rafei preached, were also attributed to Sunni Hezbollah allies and the Alawite ADP leaders. There was no doubt in Tripoli’s Sunni community that the order came from Damascus (Loveday, 2013). Although the Lebanese authorities indicted a Hezbollah ally in Tripoli, some residents decided to retaliate against March8 group leaders. Prominent March 8 Sunnis in Tripoli were assassinated: cleric Abdel Razzaq Asmar in October 2012, clan leader Houssam 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 Tawhid Movement cleric Bilal Shaaban, and members of the group of Sheikh Hashem Minqara—who was forced to flee the city (Lefèvre, 2014, p. 14).

b. Iran and Saudi Arabia fight for hegemony in the Middle East

The end of the Syrian hegemony in April 2005 provided Saudi Arabia and Iran with more opportunities to assert their influence over Lebanon and that also affected the sectarian and political balance between the Sunni and the Shiite communities (Osoegawa, 2013). Mirroring the regional rivalry between Iran and Syria, on the one side, and Saudi Arabia backed by the United States, on the other side, Lebanon became after 2005 and during the Syrian uprising the playground of the regional powers that confronted one another through their Lebanese proxies.

Saudi Arabia saw the power to the Lebanese Sunni community as a reflection of its influence in the region. Iran and Syria had seen the power of the Shiiites as the reflection of their influence in the Middle East. Their Lebanese protégés also relied on these alliances in order to preserve their political power. From 2005 to 2011, both Prime ministers supported by Future Movement, Fouad Siniora and Saad Hariri allied
Lebanon with Saudi Arabia and the United States, following the increased isolation of Syria and Iran. This policy, however, grated at the Shiite supporters of Hezbollah and Amal, who strengthened their ties with Iran and Syrian and became even more mobilized, investing in Hezbollah’s military strength (Osoegawa, 2013, p. 152). After 2011, the Syrian crisis itself has become a proxy war, also sucking in Lebanon. The Syrian government managed to survive with Iran’s help; Tehran has been able to face the Western pressure on its nuclear file and it also offered the Assad regime financial and military support. Besides getting Hezbollah and Iranian-funded Iraqi Shiite militias involved in battles (Weiss & Pregent, 2015), the Iranian revolutionary guards fought and trained militias in Syria (Blanford, 2015).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia, along with Qatar and Turkey but also with the support of the United States, supported the armed rebels, sometimes even getting into disputes for influence (Estrin & Shapiro, 2014).

In Tripoli, this power struggle also had an impact. Saudi Arabia had stopped funding the Future Movement in 2009 after showing discontent over the Lebanese party’s inability of deterring Hezbollah. At the same time, Saudi Islamic organizations funded Salafi charities and institutes in Tripoli, mostly opting for the purist/quietist sheikhs (Pall, 2013). So did Kuwait.

Qatar, on the other hand, with an assertive foreign policy in Syria and the region, opted for funding the haraki Salafis in Tripoli and other Salafi groups in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra (The National, 2015). Sheikh Zakariyya al-Masri and Sheikh Da’i al-Islam al-Shahhal are among the recipients of Qatari donations through the Sheikh Eid Organization (Pall, 2013, p. 69)
Tripoli was, therefore, a miniature of Syria, following regional developments like a mirror with all actors supporting sides in a regional Sunni-Shiite power play. On the Sunni community this aspect had an indirect effect. Mostly a poor community, it depended on its patrons for access to jobs and education, and those patrons were increasingly Salafi charities and haraki sheikhs rather than moderate politicians.
Chapter 4

Conclusions

So what pushed some Lebanese Sunnis to associate with jihadist movements in Syria against the Assad government and its Lebanese allies and get involved in a full-fledged ethnic conflict? This concluding chapter sets out first to explain how radicalization in the Sunni community in Tripoli finds its roots in the perception building process in the Sunni community before the Syrian uprising; it employs Vamik Volkan’s group psychology explanation for why groups follow bloodlines and rally around sectarian nationalist leaders (Volkan, 1998). Then it looks at how the findings of the research reinforce the idea that Islamic radical militant groups in Tripoli re-emerged on the background of the various catalysts for conflict that Brown (Brown, 2001) proposed as cause for internal conflict. Finally, the chapter looks at challenges and lessons learned from the research and set out to assess the importance of the findings within the existing literature.

4.1. A matter of perception

In the constructivist view the thesis is built on, group psychology is essential in explaining ethnic conflicts; Horowitz (2000) believes that tension between ethnic groups comes from people evaluating their value or abilities in relation with other groups.
The underlying causes of the crisis in Tripoli lie in the polarization of Sunni community that was impacted by events that preceded the Syrian crisis. They can be explained by how the community, including the fundamentalists in Tripoli, perceived their identity in relation with the political system in Lebanon, with their own political and religious representatives, as well as the patron-client representation system, their economic situation and the struggle of regional powers through local proxies.

At the beginning of 2011, when the Syrian protests started, the majority of the Lebanese Sunni community already had formed a perception over its own situation and had set its main adversaries. In “Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism” Vamik Volkan looks into group psychology and explains why an ethnic group forms a certain identity and why it might go to war with another ethnic group (Volkan, 1998). He argues that there should be a competition over resources, as well as a chosen trauma or an unresolved mourning that the group hasn’t had the time or the opportunity to deal with. Then the group builds an image of the enemy; the enemy is dehumanized and demonized, which leads to the ability to kill the enemy without remorse.

The Sunni community in Lebanon has gone through all three phases before 2011. As shown in the previous chapter there has been a clear competition over political power between the Sunni and the Shiite communities after the Taif Agreement, and this competition deepened after 2005 when the main political forces that represented the two communities became part of political alliances competing for power. Future Movement, the main political party that represented the Sunni community at the political level became part of the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance, while Hezbollah became part of the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance. This way, Hezbollah was associated with an older enemy
of the Sunnis in Lebanon, the Syrian regime.

The Lebanese Sunni community in general and the one in Tripoli in particular, had unresolved mourning with both Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. The massacre of the Tawhid Movement fighters in 1986 by the Syrian Forces and the Alawite ADP militia couldn’t have been dealt with under the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and the tight control the Syrian-led Lebanese intelligence apparatus. There was also no resolve for the assassination of Sunni former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri or for other Sunni figures killed after that, such as the head of the Telecommunications investigation team into Hariri’s death, Captain Wissam Eid, also a Sunni from North Lebanon. The only resolve for the assassinations would have been justice, but none of the investigations were ever finished in Lebanon, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon took a long time to finish its procedures and, in the meantime had become politicized and faced a credibility crisis.

Any other developments at the political level only added to the perception that the enemy (i.e. Syria and its proxy, Hezbollah) is targeting the Sunni community in Lebanon, its political and administrative representation.

Volkan pointed it out in his application of Freudian psychology to ethnicity, and Esman (2004) as well as Lake and Rothchild (1998) insist on the idea that fear is the driving force of ethnic conflict. It has become apparent that both the Shiite and the Sunni community in Lebanon, but especially the Sunni community which did not hold an organized military arsenal supported by a regional power, acted out of fear. The fear that Hezbollah might use its military arsenal to take control of Lebanon, often voiced by Future Movement officials, resulted in a spiral of deterrence of sorts during 2005-2011. Especially after the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, groups from the Sunni
community started acquiring arms. The clashes of May 2008 that ended with Hezbollah defeating the Sunni groups in Tariq al Jadideh neighborhood in Beirut contributed to the increase of fear among the Sunni community members, as it reinforced the idea that the Sunnis were being targeted and they had to challenge the enemy.

4.2 Roots for radicalization and catalysts for sectarian conflict

Roots for radicalization and mobilization in the Sunni community in Tripoli on sectarian lines were forged in the political and sectarian context that long preceded the Syrian uprising. The anti-Syrian sentiments among the Sunnis in Tripoli, especially the conservative community in the poor neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh and the vicinity, had emerged during the Lebanese civil war. The fighting between the Syrian occupation troops allied with the ADP Alawite militia and the Islamist fighters of Tawhid Movement that ended with the massacre of scores of Sunni Islamist fighters in 1986 and the arrest of many others kept Tripoli polarized on the Sunni-Alawite line too. The Alawites living in Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, where Rifaat Eid’s ADP had its headquarters, were seen as Syrian agents by the Sunnis in Bab al-Tabbaneh. The mountain was practically besieged by the Sunni inhabitants and in was virtually impossible for the population to come out; Alawite students were sometimes escorted by the Lebanese Army in order to be able to take their exams at schools in Tripoli (Hodeib, 2012).

But the root causes for the Shiite-Sunni rift and the anti-Hezbollah rhetoric on the Tripoli Sunni streets were consolidated after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, who was perceived as the strong Sunni leader the community needed in order to assert itself on the political scene in Lebanon. The new political set up in Lebanon after 2005 split the
Christian bloc in two, with the Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges Party in March 14 with Future Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement in March 8 with Hezbollah and Amal Movement, thus solving the Christian-Muslim division. But it also split the Muslim community in anti-Syrian Sunnis and pro-Syrian Shiites. With regional and international powers playing on these divisions, with the unresolved power sharing issues between the Sunnis, who wanted Hezbollah’s arms gone, and the Shiites who thought the Sunnis had too much political power in the hands of the Prime Minister, the political polarization became more obvious. But polarization by itself doesn’t necessarily lead to violence. Countries have solved conflicts by renegotiating the power sharing contract or reassigning the political representatives. This did not happen in Lebanon.

The status quo is difficult to challenge because of the unresolved issues after the Lebanese civil war, but also because of the weak state sensitive to the political developments in the region which makes it utterly impossible to achieve something in Lebanon without regional consensus. The political and sectarian divisions are usually contained over fear of another civil war; should violence occur in one area, it rarely spreads to other regions. The reasons also lie in the patron-client relationship between the political and community leaders and the armed groups, regardless of the sect. In Tripoli that was very well put by a sheikh in Bab al-Tabbeneh: “There were always people on the streets who gave the signs to the fighters when to start a fight and when to stop a fight.”

A violent conflict could not have broken out in Lebanon and in Tripoli, unless there was massive security disruption at the regional level, and the Syrian crisis offered precisely

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71 According to a personal interview conducted in August 2015.
this opportunity. Although the divisions were fundamentally political, because of the regional sectarian map and the Lebanese political system that emphasizes on sectarian identity, all issues became eventually sectarian.

According to Brown (2001) ethnic conflict needs at least one catalyst to break out: an internal mass-level factor such as bad economy, political transitions or weak state institutions, an internal elite-level factors such as political leaders who play on ethnic identity to rise to power, an external mass-level factors such as a conflict in the vicinity, influx of refugees or movement of fighters over borders, or an external elite-level factor such as foreign leaders who are interested in causing ethnic strife in a state nearby. Obviously in Lebanon in general, and in Tripoli in particular, none of these catalysts were missing. Moreover, none of these catalysts can be completely separated from the others; it is difficult to discuss them separately.

At the internal level, the Sunni community in Tripoli had battled poverty for a long time. The Syrian crisis that brought tens of thousands of refugees into the already poor neighborhoods of Tripoli, put even more pressure on the local host community and made it more dependent on charity. At the same time, the leadership vacuum left by Saad Hariri and his father, Rafik could not be filled by one political leader or even Sunni za'īm, be it moderate or Islamist. The political fragmentation of the factions representing the Sunnis in Tripoli also contributed to building the sense of insecurity among the population, which was exacerbated by the lack of trust in the state institutions and its security forces which were weakened considerably by the presence of an armed paramilitary force that did not depend on the state.

This made the Sunnis in Tripoli vulnerable to sectarian influences from the Syrian crisis
and to sectarian populist political entrepreneurs who took advantage of the political and social context to capitalize on the insecurities of the population.

The refugees fleeing to Lebanon came from the areas of Homs and Aleppo where the uprising had a pronounced sectarian character from the beginning. The Syrian refugees were mostly Sunnis that told stories about an Alawite militia helped by Hezbollah. Hezbollah itself got openly involved in the battles alongside its patron, the Assad regime and helped build the perception in the Sunni community in Syria and, implicitly, the one in Lebanon, that it was fighting the ultimate confrontation.

The involvement of the Salafi sheikhs and their rise as political representatives of the Sunni community helped radicalize and mobilize more Sunnis. The main arguments for mobilization were linked to Hezbollah’s arms and its refusal to give them up to the Lebanese state, its alliance with the Syrian regime and the constant fear that the Party of God is attempting at creating a supporter base in Tripoli itself through the allies it was supporting militarily, the ADP and Tawhid Movement. The conviction that the Lebanese state institutions and especially its security forces were influenced by Hezbollah certainly contributed to these feelings. At the same time, the mobilization of the Sunnis in Syria, offered a model to those Sunnis in Lebanon who felt marginalized.

The refugees and political activists contributed to the mobilization. The Sunni community in Tripoli felt solidarity with the Sunni community in Syria simply because they were Sunni; the fact that in Tripoli they had been oppressed by the agents of the same regime and they were also perceiving Hezbollah as an existential threat.

The Syrian regime also had a lot to do with giving the impulse for radicalization and mobilization in the Sunni community, certainly in order to serve its own purposes. From
the beginning of the rebellion, the government in Damascus spoke of terrorism and Islamists, trying to portray the Sunni rebels as jihadists that posed a threat to the region and possibly the entire world. The repeated state propaganda had a reversed effect and contributed to the establishment of a freedom fighter model: the jihad was not only for Salafis and Islamists, but also for people who fought for freedom and political empowerment.

The paradox about the security drill in Tripoli is that, once the security plan started in 2014, most veterans who had control over fighters in the Bab al-Tabbaneh were arrested and left room for younger, more radical people, not necessarily from the entourage of the well-known Salafi sheikhs, to take over what was perceived as the struggle against the oppressing security apparatus. Moreover, the army was seen as acting on behalf of Hezbollah, deemed already the “Party of Satan.” By arresting the military leaders and harassing the opinion leaders, the angry and less educated youth rebelled. Labeling people such as Shadi al Mawlawi or Osama Mansour as “Daesh” (ISIS) terrorists by state officials and politicians contributed to their victimization in the eyes of the local community.

Some of the young Salafis in Tripoli were also not educated in the universities of Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries like the old sheikhs who preach in Tripoli’s mosques. Many of them, such as Hussam al-Sabbagh, are self-taught and were introduced to Islamic extremism during their young political militant years. They do listen to older Salafi scholars in Tripoli, but most of the time they act out of political grievances, not because of their religious ideology. People like Mawlawi or Mansour, both in their 20s, acted not out of the desire to set up a caliphate but simply felt oppressed by the state.
authorities, were vulnerable to the widespread rhetoric that Sunnis were discriminated as a community in favor of Hezbollah, and they wanted to fight back. And as a Tripoli based politician put it, “there are many others who feel the same way they did.” The religious ideology only adds the sectarian element to the political struggle; but it co-opts unhappy Sunnis who don’t necessarily practice Salafism, but find themselves without much choice of patronage and representation. Moreover, belonging to such groups offers disenfranchised poor youth the sense of belonging to a larger solidary group of disenfranchised people who are fighting for their own rights. The phenomenon happened in many Syrian rebel brigades that were initially politically motivated. But because the government’s rhetoric was portraying the Syrian uprising as a Sunni Islamist uprising, the Sunni community as a whole, Islamist or not, felt attacked and expressed their solidarity through the Sunni identity as a group.

The Sunni community in Tripoli followed the same patterns as the Syrian uprising and the support it found in Tripoli. Not only the Sunni community supported the Syrian uprising; there were obviously enough supporters in other sectarian communities in Lebanon. But it was the Sunni communities that hosted most of the refugees, who got more influenced by the Syrian struggle against Assad and its grievances and it also felt targeted as a monolith in the rhetoric of some of the March 8 government officials and Hezbollah’s takfiri accusations. The empathy between the Syrian Sunnis and the Lebanese Sunnis was inevitable.

In this context the movement of fighters to and from Syria added to the catalysts for violence. Young men who left Tripoli in 2011-2012 to fight alongside the rebels in Syria came back radicalized, influenced by extremist ideas and with experience in
staging attacks against a given enemy. Most of the bombings in civilian areas in Lebanon, including Tripoli, took place in 2013 and 2014, after Hezbollah managed to take over Qusair. Many Lebanese Sunnis from Tripoli fought there and some of them came back better trained in warfare and with clear sympathies for Jabhat al-Nusra, the main faction that fought Assad and Hezbollah in the vicinity of the Lebanese border. Jabhat al-Nusra was seen as a sort of Sunni Islamic Resistance that followed the same patterns Hezbollah had followed years before; it was seen in Bab al-Tabbaneh as the only faction that could take on the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, regardless of its links to al Qaeda. However, the Islamic State did not get so many supporters. According to a political activist in Bab al-Tabbaneh, who also fought in several rounds against Jabal Mohsen, the opportunists in the neighborhood only “showed off when they said they are jihadists and Daesh. But it is really childish.” “An ideology like Daesh can’t gain adepts in Tripoli and in Lebanon in general. The people would not support it, because they are used to live together. We have Christians in Bab al-Tabbaneh who hosted Syrian refugees and supported the revolution like everybody else. Nobody would turn against them. Jabhat al-Nusra, however, can’t be compared to Daesh. They are not so harsh on the people, they don’t torture and murder like Daesh. They are just fighting Assad.”

The haraki Salafi sheikhs capitalized on the need for political representation and this Sunni solidarity with Syria. As a civil society activist put it “the religious leaders became political representatives,” and because the religious ideology got mixed with the political activism without a clear political objective and organization it only made people mobilize, incited them to fight against the perceived enemy but with no apparent gain. The fighters in Tripoli, for instance, did not demand jobs and education and more

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72 In an interview in August 2015.
development projects in their town, but emphasized on their identity and on defending their land that was not really under attack.

It would be almost impossible that any one of these catalysts for violence in Tripoli could be dealt with separately given the interdependence between the internal and external factors. The general perception among the people interviewed and also among the political circles in Tripoli is that the main root of the problem is poverty, unemployment and lack of development projects in the city. However, this largely depends on the political leadership. The Sunni community, unlike other sectarian communities in Lebanon, has been witnessing a political transition at the representation level, not only the leadership. Because the Lebanese political system is a democratic umbrella that gathers sectarian factions which transferred the feudal organization around a zaim or lord, it is the political/sectarian leaders that are perceived as responsible for the welfare of their communities (Salamey, 2014). Technically, in the Lebanese consociational system, representation means patron-client relationships.

While other communities have remained stable politically after all the changes in 2005 as their zu’ama remained in power and had time to adapt to the new system and find alternatives for successors, the Sunni community lost its za’im in 2005 and has been ever since in search for a new patron, or, at least, in search of a new form of patronage or representation. Because of this transition, many perceive that Tripoli’s welfare problems could not be solved, because, after 2011 when Saad Hariri left Lebanon, the leadership vacuum he left behind was not filled by one person who could be perceived as a legitimate za’im, responsible for the entire community. A variety of small local leaders, tried to fill that vacuum, but did not possess Hariri’s legitimacy - his father’s
heritage. As one independent politician from Tripoli put it, former Lebanese Prime
Minister Najib Mikati tried to rally Tripoli’s Sunnis under his patronage, but had one
major flaw: he was not Rafik Hariri. The Future Movement politicians were restrained
by the membership in the party and the lack of resources. The Salafi sheikhs in Tripoli
also tried to become political representatives of the community, but they were also
restrained by the organization of their movement, the fact that it was never a grassroots
movement, but a network of preachers. The only way Salafism could become a
replacement for a central patronage structure that is characteristic to the Lebanese
system was become part of it. They have tried both, but succeeded at neither. Becoming
part of the system and running for election did not succeed because they couldn’t grow
the popular support. Their image was tarnished because of the lack of cohesion of the
Salafi movement in itself, but also because its image was impacted negatively by the
rise of the jihadist factions in Syria and the atrocities committed by the Islamic State.
Many of the Salafi sheikhs rejected the practices of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq,
but they could not reject the ideology (Al Monitor, 2014). However, by adapting their
political discourse to the street, and giving a voice to the people’s grievances some of
the sheikhs were able to attract new followers, but they did not succeed in co-opting
large masses who would become practicing Salafis. However, the political discourse
that challenged the authority of the state and the security forces by portraying them as
being controlled by Hezbollah touched many non-practicing Sunnis who lived in the
neighborhoods, especially the youth, who found these ideas politically mobilizing. It
was obvious in the conversations the author had during the research that both practicing

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73 According to an interview done by the author in July 2011 and published in NOW Lebanon,
https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/najib_mikati_between_a_rock_and_a_hard_place, retrieved in August
5 2015.
Salafis and moderate community leaders had the same perceptions over what made youth in Tripoli’s poor neighborhoods radicalize, mobilize and attack the Alawite Jabal Mohsen and Hezbollah: poverty, the perception that the Sunni community is in an existential war with the Shiites at the regional level and in Lebanon, Hezbollah’s weapons, the perception that there is political conspiracy to disenfranchise them, to marginalize them. As one civil society activist put it, “radicalization of youths has been a direct reaction, or response, if you like, to political events in Lebanon and the region, and only recently the conflict in Syria.”

After Hariri’s government fell, there was simple anarchy at the level of the Sunni community in Tripoli, with different leaders from different political and religious factions trying to assert themselves as local representatives of the community. But none had either the resources or the legitimacy to become a leader. This gave way to a lot of instability, the rise and fall of several groups with different purposes and ideologies. It doesn’t matter how many security plans Tripoli sees, militants will always rise as long as the poor segments of Sunni population in the city’s neighborhoods live under the limits of poverty and lack access to public higher education. The Islamist organizations continue to exist and take the place of the Lebanese state in educating the youth and substituting the social networks, while the availability of weapons and the already deeply rooted tradition of carrying weapons make the challenge even harder to overcome. The lack of development projects is reflected not only in unemployment, but also in the degradation of the standard of living in the neighborhoods. As a sheikh in Bab al-Tabbaneh put it “it’s quiet now not because of the security plan, but because everybody is waiting to see in which direction Syria is going. Then they will react.”

74 Interviews conducted by the author in Bab al Tabbaneh and Abi Samra, Tripoli, in August 2015.
4.3. Contributions to the literature

The thesis reinforces Michael E. Brown’s matrix of proximate factors for internal conflict. He based his framework by looking at the country level and to explain why internal conflict emerges in a given state. The thesis applied his proximate factors for internal conflict at the community level, explaining why a given community engages in conflict with another community and/or other actors (be it a state, government or a political entity) and in which conditions.

The thesis set up to explain the roots of Islamic radicalization in the Sunni community in Tripoli. It found that these roots were not in the spillover of the Syrian war, which played the role of a catalyst for radicalization and conflict in Tripoli. The roots of the rise of Islamic radical movements in Tripoli have to do with much older conditions that have existed in Lebanon, and implicitly in Tripoli, for a long time before 2011. The thesis identified them as poverty and social marginalization, the feelings of political disenfranchisement, lack of political representation, feelings of marginalization, a weak state with divided institutions that could not enforce the law equally among communities and could not keep its policies functioning, politicians battling over leadership and adopting sectarian populist rhetoric as well as the patronage system at the level of the Sunni community. But above all, the main cause of Sunni Islamic radicalization in Tripoli was the sectarian system that makes up the Lebanese state. The Lebanese consociational system is based on divisions between communities; it encourages and feeds the sectarian divisions. In order to survive in this type of system, individuals have to align themselves to their sectarian identity in order to survive as citizens. Sunni Islamic radicalism capitalized on this general situation, helped by the
Syrian uprising as a catalyst. *Haraki* Salafists in Tripoli emerged as a main political voice of the Sunni community because of the need of the Sunni community for a type of leadership the rest of the sectarian communities in Lebanon, and especially the Shiite community enjoyed. The Sunnis in Tripoli needed to fight for political rights and representation and in the absence of any other legitimate political leadership as well as in the absence of a legitimate moderate religious leadership, the *haraki* Salafism provided that leadership by allowing the Sunni community to assert its Sunni identity. This was obvious especially since a large majority of the Sunnis in Tripoli attending the *haraki* Salafist sheikh’s mosques and sermons were not practicing Salafism in their daily lives.

In this sense the thesis makes a contribution to the existing literature by linking Sunni Islamic radicalism in Lebanon to sectarian identity. Previous published works only address Islamic radical movements from either the historical perspective or by linking it to economy, unemployment or social cleavages. Some authors (Caruso & Gavrilova, 2012) explained Sunni Islamic radicalization through poverty and unemployment, while others explained it through social cleavage (Piazza, 2007). Other authors believe that there is more to Islamism and jihadist groups than just poverty (Sarkar, 2013) (Moghadam, 2011) (Phares, 2008) and some authors point out that the roots of radicalism are strictly linked to the local and regional political and social status of the community (Dronzina, 2012). The thesis continues this idea, that Islamic radicalism is very much helped by the regional social and political status, but what it brings new is the direct link between confessional identity and Sunni Islamic radicalism.
Tripoli is just one case study and it cannot provide all the explanations for the rise of Islamic radicalism in a certain Sunni community, but it could be the beginning of a series of studies which can look at other communities, even in the Western countries, in order to extrapolate the conclusions.

Finally, the thesis makes its contribution to the literature on sectarian conflict in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution. As highlighted in the Introduction, the problem with most literature on sectarian conflict in Lebanon is that very little of it refers to the current security dilemma in the conflict between the Shiite and Sunni communities, the underlying causes for polarization and the catalysts for escalation in recent years, after the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

By looking at the struggles of one sectarian community in the country, the research reveals how the sectarian political system in Lebanon encourages divisions between communities and also contributes to further sectarian polarization. It propagates the weakness of the central state authority by relying on sectarian community leaders to provide for their sectarian groups and reinforces the patron-client system that makes the communities vulnerable to radical voices.
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Appendix 1

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL — EXEMPT STATUS

To: Ms. Ana Maria Luza
Advisor: Dr. Mokarram Drais
School of Arts & Sciences

Date: July 28, 2015
RE: IRB #: LAU.SAS.MD.1/28/July/2015
Protocol Title: Sunni Islamic radicalization and conflict in Tripoli, Lebanon

Your application for the above referenced research project has been approved by the Lebanese American University, Institutional Review Board (LAU IRB). This research project qualifies as exempt under the following category:

C. Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under part B. of this section, if:

(i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or
(ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

This approval is limited to the activities described in the Protocol Exempt Application and all submitted documents listed on page 2 of this letter. Enclosed with this letter are the stamped approved documents that must be used.

APPROVAL CONDITIONS FOR ALL LAU APPROVED HUMAN RESEARCH PROTOCOLS - EXEMPT

LAU RESEARCH POLICIES: All individuals engaged in the research project must adhere to the approved protocol and all applicable LAU IRB Research Policies. PARTICIPANTS must NOT be involved in any research related activity prior to IRB approval date or after the expiration date.

EXEMPT CATEGORIES: Activities that are exempt from IRB review are not exempt from IRB ethical review and the necessity for ethical conduct.

MODIFICATIONS AND AMENDMENTS: Certain changes may change the review criteria and disqualify the research from exemption status; therefore, any proposed changes to the previously approved exempt study must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation.

NOTIFICATION OF PROJECT COMPLETION: A notification of research project closure and a summary of findings must be sent to the IRB office upon completion. Study files must be retained for a period of 3 years from the date of notification of project completion.

IN THE EVENT OF NON-COMPLIANCE WITH ABOVE CONDITIONS, THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR SHOULD MEET WITH THE IRB ADMINISTRATORS IN ORDER TO RESOLVE SUCH CONDITIONS. IRB APPROVAL CANNOT BE GRANTED UNTIL NON-COMPLIANT ISSUES HAVE BEEN RESOLVED.
If you have any questions concerning this information, please contact the IRB office by email at christine.challoub@lau.edu.lb

Dr. Costantine Daher  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Lebanese American University FWA00014723  
IRB Registration # IRB00006954 LAU/IRB# 1

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Appendix 2

Questions for the conservative community leaders in Tripoli

I. Questions addressing internal factors

a. Questions addressing economic factors
   1. How does your community perceive its economic situation?
   2. What is the perception in the community of the services provided by local institutions?
   3. Do you perceive national and local government projects in your community equal to those in other areas of Tripoli?

b. Questions addressing political factors (political representation, perception of and relationship with political parties)
   1. How is your community politically organized?
   2. How is it represented at the political level?
   3. What is the relationship of your community with the political groups in Tripoli?
   4. How would you describe the responsiveness of the municipality authorities to the needs of your community?
   5. Do you feel that your community has the ability to influence policy in Lebanon? If not, why? If yes, why?
   6. How do you perceive the responsiveness of the government in Lebanon to the needs of your community?

c. Questions addressing social factors
   1. What is the relationship between your community and the rest of the Sunni community in Tripoli?
   2. What is the relationship of your community with other religious groups in Tripoli (cultural relations, political relations)
   3. What is the relationship between your community and Dar al Fatwa?

d. Questions addressing security factors
   1. How does your community perceive the security situation in Tripoli?
   2. How does your community perceive the security situation in Lebanon?
   3. What is the relationship of your community with the Lebanese security forces? Areas of collaboration; grievances.
4. What is the size of your community? Has it increased since the beginning of the Syrian uprising?
5. Did the radicalization of youth in Syria and Iraq affect the youth in your community?
6. If yes, what do you think are the factors that might lead some of the young people to join radical movements?

II. Questions addressing external factors
   a. Questions addressing security concerns in the region (Syrian conflict, the Arab Spring)
      1. What is the perception in your community of the Arab Spring movements?
      2. How does your community perceive the Syrian uprising?
      3. How was your community affected by the rise of radical groups in Syria?

   b. Questions addressing the relationship with the Syrian refugees in Lebanon
      1. What is the relationship of the conservative community with the Syrian refugees in Tripoli?
      2. What is the relationship of your community with the Syrian political activists in Lebanon or outside Lebanon?
      3. How was that relationship between your community and the Syrian refugees in Lebanon affected by the rise of radical groups in Syria?
Appendix 3

Questions for the Sunni community leaders in Tripoli

III. Questions addressing internal factors

e. Questions addressing economic factors
   1. How does your community perceive its economic situation?
   2. What is the perception in the community of the services provided by
      local institutions?
   3. How was the Sunni community economy impacted by the influx of
      Syrian refugees?
   4. Do you perceive national and local government projects in your
      community equal to those in other areas of Tripoli?

f. Questions addressing social factors
   4. What is the relationship between your community and the
      conservative Sunni community in Tripoli?
   5. What is the relationship of your community with other religious
      groups in Tripoli? Define.

{g. Questions addressing political factors (political representation,
   perception of and relationship with political parties)
   1. Who represents, in your, opinion, your community at the political
      level?
   2. What role do religious leaders play at the political level?
   3. What is the relationship between the religious leaders in your
      community and the politicians?
   4. How does your community perceive its role in policy making in
      Lebanon?

h. Questions addressing security factors
   7. How does your community perceive the security situation in Tripoli?
   8. How does your community perceive the security situation in
      Lebanon?
   9. What is the relationship between your community and the
      conservative groups in Tripoli?
  10. Why do you think youth in Tripoli might be attracted by radical
      movements?
11. What do you think are the factors that might lead some of the young people to join radical movements?

IV. Questions addressing external factors

c. Questions addressing security concerns in the region (Syrian conflict, the Arab Spring)

4. What is the perception in your community of the Arab Spring movements in the region?
5. How does your community perceive the Syrian uprising?
6. What impact do you think the Syrian uprising had on your community?
7. How was your community affected by the rise of radical groups in Syria?
8. How was in your opinion the conservative community affected by the rise of radical groups in the region?

d. Questions addressing the relationship with the Syrian refugees in Lebanon

4. What is the relationship between your community and the Syrian refugees in Tripoli?
5. What is the relationship between your community and the Syrian political activists in Lebanon and outside Lebanon?
6. How was the relationship between your community and the Syrian political activists in Lebanon and in Syria impacted by the rise of radical groups in Syria?
7. How was the security situation of your community by the presence of Syrian refugees?
8. How was the security situation of your community impacted by the presence of Syrian political activists in Tripoli?