

# Lebanese Sunni Islamism: A Post-Election Review

Abdulghani Imad



**HYRES Research Note**

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# Lebanese Sunni Islamism

## A Post-Election Review

Abdulghani Imad<sup>1 2</sup>

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**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?

HYRES is funded by the Norwegian Research Council. For further information about HYRES see [https://www.nupi.no/nupi\\_eng/About-NUPI/Projects-centres-and-programmes/Hybrid-paths-to-resistance-in-the-Muslim-world-Iraq-Lebanon-Libya-and-Mali](https://www.nupi.no/nupi_eng/About-NUPI/Projects-centres-and-programmes/Hybrid-paths-to-resistance-in-the-Muslim-world-Iraq-Lebanon-Libya-and-Mali)

## Introduction

Nearly one year has passed since the latest Lebanese parliamentary elections, which took place on 6 May 2018.<sup>3</sup> In January 2019, a new government, headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, was formed as a result of new political balances struck in inter-sectarian negotiations. Now, a year after the elections, it is the time for all political forces to evaluate the results dispassionately, especially as a new round of elections awaits this Chamber of Deputies in less than three years.

There is no doubt that the elections left a significant impact on the different political currents and on the size of their respective parliamentary blocs. The elections were of profound importance to Islamist currents, such as *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* ('Islamic Group'), the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the last elections of 2018, the group lost their only member in the former parliament, MP Imad Al Hout. None of their five nominees running in the other constituencies was successful in making it to the current council: thus, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* is no longer represented in parliament.

This research note analyses the internal and external factors that led to *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* loss of its only parliamentary seat in 2018. It uses this case to assess the broader fortunes of Lebanon's Sunni community and its status within Lebanon. The main external factors leading to *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* electoral decline included the abandonment by the Future Movement, the law on proportional representation, potential regional involvement in the Lebanese elections and the rise of pro-Hezbollah Sunni MPs like those belonging to *al-Ahbash*. The internal challenges faced by *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, on the other hand, include its strategic dilemma on how to position itself in the sectarianized New Middle East after the Arab uprisings, as well as its organizational structure and its inability to properly convince its supporters of the last-minute alliance with the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

This note also analyses the fate of Lebanon's Salafis and their absence from the elections, a result of the security pressures they face following their political support of the Islamist armed opposition in neighboring Syria. Furthermore, the research note explores the trajectory of the *Al Masharee' Association*<sup>4</sup> known as *Al-Ahbash*,

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<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary elections were supposed to take place in 2013, but they were repeatedly postponed for various reasons. The main hindrance was the Parliament's continuous failure to pass a new electoral law that could satisfy all the Lebanese political-sectarian parties.

<sup>4</sup> Lit: 'the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects'

which, by returning to parliament in 2018, presented a fatal blow to the electoral hopes of Lebanon's Sunni Islamists.

### **Abandoned by the Future Movement**

One reason for *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* electoral failure seems to be the retreat from its firm electoral alliance of the Future Movement. Led by Saad Hariri, the Lebanese Prime Minister, the Future Movement is the strongest political party representing the Sunni community in Lebanon. This electoral pact, established prior to the 2009 elections, meant that all *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* voters, in all constituencies, granted their votes to the Future Movement candidates. In exchange, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* would maintain one parliamentary seat in Beirut that was already occupied by Dr Imad Al Hout. The Future Movement's withdrawal from this agreement came unexpectedly, and had an adverse effect on *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* which found itself unprepared to find new electoral alliances. It failed to make up for the loss of voters from the influential Future Movement. However, the Future Movement also lost in the last elections; its bloc in parliament was reduced from 35 seats in 2009 to 21 in the current parliament.

### **The effects of the new electoral law**

These results were somehow predictable, because the new electoral law adopted proportional representation for the first time in Lebanon, on the basis of equal distribution of the 128 parliamentary seats among Muslims and Christians. This system grants sectarian groups and parties more representation in parliament compared to the previous majority electoral system, which had been adopted at independence in 1943. Positive aspects aside, the biggest drawback of the new proportional system is that it reinforces the power of sectarian currents and diminishes the power of national and secular cross-sectarian trends.

In light of the new electoral law, the old agreement that determined the relationship between *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and the Future Movement came to an end, leaving its ill-effects on both parties among the Sunni population in Lebanon.

Moreover, the electoral law facilitated the victory of new candidates, considered to be prominent allies with Syria and Hezbollah within the Sunni community. It also allowed some of the Sunni movements allied with Hezbollah, powerful among Shia electors, to obtain additional seats in parliament (see below). These changes allowed the formation of a new pro-Syrian Sunni bloc made up of six MPs, demanding representation in the new government with one minister. This delayed

the formation of the new government for months before it was finally accepted by PM Saad Hariri, putting an end to almost a decade of the Future Movement monopolizing the representation of Sunnis in most of the successive governments in Lebanon.

### ***Al Jama'a al Islamiyya: retrogression and retreat***

*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, the largest Sunni Islamist movement in Lebanon, was founded in the mid-1950s. It was not directly affected by the rise of Salafi currents, because these were less organized and politically experienced. The strength of the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood emerged in the first parliamentary elections after the Taif Accord in 1992, when it won three parliamentary seats in the chamber of deputies. However, its mass shrank to one deputy in 1996. In 2018, in the recent parliamentary elections, they lost their representation entirely. This loss came after a long path of decline that began in 2005 with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. At the time, significant conflicts emerged in their ranks, and great differences between some of their leaders.

The group sees itself as the largest sponsor and central reference of the Sunni Islamist movements in Lebanon. Yet, it has not always succeeded in playing this role, especially in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination. The group has faced the dilemma of having to choose opposing strategies within the Lebanese Sunni community, between national Lebanese slogans, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and between the Islamic slogans and programs that represent the basis of its agenda in Lebanon.

The problem for *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in the recent parliamentary elections was threefold: fragmentation of votes, weak alliances and political siege. The fragmentation of votes was demonstrated by its inability to obtain a parliamentary seat on its own, according to the new electoral law. For example, *Al Jama'a al Islamiyya* is notably strong in the territory of Ikleem Al- Kharroub in southeast Lebanon, but the new proportional electoral law did not enable the group to benefit from these votes. Thus, it preferred not to run in this constituency.

### **Regional involvement in the Lebanese elections?**

*Al Jama'a al Islamiyya* failed to make the strong electoral alliances necessary to gain representation in the new parliament.

*Al Jama'a al Islamiyya* members emphasize the 'political siege' targeting the organization to expel them from parliament, a result of

the pressure from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> This pressure was also exerted on Saad Hariri's Future Movement and other powerful Lebanese political currents, to prevent them from allying with *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in the elections. The secret wheeling and dealing of electoral candidates is difficult for researchers to confirm, but these claims are consistent with the efforts of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt to weaken the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in various Arab countries.

The axis constituted by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt has also exhibited relentless efforts to support opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood in various countries. After the overthrow of the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, prominent MB leaders as well as thousands of members and sympathizers were imprisoned by President Abdel Fattah Sisi's regime. Since then, the axis has accused Qatar and Turkey of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and providing a safe haven for their leaders. Moreover, the axis seeks to exert pressure on the various Arab and other foreign countries to classify all branches of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist organizations. The alleged 'electoral siege' on *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in Lebanon may be understood within this context. It prevented Lebanese political parties, of all sects and trends, from forging an alliance with it, for fear of losing their beneficial ties with those countries that have a political influence on Lebanon.

Despite the ideological ties between the various Muslim Brotherhood branches across the Muslim world, the differences between national organizations are growing. *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in Lebanon, for example, is distinct from the Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organizations. And the latter is different from the *Al-Nahda* 'Renaissance' Movement in Tunisia or the various '*Justice and Development*' Parties in Turkey or Morocco (which are themselves also very different). Therefore, because of these differences, it may be inaccurate to deal with them equally and without distinguishing one from the other.

Instead, it is important to understand the evolution of each of these national branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the light of their experiences and adaptation to the society in which they operate. *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* retained its alliance with the Future Movement, which had been the political allies of Saudi Arabia for many years. The Future Movement then gave up this alliance in accord with the Saudi

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<sup>5</sup> Author's interviews with *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* cadres, Beirut and Tripoli, 2018-2019.

position. However, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* was not involved in a hostile discourse towards Saudi Arabia.

### **Internal issues**

Despite the sound reasoning of what *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* claims regarding these pressures, which may be true, this does not conceal the fact that the waning of the group's influence began many years earlier. It also does not overshadow the internal differences that the group has suffered since the defection of its founder Fathi Yakan (1933-2009). Yakan formed a political front of his own, in an alliance with Hezbollah, after the assassination of Hariri in 2005.

Also a significant factor in the group's failure was the resignation of the head of the Political Bureau, Asaad Harmoush, from his position only a few weeks before the elections. He then announced his support for *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*'s rivals within the Future Movement. This resignation weakened the group in northern Lebanon, where it boasted historical significance and influence, and reflected the state of conflict and disagreement within the group.

In addition, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*'s managed the last electoral campaign badly; some of its members sought individual alliances with sides with which they had nothing in common. *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* attempted to salvage the situation by setting up a tactical electoral alliance to share votes with the FPM, the powerful Christian movement loyal to current Lebanese President Michel Aoun. However, the fragile last-minute alliance failed to save *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and the FPM was the only one of the two to benefit.

It is significant that it was not possible for *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* to ally itself with Hezbollah because of strategic disagreement over its Arab policies, especially the question of the latter's military intervention in the Syrian crisis. Nor was this possible for Hezbollah as it meant abandoning or weakening its historic alliances within the Sunni community. It is true that the two sides disagree on the Syrian issue and the repercussions of Iranian involvement. They are, however, in agreement on other key issues, such as on the need to resist Israeli aggression and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Both groups support the Hamas movement in Palestine and the Gaza Strip. However, these points of agreement did not suffice to build successful electoral alliances.

These factors sum up the state of disarray, dispersion and confusion experienced by *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in the most recent parliamentary elections. This was compounded by the absence of a clear political

agenda along with the conflict of positions within their ranks. For example, in southern Lebanon, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* did not form any electoral front but gave away its votes to the Future Movement. The Islamists did cause damage to the Future Movement in Sidon though, through *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* alliance with the FPM. However, as mentioned, it did not benefit from this alliance as much as the FPM candidates.

Is the problem with *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* organizational or political? Is it related to electoral tactics or strategy and political agenda? Would the group have won in the event of strong electoral alliances without announcing a clear electoral political agenda?

In addition, there are several other reasons for the retreat of the group in the recent parliamentary elections. These include internal factors, such as the resignation of the head of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* political bureau, and the absence of prominent leaders, who play an influential role in the electoral battle. This indicates a deep-rooted challenge in the organizational structure of the group and in its decision-making mechanisms. At the same time, it demonstrates the failure of the group to present a clear and convincing political program to the Sunni community, which remained largely in favor of the Future Movement and the Hariri political faction.

### **The decline of the Future Movement**

In fact, the Future Movement also experienced weakness and decline of support compared to previous years. The Future Movement has experienced sweeping electoral victories in the years following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. It alone was representing Lebanese Sunnis. The situation has changed today, as it is no longer alone in the representation of the Sunnis within parliament or even government. This decline in the popular support of the Future Movement is caused by many factors, primarily the failure of successive governments to achieve significant economic and developmental successes on the one hand and the political concessions made by the Future Movement on the other. The most criticized concession was the agreement to the election of Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's ally, as Lebanese president. Another unpopular concession among Sunnis was the approval of the new Proportional Electoral Law, which was expected to shrink the Future Movement's parliamentary bloc and in turn, increase that of the FPM and Hezbollah's allies.

This decline in the public support of the Future Movement and its expected reflection in the parliamentary elections was not successfully used by *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* as the group was not prepared for it.

New Sunni figures and leaders, in contrast, succeeded in exploiting it in their favor. This was evident in all the Lebanese provinces, starting from Beirut and Tripoli to Sidon and Western Beka'a, where Sunni candidates supported by Hezbollah won (see below).

### **The surprising alliance with the Christian FPM**

What frustrated the supporters of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* even further, was its alliance with the FPM, an alliance born out of necessity according to the group's statement. However, the group's popular Sunni base perceived it as provocative, and could not accept it.

Large segments of the Sunni voters consider the positions taken up by the FPM to be sectarian, populist and provocative towards the Sunni community. Moreover, FPM's electoral slogans referred to the restoration of the rights of Christians only. Finally, the FPM allied with Hezbollah and the Assad regime, which *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* Sunni grassroots blame for killing their Sunni Muslim co-religionists in Syria. These policies adopted by the FPM have long been subjected to strong criticism by the Sunni Islamists.

It was therefore not surprising that *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* alliance with the FPM was met with vexation by Islamist supporters, many of whom preferred to abstain from voting. Only the active and official members, who represent half of the group's estimated electoral strength, committed themselves to this alliance. In fact, the alliance did not raise much enthusiasm among the Christians of the FPM either, which had mobilized over the years against Sunni political Islam. However, the FPM's pragmatism and populism were more efficient at benefiting from the coalition.

A parallel can be found in the positions of the Lebanese Forces, the main Christian rivals of the FPM during the Arab uprisings (2010-2011). After the elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia to power (2011-2 and 2011 respectively), party leader Samir Geagea called for respect for the people's choice. The Lebanese Forces rose in opposition to the slogans endorsed by the FPM focusing on protecting Christians from the repercussions of the Arab Spring. From the FPM's perspective, the 'Arab Spring' revolutions encouraged Islamic rule that would oppress Christians. The FPM launched a fierce attack on Geagea and accused him of wanting Christians to become 'disenfranchised' and ruled by the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood. Paradoxically, these 'fanatics' themselves (*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*) allied with the FPM in the recent elections in what was seen as a pragmatic reformist alliance.

There is no doubt that the external pressures preventing strong parties within the Sunni community from allying with *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* played a significant role. However, these pressures would not have surprised the group had it been prepared in advance. The positions of these countries towards the currents of the Brotherhood are well-known and openly declared. Moreover, their influence within Lebanon and their relationships with Lebanon's leaders are also known and go back in time. This moves the discussion towards another, more important issue: the future of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in Lebanon and how it can shield itself from the conflicts between regional Muslim Brotherhood organizations and the Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt axis.

### ***Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* organizational challenges**

The most important among the repercussions of the parliamentary elections on *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* was to reveal organizational weaknesses in its strategy and structure. Heated debates amongst its cadres and officials came to the fore. At the beginning of 2019, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* held a general conference ('organizational cycle') to reflect on the lessons learnt. Following its rules of procedure, it had conducted a review of the political and organizational performance during the electoral campaign and the reasons that led to the setback. It concluded with general internal elections that left their print on the whole structure, the leadership, the Secretariat, the Political Bureau, and the central and regional leaderships. This event is not exceptional; it is an enforcement of the rules of procedure of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, which requires this organizational session to be held every three years.

Azzam al-Ayoubi, a young figure (b. 1967), belonging to the second generation, has been *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* Secretary General for the past four years. He comes after noteworthy first generation figures of the group's founding members, such as Fathi Yakan (1933-2009), Judge Faisal Mawlawi (1941-2011) and Ibrahim Al-Masri (1937- ). The new leadership succeeded in bringing about significant changes in the organizational structure of the group. It has paved the way for a new generation of leaders and cadres of competent people in the leadership bodies. However, the electoral setback has recently re-opened the debate on the validity of the new leadership options, now subject to intense critique. The atmosphere at the internal conference held on the 25 January 2019 reflected this: Azzam al-Ayyoubi was re-elected as Secretary General of the group, but beat his rival by a very narrow margin (one vote difference) at the Shura Council elections. The ballot reflects the depth of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya's* crisis, but also suggests a climate that underpins internal regulatory institutions and an ability to

absorb crises. It shows accountability and censorship, and secures the transfer of power between their leadership positions.

### **Lebanese Salafis: absence and retreat**

The largest Sunni absentee in the electoral battle was the Lebanese Salafi Movement. Lebanon's Salafis were once one of the first Salafi currents in the Arab region to participate in parliamentary elections. This was when their founder and one of their most prominent historical figures, Sheikh Salem Al-Shahal (1922-2008) ran for the Lebanese Parliament in 1972. Al-Shahal did not consider participation in the secular parliaments to be contrary to the provisions of the Shari'a. This was new, because many Salafis in other countries despised party politics. Instead, they dedicated themselves to proselytizing, fighting heresy and correcting the practices of believers by teaching them the correct doctrines. Salem al-Shahal's candidacy to the Lebanese parliament paved the way for the candidacy of other Salafis in the following elections, without recording any wins.

Hassan al-Shahal (b. 1949), head of the 'Association of Call for Justice and Salafi Guidance' (*Da'wa wa'l-Hidaya wa'l-Ihsan*) was nominated to the parliamentary elections in the city of Tripoli in the session of 1992 and then nominated again in 2009.<sup>6</sup> He received only 1.4 percent of the votes (1239 votes). The leader of the Salafi movement in Lebanon, Da'i al-Islam al-Shahal (b. 1961), Sheikh Salem al-Shahal's son, ran for the 1996 parliamentary elections in Tripoli. Al-Shahal jr., who considers himself the founder of the Salafi movement in Lebanon and headed the Salafi 'Guidance and Good Deeds' Association (*al-Hidaya al-Ihsan al-Salafiyya*) until he moved outside Lebanon in 2014, obtained results that came close to 8 percent of the votes. This is low compared to the results achieved by winning candidates from the Future Movement, *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and others, which on average scored 58 percent of the votes in the constituencies in northern Lebanon.

However, when *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and the Salafis united in a single ballot to run for the Tripoli municipal elections, some won municipal council memberships in 1998 for Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city. Together, they won seven seats out of 24 but since then they have not managed to obtain any additional seats in the municipality.

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<sup>6</sup> Hassan al-Shahal is Sheikh Salem al-Shahal's nephew and Da'i al-Islam al-Shahal's cousin and brother-in-law.

Salafis in the Arab world waited for many years, until the eruption of the Arab revolutions in 2011, to start reexamining their belief that Islamic law and religion prohibited them from participating in parliaments. In light of these considerations, Salafi political parties – which do not believe in violence – were established in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Algeria, Morocco and other countries. They participated actively in the parliamentary elections and the Arab parliaments and were represented by active parliamentary blocs.

There are several reasons to explain the absence and retreat of the Lebanese Salafis. First, their failure to unite ranks and form an organized framework that could bring together the various dispersed associations and organizations through which they carry out their advocacy activities. The second is their belief in the priority of advocacy, educational and charitable tasks over political tasks. Lebanon's Salafis currently play an important role in securing various kinds of support and care for Syrian refugees.

Some of Lebanon's leading Salafi figures, like Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir in the southern city of Saida, have faced arrest and security harassment by the Lebanese security services following their clashes with Hezbollah. The skirmishes erupted when some Lebanese Salafi activists participated in political campaigns to support Salafi organizations engaged in fighting inside Syria. This played a key role in the absence of the Salafis from the electoral scene in 2018.

### **Sectarian tension and Sunni sensitivities**

In confessionally or ethnically divided societies, in-group political pluralism is generally a sign of health. Yet, in Lebanon's delicate political-sectarian equilibrium, it also has a strategic downside for sects: political leaders who are able to monopolize their sect's political representation do gain an upper hand compared to other sects. They control a bigger share of parliamentary and cabinet seats allocated to 'their sect', and are able to speak in inter-sectarian negotiation in the name of 'their sect'. Hezbollah and its allies exclusively dominate the representation of Lebanese Shias. Moreover, through its cross alliances among those sects, like Lebanon's president Michel Aoun, Hezbollah has extended its influence to Christian communities. In the Sunni community, the Future Movement has attempted to gain similar 'sole representation' of Sunnis in a vein parallel to, but opposing, Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's political influence and alliances in the Sunni community are debated among Sunnis. Sunnis who oppose Hezbollah consider the rise of pro-Hezbollah Sunni MPs not as a sign of healthy pluralism but rather a phenomenon detrimental to Sunni interests.

Alliances between individual Sunni MPs and the more powerful Hezbollah are generally seen as a clientelization of these Sunni MPs, aiming to split and rule and, hence, gain supremacy over Lebanese Sunnis.

Underscoring this imbalance of power is not wrong, given that Hezbollah's armed arsenal is much larger than that of the Lebanese army. Added to these factors is the fact that many Lebanese Sunnis consider the Shia Hezbollah to be subject to Iran's political agenda. In this context, major currents within the Sunni community consider the extended influence of Hezbollah to be a threat. Sunni sensitivities to political alliances with Hezbollah indicate a higher salience of sectarian identities, which could be just the tipping point in Lebanon's so far stabilized but fragile political landscape.

The post-election political map of Sunni communities should be interpreted with these Sunni sensitivities in mind. The damage caused to the Future Movement as well as *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* has now become evident. The Future Movement, on the one hand, failed in its mission to become the sole representative of Sunnis. *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, on the other hand, failed to make up for losing its alliance with the Future Movement and to maintain any form of representation within the Lebanese parliament. This helped new Sunni currents affiliated to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime to enter parliament.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Al-Masharee Organization (Al-Ahbash) and its impact on Sunni Islamists***

*Al Masharee' Association*<sup>8</sup>, known as *Al-Ahbash*, succeeded in returning to parliament through its candidate in Beirut, MP Adnan Trabulsi. Trabulsi defeated the candidates of Future Movement and *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*. *Al-Ahbash* is vehemently antagonistic to Islamist parties of all kinds (Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi). The grudge between the *Al-Masharee Association (al-Ahbash)* on one hand, and *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and Salafi organizations on the other hand, goes back to the 1980s. The rise of *Al-Ahbash* had a significant negative impact on Lebanon's Sunni Islamist movements, and contributed to the weakening of the popularity of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*.

*Al-Masharee Association* is a Sunni Islamic benevolent society, established during period of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon

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<sup>7</sup> Former minister Faisal Karami in Tripoli, Jihad Al-Samad in Diniyye, Abdul Rahim Murad in the Beka'a valley and Osama Saad in Saida are all Sunni figures allied with Hezbollah.

<sup>8</sup> Lit: 'the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects'

(1976-2005). Syria's role in Lebanon was consolidated after the *Taif* Peace Agreement in 1990 that ended the sectarian civil war in Lebanon, raging since 1975.<sup>9</sup>

*Al-Masharee Association (Al-Ahbash)* was among the most prominent Sunni groups to receive funding and support from Al-Assad's regime in Syria. The group grew in size and expanded its influence in Sunni cities and areas across Lebanon during the 1990s. With Syria's backing, for the first time in 1992, it was able to secure a seat in the Lebanese parliament, in the first general elections after the war. This happened simultaneously with *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* members affirming they were victims of domestic political and security pressure (*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* did, however, win three seats in the same elections). Did this pressure increase, as some believe, as a consequence of the events that had unfolded years earlier in neighboring Syria? The Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Syria and accused by the regime of attempting to seize power and blamed for the sectarian violence occurring in Syria in the 1980s.

Hostility continued to increase between *Al-Ahbash* and *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in the 1990s. The Salafi current joined in this rivalry as well, against *Al-Ahbash*, but faced growing pressure from the Syrian-Lebanese security agencies, with many of its sympathizers thrown in prison. Hostilities intensified when the *Al Masharee Association* developed an ideological discourse that criticized and excommunicated ('*takfir*') some of the intellectual and historical figures used by Salafis and *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* as sources of jurisprudence and as religious references.

*Ahbash* attacked the founder of Wahhabism, Mohammad Ben Abdulwahab (1703– 1791), who Salafis consider a source of historical inspiration. Moreover, it lambasted *Ibn Taymiyyah* (1263–1328), one of the prominent *Hambali* jurists, who is well respected among Salafis and modern Islamist currents.<sup>10</sup> They also brutally criticized Sayyid

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<sup>9</sup> The principles of the Taif Accords were transformed into constitutional provisions after amending the old constitution. The Syrian army assumed the mandate to supervise the implementation of the accords. It was also given the task of preserving security in Lebanon for the limited duration of two years, until the Lebanese army and the other legitimate forces were reconstructed. Nevertheless, the Syrian army lingered in Lebanon for more than fifteen years, in which the Syrian regime sought to consolidate its influence and collaborate with Lebanese Muslim and Christian allies supporting its presence in Lebanon.

<sup>10</sup> The Hambali school is one of the four main schools of Sunni Islam. It was founded by Ahmad Bin Hambal (780 - 855). The other schools include Al-Shafeyyah, founded by Mohammed Bin Idris Al-Shafeyii (767 - 820); Hanafism, founded by Imam Abi Hanifa Al-Nomaan (699 - 767); and Malekism, founded by Imam Anas Bin Malek (612 - 711). These schools are known as the four Sunni sects that the Muslim majority adhere to. While Shiia

Qutb (1906–1966), a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue influencing an entire generation of Islamists.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, *Al-Ahbash* adopted many Sufi ideas and practices, which the Salafi groups consider to be heretical and acts of blasphemy. As a result, the differences between them now extend from politics all the way to ideology. The two sides exchanged accusations of treachery, heresy and deviation from religion.

### **The rise and fall of *Al-Ahbash***

The tensions reached a breaking point when the head of *Al-Ahbash*, Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi, was assassinated in the heart of Beirut in 1995. Those responsible belonged to an extremist Salafi group based in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, near the southern Lebanese city of Sidon.

Some of the Lebanese Salafi perpetrators were arrested and three of them were executed in 1997. The assassination also triggered a string of arrests of prominent Lebanese Salafis, beyond those who were directly involved in the murder. It is widely believed Islamic jurists and academics were also persecuted, in addition to Salafi Jihadis.

As a result of the loss suffered by *Al-Ahbash* with the killing of its president and founder, the group lost its parliamentary seat in the 1996 elections. However *Al-Ahbash* resumed its activities and pursued its policies until the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a crime that shook Lebanon deeply and left deep wounds in its sectarian and national fabric. The murder was blamed on Hezbollah and Al-Assad's regime in Syria. However, the report of the International Commission of Inquiry investigating the assassination also pointed to the alleged role played by Ahmed Abdel-Al, a member of *Al-Ahbash*, in the assassination.<sup>12</sup> He was arrested, along with others, for interrogation. Although *Al-Ahbash* denied having anything to do with the crime, the accusation was a painful blow to *Al-Ahbash*, leading to a decline in its popularity within the Sunni milieu and to its political isolation between 2005 and 2013.

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Ithna Ashariyyah follow the Ja'fari jurisprudence that was established by the sixth Imam Jaafar Al-Sadek (699-765).

<sup>11</sup> Qutb was executed in Egypt in 1966 on charges of plotting a military coup against the Nasser regime.

<sup>12</sup> Report issued to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 19 October 2005.

In this period, *Al-Ahbash* focused on educational institutions, services and advocacy as a priority. This retreat from political to social, educational and advocacy work contributed to reinforcing their internal unity in preparation for a strong return to the political scene, evident in the recent elections.

### **The comeback of *Al-Ahbash***

In fact, the biggest surprise of the 2018 elections was the resounding victory of the *Al-Ahbash* (*Al Masharee Association*) candidate, Adnan Trabulsi, in the Beirut elections. He came second in the Lebanese capital with 13,000 preferential votes. Following this outcome, *Al-Ahbash* allied with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. In fact, *Al-Ahbash* could have won a second seat in Beirut, and perhaps a third in Tripoli, where their candidate Taha Naji was very close to winning and taking a seat from the Future Movement.

Astoundingly, *Al-Ahbash* have achieved remarkably good electoral results among Lebanese expatriates. Their activity outside the country and in many foreign capitals, where the Lebanese are dispersed, is of great interest to them. In contrast, other Sunni Muslim opponents received little attention outside Lebanon, especially the Future Movement led by PM Saad Hariri, as well as branches of *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*.

There is no doubt that *Al-Ahbash* as activists in the Sunni Islamic sphere hold all the secrets of success for religious, organizational and political movements. They are organizationally similar to the Hezbollah configuration. They have also built a network of social welfare and dispensaries that provide medical services, vocational training, educational institutions and schools. This includes Islamic culture schools (about 10 schools, some secondary schools and 5 technical schools), a media network (including Radio *Nidaa El Eman* and *Manar El Hoda* Magazine), educational and cultural youth organizations, and a scout association. All these institutions have branches in Beirut, Tripoli, Baalbek and other cities where Sunnis are concentrated.

There are questions raised about *Al-Ahbash's* unidentified sources of finance, to which they have not provided a clear answer. In contrast to Hezbollah, which enjoys generous Iranian funding, they did not form an armed militia, fight wars or practice organized violence. They do not intervene militarily or interfere in other countries' affairs. Therefore, unlike Hezbollah, they do not pay the high price of involvement in regional conflicts, except in rare cases such as the killing of their leader in the 1990s and the accusation against some of their cadres in the assassination of Hariri. They reap the benefits of

being loyal during peacetime, and do not disrupt governments that consider them a force capable of competing with political Islamist currents. Thus, they are able to practice their religious activities freely. They are also well connected with various businessmen and know how to navigate challenges without any unnecessary confrontation. Furthermore, they do not appear on any lists of terrorist or violent organizations and, therefore, maintain relevance in the United States, Canada, Australia, various European countries and all other countries with a high concentration of Lebanese expatriates.

### **Lebanon's Sunni Islamists and Hezbollah**

The overall landscape of the influence of Sunni Islamists in Lebanon points to a clear decline. On the other hand, it indicates a growing influence of Shia Islamists, represented by the role played by Hezbollah in the Lebanese political equation. After the Taif Accord, Hezbollah succeeded in increasing its parliamentary bloc from 9 seats in 1996 to 14 out of 128 seats in 2018. Entering government after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, the 'Party of God' also steadily increased its share of ministerial seats from two to three in 2019. Needless to say, Hezbollah's political influence is much greater than the size of its representation in Parliament and the government. Indeed, its power is derived from its regional alliances and the Iranian support it receives, as well as the great military power it possesses. Hezbollah transcends Lebanon's borders to play a role in Syria and, allegedly, other Arab arenas as well. The Lebanese army and security forces are left with no choice but to coordinate their efforts with Hezbollah and adapt to the exigencies imposed.

This disparity in power and influence between Sunni and Shia Islamists in Lebanon is on the increase. It reflects a structural disproportion in the balance of power. In a diverse sectarian society like Lebanon's, this may serve as an additional motive to deepen the differences among its citizens.

**About the author**

Dr. Abdulghani Imad is a former dean of the Lebanese University's Institute of Social Science, and sociology professor at the Doctoral School of Literature, Humanities & Social Sciences. He has published many monographs in Arabic in the areas of religion, politics, and society, and is a frequent contributor to various Arab annals and scientific journals. English readers are referred to his articles 'Islamists between revolution and the state: an epilogue', *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 7:2, 2014, pp. 283-298; and 'A topography of Sunni Islamic organizations and movements in Lebanon', *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2:1, 2009, pp. 143-161. Dr. Abdulghani Imad is also the President of the Cultural Center for Dialogue and Studies – Lebanon and the Superintendent of the Tripoli Cultural Heritage and Documentation Project.



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HYRES is funded by the Norwegian Research Council. For further information about HYRES see [https://www.nupi.no/nupi\\_eng/About-NUPI/Projects-centres-and-programmes/Hybrid-paths-to-resistance-in-the-Muslim-world-Iraq-Lebanon-Libya-and-Mali](https://www.nupi.no/nupi_eng/About-NUPI/Projects-centres-and-programmes/Hybrid-paths-to-resistance-in-the-Muslim-world-Iraq-Lebanon-Libya-and-Mali).

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