

# The Specter of Sunni Military Mobilization in Lebanon

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Map of Lebanon (by Michael Markowitz, CNA)

## Executive summary

Historically, the Sunnis in Lebanon have had difficulty raising viable militias. Mainstream leaders have traditionally rejected wholesale military mobilization, preferring to pursue their community's interests through the political process. Indeed, most of the Sunni fighters in Lebanon today belong to extremist groups, which have thus far failed to garner significant public support. However, there are indications that the calculus for militia building may be changing.

Since the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, the failure of the political elite to protect Sunni interests has reinforced a sense of victimization, and has created space for the growth of militant fundamentalist groups eager to claim the role of community defenders. As sectarian tensions grow, fueled by developments in Syria and Hizballah's continued role in that conflict, the Sunni population may come to perceive regional instability as an existential threat. In this case, those leaders willing to employ violence to protect Sunni interests may gain legitimacy in the eyes of the community.

A confluence of political, social, and military dynamics affecting the Sunni community could signal a shift towards more widespread militarization. Our analysis suggests the following indicators could presage militarization of the Lebanese Sunni community:

- Mainstream Sunni politicians begin to adopt the sort of militant, sectarian rhetoric currently employed by some Islamists in order to retain their political dominance
- Sunni officials and elites attack the legitimacy of state institutions, particularly the Lebanese Army
- The Future Movement's Christian allies, particularly the Lebanese Forces and Phalange parties, break their political alliance over concerns of Sunni militancy
- Sunni groups attempt to accumulate more and heavier weaponry

- Sunni-dominated state institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces, support sectarian militias with funding, weaponry, or operational assistance

## Introduction

Spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon has prompted a level of violence between Lebanese Sunnis and their sectarian rivals unseen in recent years. As the death toll climbs, fears are mounting that further escalation in the fighting could push the Sunni community towards large-scale military mobilization. Already, in hotspots such as Sidon, Tripoli, and the Bekaa Valley, small Sunni militias have formed to battle local Alawites and funnel support to Syrian rebels, and have embarked on a bombing campaign against Hizballah – the most powerful Shi’a militia and ally of the Assad regime. Some groups have even begun to clash with the Lebanese army, which they now consider to be in league with their opponents. Most significantly, Sunni militants have begun to break with their mainstream government leadership. According to one militia commander in Tripoli, “[Lebanon’s Sunni elite] used to give us money to fight or to stop fighting depending on their political needs. But now with Syria like this, the army attacking us here, what good is the government at all? We will make our own decisions now as Sunnis and Lebanese.”<sup>1</sup>

The past decade has seen dramatic changes in Lebanon’s Sunni community and in its standing vis-à-vis other confessional groups. The assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, the failure of Sunni elites to fill the leadership vacuum, and the rise of Hizballah as a parliamentary powerhouse have fundamentally changed the dynamics of Sunni political participation and activism in Lebanon. The collective disenfranchisement felt by the Sunni community has created an unprecedented sense of both victimization and communal unity.

This paper assesses the potential for military mobilization within the mainstream Sunni community in Lebanon. We begin by looking at the history of Sunni militancy in Lebanon. Within that context we then examine various trends affecting the community, including: the

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell Prothero, “Hezbollah’s Syrian Adventure,” *Foreignpolicy.com*, May 30, 2013.

decline of Sunni political power and the community's sense of disenfranchisement at the hands of Hizballah; the leadership vacuum within the Sunni community; and the impact of increased sectarianism stemming from the Syrian war.

## The history of Sunni militancy in Lebanon

It is notable that although Lebanese Christian, Druze, and Shi'a sects set a precedent for producing militias to protect their local interests, the Sunni have not done so. As urban merchants, they had little need to organize militias to defend their communities the way that other minorities did. Even during Lebanon's civil war, there were few examples of Lebanese Sunnis organizing into confessional militias. The most notable of these, the Harakat al-Tawhid (which briefly took over Tripoli in 1984) and the Mourabitoun militias, were routed by the Syrian army and Shi'a and Druze militiamen and essentially ceased to exist as fighting forces.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Sunni militancy in Lebanon has traditionally been driven by non-Lebanese groups and individuals. There have been two main categories of Sunni militants in Lebanon: those with roots in the refugee Palestinian communities, and those with roots in the international Salafi-jihadi cause.

Palestinian militancy in Lebanon has been a major cause of instability for decades and was a major factor contributing to the outbreak of civil war in 1975. The roughly 300,000 Palestinians living in refugee camps are overwhelmingly Sunni.<sup>3</sup> Since the heyday of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, militant groups have found refuge in the camps, which have remained outside of Lebanese state control. The tradition of militancy among Lebanon's Palestinians continues to the current day. Groups such as Usbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham are prominent examples. These groups are often labeled as Salafi-jihadi because of their religious and political orientation, yet their membership is almost entirely Palestinian, which distinguishes them from the transnational Salafi-jihadi groups.

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<sup>2</sup> William E. Smith, "Lebanon: A Country's Slow Death," *TIME magazine*, April 29, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> *World Report 2013: Lebanon*, Human Rights Watch, 2013.



The second type of Sunni militancy in Lebanon emerged from the international jihadist movement. In the 1990s, veterans of the jihadist campaigns in Afghanistan and Bosnia returned to their homelands and began to influence the course of militancy in those countries. In Lebanon, the first such individual was Basim al-Kanj, a militant who returned from these campaigns and began recruiting fighters in the northern area of Dinniyeh. A shootout with the Lebanese Army on the last day of 1999 resulted in the killing or capturing of most of his followers, decimating the small group before it was able to expand. The Dinniyeh Group was the first example of international jihadists coming to Lebanon, but more appeared within a few years as the war in Iraq produced a new generation of militants committed to international jihad.

The most notable jihadist group to develop in Lebanon was Fatah al-Islam. Its founder, Shahr al-Absi, was a Palestinian who fought in Iraq with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In 2007, Absi returned to Lebanon, where he was able to recruit aspiring jihadists transiting the Palestinian camps on their way to Iraq. His group attracted Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as local Lebanese and members of other Palestinian Salafi groups. While it certainly did attract Lebanese, Fatah al-Islam was not a distinctly Lebanese organization; nor did it rally followers around Lebanese issues. The group sparked a conflict with the Lebanese Army that led to a months-long siege of its refuge in the Nahr al-Barid camp, and ended in the destruction of the camp and dispersal of the militants in September 2007.

## **Failure of the Sunni political agenda**

Several recent trends contribute to the increased potential for militancy of this type, beginning with the kernel of Sunni solidarity that followed the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Hariri is the only Lebanese Sunni figure in recent history who was able to serve as a leader to the Sunni community as a whole. His rise brought an unprecedented prominence to the Lebanese Sunni community, and his assassination galvanized it. The Sunni-dominated government that was elected after his death was empowered and determined to rectify the perceived imbalance of power in their country that had contributed to his murder.

Many Lebanese assumed that Damascus was behind the assassination, as the Syrian Army had occupied Lebanon and controlled its security situation for decades. An outpouring of anti-Syrian sentiment followed Hariri's assassination, forcing an end to Syria's occupation of Lebanon and bringing a Sunni-dominated government to power, led by Hariri's Future Movement. Yet some groups, particularly Hizballah, rallied in support of Damascus, provoking the ire of those who had demanded an end to the occupation and creating a schism that would define the country's politics for the coming years.<sup>4</sup> Taking their names from the dates on which they organized their respective foundational rallies, the March 8 Alliance consisted of the pro-Syria voices, while the March 14 Alliance stood for forging a new post-occupation Lebanon.

The newly elected March 14 government—a coalition of Sunni, Christian, and Druze political groups—pursued aggressive policies designed to rebuild the authority of the Lebanese government by rooting out the vestiges of Syrian influence and ending the militarization of Hizballah.<sup>5</sup> Despite March 14's characterization of the reforms as building state authority, the opposition perceived them to be highly sectarian in nature and designed to empower Sunnis at the expense of other sects. Yet, while this era began with a surge of Sunni unity and empowerment, political efforts were ultimately frustrated, leaving the community fragmented and dispirited.

Security sector reform efforts pushed by General Ashraf Rifi, chief of Lebanon's national police, the Internal Security Forces, were perceived to be destabilizing to the country's confessional balance. Rifi himself was open about his intention to reshape the force into one that could disarm Hizballah.<sup>6</sup> These efforts were forcefully resisted by the March 8 Alliance and were ultimately stalled, to the frustration of Sunnis, who believe that an institutional imbalance continues from the days of the Syrian occupation. "All the sensitive positions in gov-

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<sup>4</sup> The March 8 Coalition took its name from the date in 2005 on which the group organized a rally in support of Syria.

<sup>5</sup> CNA interviews with Lebanese politicians and security personnel, Beirut, October 2010.

<sup>6</sup> CNA personal interview, Beirut, October 2010.

ernment are for the Shiites or those that support them,” one Salafi cleric is reported to have said recently.<sup>7</sup>

Another significant setback to Sunni power came in May 2008 when the March 14 government moved to dismantle a telecommunications system controlled by Hizballah. Hizballah’s leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah dubbed the action a “declaration of war,” and it sparked several days of fighting between partisans of the Future Movement and Hizballah. Hizballah’s forces proved vastly superior: they quickly seized control of much of downtown Beirut from the Sunni fighters and turned their positions over to the Lebanese Army. Many Sunnis saw these events as a sign of both the weakness of their sect and of Hizballah’s domination of the Lebanese government. Sunni irregulars found themselves outmatched, outgunned, and overrun by Hizballah soldiers. For some, the defeat prompted a reconsideration of the Future Movement’s approach to informal security forces.<sup>8</sup> One retired army colonel cited this event as a humiliation that prompted him to begin to mobilize Sunni militants in the north of the country.<sup>9</sup>

The final failure of the Sunni political elite was the collapse of Saad Hariri’s cabinet in January 2011. While the Future Movement had once again dominated in the elections of 2009, tensions with the opposition continued, particularly over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in The Hague that had been established to investigate the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Although the government of Lebanon had obliged itself to fund the Special Tribunal, opponents of the March 14 Alliance increasingly called for it to be abandoned, claiming that the investigation was being conducted on falsified evidence and testimony. This opposition became stronger as the tribunal prepared to issue indictments against several Hizballah personnel for involvement in the assassination. In that atmosphere of heightened tensions, the key Druze ally of the Future Movement, fearing further

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Blanford, “Why Lebanon's Sunnis will stay calm as Syria's Sunnis wage war,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 July 2013.

<sup>8</sup> CNA interviews, Lebanon, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Radwan Mortada, “Exclusive: The Man Behind Hariri's Secret Army,” *Al-Akhhbar English*, 25 October 2012. The activities described in this article have been confirmed independently by CNA analysts in discussions with individuals affiliated with the Future Movement.

sectarian instability, broke ranks and joined the opposition, effectively forcing the creation of a new cabinet and the election of a new prime minister.<sup>10</sup> The Future Movement had been ousted, and with it, the political aspirations of the Sunni community.

The failure of the Future Movement's political agenda left the Sunni community in the governing minority, and there are signs that it also sapped Sunnis' confidence in the government of Lebanon. Since that time, claims of ineffective—and even illegitimate—government have become more common and more intense, and have tended to lead to protests and violence. In May 2012, the arrest of Shadi al-Mawlawi, a Salafi activist who was accused of joining a terrorist organization, sparked sectarian violence and prompted accusations that the Lebanese government was targeting Sunnis for supporting the Syrian opposition.<sup>11</sup> The same month, a prominent Sunni cleric was killed at a Lebanese Army checkpoint, fueling the outrage.<sup>12</sup> As an official with a Sunni charity recently noted, "Frustration is growing more and more. The Sunni street is weak and we are the oppressed sect."<sup>13</sup> In short, the combination of political disenfranchisement through the failure of political movements and decreased confidence in the Lebanese state is a potent combination that could lead to militia formation.

## More space for militant narratives

The result of these political failures has been the political weakening of the Sunni community and the fragmentation of leadership. The death of Rafiq Hariri may have been a rallying point for Lebanon's Sunnis, but it also left the country without a strong Sunni leader. His son, Saad Hariri, is a young leader with neither the personal connections nor the charisma necessary to rally the kind of political support his father had. These weaknesses have only been exacerbated by the fact that he has lived outside of Lebanon since shortly after his ouster

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<sup>10</sup> CNA interview, Beirut, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Al-Mawlawi released on bail: I was arrested for aiding Syrian refugees," *Naharnet*, 22 May 2012.

<sup>12</sup> "Sheikh Ahmad Abdel-Wahed: scholar, politician and philanthropist," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 21 May 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Blanford, "Why Lebanon's Sunnis will stay calm."

as prime minister, fearing for his personal safety. Other prominent Sunnis also do not enjoy robust bases of support. By mid-2013, this fragmentation had manifested as the difficulty of any potential Sunni prime minister to form a government. As one expert noted, “In this climate, with the Sunni community, I don’t see how a new government can be formed by any credible Sunni politician.”<sup>14</sup>

Part of the difficulty for Sunni leaders in Lebanon is the growing gap between the Sunni political elite and the constituency they represent. Dominant figures such as the Hariris, former prime minister Najib Mikati, and Finance Minister Muhammad Safadi are billionaires who have spent much of their lives outside of Lebanon. These leaders have little in common with the communities of northern Lebanon that constitute the Sunni political base. A far cry from cosmopolitan Beirut, northern Lebanon is much more like the rest of the Middle East, where poor economic conditions, social marginalization, and the absence of state institutions are the defining features.<sup>15</sup> In these regions, Islamist groups have made great strides in organizing social services and grassroots outreach for their own purposes.

The Sunni political elite has long had an uneasy relationship with the country’s Islamists. Sunni political leaders, including those of the Future movement, have access to wealth and resources, but have historically relied heavily on these Islamist groups and their organizational ability to get out the vote and muster popular support. These connections have become even more prominent since 2005, when the end of the Syrian occupation also brought about an end to Damascus’s severe repression of conservative religious groups in Lebanon. The result is a marriage of convenience that many elite Sunnis find distasteful, as political concessions to and relationships with conservative and even extremist factions are often necessary. Some of these concessions are fairly mundane. For example, the conservative al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, which is the Lebanese manifestation of the Muslim Brotherhood, was granted a share of seats in the Lebanese Parliament in exchange for supporting the March 14 Alliance. Other ties

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Salem as quoted in “Lebanese PM resigns over dispute with Hezbollah,” Reuters, 23 March 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Omayma Abdel-Latif, *Lebanon’s Sunni Islamists – A Growing Force*, Carnegie Middle East Center, January 2008, p. 6.

are more questionable. As interior minister, Ahmad Fatfat, a close ally of the Hariris, released imprisoned members of the Dinniyeh Group in order to cultivate support among his local constituents. In another case that emerged in early 2007, Bahia Hariri (Rafiq Hariri's sister) was compelled to make a payment to the militant group Jund al-Sham in the hopes of eliciting their good behavior. Instead, the militants joined Fatah al-Islam.<sup>16</sup>



Salafi cleric Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir delivering a speech.  
(photo courtesy of FreedomHouse, via Flickr.com)

The ultimate problem, and one that has contributed to rising sectarianism in the Sunni community, is that opposition to Hizballah and Damascus is one of the few ideological pillars that the elite and the conservative, impoverished base hold in common. Because of the mounting frustration with the Future Movement's political failures, it has been more difficult for the elites to find common ground with their base. For example, members of the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, have been vocal about their belief that Hariri's party has neither respected their party's rights nor appropriately assessed their electoral weight, despite the concessions they made.<sup>17</sup> More and more, the elites have needed to

<sup>16</sup> CNA interviews, Beirut, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current," *Middle East Report* no. 96, 26 May 2010.

rely on sectarian rhetoric to maintain the support of their base; this has made it easier for fringe leaders to exploit that rhetoric.

## The Syrian war comes to Lebanon

The conflict in Syria has proven hard for the Lebanese Sunni community to ignore. Over the past two years, sectarian clashes, the echoes of the civil war across the border, have become commonplace.<sup>18</sup> In some areas, cross-border fighting between Syrian rebels and Assad regime forces has brought the front literally to their doorsteps. From the early stages of the conflict, Syrian rebel fighters have crossed into Lebanon to establish safe havens from which they regroup and launch attacks. Increasingly it is clear that Hizballah's role in Syria has further stoked sectarian anger among Sunnis, who see the Shi'a group as killing their brethren across the border. Some sympathetic Sunni communities now provide direct support to their Syrian coreligionists. The Sunni strongholds of Tripoli, Aarsal, and Sidon are awash in weapons.<sup>19</sup> Even areas that are not traditional hotspots of militancy, such as Beirut's Tariq al-Jadidah neighborhood, are witnessing increased levels of arms, and some of these local groups are receiving funding from Sunni political leaders.<sup>20</sup> Small groups have been organized to facilitate the transport of weapons, ammunition, and logistical equipment across the border into Syria with the help of smugglers.<sup>21</sup> Syrian regime forces frequently shell, launch air strikes on, and conduct raids against Sunni rebels and their supply lines inside Lebanon, as well as the communities suspected of supporting them.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> CNA interviews, Lebanon, October 2013.

<sup>19</sup> CNA interviews with Lebanese security officials, Lebanon, October, 2013. Aarsal, a Sunni town in the Bekaa Valley considered a gateway between Lebanon and Syria for Syrian rebels and Lebanese supporters of the armed opposition.

<sup>20</sup> CNA interview, Beirut, October 2013. According to a senior Lebanese security official, a Sunni militia based in Tariq al-Jadidah is equipped with mortars and .50 caliber machine guns.

<sup>21</sup> CNA interviews, Beirut, August and October 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Fayal Itani and Sarah Grebowski, "Beyond Spillover: Syria's Role in Lebanon's Drift Toward Political Violence," *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, Rafik

While maintaining their anti-sectarian platform, Sunni political leaders have also backed efforts to support the Syrian rebels. The Future Movement has called for increasing Lebanese aid to the Free Syrian Army and taking a stronger stance against the Syrian government.<sup>23</sup> Former prime ministers Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati have been accused of covertly working to finance militias and arm the rebels.<sup>24</sup> Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, which fought alongside Hizballah against the Israelis in 2006, sponsored a rally of several thousand to show solidarity with Lebanese and Syrian Sunnis and to condemn Hizballah's intervention in Syria.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the political leadership, elements of the Sunni-led Internal Security Forces, were implicated in the targeting of Syria's allies inside Lebanon – ostensibly in retaliation for the assassination of the organization's intelligence chief, Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan, in October 2012.<sup>26</sup> In addition, there have been allegations of Sunni security officials redirecting arms to Lebanese militants, rather than the Syrian opposition.<sup>27</sup>

While it is clear that there is growing support for the rebels among the mainstream Sunni community and its political elites, it has been the Salafi militias that have taken the lead in actual fighting. The expanding ties between extremist groups on both sides of the border have led to an increased role for Lebanese fighters on the battlefield. According to media reports, they already constitute a sizeable part of the foreign militant force working with the opposition.<sup>28</sup> Several no-

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Hariri Center for the Middle East, July 2013.; Nour Samaha, "Lebanon's Sunnis Search for a Savior," *Aljazeera*, June 15, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> CNA interviews, Lebanon, August and October 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Lebanon... Perils of the Syrian Quake Aftershocks*, Al Jazeera Study Center, July 28, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Loveday Morris and Suzan Haidamous, "For Lebanon's Sunnis, growing rage at Hizballah over role in Syria," *Washington Post*, 12 June 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Itani and Grebowski, "Beyond Spillover."

<sup>27</sup> CNA interview with senior Lebanese security official, October 2013. According to the source, some arms purchases intended for the Internal Security Forces were sold to local militias, while other shipments moving through the Tripoli harbor destined for Syrian rebels remained in Lebanon.

<sup>28</sup> Elie Hajj, "Lebanon's Sunnis feel threatened after Arsal ambush," *AL Monitor*, 5 February 2013.; Chris Zambelis, "Lebanese Salafist Cleric Organiz-



table Lebanese Sunni extremist groups (See “Sunni militant groups” below) and commanders have been active against both the Syrian regime and Hizballah.

Perhaps the best known of those groups is the one led by the Salafi cleric Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir. In April 2013, he announced the establishment of the *Kataib al-Muqawama al-Hurr* or the Free Resistance Brigades, a volunteer force of Lebanese Sunni Muslims committed to joining the opposition in Syria.<sup>29</sup> After months of increasingly vitriolic rhetoric, in June 2013, a gunfight broke out between Assir’s entourage and the Lebanese Army at a checkpoint in Sidon. The cleric retreated to his compound at the Bilal bin Rabbah Mosque and the army pursued him, beginning a two-day battle that eventually expanded to include Palestinian organizations, which entered the fray in support of Assir, and Hizballah, which deployed in support of the army.<sup>30</sup> Another group is *Jund al Sham* (not to be confused with the Palestinian group of the same name). It is the first Sunni armed opposition group in Syria led by a Lebanese militant. It is said to be operating in Homs province and is commanded by Khaled Mahmoud, a well-known militant who fights under the nom de guerre Abu Suleiman al Muhajer. He receives reach-back support from inside Lebanon from Hussam Sabbagh, an influential organizer and facilitator, and has links with *Fatah al-Islam*.<sup>31</sup>

Highlighting the growing cooperation between extremist groups is the possible creation of a Lebanese branch of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, an al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist group fighting in Syria. The Lebanese militant, H.A. Dargham, who announced the creation of the Lebanese *Jabhat al-Nusra*, is well connected to other Salafi-jihadi groups in Lebanon. According to the Lebanese military intelligence services, Dargham is also an associate of Khaled Hamid, who is reported to be a major “logistical facilitator” between *Jabhat al-Nusra* in Syria and its al-

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es Militia Forays into Syria,” *Terrorism Monitor: In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror* XI, issue 10 (May 17, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Zambelis, “Lebanese Salafist Cleric.”

<sup>30</sup> CNA interviews, Beirut, August 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Hazem Al-Amin, “an amir “jund al-sham” al-lubnani al-muqim fii qalat il-hasan il-suriyyahi... Khalid al-Mahmud,” *Al-Hayat* (Arabic), 22 August 2013. <http://alhayat.com/Details/543791>

lies in Lebanon's north and in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilwah in Sidon, including *Fatah al-Islam* and *Jund al-Sham* (the Palestinian group).<sup>32</sup>

The epicenter for Sunni militancy in Lebanon now appears to be located in the northern town of Tripoli, the birthplace of Lebanon's Salafi movement. It has grown in political importance as a Sunni stronghold, particularly since 2008, when Beirut became militarily indefensible as a result of the defeat of the March 14 coalition at the hands of Hizballah. Today, the residents of Tripoli publicly show their support for the Syrian rebels, with opposition flags waving from rooftops and graffiti calling for the ouster of Assad. According to Lebanese security officials, Sunni extremists from Tripoli have been flocking to Syria to join *Jabhat al-Nusra*.<sup>33</sup> Other militant groups are alleged to have received funding from the Hariris, Mikati, and Saudi sources.<sup>34</sup> In a microcosm of the war in Syria, militants from the Tripoli neighborhoods of Sunnis and Alawites, the latter being the sect of the Assad family, regularly engage in violent sectarian clashes. In 2012 alone, at least 70 people died in such fighting.<sup>35</sup>

It is noteworthy that Salafi-jihadi groups do not enjoy the support of most of the Lebanese Sunnis. They have not been able to expand beyond small cells, and at the national level they remain politically marginalized. However, increased sectarian violence may discredit moderate political leaders and could serve to empower those groups that are the most willing and able to use force to protect their sect. Of particular concern then is the potential for Hizballah's intervention in Syria to act as a catalyst for the radicalization of larger parts of the Sunni population in Lebanon. Today, radical Sunni clerics in Lebanon's cities are effectively rallying Sunnis behind a sectarian narrative of their marginalization in Lebanon at the hands of Hizballah.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, "The Syrian Spillover and Salafist Radicalization in Lebanon," *CTC Sentinel*, July 23, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Dehghanpisheh and Haidamous, "Closer Ties Emerge."

<sup>34</sup> CNA interview with senior Lebanese security official by phone, October 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Dehghanpisheh and Haidamous, "Closer Ties Emerge."

<sup>36</sup> Itani and Grebowski, "Beyond Spillover."

Alongside Syrian rebels, native extremist groups and Palestinian militants have begun a campaign of attacks aimed at Hizballah targets inside Lebanon.<sup>37</sup> Syrian rebels have conducted raids on Hizballah artillery positions along the border and are said to have launched rocket attacks on Hizballah-controlled areas in Beirut.<sup>38</sup> The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, an al-Qaeda linked Palestinian group, has attacked Hizballah convoys near the Syrian border.<sup>39</sup> In August 2013, a new and relatively little known Sunni group calling itself the Brigades of Aisha detonated a car bomb in a Hizballah stronghold in Beirut.<sup>40</sup>

The war in Syria is also having a tangible impact on Lebanon's social landscape. By November 2013, the United Nations had registered over 800,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a number that is approaching a fifth of the country's total population.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the destabilizing impact of these refugees on Lebanese society and the Lebanese economy, the presence of these refugees could embolden Sunni militants by providing refuge, as Palestinian camps have in the past, and connections to rebel groups fighting in Syria.

## Conclusion

Political developments in Lebanon have left Lebanese Sunnis frustrated, disenchanted, and dispossessed. The weakness of moderate leadership, in conjunction with other regional trends, has led to an

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<sup>37</sup> In July 2013, an anti-Syrian rebel al-Qaeda-affiliated organization's terror plot was averted after detailed intelligence warnings from America's CIA were passed onto Lebanese security officials. The plot included the use up to seven tons of explosives in a pair of huge truck bombings targeting Hizballah-dominated southern Beirut suburbs, as well as suicide bomber attacks targeting a list of Hizballah and Lebanese officials and diplomats from nations supporting the Syrian regime.

<sup>38</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Lebanese Fight on Both Side of the Conflict in Syria: Bloodshed back home feared as Shiites battle Sunnis in border area," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> "Abdullah Azzam Brigades Claim Majdal Anjar Blast, Vow to Turn Bekaa into 'River of Blood,'" *Naharnet.com*, July 18, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Laila Bassam, "Car bomb kills 20 in Hezbollah's Beirut stronghold," *Reuters.com*, August 15, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, UNHCR, accessed November 12, 2013, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

increasingly sectarian—specifically anti-Shi’a—atmosphere in Sunni communities. These developments establish the conditions for radicalization to which the Syrian war adds an opportunity for militancy. The result is a dangerous atmosphere in which more Lebanese Sunnis could take up arms and become a new, destabilizing force in Lebanon.

Our analysis of Lebanese history, political dynamics, and current events in Syria suggests that, despite having little experience building sectarian militias, the mainstream Sunni community and their political leadership increasingly may feel pressured to mobilize militarily in order to reverse its political marginalization and combat the rising popularity Sunni extremist groups. The following indicators could presage militarization of the Lebanese Sunni community:

- **Mainstream Sunni politicians begin to adopt militant, sectarian rhetoric in order to retain their political dominance.** Currently, mainstream Sunni leaders are content to leave calls to militancy to the Islamists. If, however, they begin to lose the support of their political bases, they may be compelled to sanctify violent struggle.
- **Sunni officials and elites attack the legitimacy of state institutions, particularly the Lebanese Army.** Mainstream Sunni narrative continues to champion the Lebanese state; only radicals, such as Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, have impugned the Lebanese Army. If, however, the Sunni public begins to believe, like Sheikh Assir, that Hizballah has taken control of the Army, Sunni officials may be obliged to publically criticize the Army.
- **The Future Movement’s Christian allies, particularly the Lebanese Forces and Phalange parties, break their political alliance over concerns of Sunni militancy.** Though the March 14 Alliance has fragmented, the Future Movement maintains its alliances with Christian political parties. If, however, Future’s Christian partners perceive an unpalatable level of radicalism among mainstream Sunnis, they may be forced to break these ties.
- **Sunni groups attempt to accumulate more and heavier weaponry.** There is some evidence of local arms build-up, but this seems to be limited. If, however, the Sunni community per-

ceives an existential threat as a result of spillover from Syria, it may be compelled to acquire arms.

- **Sunni-dominated state institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces, support sectarian militias with funding, weaponry, or operational assistance.** There have been allegations of Internal Security Forces personnel engaging in sectarian revenge attacks. If sectarian violence increases, Sunni security personnel may decide to act in the interests of local militias despite their uniform.

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