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Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force

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Introduction: The Context of Islamization

Sunni Islamist movements are gradually emerging as a significant part of Lebanon's power scene. The Lebanese army's three-month military campaign against one such movement, *Fateh al-Islam*, in the *Nahr al-Bared* Palestinian refugee camp in North Lebanon, which ended in early September, triggered a fierce debate about these groups and their political and social agendas. Until recently, Islamist arguments did not resonate with the majority of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims. However, turbulent events and an incoming tide of public opinion following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, a rising tide of sectarianism across the region, and the Israeli war against Hizbollah and Lebanon in July 2006 have all given Islamists a framework for advancing their agenda among Lebanon's Sunna. They are no longer an irrelevant political force.

By Sunni Islamist forces we mean here those sociopolitical movements that embrace Islam as the only framework for social and political change and mobilization. This includes mainstream political movements, such as *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Group), *Jamiyyat al-Masharii al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya* (Organization of Islamic Charitable Projects, also known as *al-Abbash*), *Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami* (the Islamic Action Front), and *Hizb al-Tahrir* (the Party of Liberation). It also refers to the Salafist movement, which is a loose grouping of religious, social, educational, and charity organizations that focus on the Islamization of society and operate only tangentially in politics; but it also includes a fringe element of radical militant and al-Qaeda-inspired groups such as *Fateh al-Islam*, *Usbat al-Ansar*, and *Jund al-Sham*. In between is a burgeoning reformist Salafist current such as that associated with the Lebanese Islamic Forum for Dialogue and Daawa. The expanding social base of the Salafists is transforming them into a significant political force, even if most of them stay aloof from politics per se. The word "Salafist" is derived from the expression *al-Salaf al-Salih* (the Pious Predecessors), a term coined to refer to Prophet Muhammad's companions and early followers. Salafists adhere to a literal interpretation of the holy text and seek to revive a streak of Islam that was practiced during the Prophet's time.

The emergence of Sunni Islamists as significant political actors in Lebanon is closely linked to Hariri's death, which deepened a sense of sectarian persecution and solidarity among the Sunna of the country. Politically, Hariri's rise to power in Lebanon came at the expense of traditional Sunni politicians. Hariri originated from a modest non-political family but had become a billionaire businessman in Saudi Arabia and returned to Lebanon to become Prime Minister

in 1992; he had close relations with Syria for many years, but the relationship soured in the late 1990s. During the 1990s he had built himself up as the predominant Sunni politician in the country. In so doing, he worked systematically to exclude, co-opt, or neutralize other Sunni politicians. He came to be identified as the leader of the Sunna par excellence. When he was killed, Sunna were left with a huge leadership vacuum and “a sense of being orphaned,” as one veteran Islamist figure put it. Also, the death of Hariri “Lebanonized” the Sunna. In a complete break with their history, Lebanon’s Sunna began to act not only as a sect among other sects, but also as a minority whose existence was threatened, whose leaders were targeted, and whose sense of victimization was deep. It is within this context that the majority of Sunna became supporters of *Tayyar al-Mustaqbal* (the Future Movement), a movement founded by Hariri that has become the predominant political force in the Sunni community under his son and successor, Saad. Most recently, the year-long protest movement spearheaded by Hizbollah and other opposition groups against the Hariri-backed government of Fouad Siniora was understood by the majority of Sunna in sectarian terms, as a “Shi’i”-led act of hostility against a “Sunni”-led government, rather than opposition to what those groups perceive as the government’s failing policies and its poor performance during and after the summer 2006 war with Israel.

Shii-Sunni tensions reached an unprecedented peak in January 2007, when supporters of Hizbollah and the Amal Movement (another prominent Shi’i movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri) clashed with *Mustaqbal* supporters in violent scenes that reminded the Lebanese of the civil war days. Among those arrested during the clashes were members of a small Sunni Salafist group, *al-Daawa wal-Tableegh* (roughly, Proselytize and Inform). Some of the group’s members had been implicated in a plot to assassinate Hizbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in March of 2006. Anti-Shi’i rhetoric came to permeate the everyday discourse of ordinary Sunna, and both the Sunni religious establishment represented by Mufti Rachid Qabbani and the political leadership of *Mustaqbal* played an important role in fanning the flames of sectarian tension on the Sunni side. The result is a “Sunni street,” which is not only more sectarian and radicalized in general, but also has been left vulnerable to more extremist religious leaders who have a stronger message of sectarian hatred and rejection of the other. The religious establishment has not only turned a blind eye to the politicization of sectarian identities, at times, it has been party to it: the scene of Mufti Qabbani leading prayers in the government Serail, seat of the Siniora government, following the opposition sit-in, sent a clear message to the Lebanese that he was defending a “Sunni” position, thus serving further to define the conflict in sectarian terms.

Some Salafist forces, in alliance with *Mustaqbal*, also played a significant role in inciting sections of the Sunni street against the Shi’a and Hizbollah, under the banner of “defending *Ahl al-Sunna*.” Anti-Shi’a leaflets filled with vitriolic

language were found in Beirut and the Beqaa. Prominent religious scholars like Muhammad Ali al-Juzo, the Mufti of the governorate of Mount Lebanon, were given a platform to incite and mobilize their followers in dangerously strong sectarian language. It is within this context that radical Islamists—particularly from Salafist ranks—began to come into their own.

Although *Mustaqbal* presents itself as a modern movement embracing a moderate view of Islam and defends the concept of the state, it has had few qualms in undermining those mainstream Islamist forces that don't tow its line, such as the Islamic Action Front, while making alliances with forces that hold an ambivalent vision of the state and embrace a radical—and at times extremist and intolerant—view of Islam. The lack of a clear political or ideological vision on the part of *Mustaqbal's* leadership often forces it to resort to sectarian discourse in order to mobilize its social base. In this context, Islamists—particularly the radical elements among them—are regarded as useful tools in securing popular support.

The political crisis sparked by the resignation of all five Shi'a ministers from the government last November and followed by a year-long sit-in, clearly exposed the splits among Lebanon's Sunni Islamists and confirmed that they were not monolithic. While some of the Islamist forces allied with *Mustaqbal* played a significant role in exacerbating the sectarian tensions, other Sunni Islamists joined ranks with Hizbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement (a group composed mostly of Christians and led by former army general Michel Aoun) and other opposition parties against the Siniora government. The split exposed the political—as opposed to the sectarian—nature of the conflict; it also showed that Sunni Islamists were not only divided over their relationship with the main “secular” force in the Sunni street, i.e., Hariri's *Mustaqbal*, but most importantly that they were divided over what type of relationship to have with the Muslim “other,” the Shi'a, and what relationship to have with their fellow Islamists, Hizbollah.

The relationship between Sunni Islamist movements and *Mustaqbal* is complex and ambiguous, to say the least. Islamists' votes in north Lebanon helped the Hariri bloc achieve a landslide victory there, winning all twenty-eight seats of the north in the 2005 elections. A pragmatic relationship emerged during the period that followed. While some Islamist forces sought an alliance with *Mustaqbal* in search of financial support, political influence, and protection, as is the case with some Salafist figures, others did it out of a sense of sectarian solidarity (e.g., the case of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*). A third force, *Hizb al-Tahrir*, kept the relationship ambiguous, coming out neither in support nor in opposition to *Mustaqbal*. Yet other Islamists, such as the Islamic Action Front, chose to remain in the opposition camp. In the meantime, the *Mustaqbal* movement benefited from the mobilizational abilities and social capital of the Islamists, particularly in the north, but publicly kept them at arm's length, in order not to alienate their non-Sunni allies in Lebanon and their American and other Western backers.

Through his advisers and MPs in the north, Hariri worked on co-opting the Islamists. The majority of Salafists were among the co-opted forces as was *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*. The government tried to co-opt *Hizb al-Tahrir* by licensing the previously outlawed party; this moderated the party's stand but did not lead to its full co-option. The attempts at co-option alienated some mainstream Sunni Islamist forces like the Islamic Action Front as well as some Salafists, particularly those who embrace a more moderate and reformist stance toward the Shi'a and some other doctrinal issues.

There is growing evidence, however, to suggest that the alliances that *Mustaqbal* struck with some of these Islamist groups are being put to the test. Some criticize *Mustaqbal's* pro-Western alliance and its deviation from the cause of resistance. Others fault *Mustaqbal* for failing to adequately defend the Sunni community. A number of Salafists and mainstream Islamists are questioning the alliance in light of the large-scale confrontation between the Lebanese army and the Salafist *Fateh al-Islam* group in *Nahr al-Bared*. That episode revived the Salafists' worst fears of being targeted by the security establishment—as was always the case during the thirty years of Syrian rule in Lebanon—or of being sacrificed on the altar of politics. The visit made by a delegation of the heads of Salafist associations (*al-Hay'at al-Salafiyya*) of the north, which represent many of the loosely affiliated Salafist religious, social, educational, and charitable organizations in Lebanon, to the Internal Security Forces (ISF) chief Ashraf Rifi on September 14, 2007, just a few days after the battles ended, reflected how deeply concerned they were over the fallout from the *Nahr al-Bared* confrontation. According to one source who attended the meeting, the two parties exchanged assurances that the Salafists were not targeted by the ISF. The delegation vowed to remain committed to safeguarding and defending national security, because “it was an important requirement to spread *al-daawa* (the Call), the Salafists' foremost priority,” according to the Lebanese *as-Safir* newspaper.

One of the main points of contention upsetting the Hariri–Islamist alliance is the position vis-à-vis the issue of resistance. During the July 2006 war, Islamists affiliated with *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* returned to a cause they had long neglected: resistance against Israel. Some JI members fought alongside Hizbollah in the southern towns along the border with Israel. Today, the question of what role they can play as a resistance force has become one of the most pressing issues for them. The most radical among them say their “conflict” with Hizbollah is not sectarian but exists only because Hizbollah “monopolizes the resistance against Israel and does not allow other forces to operate.”

Sunni Islamists' preoccupation with the issue of resistance can be understood within the context of seeking to acquire legitimacy in the Sunni street, which has always regarded itself as the defender of the nation's Arab identity and a champion of resistance against Israel. It is also a useful tool in the turf battles some Islamists have waged against *Mustaqbal*, which some forces accuse of “serving the Western project.”

The Sunni Islamist question in Lebanon has become the focus of a vigorous debate among Islamists themselves in the country, particularly in the wake of two key developments: first, the confrontation with *Fateh al-Islam*, which the head of Lebanon's armed forces described as being affiliated with al-Qaeda; second, press reports that repeatedly spoke of "a growing presence of al-Qaeda on Lebanese soil." This raised fears that religious extremists now see Lebanon, like other failing states, as attractive terrain in which to establish a foothold. Initial police investigations of the attacks against the new United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL II) in the summer of 2007 as well as the bombing of a bus in Ain 'Alaq, a predominantly Christian area, in February of the same year, suggested that both have been the work of al-Qaeda-inspired Salafist groups or individuals. Police reports said that *Fateh al-Islam* was implicated in the Ain 'Alaq bombing, while a video message from al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, hailed the attack against UNIFIL without taking any responsibility for it. The growing sectarian tension across the region following the U.S. occupation of Iraq has also shifted attention to the role played by Islamist forces in countries with a Shi'i–Sunni divide such as Lebanon in exacerbating tensions.

Lebanon's internal dynamics have always been part and parcel of its external and regional alliances and relations; the same applies to its Islamists. The Western wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been crucial factors in shaping the debate among Islamists inside the country and in providing them with ammunition to advance their agenda insofar as it appears to confirm their worst fears of a Western campaign against Islam and Muslims.

Although it is difficult to assess the real weight Sunni Islamists have on the Lebanese political scene, there are crucial questions that this paper seeks to address: Who are the most influential Islamist groups in Lebanon today? What are their areas and tools of influence? To what extent do the different Islamist groups embrace different political and social agendas? What are their sources of funding and who are their constituencies? What criteria govern their political alliances and what is their stand vis-à-vis the current political conflict in the country? And, most importantly, what is their view regarding the sectarian tension and what kind of relationship do they have with the predominant force among Lebanon's Shi'a: Hizbollah? Addressing those questions will help in understanding the political transformations that are taking place among Lebanon's Sunna.

Mapping Lebanon's Sunni Islamists

Lebanon's Sunni Islamists are neither monolithic nor unchanging. They run the gamut from fairly moderate organizations like *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* all the way to the radical Salafism of al-Qaeda-inspired groups such as the Dinniyeh Group, which clashed with the Lebanese army in 1999. Some movements such

as *Tawheed* used to embrace an extremist vision of politics as reflected during their takeover of Tripoli in 1984–85 (this involved the killing of political opponents, imposing a very strict code of conduct, and forcing non-Muslim residents out of the city). Today it holds a centrist approach to politics and stands in a political alliance with Hizbollah under the umbrella of the more mainstream Islamic Action Front.

Furthermore, Islamists have not met strong opposition or resistance from the Sunni social environment within which they operate. The north has been the birthplace of the majority of these Islamist movements. The city of Tripoli, as well as rural areas like Akkar and Dinniyeh, served as fertile ground for Islamists. Demographic factors are often cited to explain the phenomenon, as half of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims are concentrated in the northern provinces. Harsh economic conditions, social marginalization, and a dearth of state services are the classic motives often referred to to explain why Islamists find refuge and recruits in this part of the country. A report issued by the Council for Development and Reconstruction about poverty in Lebanon found that the monthly income of half of the families who live in *Bab al-Tibbaneh*, a poverty-stricken area in Tripoli, does not exceed \$130. Another report estimated that 23.7 percent of Lebanon's poor live in Akkar. A vast network of social services and religious schools has helped increase the influence of Islamists among Lebanon's Sunna.

The Syrian military presence, which lasted for thirty years, was one of the crucial factors in shaping the evolution of Islamist movements. Most Islamists from across the board—with the notable exception of the *Ahbash*—bitterly recall a “policy of siege” imposed on their activities while under Syrian tutelage. Many Sunni Islamists make no secret of their anti-Syrian sentiments. Many were forced to go underground, their members were hunted, and their schools and places of worship were kept under the watchful eye of Syrian and Lebanese intelligence. However, Syrian and Lebanese prisons were breeding grounds for new recruits.

The period after Syrian withdrawal witnessed a surge in Islamist activities in the north. Islamists have been granted a freer space to act: however, they complain that the Lebanese authorities inherited from the previous security regime “a legacy of hostility” against all things Islamist.

There exists a schizophrenic relationship between the Islamists and the Lebanese security establishment with its two poles, the army and the Interior Security Forces. While the army has a record of confronting Islamists since 1999, the pro-Hariri internal security forces have maintained a close relationship with them.

The confrontation with *Fateh al-Islam* is the latest and largest chapter in a list of violent encounters between the Lebanese army and militant Islamists, although such militants have remained on the fringe of the Islamist movement. Such “Islamist uprisings,” as one analyst described them, are not

entirely uncommon. The first uprising took place in 1999, when a group dubbed *Majmouat al-Dinniyyeh* (Dinniyyeh Group), composed of Salafists and outlaws, clashed with the Lebanese army. Its leader was killed and the movement crushed. This scenario played itself out several times in the Ain al-Helwa refugee camp in Sidon, where army units frequently clashed with Islamists—both Lebanese and Palestinian—located there. Then came the last episode—the confrontation with *Fateh al-Islam*. It indicated the failure of the mainstream Islamist movement and the Lebanese security apparatus to create a proper dynamic through which to contain such “uprisings.”

The political and sectarian tension as well as the security vacuum that the country experienced following Hariri’s killing were two key reasons cited for the rising influence of these groups during the past two years.

The Sunni Islamist movements in Lebanon fall into two types: 1) mainstream movements, and 2) Salafist movements.

Traditional Islamist Movements

Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya

This group’s founders were inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood of Hassan al-Banna; it evolved from a small charity and *daawa* group called *Ebaad al-Rahman* (Worshippers of God) in Tripoli in 1956 into a full-fledged socio-political movement. It officially opened its Beirut offices in 1964 under the name of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*. In the 1980s, the group founded a military wing called *Quwwat Fajr* (the Fajr Brigades) to resist the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Group) identifies itself as a “Lebanese group,” thus putting a high premium on its Lebanese identity. It calls for the unity of Lebanese society on a nonsectarian basis. On the question of an Islamic state, Ali al-Sheikh Ammar, JI’s political bureau chief, sums up the movement’s view by saying that as a matter of principle “the society should be acting according to Islamic precepts; however, this view cannot be imposed by force on a multi-confessional society.”

It embraces a centrist political project similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, although party seniors are keen to stress their organizational and political independence from the mother organization. They stress the “exceptionalism” of Lebanese society. Nothing illustrates this point more clearly than the movement’s stand on the current political conflict in Lebanon. It is vague and contradictory, reflecting the internal conflict the movement is going through. It is torn between, on the one hand, remaining faithful to its founding principles of supporting notions of resistance and an anti-U.S./Israeli agenda, and, on the other hand, political expediency and pragmatism, which force the group to ally itself with the U.S.-backed March 14 forces. Such a stand caused a

split within the movement a year ago and caused JI to lose one of its key founders, Sheikh Fathi Yakan. Yakan left because of differences over two key issues: the alliance with *Mustaqbal* and the hostile stand toward Hizbollah.

Although leading figures dismiss any sectarian motivation behind their political alliance, their discourse reveals a sense of sectarian solidarity, stating that they are “feeling orphaned as Sunna after Hariri’s death,” that “Sunni leaders are being targeted by Syria,” and bemoaning “the injustices that have been inflicted on the Sunna during Syrian rule.”

Although the movement is not a political party, it has the hierarchy of one. Its cadres are estimated to number 1,200–1,500. In its political platform, the movement describes engaging in politics as “a must” and insists that the religious and political activities of the movement should go hand in hand. *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* participated in the first post-civil war parliamentary elections, and won seats in Tripoli, Dinniyeh, and Beirut. In 1996 its influence waned and it won only one seat. In the municipal elections of 1998, *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* achieved very strong results. In the year 2000, none of its candidates made it to parliament. *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* boycotted the 2005 parliamentary elections in protest against the controversial election law. It continued, however, to field candidates in professional, syndical, and municipal elections.

On the regional level, *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* terms “facing the Zionist schemes” a top priority. It is precisely because of this that the movement has a complicated relationship with Hizbollah. On one hand, Hizbollah has come to be the icon of resistance—a principle that JI embraces. On the other hand, internal political conflict between Hizbollah and JI’s *Mustaqbal* allies has complicated the issue. JI leaders insist that the strained relationship with Hizbollah is not sectarian-inspired. “We are neither in alliance with *Hizbullah* nor against it,” said Ibrahim al-Masri, JI’s deputy head. During the July war, explained al-Masri, many JI members fought alongside Hizbollah fighters in some of the Sunni border towns such as Yareen, Marwaheen, and al-Bustan. *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* enjoys a presence there through its schools, clinics, and charitable associations.

This “holy” alliance did not, however, stop the movement from harshly criticizing Hizbollah’s political performance after the July war. “Today there is a political conflict with *Hizbullah*,” acknowledged al-Masri. The two parties, however, still hold regular monthly meetings where “all issues are put on the table.” JI also makes electoral alliances with the party when the need arises. Al-Masri described the alliance with *Mustaqbal* as “a marriage of convenience” and denied reports that Hariri funds some of JI’s activities. “We are a self-funded organization,” he insisted. But some funds do come from charitable organizations and sympathizers in the Gulf region. The current leadership is dominated by three main figures: Faysal al-Mawlawi, Ibrahim al-Masri, and Ali al-Sheikh Ammar.

Jamiyyat al-Masharii al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya

This group, whose name translates as the Association of Islamic Charity Projects, and which is also known as *al-Abbash*, was formed in 1980 under the guidance of Sheikh Abdallah al-Harari, who is of Ethiopian origin. When Sheikh Nizar Halabi chaired the association, he created its main structural body. Halabi also drew the lines between the Association and the other Islamist organizations working on the scene. Its mission, according to one of its members, is to spread “the correct religion and to fight the misguided, particularly those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood school.” The Association’s emergence as an Islamist movement was shrouded in ambiguity and skepticism about its origins and agenda. Although it never managed to obtain a license from *Dar al-Fatwa*, it nonetheless continued to operate.

According to its leadership, the Association lives off the flow of funding and donations that come from sympathizers and members. There are no figures as to the exact number of members. But in a span of a decade it managed to set up headquarters in a number of Beirut neighborhoods, like Burj Abi Haidar and Zuqaq al-Balat, and set up two schools in Beirut, one in Tripoli, and one in the Beqaa. In 1991, Halabi was assassinated, but the association absorbed the shock and vowed to continue under the new leadership of Sheikh Hosam Qarqeera and to “steer clear of extremism, violence and terrorism and to remain committed to the moderate Arab nationalist line.”

It has an ambivalent position on political participation. It had the backing of the Syrians during their thirty-year rule in Lebanon. Indeed, the Syrians have been accused by *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* and *Harakat al-Tawheed* of helping create *al-Abbash* as a tool to fight other Islamist forces, and the Syrians did encourage them to occupy mosques in Beirut and Tripoli and expand their base. While the *Abbash* still owe their original growth to the Syrians, politically, they are in an undeclared alliance with *Mustaqbal*, perhaps for reasons of current political expediency.

Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami (the Islamic Action Front, or IAF)

The IAF was formed in August 2006 by Fathi Yakan, a veteran of Islamist politics in Lebanon who had co-founded *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*. Yakan broke ranks with *al-Jamaa* in 2006 because of differences over their alliance with *Mustaqbal*. Yakan believes that under Saad al-Hariri’s leadership, *Mustaqbal* is serving Western interests in Lebanon and allying itself with the United States and the axis of so-called “moderate” Arab regimes as opposed to the resistance camp of Syria, Iran, Hamas, and Hizbollah, of which Yakan is a strong ally. He says *Mustaqbal* is moving the Sunna away from their founding principles, namely resistance to U.S. hegemony and safeguarding the Arab identity of Lebanon.

The IAF, in its founding statement, described itself as an independent entity created at a time when “the Islamic nation is subjected to a vicious U.S.–Zionist attack. Its main goal is to work on national and Islamic unity and protect the Resistance and stand up to any attempts at sowing sectarian strife.”

IAF, according to its ideologues, seeks to occupy the space between “the U.S.–orchestrated chaos and al-Qaeda chaos” in Lebanon, and to mobilize the sections of the Sunni street that do not identify with either. The movement is currently leading a media offensive to introduce itself to the Lebanese public. “We do not want this to be a one-man show,” said one young figure of the movement, referring to Yakan’s influence on the IAF. The movement will, nonetheless, capitalize on Yakan’s high profile as a veteran of Islamist politics. IAF is still in its early stages, but some leaked reports about the internal debates suggested that there is already a conflict over the place IAF should occupy in the current political crisis. IAF cadres want to attract those segments in the Sunni street who think *Mustaqbal* lost direction under Saad Hariri’s leadership. In several statements, Yakan seemed intent on creating “an Islamist resistance” that transcends sectarianism. He has been a staunch critic of Islamist forces that work to undermine Hizbollah’s role as a resistance movement “and those who issue *fatwas* (edicts) against the Shia.”

Despite his defection, Yakan spoke well of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* and praised its role in joining the resistance against Israel’s most recent aggression against Lebanon. He acknowledged that his movement seeks to include other Islamist and Jihadist forces and, most importantly, the Salafists.

The IAF is an umbrella organization that brings together several Islamist groups, including *Harakat al-Tawheed* with its two wings, one headed by Sheikh Bilal Shaaban and the other by Hashim Minqara, as well as other smaller Islamist groups such as Islam Without Frontiers, the Imam Ali Association, the Muslim Associations in Lebanon Forum, and the Islamic Action Forces.

Hizb al-Tahrir

This group is an offshoot of a pan-regional party formed by Taqieddin al-Nabahani in 1953 and maintains only a small presence in Lebanon. It was licensed as a party by the Siniora government in 2006. The party held its second convention in August 2007, in which it reiterated its call for establishing *Dawlat al-Khilafa* (the Caliphate). It has cadres across Lebanon and headquarters in Tripoli. Its visibility is, nonetheless, more media-made and less a well-organized movement with a substantial following in Lebanon. The party denounced the opposition’s sit-in in downtown Beirut, but at the same time was critical of *Mustaqbal*’s insistence on establishing an international tribunal related to Hariri’s assassination. “The exit strategy for Lebanon,” said one of its leaders in a recent press briefing, “is to establish the Caliphate and embrace Islam as an

all-inclusive political vision.” The party forbids participation in elections and has vowed not to use violence to achieve its agenda.

There appear to be some common characteristics that unite the aforementioned movements. They can be summed up as follows:

- 1) They have a strong Islamist agenda, but they take into account the specificity of the Lebanese situation, and thus accept that actually achieving some of their Islamist goals for the state and society is not immediately possible in Lebanon.
- 2) Although most do not have developed political party structures, they do—with the exception of *Hizb al-Tahrir*—participate in the political process.
- 3) Foreign policy and sectarian affiliation are the defining elements of their political alliances. Their rhetoric focuses on three main goals: national and Islamic unity, resistance against Israel, and opposition to Western and U.S. hegemony.
- 4) Their positions vis-à-vis internal politics form the dividing line among them. The difference between *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* and *Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami*, the two key and perhaps competing forces, lies in internal political alliances. While *al-Jamaa* maintained an alliance with *Mustaqbal*, *Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami* stood in the camp of the Lebanese opposition. Others chose a third way by maintaining an ambiguous stand, namely *Hizb al-Tahrir* and the *al-Abbash*.
- 5) They strive to expand their social base by attracting those disgruntled sections of the Sunni street who are disillusioned with *Mustaqbal*. This is particularly true in the north, where protesting voices are beginning to be heard among those who once were staunch *Mustaqbal* loyalists. *Mustaqbal*'s failure to deliver on many of the promises it made during the elections is driving many groups to question their alliance with it.

The Salafist Movements

The Salafist Mainstream

Since its founding by Sheikh Salem al-Shahhal in 1946, the Salafist movement, or *al-Haraka al-Salafiyya*, has grown into a movement of some fifty organizations operating as charitable associations and religious schools, mainly concentrated in the north but having branches in Beirut and Sidon. Shahhal remains the spiritual icon of the movement, while his two sons have inherited his mantle and now operate within *Jamiyyat al-Hidaya wal-Ihsan* (the Association of Guidance and Charity, AGC).

Like the rest of the associations that make up the Salafist movement, AGC is a Wahhabi-inspired Salafist movement that puts a high premium on scholastic activities; members teach the Quranic text and *hadith* with emphasis on charity and social work. AGC embraces a conservative vision of politics and society and has an ambivalent view of the Lebanese state. Some other Salafists consider it “an illegal entity” altogether. Generally, the mainstream Salafist organizations all claim they seek reform without resorting to violence, renouncing violence as an instrument of social and political change.

In the 1980s, Tripoli was witness to an upsurge of Salafist influence. It ended with the takeover of the city in 1984 by *Harakat al-Tawheed*, led then by Sheikh Said Shaaban. An effort to Islamize Tripoli was undertaken, but Shaaban's movement broke down under heavy Syrian attack and its rule ended in 1985. Meanwhile other Salafists were more concerned with fighting Israel. Shahhal's movement formed a military wing called the Nucleus of the Islamic Army, but it was short lived and gave up its military ambitions. In 1990 the movement operated through the Islamic Charity and Guidance Association, whose goals were to reform society, build mosques, schools, and centers for teaching the Quran, and help the poor and needy.

In 1996 the Lebanese government accused the association of inciting sectarian hatred in its educational curricula, and the association was dissolved. Shahhal's older son, Dai al-Islam, who took over the movement's leadership, decided to set up another charitable organization called Endowment for the Revival of Islam, which focused on social work. In 2006 he set up an association called *Zad al-Akhira* Institute. This, along with the rest of the charitable associations and institutions of religious education, constitutes the framework through which Lebanon's Salafists advance their agenda, expand their social base, and accumulate political capital, despite their apolitical nature and activities.

As a matter of principle, Salafists have generally steered away from Lebanese politics. However, a dramatic change took place following Hariri's killing, when the different Salafist organizations mobilized their constituents—the majority of whom inhabit the poorer sections in the north—to participate in the elections.

The growth of the Salafist movement in Lebanon is closely linked to the significant role assumed by Saudi Arabia when it replaced Egypt's al-Azhar, the traditional venue of religious knowledge, as a destination for Lebanese preachers. Lebanese preachers who received religious education in Egypt still hold posts in the religious establishment. Some recall fondly the times when scholarships and grants to al-Azhar came in abundance and were the aspiration of would-be preachers during the Nasser years. “When Sadat came, the flow of grants dried up,” said Sheikh Khaldoun Uraymit, a veteran preacher from Akkar. “There seemed to be an implicit deal that Egypt gives up its role as the beacon of religious teaching to Saudi Arabia. This is when Wahhabism entered into Lebanon.” Uraymit received his education at al-Azhar and witnessed the changing times and cultures during his thirty-year tenure in *Dar al-Fatwa*, the official Lebanese

Sunni religious establishment. Uraymit, a staunch critic of the establishment, holds it responsible for the rise of extremist Islamists in Lebanon.

Hariri's killing and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005 have been the two factors responsible for unleashing the powers of the Salafists, long repressed under heavy-handed Syrian rule. Not only did they break with the traditions of shunning elections—Hassan al-Shahhal, a well-known Salafist figure in the north, ran for parliament—they also mobilized their constituencies as part of the electoral campaign of *Mustaqbal*. The sense of victimization created by Hariri's death, coupled with deeply rooted hostility against the Syrian legacy in Lebanon, drove Salafists and their followers to vote for Hariri's list, even though it included figures from the "Lebanese Forces," the party of the extreme right-wing Christian wartime militia. The most significant result of the election is that while Shahhal did not make it to parliament (Salafists preferred Hariri to him), Hariri's list took the twenty-eight seats in the north. It is times like these of political and sectarian tension that help Salafists expand their influence.

Today one of the leading Salafist figures in the north, Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, identifies the Salafist movement as "the true face of Islam." It has no political project or vision for Lebanon, he explains, other than spreading *daawa* in society. "Our goal is a call to go back to the basics of Islam," says Shahhal. This undertaking is primarily done through religious institutions, Quranic schools, a radio station, and charitable organizations under the movement's supervision. These organizations are independent of any state supervision. Even religious schools are not supervised by *Dar al-Fatwa*.

While traditional Salafists like to present themselves as above the political bickering in the country, this ostensible aloofness from politics does not match reality. They are as heavily involved in politics as everyone else. By and large, they were not immune to the political polarization that has gripped the country during the past few years. On the contrary, they were a party to it, making no secret of their sympathies and, at times, making overt alliance with March 14 forces. They have been at the heart of the increasing sectarian tensions between the country's Sunna and Shi'a.

Reformist Salafists

The body of associations constituting the Salafist movement in the north is not a monolith. There are divergent groups among Salafists. While Salafist figures like Shahhal do not acknowledge the existence of other factions within the Salafist movements, there seems to be an emerging—although still at a very early stage—movement of Salafist reformists. This group, consisting mainly of a breed of young preachers and professionals, is making clear that it does not share traditional Salafists' views regarding two key issues: the rhetoric regarding the Shi'a and Hizbollah and the relationship with *al-Mustaqbal*.

Sheikh Muhammad al-Khodr is one such Salafist reformist figure. He leads an organization called the Lebanese Islamic Forum for Dialogue and Daawa. Khodr is highly critical of the state of Islamist movements in Lebanon today. He says the forum is an attempt to search for common ground to found “a common Islamic project and vision.” He says this is needed because “Islamists have been no more than ‘tools’ used by both parties in the current political conflict.” Khodr admitted that the schisms that exist in the Islamist movement today have rendered it ineffective in the political balance of power. “Islamist movements today are either tools in the hands of other secular forces or they embrace an agenda that is far from reality,” he said. The thirty-five-year-old sheikh considers the traditional Salafists to be out of touch with reality. Although traditional Salafism has a wide following among the young, he observes it has failed to propose a political project. “As an Islamist movement and as Salafists in particular, we lack leadership and a vision for political and social change,” he said.

Khodr articulates what amounts to a reformist vision. It is a view that accepts the other. It is Salafism, he said, that adapts itself to a multi-confessional society like Lebanon. The challenge facing Khodr and his supporters is how to change the perceptions and views of their following—mostly young men—who have been fed a rigid religious discourse. “We want to move our young men from ideas of extremism and we are receiving a positive response to that,” he said. The real challenge, however, is the internal schism within the Salafist movement. This schism has been exacerbated by the position adopted by the traditional Salafist leaders who opposed any attempt at change and reform. According to Khodr, “There are attempts to project us as undermining the Salafist traditions and as having given up our principles and hence as not representing the Salafist movement.”

His views on the relationship with the other sect of Islam makes him part company with his traditional Salafist counterparts. While he acknowledged the doctrinal differences with the Shi’a, he insisted that the Salafist *Ulama* (Islamic scholars) did not call the Shi’a apostate. “It is not our approach to exclude the Shia altogether,” he explained. The conflict in Lebanon is not a sectarian one, he believes. It has a regional edge to it. The biggest threat, according to Khodr, is U.S.-Israeli hegemony. “It is the new Middle East Project, which aims to change the identity and culture of the region that remains the biggest threat to us,” he said. Accordingly, Khodr stands in the same camp with Hizbollah, a fact he acknowledges but is hesitant to do publicly for fear of being criticized by traditional Salafists.

He competes with traditional Salafists for turf and influence among young Sunna. The traditional Salafists enjoy a larger popular base, Khodr explained, and the more radical they are, the more popular they become. At times of sectarian tension, he said, traditional Salafists take over completely.

Al-Mustaqbal and Salafists: Marriage of Convenience

The political alliance of larger sections of the Salafist movement with the Western-backed March 14 forces might come as a surprise, but it can be understood within the context of sectarian affiliation and, in particular, the relationship with Saad al-Hariri's *Mustaqbal*. Hariri is viewed by the majority of Lebanon's Sunna to have inherited his father's leadership legacy. The Salafists, despite disagreement with Hariri over key issues that they voice privately, do not want to "break the Sunni ranks" by confronting Hariri. Secondly, both Salafists and Hariri can claim to be standing in the face of a common enemy, Hizbollah, although each for his own reasons. While in public Hariri does not associate himself with the Salafists, he never stopped his allies from using sectarian discourse to mobilize the street under the banner of defending *Ahl al-Sunna*. At times, Hariri himself resorted to such rhetoric when all other means failed.

Some of his supporters in *Mustaqbal* disagree with this view. They argue that some of them are uncomfortable with the alliance with the Salafists. Their political project, says one member of *al-Mustaqbal*, stands on a completely different foundation than the Salafists. "There is no alliance or animosity between the two," he says, adding, however, "Hariri's is a project which calls for a state for all its citizens; they want an Islamic state." Finally, he says, "*Al-Mustaqbal* is in opposition to *Hizbullah* not out of sectarian reasons, but simply because of its regional alliances."

The relationship between *al-Mustaqbal* and the Salafists is shrouded in ambiguity. While publicly *al-Mustaqbal* keeps a distance from Salafists, its MPs in the north work on building bridges with the Salafist movement, convinced that it has a wide popular base that can serve the interests of *al-Mustaqbal* during elections or periods of political tension. For example, *al-Mustaqbal* has benefited from the anti-Shi'a rhetoric adopted by some Salafist sheikhs to mobilize the Sunni street during its political conflict with Hizbollah. This rhetoric prevented the Sunna from questioning Hariri's political vision or lack thereof and made them focus on his hostility toward Hizbollah and, by association, the Shi'a.

The alliance has, nonetheless, gone through difficult times. The confrontation with *Fateh al-Islam* and the fact that the three main figures of the Sunni sect (Prime Minister Siniora, Hariri, and Mufti Rachid Qabbani) stood in support of finishing off a group that many Salafists regard as comrades, caused simmering tension and discontent in their ranks. Some Salafists also think they are "being used" by *al-Mustaqbal* in its political conflict against its rivals, be they other Sunni political forces or Hizbollah. They cite two incidents to support their case. One was the so-called "Tabaris incident" (*Ghazwat al-Tabaris*), in which many young Salafists responded to a call by *Dar al-Fatwa* to take to the streets in protest against Danish cartoons ridiculing the prophet. The situation got ugly when the protesters set fire to the Danish embassy and attacked

a number of churches in Ashrafiyya, a predominantly Christian neighborhood. Security forces interfered to stop the riots and many protesters, mostly Salafists, were arrested. They felt they were let down by Hariri and *Dar al-Fatwa*, neither of whom defended them or stepped in to set them free. The second incident took place last January, when young Salafists took to the street against supporters of Hizbollah and the Amal movement. The army intervened to break up the protest. Many protesters were arrested. Hariri remained silent, despite the fact that these young men took to the streets prompted by sectarian mobilization carried out by *al-Mustaqbal* members. Such incidents fed a growing perception within Salafist ranks that Hariri “is not doing enough to protect the Sunna and their rights.”

Traditional Salafists hold the view that the political deadlock in Lebanon is a result of the conflict between an Iranian-Syrian axis on the one hand and a U.S.-led Western axis on the other. As for the relationship with other Islamist groups, Salafist leaders say they search for common ground with other groups, but what they do not say is that there are deeply rooted differences, which sometimes result in armed confrontation, between them and other groups, such as *al-Abbash*. A conflict with *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* prompted Shahhal to accuse the group of “wanting to control all other Islamist groups and speak in their name.” Such statements illuminate the continuing tensions between traditional Salafists and mainstream Islamist groups.

The funding of the Salafists has been one of the most contentious issues. Several reports spoke of a financial outpouring by the Hariris to Salafists to buy their loyalties. Some even suggested this undertaking was sectarian-inspired, designed to secure an army of Sunni recruits to face up to Hizbollah in case of any future confrontation. Salafist leaders deny categorically that they get funding from Hariri, insisting that the funds mainly come from sympathetic individuals and associations in the Gulf, rather than from state organizations. Al-Shahhal, for example, is well connected with a number of charitable associations in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Qaeda-Inspired Salafists

Armed Islamist groups are independent of al-Qaeda in terms of logistics and finances, but are inspired by its ideology. They are not a new phenomenon. They have existed for at least the past fourteen years in the form of small groups that act independently, rather than operating according to a unified Islamic point of reference. They have had different motivations. Some were inspired by the injustices befalling Muslims across the world. This is what inspired the first operation, conducted in 1993 by a group of young men who planned to attack a convoy of bishops in north Lebanon in protest against the massacres in Bosnia committed by Serbs against Muslims. Another operation was undertaken for

political reasons: a group, possibly *Usbat al-Ansar*, assassinated Sheikh Nizar Halabi, the leader of *al-Ahbash*, in 1995, believing *al-Ahbash* was receiving Syrian aid to assassinate Sunni figures. Other operations were personal vendettas; for example, the killing of four judges in Sidon in 1999.

Clearly, those groups had no connection with al-Qaeda, which had not acquired the name and fame then, except through individuals who fought in Afghanistan and returned to Lebanon. Among the characteristics shared by those groups are:

- 1) They do not believe in the political process or participate in elections.
- 2) They seek to establish the “rule of God” and to fight those who harm Muslims. Some of them went to fight the Americans in Iraq while others attacked UNIFIL in south Lebanon.
- 3) Unlike other Salafist groups, they do not publicize their activities. They rarely claim responsibility for bombings.

Some key militant Islamist groups that have emerged on the Lebanese scene are:

Majmouat al-Dinniyeh (the Dinniyeh Group)

This group is led by Bassam Kanj (also known as *Abu Aisha*). He formed the group following his return from Afghanistan. Inspired by al-Qaeda, he sought to create a similar group in Lebanon. Most of the young men who joined him were not necessarily embracing al-Qaeda doctrine (they had hardly even heard of it then). Many were fugitives from Tripoli escaping the heavy hand of the police. A few were former members of *Harakat al-Tawheed*. The Dinniyeh Group clashed with the army in December 1999, as a result of which Kanj was killed and many in the group were killed or captured. It was the first “uprising” by fringe Islamists in Lebanon.

Usbat al-Ansar (Band of Partisans)

This group is a Palestinian Salafist organization. It is led by Ahmed Abdel-Karim al-Saadi (also known as *Abu Mehjen*). It was formed in 1985 in *Ain al-Helwa* refugee camp. In September 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush froze its financial assets in the United States after it was listed as an extremist Islamist organization by the Lebanese state. On September 26, the group issued a statement denying any “organizational links with al-Qaeda” and insisting that “its decisions are independent.” “The link with al-Qaeda is more doctrinal and religious than organizational,” the statement added. Recently, the group was given a security assignment by the Lebanese army and now acts as a buffer between the army and *Jund al-Sham* (another radical Palestinian Jihadist group). This move meant that *al-Ansar* weapons, long regarded as illegal, have acquired legitimacy under this new agreement.

Jund al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant)

This group started as an offshoot of *Usbat al-Ansar*. It was created in 1989 by the Palestinian Muhammad Ahmed Sharqiyya. It has come under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Hizb al-Tahrir*. It is mainly concentrated in *Ain al-Helwa* refugee camp in Sidon. The group apparently embraces violence as a means of achieving change and terms all current governments and armies *kafir*, or apostate. According to Palestinian sources, the group is not very significant since its membership is no more than thirty, most of whom are wanted by the Lebanese police. They have been involved in attacks against Lebanese army posts outside of the camp. An intervention by Bahia al-Hariri, the sister of the late Rafiq al-Hariri and MP for Sidon, was meant, according to her, to protect the Lebanese army's back by attracting *Jund al-Sham* with financial aid. Now the task of keeping them under control has fallen to *Usbat al-Ansar*. The situation in Ain al-Helwa camp, nonetheless, remains edgy.

Fateh al-Islam

When a leading Salafist sheikh who was in constant contact with Shakir al-Absi, leader of *Fateh al-Islam*, was asked who they were, he answered, "A group of young men who came to Lebanon during the July war [of 2006] thinking a new front has been opened to wage their war on America and Israel from here." The end of the Lebanese military campaign against *Fateh al-Islam* left many more questions than answers. Absi is a Palestinian Jordanian who served in the Jordanian army, escaped a death sentence in Jordan, and was imprisoned in Syria for three years on charges of smuggling weapons to the Golan Heights. Three years later, he was freed and reappeared in Lebanon, where he was said to have supervised military training for members of *Fateh al-Intifada*, a group closely allied with Syria. He defected from the group and established *Fateh al-Islam*, taking over the offices of *Fateh al-Intifada* in *Nahr al-Bared* refugee camp in November of 2006.

The confrontation with the Lebanese army, which led to the liquidation of *Fateh al-Islam* and a humanitarian disaster for the 40,000 Palestinian refugees, took everyone by surprise. A bank robbery near Tripoli in May led to clashes in the streets of Tripoli between security forces and members of *Fateh al-Islam*, the suspected robbers. Two members of the group were killed. In revenge, *Fateh al-Islam* members slaughtered at least fifteen Lebanese soldiers near the refugee camp. The army decided to attack the camp to capture those responsible. What was meant to be a quick operation went on for three months, suggesting that the group had been armed to the teeth and was prepared for such a confrontation. At the same time, Salafist figures close to Absi said that *Fateh al-Islam* leaders did not want a showdown with the Lebanese state and that the battle was badly timed.

Fateh al-Islam members were charged with killing soldiers and civilians and transferring explosive material. Although there are conflicting reports about the

number of the detainees belonging to *Fateh al-Islam*, on August 20, the security forces announced that 227 people had been arrested and accused of belonging to *Fateh al-Islam*, sixty-nine of whom were said to be Lebanese nationals. Absi, who is believed to be on the run now, said in earlier press interviews that his organization had no connection with al-Qaeda and does not want to target UNIFIL and that its ultimate goal was to “defend Islam and Muslims.”

While it is true that *Fateh al-Islam* might not have a direct connection with al-Qaeda, nonetheless, it adopted al-Qaeda’s recruitment patterns with regard to the many Arab nationals who constituted part of its fighting force. On September 25, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) said that the *Fateh al-Islam* detainees were *all* Arab nationals, some of whom had entered the country legally and posed as rich Gulf tourists or Sunni clerics coming to “defend *Ahl al-Sunna* against the extremist Shia trend.” Although police investigations of the detainees, including some high-ranking members, such as Abu Salim Taha, the group’s spokesperson, suggested that *Fateh al-Islam* had made no organizational connection with al-Qaeda, there seemed to have been some initial contacts with members of al-Qaeda in Iraq. A report presented to the Lebanese cabinet on September 24 by army intelligence chief George Khoury said the group had links with many regional forces. While Syria had facilitated entry into Lebanon for some of the fighters, most of them, including Saudis, Yemenis, and Chechens, entered the country through the Beirut airport. Khoury revealed that the funding for these flights had come mainly from Saudi Arabia through charitable organizations and individuals. He said a list of those organizations and individuals and the exact amounts of money contributed has been submitted to Saudi intelligence officials.

As *Fateh al-Islam* becomes history, the important thing is the impact this military confrontation will have on the rest of the Salafist groups, particularly those that embrace al-Qaeda’s worldview. Many Salafist figures argue that the confrontation has dealt a fatal blow to al-Qaeda-inspired Salafists. The mistake *Fateh al-Islam* committed, they argue, is that it ignored “the exceptionalism of the Lebanese context.”

Al-Qaeda in Lebanon

Al-Qaeda has long regarded Lebanon as a passageway for recruits and logistical support. The year 2005, however, proved a turning point for al-Qaeda’s role in Lebanon. A number of developments shed light on al-Qaeda-inspired groups in Lebanon. First, the killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri demonstrated the presence of a grave security vacuum. Second, the U.S.-led coalition pressure exercised on al-Qaeda elements in Iraq, particularly Arab nationals, forced them to seek other venues, and Lebanon emerged as one of these. Third, the rising wave of sectarian tension across the region inspired

some Sunni groups to solicit al-Qaeda's help. In 2005, statements signed by al-Qaeda threatening to kill Shi'a figures were found in different parts of Lebanon. Last December, residents of *al-Basta*, a mixed middle-class neighborhood in the heart of Beirut, found leaflets with vitriolic anti-Shi'a language inciting Sunna to "expel Shia from the neighborhood wherever they are." Similar leaflets were found in the Beqaa valley. The leaflets were not signed. A number of other statements were signed by *Tanzeem al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Sham* (al-Qaeda in the Levant). Their authenticity, however, could not be verified, because the name "al-Qaeda," according to one Lebanese expert on Islamist movements, has been a façade behind which some unknown local groups or even intelligence agencies hide to achieve certain political ends or to exacerbate tension between the Sunna and Shi'a.

The year 2006 saw a number of arrests of groups and individuals who are inspired by al-Qaeda's doctrines. There are now over 250 detainees in Lebanon's main Roumieh prison who belong to al-Qaeda-like Salafist groups, or what are commonly known as Jihadi Salafists. The arrests, however, do not necessarily mean there is an organizational existence for al-Qaeda in Lebanon. Lebanese Internal Security Forces Chief Ashraf Rifi explained that what existed in Lebanon was "a fake al-Qaeda." In other words, the arrests of individuals and groups who are inspired by al-Qaeda does not constitute proof that al-Qaeda exists in Lebanon. Rifi, who is close to Hariri, maintained good relations with Lebanon's Salafists. He even went so far as to engage some Salafist figures in the mediation efforts between the ISF and *Fateh al-Islam*. One prominent Salafist who was asked to be a mediator between the two parties said neither *Fateh al-Islam* nor the ISF wanted the battle in the first place. "Some elements within *Fateh al-Islam* forced an ill-timed confrontation on the group," he said.

Many thought that this "close" relationship between the ISF and many Salafist leaders should have spared the country and the security forces the catastrophic situation in *Nahr al-Bared*. Yet it did not. For no matter how much security chiefs may have thought they had the "Salafists under control," some elements were bound to deviate from the script.

It is no surprise that the squalid Palestinian camps in Lebanon are fertile ground for radical Salafist groups. The camps do not fall under the supervision of the Lebanese state, according to a previous agreement between the state and Palestinian factions. It is not true, however, that the Lebanese state or the security establishment does not have access to the camps. Lebanese intelligence does maintain a presence through "its men" in the camps. So it should have been aware of the developments that were taking place. Besides, most of those groups, if not all of them, had been in contact with not only the security and military establishments but also with Lebanese political forces, as was the case with MP Bahia al-Hariri and *Jund al-Sham* in *Ain al-Helwa* refugee camp.

Conclusion: Ongoing Risk of Radicalization and Sectarian Tension

As argued above, Lebanon's Sunni Islamists do not act as a monolith. They are divided by different sets of political and social goals. While the mainstream Islamist groups such as *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*, *al-Abbash*, and *Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami* will continue to exist on the scene as important actors, the worsening political and security situation in the country can only boost the most radical elements within the Islamists' ranks. In the north there is clearly a schism between the different Islamist forces. They are divided between those in alliance with *Mustaqbal* and those that stand against it. It is this schism that creates the vacuum in which al-Qaeda-inspired elements can operate.

The radicalization of the young Sunna is due to a number of factors: to begin with, economic austerity, increasing unemployment, lack of basic services, and social marginalization. The continued targeting, arrest, and torture of young men in the north under the pretext of tracing extremists can only increase the sense of victimization and persecution among these groups. After the *Nahr al-Bared* confrontation, security forces waged a campaign against young Salafists, claiming to be tracking down the remnants of *Fateh al-Islam*. This only exacerbated tensions and increased the sense of victimization of young Salafists.

Another important factor has to do with the role played by the Sunni religious establishment. The legitimacy of the establishment headed by Qabbani is questioned by many Sunna, who see it as "an organ subservient to *al-Mustaqbal*." The weakness of the establishment has left many young men without a religious leadership to which to turn. The establishment keeps allowing some of its religious men to continue with sermons and religious teachings that incite hatred of Shi'a. More importantly, *Dar al-Fatwa* has no supervision whatsoever over the educational curricula in the various religious institutions, which number 300 nationwide. A weak religious establishment is thus seen as implicated directly or indirectly in encouraging the radicalization of young Sunna.

The same could be said about the political leadership of *Mustaqbal*. It has regarded Salafists, even the most radical of them, as tools of influence to be used against its rivals in times of political tension. This could backfire as a growing number of Salafists are questioning their alliance and loyalty to Saad Hariri, since he failed to provide them with political cover when they needed it. Since security strikes and arrests will continue to target them, the resentment will grow. These groups have benefited from the fact that *Mustaqbal* has dramatically weakened all other political leaderships in the north.

So unless the Lebanese state changes its strategy toward Salafists, becomes more present in poverty-stricken areas, and does not leave its population at the mercy of electoral promises that are never delivered, the danger of seeing more radical al-Qaeda-style militancy among Salafist youth remains a real danger.

Perhaps the greatest danger such radical elements pose has to do with the sectarian tension in the country. Events in 2007 have shown that mobilization along sectarian lines can quickly translate into near-civil-war tensions. The radical elements among Salafists will continue to have influence so long as the political conflict is not settled.

The grievances against the Shi'a continue to permeate the Friday sermons in many a mosque in Tripoli. It is perhaps due to Hizbollah's discipline and self-restraint that the sectarian tension has not turned into an all-out confrontation between the country's two Muslim sects. In a recent speech on *Yawm al-Quds* (Jerusalem Day, October 5), Hizbollah's Secretary-General Nasrallah insisted that even "if they kill one thousand of us, we will never be dragged into *fitna*" (sedition). Hizbollah has also undertaken what the majority of *Mustaqbal's* Sunni supporters feel to be provocative acts, such as taking over part of downtown Beirut, virtually surrounding the government house, and closing off Beirut's major roads and highways in January 2007. Both sides, however, have realized the danger of sectarian explosion and have taken some measures to reduce tensions and step back from the brink.

Lastly, Islamists, like any Lebanese political force, are affected by regional developments. Events in Iraq and Afghanistan will continue to feed much of the Islamists' debates about their role in politics and the way in which they can stop what they perceive to be ongoing "aggression" against Muslims.

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