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**SALAFIS IN LEBANON: EXAMINING THE
ROLE OF EXTERNAL FINANCING ON
THEIR ALLIANCES AND ACTIONS**

by

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December 2020

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OF EXTERNAL FINANCING ON THEIR ALLIANCES AND ACTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

What role do state and non-state sponsors play in the decision-making process of Lebanese Salafi groups? This thesis examines the ideologies of various Lebanese Islamist groups in relation to those of their declared and clandestine sponsors to find out whether these groups diverted from their core ideological principles because of external sponsor pressure. The examination presents a case study of North Lebanon and Tripoli, in particular, based on media reports and publicly available government documents as well as scholarly research in both the English and Arabic languages to offer a complete, accurate, and unbiased view. After providing an overview of the historical roots of Salafism, the thesis examines the groups' respective ideologies, structures, leadership, and sources of funding. Finally, the thesis compares the impact of those financial sources on the examined areas. A main finding is that all but one of the examined groups are driven by the influence of money; they shifted their respective ideologies in order to meet the interests of their state sponsors. Although ideological considerations are important for Salafi groups in Lebanon, the interests of external sponsors are often prioritized above local political preferences. A policy implication of this analysis is that analyzing external sponsor preferences is potentially predictive of the conduct of Lebanese Salafis.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AMAL	Afwaj al-Muqawamah Al-Lobnaniyya
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
FAI	Fateh al-Islam
FPM	Free Patriotic movement
GCS	Guidance and Charity Society
IHE	Islamic Heritage Endowment
IG	Islamic group
IUM	Islamic Unification Movement
JI	al Jama'a al-Islamiyya
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PFLP-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command
SACF	Sheikh Aid Charity Foundation
SRIH	Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The dynamics of Salafism globally has been crucial in shaping the structure of the Lebanese Salafi scene due to its dense transnational linkages, especially to the Arabic Gulf States. This thesis provides insights into what drives the social and political rise of Salafis in Lebanon after a period of low profile. In addition, it will look into the effects of the global split within Salafism into a politically quietist faction and an activist one, and how the internal transformation of the movement in the Gulf countries led to the fragmentation of the Lebanese Salafi community.

Specifically, this study asks what role state and non-state sponsors play in the decision-making of Salafi groups. Will the Lebanese Salafi groups divert from the core ideological principles to which they adhere because of pressure from their sponsors? How does that affect their image in the eyes of the public? To answer these questions, this thesis undertakes a case study of North Lebanon and tries to relate the Salafi groups present in the north with sponsors that influence those groups. Through the lens of these Salafi groups, the thesis tries to explain the political orientation of Lebanon's Salafism.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Salafism has been a salient religious trend, but it recently developed into a more activist movement. The term Salafi itself has been around since the 12th century. According to Bernard Haykel, Salafis existed long before the 1990s; he based his finding on “a fatwa in which Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) uses the Arabic noun al-salafiyya.”¹ Salafism is not a movement or a hierarchical organization that operates under the leadership of a singular figure. Since the first wave of Salafism was ushered in by Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), and Rashid Rida (1865–1935), the term Salafism has become associated with a more violent activist methodology.

¹ Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in Roel Meijer, ed. *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.

The study of Salafi movements in general by Western scholars is relatively new. It was primarily after 9/11 that they wanted to understand the development of Islamist ideology. When it came to Lebanon, however, Western academic researchers have written extensively on Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi'ite militia that is currently a government party. Backed by Iran, Hezbollah has been a rich asset for Iran's proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and South Lebanon. Little attention has been given to Lebanon's Salafi scene, which is another potential source of instability in the region. This thesis looks into this neglected aspect deeply and tries to find out the potential threats arising from the Lebanese Salafis.

Lebanon's Salafi movement started as a peaceful ideological movement but became more radical for socio-political reasons. Before the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), Salafis in Lebanon constituted a marginal group with no significant political or social influence. Yet, in the 1990s, Salafis, on one hand, backed by the Gulf, established themselves in Northern Lebanese society and became an influential movement. On the other, backed by Iran, they strengthened their grip over the Palestinian camps, mainly Ain El-Hilwi, and had several clashes with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). According to Bernard Rougier, a pro-Iranian organization known as the Congregation of Muslim Ulama (Tajammu' al-Ulamaa al-Muslimin) played a role in the war of the camps.² Palestinian Sheikhs Ibrahim Ghunaym, Jamal Khattab, Abdallah Hallaq, and others advocated for Islamism among the Palestinians to counter the PLO.³ Since the Arab Spring, Salafism has increased its presence on the socio-political map of the Middle East. In a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted in November 2018, the number of jihadi-fighters was 270 percent greater than in 2001.⁴ The Middle East was one of the regions with the highest number of such fighters, with Syria

² Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2007, 32–33.

³ Rougier, 40–48.

⁴ Seth G. Jones, Charles Vallee, Danika Newlee, Nicholas Harrington, Clayton Sharb, and Hannah Byrne, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups," CSIS, November 2018, IV, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>.

having “between 43,650 and 70,550 fighters.”⁵ Tensions between Lebanese Salafis and Shi’ites have been rising due to Hezbollah’s continuous wins in its fights against Salafi groups in Syria. More concerning, Salafis in Lebanon might try to bring the fight inside the fragile country of Lebanon, sparking yet another civil conflict.

Factors such as “changes in leaders, effectiveness of leaders, fluctuations in outside support, and changes in territorial control” often lead individual fighters and supporters to shift between groups or networks.⁶ This fluidity suggests that studies should focus on jihadi networks rather than their formal groups. The ties of the Lebanese Salafis to other Salafi movements outside Lebanon might direct their actions to suit the agendas of foreign countries. This might cause instability in the region and could potentially harm the interests of the United States in the Middle East. At the same time, these networks can be fertile soil for global Salafis for money laundering and arms deals because of the mixed nature of Lebanese society. It would be a mistake to declare victory over terrorism too early and, thus, mistakenly redirect the available resources and attention away from terrorist groups.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are at least two prominent views of Salafism in Western scholarship. The first and perhaps the most dominant view emphasizes the ideology of Salafism. The implicit assumption is that ideology is a major driver of Salafi movements and their political conduct. The second approach emphasizes the political context that shapes the growth and specific ideology of Salafism. The implicit assumption is that ideas alone do not explain the political behavior of Salafi movements. These two approaches can inform the study of Salafism in Lebanon, but they also may overlook a third dimension: the role of regional sponsors and external funding for Salafi movements. I suspect that all three approaches are important to fully understand the evolution of Salafism in Lebanon.

Who are the Salafis?

⁵ Jones et al., “The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat.”

⁶ Jones et al.

The public understanding of the word “Salafis,” i.e., returning to the pious predecessors, differs from the academic understanding, which relates the word Salafi to the violent actions conducted in the name of Islam. For the majority of Sunni Muslims, Salafis call for the return to the first four successors of Prophet Muhammad, the rightly guided caliphs. This definition adopted by Muslims such as Khouhani and Aboutaleb generalizes the Salafi term, thus making it include more people than the Salafis referenced by academics.⁷ For the broader public, mainly people who fear Salafism, the term is equal to “extremist” or “radical” forms of Islamism.

According to the French scholar Henri Lauzière, from 1920s onward, Salafism shifted away from Islamic modernism. Before 1990, academics considered that the birth of Salafism started during the late 19th century and not in the medieval period.⁸ Yet, after the destruction of the caliphate that followed the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Mandate territories, the vulnerability of the *umma* was evident. The rise of a young and ambitious Saudi state gave hope of a “social and political renaissance in the Muslim world,” hence attracting many influential reformers, including Rashid Rida.⁹ Elites of the Saudi state were promoted by publishers such as Salafiyya Press and Bookstore and Manar Press.¹⁰ This perhaps created the correlation between the terms Salafism and Wahhabism and prepared the public for what might be considered a “neo-Salafiyya.”

Salafis share the same beliefs but differ politically. Quintan Wiktorowicz has categorized Salafis into purists, politicians, and jihadis. He defines purists as the Salafis who “emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and

7 Joas Wagemakers, “Salafism: Generalisation, Conceptualisation and Categorisation,” in Magnus Ranstorp, *Contextualising Salafism and Salafi Jihadism* (Copenhagen: Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, March 2020), 22.

8 Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (August 2010): 373. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743810000401>.

9 Lauzière, 382.

10 Lauzière.

education.”¹¹ On the other hand, politicians to him “emphasize application of a Salafi creed to the political arena, which they view as particularly important because it dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate.”¹² Jihadis, finally, “take a more militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution.”¹³ Another Hungarian scholar, Zoltan Pall, initially divided Salafis into obedient purists and activists (*harakis*) depending on their political approach to the ruler. Then, he subdivided purists into “purist-rejectionists” who stay away from politics entirely, and “purists-politically oriented” who engage in politics.¹⁴ The latter do so not to as an act of opposing the leaders per se; rather, they look at it as engaging in missionary activities. *Harakis*, however, take part in non-violent “political activism.”¹⁵ Later on, Pall added the *jihadis* who “believe that removing secular regimes and imposing Islamic legislation could happen only through armed jihad.”¹⁶

1. Approaches to Salafism

Scholars have different views as to why Salafism spreads and flourishes in certain areas. Their categorization falls into two major approaches, the ideological approach and the political approach. Bernard Haykel and Maher Shiraz are among the scholars who believe that ideology is the basic motivator. They put weight on ideas that motivate people and allow them to act accordingly. On the other hand, Thomas Hegghammer and Barbara Walter find it difficult for ideology to explain the political decisions that Salafis take. For them, what motivates people is the political stand, and ideology plays but a minor role.

For the scholars who support the ideological approach, teachings and opinions should be derived from authoritative sources. According to Shiraz Maher, ideological and

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

12 Wiktorowicz, 208.

13 Wiktorowicz.

14 Zoltan Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon: Local and Transnational Movements* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 19–22.

15 Pall.

16 Pall, 21.

political ways of thinking differ in that ideology attempts to “bring together a series of speculative abstractions into a coherent doctrine in the pursuit of utopia or, at the very least, a better way of living.”¹⁷ For Haykel, Salafism had always portrayed itself as the binary opposite of Sufism.¹⁸ This suggests that the base of Salafism is the war of ideas; hence, what Salafis value first are the principles and ideas that unite them. For that, Salafis always cite the sacred writings of the Quran to back up their actions claiming religious certainty.¹⁹ These claims are a trademark of the Salafis.²⁰ They claim that they rely only on the sound proof-texts from revelation, and any judgment or opinion is based on relevant verses.

The core principles that constitute the base of Salafi practice can influence everyday life for its followers. According to Haykel, even ordinary Muslims who do not self-identify as Salafis are attracted to the idea of textual forms of authority and the “call for reform of Muslim belief and practice by returning to the model of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.”²¹ Haykel concentrates on the principle of theology, and stresses that inner faith and manifest action constitute true belief for Salafis, and that together, these variables can either increase or decrease that belief.²²

On the other hand, Maher considers theology as one of five principles or filters by which Salafis explain their deeds. For him, Jihad, Takfir, Al-Wala’ Wa-L-Baraa, and Hakimyya also help Salafis take decisions on how to act.²³ Maher argues that Salafis discuss the jurisdictions of “the greater Jihad,” defensive jihad, and other forms to learn how to apply them in their everyday life. *Takfir* (excommunication) is important to prevent mistakenly going into *shirk* (apostasy). Similarly, the concept of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty to God and the disavowal of what is displeasing to Him) traditionally

17 Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.

18 Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 41.

19 Haykel, 36.

20 Haykel.

21 Haykel, 35.

22 Haykel, 40.

23 Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 25.

existed as an idea related solely to matters of personal conduct and behavior.²⁴ But the central pillar of Islam, as Maher and Haykel agree, is *tawhid*, or monotheism. And finally, to some Salafis, the principle of *hakimiyya* (authority to a set of rules) is independent of *tawhid* (Oneness of God) in a sense that governance is elevated to a level of doctrinal significance. Maher distinguishes between activist Salafis who adopt a more liberal and tolerant view than Salafi-Jihadis.²⁵ Activists prioritize social order and are more flexible about sins committed by rulers compared to their jihadi counterparts.

Of the five principles, Joas Wagemakers values *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* as the dominant ideology-based motivator of Salafi Jihadis in particular. Wagemakers argues that Ibn Taymiyya uses this concept as a means to fight *bida'* (heresy), and that Sulayman ibn 'Abdallah Al al-Sheikh, the grandson of Mohammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, develops it a step forward as a tool against *kufr* (unbelief).²⁶ Other Islamic scholars such as Hamd ibn 'Ali ibn 'Atiq and Abu Mohamad Al-Maqdisi use this principle to justify *takfir* since they equate adhering to un-Islamic laws with worship, leading to sinful *wala'*, that should be countered with *bara'*, and hence the rulers of the Muslim world should be the target of this disavowal.²⁷ As such, jihadi groups have used this principle in their doctrine to justify the use of violence and get approval from their followers.

Other scholars, although not removing the effect of ideology, put more emphasis on the political context in which Salafis live to explain their actions. This approach seems to be more applicable to Salafi Jihadis than other Salafi groups. According to Walter, the “level of competition, a group’s local support network, and the institutional constraints on state power” directly influence what ideology the group adopts, and especially, it defines the level of extremism.²⁸

²⁴ Maher, 122.

²⁵ Maher, 206.

²⁶ Wagemakers, “The Transformation of a Radical Concept,” 87.

²⁷ Wagemakers, 95.

²⁸ Barbara Walter, *The Extremist’s Advantage in Civil Wars* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 34.

In looking at Islamist groups in general, Hegghammer suggests five rationales to conceptualize the violent and non-violent forms.²⁹ According to him, Islamists' actions are either "State-oriented, Nation-oriented, Umma-oriented, Morality-oriented, or sectarian."³⁰ By suggesting that Islamists shape their strategy and identify their priorities by adopting a dominant rationale, and that this defines the form and direction of its violence, Hegghammer weighs politics over religion.

2. Alternative Approach to Salafism

State intervention and sponsorship of insurgent groups is evident in a lot of recent civil wars. No less important than the ideology and politics is the role of regional sponsors and external funding. Salafi groups often get funding from private or state sponsors. This suggests that the donors expect to have an influence on the decisions of those groups. According to Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton Mullins, outcomes of external financing vary depending on "types of resources, sponsor actions and preferences, methods of delivery, and structure of the opposition group."³¹ The authors present a case study on the Farouq Brigade, the most effective fighting force of the Free Syrian Army. In its early days, the Farouq Brigade presented a "secular, nationalist agenda and appealed to Syrians regardless of sect"; yet, it gradually switched its face after the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar started financing the opposition.³² The leaders of the group grew Salafi-style beards and changed the logo of the group to a "black flag with crossed swords commonly seen among jihadist groups."³³ The Syrian experience demonstrated groups' ideological alignment with funding sources.

29 Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism" in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijir (Oxford, UK: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 259, [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333431.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333431.001.0001).

30 Hegghammer.

31 Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins, Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War, *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, August 25, 2017, 4. <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/56079>.

32 Baylouny and Mullins, 8.

33 Baylouny and Mullins.

The initial funding of state sponsors, however, does not necessarily translate to total submission from the sponsored group. Hence, state sponsors often search for groups in their early emergence. Moreover, Henning Tamm argues that external sponsors prefer to bankroll groups or individuals who resemble their ideological preferences.³⁴ This funding is not permanent as rebel leaders and state sponsors might switch with time, leading the rebels to harm the sponsors' interests. In response, sponsors redirect funding to support a "leader's internal rival."³⁵ Lee Seymour presents three case studies (the split of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in 1991, Gordon Kong's faction of the South Sudan Defense Force in 2005, and Minni Minawi's faction of the Sudan Liberation Army in Darfur during 2006) that provide evidence on groups frequently changing loyalty based on funding sources.³⁶

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The aforementioned literature review suggests at least three hypotheses for studying Lebanon's Salafi movement.

Hypothesis 1: Ideological divides motivate the decisions taken by the Lebanese Salafi groups.

To test this hypothesis, this thesis looks into the compatibility between the political orientation and the ideological orientation of Lebanon's Salafis.

Hypothesis 2: Political considerations are the main motivations that drive decision-making among the leaders of Lebanese Salafi groups; they revise their ideologies continuously to achieve specific political objectives.

To test this hypothesis, this thesis explores the evolution of political decisions and their congruence with prior Salafi ideology.

³⁴ Henning Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion," in *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2016): 599–610.

³⁵ Tamm, 599.

³⁶ Lee Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage, and Realignment in Sudan," *Internal Securities* 39, no.2 (2014): 92–131, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00179.2014.

Hypothesis 3: The role of state and non-state sponsors is more influential to the Lebanese Salafi decision-makers than the ideological ideas to which they adhere.

I test this hypothesis by comparing the compatibility between the interests of external sponsors and the actions of the related sponsored Lebanese Salafi group. I expect to see decisions that violate the groups' ideological preferences to the benefit of their external sponsors. Additionally, I expect to observe Salafi groups that share a common ideology but have distinct state sponsors competing and fighting with one another.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

The unit of analysis is the influential players in the Lebanese Salafi organizations. The thesis looks into a few players through the lens of a case study of North Lebanon and Tripoli, in particular. Tripoli long enjoyed the advantage of a stable, Sunni-supported environment unlike in the cities of Saida and Beirut where Sunnis coexisted with the Maronites, Shi'ites, and the Druze. Tripoli was prosperous because of European missionaries, the advanced transportation system, and the port. After the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1979, al-Azhar University restricted its scholarships from students coming from Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon because those countries opposed Anwar El Sadat's change of policy. Consequently, the Islamic University of Medina opened its doors for those students. Upon their return, the Lebanese graduates were to transform Salafism from being a marginal group into one of the most important Sunni movements.

Research sources for this thesis encompass both primary and secondary material. Primary sources are videos, booklets, and comments from the Salafi preachers. Secondary sources include academic books and articles by reputable scholars in both the English and Arabic languages. Sources in the two languages are consulted as information that is consistent between materials in both languages have more credibility over any one-sided story. Other secondary sources include newspapers, speeches, and the author's own experience. These are treated as supplemental information to comment on events that are not well expressed in primary and other secondary sources.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

Salafism in Lebanon is a unique case in the Arab world because of the political and social circumstances that affected its creation. Since the introduction of the ideology in the year 1882 in Beirut by Sheikh Mohammad Abdo, Salafism has evolved and fragmented.³⁷ This thesis addresses this issue, trying to shed light on the role of state sponsors (Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait) and non-state actors (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda). Central to this thesis is the question: Was the ideology of Salafism used to serve political aims or was the politics used to serve the ideological aims? The second chapter is devoted to an introduction to Salafism in general and the Salafism in Lebanon. After that, Chapter III discusses the influence of the ties between Lebanese Salafi groups and state sponsors on the decision-making process of the Salafi groups. Chapter IV looks into the respective effect of non-state actors. Finally, the Chapter V gives the conclusion, discusses the findings from testing the hypotheses, and deduces policy recommendations.

This thesis design gives a wider understanding of the role of outside actors on Lebanese Salafis. The historical dynamics of Salafism globally have been crucial in shaping the structure of the Lebanese Salafi scene, which has dense transnational linkages, especially to the Arabian Gulf. By looking at the interactions that the Salafis had with other players on the Lebanese stage, this thesis can help answer the question of how important these state and non-state actors have been to the core of the Lebanese Salafis. The fragmentation of the Lebanese Salafis, for example, is part of the fragmentation of the Gulf Salafis. And, although other cities have their own independent Salafi movements, Tripoli is an ideal case study to understand the interactions between many opposing parties. By examining these relationships, this thesis can help find out to what extent Salafis in Lebanon might cause instability to the area and to the United States' interests in the region.

³⁷ Saoud Al-Mawla, *Salafism and New Salafism: From Afghanistan to Lebanon* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Sa'er Al-Mashrik, 2016), 237.

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II. THE HISTORY OF SALAFISM IN LEBANON

Salafism in Lebanon is a unique case in the Arab world because of the political and social circumstances that affected its creation. The introduction of the ideology started as early as the year 1882 in Beirut with Sheikh Mohammad Abdo.³⁸ The movement remained weak and unorganized until Saudis funded the Salafi movement created by Sheikh Salim Al Shahhal in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1964. His son and successor, Da'i al-Islam, benefited from the Lebanese civil war to grow the militant branch of the movement. More recently, the split between Saudi and Kuwaiti Salafis over political issues during the 1991 Gulf War had an equivalent split in the Lebanese Salafis. The Saudis were mainly supportive of the *harakis* in Lebanon whereas the Kuwaitis exclusively sponsored Lebanese purists.³⁹ Kuwaiti charities funded Sheikh Safwan Al-Zo'bi to counter the Saudi school run by Sheikh Al Shahhal in Tripoli. Furthermore, the Syrian regime aimed to fragment Lebanese Sunnis and thus created the Al-Ahbash movement that spread in all Sunni areas to counter Salafism. Ultimately, Sunni-Shi'ite differences helped Lebanese Salafis recruit more from the Sunni world because they presented themselves as the true fighters for the true religion.

Relatively few scholars have explored the dynamics of Lebanese Salafism in depth. In order to understand how this movement is differentiated and that it cannot be quite understood using Western concepts of organizations, it is necessary to provide a detailed history and analysis of the movement. This chapter introduces the history of Salafism in Lebanon, its geographic and institutional presence in the country, the key personalities and ideologues that have shaped the movement, and lastly its fragmentation. The chapter discussion sheds light on the official start of the movement as a purist faction under Sheikh Salim al-Shahhal in 1964 in Tripoli, and how it splintered into multiple schools and organizations affected by the political agendas of the Gulf, mainly those of the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and Qataris.

38 Saoud Al-Mawla, *Salafism and New Salafism*, 237.

39 Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 88.

A. THE EARLY RISE OF SALAFISM IN LEBANON

Before the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), Salafis were limited in numbers and unable to expand. According to Saoud al-Mawla, after Sheikh Mohammad Abdo was exiled from Egypt in 1882, he started religious study sessions at al-Himade's house in Msaytbeh District, Beirut.⁴⁰ This played a big role in spreading the Salafi ideology. Out of the four *madahib* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence), the Lebanese mostly follow Muhammad bin Idris al-Shafi'i. On the other hand, Saida's sheikhs mostly follow Abu Hanifa. Followers of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal do not exist in Lebanon except for those who graduated from Saudi Arabia's schools. Up until 1945, Tripoli had four Islamic institutions.⁴¹ In 1946, Sheikh Salim al-Shahhal founded "Shabab Muhamad," which was later called "Muslimoun."⁴² "Muslimoun" was the first public Islamic movement in Tripoli; it called for "promotion of virtue and prevention of vice," with some enforcing actions.⁴³ With the rise of Nasserism in the mid-1950s, however, "Muslimoun" degraded significantly. Salafis lacked sufficient funding and a distinguished ideology; moreover, they could not compete with Nasserism that was attracting the youth. After Sheikh Salim al-Shahhal returned once again from Saudi Arabia in 1964, he founded the Salafi Movement in Tripoli. He sent his three sons, Da'i al-Islam, Radi, and Abu Baker, to learn Shari'a in Medina, Saudi Arabia. With Sheikh Salim getting older, his son Da'i al-Islam led the movement, representing the second phase of the movement, militant Salafism. In the early years of the 1970s, Da'i al-Islam started the Islamic Army to fight all non-Islamic trends gaining ground in Tripoli.

An important factor in the transformation of Salafism into a militant movement was the creation of the Islamic Unification Movement (IUM) that controlled Tripoli from 1982 until 1985. The Left, consisting mainly of Lebanese Communist Party or other radical Marxist groups, attracted Tripoli's Sunni youth because of the uneven distribution

40 Al-Mawla, *Salafism and New Salafism*, 237.

41 John Gulick, *Tripoli: A Modern Arab City*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.

42 Al-Mawla, *Salafism and New Salafism*, 276.

43 Al-Mawla.

of wealth in the country until the beginning of the 1980s.⁴⁴ Without a viable alternative, the inhabitants of Tripoli once again returned to focusing on religious practices. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the withdrawal of the PLO led to the decline of the Leftist movement and expansion of the Sunni religious movement. At the same time, the success of the Iranian revolution gave credibility to Islamists who had upheld the possibility of establishing an Islamic state in the region.⁴⁵ Under these conditions, the charismatic Sheikh Saeed Sha'ban founded IUM after leaving the Muslim Brotherhood because of a disagreement on methodology. The IUM took control of Tripoli and North Lebanon in 1982 with material support from the PLO and the Iranian Republic; Sa'id Sha'ban announced the founding of an Islamic emirate in the North. During its three-year reign, IUM lost popular support because of the terrorism it practiced (in 1983 IUM fighters killed dozens of members of the Lebanese Communist Party), the internal schisms, and its lack of a unified ideological direction. The movement ended when the Syrian Army that had been occupying Lebanon since 1976 managed to defeat it militarily in 1985.

After the collapse of the IUM's mini-state, different players in the Sunni religious community tried to fill the vacuum; Salafis gradually filled the space. Tripoli long enjoyed the advantage of a stable, Sunni-supported environment unlike in Saida and Beirut where Sunnis coexisted with the Maronite, Shi'ites, and the Druze. Tripoli was also prosperous because of European missionaries, an advanced transportation system, and the port. After the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1979, al-Azhar University restricted its scholarships from students coming from Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon because those countries opposed Anwar El Sadat's change of policy. In response, the Islamic University of Medina opened its doors for them. Upon their return, the Lebanese graduates were to transform Salafism from being a marginal group into one of the most important Sunni movements.⁴⁶ In the 1980s, many Lebanese Sunnis converted to Islamism after the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood and the invasion of

⁴⁴ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 68.

⁴⁵ Pall, 69.

⁴⁶ Pall, 76.

Israel in 1982. Salafis benefited from the weakening of the traditional religious elite, the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood's type of Islamism, and the appearance of wealthy sponsors from the Gulf countries to strengthen their positions.

With funding from the Gulf and a vacuum in the religious space, Salafis strengthened their grip in Tripoli. In 1988, Sheikh Da'i al-Islam Al Shahal created GCS with Saudi money to cover Sunni needs in the social and educational domains. The Islamic Group (IG) filled some of these gaps, but that group started to decline soon after the Ta'if Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war was reached. The group mainly declined because it did not carry a clear agenda, differences arose between pro- and anti-Syrian wings, and activists—such as Sheikh Sa'd al-Din Kibbi—left the group to create their own independent group. Finally, Palestinian members left to join Hamas. The deterioration of the IG's presence on the Sunni religious front created opportunities for Salafis to accumulate religious capital by appearing as the righteous few who sincerely care about Islam by providing religious services for Muslims.⁴⁷

After the Lebanese Civil War, the Syrian regime considered the Christian Lebanese Forces and the PLO a more dangerous threat than the Salafis. Syrian and Lebanese intelligence believed that any threat coming from the Salafi community could be countered by the presence of many informants among the movement's followers. They believed that the ties between the Lebanese Forces and Israel were troubling, and the Arab World's sympathy for the PLO legitimized them in the eyes of Muslims. The Syrian regime countered both by presenting themselves as the last Arab regional power capable of protecting the Muslim community. A vital function of Muslim religious leaders—Sunnis and Shi'ites alike—was to systematically transform the question of Syrian-Lebanese relations, when it was raised, into one of inter-Lebanese relations, thereby preventing the creation of a national coalition directed against Syria.⁴⁸

Around 1990, Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal returned to Tripoli from Saudi Arabia, and the Syrians allowed him to increase his influence in Tripoli because they wanted the

⁴⁷ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 71.

⁴⁸ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 261.

Sunnis fragmented. With funding from Saudi Arabia, Da'i al-Islam developed his own group operating in almost every Sunni region. *Manar Magazine* published by Mohamad Rasheed Rida and *Fateh Magazine* by Moheb Deen Khatib also supported the spread of Salafism in the early 1990s.⁴⁹ One of the ways to know the dominance of an Islamic movement is to see how many mosques it controls. In 1990s Tripoli, out of 110 mosques, 40 mosques were controlled by Dar al-Fatwa, 40 by Salafis, and 30 by different other movements such as al-Ahbash, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, and al-Tabligh.⁵⁰ This was beneficial for the Syrian regime as a convenient way to keep a solid grip and to manipulate the Lebanese Sunni domain.

In 1983, Syrian intelligence allowed the Ethiopian Sheikh Abdallah al-Hirari to head the "Islamic Society for Charitable Works" movement, known as al-Ahbash, in order to counter Salafism. Through militia tactics that blended brutality and intimidation, the Ahbash in the 1980s seized the mosques of Burj Abu Haidar, Zuqqat al-Blat, and Basta Fawqa in the capital's western neighborhoods, imposing their own interpretation of the sacred texts and ousting Dar al-Fatwa's legally appointed Sheikhs.⁵¹ They spread in all Sunni regions, leading to clashes with Salafis. Ahbash's main competitors were the Muslim Brothers (*Jama'a al-Islamiya*) and the Salafis. Ultimately, another militant group, in the Ain al-Hilwa Palestinian refugee camp in Saida, Usbat al-Ansar, murdered the head of the al-Ahbash organization Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi on August 31, 1995. The Lebanese judiciary accused Abu Mihjin, the "brains" behind the operation, condemning him to death in absentia on January 17, 1997.⁵² The tribunal also issued death sentences to three Islamists among the five men arrested, and they were hanged in the courtyard of Rumiyyeh Prison on March 24, 1997.⁵³ At the same time, the Syrian regime and its representatives in Lebanon used the event to crackdown on the entire Salafi movement. The Lebanese judiciary ordered the closure of GCS, a charitable and educational

49 Al-Mawla, *Salafism and New Salafism*, 237.

50 Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 62.

51 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 113.

52 Rougier, 120.

53 Rougier.

organization directed by Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal, in 1996 arguing that al-Shahhal's network was spreading extremist ideas.⁵⁴ In addition, the state's *ulamas* (religious scholars) were not allowed to provide religious expertise in defining the organization Halabi headed, which would have legitimized his execution and made it possible to emphasize the apostasy of al-Ahbash.⁵⁵ This conveyed a feeling that the trial was a parody of justice.

After this incident, the Salafis gained legitimacy as the defenders of Sunnis in the face of the “deviant” teachings of al-Ahbash. Al-Ahbash used the theme of *takfir* to counter anyone who dared challenge their teachings. The struggle therefore prompted an intensification of Sunni identity and gave rise to militant solidarities with new political affiliations. In the early 1990s, young Palestinians from the Muslim Student Union tried to counter al-Ahbash takfir ideology inside the Palestinian camps by explaining the doctrine of Sheikh Halabi's organization and its deviant character in relation to Sunni orthodoxy. Trained Sheikhs in Ain al-Helweh's mosques provided an audience that had not mastered the core of Islamic texts with the intellectual instruments necessary to upend the Ahbash's religious posturing and contest the organization's dialectics. Hasan al-Qatarji, a Lebanese Sheikh who taught *hadith* sciences at Dar al-Fatwa's Faculty of Islamic Law in Lebanon, gave a lecture at al-Nur Mosque in Ain al-Helweh on the dangers inherent in rashly using *takfir*; he explained the conditions for its valid use as established in Islamic history.⁵⁶

B. INTERNAL SPLITS IN LEBANESE SALAFISM

Since the 1990s, Tripoli's Salafis have been divided into two main schools: *harakis* represented by Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal and purists represented by Safwan Al-Zo'bi and Hasan al-Shahhal. Since the founding of Salafism Movement by Sheikh Salim al-Shahal, his family dominated Tripoli. In 1990, Saudi charities and the Kuwaiti *Jama'iyyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami* (Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage—

⁵⁴ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 83.

⁵⁵ Pall, 122.

⁵⁶ Pall, 125.

SRIH) both supported GCS. In 1997, the leadership of SRIH became purist, and so SRIH cut off the funds from all *haraki* organizations. A young sheikh, Safwan al-Zo'bi, created the Islamic Heritage Endowment and got his funds from the Kuwaiti SRIH.⁵⁷ SRIH's main intention was to create a strong purist stream of followers in the country to counterbalance the *harakis*. For that, they managed to fund charities of Dr. Hassan al-Shahhal, director of Ma'had al-Da'wa wal-Irshad (Call and Guidance College) and the cousin of Da'i al-Islam.

Notably, the Lebanese militants who led the Diniyeh insurrection in 2000 developed their political and religious identity outside Lebanon and, more generally, outside the Middle Eastern religious scene and the global Arab political system.⁵⁸ The leader of the Sir al-Diniyeh group, Basim al-Kanj (Abu Aisha), traveled between the United States and Lebanon; he spent some time in Afghanistan where he was radicalized and was convinced of the importance of an Islamic caliphate. He had some ties with Usbat al-Ansar in the Ain el-Helwe camp although the two groups had different history, experience, and political trajectories. The feeling of participating in a holy war in the mountains of Diniyeh mobilized Muslims of Palestinian origin just as it did Muslims of Lebanese nationality. While the “state of Hezbollah” has been able to develop its “Islamic society” outside—or, rather, beside—state institutions, the Islamicized segments of the Sunni community have not been given the same right, even in those regions neglected by the Lebanese state since independence.⁵⁹ Basim remarkably recruited young people and formed a strong group that aimed to build an independent Islamic emirate in Sir al-Dineyeh, equivalent to the “state of Hezbollah.” His strong connection with Usbat al-Ansar helped him train his militants, fund his group, and recruit new members to his group.

Basim al-Kanj's group clashed with the Lebanese Army on New Year's Eve 2000, losing the battle in one week. Basim ordered his men to take over a building in the

⁵⁷ Ali Abed El-Al, “Lebanon's Salafists: Foundation and Evolution,” *Arab Times* (Blog), 2010 http://www.arabtimes.com/portal/article_display.cfm?Action=&Preview=No&ArticleID=15322.

⁵⁸ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 244.

⁵⁹ Rougier.

village of Assoun, North Lebanon, that housed the radio station of al-Hidaya, a Salafi association that had been disbanded. To control the situation, Islamist figures from Tripoli and the surrounding region, among them Sheikh Da'i al-Islam al-Shahal, approached the Jama'a Islamiyya deputy Khalid Dahir and asked him to mediate between the armed groups and the Lebanese Army. The efforts did not work, and after a few clashes, the Lebanese Army overcame the last stronghold of the movement on January 3, 2000.

After the Diniyeh events, the Syrian authorities changed their policy on Islamism and attempted to exercise stricter control over the various radical Sunni movements. They saw a threat in radical Sunni groups that could rally anti-Syrian mobilization, and the Syrian authorities wanted to keep the Christians feeling threatened and in need of Syrian protection. The authorities reactivated Sunni militias that they—and AMAL, the Shi'ite group headed by Nabih Berri—had eliminated in the mid-1980s, as long as the groups legitimized Syria's actions.⁶⁰ In early 2000, the Syrians released from jail Hashim Minqara, the former Tawhid emir of the Mina of Tripoli, to challenge Bilal Sha'ban, the son of Sheikh Sa'id, over the leadership of the movement.⁶¹ They gave credibility to the little known Union of Akkar Ulama to counter Maronite authorities. When an assembly of Maronite bishops published a document denouncing the effects of Syria's presence in Lebanon at the political and economic levels, the members of the Union strongly criticized the patriarch's position, accusing him of serving Israeli interests and of pursuing "isolationist" projects.

Hence, Salafis in Lebanon were relatively unified up until the second half of the 1990s when they fragmented for three reasons. The first factor, mentioned earlier, was that the Syrian regime dissolved the GCS in 1996 through the pro-Syrian Lebanese authorities, accusing the organization of inciting sectarian hatred.⁶² Students of Sheikh al-Shahhal created various Sunni Movements and worked to gain Sunni acceptance. They found hosts ready to fund their agenda. Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal was linked to the

60 Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 265.

61 Rougier.

62 Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 83.

Diniyeh group. After the battle in January 2000, many members of the organization were arrested, and Sheikh Da'i fled to Saudi Arabia to escape possible prosecution.⁶³ The second factor that led to the split of the Salafi movement was the fragmentation of Saudi Arabia Salafis, especially after the war in Iraq in 1991, and the purist state *ulama* legitimization of the American presence on Saudi Arabian soil. Since many Lebanese Salafis studied in Saudi Arabia and all of them had contacts with the Gulf countries, they did not remain unaffected by the aforementioned debates. The third and last factor was the drying up of Saudi financial sources following the 9/11 terror attacks and the subsequent "war on terror." Owing to American pressure after the September attacks, the Saudi government restricted the rights of al-Haramayn to support Salafi groups in foreign countries and then closed the institution altogether in 2004.⁶⁴ Consequently, Lebanese Salafis started searching for other sources of funding and split apart depending on the charity that funded them.

Syrian occupation ended on April 10, 2005, only a few months after a car bomb killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and 21 others in Beirut, for which many blamed the Syrian regime. Demonstrations by Christians, Sunnis, and Druze immediately followed that event. The Syrians' departure marked the relaxation of the tight security control over Salafis and the security services' pressure on *haraki*, in particular. As a result, al-Ahbash's influence declined and many followers changed heart because of the Ahbash's close ties to Syria. Charges against Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal were dropped and he returned to Lebanon. Meanwhile, Salafis cooperated with the al-Hariri clan to gain funding for their charity networks in return for the votes of their followers in the elections.

In terms of structure, transnational purist networks are generally more hierarchical than the *haraki* ones. The great Islamic scholars of the Gulf possess significant religious authority over the Lebanese purists. The Lebanese fatwa council that consists of local scholars issues independent legal opinions only when the fatwas of the Saudi great *ulama*

⁶³ Zoltan Pall, *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe* (The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 52.

⁶⁴ Pall, 53.

are not specific enough to the local circumstances. On the other hand, *haraki* transnational networks are much more horizontal. They regard this domination of great scholars in the Lebanese purist network as a distortion of the teaching of Islam, which advocates the individual freedom of the learned to interpret the Text.⁶⁵ In Sheikh Salim al-Rafi'i's opinion, local Salafi Sheikhs can also be highly knowledgeable and almost certainly have deeper insights into what is going on in their own community and their country.⁶⁶

Just as the structures of the purist and the *haraki* Salafi factions differ, so does the structure of their respective transnational links. The different views about the ruler's role are a particular cause of mistrust between these groups, and they disparagingly label each other "innovators" or *murji'a*.⁶⁷ Both purist and *haraki* Lebanese Salafis extend their networks in the direction of the Arabian Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, to improve their religious knowledge and acquire funds. The learning occurs at the level of the Sheikhs or among active followers; passive followers rarely interact with outer sources. For Sheikhs, network ties can emerge in the early years of studying Shari'a, or through formal and informal encounters between Sheikhs in Salafi events. Committed Lebanese Salafis often interact with visiting Salafis from Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, or in online communities based on shared ideology. Funds from Gulf-based charities are vital for the survival of the Salafi networks. As stated earlier, since 1997, SRIH has only sponsored purists whereas the Qatari Sheikh's Aid Charity Foundation (SACF) financed the North Lebanese *haraki* network. After 9/11, charity organizations became more careful in distributing money to Salafi networks, and after the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, they became even more careful about where their money was going in an attempt to curb the funding of militant groups in Syria.

The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon also were not isolated from the Arab world's increased interest in Islamism and Jihadi Salafism. Ain al-Helwe is the largest

65 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 71–72.

66 Pall, *Salafism In Lebanon*, 178.

67 Pall, 177.

camp, with more than 80,000 inhabitants in one square kilometer. It operated throughout the Syrian occupation as a refuge and a training environment for the people who ran away from the Syrian militant actions in the North. Militant groups started openly targeting the Lebanese Army believing in the “near enemy then the far enemy” policy of Bin Laden. The Lebanese Army was able to stand up against all groups, keeping the Jihadi Salafis in the Palestinian camps contained. Perhaps the sharpest encounter was the three-month fight of Naher al-Bared refugee camp in Northern Lebanon between the Lebanese Army and “Fateh al-Islam,” an offshoot from “Fateh al-Intifada” that was linked to the Syrian regime. Clashes started May 20, 2007, when “Fateh al-Islam” fighters attacked three Lebanese Army checkpoints and killed a number of soldiers. The fight ended on September 2, 2007, with the escape of Shaker al-Absi, the founder of the group. The Lebanese Army gained control over Naher al-Bared camp.

Initially, neither global jihad nor Salafi-Jihadism had popular traction in Lebanon. Sheikh Abdallah Azzam’s call for global jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, with the tacit or explicit encouragement of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, fell virtually on deaf ears in Lebanon.⁶⁸ The emergence of the al-Haraka al-Islamiyah al-Mujahida (the Islamic Jihad Movement) in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Helweh by Sheikh Ibrahim Ghunaym was a call for jihad against the Zionists in view of the Arab defeats of 1967 and 1973. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PLO defenses quickly broke, whereas Sheikh Ghunaym’s student Hisham Shraydi held the front for 20 days, giving legitimacy to the resistance. He was radicalized by Imam Hassan Zaghmut who introduced him to the ideas of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁹ Shraydi formally established his movement in 1986, naming it Usbat al-Ansar. Consequently, the brutal Syrian suppression of the IUM in Tripoli led them to find refuge with Usbat al-Ansar. Usbat al-Ansar acted on its ideology by imposing its fundamentalist view of Islamic creedal principles on Palestinian society and making *jihad* (armed struggle) a focal point of its militant activism against idolatrous societies and rule.

⁶⁸ Robert Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apolitical to Transnational Jihadism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 138.

⁶⁹ Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apolitical to Transnational Jihadism*, 139.

Though quietist Salafis have frowned upon the confrontational discourse and takfiri rhetoric of *haraki* Salafis, their efforts to unite Salafis and oppose takfir ideology have thus far not succeeded. The strong belief championed by *harakis* that Sunnis have been turned into lambs for slaughter has prevailed among most Sunnis.

Sunni-Shi'ite tensions have given the Salafis an opportunity to reach a larger Sunni audience. The dominance of the Shi'ite parties AMAL and Hezbollah over the Sunni majority has led to many recruits to Salafism. Since the start of the Arab Spring and the Syrian revolution of 2011, which was accompanied by increasing Sunni-Shi'i sectarianism, many Lebanese Sunnis have started to associate themselves with Salafism.⁷⁰ Sheikh Ahmad Al Asir's movement in Saida was a proof of the escalation of the Lebanese Sunni mindset toward political radical non-Jihadi Salafism, a new classification unlike the organizations before.⁷¹ Al Asir based his movement on the oppression that the Sunnis felt due to the actions of Hezbollah and AMAL, which resonated with many Sunnis who shared the same beliefs but did not act to challenge it. After the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Al Asir raised his voice because he saw the rise of Sunnis in Syria as a game changer, and that Islamists could now directly challenge Iran and Hezbollah. He lost a battle against the Lebanese Army, however, and the Lebanese General Security caught him in Beirut International Airport two years later while he was trying to run away with a fake passport and a shaved beard.

Various attempts to unite the Sunni Salafis have not been successful. Motivated by their desire to unite and stand as the guardians of the Sunni community, Salafis look to a *hadith* by Prophet Muhammad that "the hand of God is with the group" as the overriding principle to surmount their factionalism.⁷² This did not resonate with the events in the Middle East and, in particular, the Syrian Civil War. *Harakis* have continued to criticize the state and the purist Salafis. The suppression of al-Assir and the assassination attempts on Sheikh al-Rafi'i and Sheikh Baroudi in Tripoli assured that the *harakis* would not back down.

⁷⁰ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 160.

⁷¹ Al Mawla, *Salafism and the New Salafists*, 296.

⁷² Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apolitical to Transnational Jihadism*, 232.

C. CONCLUSION

As described in this chapter, Salafism in Lebanon may be considered as an extension of transnational Salafism; nevertheless, Salafism in Lebanon has developed within a domestic context heavily influenced by regional ideologies and politics. It is, in fact, very much alive and even growing among Sunni Muslims in the country. The reason the Gulf is so important to Lebanon is that while Saudi Arabia supported the purists, the tendency among Kuwaiti and Qatari Salafis was to create space for the *harakis*. This led to both trends developing regional and even global networks of charity, influence, and support. Nevertheless, Salafis in Lebanon rely more on informal ties than institutional ones, which helps them survive repression by the Lebanese security services. This chapter has explored three schools of Salafism—quietist, activist, and Salafi-Jihadist—that are, more or less, in line with the transnational networks of Salafism whose roots go back to the theological and ideological development of Salafism in Saudi Arabia. Salafis, even though they have different and even conflicting ideologies, share a common aim to purify Islam from intruding ideas and to establish an ideal Islamic society. Hence, Salafism constitutes a theological and realistic challenge to the plural society of Lebanon and to the region. Most likely, the importance of Salafism in Lebanon lies in the movement’s ability to shape the religious identity of the regular Lebanese Sunni believers and not in its potential to launch armed action.

The next chapter considers the actions of Salafi decision makers in relation to the pressure from state sponsors. Rich states have always showed an interest in foreign organizations for various reasons; states might want to spread their religion, culture, or influence. The chapter mainly considers Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar’s favored Salafi organizations, and the influence of their decisions, if any, to favor the interests of those countries. At the same time, the next chapter looks into the political and ideological aspects of the organizations’ decision-making. Changes in ideology or political pursuits to favor the donor-state’s vision will favor hypothesis three. It is true that states look for organizations most closely aligned with their ideology, but at some point along the way, a difference in vision might arise between the organizations’ leaders and their sponsors.

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III. DECISION-MAKING IN LEBANESE ISLAMISTS GROUPS WITH STATE SPONSORS

Different states have played major roles in shaping and developing Islamic currents to strengthen their position in the Arab and Muslim world. A general take-away is that a regime's international influence and thus its survival has been the main motivator for states to fund organizations outside their borders and intervene in the shaping of their ideologies and policies. In the economically struggling suburbs of Tripoli and in Palestinian refugee camps, Salafism emerged as a social movement and "an alternative to anomie and gang crime for excluded and unemployed youths."⁷³ During the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), Syria exploited its physical military presence to influence and contest Salafism. In 1983, the Syrian intelligence allowed, if not ordered, the Ethiopian Sheikh Abdallah al-Hirari to head al-Ahbash, in order to counter Salafism. Attacking the PLO in Naher Al-Bared camp in 1983 and crushing the IUM in 1985 were part of the Syrian regime's agenda to make sure that its sectarian grip in Syria was not opposed.

The return of Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal in 1990 was the beginning of the rise of *haraki* Salafis backed by Saudi Arabia. His organization GCS kept Salafis together due to Sheikh Da'i's prestige, authority, and financial power.⁷⁴ With this, Saudi Arabia was counterbalancing Iran's effort to win the hearts and minds of the Sunni population in the Middle East. In 1968, Ayatollah Khomeini told Muslims that it was necessary "to help PLO's men fight unbelieving and inhuman Zionism."⁷⁵ This gradually declined until the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 when the PLO was not a good option as Iran's ally anymore. According to Muhammad Hasan al-Amin, the Iranians wanted full support in the war, which the PLO could not give them, and so they created Hezbollah in 1985.⁷⁶ After Syrians banned GCS in 1996 using the Lebanese juridical institutions, purist Salafis

⁷³ Tine Gade, "Limiting Violent Spillover in Civil Wars: The Paradoxes of Lebanese Sunni Jihadism, 2011–17," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10, no. 2 (April 2017): 9.

⁷⁴ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, 82.

⁷⁵ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 28.

⁷⁶ Rougier, 30.

expanded their influence. They benefited from the appearance of the two Gulf charities SRIH and SACF on the Lebanese scene.⁷⁷

Today, Islamic movements in Lebanon count more than twenty powerful organizations, each having a political or ideological agenda, and many are not open about their sources of funding. The Norwegian political scientist Thomas Hegghammer considers Islamist movements to follow four different rationales: socio-revolutionary, nationalist, pan-Islamist, or sectarian.⁷⁸ Since the cost of using violence is too high, the number of Lebanese Sunnis who escalated their strong frustration was very limited.⁷⁹ This chapter looks at al-Ahbash, funded by Syria; the GSC, funded by Saudi Arabia; and the Islamic Heritage Endowment (IHE), funded by Kuwait. The aim is to find out whether such organizations change ideologies to mirror the sponsoring state.

A. ISLAMIC SOCIETY FOR CHARITABLE WORKS (AL-AHBASH)

There is much controversy surrounding how this organization started, how it built its ideology, and how it fits in the Lebanese Islamist community. Some scholars like Nizar Hamzeh consider al-Ahbash as a Sufi movement that is spiritually Islamist but not politically.⁸⁰ Others such as Bernard Rougier and Zoltan Pall categorize it more as a proxy for the Syrian regime that sought division of the Lebanese Sunnis to consolidate Syrian influence in Lebanese politics. To better understand this organization, this research looks into three factors: the ideology of the founder of the movement, the circumstances in which al-Ahbash strengthened its grip, and the origins of the group's funding.

The founder's belief system has a complex structure that incorporates Sufi spiritualism with parts of Sunni and Shi'i theology. Sheikh Abdallah al-Hirari, the

⁷⁷ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 28.

⁷⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islam," In *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, edited by Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 244–266.

⁷⁹ Gade, "Limiting Violent Spillover in Civil Wars," 10.

⁸⁰ Nizar Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon: A Guide to the Groups," *Middle East Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (September 1997): 47–53, <https://www.meforum.org/362/islamism-in-lebanon-a-guide-to-the-groups>.

founder of al-Ahbash, settled in Beirut in 1950 after a journey from Ethiopia to the Hijaz, then Jerusalem and Damascus. With that, he developed a moderate and tolerant Islamic system that allows pluralism without political activism and the resort to violence against the rulers.⁸¹ His main aim was to recruit more believers while at the same time maintaining political passivity.⁸² Although Habashi respects the pious ancestors and the Shari'a, he might be a possible follower of the "Kalamiya (literalist) tradition of the Mu'tazila who stressed the superiority of reason over revelation" because of his emphasis on the science of *hadith*.⁸³ He deemphasizes the importance of Ibn Taymiya as Sheikh al-Islam, and considers that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and Sayyid Qutb were not figures of Islamic authority.

Al-Ahbash originally had political differences with Salafis and Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya that later on evolved into an ideological struggle. The Ahbash started with a few hundred members during the civil war and became a large Islamic movement by the late 1980s. As mentioned in Chapter II, al-Ahbash followers forcefully took over mosques in Beirut defying Dar Al-Fatwa. This was at a time when the Syrian regime had the Christian parties and the PLO as their main enemies; it had a need to legitimize its intervention in Lebanon. Such mobilization maintained religious tension that allowed Syria to act as a permanent regulator of the Lebanese social and political spheres.⁸⁴ And, although the Syrian-favored organization spread all over the world, it was banned in Syria. Al-Ahbash did not create its own militia; moreover, it did not take part in sectarian violence or any of the conflicts with Israel. It advocated for pluralism and tolerance, a moderate alternative to Islamism, which gained the support of many of the Sunni urban middle class. The main target of the organization was recruitment and increasing its influence. With that call for Islamic pluralism, al-Ahbash organization aggressively worked to challenge the doctrine and preaching of other groups.⁸⁵ The organization also

81 Nizar Hamzeh and Hrair Dekmejian, *A Sufi Response to Political Islamism: Al-Ahbash of Lebanon*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

82 Hamzeh and Dekmejian.

83 Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon," 51.

84 Rogier, *Everyday Jihad*, 261.

85 Hamzeh and Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism," 5.

wanted to influence the ballot box and the street battles. On the ideological level, it attacked the founder of Wahhabism, Mohammad Ben AbdulWahab (1703–1791), who Salafis consider a source of historical inspiration. Moreover, it lambasted Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), one of the prominent Hanbali jurists, who is well respected among Salafis and modern Islamist currents. They also brutally criticized Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue influencing an entire generation of Islamists. Moreover, al-Ahbash adopted many Sufi ideas and practices, which the Salafi groups consider to be heretical and acts of blasphemy. As a result, the differences between them now extend from politics all the way to ideology. The two sides have frequently exchanged accusations of treachery, heresy, and deviation from religion.⁸⁶

Although it is hard to trace the funding of al-Ahbash, the organization most probably takes money from the Syrian regime or individuals who pay allegiance to Syria. According to its leaders, sympathizers and members donate to the organization; this sort of funding is what keeps the association alive.⁸⁷ The hierarchal organization of al-Ahbash, and the organized way in which it took control over strategic mosques in Beirut suggest that a godfather sponsors the organization. The opposition from Dar al-Fatwa did not affect the organization and it continued to operate without a license. Furthermore, the Syrian regime hunted most Islamist groups forcing them to go underground at the time when it fully supported al-Ahbash. The benefits of an ideology of seeing Syria as the only representative of Muslims was priceless for the Syrian regime since it could not easily face a united Sunni front. Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (JI) and Harakat al-Tawheed openly accused the Syrian regime of helping to create al-Ahbash as a “tool to fight other Islamist forces.”⁸⁸ Evidence shows, in fact, that the Syrians encouraged al-Ahbash to improve their influence by occupying mosques in Beirut and Tripoli.⁸⁹

86 Imad Abdulghani, “Lebanese Sunni Islamism: A Post Election Review,” Norway: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019, 16–17.

87 Omayma Abdel-Latif, “Lebanon’s Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force,” *Carnegie Papers*, 6 (September 2008): 1–22. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec6_abdellatif_lebanon_final.pdf.

88 Abdel-Latif, “Lebanon’s Sunni Islamists,” 9.

89 Abdel-Latif.

Whether created by the Syrian regime or just exploited by it, al-Ahbash shows deviation from the Sufi traditions to better blend in the Lebanese political system. With the high Lebanese regard for religious pluralism, Sufism had special strength as the Ahbash narrative shows.⁹⁰ In such cases, modernization and industrialization were not able to cause the Sufi orders to decline. Followers managed to pull bloody fights against JI and other Islamists while supporting Syria as the true defender of Muslims and avoiding any fights with Israel. Their adaptation is most probably based on political reasons; al-Ahbash sought a more significant role in the Lebanese politics and hence adapted their teachings to accommodate a wider range of Muslims.

B. GUIDANCE AND CHARITY SOCIETY (GCS)

The Salafi movement started with Sheikh Salem al-Shahhal in 1946; it has developed into a movement of approximately 50 organizations operating as religious schools and non-profit organizations, mostly in North Lebanon.⁹¹ The sub-organizations related to al-Shahhal are Wahhabi-inspired; their scholars graduate from Saudi Arabia's religious schools with hardline Wahhabi ideology. Originally, the mainstream Lebanese Salafi organizations were quietists who claim to "seek reform without resorting to violence, renouncing violence as an instrument of social and political change."⁹² Over time, however, the *harakis* began to improve their position and convert purists upon the return of about "fifty Lebanese graduates of the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia."⁹³ In 1990, the movement operated through the GCS, who aimed to reform society, help those in need, and build educational and religious facilities such as mosques and schools. They functioned under the authority of Sheikh Salem's son Da'i al-Islam, gradually transforming them more closely into *harakis* since the Saudi Sahwa movement affected him and many other Lebanese Sheikhs. Salafis portrayed themselves as the resistance to the Shia "threat" and as saviors of Sunnis. The *haraki* Salafi organization

90 Hamzeh and Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism," 14.

91 Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon," 50.

92 Hamzeh.

93 Zoltan Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 12–17.

SRIH openly supported GCS up until 1997.⁹⁴ Upon his return to Lebanon in 1990, al-Shahhal received from SRIH “hundreds of thousands of dollars, likely in excess of \$1 million, to establish religious colleges in Tripoli.”⁹⁵

As mentioned in Chapter II, the Syrian regime cracked down on the organization in 1996. After Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination in February 2005 and the following rapid Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, Salafis gained power and mobilized in coordination with the Future Movement. Hariri’s death created a sense of victimization that, added to the hatred of and hostility against the Syrian regime, led Salafis to vote for Hariri’s endorsed candidates; Salafis turned a blind eye to the fact that the list included figures from the Lebanese Forces, “the party of the extreme right-wing Christian wartime militia.”⁹⁶ In general, Lebanese Salafis have stayed away from Lebanese politics, following their initial ideology. They were inactive during the tenure of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, but later on they indulged into politics as everyone else siding with the March 14 movement.

An issue that was highly disputed was how Salafis got their funds. Perhaps the Hariri supported the Salafis in hope of buying their loyalties. This might have been a plan by the Hariri to mobilize Sunni fighters in any confrontation with Hezbollah; at the same time, this explains Saudi Arabia’s control over Salafis. Al-Shahhal undeniably got funding from Gulf organizations, encouraged by their states, to start his movement. With the split of the Gulf States, Da’i al-Islam remained loyal to the *harakis* and hence kept receiving the Saudi funding. Kuwait’s turn toward purist Salafis led to the loss of funding from SRIH to the GCS. At a later stage, the Arab Spring was a boost for the Gulf-supported *harakis* to increase their grip because of the continuous support that the Arab leaders got from the purists.

Even though Salafis had a hard time selling the idea of collaboration with parties that go against their ideology, they managed to mobilize their followers by presenting al-

94 Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism*.

95 Pall.

96 Hamzeh, “Islamism in Lebanon,” 50.

Hariri as the protector of Sunnis in Lebanon. Moreover, al-Shahhal, due to constant unrest with the JI, accused the group of “wanting to control all other Islamist groups and speak in their name.”⁹⁷ This provoked the already high tensions between Islamist groups such as the JI and the Salafis. One explanation for that outside the ideology is the global tension between the Saudi axis on one hand and the Muslim brotherhood on the other that transferred the political tensions into Lebanese groups. Meanwhile, Salafi leaders have refused to admit that the Hariri funds them, insisting that “the funds mainly come from sympathetic individuals and associations in the Gulf, rather than from state organizations.”⁹⁸

C. ISLAMIC HERITAGE ENDOWMENT (IHE)

As mentioned earlier, purists in the North flourished with the changes in the Kuwaiti SRIH that decreased the role of *harakis*.⁹⁹ After SRIH stopped funding the GCS and started searching for more convenient organizations to support, purists gained the upper hand. In addition, the crackdown against *haraki* Salafis by the Syrian-influenced Lebanese authorities in the 1990s played a role in their rise. Moreover, the Lebanese Salafis lost resources and leadership after the Diniyeh fight with the Lebanese Army. They searched for other potential donors; they contacted several charities in the Gulf who previously supported al-Shahhal. The Lebanese purists who were marginalized by the GCS reconnected with the SRIH for financial support. Support was marginal in view of the Syrian regime crackdown on all Salafi groups; yet with the withdrawal of the Syrian forces in 2005, SRIH opened a branch in Tripoli and “became the dominant sponsor of the purists in Lebanon.”¹⁰⁰ The SRIH financed the newly created IHE, which consisted of several Salafi organizations in the North, mainly in Tripoli. “Under the leadership of the relatively young Sheikh Safwan al-Zaabi, the IHE became the backbone of the emerging purist faction in North Lebanon.”¹⁰¹ Several sheikhs from Tripoli and the surrounding

97 Hamzeh, “Islamism in Lebanon,” 50.

98 Hamzeh.

99 Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism*, 12–17.

100 Pall.

101 Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism*, 14.

areas signed an agreement, prepared by al-Zaabi, providing them with money from funders of the IHE, on condition that they follow a set of rules.¹⁰² First, they should stay loyal to the Saudi great *ulama* and not mock them. Second, despite injustices perpetrated by the rulers, Islamic society should be created by peaceful means. By that, the document prevents jihad that militant groups call for and ensures that the followers abide by the rules set by the rulers, even if those rulers are not Muslims. Hence, the agreement supports all means of coexisting with the Christians. In view of the SRIH after their shift to purists, these points reflect their preferences.¹⁰³ In addition to that, the IHE created a fatwa council that included highly respected Salafi figures. One fatwa, for example, allowed for participation in elections. To the clerics justifying this fatwa, “participating in the election of representatives to parliament is legitimate, since Lebanese law does not oblige them to make decisions that are un-Islamic.”¹⁰⁴ Al-Zaabi gained benefits from the candidates in exchange for support from IHE followers and supporters at the ballots. The winners in elections had an obligation to provide jobs and other services for purist Salafis. At the same time, the network that started with the small branch of SRIH in Tripoli expanded to more villages. This was possible with the increased ability of the IHE in recruiting more voters and hence improving the funder’s position in Lebanese politics.

With the outbreak of revolutions in the Arab countries, *haraki* Salafis regained power from the purist IHE’s network. This was not a unique event in Lebanon; it was consistent with many other countries. The uprisings resulted in the expansion of *haraki* Salafism and at the same time moving away from purists. This is mainly explained by the continuous support that purist leaders gave to the autocratic Arab regimes, issuing fatwas to try and save the losing leaders. In early 2011, “an anti-Shia group gained domination of the SRIH, and it did not tolerate al-Zaabi’s close contacts with the Shia party.”¹⁰⁵

102 Pall.

103 Pall, 12–17.

104 Pall.

105 Pall, 16.

SRIH fired Al-Zaabi in view of his attempt to bring Salafis and the Shia Hezbollah into a mutual understanding and in view of his ties to Syrian leaders.¹⁰⁶

As can be deduced, the IHE mirrored the views of its funder, SRIH. Kuwait was the most charitable country in the Gulf before 2011, making it ideal for private charities because of the relaxed financial laws and lenient political oversight.¹⁰⁷ When the IHE offered financial support to Salafis in the North, they had to abide by the red lines that the mother organization drew. Any deviation from that would threaten to block the flow of money. When the management of SRIH grew more aggressive against Hezbollah because of its intervention in Syria, they removed the founder of IHE from office.

D. CONCLUSION

States sponsored Lebanese Islamist organizations to gain a foothold in Lebanese politics, hence strengthening their position in Middle East geopolitics. This chapter considered al-Ahbash sponsored by Syria, the GCS sponsored by Saudi Arabia, and the IHE sponsored by Kuwait, looking into their decision-making processes compared to their funders' vision. Al-Ahbash survived because of the political gain that the Syrian regime got from splitting the Lebanese Sunnis. The privileges that its members had and the compelling recruitment banner of seeking peace attracted many new members. The leaders of al-Ahbash were most probably interested in potential financial gain while prospering under the protection and blessing of the Syrian regime. Although GCS leaders denied being funded by states, evidence showed that the Gulf States were interested in strengthening the position of Salafis in Lebanon. Since 1990, Saudi Arabia had helped GCS through Gulf charities, and in return, GCS mirrored the funders and advocated for loyalty to the leaders. At the same time, they backed up the Saudi-sponsored sectarian Hariri family while clashing with the JI whose ideology was connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. IHE was a mirror of the Kuwaiti purist organization SRIH; this was evident with the change in IHE's stance as more anti-Hezbollah as the leadership of SRIH became more anti-Hezbollah. The generous funding that Kuwait offered to IHE and other

¹⁰⁶ Pall.

¹⁰⁷ Creighton Mullins, "Syria and the Rise of Radical Islamist Groups" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), 108.

Salafi organizations was accompanied by a condition that members of those organizations not criticize their leaders. All three studied organizations showed a tendency to vary their beliefs when that suited their funders.

Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and other countries were also involved in the Lebanese Islamist world. Iran sought to legitimize its Islamic banner by supporting the PLO and other minor organizations in Lebanon. Yet, the Palestinian leadership refused to place itself under Iranian guardianship. This defection led some leaders, including Defense Minister Mustafa Shamran, to argue that the new Islamic Republic should choose a Lebanese constituency deprived of true leadership, such as the Shi'ites, rather than trying to help the unpredictable Palestinians.¹⁰⁸ With the Iraq-Iran war, it was evident to Iran's leadership that it was harder to sell its cause to a Sunni organization; with no Shi'ite organization that suited their agenda, Iran's leaders managed to help create and fund Hezbollah. At the same time, Iran supported minor Sunni organizations and individual Sunni clerics in Lebanon to keep a presence in the Sunni world. One of the most controversial figures accused of being partially funded by Qatar was the hardline Salafi cleric Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. According to Hazem El-Amin, an al-Hayat journalist, no one has a clear answer to who was arming al-Assir, but definitely, the weapons that he had suggest that money came from an external funding organization or state.¹⁰⁹ In addition, Turkey has been working slowly and assiduously, via non-governmental organizations and government relief organizations such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, to establish its foothold in Lebanon.¹¹⁰ This proves that the Lebanese stage is not closed to certain countries and any country can try to gain a foothold if that benefits its agenda. Built-in organizations are ready to shift their claims to mirror their funders. Several Salafi organizations, as shown in this chapter, have

¹⁰⁸ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Dana Moukhallati, "Breaking Down Ahmad al-Assir: The Man behind the Beard," *Al Arabiya*, June 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2013/06/25/Breaking-down-Ahmad-al-Assir-the-man-behind-the-beard>.

¹¹⁰ Jonathan Spyer, "Is Turkey Moving into Northern Lebanon?," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/is-turkey-moving-into-northern-lebanon-640226>.

alternated their role in internal politics depending on the money they received and the policy they carried.

The next chapter examines organizations funded by non-state actors or by individuals who find the argument of those organizations compelling. States are not the sole funders of Salafism in Lebanon; other interested groups invest in Islamist organizations for their own reasons. JI, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, has had to interact with various Lebanese components in order to survive. The Islamic Unification Movement in Tripoli went through various stages throughout the 1980s, and it was highly affected by the Syrian influence in Lebanon during that era. In addition, al-Qaeda inspired groups had some say in Lebanese politics. They recruited fresh volunteers based on hardline ideology; yet, did they act upon that ideology or for the political gains their funders might realize? The next chapter looks into those political components to see how they change positions to accommodate the flow of money to the organization.

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IV. DECISION-MAKING IN LEBANESE ISLAMIST GROUPS WITH NON-STATE SPONSORS

This chapter studies several movements that are not directly tied to state funders. Specifically, it examines the JI, the Islamic Unification Movement, Usbat al-Ansar, and Fateh al-Islam; and it looks at the relationships between them and their funders to see whether decision makers of such organizations take the benefits of the funding organization into consideration when working their own policies. Since JI was ideologically tied to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi-UAE-Egypt Axis hindered its development in many countries, including Lebanon. In order for them to survive, JI leaders had to work hand in hand with non-Muslim leaders and vote for them in the elections. The goal was to insure their political survival. The Islamic Unification Movement took over Tripoli and tried to apply Islamic Law. After gaining control over the area, they were soon crushed by the Syrian regime and its allies; consequently, the movement's leadership switched to a more lenient approach and got funds from interested groups that saw in them potential for legitimacy in future Sunni-Sunni conflicts. Finally, al-Qaeda inspired ideology was a great device for Usbat al-Ansar and Fateh al-Islam to recruit and legitimize their presence in the Lebanese Sunni world. They received money accordingly and worked their best to continue to get funding even if in doing so they harmed their own image in the eyes of the public.

A. AL JAMA'A AL-ISLAMIYYA

Fathi Yakan (1933–2009), the founder of the JI, expressed his Islamic activism and orientation based on the vision of Hassan al-Bannah and Sayyid Qutb, forming the basis of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology.¹¹¹ To him, Islam had been fighting a hard battle; and only through actively fighting back could Muslims preserve their existence. In particular, he saw in Qutb's militant ideology a successful strategy to prevail in such a fateful battle.¹¹² Created in 1964, the JI became present in all of Lebanon's cities and

¹¹¹ Robert Rabil, *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon: The Challenge of Islamism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 31.

¹¹² Rabil, *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon*, 32.

villages.¹¹³ Across the country, the group has since established a network of schools and medical facilities that strengthen its influence. Moreover, the group has a strong presence in the religious sector that makes JI a very powerful Sunni Islamist actor with influence in various mosques and institutions. At the same time, JI competes with al-Ahbash and IUM, in addition to “the traditional Sunni religious establishment as represented by the Juridical Office (*Dar al-Ifta*) and traditional leaders (the Karamis of Tripoli, the Salams of Beirut, and the Hariris of Saida), whom it regards as the instruments of foreign interests.”¹¹⁴

The JI’s political survival has been highly affected by its leadership’s take on the war in Syria and the intervention of Hezbollah. On one hand, JI might remain on the fringes of Lebanese politics for its opposition to the Syrian regime, and the competition with the main Sunni rival, i.e., the Future Movement. On the other, JI might benefit from criticizing the Syrian regime and its local proxies since it resonates with many Lebanese Sunnis.¹¹⁵ Saad al-Hariri, leader of the Future Movement, was seen as moving closer to the axis led by Damascus and Hezbollah. He embraced an Assad loyalist, Sleiman Frangieh, as his candidate for the Lebanese presidency, and he quickly accepted the special tribunal for Lebanon’s verdict that favored Hezbollah; hence, his popularity among Sunnis weakened. In contrast, the leaders of JI switched from the older vision, which was closer to the Syrian regime, to a more hardline approach with “younger, more principled figures such as the secretary general Azzam Ayyoubi, Mohammed Sheikh Ammar (the new head of the Majlis al-Shura) and cleric Ahmad al-Omari.”¹¹⁶ They are lately winning the hearts and minds on the Sunnis with their objection to the role Hezbollah is playing in the region and opposing the Syrian regime.

The relationship between JI and Hezbollah keeps has continued to evolve over time. At the start of Hezbollah in 1982, the two Islamist groups found in Israel a common

113 Raphael Lefevre, “A New Direction for Lebanon’s Muslim Brothers,” Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62740>.

114 Hamzeh, “Islamism in Lebanon,” 49.

115 Hamzeh.

116 Hamzeh.

enemy and a reason to collaborate. JI's military wing, Quwwat al-Fajr, and Hezbollah coordinated more than one operation against Israel.¹¹⁷ Yakan formed a political front of his own, in an alliance with Hezbollah, after the assassination of Hariri in 2005.¹¹⁸ Although the relationship started deteriorating after the 2000s, real problems came after Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian war. The political differences have not yet led to military confrontations between members, but they both have strong support bases in various places in Lebanon that might lead to clashes in the future. So far, perhaps knowing that JI will lose any confrontation against Hezbollah, Ayyoubi has so far persistently advised JI members to refrain from any sectarian conflict with the Shi'ites.¹¹⁹ The group's leadership tries to appeal to Sunnis by politically attacking Hezbollah and the Syrian regime while at the same time trying to keep the internal stage conflict-free.¹²⁰

To insure a place in the Lebanese politics, JI has collaborated with parties that were traditionally on the opposite side. In as yet unsuccessful effort to attract new recruits, JI offers less sophisticated social welfare services than the ones that Hezbollah provides; the results at the ballot show that it won "three seats in the 1992 parliamentary elections but just one seat in 1996."¹²¹ The axis made up of Saudi Arabia, the United Emirates, and Egypt has led to the abandonment of Jama'a by the Future Movement in the elections. In a completely non-ideological act for political reasons (survival), it had to align with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in the 2016 elections.¹²² This decision was not beneficial for Jama'a as they lost in the elections and lost some credibility in the Sunni population.

To sum up the JI's position, this study deduces that Jama'a is a relatively minor player in the Lebanese Sunni politics because of the inconsistency between its ideology and its political decisions. Jama'a follows the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood.

117 Lefevre, "A New Direction for Lebanon's Muslim Brothers."

118 Rabil, *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon*, 9.

119 Lefevre.

120 Lefevre.

121 Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon," 49.

122 Rabil, 11.

States do not seem to fund the Jama'a; rather, the group attracts individual funds from believers in the ideology. Jama'a leaders insist that it is a self-funded organization although they admit that some funds "do come from charitable organizations and sympathizers in the Gulf region."¹²³ JI diverged from its core ideology occurred during the elections and in its relationship with Hezbollah, primarily for survival and pursuit of a larger role in domestic politics. Hence, its main ideological enemy is al-Ahbash whereas its main political competitor is the Future Movement.

B. ISLAMIC UNIFICATION MOVEMENT (IUM)

The militant Sunni group IUM was founded by Sheikh Sa'id Sha'ban's (who died in 1998), splitting from the JI in 1982.¹²⁴ It gradually took control over Tripoli by militarily defeating several rivals up until its peak of power in 1984 when Khalil 'Akkawi and Kan'an Naji, two important leaders of the IUM, organized their own associations.¹²⁵ The IUM imposed Islamic laws in Tripoli, and violently struck the opposition in order to consolidate an Islamic state. They openly killed a number of communists who dared question their rulings. The Sha'ban's IUM had to collaborate with Hezbollah and the PLO to ensure a place in the Lebanese politics. Thus, Sha'ban's frequently went to Iran and grew close ties to Hezbollah; moreover, the PLO trained his fighters. They got their weapons from captured Lebanese Army forces and Internal Security forces barracks during the civil war. As stated in Chapter II, the Syrian Army crushed the IUM in 1985, but the group was allowed to remain unarmed to serve Syrian agendas. In addition, this might have occurred because of Sha'ban's links to Iran.¹²⁶ In 1988, IUM forces directed their militant power to fight Israeli forces and its puppets side by side with the Islamic Resistance. This major shift was a direct consequence of the Syrian intervention.

The organization changed fronts to ensure its political survival. Sa'id Sha'ban's favored a uniting Islamic rule that forms an umbrella for other religions separate from

123 Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Grown Force," Carnegie Papers, 2008, 8.

124 Hamzeh and Dekmejian, "A Sufi Response to Political Islamism," 4.

125 Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon," 50.

126 Marius Deeb, *Militant Islamic Movements in Lebanon: Origins, Social Basis, and Ideology*, (Washington, DC: Center For Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 10.

sectarianism, nationalism, and democratic pluralism.¹²⁷ He considered the Syrians as rescuers of the Lebanese Maronites through the Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976. On the other hand, in the post-war years, aside from a very few moments in which he criticized the Syrian regime, he was careful not to disturb its authorities. In fact, he supported the Syrian military presence in Lebanon considering it the mother organization that had the potential to lead an armed action against Israel.¹²⁸ This was a lesson learned from 1985 to ensure the survival of the organization.

The IUM most probably received money from Iran, the PLO, and individual supporters. The organization does not openly reveal its source of funding; hence, the tracking of its finances is difficult. When the IUM was formed, it was widely believed that Iran had financed it.¹²⁹ Yet, Sha'ban's alliance with the PLO in 1983 provided him with yet another source of money and arms.¹³⁰ An article by Tony Badran, posted by Washington's "Foundation for Defense of Democracies," considers the organization as an Iranian asset backed by the PLO.¹³¹ On the other hand, in an interview, Bilal Sha'aban, the head of IUM since the 2000s, states that the funding was only local. He declares that donations come from advertisements on the radio, revenues from medical clinics, Zakat, membership fees, and donations from friends and supporters overseas.¹³² Before the crackdown on the organization in 1986, it served as a spearhead for anti-Syrian organizations. Its control over Tripoli was of great advantage to Iran in its competition with Syria for control in Lebanon. At the same time, it helped Yasser Arafat, the head of the PLO, to legitimize his fight against Syria. After the civil war, the organization avoided clashes with the Syrian forces to insure its survival. In recent times, the IUM has continued to side with Hezbollah due to the financial support from Iran.

127 Hamzeh, "Islamism in Lebanon," 50.

128 Hamzeh.

129 Deeb, "Militant Islamic Movements in Lebanon," 8.

130 Deeb.

131 Tony Badran, "Hezbollah's Sunni Support Network," FDD, 2016, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/04/07/hezbollahs-sunni-support-network/>.

132 Kamal Shayya, Rania Sabaayon, Ghassan Makarem, Makram Kamel, Mustafa Hazim, "Islamic Movements in Lebanon," Husni Zeineh, trans. (Beirut, Lebanon: Masar Association, 2009), 97.

C. AL-QAEDA-INSPIRED SALAFIS

Groups affected by al-Qaeda ideology will continue to exist on the Lebanese soil for a while but with varying degrees of influence on Lebanese politics. For at least the past 14 years, small groups have acted independently without a shared Islamic framework. They are “independent of al-Qaeda in terms of logistics and finances, but are inspired by its ideology.”¹³³ They get support from individual sympathizers who find the grievances that those groups share appealing. Some groups have clashed with the security forces and this led to their demise (the Diniyeh group in 2000 and Fateh al-Islam in 2007), whereas others had a few skirmishes but continue to exist today (Usbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham). Recently, in September 2020, the armed forces clashed with a new group in Wadi Khaled in the north, killing 13 of its members and capturing 15. The next day, a suicide bomber tried to sneak into an army base but was shot before he got to his target. This illustrates how the al-Qaeda threat is still alive to this day.

These groups have shared characteristics that identify them. First, they do not participate in elections and have a distrust of the political process. Second, they see themselves as protectors of true Muslims and try to implement what they see as the “rule of God.” In order to accomplish that, some have fought against the Americans in Iraq whereas others have conducted attacks against the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in southern Lebanon.¹³⁴ Third, unlike other Salafis, al-Qaeda inspired organizations keep their activities private.¹³⁵ They rarely disclose their operations, seldom claim responsibility for bombings or military actions, and work in secrecy. This chapter looks into Usbat al-Ansar and Fateh al-Islam to see what influence money had on their decisions.

1. Usbat al-Ansar

Usbat al-Ansar is a Sunni extremist group that works on Lebanese soil; it is affiliated with al-Qaeda and follows the same fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. It

¹³³ Hamzeh, “Islamism in Lebanon,” 50.

¹³⁴ Hamzeh.

¹³⁵ Hamzeh.

first emerged in the Ain al-Helwi Palestinian refugee camp near Saida in the early 1990s. The group aims to establish a radical Sunni Islamic state in Lebanon and to prevent “what they perceive as anti-Sunni Islamic influences in Lebanon.”¹³⁶ Later on, the group conducted several operations against nightclubs and liquor stores; they also assassinated Lebanese religious leaders.¹³⁷ Moreover, its members fought against the Coalition Forces in Iraq in the mid-2000s. Nonetheless, Usbat al-Ansar has been careful not to be linked to such actions in fear of losing internal support from Lebanese Sunnis; hence, it rarely claims any attacks that its members conduct inside Lebanese territory.

The actions conducted by Usbat al-Ansar strongly reflect its funders’ plans and visions. It is likely that international Sunni extremist networks support the group.¹³⁸ The group has reportedly received money from both the al-Qaeda network and the Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi network; it also has links to “al-Diniyeh group, Takfir wal Hijra, Asbat al-Nur, and Jund al-Sham, which in turn have links to Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi network.”¹³⁹ Although they do not always claim responsibility for their operations, several attacks on courts, Lebanese Army posts in Saida, and other governmental buildings were reliably attributed to Usbat al-Ansar. After 9/11, the group was part of the global network that followed the al-Qaeda agenda. Usbat al-Ansar was responsible for killing a U.S. missionary in Saida in 2002, and for attacking Western fast-food restaurants all over Lebanon around the same time.¹⁴⁰ The timings of such operations suggest that the group serves as loyalists to the networks that fund them.

136 Phillip Ruddock, Letter from the Hon. Philip Ruddock MP, Attorney General, to Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS, and DSD, *Asbat al-Ansar: Attachment A*, 05/2082 (Canberra, Australia: 2005), https://web.archive.org/web/20110605015517/http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/pjcaad/terrorist_listingsb/subs/sub5.pdf.

137 Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” in *Country Reports on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2014), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239413.htm>.

138 Bureau of Counterterrorism.

139 Ruddock, *Asbat al-Ansar: Attachment A*.

140 Ruddock.

2. Fateh al-Islam

Fateh al-Islam (FAI) was established November 26, 2006, when its founder, Shakir al-Absi, took over bases in Nahr al-Barid camp in North Lebanon that belonged to Fatah al-Intifada, raising black banners with the inscription *tawhid* over the camp, and distributing papers that included his plan to bring “religion to the Palestinian cause.”¹⁴¹ There are indications, however, that a long time before the official move, the group had gathered and solidified its grip inside the camp. Al-Absi was imprisoned for three years in Syria for arms dealing, for example, and then he mysteriously appeared in Nahr al-Barid upon his release. Members of FAI had some friction with Lebanese Army soldiers at the entrance of the camp, yet little could be done since according to the 1969 Cairo Agreement, Lebanese security forces cannot enter the refugee camps. Still, international networks of the Salafi militants in the Palestinian camps suffered some losses of materials and personnel with raids by the Lebanese security forces outside the camps. Most probably, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon have become “more global in their nature and identity” because of the international training and financing networks.¹⁴²

FAI has had ties to more than one external actor but it was mainly linked to the al-Qaeda network and Syrian intelligence. When the group’s plans failed and the Lebanese Army was taking over, Shahin Shahin, a Palestinian from Nablus whose real name was Azzam Nahar, took over the group.¹⁴³ The Congregation of Palestinian ‘Ulama met with the FAI leadership several times, and one representative of the Congregation reported that Shahin Shahin was among the elements linking FAI to al-Qaeda.¹⁴⁴ Al-Qaeda ideology was beneficial to give the group legitimacy in its fight against the Lebanese Army. At the same time, Ahmed Mar’i, an FAI detainee, confessed to the Lebanese police that the Syrian intelligence services were on good terms with the movement. Those who believe that FAI was a tool of the Syrian regime consider that the change in the

141 Tine Gade, *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad*, Report No. 2007/02727 (Kjeller, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007), 22.

142 Gade, 20.

143 Gade.

144 Gade, 31.

leadership was a show to erase the Syrian ties. The disappearance of Absi, though, raises many questions as to how he was able to leave the surrounded camp and why he has not showed up somewhere else. Nevertheless, FAI is a fragmented group in which global jihadis and local Salafis have fought in the same front with former Fatah al-Intifada members and criminals who were recruited in Lebanese prisons. This negates the idea of a united group fully running for a unified ideological or political goal.

Money was the main motivator for most members of the FAI, whereas the group was allowed to exist for political gain by the Syrian regime. Palestinian militias opposing the Oslo Accords and regional groups that sought to restore Syrian hegemony in Lebanese affairs most probably supported FAI.¹⁴⁵ In addition, links with al-Qaeda groups provided the FAI with access to many foreign fighters who joined the group for financial gain. In fact, a majority of the recruits included those who sought to gain income.¹⁴⁶ Those were mostly foreign fighters who spilled over from Iraq and other places. Different supporters and sponsors seem to have aided the FAI: Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) and Abu Musa's Fatah al-Intifada provided at least logistic help.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, local cells provided training on explosives and managed the recruitment inside Lebanon whereas global jihadis assisted in “financing, recruitment, and propaganda.”¹⁴⁸ Both the leader of the group and its second in command (Abu Horeira) were imprisoned in Syrian jails for a while before being released. This might mean that they were recruited there and only allowed to be set free on the condition that they were to serve the Syrian regime's interests. Their motivation hence was survival and financial gain.

D. CONCLUSION

The use of violence in the Lebanese Sunni world started as a socio-revolutionary movement then changed to a pan-Islamist one, and at a later stage, to a sectarian

¹⁴⁵ Gade, 8.

¹⁴⁶ Mohamed Younes, “Abbas Decides on Aid to the Refugees from the Barid” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat* (newspaper, London office), June 8, 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Gade, “Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon,” 25.

¹⁴⁸ Gade.

movement.¹⁴⁹ The IUM was the first socio-revolutionary movement that existed during the civil war. Later, Usbat al-Ansar continued with the bombing of places serving alcohol with a moral justification for the casualties without adopting a jihadi strategy. A new stage was developed in the 2000s with the attacks on American fast-food chains in Lebanon, and the failed attempt to assassinate the American ambassador. Between 2005 and 2011, Islamists shared a pan-Islamist ideology and an anti-Shia (sectarian) one. It was only after the Arab Spring that hatred of the Shia justified the cause in light of Hezbollah's participation in the war in Syria. For the JI, the political struggle for survival resonated more than the principles and ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their decision-making process was concerned more with maintaining a presence in the political sphere, allowing them to violate the Islamic principles that they claim to adhere to. In the ballot, they coordinated and ordered their adhering supporters to vote for the hardline Christian party FPM. Contrary to their calculations, and although their supporters blindly followed the orders, supporters of the FPM did not vote for their candidates. This was a significant embarrassment for the JI leadership and questioned the correctness of their choice.

The IUM and al-Qaeda-inspired movements in Lebanon both sought financial gains more than political survival. IUM leaders opposed Syrian authority in North Lebanon for the convenience of their funders, Iran and the PLO. Even after the crackdown on the organization by supporters of the Syrian regime, the IUM continued to receive funds from pro-Iran organizations such as Hezbollah, and hence, the IUM continued to adhere to Iran's policies in the area. Even with the growing hatred toward Shia organizations, the IUM has continued to support and coordinate with Hezbollah while still receiving money from Iran. Al-Qaeda inspired organizations have used the ideology to legitimize their own existence and receive support from believers while at the same time aiming for personal gains in fragmented groups. Decision makers of those groups have not been able to unify the opposing agendas under one banner, which has led to the weakening of and crackdown on those affiliations.

149 Gade, "Limiting Violent Spillover in Civil Wars," 7.

This chapter looked at JI, IUM, Usbat al-Ansar, and FAI; it deduced that while the JI leaders took decisions based on the group's political survival, the remaining observed organizations aimed for financial gains. This continues the findings of Chapter III about the state-funded organizations. It seems that the Lebanese Islamists in general, and the Salafis in particular, care more about the continuous flow of resources than they do about selling the ideological banners that they raise. The next chapter presents the conclusion and policy recommendations for both the Lebanese authorities and the U.S. policy makers.

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V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Outside interest was the main catalyst for Islamists to thrive in Lebanon. If one had taken a survey of the major political parties and organizations in Lebanon in 1980, he would hardly have found any Islamic movements of political significance.¹⁵⁰ With the flow of money from interested states and organizations, the Lebanese Sunni sphere witnessed the emergence of new groupings in different niches. Some of these groups were interrelated and members switched from one group to the other, whereas others were rivals. Groups that proved themselves worthy of funding received substantial money and were encouraged to spread their influence to improve their funders' power in the geopolitical sphere.

A. SUMMARY OF POLITICAL SURVEY

In general, the Lebanese Islamist groups, including Salafi organizations, showed a willingness at the leadership level to depart from their ideology for the sake of satisfying their bankrollers. Table 1 summarizes the findings of this research. Although it does not show all the findings, this table displays the groups that were looked at in the research to reach a conclusion as to what mainly drives their decisions. Al-Ahbash was mainly sponsored by Syria, adopted the Sufi ideology, and aligned itself with the Syrian regime. The group competed with Salafis and the JI in winning the hearts and minds of Sunnis. Although political survival was important to al-Abash and some members adopted the ideology in total belief, their main motivator was found to be financial. Meanwhile, the GCS was sponsored by Saudi Arabia, adopted the activist Salafi ideology, and positioned itself against the rulers and against the Shia. The GCS competed with al-Ahbash and the JI to spread its influence mainly in North Lebanon. The group kept its activist ideology mainly since it attracted a good income from Gulf States and state-related organizations. On the other hand, the IHE was a Kuwaiti sponsored, purist Salafi organization. The organization aligned itself with the ruler, facing activist Salafis in the Sunni sphere. Although political events pushed for an activist agenda, the IHE remained

¹⁵⁰ Deeb, "Militant Islamic Movements in Lebanon," 1.

within its funders' agenda and kept advocating for loyalty to the rulers in order to secure the flow of money.

Table 1. Summary of the Groups

Group	Sponsor	Ideology	Political Alignment	Main Adversary	Main Driver
Al-Ahbash	Syria	Sufism	Pro-Syria	Salafis, JI	Financial
GCS	Saudi Arabia	Haraki Salafism	Anti-Shia, Anti-Ruler	Al-Ahbash, JI	Financial
IHE	Kuwait	Purist Salafis	Pro-Ruler	Haraki Salafis	Financial
JI	MB loyalists	MB	Anti-Ruler	Salafis, Al-Ahbash	Political
IUM 1982–1986	Iran, PLO	Haraki Salafism	Anti-Syria	JI, Syrian Loyalists	Financial
IUM 1988–Present	Iran	Purist Salafism	Anti-Israel	JI	Financial
Usbat Al-Ansar	Al-Qaeda	Jihadi Salafism	Militant Islam	PLO, Lebanese Authority	Financial
Fateh Al-Islam	Al-Qaeda	Jihadi Salafism	Militant Islam	Lebanese Authority	Financial

The JI was the only group that deviated from the overall trend of following the money. Loyalists to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology sponsored the JI, which advocated overturning the current political system. Perhaps the political struggle with the Saudi-Egypt-UAE axis was so high that JI leaders found it hard to stay in the game. They competed with the Salafis and al-Ahbash on an ideological basis, but sought survival

through political agreements that opposed their ideology. To ensure that they remained a party in the Lebanese political system, they aligned themselves with hardline Christians. Today, although being the second leading political power after the Future Movement in the Lebanese Sunni sphere, they have no representative on the national level. This might explain why they are not currently driven by the influence of money; rather, they are aiming for political survival.

Although the IUM had a hardline ideology upon its formation, the group developed an interest in Iran's money that tune-fined its decisions. Before the crackdown by the Syrian Army and its local proxies and allies, the IUM adopted an activist Salafi ideology, and got funding from Iran and the PLO to develop an anti-Syrian stand. It controlled Tripoli for a while and developed an Islamic State that lasted a couple of years. During this period, IUM members killed a few opposing voices, and maintained its rule over its independent territory. Ideology was a driving factor for the IUM's actions, but its main motive was to keep the flow of money coming from Iran and the flow of weapons and equipment from the PLO. After being smashed by the Syrian axis, the IUM was allowed to survive to keep the Sunnis fragmented. The IUM also kept receiving funds from Iran, but switched to a purist Salafi ideology that advocated for being loyal to the rulers. The group switched its voice to the broader, more compelling argument of advocating against Israel. That way, the IUM maintained the flow of money from Iran while at the same time avoided harming the Syrian regime.

Finally, al-Qaeda-inspired groups recruited jobless and convicted criminals for the sake of financial gains. They adopted Jihadi Salafism and aligned themselves with the dream of an Islamic Umma. In reality, those groups were fragmented and they members were largely interested in financial gains. This research looked into Usbat Al-Ansar and Fateh Al-Islam, two groups that are openly pro- al-Qaeda's. Usbat Al-Ansar openly opposed the PLO while covertly defying the authority of the Lebanese government; yet, in reality, they maintained the flow of money from al-Qaeda supporters in the world by selling the ideology of sacrificing themselves for the Umma. At the same time, Fateh al-Islam gathered different members who each had their own agenda. Mostly, its members were driven by financial gain and they openly opposed the Lebanese authority. Their

failure to mobilize the Sunni population was mainly because of their terroristic approach by which they conducted various operations that involved civilian casualties. This maintained the flow of money from individuals who supported their cause, and allowed the groups to get financial gains.

In conclusion, funded by various states and state-like organizations that grew interested in Lebanese politics, Islamist groups expanded their power in Lebanon. With their competing agendas, leaders of those groups got financial support from external groups in return for advocating the bankrollers' agendas. For the most part, leaders of the groups sought financial gains, and allowed for deviations from the proclaimed ideologies of their groups. As long as these groups remained a player in the Lebanese politics and got the green bills, they have been willing to sacrifice part of their ideology.

B. MAIN FINDINGS

This research considered three hypotheses in an attempt to explain the main influencer in Lebanese Islamist's decisions.

1. First Hypothesis Finding: Ideological Considerations

The first hypothesis expected that ideological divides motivate the decisions taken by the Lebanese Salafi groups. Throughout the observed groups, ideology seems to be an excuse to recruit and control; yet, it does not seem to be an "all in" approach. Rather, leaders who do not show leniency in adapting their ideology to new circumstances seem to depart from their organizations. The IUM switched from being an activist Salafi group to a purist one after its military defeat; in turn, its members no longer viewed the Syrian regime as the enemy, but instead saw it as Israel. Founders of organizations, on the other hand, left their groups after disagreements with the groups' funders. The IHE founder, the young Sheikh Safwan al-Zaabi, was removed from office by the Kuwaiti SRIH leadership. The JI founder Fathi Yakan departed from the group to form his own organization after disagreements with other leaders.

Although ideology was the face of some struggles, it looks like leaders of those groups used this debate to favor their political standing. Al-Ahbash adapted its ideology in time to compete against the JI and Salafis. Al-Qaeda-inspired groups also used their

ideology to advocate for fund-raising events. From the findings, it seems that ideology is not the main motivator of Lebanese Salafi groups. Rather, ideology is used as a cover to recruit and attract funders.

2. Second Hypothesis Finding: Political Considerations

The second hypothesis suggested that political considerations are the main motivations that drive decision-making among the leaders of Lebanese Salafi groups; they revise their ideologies continuously to achieve specific political objectives. After studying the groups presented in this research, it seems that the JI was the only group that applied such a policy. With competition from the Saudi-Egypt-UAE axis, the JI aligned itself with the FPM, a hardline Maronite Christian party. This agreement was not to its benefit at the ballot box as the members of the FPM did not elect the JI representatives, and the JI ended up with no official representation.

Other groups also sought political survival, but were more driven by the money flow. Al-Ahbash, for example, was concerned about remaining a player in Lebanese politics, but receiving financial aid was of bigger importance. Meanwhile, the GCS and IHE competed for political control over Tripoli and the North but only to ensure financing from the Gulf charities. Thus, this hypothesis seems not to work for the Lebanese Islamist groups.

3. Third Hypothesis Finding: Financial Considerations

The third hypothesis proposed that the role of state and non-state sponsors is more influential to the Lebanese Salafi decision makers than the ideological claims which they profess. This hypothesis seems to be the most compelling as all but one of the studied groups seem to follow such reasoning. The GCS mirrored the Saudi wishes in controlling the Lebanese Sunnis; they activated the public and adapted their ideology to suit the mother funder. When being anti-Shia secured better external financing, the IHE and al-Qaeda-inspired organizations became more hardline. The split among Gulf Salafis resulted in a split among Lebanese Salafis, which suggests that the funders conveyed their vision to their funded proxies.

Events show that Lebanese Islamist groups are ready to deviate from their ideologies to mirror the views of their external state and non-state sponsors. When al-Qaeda leaders asked all true followers to conduct operations against U.S. interests, their Lebanese sympathizers followed the request and conducted several operations. Instead of fighting disbelievers and aligning with people of faith, al-Ahbash worked for the Syrian regime's agenda. It saw in the Salafis and the JI enemies of the faith, and adopted an ideology that recognized this belief instead of befriending them and taking Christians as enemies, for example. This indicates that the funders played a significant role in adjusting their recipients' ideology in the way that best serves the funders' interests.

C. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Lebanese Islamist groups are constantly competing for power in the Lebanese Sunni sphere. Lebanon is a sovereign country and regional states should not meddle in its internal affairs by promoting dangerous actors that undermine its stability and the stability of the region as well as the international community. Several times, the position taken by one or more of these groups has affected Western interests in the region. In an attempt to push those groups into changing their point of view, U.S. Middle East strategists might have mistakenly sought to pressure those groups into changing their stand. This study suggests that Islamist groups in Lebanon only have a range in which they are allowed to decide. Apart from that, their decision-making process passes through a "bankroller interest" filter. If those actions are seen to harm the funders, the group leaders find a way to go around them, and include their actions in a seemingly well-designed ideological strategy.

This suggests that the key to make those organizations change their stand is through their funders. Pressure should be directed towards the funders rather than the organizations for an efficient use of resources. For example, if one Salafi group conducts an operation and takes American hostages to serve a certain political objective, conducting negotiations with them is a waste of time and resources. This research suggests that pressure should be exerted on their funders; only with sincere requests from their funders, will Lebanese Islamist groups accept to resolve the issue. U.S. Middle East foreign area officers should keep in mind an up-to-date funder-organization relationship

study, and make good use of it in situations that require a Lebanese group to deviate from its core ideological stand. Only with the help of the funder can issues be resolved smoothly.

At the same time, given how flexible Salafis are with their ideology, the Lebanese government or its Western allies may be able to buy the Salafis off. Salafis may be an efficient proxy tool to balance against another proxy actor in Lebanon, i.e., Hezbollah. Hence, any weakening of the Salafis would lead to strengthening Iran's proxy in Lebanon. This case illustrates that threats inside Lebanon can metastasize into regional and global threats, and therefore the international community should support efforts to halt external interference in Lebanon through the material support for religious fundamentalists. It might be hard to stop foreign states from interfering in Lebanese Islamist groups because of the return value that those actors gain from their geopolitical game. Yet, if the United States exerted enough pressure on interested outsiders, they might refrain from intervening in Lebanon's internal affairs when they consider that their losses outweigh their gains.

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