Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The initial framework of this project was to explore the transnational religious networks operating in Lebanon, and the relations between these and Gulf actors. The project was originally designed in 2013, and during the past three years, a number of studies have been published which cover several of the aspects this project was set to research. However, doing fieldwork in Lebanon in January and February 2015, I became aware of several aspects of Lebanese Sunni politics which had not been covered by any of the above mentioned studies. These relates to how the main Sunni political expression in Lebanon, Tayyar al-Mustaqbal, the Future Movement, is maneuvering to confront the challenges facing the community. What are these challenges? And are there any challengers to the hegemonic position the Future Movement has had for the last decade? If so, who are these, and what has been their strategy for challenging the Future?

Abstract

This report deals with the challenges facing the Lebanese Sunni leadership, first and foremost embodied by the Future movement led by former premier Saad al-Hariri. For at least the last ten years, since the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the community in general and its leadership in particular has felt increasing pressure both from within the community and from outside. While these are more often than not related, the focus of this paper will be the internal pressures, not least from an increasingly vocal and dissatisfied Islamist “opposition”. The very popular Ashraf Rifi, resigned minister of Justice, and possibly an emerging contender to Saad al-Hariri, is also included.

The backdrop of this report is the ongoing war in Syria, and the report gives an overview of how these contending forces have used this war, and implications of it related to Hizballah in particular, to mobilize against what is viewed as an Iranian rather than Syrian dominance over the country. By extension, this criticism is also directed at the Sunni political establishment for not being able to stand up for the (Sunni) Lebanese rights.
Introduction

The conflict in Syria constitutes the backdrop of these developments, and it was an initial hypothesis of mine that many of the religious networks operating in Lebanon were closely linked to networks in Syria and had the same (Gulf) backers. As my research progressed, I found that the networks in Lebanon, by and large, have no direct links to networks in Syria, not on an organizational level or otherwise. This is due to several factors, the most important of which is the aggressive and confrontational strategy adopted by Hizballah in dealing with any group, party or individual who might be perceived as a threat to the party’s involvement in the Syrian war on the side of the Asad regime. Hizballah enjoys close relations with several LAF commanders, and together the two parties have managed to restrict the flow of Lebanese wanting to fight with the opposition, as well as depriving the Syrian opposition of the opportunity to use Lebanon as a “safe zone” from where it can regroup, rest and get provisions.

This is not to say that there are no links at all, but these do not seem to influence the activities of the groups in question in any profound way. The exception to this are groups which might be referred to as jihadi-salafi, but these groups do not operate openly in Lebanon, save for a handful of smaller Palestinian groups operating out of the Ain al-Hilwa camp in the southern city of Saida.

These developments, the war in Syria, and an increasing pressure from Hizballah, constitute a serious challenge to the Future movement on many levels. The Future is, to a large extent, dependent on Saudi Arabia for political backing, but also for economic largesse. The Kingdom wants the Future to continue as a moderate all-encompassing movement, as does the Future leadership itself. While Hizballah continues to accuse the Future of backing “terrorists” and Islamist extremists, it has become of paramount importance for the Future leadership to disassociate the movement from any group or persons that are deemed too radical. Not only due to Saudi concerns, but also out of concern for not offending the considerable Christian constituency it has developed.

I will start this report by putting the “targeting of the Sunnis” in a regional context, and point to the main reason for this sense of being targeted. Then I will proceed by pointing to the three intertwined main grievances of the Lebanese Sunnis. Furthermore, I will be identifying what I mean by the Sunni leadership, and some of the main characteristics of those who constitute this leadership. Then I will look at what I argue are the main challengers to the dominant position of the Future, who they are, and how these have related to the Future. I will then point out some important developments set in motion by the conflict, or what is now a civil war, in Syria, and also how these developments have been met by the Sunni leadership, with a special focus on the rise and demise of Ahmad al-Assir. I will conclude by examining some of the criticism which has come from within the Future itself, and the background for this, and lastly point to the dilemma facing this leadership in tackling this criticism.
In the aftermath of the military coup in Egypt on the 3 July 2013, and of course coupled with the war in Syria, a pronounced sense of being targeted has been expressed by many Sunni Islamist forces in the region. An indication of this could be observed following the coup, when the Muslim Brotherhood sent a delegation composed of MPs from several countries, including Turkey, to express their concern to European parliamentarians. This delegation included Lebanese MP Imad al-Hout, who represented al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya.

While the case of Egypt has its own dynamics, the cases of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon have a major point of grievance in common: an aggressive Iranian policy of asserting itself as a major player in the region, and a perceived lack of will on the part of other Arab states to confront Iranian designs for the region. When a Saudi-led coalition eventually took on the Houthis in Yemen, this received wide support, but still with a feeling of ‘too little too late’.

In Lebanon, these Sunni grievances reach far beyond the Islamist forces, and have been observed from at least 2008. What are the main grievances of “The Sunnis”, if we might refer to this group as a collective? What lies behind the declared sense of being targeted? I have singled out three main points, which are intertwined and all related to Hizballah; that they used their weapons against their fellow Lebanese in May 2008, the main target being the Future movement and supporters of Druze chieftain Walid Jounblat; following this, their insistence on clinging on to their weapons at any cost; and lastly, the war in Syria, which might also shed some light on some of the reasons for this, with Hizballah directly participating in this war, despite the objection of a majority of the other Lebanese parties.

There are other grievances as well, but all are related to the feeling of being treated differently than the other components of the Lebanese state, not least vis-à-vis the Shiites. One of these is the case of the Islamist inmates at the infamous Roumieh prison, some of whom have been imprisoned for years without being brought before a court. In June last year, a couple of video clips emerged, showing some of these prisoners being severely tortured by prison guards. This provoked widespread condemnation, but the leading voices in the condemnation were all Sunni politicians, clerics and the mufti. It immediately turned into a top story on most news outlets, but while the pro-Hizballah paper al-Akhbar ran a story claiming that Justice Minister and Future member Ashraf Rifi was using this as a pretext to launch an intifada against fellow Future member and interior minister Nuhad Mashnouq, with the support of Salafi organizations and emirs from al-Qaida, the Hizballah news site al-Ahed did not mention the story at all. It took several days before other parties denounced the abusive behavior of the prison guard. This is one example of many incidents which add, in the view of many Sunnis, to the feeling of being targeted.

The Sunni Establishment

The main expression of the Lebanese Sunni leadership is of course the Future Movement, as it is commonly referred to. However, in Arabic the term ‘tayyar’ is used, thus implying a somewhat looser structure than a ‘movement’. Although some of the policies differ significantly, on an
organizational level there are several similarities with the other main current, tayyar al-waṭani al-hurr, or the Free Patriotic Movement, led by Michel Aoun.

Both are built around a founding father, and both founding fathers are not from what might be referred to as leading families (Karami, Solh, Salam on the Sunni side). Both are, to a degree, still a family business, stuffed with family members.

Both have what might be called “minimum” programs; the Future has a policy document (wathiqa), while FPM has a charter, both with a rather centrist outlook. And both have coopted or included members of established leading families into the tayyar.

The biggest difference is in the sectarian composition; while FPM is almost an exclusive Christian expression, there is one Shiite MP in its parliamentarian block and the rest are Christian; the Future has 8 Christian MPs, as well as a Shiite and two Alawis, in its block.

The last point is of considerable importance when assessing Sunni grievances of being sidelined and targeted. While the other two major Lebanese sects, the Christians and the Shiites, have several parties which can claim to be chartering for these constituencies, such as Hizballah and Amal for the Shiites and Lebanese Forces, Kataib and the FPM for the Christians, it is problematic to lump the Future into this category. As will become clear when assessing the contesters to the Future Movement later in this report, the lack of a firmly Sunni-based party is a major grievance for some actors.

I have chosen to include three other persons/expressions as part of the Sunni establishment; The Karamis (Faysal, son of the late Omar, and Ahmad, cousin of Omar and allies with Miqati), Najib Miqati, one of the richest men in the Middle East, and Mohammad Safadi, businessman and longtime ally of Hariri, but now closer to Miqati. It is not unlikely that these two will try to forge a closer alliance. What these three have in common is that they are based in Tripoli, and draw their support from this city. They are all established politicians, but none of them have established political parties, and rely on their personal networks to mobilize support. And while these politicians are still able to muster some support among their almost exclusive Sunni constituencies, with the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, they find themselves in a difficult position. All of them are viewed as being close to the Syrian regime, not least Faysal Karami. But also Miqati, who had invested heavily in Syria prior to 2011, and Safadi, who broke ranks with Hariri, are struggling to project an image of themselves as the protectors of “Sunni rights”.

The Challengers

*The Muslim Brothers*

I have identified several challengers to the hegemony of the Future as the representatives of the Lebanese Sunnis, and one of these is clearly the Jama’a al-Islamiyya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The JI has a complicated relationship with the Future, not least during the
reign, so to speak, of the JI founder, the late Fathi Yakan. He eventually left the JI and went on to found the Islamic Action Front in 2006, as a reaction to the warming relations between the Future and the JI in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. However, the JI had a very close relationship with Hizballah more or less up to 2008, where this became impossible in the face of Hizballah’s targeting of the Future.

In the elections of 2009, the JI got only one representative elected, Imad Hout from Beirut’s III district. He was elected on a bill supported and dominated by the Future. The reason why the JI was only given one “safe slot” is mainly due to two important factors, both illustrative of the relationship between the two groups: the Future’s insistence on distancing itself from Islamist policies, due to a wish to project itself as being an all-inclusive expression of political moderation. The other reason for “snubbing” the JI is also important; the Future’s relationship with, and possibly dependence on, Saudi Arabia. There is no wish whatsoever from the Saudi side to give any prominence to any political expression associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Indicative of the uneasy relationship are the latest elections to the Higher Islamic Council. The Future-backed candidates swept up almost the whole country except in Tripoli. Here the JI allied itself with Faysal Karami, Miqati and Safadi, and won the five seats up for grabs there.

But it is not only the Future which wants to keep the JI at arm’s length; the same is true the other way around. Leading members of the JI have, on several occasions over the years, pointed out that there are no special bonds between the two groups. In an interview in 2014, the chief of the JI’s politburo in South Lebanon, Bassam Hammoud, stated that the JI is dealing with the Future in the same way that the group is dealing with other Lebanese parties. This view was echoed by Imad al-Hout when I interviewed him last year.

The coup against Egyptian president, Mohammad Mursi, in 2013, and following that, the decision by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, is also a source of tension between the two groups. The Future, which is dependent on Saudi support, came out in support of the coup. But whether they did so out of a conviction that this was the right thing to do, or rather supported it in order not to offence the Saudis, is debatable. The JI, on the other hand, condemned the coup, and joined other branches of the Brotherhood around the Middle East in fronting a campaign against it. An interesting point to notice in this respect is the continued insistence on part of the JI to distance the group from the realm of the Brotherhood’s organization. The JI leaders insist that the group is a purely Lebanese expression, and that they are not subject to decisions taken elsewhere. At the same time, the JI does not hide its support for “the Syrian brothers” in their fight against the Assad regime. The support seems to be restricted to the moral realm; the JI is careful not to provoke a reaction from their old allies in Hizballah, which would have clamped down on any attempt by the JI to supply their Syrian brethren with any material goods.

The last point is illustrative of the balancing act that has come to be the very strategy of the JI in maneuvering in the Lebanese political landscape. It is careful not to provoke others, with the possible exception of the Free Patriotic Movement’s General Michel Aoun. Their relations with the
Future, and the Future-related MPs, are important for the JI, but only to a certain degree. The JI cannot afford to be seen as an appendix to the Future, but needs to hold open other channels for the next parliamentary elections, where it hopes to increase its representation. The alliance with Miqati and Safadi for the Higher Islamic Council elections in Tripoli is clearly intended as a signal to the Future not to take the JI votes for granted. The JI boycotted the parliamentary elections in 2005, and could possibly do so again, should it not manage to secure a satisfactory deal with any of the other Sunni forces.

In recent years, the JI has greatly developed and expanded its social services in a number of areas, including in Sunni villages in South Lebanon. This includes a number of services directed at the Syrian refugees in the country, and an interesting case in this respect is the Qatari Center for Teaching Syrian Students in Saida. The center is financed by the Qatari state, but operated by members of the JI through the Islamic Welfare Organization, a local NGO based in Saida\(^8\).

**The Salafi Groups**

The other main Islamist challenge to the Future is from the Salafi-movement. While the main Salafi expression in Lebanon, the Dawa’a Salafiyya, founded by Salem al-Shahhal, and now led by his son Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, has traditionally not been directly involved in politics, they supported the Future in the latest elections in 2009. Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal is educated in Saudi Arabia, where he has spent considerable time, and it is also suspected that most of his material support comes from the Kingdom. This in turn has impeded him to not challenge the Future directly. His cousin Hassan did so in 2008, when he signed a memorandum of understanding with Hizballah. The reaction from almost all other Salafis was extremely negative, and he was forced to abandon the agreement before the ink had dried\(^9\). The reason he could initiate this agreement in the first place is probably that he was not financed by Saudi Arabia, but rather by Kuwait\(^10\).

This incident is also indicative of the general situation for the established Lebanese Salafis; Rather than being united in one association or group, all the different preachers have their own group of followers, and run their own mosques and charitable work. While one of these, Salem al-Rafa‘i, tried to form a political Salafist party in late 2012, clearly inspired by the success of the Salafi parties in Egypt, nothing came out of this effort, and they remain a deeply divided flock.

A source with intimate knowledge of the different Islamist movements in the country, who I interviewed during my fieldwork in 2015, singled out four main trends within the Salafi movement in Lebanon, typically identifying the leaders and not the groups or networks they lead. This reflects the rather loose structures of these groups, and the importance of the leader rather than the actual religious or political direction of these networks.

These four are the networks of Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, Hassan al-Shahhal, Bilal Shaaban and Salem al-Rafa‘i.

As mentioned above, Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal is leading what is considered to be the main trend within the movement in Lebanon. The founder of this trend, his father Salem al-Shahhal, focused
on dawa’a and represented what is commonly referred to as the quietist tradition within Salafism, in line with a traditional Wahabi outlook. However, due to the strong Syrian influence in Lebanon in general, and Tripoli in particular, up to 2005, Dai al-Islam faced a number of setbacks and challenges. In 1996, the organization his father founded, Jam‘iyya al-Hidayya wa al-Ihsan, was closed by Lebanese authorities, probably at the behest of the Syrian regime. This organization had received considerable funding from individuals in the Gulf which were associated with the Wahabi religious establishment, as well as from the Jam‘iyya al-Bar wa al-Ihsan.11 The new organization he established was basically the same as the old one, but with a new name. In the years since then, he has continued to establish mosques and charitable projects, but the uprising in Syria and its implications on Lebanon’s Salafis has put him in a difficult position. More activist-oriented Salafis have been able to take the lead, and Dai al-Islam has not managed to balance the quietist outlook and implicit support for the Future with the pressure to take a more activist stand in favor of the uprising in Syria. Rather, he seems to have left the quietist realm and tried to reassert himself as not just a religious but also political leader. He has embarked on a campaign against the Lebanese army, using much of the same rhetoric as Ahmad al-Assir, branding it the Safavid army and accusing it of conspiring against the Sunnis12. The same criticism has been leveled against the Future and its leadership, which he has accused of failing to protect the Sunnis13, and last autumn he threatened to declare an all-out jihad in Lebanon14.

The reasons for this new, militant approach has to do with the case of another Salafi linked to the network of Dai al-Shahhal, Bilal Deqmaq. In October 2014, Lebanese troops raided his parents’ house in Tripoli, where they discovered a considerable amount of weapons. Al-Shahhal was furious, and claimed that the weapons were his and that they were purely for self-defense. Deqmaq escaped to Turkey, but was arrested and handed over to Lebanese authorities earlier this year. He was accused of selling the weapons to unspecified extremists; upon his arrest in Turkey he possessed over 250 thousand dollars, which Lebanese authorities claim was the profit from these sales. In the wake of this, an arrest warrant was issued for Dai al-Islam as well, but he managed to escape, and is still on the run. It is believed that he has made it out of the country, quite possibly to Qatar. He is still very active on social media; on Facebook he issues statements on the page “The media office of the Salafi movement in Lebanon”, al-maktab al-`alami lil-tayyar al-salafi fi Lubnan15, and he is very active on Twitter16.

Hassan al-Shahhal is a cousin of Dai al-Islam, and started out in the same organization as his and Dai al-Islam’s brother, Radi al-Islam. He broke with his two cousins in the early nineties to establish his own organization, also with headquarters in Tripoli. Hassan remained a little-known figure outside Salafi circles until 2008, when he made headlines after signing a memorandum of understanding with Hizballah. He did so in cooperation with another Salafi sheikh, Safwan al-Zu’bi, who was the Lebanese representative of the Kuwaiti organization Jam‘iyat Ihya’al-Turath al-Islami, the Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage. In other words, Hassan al-Shahhal was not dependent on Saudi money and could therefore act independently. However, the two sheikhs gravely misjudged the feelings of the “Sunni street” and the rest of the Salafi movement in Lebanon. The memorandum was signed shortly after Hizballah had turned its weapons against the Future in the streets of
Beirut, and the anger against the party was still running high. A fierce campaign was set in motion against the memorandum, orchestrated first and foremost by Dai al-Islam, but it was also criticized by members of the Future. The two sheikhs had to abandon the document before the ink had dried, and this incident seems to have permanently sidelined Hassan al-Shahhal and his ambitions to become a leader of the Lebanese Salafis. He continues to operate on a low scale, now funded by Iran.17

Bilal Sha’aban is another of the Salafi shaykhs which condoned the memorandum of understanding, though he himself was not directly involved. The son of Tawhid-founder and leader Sa’id Sha’aban, he is clearly in the pro-Syrian fold. When the founder of the Jamaa al-Islamiyya, Fathi Yakan, eventually broke with the organization he founded, Sha’aban was one of those who joined the new group he set up, the Islamic Action Front. This was in 2006, but following the death of Yakan three years later, the Front has slowly lost all its importance. This development has not only been restricted to this organization, but the same fate has met other pro-Syrian Sunni expressions after the outbreak of the uprising in 2011. Another example, in this respect, is the once powerful and influential Abhash-group, or The Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects, Jam’ia al-Mashari’ al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya. This group lost all its former influence in recent years, a development set in motion following the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, but from 2011 onwards, it has practically disappeared.

Salem al-Raf’a, has, in the last few years, emerged as a strong contender for the leadership of Lebanon’s activist Salafis. He spent some twenty years in exile, from 1985 to 2005, when the Syrian grip of the country loosened following the assassination of al-Hariri and the subsequent forced withdrawal of the Syrian occupation forces. Al-Raf’a took the lead in supporting the uprising in Syria, and made no secret of his intent to arm as many insurgents there as possible.18 At the same time, and unlike other Salafis such as Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, he has managed to avoid being directly implicated in cases of weapons smuggling or dealing.

The one factor which sets him apart from other anti-Syrian Salafis is his direct criticism of the Future movement, and his wish to set up a political party challenging it. He does not advocate jihad in Lebanon, but has repeatedly called for Lebanon’s Sunnis to join the fight against the Syrian regime. And while being extremely critical of Hizballah, not just because of their involvement in the war in Syria, he has also lambasted Lebanese Sunnis who support the party. Rabil claims that he has implicitly called for their murder19, but I have found no statement from al-Raf’a himself which could confirm this.

Together with other activist Salafi shaykhs such as Zakariya Abd al-Razaq al-Masr, al-Raf’a has been active in the Council of Muslim Ulama. The council bring together a wide variety of ulama, including from the Dar al-Ifta’, and gained particular importance during the last years of Mohammad Rashid al-Qabbani’s reign as mufti of the republic. The very unpopular mufti was replaced a couple of years ago by Abd al-Latif Derian, who enjoys the backing of the Future, but also political establishment figures such as Najib Miqati and Mohammad Safadi. At a certain point, the council seemed on the verge of taking over the role of Dar al-Ifta’, with even the mufti of North Lebanon, Malik Sha’ar,
taking part in their meetings. With the election of Derian as the new mufti, the council’s activities have decreased, but for al-Rafa’i it is still an important pulpit.

**A New Generation of Salafis**

With the outbreak of an uprising which has developed into a civil war in Syria, a new kind of Salafi expression emerged. This is young, disgruntled Salafi-inspired youths, with an activist outlook, who quickly took to the streets to demonstrate their support of the uprising. An example of these is Shadi al-Mawlawi, aged around 28, of Bab al-Tebbane in Tripoli. He was arrested in 2012, on unclear charges of ties to a terrorist organization, after apparently falling into a trap set up by the general Security, al-Amn al-`Aam. He was arrested inside the offices of Mohammad Safadi’s charity organization I Tripoli, and when he was released, after spending over a week in prison, he was brought by a car sent from Safadi to his office, and after that on to Miqati’s office for a meeting with the then premier.

Elections was expected to be held in 2013, and while both Safadi, Miqati and others have supported armed groups in the Bab al-Tebbane neighborhood over the years, it seems clear that the very public support for Mawlawi by Safadi was intended as an attempt to tap into a perceived popular support enjoyed by the former. Not only did that backfire, the case of Mawlawi also illustrated another feature; the blurring of the lines between activist Salafis, or just religiously committed youths, and jihadis. Mawlawi, like many others from different parts of Lebanon, was enraged by what they perceived as a lack of support for the Syrian uprising from the Sunni political establishment. He went on to join Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, and was charged by Lebanese authorities for membership in a terrorist organization in 2013. He is still a fugitive, but his wife and son were arrested after emerging from the Ain al-Hilwe refugee camp in Sadia.

**The Ahmad al-Assir Phenomenon**

Saida also brought us another phenomenon which had the ambition of challenging the Future hegemony, the firebrand preacher Ahmad al-Assir. His background is unlike that of many others, as he did not start out in the Jamaa Islamiyya or one of the Salafi groups, but rather as an activist in the Jamaa al-Tabligh. This movement was founded in India in the 1920s by a Deobandi scholar called Mohammad Ilyas al-Khandahalawi, and has been viewed by many as a purely proselytizing movement with no political agenda. Others have disputed this view, and pointed at the generous funding it has received from many Saudi based, Wahabi organizations, such as the World Muslim Leauge. Al-Assir was a junior member of this group until he established himself in the traditionally Christian Sidon neighborhood of Abra. From his base in the Bilal bin Rabah mosque, he slowly cultivated a group of devoted followers, but both he himself and the group around him were not noticed before 2010-11. At that point, al-Assir started to attend meetings of Sidon-based ulama, but still as a junior, and it was others who would speak to the media. All this changed some time in late 2010, when al-Assir could greatly expand his work due to newly acquired wealth. Several sources I interviewed claimed that the money came from two different sources; the first was
claimed to be a group of wealthy, local businessmen of Palestinian origin, and the other private Qatari donations. What these two sides had in common was the wish to confront Hizballah and their weapons, but without supporting Hariri (the Future), and by extension, Saudi Arabia.

In 2012, he initiated a campaign against what he branded “illegal weapons”, i.e. Hizballah’s weapons. There are several noteworthy factors of this campaign; it was framed by al-Assir as a support for the LAF as the sole legitimate carrier of arms in Lebanon. Al-Assir was denying that he was a Salafi throughout the whole campaign, and it was in part directed at the Future for their unwillingness to take this issue seriously and confront Hizballah.

Together with a group of followers, al-Assir staged a sit-in in Sidon, blocking the main highway leading to the south of the country, to demand that Hizballah give up its weapons. This catapulted him to national fame, and tensions ran high, not only in Sidon but around the country. Hizballah was furious, the blockade harmed their direct access-route to the south, but others cheered him on. During fieldwork at the time in Beirut, I asked several Christian youths affiliated with 14 March parties what they thought about al-Assir’s campaign. As it turned out, they all supported it, and I followed up by asking them why they supported an Islamist like al-Assir. “I might not agree with him in all matters, but he never demanded that Lebanon should be turned into an Islamic Republic”, one of them answered, in a clear reference to Hizballah and their previous demands for the establishment of such a republic in the country.

The most remarkable factor of the sit-in was the reaction from the Lebanese authorities, or rather the lack of any reaction. The Minister of Interior at the time, Marwan Cherbel, went himself to Sidon and met with al-Assir. Photos of the two men in what seemed like a very friendly conversation circulated in the media. This took place despite the fact that Cherbel belonged to the Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun, a close ally of Hizballah. The sit-in was dissolved peacefully after some days, with al-Assir promising to continue his campaign.

Just a few days after the end of the sit-in, al-Assir was interviewed on local TV-station al-Jadeed, where he levied unusually heavy criticism on Hizballah’s secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, and AMAL leader Nabih Berri. He vowed not to let them sleep at night as long as Hizballah did not surrender its weapons, but ended almost every sentence with the words bi tariqa silmiyya, in a peaceful way. This interview led to an arson attack on the TV station, where molotov-coctails were thrown at the building housing the station in West Beirut, and burning tires blocked its main entrance. Unfortunately for the attackers, one of them caught fire himself, and was apprehended by guards outside an office of the Progressive Socialist Party just down the street. The man, Wissam Alaeddin, turned out to be a member of the Hizballah-founded Resistance Brigades, saraya al-muqawama.

The attack on al-Jadeed further boosted al-Assir’s credentials a non-partisan defender of the Lebanese Army, and Ahl al-Sunna, the Sunnis of Lebanon. Al-Assir had increasingly adopted this phrase following the end of the sit-in in Sidon, and while his main criticism was directed at Hizballah, he increasingly focused on the Future and their unwillingness or inability to secure the interests, as he saw it, of the Sunnis.
A factor which helped to increase the interest in al-Assir, and possibly his popularity, was the devotion of the famous singer Fadel Shaker. Right at the start of the sit-in, he showed up to express his support for al-Assir, while at the same time announcing that he had left his singing career, which he now considered haram. He would now devote his life to God, and Ahmad al-Assir. This came as shock to most Lebanese, who was used to seeing Shaker surrounded by beautiful women in the glossy videos made for his love songs.

Al-Assir’s campaign eventually failed; provoked by Hizballah, he ended up in an armed confrontation with the LAF, where he, Fadel Shaker and other followers became holed up in the Bilal bin Rabah mosque in Abra. But he and a host of his followers managed to escape, in turn raising questions as to how this was possible, given that the mosque was completely surrounded by the Army. Fadel Shaker ended up in Ain al-Hilwe, where he has been living since. He gave an interview to Lebanese broadcaster LBC some time ago, denouncing al-Assir and expressing his wish to return to “a normal life”\textsuperscript{23}. This has been rejected by the Lebanese judiciary, not least due to the film-clips posted on Youtube where Shaker is boasting about having killed members of the LAF\textsuperscript{24}.

The whereabouts of al-Assir himself remained unknown for a long time, but he was at times very active on Twitter. On his account there, he was continuing his campaign, now first and foremost directed against the Future, or the \textit{sahwa} (hinting at the Sunni Iraqi tribes who were co-opted by the Americans to fight al-Qaida and Sunni insurgents there) as he brands them, the LAF, or \textit{jaysh al-safawi} (The Safavid army) in addition the \textit{hizb al-alat} (party of Gods), Hizballah. The focus of Assir subsequently became focused on Syria, portraying himself as a supporter of the mujahidin, decrying the in-fighting between ISIS and Nusra\textsuperscript{25}.

However, the trajectory of Ahmad al-Assir took an unexpected turn on August 15 last year, when he was arrested at Beirut’s International Airport. He had undergone plastic surgery, shaved his beard, and was in possession of a forged Palestinian passport with an authentic Nigerian visa. Why he was fleeing to Nigeria, via Cairo, remains a mystery, as does his hiding place in Lebanon before he was arrested.

Al-Assir has yet to stand trial, and has he himself become one of the many (Sunni) Islamist prisoners waiting to be brought before a court. And while most Lebanese have little if any sympathy with the actions of al-Assir, not least the use of arms against the LAF, many will claim the he is yet another victim of a conspiracy aimed at silencing Sunni opposition, the current status quo\textsuperscript{26}.

\section*{Criticism from Within}

But the criticism directed against the LAF for their focus on hunting down Sunnis, is not only coming from outside of the Future. Several MPs allied with the Future, such as Khaled Daher and Mohammad Kabbara, have voiced the same kind of criticism.

In a long interview I conducted with Daher at his residence in Tripoli in February 2015, he took it upon himself to explain to me the present situation of the Lebanese Sunnis. He started out by devoting considerable time to the regional context, with the war in Syria, the coup in Egypt, the war
in Iraq, not to mention the situation for the Palestinians. In his view, the sidelining of the Sunnis in Lebanon is only part of a regional trend where the Sunnis are targeted, and where the beneficiaries are first and foremost the Iranians and the Israelis.

Daher, who hails from the ‘Akkar region north of Tripoli, was himself a member of the Jamaa al-Islamiyya, before he left the group in 2000. In 1996, he was elected to the parliament as the sole representative of the JI, but he claims that the Syrians vetoed his candidature in 2000, and that the leadership of the JI bowed to the pressure. Following this incident, Daher continued in politics as an independent Islamist. In 2009 he was elected to parliament on a list dominated by the Future members, but he himself was careful to emphasize during the interview that he had not joined the movement.

While the Future leadership might have been irritated by Daher’s previous statements, in February last year the relations between the two reached a low point, and Daher was expelled from the Future’s parliamentarian block. Despite his insistence of not being a member of the movement, it turned out that he had attended the meetings of that block on a regular basis. But the reason he was expelled was not the statements against the Army, which it seemed that the leadership could tolerate, but rather a statement deemed deeply offensive to the Christians.

Following talks between the Future and Hizballah, they had decided yet again to remove party symbols from the streets of the country. These “offensives” have become a regular occurrence; every time tensions between the two groups seem to get out of hand, they meet and agree to ease the tension, often by removing party banners and flags from the streets of the capital. But this time, and as part of a larger security plan, khitta amniiyya, intended to be implemented in other parts of the country, the turn had come to Tripoli. When I had finished my interview with Daher he left for al-Nour square in downtown Tripoli to take part in a demonstration against one of the consequences of the security plan. At the Nour square, Hizb al-Tahrir had erected their black and white flag with the Muslim article of faith on it; there is no God but God, Muhammad is his messenger. The Internal Security Force, under the Ministry of Interior, had decided that this was a party symbol and wanted it removed. The Minister of the Interior, Future member Nuhad Mashnouq, furthermore said that the black flag with the white letters had traditionally been used in times of war, and as such it was inappropriate to use it now. This provoked Daher, who saw the flag as a purely religious symbol, and at the small demonstration he lambasted the ISF and their targeting of the Sunni. If this was the new strategy, he said, one should start by removing the Yasu´ al-Malik, Jesus the King, statue in the mountains outside Jounieh, right in the middle of the Christian heartland. This statement made the headlines of all Lebanese news outlets immediately, and drew harsh condemnation from all sides, not least from the Future movement itself. The leadership demanded an apology, which he offered, but at the same time he claimed that he had been misinterpreted. The apology did not seem to have impressed the leaders of the movement, and Fuad Siniora, on behalf of Saad al-Hariri, held a meeting with Daher after which it was announced that he had suspended his membership in Futures parliamentary block27.

It is interesting to note that it was not the criticism of the Lebanese army which led to Daher being expelled from the block, but rather an attack on the country’s Christians and their religious
symbols. This could very well imply that the Future have to accept a certain level of criticism of the LAF, and that the leadership of the movement is painfully aware of the difficult position they find themselves in.

The sometimes harsh criticism of the army has been rebuffed by other members of the Future movement, declaring that the army is a red line, and that the LAF should not under any circumstances be criticized. With the new government of Tamam Salam taking office in 2014, this side was given a substantial boost when Ashraf Rifi was named the new Minister of Justice. Not only is Rifi himself from Tripoli, but he is also the former head of the Internal Security Service, the Lebanese police force. The ISF is the only one of the state’s security organizations which is seen as not being dominated by pro-Hizballah forces, and which has genuine trust among the country’s Sunnis. In many respects, Rifi represents the opposite of MPs such as Daher; his background is from the state’s security apparatus, whereas Daher is an Islamist activist. But Rifi is viewed by many Future supporters as a strong man who is able to implement his policies. While, not entirely due to the efforts of Rifi, the security plan which was implemented in Tripoli seems to work. For a year and a half, the Bab al-Tebbane-Baal Mohsen front in the city has been quiet, armed Islamist militants have not showed themselves in the streets, and many of them have been arrested. It should be added that Ali Eid and his son Rifa´at, the leaders of the Alawi dominated Arab Democratic Party, based in Baal Mohsen, have left the city and taken refuge in Syria.28 They fled the city after being implicated in the bombing of two mosques in the summer of 2013, and while Rifa´at is still at large, his father Ali died at a hospital in Tartus, Syria late last year. He was buried in a village on the Syrian border, with his fugitive son present.29

There is no doubt that the targeting of militant Islamists by the judiciary and ISF have contributed to the grudges many Sunnis have to the political establishment in general, and the Future in particular. But on the other hand, one should not forget that large segments of the Sunnis support the campaign against these armed gangs, and as an extension of this the picture these contribute to of the Sunnis as a gang of religious zealots.

However, it still seems to be Hizballah and their policies that are the main grudge of those who claim to speak on behalf of the Lebanese Sunnis. After retiring as the head of the ISF and turning to politics, Ashraf Rifi became one of the party’s most vocal critics. This peaked in February this year, when he resigned as minister of justice, because he considered that to continue to serve in the government would mean an acceptance of this “deviation”, i.e. the policies of Hizballah.30 Since then, relations between Rifi and the Future leadership have deteriorated considerably, which could be observed in the run-up to the local elections this spring. In Tripoli, the Future, Miqati, Faysal Karami and local families have made an alliance, and formed a so-called consensus list. Rifi is working on his own list to compete against the Future/Miqati list, but an interesting point here is that he has not been in touch with Khaled Daher to secure his support for the competing list.

These views and this scathing criticism directed at Hizballah are expressed at a time when the Party continues to insinuate that the Future supports “terrorists”, openly or covertly.31 And at a time when Hizballah itself is openly engaged in the war in Syria in a much more extensive way than
previously thought. The fact that this engagement goes unchallenged by the LAF is at the core of the criticism against them from Islamist-leaning politicians and activists.

**Responses to the Challenges**

The response of the Future has been very clear; to stick with the state institutions, not least the LAF. One might add that the Future has no choice but to do so, it has no militia of its own, and cannot afford to be seen as being lenient towards Sunni extremists. This point is amply illustrated by the swift action taken by the Future leadership in the case of Khaled Daher. The strategy of sticking with the Lebanese state institutions has governed the politics of Future since the popular uprising in 2005, when a broad alliance was formed to oppose Syrian designs for the country. One could also easily argue that this was at the core of the strategy of the late Rafiq al-Hariri. For years he had a tense relationship with Hizballah, who on several occasions put the premier in a difficult position by launching attacks on Israeli targets when the premier wanted a calm southern border.

These incidents were also humiliating for him, as it showed the whole world that neither he, nor the Lebanese state, were the ones who presided over war and peace. This scenario was repeated in 2006, when the party crossed the Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon, to abduct several Israeli soldiers to be used as bargaining chips in a future prisoner swap. While enormous damage was inflicted on the country, the Lebanese state was not even a part of the conflict, and as such had no chance to stop it. Hizballah subsequently went on to call the outcome a “divine victory”, *nasr illahi*, further antagonizing the clear majority of the population, who wants the Lebanese state to be the sole carrier of arms.

But Hizballah continued their attacks on the Lebanese Sunnis, also with the help of maverick former army commander, Michel Aoun, after 2006. Following the July war, these two parties organized a sit-in outside the government headquarters in downtown Beirut, paralyzing all parliamentarian work for nearly two years. The two parties, Aoun’s FPM and Hizballah, had different reasons for doing so; for Hizballah the top priority was to thwart the work of the STL, while Aoun wanted to be elected president. What united the two was their hostile view on the Sunnis, and their perceived designs for Lebanon.

The blockade of the parliament ended after Hizballah turned their weapons on their opponents; on the streets of Beirut they mobilized armed gangs from the SSNP (Syrian Social National Party) and gunmen affiliated with AMAL, while their own elite forces went after supporters of Walid Jounblat in the mountains south east of Beirut. This led to the Doha accord, which secured Hizballah and FPM a blocking third in the new government.

The results of parliamentarian elections in 2009 came as a shock to both Hizballah and FPM, given that the two groups had been confident that they would end up with a clear majority. Future leader Saad al-Hariri eventually managed to get a government in place several months after the elections, but this collapsed after just over a year. The collapse came as Hizballah sent their “black shirts”, this time unarmed, into the Druze heartland. The aim was to terrorize PSP head, Walid Joumblat, to withdraw his support for the government, which he immediately did. After the fall of
his government, Saad al-Hariri left Lebanon, due to threats against him and his family. He only returned for a couple of short visits after that, until the spring of this year when he returned with a declared intention of staying. Following his departure, FPM leader, Michel Aoun, openly bragged about having given him a one-way ticket. At best, this can be interpreted as a grave insult, but given the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, also as a direct threat to his life. Seen from the “Sunni street”, this was yet another humiliation at the hands of Hizballah and their allies.\(^{35}\)

**Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

The leadership of the Future movement is acutely aware of the difficult position they find themselves in. On the one hand, there is an increasingly aggressive rhetoric against them from Hizballah and their allies, equating support for the Syrian opposition with supporting the Islamic State and other takfiri groups. In the black and white world of the Party there is no room for such a stance; you are either with Asad or with IS.

The support from the “Sunni street” for the uprising in Syria is very clear, but it has been difficult for the Future to translate their support for the uprising into political capital and leverage. The case of Future MP, `Uqb Saqr, is illustrative, both of the difficulties the Future leadership have in this respect, but also of the dependence on Saudi Arabia, which is not always an asset for the movement. Saqr is a Shiite whose family hails from Zahle, and he was elected to the parliament in 2009 on the Future supported list there. Born in 1975, he is a young and vocal opponent of Hizballah. He quickly became very popular among March 14 supporters, and is equally detested by Hizballah and their allies.

In November 2012, the Lebanese pro-Hizballah daily al-Akhbar and Michel Aoun’s Orange TV published a taped recording of a conversation between Saqr and a commander linked to the Free Syrian Army. This made headlines in Lebanon, as it implicated the MP in the transfer of arms to Syrian rebels. Following the publication of the tape, Saqr held a press conference in Istanbul where he vehemently denied that he was involved in providing arms to the rebels, insisted that the tapes were doctored and claimed that his mission was to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians in need, at the behest of Saad al-Hariri. This was later confirmed by Hariri, but it seems obvious that there is more to the story than that. It is quite possible that Saqr was involved in providing weapons to FSA groups, but rather than doing this on behalf of the Future or Hariri personally, it is most likely that this was done on behalf of Saudi Arabia. The finances of the Future were at this point already problematic, and employees in Future TV and their newspaper al-Mustaqbal received their payments late, if at all. Following this story, Saqr disappeared from the public eye completely, but the opponents of the Future did not succeed in tarnishing the movement’s image in the view of the “Sunni street”. However, the Future did not succeed either in projecting themselves as able to “do something” to really support the Syrian uprising.

In May last year, Saqr reappeared from obscurity, and gave an interview to the Future’s TV station, where he commented on a number of issues, many relating to Syria, but also to the ongoing dialog
between the Future and Hizballah\textsuperscript{38}. Emerging strongman Ashraf Rifi also published a recent picture of the two together, accompanied by the line “Greetings to the friend the MP Oqab Saqr”\textsuperscript{39}.

But there are more to these statements than what relates directly to Syria, and of the underlying factors governing the relations between the two groups, the question of the STL is possibly the most explosive. Five members of Hizballah are indicted in the case, all are still at large and possibly still in Lebanon, with the exception of Mustafa Badr al-Din who was recently killed in Syria. Should these five be found guilty of contributing to the assassination of al-Hariri, it is highly possible that the party will use all the means at their disposal to have Lebanon officially break their relations with the STL.

But on the other hand, the Future will have to take the criticism from its supporters more seriously than it has done. This is true if it wants to preserve its hegemonic position as the Sunni expression.

A senior member of the Future leadership, who I interviewed in February last year, illustrated the difficult position they find themselves in by pointing to the case of Saudi assistance to the Lebanese Army. The Saudis had offered some three billion dollars in aid to the LAF, intended to be used for purchasing weapons from France. In a move that says a lot about the Saudi view on Lebanon, the Kingdom made Saad al-Hariri responsible for overseeing the implementation of the grant, rather than the prime minister Tamam Salam, or the head of the LAF, Jean Qahwagi\textsuperscript{40}. The grant was announced last summer, at a time when the LAF was engaged in heavy fighting in and around the Biqa’a town of Arsal. While there is no doubt that both the al-Qaida franchise Nusra Front and the Islamic State has a foothold in the surrounding area, the offensive was not restricted to fighting these two groups. Rather, it seemed to include fighting all Syrian opposition forces which might have a presence in or around the town. Scores of male refugees were rounded up in the makeshift refugee camps in the town, in an effort to purge the area of anyone suspected of aiding the Syrian armed opposition. Much in line with Hizballah’s framing of the battle, it was also portrayed by the LAF as a battle between terrorists and the LAF, and the presence of forces other than the two terrorist groups were not mentioned\textsuperscript{41}. But while al-Hariri blamed Hizballah for instigating the fight, and held the party responsible for what was going on there\textsuperscript{42}, he could not criticize the LAF. On the contrary, at the behest of the Saudis, he was in charge of providing the arms the LAF was using. And all this was happening while Hizballah itself was as engaged as ever in the war efforts of the Syrian regime, freely moving between Lebanon and Syria without the slightest interference from the LAF.

“It is a great dilemma, we know the Saudis are providing the weapons which are then used to fight the Sunnis in Arsal and other places.” This is how a leading Future member put it to me when I interviewed him. But the most problematic for him and the Future movement as such, is that there is no solution in sight. The Future is overtaken by the events that are unfolding, and they have no possibility themselves to change the course of these events.
Conclusion

The most striking of my findings during the work with this report is how Lebanon-centered the agenda and rhetoric of the different actors of the Sunni political stage are. Despite its prominent place in the rhetoric of many groups, not least the Salafis, the ongoing war in Syria has not become the mobilizing factor one might expect. Rather, it is used first and foremost in two ways; as an example of how the Sunnis in the region are targeted, and it is used in the domestic struggle between the different actors on the Lebanese political stage.

I have further tried to demonstrate that the Future is under considerable pressure from Sunni opponents to take a more active stand against Hizballah in general, and its involvement in the Syrian war in particular. However, the pressure on the Future is not only coming from disgruntled Sunnis or Hizballah, but also from its main source of support: Saudi Arabia. In a remarkable turn of events, earlier this year Hariri announced his support for Sleiman Frangié as the new president of the republic. To support a childhood friend of Bashar al-Assad for the presidency seems to have irritated the Saudis to a considerable degree, and shortly after it cancelled the announced military aid package it had promised for the LAF. Officially, the Saudis cancelled the aid due to Lebanon’s failure to come out in clear support for the Kingdom after its embassy in Teheran was attacked by a mob in January this year. But it is difficult not to view it as a snub to the Future and its leader, who was put in charge of receiving the aid.

It is difficult to predict how these developments; the criticism from Sunni Islamist opponents, the criticism from within the movement, the war of words with Hizballah and the bumpy relations with Saudi Arabia, will affect the movement. If the latest results from the municipal elections could give us an indication, it would be that the clear majority of the Sunnis still support the movement. In Beirut, the list supported by the Future won a sweeping victory in the 2nd and 3rd district, both with a Sunni majority. But municipal elections in Lebanon are like municipal elections in other countries; local considerations play a greater role than national politics. It is therefore too early to predict the impact of the latest maneuvers of the Future, but it is unlikely that the movement would change its policies to a great extent. The escalating conflict with former Minister of Justice is an example in this respect.
32 Aoun (Lebanese Forces) for Aoun’s candidacy http://www.lebanese.com/2016/01/18/samir-geagea-michel-aoun-11/

33 Following the signing of the “Memorandum of Intentions” between the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement, which clearly states that the parties agrees to work for “securing the borders with Syria and preventing Lebanon from being used to transfer weapons or fighters” to that country. See the Lebanese Forces: Naṣṣ ʿīlān jaʿjaʿ tabānī “al-quwwāt” taršīh ʿaūn (The text of Geagea’s announcement of the endorsement of “The (Lebanese) Forces” for Aoun’s candidacy) http://www.lebanese-forces.com/2016/01/18/samir-geagea-michel-aoun-11/


5 Daily Star 11.05.2015: Future candidates win Higher Islamic Council poll.


7 ibid

8 http://en.iswa.lb.org/qatar-launches-the-qatari-center-for-teaching-syrian-students/

9 Rabil p.182-3

10 A claim put forward by a member of the JI interview by the author in January 2015

11 Rabil p.82


14 See MTV 25.10.2014: Dai al-Islam a-Shahhal to declare jihad across Lebanon.

15 http://mtv.com.lb/EN/News/405274

16 https://ar-facebook.com/salafimedialb

17 https://twitter.com/daeislam

18 According to sources close to the Salafi scene in Tripoli interviewed by the author in January and February 2015

19 Rabil p. 11

20 Rabil p.243

21 Alexiev, Alex: Tablighi Jamaat: Jihaḍ Is stealthy Legions, in The Middle East Quarterly, Volume 12, Number 1, 2005

22 My sources did not exclude the possibility that Qatari officials could have given al-Assir financial assistance, but specifically mentioned private donors from the Gulf state as one of two main sources financing his activities.

23 A small section of this post is posted by MEMRI on YouTube, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBIIJ3xMCZM

24 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6pRiiN5Sso

25 For al-Assir’s Twitter account, see https://twitter.com/alamd_alaseer

26 Lebanon Files 18.08.2015: Khalid Dahir: al-Assir kana dahihyya li muʿamara (Khalid Dahir: Al-Assir was the victim of a conspiracy).


31 See for instance Daily Star 29.05.2015: Hezbollah accuses the Future of “embracing terrorists”.

Authors interview with Professor S.M. Jal al-Dib June 2013

This view was expressed by a host of Hizballah-supporters I met and interviewed during fieldwork in South Lebanon in the autumn of 2008 and spring 2009.

See “Aūn: Qa‘fānā one-way ticket lil-Harīrī wa lan ya‘ūd (Aoun: We brought a one-way ticket to al-Hariri and he will not return). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa7bta4i_o


This was related to the author by acquaintances employed in the newspaper.

MTV Lebanon 04.05.2015: Min Ashraf Rīfī ilā Uqāb Ṣaqr. http://mtv.com.lb/News/473956


Al-Safīr 06.08.2014: Al-Ḥarīrī: “Ḥizb Allah” mas’ūl ūmā yaṣrī fī “Arsāl (Al-Hariri: “Hizballah” is responsible for what is going on in Arsal). http://assafir.com/Article/1/365088/MostRead