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Moussalli, A.S.

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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-Khairiyya 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.

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

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