Limiting violent spillover in civil wars: the paradoxes of Lebanese Sunni jihadism, 2011–17

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ABSTRACT

Research on violent spillovers in civil war has often exaggerated the potential for conflict contagion. The case of Lebanon is a counter-example. Despite the massive pressure of the horrific war in next-door Syria, it has, against all odds, remained remarkably stable – despite the influx of more than 1 million Syrian refugees and almost complete institutional blockage. This paper, based on ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews from Lebanon, studies the determination to avoid a violent spillover into Lebanon from the perspective of the country’s Sunni Islamists. Recent trends in the scholarly literature have shown that Islamists are not inherently revolutionary, nor always dogmatists, and often serve many social purposes at home. The main argument is that the Syrian war has not been imported into Lebanon; instead, the Lebanese conflict is externalized to Syria. Lebanon’s conflicting factions, including the Islamists, have found the costs of resorting to violence inside Lebanon to be too high. Even those Lebanese Sunnis who have crossed the borders to fight in Syria do so because of domestic reasons, that is, to fight against Hezbollah on Syria soil, where they can do so without risking an explosion of the Lebanese security situation. Sectarianism, in the sense of opposition to Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shia, is the main driver of radicalization for Lebanese Sunnis.

KEYWORDS

Lebanon; Islamism; jihadism; salafism; civil war studies

Research on violent spillovers in civil war has often exaggerated the potential for conflict contagion (Kalyvas 2006; Black 2013). Civil wars are often presented as an expanding metastasis, very prone to spread across borders. According to the literature, violent spillover is found to be more likely in a neighbouring country with lax border controls and similar ethnic and religious make-up (Stefanova 1997). Moreover, large influxes of refugees and the fragility of the host state are other factors that might facilitate a cross-border spread of the conflict (Young et al. 2014). The risk of spillover is positively correlated with increased conflict intensity.

The case of Lebanon is a counter-example. A least likely case to show resilience against the massive pressure of the horrific war in next-door Syria, it has, against all odds, remained remarkably stable – despite the influx of more than 1 million Syrian refugees and almost complete institutional blockage. For nearly two-and-a-half years, between May 2014 and
October 2016, the country remained without a president and the chamber of deputies has unconstitutionally extended its mandate twice. Moreover, the lack of border demarcation between Syria and Lebanon in mountainous areas early on in the conflict and the weakness of the army made the latter ill-prepared to control border crossings. Lebanon, the ancient land of Cedars, has many of the same religious and political cleavages as Syria, and due to intermarriages, numerous family ties exist between the countries. Furthermore, Lebanese conflicting political–religious camps both have hardliners pitted against each other on the ground in Syria. Yet, they have not been willing to open a front inside Lebanon.

This paper, based on ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2008 and 2016, studies the determination to avoid a violent spillover into Lebanon from the perspective of the country’s Sunni Islamists. While Islamists are often perceived as a threat to Lebanon’s stability and national cohesion (e.g., Ibrahim 2012; Rabih 2015), recent trends in the scholarly literature have shown that Islamists are not inherently revolutionary, nor always dogmatists, and often serve many social purposes at home (Clark 2004; Pall 2014; Collombier and Roy 2017). Moreover, radicalization is a situational pose that actors can move in and out of, depending on their circumstances and strategic calculations (Utás and Vigh 2017). This paper shows that Salafis are very embedded into local politics, and often take similar political stances as people around them.

Despite the many historical ties between the Syrian and Lebanese scenes, and despite Hezbollah’s massive involvement in Syria, only around 1000 Lebanese Sunnis have travelled to fight alongside jihadi groups (The Economist 2014, Neuman 2015; Schmid 2015). Given Lebanon’s geographical location, the number is relatively low, not least in comparison with the more than 2000 foreign fighters of French nationality who have travelled to Syria. Moreover, jihadi political violence within Lebanon has remained limited. Why, despite the many socio-economic and political grievances among segments of Lebanese Sunnis, are they not turning towards jihad in greater number?

The main argument is that the Syrian war has not been imported into Lebanon; instead, the Lebanese conflict is externalized to Syria. Lebanon’s conflicting factions, including the Islamists, have found the costs of resorting to violence inside Lebanon to be too high. Lebanese Islamists have in recent decades become more focused on solely domestic and internal affairs. Their priority is the Lebanese scene, not the solidarity with the Syrian cause (the main alternative focus is how Lebanon could benefit from a prospective Syrian reconstruction). Even those Lebanese Sunnis who have crossed the borders to fight in Syria do so because of domestic reasons, that is, to fight against Hezbollah on Syria soil, where they can do so without risking an explosion of the Lebanese security situation. Sectarianism, in the sense of opposition to Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shia, is the main driver of radicalization for Lebanese Sunnis. Thus, support for global jihadism remains limited, though sectarian frustrations of Lebanese Sunnis is a potential tipping point that could trigger jihadi radicalization on a larger scale.

The paper is structured as follows. Next it gives the background to the Lebanese crisis. Thereafter, it shows the factors that led to the containment of Lebanese jihadism, including the gradual dissociation between Lebanese and Syrian Islamism and the turn of Lebanese Islamism away from pan-Islamism and towards sectarianism and anti-Shiism. Moreover, it analyses the motivations of Sunni fighters in Syria and the weakness of Islamic State (ISIS – Daesh) in Lebanon. Finally, it identifies the potential tipping points.
The Lebanese crisis

In April 2005, the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, triggering a political crisis. The Syrian army intervened in Lebanon in 1976, during the civil war, and its military presence was sanctioned by the 1989 Taif Accords, which ended the civil war. The Syrian protectorate (often referred to as a tutelage) was imposed with the harsh repression of political opponents, and contributed to the discredit of the Lebanese parliament and an increase in corruption of the Lebanese system. It split and divided enemies of the Syrian regime, but also helped the country maintain stability and calm. The Syrian withdrawal created an opening of the political space throughout the country, but also polarized the political landscape, between the March 14 and the March 8 Alliances (named after two rival demonstrations against and for the al-Assad regime, respectively). The March 8 Alliance is dominated by Hezbollah and its allies, the Shia-based Amal movement and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by General Michel Aoun. The March 14 Alliance includes Sunni politicians in the Future Movement (led by Saad Hariri, son of Rafiq) and the Christian Phalangist (Kataib) and Lebanese Forces parties.

Unlike the Shia community, where the rise of Hezbollah in the 1980s destroyed the power bases of traditional Shia notables, Sunni leadership is dominated by the notable elites. The mainstream of Sunni political opinion is pragmatic, and to the extent it supports political movements it supports the Hariri family or competing notables. Only a few per cent of Lebanon’s Sunnis (who constitute 30–35% of Lebanon’s total population) support Islamist groups (Gade 2015a). Arab nationalist and radical left militant groups were strong in the 1970s and had grassroots appeal but were replaced by Islamist groups in the 1980s. The Future Movement, created by Rafiq Hariri in 1998, has since 2005 been the strongest political force among Sunnis in Lebanon. Led by Saad after 2005, it gained popularity in the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal. It lost some of its popular appeal after 2011 when Saad lived outside Lebanon, but the greatest competition came from rival Sunni elites rather than from Salafi groups. The major challenger to Saad Hariri since 2011 has been Ashraf Rifi, a Tripolitanian former head of the internal security forces (ISF), who served as Minister of Justice from 2014 to 2016. In 2016, his electoral list gained around two-thirds of the seats in Tripoli’s municipal council. Like Hariri, Rifi is part of the establishment. He uses sectarian slogans to mobilize segments of the Sunni population, yet he also respects the informal rules of the Lebanese political game (Gade and Moussa 2017).

From an early stage, Lebanon’s opposing political–sectarian camps agreed on the principle of neutrality to the Syrian crisis (Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the UN 2012). However, since 2012, Hezbollah, the largest military force in Lebanon, has broken with this by its military involvement in Syria on the side of President al-Assad. The Future Movement declared support for the Syrian uprising early on, but emphasized that it was not in the interest of the Lebanese state, nor in that of the Syrian opposition, that Lebanese actors involved themselves. Yet, Lebanese and international media accused Oqab Saqr, a Future member and Shia MP from Zahleh, of delivering weapons to the Syrian opposition for Saad Hariri (Mortada 2012). Saqr denied this, stating that he had only been responsible for political and humanitarian support to the Syrian uprising. Yet, his four-year absence from
Lebanon, until he returned in October 2016, could have been an attempt by the Future movement to bury an embarrassing story.

Although Lebanon is today the country in the world with the highest refugee/citizen ratio (more than 30%), jihadi radicalization has been limited. This is paradoxical as Lebanon has a history of violent destabilization due to refugee influx. The civil war (1975–90) is often blamed on Palestinian refugees. After 1967, the Palestinian commando movement polarized the Lebanese population along confessional lines: while Muslims and Arab nationalists considered the support to the Palestinian resistance as a top priority, the Christian conservatives rather favoured reaffirming Lebanese sovereignty (Salibi 1976). A similar polarization has not occurred in Lebanese public opinion with the Syrian crisis; although the population is split towards the latter, there is a national consensus to shield the country from violent spillover from Syria.

Moreover, the literature shows that when refugees rebuild solidarity ties in exile, religious identifications often prime over national ones (Rougier 2007b). Poor living conditions and outbidding between rival militias have led to a rise of jihadism in some Palestinian refugee camps. However, among the Syrians in Lebanon, the spread of Salafi jihadism has so far been contained – despite extremely harsh social and legal conditions. The presence of Syrian refugees, and the networking between Syrian and Islamist groups, could potentially have radicalized Lebanese Salafis. Yet, although some contacts have developed between Syrian and Lebanese Islamist groups operating in Lebanon, hindering radicalization has been a priority for the Lebanese authorities (Lefèvre 2014; Sude, Stebbins, and Weilant 2015).

The security situation in Lebanon deteriorated between 2011 and 2014. Then, in February 2014, with the end of former President Michel Sleiman’s mandate drawing near, major political figures agreed on the formation of a government led by Tammam Salam. A security plan was also implemented, and the army and security forces were deployed in volatile areas and given the political backing to intervene and make arrests. The plan, which was applied in the northern city of Tripoli to end a regional and sectarian proxy conflict, proved surprisingly successful. This was possible because the Future Movement, the largest Sunni movement, endorsed the plan and gave full and explicit support to the Lebanese army in its struggle against Sunni jihadism. Moreover, the army has obtained international material support and reinforcements.

The dissociation of Lebanese and Syrian Islamists

The Syrian and Lebanese socio-political scenes were long so intertwined that they constituted a single social space. Lebanon was part of Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham) prior to 1920, and Sunni elites in Tripoli refused the ‘Lebanese entity’ and asked for reunification with Syria until the 1930s. During the 29-year-long Syrian tutelage, Lebanese border regions became absorbed into the Syrian labour and black markets (Gade 2015b; Picard 2016). Moreover, Syria was the bridge to the wider Arab world and a favoured holiday destination, especially in middle-income Muslim areas close to the border.

The political relationship between Lebanese Sunnism and the Assad regime, on the other hand, was complicated. Sunnis in northern Lebanon had historically supported all the political enemies of the Syrian Baathist regime: Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt, Yasser
Arafat’s Fatah and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in its struggle against the regime. There was also a sectarian element to this, as Nasser and Fatah were associated with the Sunni majority, and Hafiz al-Assad with the Alawite minority.9

Lebanese Islamism developed with inspiration from Syria, but it became autonomous and more pragmatic than its Syrian counterpart. In the early 1950s, during Adib Shishakli’s regime, Syrian MB leader Mustafa Sibai sought refuge in Lebanon and helped create the first Lebanese Islamist society, Ubbad al-Rahman (UR), in Beirut. The Lebanese branch of the MB, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (JI), was formed on direct impulse from the Syrian MB, when a group from Tripoli led by Fathy Yakan, an engineer and preacher, broke with UR’s Nasserite line (Bizri 1985; Itani, Ali, and al-Manna’ 2009). It also broke with the line of the Syrian MB against its regime.

Yakan, who passed away in 2009, had close ties to President Hafiz al-Assad. JI was organizationally tied to the MB network, but had from the outset chosen a more pragmatic political strategy. It officially opposed the Islamist armed struggle against the Assad regime (1976–82), and considered that the Syrian MB had a ‘simplistic and idealistic style’.10 The fact that the Islamic rebellion failed in Syria meant that it could never work in Lebanon.11 Such stances made it possible for Yakan to function as a mediator between exiled Syrian Islamists and the regime in the 1990s (National Organization for Human Rights in Syria 2014).

However, other Lebanese Islamists became strongly involved in the opposition to the Syrian authorities. In September 1982, the Islamic Tawhid movement (harakat tawhid al-islami), a militia allied with Fatah, declared the establishment of an ‘emirate’ in Tripoli. Tawhid was the result of a unification of several Islamist groups already in existence, some of which had close ties to the grassroots in poor quarters. It was a byproduct of Arafat’s struggle against the Syrian regime, and of the Islamist fervour in many areas of Lebanon following the Israeli invasion (Seurat 1984; Richard 1988; Gade 2015a). Although it did not openly involve itself in Syria’s internal conflict at the time, it resisted the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and its heavy repression of political activists.

While Tawhid’s struggle against the Syrian regime was separate from that of the Syrian MB (for the Syrian case, see Lefèvre 2013), sympathy with the Syrian Islamist opposition existed at the grassroots level, not least because of family ties. After the destruction of Hama, some dozen members of the Syrian MB fled to Tripoli and were welcomed as ‘al-Muhajirun’ by Lebanese Islamists who compared themselves with ‘al-Ansar’ (Seurat 1984). These terms referred to the early history of Islam when the prophet and his companions (al-Muhajirun) in 622 CE fled from Mecca to Medina where they were welcomed by local supporters (al-Ansar).

The sympathy that had existed in the grassroots between Syrian and Lebanese Islamists dissipated over time, however. The Tawhid movement was crushed by the Syrian army in 1985–86, and a period of harsh repression of Tripoli’s Islamists followed (Amnesty International 1987). Many were arrested and detained in Syrian prisons along with members of the Syrian MB. No real common solidarity developed between Lebanese and Syrian Islamists at that stage. When Lebanese Islamists were released, they turned into informers of the Syrian regime (Gade 2015a). It was rare to be able to leave a Syrian prison without having signed a pledge promising to cease all sorts of political action against Syria, and committing to meet regularly for briefings with Syrian intelligence officers (Rougier 2011). Moreover, for many, despite years of combat, Syria was actually not seen as a
complete enemy, since many Islamists agreed with President Hafiz al-Assad’s so-called steadfastness policies vis-à-vis Israel.

Those activists who had still not had enough of anti-Syrian militancy after years in Syrian jails, a very small minority, travelled to the Palestinian camp of Ayn al-Hilweh in southern Lebanon, where Syria had a less direct influence, and joined the emerging jihadi groups there (Rougier 2011). Doing so, they were socialized into other, transnational narratives that identified with the entire Islamic *Umma*, disengaging from the local struggle within the Syrian political scene.

This shows that although Lebanese Islamism developed with inspiration from Syria, ties of common solidarity were broken in the 1990s during a period of repression by the Syrian army. Furthermore, the social ties between the two countries also broke down after the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005, and the beginning of a difficult, and largely unsuccessful, nation-building process in Lebanon. Not only Sunni secular politicians but also Lebanese Islamists became close to the March 14 Alliance and adopted a *Lebanon first* policy. This stance continued after war in Syria broke out, and Lebanese Sunni Islamists focused more on salvaging Lebanon or on making private material gains from smuggling than on assisting the Syrians in their uprising.

**Jihadism in Lebanon: causes, rationale and links to Syria**

The rise of Salafism in Lebanon occurred concurrently with the depreciation of institutional politics, and the rise of corruption, after the end of the civil war. The decline of political life was particularly visible in the Sunni community, where after Arab nationalism lost of impetus in the mid-1980s, leaders often lacked a clear mandate. The Sunni politicians elected to parliament in the 1990s and early 2000s were either very close to the Syrian regime (such as Salim al-Hoss and Abd al-Rahim Mrad) and/or had entered politics through the charity sector (such as Najib Miqati, Mohamed Safadi and Rafiq Hariri). Sunni leaders were less than ever representative of the masses.

Salafism had first gained a foothold in Tripoli when a generation of students of religion from Tripoli travelled to the Islamic University of Medina in the 1980s (Gade 2015). Once their studies were completed they established Sharia institutes in Lebanon funded by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Jihadism developed in the ancient land of the Cedars in the late 1990s as a result of networking between Lebanese jihadi activists and the global jihadi network. Approximately 200 Lebanese participated in the Afghan jihad, but very few travelled further on to other jihadi battlefronts in Chechnya and Bosnia. In most of the cases, radicalization of Lebanese nationals occurred in the diaspora where many Sunnis from the north found refuge after the crushing of the Tawhid movement (Rougier 2007a, 2015). The first jihadi groups on Lebanese soil appeared in the Palestinian camp of Ayn al-Hilweh near Saida in the 1990s (Rougier 2007a).

**The orientations of jihadi violence**

The Norwegian political scientist Hegghammer (2009) distinguishes between different rationales, that is, mid-term political aims and strategies, that Islamist movements may follow: socio-revolutionary, nationalist, pan-Islamist, morality oriented or sectarian (anti-Shia). These are ideal types; Islamist movements move between these categories,
and many follow several rationales (or action grammars) at the same time (though one generally dominates).

Sunni Islamist violence in Lebanon (Gade 2015a) has turned from being socio-revolutionary and pan-Islamist towards being sectarian (anti-Shia). Islamism first experienced a socio-revolutionary phase during the civil war (1975–90) with the rise of the Tawhid movement. Second, a morality-oriented (very low-intensity) phase in the 1990s took place, with attacks and plots against vendors of alcohol carried out by Islamists who did not claim to be jihadis. The third phase, which began in 2000, was pan-Islamist. It had a clear global Salafi jihadi imprint in the sense of al-Qaeda’s international terrorism. Its manifestations included in the 2000s attacks on American fast-food chains, the assassination attempt against the American ambassador to Lebanon, as well as the travelling of some dozen Lebanese and Palestinians to join the Islamist insurgency in Iraq after 2003. Finally, a sectarian phase started in the mid-2000s, which has lasted until today (Gade 2017). After 2005, Lebanese jihadis were increasingly Lebanized and dragged into the country’s political and confessional struggle.

Importantly, there are few to no episodes of socio-revolutionary Sunni Islamists’ violence in post-war Lebanon. Sunni jihadis rarely targeted the state and did not attempt to create an Islamic emirate in Lebanon, because they knew they would lose. When episodes of violence against the army occurred, they were not attempts to open a front but the results of a misreading of the army’s intentions and self-defence. Lebanese jihadis primarily wanted to control small plots of land where they could train foreign jihadis, such as Chechens (in the late 1990s).

In 2007, Fatah al-Islam (FAI), the primary jihadi group in Lebanon, opposed the Lebanese army in battle for three months. Yet FAI’s rationale was not socio-revolutionary: the group’s primary aim had been to train jihadis to send them to Iraq. The battle against the army broke out in May 2007 after the ISF raided a Tripoli apartment of FAI members who had robbed a bank (Rougier 2015). In retaliation and revenge, FAI’s military committee, led by Abu Hureira (acting without the knowledge of FAI commander Shakir al-Abisi), executed a dozen soldiers sleeping at the entry point to the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Barid, which led the army to react immediately by bombing the camp. The battle and the many deaths on both sides sparked strong animosity between the two camps, which explain the jihadi groups’ many retributionary attacks against the military in 2007–10. The tendency of the nationalization – and sectarianization – of Lebanon’s jihadis crystallized with the Syrian war. After 2011, the jihadis began almost exclusively to target symbols of political Shiism and Hezbollah in addition to the army.

**The rise of the sectarian rationale, 2000–16**

What explains the turn towards an increasingly sectarian rationale? Importantly, being a Salafi in Lebanon was also way to oppose political Shiism: Hezbollah was both a model to emulate and a threat for Sunni jihadis (Rougier 2007b). Jihadis attempted to imitate the so-called resistance society of the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut; in their training camps in the remote Dinniyeh mountains, for instance, they created a space to purify Sunni identity and to control territory in a manner similar to Hezbollah.

After the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hezbollah, the secretary general of the party, Hassan Nasrallah declared a ‘divine victory’ (*nasr min allah*). The party gained
tremendous popularity in the Arab world, sparking fear of a so-called Iranian crescent among other Sunni Arab leaders. In the aftermath of the war, Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies in the March 8 Alliance asked for greater power in the domestic system. Opposing it was the March 14 Alliance, dominated by the Future Movement, the largest Sunni movement in Lebanon. The political conflict between the March 14 Alliance and the March 8 Alliance often used a sectarian rhetoric. The Future Movement assumed that the Sunni urban poor in Tripoli had sectarian inclinations, and to mobilize this constituency against Hezbollah it utilized anti-Shia vocabulary and gave financial support to Sunni Islamist groups (Gade 2015a). The first Sunni–Shia clashes, between followers of Amal and Hariri, occurred in January 2007 in the area of Tariq Jadideh.

Over time, the Future Movement lost control of the sectarian symbols used in poor urban quarters, and street politics were increasingly taken over by Salafis. Hariri suffered a devastating symbolic defeat in West Beirut on 7 May 2008 when Hezbollah and its allies turned their weapons inwards and, in a few hours, took over the areas where Saad Hariri lived (Haenni 2008). Afterwards, it gave the areas over to the army, attempting not to cross the set rule of the political game. Nonetheless, the event of 7 May led to an increase in anti-Hezbollah and anti-Shia sentiments, and the widespread use of the formula ‘party of the devil’ (hizb al-shaytān). The Salafis gained increased popularity, as youths from the north were searching for a stronger Sunnism to counter Hezbollah. Sunni masses expelled the allies of Hezbollah from north Lebanon, killing a dozen civilians (Rosen 2010), and they considered that this violence helped them restore what they saw as Sunni honour. This came after the Salafi shaykh Dai al-Islam al-Shahal proclaimed a fatwa on national television calling for Lebanon’s Sunnis to defend themselves ‘using all means necessary’. According to certain Islamists, ‘Fatah al-Islam should have appeared in 2008 and not in 2007, because after 7 May 2008, many more people would have supported it; everyone were searching for a military actor to defend themselves’.16

Moreover, clashes broke out between the Sunni area of Bab al-Tebbaneh and the Alawite ghetto of Baal Mohsen as a result of a mistake of calculations on the Sunni side. Local actors close to the Future Movement wanted to put pressure on the Alawites in Baal Mohsen, but without reopening the trenches. The conflict between the two areas had roots back to the civil war in Tripoli (1975–90) when a member of the Islamic Tawhic movement (see above) in Bab al-Tebbaneh had fought against an Alawite militia controlled by Damascus (Gade 2015b). The street fights gave a role to local Salafis who gained support and funds from the Future Movement, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait to fight against an Alawite minority bolstered by Hezbollah, the Syrian regime and Iran. Mainstream Sunni leaders were to blame for empowering Salafis in this battle. Sunni leaders had an interest in letting the conflict continue, because attacking Baal Mohsen helped them demonstrate their courage, physical prowess and continued relevance. In fact, in 2011, when clashes broke out again, they had become the expression of Sunni–Sunni rivalry. To paraphrase an Islamist leader with links to the Sunni militias, ‘if Miqati’s people want to send a message to Hariri, they hit Baal Mohsen, and if Hariri’s people want to send a sign to Miqati, they hit Baal Mohsen, too. It is the place that everyone hits’.19

In short, sectarianism had become so widespread in Lebanon in the period after 2011 that it constituted an essential power resource for Islamists and secular Sunni politicians. The opposition to Hezbollah became the main mobilizing factor in Lebanese Sunnism,
and Salafi leaders became to be seen as Sunni counterweights against Hezbollah. This echoed a trend of anti-Shiism also on the rise in the Gulf and Iraq in the aftermath of the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime (Haddad 2014; Wehrey 2014).

**Grievances and mobilization: the limits of Sunni radicalization in Lebanon**

Radicalization is a process of interaction between a social movement and a state in which the former gradually changes perceptions and/or actions (often embracing the use of violence) (della Porta and LaFree 2012). The definition is useful for the Lebanese Sunni case: jihadi violence occurs as a result of a long period of alienation vis-à-vis the state.

Jihadism gained ground in certain suburbs of Tripoli not only because of the economic frustration of the population but also because of the strong presence of jihadi networks (for this general argument, see Denoeux 1993; Wiktorowicz 2005), and even jihadi families, in the area. In Tripoli’s poor suburbs as well as in Palestinian refugee camps (Rougier 2007a; Sogge 2015), Salafism emerged as a social movement (Meijer 2009) and an alternative to anomie and gang crime for excluded and unemployed youths (Gade 2015a).

Outside poor urban quarters, jihadi Salafism mobilized in prison, especially in ‘section B’ of the penitentiary centre in Romiyeh, where men arrested for terrorism charges were held together. Until early 2015, they were accorded a great freedom of movement; trafficking of mobile phones, computers and drugs flourished, and all the currents of Syrian–Lebanese jihadism were present, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front) and ISIS (Daesh), and outbid each other to recruit the highest possible numbers of adherents.20 For this reason, many youths were radicalized in prison.21

The main factor why youths joined jihadi groups was, however, as a reaction to the very high level of police repression and the many army raids and arrests that occurred in certain areas, such as al-Mankubin, Tripoli’s most deprived suburb. Radicalization emerged from a negative interaction with agents of state repression. The army’s stance after the beginning of the Syrian war and the implementation of the security plans in Tripoli and the Sunni areas of the Beqaa made Sunni Islamist groups from the peripheral north and east begin to see the military institutions as being influenced by Hezbollah (Gade and Moussa 2017). Although Tripoli’s Sunnis welcomed the security plan and the return of relative stability, it also fuelled a sentiment of double standards. The government did not implement a similar security plan in Hezbollah-controlled areas because it would have propelled the wearisome question of Hezbollah’s weapons back to the centre of the political agenda. Yet, thousands of arrest warrants were issued against Sunni youths, often teenagers.22 Many of these returned radicalized from prison. While the army let Hezbollah fighters cross freely back and forth into Syria, Lebanese Sunni fighters who returned were arrested.

The turning point for many Sunnis was had come two years earlier when two Sunni religious shaykhs from Akkar were shot and killed by the Lebanese army at a checkpoint on their way to participate in an anti-Syrian rally (Daily Star 2012). The accusations of partiality constituted a threat to the unity of the army, itself approximately 40% constituted by Sunnis at the rank-and-file level.23 Sunnis had historically seen the army as legitimate, but this was now being challenged (Knudsen and Gade 2017). However, the phenomenon of Sunni army defections was avoided because of Hariri’s strong declarations
of support for the military. Moreover, the army also remained the solution to secure the livelihood to disenfranchised populations in Akkar (Yassin 2017).

Indeed, very few Sunni Islamists have proved willing to open a battle against the army, even after 2011. During the clashes that pitted his group against the army in Saida in June 2013, shaykh al-Assir, a Salafi known for his virulence against Hezbollah (Meier 2014), called upon ‘honourable men’ (al-shurafa’) to defect. Not surprisingly, no such defections occurred, as Sunni Islamists in Saida and Tripoli had little to gain from supporting an outlaw. Moreover, Saida’s Salafi scene was weak and forced to be pragmatic, as the city was surrounded by a Shia-dominated countryside. Thus, despite the existence of strong frustration among Lebanese Sunnis, the number of people who acted upon it was very limited because the costs of resorting to violence was too high. Yet, it could be asked whether the massive repression of Sunni youths was not creating a time bomb?

Who are the Lebanese Sunni jihadi fighters in Syria?

Lebanese Sunni fighters in Syria were estimated to have joined Jabhat Fatah al-Sham primarily, secondly ISIS and thirdly Ahrar al-Sham. The mentioned number of around 1000 Lebanese Sunnis believed to have participated in combat in Syria is higher if the many people who have crossed the border to assist in periodic battles or who have provided logistical aid are also counted.

Unlike Hezbollah’s army presence in Syria, the Sunni jihadis who travelled to Syria mainly did so upon individual initiatives. Yet, unofficial organizers of the dispatching of Sunni volunteers to Syria existed, the two primary ones being Hussam al-Sabbagh and Khaled Mahmoud, both former FAI leaders. Although close to dismantled with the Syrian war and integrated into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other groups, FAI in Lebanon still remained as a network through which recruiters of Sunni volunteers mobilized (Salhani 2014; Hoover 2015). Moreover, most of the Lebanese Sunnis reported dead in Syria were former FAI members.

Mahmud, also known as Abu Suleiman al-Dandashi, functioned as a caretaker in Syria for Lebanese who wanted to fight regime forces. He was a Lebanese from al-Mankubin, who had spent years in prison because of involvement in the Dinnyeh group fighting the Lebanese army in 1999–2000 and in FAI (Saad 2013; Caillet 2014; Kullab 2014; Alami 2015). Released in June 2012, he travelled to Syria and established a cell associated with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham at Krak de Chevalier castle. Here he commanded between 70 and 100 Lebanese fighters, many of whom were former FAI fighters (LBCI 2013). Some had travelled to Syria with the aim of teaching Syrian fighters how to handle explosives (Baker and Rami 2012).

Mahmud coordinated with al-Sabbagh, the other former FAI leader, who travelled back and forth between Tripoli and Syria. He commanded a group of gunmen in Bab al-Tebbaneh after 2011, and was said to have worked as a facilitator for local youths in Tripoli eager to fight in Syria. Also described as a middleman between Tripoli and al-Qaeda leaders, al-Sabbagh had an impressive list of jihadi contacts, having met Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan prior to 2001, fought in Chechnya and being very close to jihadi financiers in Sidney (Rougier 2011; ABC News 2014). Yet, he was also very close to Lebanese security services and was said to play a stabilizing, mediating role.
The fall of Krak de Chevalier citadel to regime forces in March 2014 and the fall of Yabroud in the al-Qalamoun region in the Beqaa Valley days later scattered al-Dandashi’s Lebanese cell and killed its leader (LBC 2014, YouTube 2013). Surviving fighters escaped to Lebanon, while others joined more hardline Salafi groups. Some of the Lebanese fighters were, at least initially, associated with Salafi-nationalist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham (Pierret 2015), but stated as having little respect for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Concerning ISIS, they said that ‘despite some disagreements’, its fighters were ‘good guys who defended Muslim lands against the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad’ (LBCI 2013).

Some of the Sunni fighters reported dead in Syria were sons or brothers of infamous Lebanese jihadis who were eager to pass on the family legacy. That was the case for Malek Hajj Dib, a Salafi activist from Akkar, killed in November 2012 in an ambush in Tell Kalakh in Syria, near the border (Naharnet 2012). Some of his family members published photographs of him on Facebook with the inscription ‘Malek Hajj Dib. Youths of the Islamic Umma’ and the banner of jihad (Facebook 2012). The Hajj Dib family had a long history of contributing to Salafi jihadi movements. His cousin, Yusuf Hajj Dib, was given a life sentence in Germany for his attempt to blow up two passenger trains in Dortmund and Koblenz in 2006 (Steinberg 2013). Yusuf’s brother, Saddam, was a FAI leader killed in May 2007 during clashes with the army (Rougier 2011).

This shows that it was the same people, or the same families, who engaged themselves in jihad in Iraq and in acts of international terrorism who also clashed with the army as members of FAI and who took part in Tripoli’s sectarian conflicts in 2012 and 2013. This bore testimony to the role of family networks in radicalization in Tripoli. Moreover, it showed the flexibility of Salafi–jihadi discourse, which easily adapted to local circumstances and external demand.

The motivational factors: why do Sunnis go to fight in Syria?

The radicalization literature generally distinguishes between two categories of persons: on the one hand, terrorists who use violence outside jihadi combat zones, in Europe for instance; on the other hand, the jihadis who fight inside Muslim combat zones (in the broad sense), from Mali in the west to Afghanistan in the east (Roy 2016). The causes of radicalization and embracing of political violence are considered to differ between the two categories. In Europe the debate is focused on the social background and the role of religion in the public sphere (Burgat 2016; Kepel 2016; Roy 2016); in the Arab world, motivational factors for jihadis are considered to include the negative economic trends and the failure of the Arab uprisings to create better futures for youths and the transformations in the religious field (Collombier and Roy 2017; Narbone, Favier, and Collombier 2016).

In contrast to the Europeans, Lebanese Sunni fighters are not regular ‘foreign fighters’ in the sense of volunteers with no other apparent link to the conflict than a religious affinity with the Muslim Umma (Hegghammer 2010–11). Ties of kinship incite Lebanese Sunni youths to participate in the battle in Syria. Many Sunni families in Tripoli and Akkar had relatives in the Syrian town of al-Quaysayr, near the northern Lebanese border. Furthermore, sectarianism, more so than pan-Islamism, was an important motivational factor. Most of the Lebanese Sunnis who travelled to Syria did so in order to fight
Hezbollah because they could not do so in their own country without risking a civil war. Lebanese Sunni Salafi fighters and Shia Hezbollah combatants opposed each other directly in battle in al-Qusayar and in al-Qalamoun (near the border in the Syrian Beqaa Valley), where both actors were heavily involved.

A segment of poor Sunni youths without opportunities saw ISIS as a defender of Sunni rights against Shia Iran, Hezbollah, the ‘Alawite’ regime of Bashar al-Assad and orthodox Russia. The fact that ISIS did not oppose the Assad regime in battle before 2014, and rarely did so afterwards, seemed to matter less than the groups’ record of battles against Hezbollah and other Shia militias. Lebanese Salafis fighters saw the Syrian crisis as a first step in a broader confrontation with Iran. Many also said that they joined jihadi groups after hearing about violations committed by the Lebanese intelligence services, vis-à-vis the Sunni population, showing yet another domestic source of motivation (al-Ali 2015). There were even indications that Lebanese ISIS sympathizers were more anti-Shia and anti-Alawite than their Syrian counterparts. Lebanese activists called on ISIS in 2014 to adopt a more sectarian modus operandi fighting Alawite villages instead of seizing oil wells and attacking the FSA (Caillet 2014).

The lifting of jihadi banners inside Tripoli may also be understood as part of sectarian competition with Hezbollah. For instance, during the battle of al-Qusayar (May 2013), roadside banners with pictures of Sunni youths who fell in Syria were raised in the city’s main squares, commemorating those who died ‘defending the honour and glory of the Umma’ and ‘defending the dispossessed’ (al-mustad’afun). Such banners mirrored Hezbollah’s habit of raising banners of its martyrs who had died in the resistance against Israel. Moreover, they were a way to show defiance towards a state system in which some Sunnis perceived themselves to be second-rank citizens.

The same interpretation is valid for the dozens of posters that were put up along the main road in Tripoli to welcome Saad al-Masri, a militia leader in Tripoli who was released from jail in March 2016. The army and intelligence services tolerated the posters, evident by the fact that they were allowed to hang for a week, albeit with bullet holes. Most of Tripoli’s population agreed with the idea that many Sunni youths were unjustfully arrested. The jihadi flags visible in many alleys and squares in poor areas of Tripoli after 2008 should also be interpreted in a similar way. They were raised primarily to mark what they saw as a Sunni territory in opposition to Hezbollah’s Shia spaces. This recalls Rougier’s argument that Salafis harbour both admiration and jealousy vis-à-vis the Shia party (Rougier 2007b).

Thus, to sum up, all those who left to fight in Syria were jihadi, and most had ties to former jihadi groups in Lebanon, such as FAI. Yet, they had joined jihadi groups out of domestic political concerns, in opposition to Hezbollah. Sectarianism more so than pan-Islamism was the important motivational factor.

Tipping points

Although ISIS may attempt to use northern Lebanon as a rear base, there is little indication that the jihadi group will attempt to open a Lebanese front anytime soon. Since 2011, Syrian jihadi groups have infiltrated Sunni areas in northern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley to access health services (allegedly funded by Gulf money). After Hezbollah regained control of the Syrian–Lebanese border following the battles of al-Qusayr
(spring 2013) and al-Qalamoun (late 2013), the area of Arsal is the only place where Hezbollah had not sealed the border, and assistance to Syrian jihadi groups still occurred at the time of writing (March 2017).

In August 2014, clashes between the Lebanese army and Syrian-based jihadi fighters led to the death of 20 soldiers and the capture of 28 servicemen (Gade and Moussa 2017). In 2014 and 2015, the two groups made demands vis-à-vis the Lebanese government to free Salafi jihadi prisoners in Romiyeh in exchange for the kidnapped soldiers. This demand was tailored to gain popularity with the families of the Salafi prisoners, many of whom were from the impoverished suburbs of Tripoli, al-Mankubin and Bab al-Tebbaneh. This contributed to creating a link between the Syrian war and Lebanese fighting for what they call Sunni rights. Finally, a prisoner swap took place in December 2015, after Qatari mediation, easing tensions (Samaha 2015). However, nine servicemen are still held captured by ISIS. Moreover, the disastrous result of the confrontation destroyed the morale of many of the fighters.36

In addition, jihadi groups seeking to retaliate for Hezbollah’s actions in Syria have claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in the Shia-majority southern suburbs of Beirut; the most violent one, in November 2015, killed 43 people. The attacks are condemned by all Lebanese, but still have the effect of dividing the population. Islamists and Sunni civilians in northern Lebanon more generally pay the price of arrest and raids in northern Lebanon following such attacks, while Hezbollah’s leadership engages in intense efforts to avoid Shia reprisals against Sunni areas. In August 2013, a bomb attack targeting two mosques in Tripoli had killed almost 50 (al-Jazeera 2013), leading to an escalation of sectarian clashes.

Yet, and despite the strong sentiments frustration among Sunni poor youths, people did not resort to violence inside Lebanon. There were many reasons for this. Firstly, international jihadis were extremely reluctant to open a front in Lebanon. Because of the demographics, jihadi strategists generally favoured using the country as a rear base. According to the Syrian-born jihadi strategic thinker Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri’s (Mustafa Setmariam Nasar) writing of the period prior to the year 2000, the idea of opening a jihadi front in Lebanon was:

one that goes against the geography, the politics and the available elements of the day, and I felt that they should return to Afghanistan, where they might take advantage of the situation there during the Taliban era. I felt this would give them time to better prepare for the execution of this plan [...] (al-Hakim 2004, 784)

Secondly, if global jihadi strategists did not wish to open a battle, the Lebanese themselves were even more reluctant. The memory of the civil war was still extremely vivid, and made people shy away from taking steps that could lead to a new conflict. Within the very small minority of Lebanese Sunni youths who supported ISIS in Syria and Iraq, even among those who travelled to fight in Syria, extremely few wanted to see ISIS inside Lebanon.37 The fact that the Lebanese who identified with ISIS mainly did so from a distance gave reason to believe that the support was more sentimental than operational. It was an expression of sectarianism more than a declaration of sympathy for the global jihadi movement.

Thirdly, the mediation work of Salafi shaykhs to contain the jihadis inside Lebanon explains why Lebanon avoided jihadi violence. Faced with ISIS, many Sunni Islamist
Shaykhs are drawn towards a more moderate discourse, fearing ISIS support among the young. Also for Islamists, the potential costs of war are too high, and few have been willing to risk their legal existence. Several well-connected figures have built ties between Lebanon’s Salafi groups and the law enforcement agencies (Zaatari 2016). Mosque imams close to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in Tripoli condemned a suicide bombing that killed nine in an Alawite-majority area in the city in 2015, clearly pointing out the rules of the political game to their constituencies.

Had Lebanon, through its long civil war, reached a political maturity, which made it easier to take efficient and pragmatic solutions, such as inclusion of radicals? Hussam al-Sabbagh, the Salafi leader, was one of the interlocutors between the jihadis and the state. He and others conveyed a clear message from Lebanese authorities that violence inside Lebanon was forbidden. There was a Lebanese domestic agreement to avoid fighting inside the country, as well as consensus among international players and Syrian fighters to avoid a spillover, as this went against the interests of all. Those who wanted, could, however, go to Syria. There was evidence to claim that Lebanese security services made the travel to Syria relatively easy for jihadis as a means to rid the country of their destabilizing influence. Once they had left for Syria, it was difficult for most to return as they would then face arrest.

Even if ISIS loses its territory in Syria and Iraq, it is more likely to turn towards a classical terrorist modus operandi (suicide bombings) in those countries than in Lebanon. Facing growing pressure in Syria and Iraq, ISIS militants might, however, decide to shift the battle to Lebanon, activating sleeper cells. The return of Lebanese jihadis from Syria has been limited due to pressure from the security services and the death of some operatives in Syria. A change of ISIS strategy could change the equation for Lebanese Sunni Islamists who have deep grievances against the state and who identify more with the transnational Islamic Umma than with the multi-communal Lebanese polity (Rougier 2007a; Gade 2015b).

There is also potential for larger-scale violence in Lebanon in the medium- and longer-terms, especially if political entrepreneurs should mobilize refugee frustrations into political grievances. Mainstream educational Islamist networks have capitalized on providing humanitarian aid to refugees, often with funding from the Gulf. Yet, this has so far not led to a politicization of the refugees. Salafi shaykhs also have influence, and the societal roles that such shaykhs have acquired by providing aid sometimes translate into arbitrary power over the poorest among the refugees.

The nightmare scenario of widespread arming and jihadi radicalization of the Syrian refugees as a result of mobilization by social entrepreneurs is very distant. Political scientists have shown that the most destitute of the poor, those who worry a lot about their very survival, are not the most prone to revolt (Davis 1962). Syrians themselves feel that they have no interests to serve by intervening in internal Lebanese conflicts (ICG 2013). However, in the longer-term, the grievances of frustrated, outcast young Syrian males of military age could be fuelled by Islamist entrepreneurs (Davis, Taylor, and Murphy 2014). Since 2014, local police have raided refugee camps, claiming that jihadi militants were hiding among the refugees, and municipalities have imposed curfews (Rollins 2016). Syrian children deprived of schooling may also be more vulnerable to recruitment to armed groups.
Conclusions

This paper has shown that the Syrian war was not imported to Lebanon; instead, the Lebanese internal conflict was externalized in Syria. The number of Lebanese Sunnis fighting in Syria was limited. Moreover, those who supported ISIS in Lebanon did not want the jihadi group to come to Lebanon because few wanted to return to the situation of a civil war (1975–90). Also, the horrible pictures from Syria gave few incitements to create something similar in Lebanon. Because of high opportunity costs and learning from previous wars, the general Sunni population did not wish to take part in acts of violence. There was frustration among Sunnis, but the number of people who acted upon it was limited.

Secondly, the Syrian uprising has strengthened a sectarian rationale among Lebanon’s Sunni Islamists, replacing the former pan-Islamist rationale. Lebanese jihadis dissociated themselves from the horrors in Syria. Although they intervened in the Syrian war, they mainly did so to oppose Hezbollah. They fought in Syria because they did not want to risk a new war inside Lebanon. While the influx of more than 1 million Syrian refugees did not lead to radicalization in Lebanon, the Syrian war became an outlet for Lebanese tension. Lebanese Salafi jihadis increasingly dissociated themselves vis-à-vis the Syrian war. For this reason, important turning points in this war, such as the fall of Aleppo, are less important than internal political events in Lebanon. At the same time, the Syrian war also destabilized Lebanon, and devastated its economy. Thus, the Lebanese scene cannot return to stability without a solution to the Syrian crisis.

Thirdly, one of the root causes of jihadism is the leadership crisis within the Lebanese Sunni community, meaning that mainstream Sunni leaders often did not echo the grievances, or the interests, of the population. Hence, jihadi groups became the main spokespersons of so-called Sunni rights against Hezbollah (such as the right not to be arrested without tangible proofs and the right to a speedy trial). Yet, this tendency has been contained with the rise of Sunni contenders to Saad Hariri, who take strong stances against Hezbollah. Moreover, Hariri’s return to the premiership will probably help him re-establish some of his clientelist networks.

It follows that confessional overbidding and hatred towards Hezbollah could potentially push a much greater number of Sunni youths towards taking up arms. If ISIS or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham use this strategy, the political and economic frustrations of many Sunnis being the same, then the risks of violence and civilian discord may increase. A question to be asked is whether this sectarian rationale weakens or strengthens the Islamists when it comes to domestic mobilization capacities and international support. Since sectarianism can be fronted equally by secular Sunni politicians as by Islamists and Salafis, we might well be witnessing the decline of Islamism and the rise of a different, still populist, political trend.

Notes

1. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stopped registering refugees in May 2015; its official estimate is approximately 1 million. In addition, some 42,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria receive aid from UNRWA (UNRWA 2016b).
2. Islamism is political Islam, while Salafism is a particular sub-current of Islamism, associated with an emphasis on the doctrine of oneness of God (Tawhid). Salafism exists in non-violent and violent (jihadi) forms.
3. Journalist Fidaa Itani, a specialist on Jihadi movements, estimated in March 2016 the number of Lebanese to have gone to Syria not to exceed 900. Personal communication, Beirut, August 2016.

4. Lebanon has 18 different confessional groups: Sunnis, Shia and Maronite Christians constitute the three largest ones.

5. Interview with Mustapha Allouche, Tripoli, February 2015.

6. There are approximately 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, over half of whom live in the 12 official Palestinians refugee camps spread around the country (UNRWA 2016a).


8. Saudi pledges of a US$4 billion donation of French military equipment were withdrawn in 2016 because of the growing Saudi–Iranian tensions. However, the United States and UK have stepped up their military assistance since 2011 (Moussa 2014, 490).


10. Interview with Fathy Yakan, Tripoli, April 2008.

11. Interview with Muhammad Khodr, an Islamist cleric close to the March 8 alliance, Tripoli, February 2009.

12. Some subgroups within the FAI were also influenced by Syrian intelligence, creating internal discords between Saudi and other Arab Jihadis who wanted to fight in Iraq and the local leadership controlled by Syrian intelligence (Gade 2007, Rougier 2011).

13. Interview with Nabil Rahim, Tripoli, October 2016.


15. Field observations by the author, Akkar, 10 May 2008.


17. Interview with an Islamist leader close to Hariri, Tripoli, October 2016.

18. Interview with an Islamist leader close to Hariri, Tripoli, April 2016.


20. Interview with Nabil Rahim, a Salafi leader and former detainee, Tripoli, October 2016.


22. Interview with Misbah al-Ahdab, Beirut, February 2015.


24. I am grateful to Nayla Moussa for this information. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= f1KeEe1VNvo/. Al-Assir fled, but was arrested in August 2015 at Beirut airport trying to board a fight to Nigeria (Gade and Moussa 2017).


27. Interview with Fidaa Itani, Beirut, October 2017.

28. Its branch in Gaza, not the Lebanese one, was behind the attacks claimed by the group in Syria (Jihadology 2012).

29. Phone interview with Nahla Chahal, October 2013.


32. Discussion with Samia Kullab, Beirut, February 2015.

33. Interview with Misbah al-Ahdab, Beirut, February, 2015.

34. Field observation, Tripoli, March–April 2016.

35. An opinion voiced by observers from several political sides; interviews in Lebanon, August 2016.

36. Interview with Muin Merhabi, Beirut, February 2015.

37. Interview with Misbah al-Ahdab, Beirut, February, 2015.

38. I am grateful to Sahar Atrache, senior analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), for this information.

39. I am grateful to Professor Sari Hanafi, American University in Beirut, for this information.

40. Interview with a popular leader in Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, March 2016.
41. Interview with Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, April 2016.
42. Interview with a popular leader in Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, March 2016.

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