



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Political Islam in Sunni Communities of Lebanon

Moussalli, A.S.

Citation

Moussalli, A. S. (1999). Political Islam in Sunni Communities of Lebanon. *Isim Newsletter*, 3(1), 25-25. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17302>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17302>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Middle East
AHMAD S. MOUSSALLI

Most recent scholarly publications on and interests in political Islam in Lebanon cover primarily Hizbullah, the leading fundamentalist movement in Lebanon. A number of smaller movements, in particular within the Sunni community, have attracted less attention. Like their Shi'ite counterparts, most of these groups surfaced during the war years, in particular after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Political Islam in Sunni Communities of Lebanon

The political landscape of Lebanon in the late 1990s differs markedly from that of a decade earlier. For instance, the new leadership of Hizbullah were well able to prepare the party for the new and difficult stage of post-militia politics. Many positive steps have been taken in terms of relations with the Lebanese state, whose legitimacy the party endorses. Hizbullah leaders now hold meetings with various Lebanese political factions, including bitter enemies of yesterday, like the Phalangists and the Communists. They have even met with representatives of the Lebanese government and its army. This would have been inconceivable until recently. Among the various Sunni fundamentalist groups, support for the reconstruction of the country and the State, too, has increased. But due to their limited size and failing popular support, some of these movements find difficulty in participating in post-militia politics.

Al-Ahbash
The Sunni political groups include al-Ahbash, Harakat al-Tawhid, and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya. Recently Al-Ahbash has begun to receive scholarly attention. The group, legally

known as Jam'iyyat al-Mashari' al-Khaiiriyya al-Islamiyya (Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects), is a small Sunni group of the traditional fundamentalist thought. Its headquarters are in the area around the Burj Abi Haydar mosque in Beirut. Al-Ahbash is spiritually headed by al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Habashi, a former *mufti* from Ethiopia. The group is involved with theological issues and is anti-Shi'ite and very secretive. For the last few years, al-Ahbash has become very active against Islamic fundamentalist movements in Lebanon, and one of the presidents of the association, Shaykh Nizar al-Halabi, was assassinated in 1995 by a militant fundamentalist group. The group seems to be supported by Syria, which wants to further Syrian political objectives in Lebanon.

Al-Ahbash opposes the basic doctrines of modern fundamentalist movements, which it accuses of neglecting the Prophet's traditions. It harshly criticizes other Islamic movements and accuses their leaders, such as Sayyid Qutb and Hasan al-Banna, of unbelief (*kufr*). The group conceives itself as a moderate Islamic movement that is concerned with ethics. Its current president is Shaykh Husam al-Din Qaraqira, a graduate of an Islamic seminary in Syria. Al-Ahbash's activities became more apparent when one of its members was elected to the Lebanese parliament in 1992. Al-Ahbash lost that seat during the 1996 elections, and the assassination of its leader by the Islamic Band of Helpers ('Usbat al-Ansar al-Islamiyya) reduced its activities. The group has an elaborate structure that includes schools, centres, sports, and scouts. It is unclear as to who the sources of al-Ahbash funding are, especially given its spending on activities in many parts of the world.

sunna (way) of the Prophet. It believes that all political systems are living the life of paganism (*jahiliyya*). Al-Ahbash is targeted as its foremost enemy because of its justification of un-Islamic governments and of its very strong opposition to Islamic fundamentalism.

Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami
Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami is the most important radical Sunni movement in the northern town of Tripoli. It was founded in 1982, and its leader is Shaykh Sa'id Sha'ban, a former member of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group). He was able to assert his power over the city in 1983 against Syria's wishes. Sha'ban, who comes from a lower-middle-class family, has been successful in attracting the classes of the poor in Tripoli. Sha'ban had been a member of the pro-Saudi Muslim Brotherhood before setting up his movement in 1982. It was the outcome of unifying three fundamentalist groups: Soldiers of God (Jundallah), al-Muqawama al-Sha'biyya (Popular Resistance), founded by Khalil 'Ikawi, and the Movement for Arab Lebanon (Harakat Lubnan al-'Arabi), founded by Dr 'Ismat Murad. However, the first two groups split from the Islamic Unification Movement by the summer of 1984, denying Sha'ban an important power base. Al-Muqawama al-Sha'biyya formed al-Lijan al-Islamiyya (Islamic Committees), and the Movement for Arab Lebanon formed Lijan al-Masajid wa al-Ahya' (Committees for Mosques and Neighbourhoods).

Sha'ban believed the civil war could end only if *shari'a* (Islamic Law) were applied in Lebanon under an Islamic government. He was very antagonistic of the communists, who were subject to the deadly massacres of his movement in Tripoli. The movement controlled the city for a few years and imposed strict Islamic laws on the people. But when Syrian forces entered the city, the movement was defeated. In recent years, Sha'ban has become a close ally of Iran, and he has improved his ties with Syria.

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya
The last Sunni group treated here is al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya. This fundamentalist group was established in 1964 in Tripoli by young members of 'Ibad al-Rahman (the Worshipers of the Merciful). According to one of its leaders, 'Abd Allah Babati, the split took place because some younger members wanted to be involved in politics. The movement was led by the influential Sunni fundamentalist thinker Fathi Yakan, Judge Faysal al-Mawlawi, and writer Muhammad 'Ali al-Dinnawi. It called for an Islamic society and state whose bases were derived from *shari'a*. This call led to its advocating and using political violence and radicalism, and to the establishment of its own military wing in 1976.

The group fought during the civil war on the side of the leftist-Islamic coalition in Tripoli. While it opposes secularism and communism, it considers Islam to be the best solution to the Lebanese crisis. Later on, however, some of its members, like Yakan and Zuhayr 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Ubaydi, became members of the secular, though confessional, Lebanese Parliament. The group still calls for the abolition of confessionalism.

During the Israeli invasion of 1982, the group launched military activities against the Israelis. However it is not, for the time being, trying to set up an Islamic state in Lebanon, because it believes that the Islamic state should be a natural outcome of a particular environment, which Lebanon lacks because it is composed of groups that have different religions and sects. Its participation in the electoral process has reduced its original claims and led to its moderation. ♦

Prof. Ahmad S. Moussalli, Department of Political Studies, American University of Beirut, Lebanon.
E-mail: asmouss@aub.edu.lb

Selected recent bibliography

- Abu Khalil, As'ad, 'Lebanon', *Political Parties of the Middle East and North Africa*. Ed. F. Tachau. London: Mansell, 1994: 297-368.
- Al-Habashi, Shaykh 'Abd Allah, *Sarih al-Bayan*. Beirut: Islamic Studies and Research Section, Jam'iyyat al-Mashari' al-Khaiiriyya al-Islamiyya, 1990.
- Hamzeh, A. Nizar, 'The Future of Islamic Movements in Lebanon', *Islamic Fundamentalism: Myths and Realities*. Ed. Ahmad S. Moussalli, 249-274. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998.
- Hamzeh, A. Nizar, and H. Dekmejian, 'The Islamic Spectrum of Lebanese Politics', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 15, 3 (1993): 25-42; 'A Sufi Response to Political Islamism: Al-Ahbash of Lebanon', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28 (May 1996): 217-229.
- Hanf, Theodor, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation*. London: Centre for Lebanese Studies and I. B. Tauris, 1993.
- Khashan, Hilal, 'The Development Programs of Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Lebanon as a Source of Popular Legitimation', *Islam and the Modern Age*, 25 ii (1994): 116-142; 'The Development Programmes of Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Lebanon as a Source for Popular Legitimation', *Islamic Fundamentalism: Myths and Realities*. Ed. Ahmad S. Moussalli, 221-248. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998.
- Moussalli, Ahmad S., 'Islamist Perspectives of Regime Political Response: The Cases of Lebanon and Palestine', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 18 iii (Summer 1996): 53-63.
- Shrara, Wadah, *Dawlat Hizballah: Lubnan Mujtama'an Islamiyyan*. 2nd ed. Beirut: Dar al-Nahar li al-Nashr, 1997.

ADVERTISEMENT

TAYLOR & FRANCIS LIMITED

ARABIC AND MIDDLE EASTERN LITERATURES
Editors: James Montgomery, University of Cambridge, UK, and Robin Clark, University of Oxford, UK
Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures addresses questions of textual interpretation of the literatures of the pre-modern and modern Middle East.
1997 Volume 27, Number 155, £55.00

BRITISH JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES
Editors: Adrian Giles, University of Manchester, UK, and David S. Gifford, University of Manchester, UK
British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies aims to maintain a balance in coverage between the modern and traditional and the more traditional disciplines associated with Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.
1997 Volume 26, Number 1, £35.00

ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN MUSLIM RELATIONS
Editors: John L. Esposito, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA, and David Thomas, York St John College, York, UK
Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations provides a forum for all those who wish to enhance their mutual appreciation of the two religions in relation to historical, empirical, theological, and thematic levels.
1997 Volume 10, Number 155, £55.00

JOURNAL OF MUSLIM MINORITY AFFAIRS
Editor: Saleem S. Wameed
Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs is the only scholarly journal analyzing Muslim communities in non-Muslim societies, and provides a wealth of comparative Muslim communities in contemporary society that cannot be found anywhere else at discounted prices.
1997 Volume 19, Number 1, £55.00

For further details on these and other journals, or to request an inspection copy, please contact:

Taylor & Francis Ltd • Bankside Road • Basingstoke
Hants • RG24 8UR • UK
Tel: +44 (0)1256 332000 • Fax: +44 (0)1256 332045
E-mail: info@tandf.co.uk

Taylor & Francis Inc • 47 Runway Road, Suite 105 • Levittown
PA 19057-4700 • USA
Tel: +1 215 269 0800 • Fax: +1 215 269 0369