

# Sunnism, Salafism, Sheikism: Urban Pathways of Resistance in Sidon, Lebanon

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**HYRES Research Note**

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## **Summary**

This brief analyses Salafism as an urban phenomenon, with an emphasis on the contentious period following the Syrian uprising turned civil war (2011–present). To understand Salafism’s popular appeal, it is necessary to examine the pathways of resistance in specific urban contexts. In Lebanon, Salafism expanded from its Tripoli centre to secondary towns and cities such as Sidon, where Sheikh Ahmad Assir’s neo-Salafism became a political force and can be classified as a “new social movement”. Neo-Salafism, is not built on religious credentials and authority, but combines populism with sectarianism. This also accounts for its popular appeal, especially after 2011, when the Syrian conflict stoked Sunni-Shia tensions and anti-Hizbollah rhetoric.

The erosion of Sunni political pre-eminence (“Sunnism”) and the crises in the Sunni religious (Dar al-Fatwa) and political establishment (Future Movement), prompted a temporary shift from “Harirism” to “Sheikism” that transferred the moral leadership of the Sunni community from the political elite to the lay town preacher; Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. This also involved a shift in the locus of contentious politics from the capital Beirut to secondary cities such as Sidon and a strategic shift from electoral politics to grassroots’ protests, sit-ins and rallies. Ultimately this led to an armed confrontation that crushed the Assir-movement, eroded its popular support and was followed by an electoral defeat that made political elites reassert control.

## **HYRES – Hybrid Pathways to Resistance in the Islamic World**

HYRES studies the interaction between Islamist movements and the state in the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Mali, and is designed to answer the following question: Why do some Islamist groups pursue their political and religious project within the state to which they belong – while other Islamist groups refuse to accept these borders, seeking instead to establish new polities, such as restoring the Islamic Caliphate?

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## **Introduction**

This brief analyses Salafism as an urban phenomenon, with an emphasis on the contentious period following the start of the Syrian conflict (2011–present). To understand Salafism’s popular appeal, it is necessary to examine the pathways of resistance in specific urban contexts. In Lebanon, Salafism expanded from its Tripoli centre to secondary towns and cities such as Sidon, where Sheikh Ahmad Assir’s neo-Salafism became a political force and can be classified as a “new social movement”. To understand its growth, it is necessary to examine the urban environment that provides its socio-political base and the clientelist and Islamist milieu that shaped it.

In Lebanon, Salafism took hold in select rural and urban localities, with Tripoli, the centre of Salafism. Though historically connected, the Salafist groups are deeply divided, with each Sheikh having his own local following. This also accounts for the problem of mobilising followers beyond the urban locale, and the tendency to remain a localised groups and enclaves. Neo-Salafism is not built on religious credentials and authority but combines populism with sectarianism. This also accounts for its appeal among ordinary people, especially after 2011, when the Syrian uprising turned civil war. In secondary cities like Sidon, Salafism not only found the disgruntled masses and urban precariat but also the middle-class supporters and wealthy backers who sought to carve out their place in local clientelist hierarchies.

Existing scholarship on Sheikh Assir has examined the political transition that and shift from “Harirism” to “Sheikism”, meaning that the leadership of the Sunni community shifted from the urban elite to the lay town preacher, Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir (Meier and Peri 2017). This also involves a shift in the locus of contentious politics from the capital Beirut to secondary cities such as Sidon and a conceptual shift from elite politics to that of the grassroots. This brief aims to explain this twin transition and hence to explain the “urban path of resistance” in Sidon, Lebanon’s second largest city and seat of the Assir movement. Existing scholarship has tended to account for Sheikh Assir as leading a movement of the poor and disenfranchised. Islamism and support for Islamic militancy is typically attributed to the urban poor and what Asef Bayat (2007) has termed an “urban ecology” attributed to the growth of Salafist and other fundamentalist groups. However, turning conventional wisdom on its head, Bayat convincingly argues that the groundswell of Islamic militancy, and more generally, Islamism, are not the urban poor but the educated middle class. The “urban path of resistance” in Sidon lends support to Bayat’s argument, showing that supporters were not predominantly the urban poor and was backed

financially by members of the upwardly mobile middle classes. The Assir movement's rapid growth after 2011, was spurred by the onset of the Syrian civil war which paralysed the political system, polarised the public and deepened the Shia-Sunni divide. The popular support for Sheikh Assir was followed by the abrupt downfall of the movement and its leader following a deadly confrontation with the Army, that saw traditional Sunni elites reassert control. Assir's attempt to challenge the political system from within and restore the Sunnis to their rightful place failed while their grievances remain unresolved.

### **Salafism**

Salafism has a transnational reach, but there the focus here its local and national characteristics in Lebanon and (Pall 2013, Rabil 2014, Rougier 2015) and in particular the role of city-based neo-Islamists represented by Sheikh Ahmed Assir. In Lebanon, Salafism took hold in select rural and urban localities (Saab and Ranstorp 2007: 829), with Tripoli, the centre of Salafism. Though historically connected, the Salafist groups are deeply divided, with each Sheikh having his own local following. This also accounts for the problem of mobilising followers beyond the urban locale and the tendency to remain localised movements. Islamic movements can be analysed a subclass of what is termed "new social movements" (Wiktorowicz 2004). The key characteristics of social movements are their conflictual relations with opponents, networked character and in-group collective identity (Della Porta and Diani 2009: 20). Moreover, Salafist movements like the one examined here, have a religious outlook and organizational characteristics that make them espouse formal organization in favour of loose networks but for doctrinal reasons, do not consider themselves a movement (*haraka*) (Pall 2013: 25). The key doctrinal tenets of the Salafist creed are, the unity of God (*tawhid*), a binary world view and literal interpretation of the Quran (Pall 2013: 20–21).

Salafists seek to uproot Sufism and stop the Shia expansion which puts them at odds with Hizbollah and Sufi-inspired Sufi groups leading to contention and violent confrontation. During the latter part of the civil war, violent conflict broke out between the country's four major Sunni Muslim groups which also impacted the trajectory of the Salafi movement (Pall 2013: 45). The conflict culminated with the murder of Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi, the leader of Al-Abash, a Sufi inspired movement, by members of Usbat al Ansar, a Salafi group based in a Sidon refugee camp (**Table 2**). The persecution of Salafi groups that followed resulted in the movement's disintegration and made Salafism split into a peaceful, quietist branch and a militant jihadist branch (Saab and Ranstorp 2007: 837).

<b>Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Founder/leader</b>
<i>Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya</i>	Lebanese Branch of Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt)	Fathi Yakan (d. 2009)
<i>Usbat al-Ansar (a.k.a. Osbat al Noor)</i>	Salafist group split into many factions, based mainly in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, Sidon)	Founded in 1985 by Sheikh Hisham (d. 1991)
<i>Al-Ahbash</i> (Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects)	Sunni movement, including elements of Sufism	Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi (d. 1995)
Sources: Pall (2013: 45ff.)		

Following Tilly and Tarrow's (2015, 114-15) argument in favour of distinguishing social movements based on the forms of contention they engage in, this also opens for studying what triggers the transition of repertoires of protest, from collective action (demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins) to violent forms of contention (clashes, brawls, riots). Thus, this case study is an opportunity to study the transformation of a social movement from a peaceful to a militant one (2011–13) and the political ramifications for the movement, leadership and the urban milieu that nurtured it. The Assir movement's growing popularity was enabled by three concurrent crises; sectarian, religious and political. The first was the 2011 ousting of Hariri that brought down his government and by implication, the claim to Sunni political pre-eminence ("Sunnism"). Secondly the crisis inside the Dar al-Fatwa, the country's highest Sunni religious authority. Finally, the crisis in the Future Movement that had stifled reform and frustrated supporters to become disconnected from its base.

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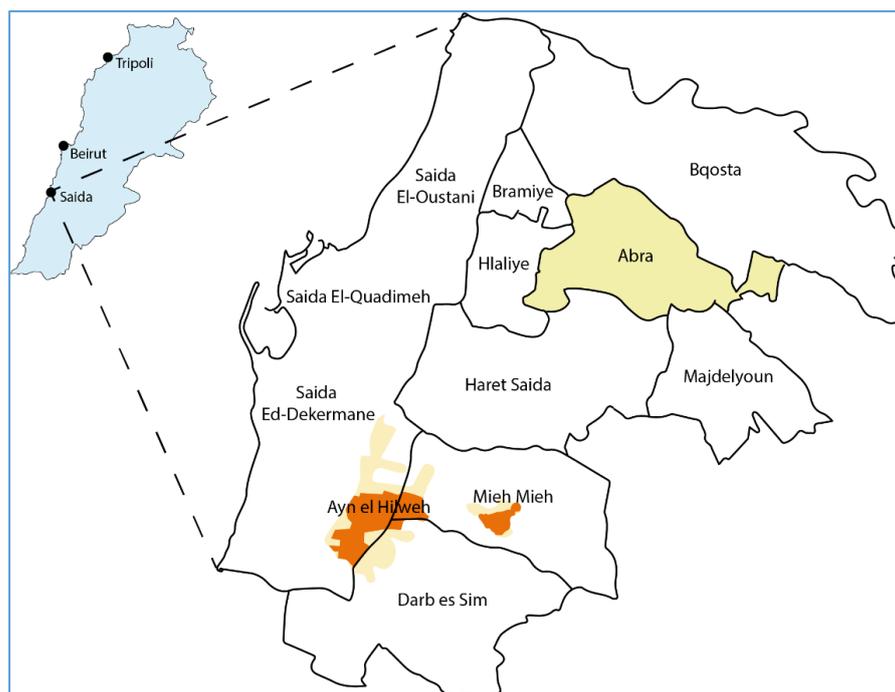


Figure 1: Sidon, with Abra and adjoining municipalities (Image courtesy of: CMI/ Robert Sjursen)

### Sunnism

The late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (1944–2005), was Lebanon’s preeminent statesman, and whose dominant position in Lebanese post-war politics and as leader of the Sunnis has been termed “Harirism” (Meier and Peri 2017). Following Hariri’s assassination, there was a gradual shift from “Harirism” to “Sheikism”, meaning that leadership of the Sunni community shifted from the urban elite to the lay town preacher, Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. This also involved a shift in the locus of contentious politics from the capital Beirut to secondary cities such as Sidon and a conceptual shift from elite politics to that of the grassroots. The tensions between the two can be illustrated with the nationalist slogan of the Future Movement after 2005; “Lebanon first” (ICG 2010: 7) and the sectarian sentiments in Beirut’s Sunni stronghold, Tariq al-Jadideh, rallying behind the slogan “Sunnis first” (*al-sunna al-awwalan*) (Baumann 2016: 179). The claim to Sunni political pre-eminence lies at the heart of what has been termed Sunnism (Gade 2012) and is linked to the general decline of the Sunnis following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 (Knudsen 2016). Despite being a numerical majority in the country and the Sidon region the Sunnis act “as if being a minority”, hence suffers from an inferiority complex. The Sunnis also saw their position weakened after 1990, despite the PM

wider powers, and the growing political and military might of Hizbollah and the Shia.

As shown by Cammett (2014: 123) there is strong in-group support for sectarian parties in Lebanon (**Table 2**). The Sunnis display the highest in-group partisanship (Future Movement), eclipsing that of the Shia with sectarian loyalties split between the two parties Amal and Hizbollah. Importantly, the Sunnis also have the lowest level of the political activism, consistent with the problems of mobilizing them in electoral politics and the widespread use of strategic service provision and vote buying to win closely contested elections and electoral seats. This, points to the importance of mobilizing the Sunni grassroots and the potential importance of firebrand Sheiks in attracting, mobilizing and harnessing the “Sunni Street” for electoral purposes.

<b>Sectarian identity</b>	<b>Partisanship</b>	<b>In-group partisans %</b>	<b>Correlation</b>
Sunni	Future Movement	83.3	0.84
Christian	Christian party	82.6	0.79
Shia	Hezbollah	63.6	0.71
	Amal	31.6	0.51

Reproduced from: Cammett (2014: 123)

This paradox follows from sectarianism replacing communitarianism after 2011, when Prime Minister Saad Hariri was forced to step down and street protests erupted in Beirut and Tripoli in late January 2011. The Future Movement was weakened following Hariri’s forced departure from office and he neither reached the level of influence of his father, nor fulfilled the Saudi sponsors’ ambitions for the country or mounted a political challenge to Hizbollah. The Future Movement a.k.a. Future Current (*Tayyar al-Mustaqbal*) was registered as a party in 2007 but lacks party-like structures, program and organization (ICG 2010: 17).

At the same time, the Dar al-Fatwa, the country's highest Sunni religious authority, was stifled by lack of reform and challenged by new breed of preachers mounting a leadership contest seeking to depose its leader, Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani. Adding to the disarray, Qabbani was embroiled in a row with the Future Movement and former PM Saad Hariri, that in 2014 deposed Qabbani, a position he had held since 1989, following the assassination Mufti Hassan Khaled (Knudsen 2010). Disliked and distrusted by many, Sunnis, Qabbani also represented a singular and orthodox version of Sunni Islam that that gave rise to political alienation and Islamic activism (Salafism) in places like Tripoli and Sidon (Henley 2017: 301). At the same time, the Sunnis turned away from the established political leaders and embraced hard-liners such as former General Ashraf Rifi, who advocated a sectarian Sunni narrative and called for a stronger front vis-à-vis Hizbollah (Knudsen 2017).

With the traditional Sunni leadership losing its grip on the populace, the support grew for neo-Salafists such as Assir, whose message was not religious but sectarian (Samaha 2013). Neo-Salafism, unlike Salafism, is not built on religious credentials and authority, but combines populism with sectarianism. This also accounts for its appeal among ordinary people, especially after 2011, when the Syrian uprising turned civil war. The Syrian conflict between the Alawite Assad regime and the Sunni insurgents (Free Syrian Army), was replicated in Lebanon as a contest between Sunnis and Shias. In the final stage of narrative inversion, the Sunni majority is portrayed as being dominated, indeed under siege by the Shia minority. This also replicates historical shifts among the Lebanese Shia who was likewise mobilised by a charismatic cleric, Musa Al-Sadr, to form the "Movement of Deprived" that transformed into a military resistance brigade at the eve of the civil war (Ajami 1987). In a similar vein, the Sunnis gradual decline since 2005, has created an acute sense of disillusionment and frustration, to become a "neo-movement of the deprived". The void between the Sunni political elite and the grassroots or "Sunni street" means that the only issue that unites them are their opposition to the Syrian regime and Hizbollah (Asfura-Heim, Steinitz et al. 2013). This means that traditional Sunni leaders must either resort to a sectarian rhetoric to maintain the support of their base or, as last resort, co-opt and appease Islamist movements such as Sheikh Assir's. To understand this, we need to examine the political economy of Sidon that was conducive to the movement's growth and the "urban ecology" (Bayat 2007) that provided the movement's socio-political base.

## Sidon

Sidon is Lebanon's third largest city and administrative centre of the Governate of South Lebanon comprising three districts (Sidon, Jezzine and Tyre) with Sidon comprising sixteen municipalities, of which one is Abra (pop. 13,300), the centre of the Assir-movement (**Figure 1**). Hampered by its proximity to Beirut, Sidon is a backwater and South Lebanon has the lowest number of foreign economic investments and subsidized government loans (UN-Habitat 2017: 88). In the Sidon district, one third live below the national poverty line of USD 4 a day, which is higher than the national average. Poverty also afflicts the Palestinian refugees, who have the highest poverty rate in Lebanon and lack civil rights. Sidon includes two refugee camps Ayn al-Hilweh and Mieh Mieh, the former the country's most populous camp and with frequent violent conflict spilling across camp boundaries. The camp and its immediate surroundings (Taamir) are hubs for jihadist and Salafist groups (e.g., Jund e-Sham, Osbat al-Ansar) engaged in armed conflict with Palestinian nationalist groups (Knudsen 2005, Rougier 2007, Sogge 2018).

Sidon is characterised by strong systems of non-state and informal governance at the expense of the public authorities involving political parties, associations and syndicates and, especially, influential families and individuals (UN-Habitat 2017: 40ff). Following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the nationwide protests and international prosecution that followed (Knudsen 2012), none wield greater influence than the Hariri family, represented by the late Hariri's sister, MP Bahia Hariri. Using personal networks and local family associations, Bahia Hariri has built a clientelist network that attracts foreign and local development money and keep "citizens continuously indebted and dependent" (Ghaddar 2016: 10). Bahia Hariri is also involved in security provision and controlling Islamist and Salafi groups and has been engaged in buy-outs and swaps with militant groups to leave Sidon. The local representatives of the mainstream Sunni parties, the Future Movement and the *Jamaa al-Islamiyya*, covertly supported Assir, and they were with him if he succeeded, only to abandon him when he failed.

## Sheikism

Sheikh Assir (b. 1968) was one of the early followers *Dawa'a Tabligli*, a quietist Islamic movement and rose from being a member to a central figure in the movement. From the early 1990s, he became a preacher and had followers from around Sidon, travelling with him throughout Lebanon on missionary tours (*da'wa*). In the mid-1990s he established his own centre in Abra (**Figure 1**), the Bilal al-Rabah mosque. The

unassuming ground-floor centre reflected the lay character of the movement and Assir's formal status as a lay preacher (*da'i*), rather than religious scholar (*'alim*). Assir's independent status attracted many people to his mosque and attending the sermons. The fact that Assir did not pay allegiance to a local and religious authority, made his message attractive to many, including the middle classes and the wealthy individuals and influential families who endowed his movement with money and funds. They saw in Assir a future leader and supporting him and providing him with a religious platform conferred religious legitimacy and an avenue for social mobility in the city's entrenched hierarchy.

Following the onset of Syrian conflict in March 2011, Assir's message became more confrontational with verbal attacks on Hizbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah. Radicalized by the onset of the Syrian war, he began attacking his opponents in particular oppression in Lebanon and in Syria, with Hizbollah being active on both fronts. This is an issue that unites both the Sunni political elite and the grassroots, with strong mobilising power. During spring 2012, Sheikh Assir undertook a series of nationwide rallies, that was broadcast on national TV that made him a household name and face of the Salafist movement in Lebanon. Towards the end of 2012, Assir's actions grew increasingly confrontational, with his closest followers branding automatic guns signalling the growing militarisation of the movement. During this time Assir also announced his departure from the *Dawa'a Tabligihi* group, a reflection of his growing politicisation and that of his movement. This was followed by a series of conflict events that raised the stakes for Assir and as well as his opponents, with tensions rising and the Army deploying in Abra. The Abra mosque was slowly being encircled by the *Sarayaa Mukawama*, a Hizbollah-affiliated militia of non-Shia volunteers supporting the movement. The situation gradually got more serious after a series of clashes brought the latent conflict to a head during the "Battle of Abra" in late June 2013. The battle turned Abra into disaster zone, killing 18 soldiers and injuring more than 100. About 40 of Assir's men were killed and another 65 taken into custody amidst charges of Army brutality and torture. After two years in hiding, Assir was arrested and kept in solitary confinement in the notorious Roumieh prison, until appearing before a military tribunal. After deferring the trial proceedings several times, Assir received the death penalty for his role in the killing of 20 soldiers in late September 2017.

### Political fall-out

The Abra incident posed huge costs to Sidon; the city's reputation, peaceful image and retail trade suffered. In post-conflict Abra, the Assir compound was deserted, the worshippers disappeared, and the erstwhile supporters grew silent. Wanted by the authorities, Assir's closest aides went underground to avoid arrest, yet many were tried later in absentia and received long prison terms. In Sidon, many of Assir's former supporters retracted their support, indeed, the more prestigious the supporter, the greater the need to publicly withdraw their support.

Sidon is predominantly Sunni with about 84 per cent of the registered residents, but there is sizeable Shia community in Haret Saida (pop. 19,625), supporting Amal and Hezbollah (Ghaddar 2013). Of the about 125,000 registered voters in Sidon, about half cast their vote in municipal elections. In 2016, three electoral lists contested the municipal elections. The two largest ones, Saida's Development list was backed by the Future Movement and the Voice of the People, comprising their opponents, the Popular Nasserist Movement backed by Amal and Hezbollah (**Table 3**). The third list, Saida's Freedom (*'ahrar Saida*), was a newcomer led by Ali Sheikh Ammar, a former executive bureau chief of *Jamaa al-Islamiyya* and a supporter of Sheikh Assir. Saida's Development list won but lost almost a quarter of the votes obtained in the 2010 election. The Saida Freedom list came third, with about two-thousand votes, consistent with estimates of the popular support for Assir, locally considered an "election key" (*miftah inthikibat*) in Sidon's entrenched clientelist politics (Azzam 2013: 51). Due to the winner-takes-all system used in municipal elections, the Saida's Development list bagged all the seats in the municipal council.

The 2016 election results are consistent with the diminished public support for Assir, with many disavowing him and negating their former allegiance and support for the movement. Yet, local people are adamant that Assir was led into a trap, that the Hizbollah-affiliated militia (*Sarayaa Mukawama*) started the fatal battle, and that Assir's subsequent trial by military tribunal was unjust and the verdict politically motivated. This can also account for the declining voter turnout in Sidon and the diminishing support for the Future Movement, covertly supporting Assir only to drop him when he turned against the Army. This also ties in with the Sunni conviction that the Army is Hizbollah-controlled and not a neutral arbiter (Knudsen and Gade 2017).

**Table 3: Municipal elections in Sidon: 2010 and 2016 \***

List name	List members and backers	Electoral votes		
		2010	2016	Change %
Saida's Development	Future Movement, Jamaa al-Islamiyya, independents (including former mayor Bizri)	18,693	14,283	-23.5
Voice of the People	Popular Nasserist Movement, backed by Amal and Hizbollah	8,772	7,950	-9.4
Saida's Freedom	Independents and Assir-supporters led by Ali Sheikh Ammar	NA	2,277	NA

(\*) Registered voters 2016: (60 610), votes cast (26 970), voter turnout (44.5%); NA – not applicable.

## Conclusion

This brief analyses Salafism as an urban phenomenon, with an emphasis on the contentious period following the Syrian conflict (2011–present). To understand Salafism's popular appeal, it is necessary to examine the paths of resistance in specific urban contexts. In Lebanon, Salafism expanded from its Tripoli centre to secondary towns and cities such as Sidon, where Sheikh Ahmad Assir's neo-Salafism became a political force and can be classified as a "new social movement". Neo-Salafism, is not built on religious credentials and authority, but combines populism with sectarianism. This also accounts for its popular appeal, especially after 2011, when the Syrian conflict stoked Sunni-Shia tensions and anti-Hizbollah rhetoric.

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### **Partners:**

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CMI - Christian Michelsen Institute

Cultural Centre for Dialogue and Studies, Beirut

ARGA - Alliance pour Refonder la Gouvernance en Afrique

MERI - Middle East Research Institute

EUI - European University Institute