Introduction

During the autumn of 2009, I had a discussion with a few young, long bearded Salafi preachers dressed in robes that did not reach beyond their ankles and a handful of local men in a bakery in the Mina district of the Northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. After the preachers had left, I referred to them as Salafis, representatives of a puritan Sunni Islamic movement that intends to return to the morality and belief of the first Muslims, in front of the locals. The locals expressed astonishment; one of them told me: "*Wallahi hol shabab tayyibin-tayyibin, ma 'araft annon Salafiyya!* [I swear to God, those guys are very good people, I didn't know they were Salafis]." At the time, the term "Salafism" had negative connotations.

The three preachers were well-known in the neighborhood for their personal piety and for providing religious consultation and conflict mediation to the members of the local communities. No one would ever connect them to any violent acts, and people commonly associated Salafism with violence. In the 1990s and 2000s, Salafist Jihadi groups had gained prominence in the Lebanon by causing a number of violent incidents, such as the Battle of al-Dinniya in 1999 and the Battle of Nahr al-Barid in 2007.

During the first of these battles, the Lebanese army and an armed Salafi group in the mountainous Sir al-Dinniya region near Tripoli clashed on New Year's Eve 1999. Bassam al-Kanj, a veteran Jihadi with combat experience in Afghanistan, set up a training camp to prepare and send fighters to Chechnya. The army's final besiegement of the camp left thirty people dead.[1] The three-months long fighting in Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Tripoli between May and September 2007 led to even more casualties. In the battle between the *Fath al-Islam*, an al-Qaida-inspired militant organization,

[1] Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 229–266.

and the Lebanese army, around 600 people died and tens of thousands of people were displaced.[2]

Many press reports appeared also on *'Usbat al-Ansar*, another Jihadi group that controlled areas in 'Ayn al-Hilwa Palestinian camp near the southern city of Sidon.[3] Since the jurisdiction of the Lebanese authorities does not extend to the Palestinian refugee camps, the group could emerge in the 1990s as one of the most powerful forces of 'Ayn al-Hilwa, and they rivalled the major Palestinian factions such as Fatah and Hamas.[4] In short, due to the prominence of Jihadi Salafism in Lebanon's political events, the label "Salafism" was almost exclusively associated with Jihadi Salafism.

The majority of Salafis who carried out peaceful proselytization did not appear in the Lebanese public sphere that frequently. This is despite the fact that they made up the majority of Lebanese Salafism, constituting ideologically diverse networks with dense linkages to the Arabian Gulf and Europe. As my anecdote demonstrates, people were not aware that some of the preachers were Salafis. Many of the latter also did not use the label very often because of the negative connotation attached to it. Some Salafis argue that Salafis simply follow the original and uncorrupted form of Islam, therefore another label than Muslim is not necessary.

The situation changed radically after the 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings. Although the protest movement that emerged in Lebanon was too modest in scale to bring down the sectarian-based regime, the wave of revolutions in the region has nevertheless had a severe sociopolitical impact that contributed to the rise of nonviolent Salafi groups. During my visits in 2011 and 2012, I observed that the movement's activists were increasingly participating in managing the affairs of local communities. In Tripoli's al-Tabbana district, leading Salafi figures established a consultative council (*shūra* in Arabic) to discuss local issues such as social welfare, the hosting of the constantly increasing numbers of Syrian refugees, and political action to free prisoners who are being held by the Lebanese authorities without trial and accused of "terrorism."

Some prominent Salafi shaykhs, with the leadership of Salim al-Rafi'i and Zakariyya al-Masri, openly challenged the authority of Dar al-Fatwa

[2] See this series of reports: "The Story of Nahr al-Bared," NOW, October 10, 2007, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/the_story_of_nahr_al-bared (accessed December 28, 2016).
[3] "Za'im 'Usbat al-Ansar bi-Lubnan Yatahaddath 'an al-'alaqa ma'al-Qa'ida," *al-'Arabiyya*, June 17, 2007. www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/06/17/35582.html (accessed November 7, 2010).
[4] Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, pp. 143–169.

when they joined and filled leading positions in *Hay'at 'Ulama' al-Muslimin* (League of Muslim Scholars). The League was created in 2011 and included religious scholars (*'ulama'*) mainly from the Salafi movement and the Lebanese Muslim Brothers (*al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*). It claims to represent the majority of the Sunni *'ulama'*, and issues statements and *fatawa* (nonbinding legal opinions) relating to many of the most important concerns of the Sunni community. In fact, some analysts regard it as a "counter-Dar al-Fatwa."[5] Both the international and local media have paid significant attention to the Salafi ascendancy in North Lebanon.[6] Salafi personalities are frequent guests on Beirut-based TV channels' political programs. While previously perhaps the only publicly known Lebanese Salafi personality was Shaykh Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal, the head of the oldest Lebanese Salafi organization, *Jama'iyyat al-Hidaya wa-l-Ihsan* (Guidance and Charity Society – GCS), today many Lebanese know about other leading Salafi figures such as the Tripolitan shaykhs Salim al-Rafi'i, Zakariyya al-Masri and Ra'id Hulayhil.

This book traces the evolution and dynamics of non-Jihadi Salafi groups in Lebanon. Throughout the monograph I use the term Salafi to refer to nonviolent groups unless indicated otherwise. The historical dynamics of Salafism globally have been crucial in shaping the structure of the Lebanese Salafi scene due to its dense transnational linkages, especially to the Arabian Gulf. Therefore, I will provide insights into how both the global split of Salafism into a politically quietist (which later I call purist) and activist (or in Arabic *haraki*) faction and the internal transformation of the movement in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia led to the fragmentation of the Lebanese Salafi community. Schisms at the transnational level have led to the emergence of the purist–*haraki* dichotomy in Lebanon as well. I will also discuss how and why the *haraki* faction emerged as predominant in the post–Arab Uprisings period. Transnational charities that support Lebanese Salafi groups played imperative roles in these developments. Therefore, I put special emphasis on examining the linkages of the latter, especially the Kuwaiti *Jama'iyyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami*

[5] "Radical mosques pose challenge for Dar al-Fatwa," *The Daily Star*, February 21, 2015, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Feb-21/288240-radical-mosques-pose-challenge-for-dar-al-fatwa.ashx (accessed October 17, 2015).

[6] Wassim Mroueh, "Salafism gains ground in Lebanon over Syria," *The Daily Star*, August 22, 2013; Hashem Osseiran, "Lebanon's Salafists poised for parliamentary polls?" *The Arab Weekly*, November 27, 2016, www.thearabweekly.com/?wrid=156 (accessed December 20, 2016).

(Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage – SRIH) and the Qatari Mu'assasat al-Shaykh 'Aid al-Khayriyya (Shaykh 'Aid Charity Foundation – SACF) to the Lebanese Salafi scene.

After taking a closer look at the historical trajectory of Lebanese Salafism, the second focus of this monograph is explaining how these Salafi groups establish their authority, create and mobilize symbolic and material resources, and attract their followers. I will do so by analyzing the movement's internal structure, and explain how Lebanese Salafis constitute collectivities and what their transnational ties look like. Lebanese Salafis have strong local roots and were not planted by the Gulf countries; nevertheless, charities and private donors from Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have been crucial in facilitating the expansion of the movement. Money that Lebanese Salafi shaykhs received from the Gulf enabled them to build religious infrastructure and provide financial assistance to their followers. Scholarships from the Gulf States made it possible for many Lebanese Salafis to pursue their studies at the Islamic University of Medina or other Saudi Islamic higher educational institutions. This is why part of the book examines the structure of Lebanese Salafism not only locally but also in a transnational context.

I.1 The Rise of Salafism

Since the Arab Spring, Salafism has increased its presence on the sociopolitical map of the Middle East. While the authoritarian regimes in Cairo and Tunis had limited their options and often repressed them, the activism of Salafis reached an unprecedented level after state control had been lifted in 2011. In Egypt, for example, besides increasing proselytization in the mosques, universities, and the media, Salafi parties formed the second largest parliamentary block. Salafism remained a relevant force in the country even after the coup on July 3, 2013 when the army overthrew President Muhammad Mursi, who had been delegated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Even in countries where the ruling system did not collapse during the Arab Spring, many people started to see Salafis as a potential alternative to their Sunni Muslim leaders. This is an important factor and is one reason, among others, why Lebanon is currently experiencing a Salafi upsurge.

The Syrian uprising and civil war have affected Lebanon severely. As its neighbor gradually sank into the abyss of civil war after the spring of 2011, the Lebanese economy suffered heavy losses, as it is largely dependent on Syrian imports and exports. As a result, tourists

and investors, mainly from the Gulf countries, also tend to avoid the country, exacerbating an already severe financial crisis. The influx of more than a million Syrian refugees has also added to Lebanon's socioeconomic instability.[7]

The deepening political divisions resulting from the events in Syria, however, have posed a bigger threat to Lebanon than the worsening economic conditions. Syria, which occupied the country between 1976 and 2005 and dominated its political and economic life, has long-term allies among the country's fragmented political elite. Since the 1980s, Hizbullah, the Shi'ite Islamist militia and political party, has enjoyed the protection of the Syrian government, first that of President Hafiz al-Assad and then later his son, Bashar. Other forces, such as the Shi'ite AMAL (*Lebanese Resistance Battalions – Afwaj al-Muqawwama al-Lubnaniyya)* movement, and the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party, all forged strong relationships with the Syrian regime. Michel 'Awn's Christian Free Patriotic Movement[8] joined this alliance, which is also called March 8 block,[9] after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal. These groups are largely dependent on Syrian patronage to maintain their local influence and ensure their long-term survival.

The hostility felt by Lebanese opponents of the government in Damascus toward the Assad clan reaches back several decades. The leading force in this camp is the predominantly Sunni Muslim Future Movement (*Tayyar al-Mustaqbal*), which is dominated by the Hariri family. Walid Jumblat's mainly Druze Progressive Socialist Party and the two Maronite Christian parties, the Phalangists and Samir Ja'ja''s Lebanese Forces, are also important elements of this coalition, which is commonly referred to as March 14 block.[10] Since 2005, when the Syrian occupation ended, the positions of the pro- and anti-Syrian camps have hardened, and have often culminated in political deadlocks and crises. Today, the various

[7] "UNHCR: Syrian refugees cross four million mark," *Al Jazeera English*, July 9, 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/unhcr-syrian-refugees-4-million-150709033023489.html (accessed July 10, 2015).

[8] Michel 'Awn had been a long-time foe of Syria since the Lebanese Civil War. However, when he abandoned the anti-Syrian block in 2005 and allied with Hizbullah in the following year, he became closer to the Assad regime. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, 'Awn has openly supported the Assad regime many times.
"Aoun defends Hezbollah's involvement in Syria Civil War," *Ya Libnan*, May 19, 2013. www.yalibnan.com/2013/05/19/aoun-defends-hezbollahs-involvement-in-syria-civil-war/ (accessed June 28, 2013).

[9] March 8 is a reference to a demonstration on March 8, 2005 in Beirut organized by the allies of Syria to show their support to Damascus even after the announcement of the withdrawal of the Syrian army.

[10] March 14 is a reference to an anti-Syrian mass demonstration in Beirut on March 14, 2005.

Lebanese factions are providing political, material, and even armed support both to the Syrian government and to the opposition.

The opposition of these two camps has led to a political deadlock that lasted more than two years. After the end of Michel Suleiman's presidency in May 2014, Lebanese voters have been unable to elect a new president until the end of 2016, when Michel 'Awn became the new head of state due to a compromise between the two camps.[11] This political feud led to the near paralysis of many state institutions, and resulted in a dire economic crisis and social instability. The Lebanese security forces were unable to establish control in most areas along the Syrian border, which are currently dominated by militant groups such as *Jabhat Fath al-Sham* (Front for the Conquest of the Levant), formerly known as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (al-Nusra Front), and the Islamic State.

The political conflict in Syria is also reflected in the sectarian tensions within Lebanese society. The majority of the Shi'i community (approximately 30–35 percent of the population) supports the Assad regime, while most Sunnis (25–30 percent of the Lebanese) are on the side of the by now extremely fragmented opposition. In recent years, Sunni–Shi'i sectarianism has often culminated in violence and armed confrontations. In 2013–2014, suicide bombings and other attacks were carried out by Sunni militants in Shi'i neighborhoods. Militants allegedly close to Hizbullah blew up Sunni mosques in Tripoli in August 2013.[12] While Shi'i militants belonging to Hizbullah have crossed the border and joined the forces of the 'Alawi[13]-dominated Assad regime, Lebanese Sunnis are fighting alongside the predominantly Sunni opposition. Between April and June 2013, hundreds of Hizbullah fighters aided the Syrian army in the siege of al-Qusayr, a rebel stronghold. The opposition forces consisted of some Lebanese Sunnis, mostly from the North.

In the midst of this sectarian upheaval, Lebanon's Sunni community is facing an intensifying leadership crisis. The dominance of political patrons (*zu'ama*) over Sunni Muslims has waned since the Arab Uprisings. Sa'd al-Hariri – the son of the murdered ex-prime minister Rafiq

[11] "Michel Aoun elected president of Lebanon," *Aljazeera*, October 31, 2016. www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/michel-aoun-elected-president-lebanon-161031105331767.html (accessed November 1, 2016).

[12] Fernande van Tets, "Lebanon: Death toll in twin mosques bombings in Tripoli rises to 47," *Independent*, August 24, 2013, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-death-toll-in-twin-mosques-bombings-in-tripoli-rises-to-47-8782812.html (accessed November 13, 2016).

[13] 'Alawis are considered an offshoot of Shi'i Islam. Their proportion in the Syrian population is approximately 8–10 percent. The majority of 'Alawis originate from the northwest coastal regions.

al-Hariri and the head of the Future Movement – who was regarded as the leader of the Sunni community after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal, has lost much of his authority. As prime minister, he was unable to hold his governing coalition together after the 2009 elections. In 2011, the al-Hariri government was brought down due to a series of internal disputes. In the eyes of Lebanese Sunnis, Hariri's inability to hold on to power was proof of his weak leadership skills. His lack of charisma increased the disappointment of the community. Moreover, he proved unable to fulfill any of his key promises, namely removing the weapons of Hizbullah and reinforcing the state's dominance over the entire territory of Lebanon. Hariri's successor, the more charismatic Najib Miqati, also could not unite the Sunnis under his leadership because he agreed to form a political alliance with Hizbullah, and thus was regarded as a traitor by many. Although Miqati resigned in 2013 due to disagreements with the March 8 block, during the reign of the government of Tammam Salam, a scion of a traditional Beiruti Sunni notable family, the authority of the *zu'ama'* did not reemerge. Internal divisions also undermined the credibility of the Future Movement.[14] At the end of 2016, Hariri returned to power and became prime minister again, but it is not yet clear at the time of writing in December 2016 if his authority will recover to the 2005 level.

Many of those who lost faith in traditional Lebanese Sunni community leaders started looking for alternatives. Some expressed sympathy or joined the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) or even the Islamic State. Others rallied behind Ahmad al-Asir, a notorious cleric from Sidon, whose fierce sectarian rhetoric attracted thousands.[15] The majority, however, especially in the northern regions of the country, where the majority of the Sunnis live, sympathized with Salafi preachers, who mostly advocated peaceful means of activism.

Salafis have thrived since the eruption of the Syrian conflict. The sermons of Salafi preachers, who disseminate harsh anti-Shi'i messages and associate Hizbullah and the Assad regime with a global Shi'i conspiracy, have become increasingly popular. Salafi scholars are becoming the most influential religious authorities in the northern Sunni community, especially in Tripoli, the region's capital, where they have become

[14] The most notable of these divisions emerged at the beginning of 2016 between Sa'd al-Hariri and ex-Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi, "Khilaf 'Alani bayn al-Hariri wa-Rifi … 'Asifa bi-bayt al-Mustaqbal," *al-'Arabi*, February 12, 2016. https://arabi21.com/story/887179 (accessed March 18, 2016).

[15] Nour Samaha, 'Who Is Lebanon's Ahmed al-Assir?' *Al Jazeera English*, June 26, 2013, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/06/201362520292853615l.html (accessed June 27, 2013).

visible everywhere. Increasing numbers of young men are choosing to give up their secular lifestyles and adopt a Salafi way of life. Many of those who had previously worn fashionable clothes, enjoyed Western and Arabic popular music, and consumed alcohol, now wore proper Islamic dress and grew their beards. Also, the popularity of Salafi religious lessons in mosques has risen sharply since 2011. More and more regular or ordinary believers are seeking advice and religious services from Salafi shaykhs rather than going to the *'ulama'* (religious scholars) of Dar al-Fatwa, the official religious institution of Sunni Islam in Lebanon.[16]

I.2 Sunni Movements and Religious Actors in Lebanon

Historically, Lebanon has been at the intersection of a transnational flow of ideas, and therefore many Sunni Islamic intellectual trends and movements that appeared in the Middle East in the twentieth century took root in the country.

Since its establishment in 1931, Dar al-Fatwa, headed by the Mufti of the Republic, has served as the institutional authority and supervising body of Sunni religious life in Lebanon. The institution is a part of the state administration and issues religious rulings and supervises religious institutions, such as mosques and charity endowments. Traditionally, most of Dar al-Fatwa's officials received their education at one of the major Middle Eastern Islamic educational centers, such as al-Azhar in Cairo, and most of them adopted one of the traditional schools of jurisprudence: mainly the Shafi'i and the Hanafi.

Dar al-Fatwa has to share the Sunni religious domain with various Islamic movements. Sufi orders are the oldest of the latter that have been present in the area for hundreds of years.[17] Sufis have many orientations ranging from text-based approaches to approaches that exempt their more advanced members from following the basic rulings of Islam (such as prayer or the prohibition of alcohol). What they have in common though, are their striving for a personal engagement with and experience of the divine.[18] Sufis commonly organize in orders

[16] Throughout this book I will use the term "ordinary believers" to refer to regular or everyday Muslims who cannot be considered as participants of any Islamic movements.

[17] Daphne Habibis, "Change and Continuity: A Sufi Order in Contemporary Lebanon," *Social Analysis*, 31, no. 2 (1992), pp. 46–47.

[18] William C. Chittick, "Sufi Thought and Practice." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, vol. 5., edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

(*tariqa*) around a shaykh who is believed to have reached considerable spiritual advancement. While Sufi orders generally have declined in Lebanon, two orders, the *Naqshbandiyya* and the *Qadiriyya* are still strong, especially in the North.

The Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic group – IG) was officially established in 1964. Its founder and first leader, Fathi Yakan (1933–2009), was among the internationally most influential ideologues of the Brotherhood.[19] The Brotherhood's main goal at the time of its founding stopping the "westernization" of Lebanese Sunnis and "making Islam the center of their identity."[20] For this, IG gradually built up a network of charities and schools that expanded into many Sunni-inhabited areas of the country. After the end of the civil war, IG regularly participated in parliamentary politics, but won only a few seats.[21] After the 2005 Syrian withdrawal, IG sided with the March 14 camp, which led to the split of Fathi Yakan and dozens of his supporters. Yakan, who had close relations to the Assad regime established a new, pro-March 8 Islamic movement, *Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami* (Islamic Action Front IAF) in 2006, which, due to the anti-Syrian popular sentiment of the time among the Sunni Lebanese, remained marginal.[22]

Another movement that had a profound impact on Lebanon's Sunni Islamic scene is *Jama'iyyat al-Mashar'i al-Khayriyya* (Association of Charitable Projects) or *al-Ahbash* (Ethiopians) as people commonly refer to it. The name is a reference to the movement's founder 'Abdullah al-Harari (1910–2008), who was of Ethiopian origin. Al-Ahbash emerged in the 1960s but appeared as an influential movement in the midst of the civil war in the 1980s, when it managed to control several neighborhoods in Beirut. Al-Ahbash refer to themselves as a Sufi-inspired movement that follows Shafi'i jurisprudence, and generally oppose the ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism. In the 1990s, an often violent competition erupted between al-Ahbash on one side and IG and the Salafis on the other. Until the end of the Syrian occupation, the movement enjoyed the support of the regime in Damascus and had a cordial relationship with Hizbullah. These connections were helpful to expand

[19] While Fathi Yakan is neglected by academics, several young and middle-aged members of the Kuwaiti and Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood told me that they grew up studying his books. Series of informal conversations, Kuwait, January 2012 and January–June 2016.
[20] Interview with Ibrahim al-Masri, Beirut, July 7, 2008.
[21] Three seats in 1992 and one in 1996.
[22] Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists – A Growing Force," *Carnegie Papers*, January 2008, pp. 9–10.

their control over several mosques and Islamic institutions. Al-Ahbash attracted many middle-class members, who voted for the candidates of the movement during parliamentary elections.[23] After 2005, public sentiment among the Sunni community turned against those who were regarded as allies of the Assad regime. This led to the rapid decrease of al-Ahbash's popularity in Lebanon.

Jama'at al-Tabligh (or al-Tabligh as local Lebanese refer to it), a proselytization movement that focuses on personal piety, was founded by Muhammad Iliyas (1885–1944) in British India in the 1920s, and gained a foothold in Lebanon in the 1970s. Al-Tabligh is hierarchically organized, and each member has to spend three days of the month on a proselytizing tour (*khuruj*).[24] Perhaps the most important center of the movement is the *Tinal* mosque in Tripoli. Al-Tabligh is present almost everywhere in the Sunni-inhabited areas of Lebanon. Yet, it is difficult to estimate how many followers the movement has, and how influential it is. In some of the more traditional neighborhoods of Tripoli, such as al-Qubba, Abu Samra, and some parts of al-Mina, many inhabitants are aware of the presence of the movement and talk rather positively about them, but few actually join their activities.[25]

Among the oldest Islamic movements of Lebanon is *Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami* (Islamic Liberation Party – ILP). ILP was founded by the Palestinian Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (1910–1973) in 1952 in East Jerusalem. The party's main message is the necessity of the unification of the Muslim world through the reestablishment of the Caliphate. Unlike the previously discussed movements, ILP does not have charity or proselytization activities. Instead, it spreads its political message through publications, organizing conferences, reading groups, and, occasionally, demonstrations.[26] ILP has been present in Lebanon since the 1950s. The country serves as one of the most important international centers of the movement since its media office is located in Beirut. Despite this, similarly to al-Tabligh, it is difficult to estimate the size of ILP. In an interview in 2009, a Lebanese Palestinian ILP member claimed that the party has 4000 active members.[27] This seems

[23] A. Nizar Hamzeh and R. Hrair Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism: al-Ahbash of Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28, no. 2 (1996), p. 226.
[24] Abdul Ghany Imad, "A Topography of Sunni Islamic Organizations and Movements in Lebanon," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2, no. 1 (2009), pp. 157–158.
[25] Personal observation during my fieldwork between 2009 and 2012.
[26] Imad, "A Topography of Sunni Islamic Organizations," pp. 152–156.
[27] Interview, al-Baddawi refugee camp, October 24, 2009.