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Crossed Views on Jihadism in the Middle East: The Engagement of Lebanese Fighters in Syria

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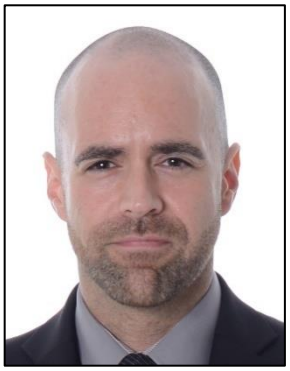

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Acronyms

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDGS	General Directorate of the General Security
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IFPO	Institut Français du Proche-Orient
IR	Islamic Resistance
ISF	Internal Security forces
ISIL/Daesh	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS/Daesh	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
M14	March 14th Coalition
M8	March 8th Coalition
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SLA	South Lebanon Army
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

Executive Summary

The "Arab Spring" in Syria has swiftly turned into a multilayered and total war involving global, regional and local actors, some in an official (inter-)governmental capacity but many in other capacities obeying to logics that challenge common understandings of border and identity. This report aims at studying one such instance: the involvement of Lebanese non-state actors in Syria. Considering the extent of their respective involvement in the Syrian conflict in spite of the Lebanese governmental "policy of dissociation", two non-state actors have been studied: pro-Assad Hezbollah and informal Sunni movements that have embraced the fight against Damascus. Beyond the assessment of who these actors are and how they involve in the conflict, the research devotes special attention to what our fieldwork shows to be a key mobilizing factor: the mobilization of identities across borders.

Based on more than 50 semi-directive interviews conducted in Lebanon between December 2013 and September 2017 with a variety of actors and observers[1], this joint research shows differentiated patterns of identity mobilization. On one side, Hezbollah's operatives are bound to a powerful top-down organization with an agenda underpinned by geostrategic calculations and identity politics; for this group, *asabiyya* ("esprit de corps") has proven to be paramount. On the other side, the involvement of Sunnis takes place on an individual basis within networks of jihadis built almost exclusively on the activation of religious identities and enmities; for these mostly atomized actors, social anomie (*i.e.* the loss of social bearings) has been found essential. Interestingly, the research has shown that both these obviously opposite social experiences (excess and lack of belonging) converge in making identity so prone to activation that individuals opt for a path leading to a likely if not a certain death in a cross-border conflict that is not theirs at first sight. Our research ambitions to understand these dynamics while relating them to broader factors, and notably to the failure of the Lebanese state and society to build a cohesive national project. Both these factors have led to excessive polarization and ensuing narratives of victimization, hence sustaining the cultivation of transnational primary identities at the expenses of national belonging.

[1] The interviews covering the Shia perspective were conducted by Didier Leroy, while his research was supervised by the Chair of Sociology of the Royal Military Academy. The interviews covering the Sunni perspective were conducted by Elena Aoun.

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1. Introduction

The Arab Spring in Syria has turned into a multilayered conflict involving – in a variety of ways – global, regional and local actors, some in an official (inter-)governmental capacity but many in other capacities obeying to logics that challenge common understandings of border and identity. This report aims at studying one such phenomenon: the reciprocal contamination of Syrian and Lebanese conflict dynamics. It will focus on two Lebanese non-state actors: Hezbollah that supports the Syrian regime, and rather informal Sunni movements supporting Syrian rebels.

Beyond the assessment of who these actors are and how they involve in the conflict and interact with Syrian actors, attention will go to the mobilization of identities and solidarities beyond borders. The paper will ask questions about how some places have been given special meaning and identities reframed in order to prompt Lebanese youngsters to fight and die in Syria; the variety of temporalities that are in play at the level of both identity construction (e.g. narratives about enmity between Sunni and Shia) and political projects whose territorial translation might qualify as either pre- or post-Westphalian; and the geopolitical implications of a Middle East where non-state actors overflow states and borders.

The dynamics underlying the action of these two very different sets of actors who have come into violent collision course are much more complex and powerful than initially thought. They require a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach taking into account a variety of levels ranging from global geopolitics to regional cleavages, to local situations and to the most intimate experience of radicalized individuals. Though more than 50 interviews have been conducted with a variety of actors and observers in Lebanon in the framework of four fields undertaken between December 2013 and September 2017, many efforts remain to be yielded in order to better grasp and connect the unfolding dynamics, both empirically and conceptually. Therefore, this paper offers the early findings of an on-going research that has relied on an inductive approach.

These findings have already given way to the development of conceptual and theoretical analyses based on the constructed nature of identity and enmity. Though further empirical data needs to be collected and our theoretical frame refined accordingly, we have already consolidated the core argument that revolves around the importance of identities on both sides of the military and symbolic battlefield in and around Syria. While *asabiyya* ("esprit de corps") and anomie (*i.e.* loss of social bearings) are located on opposite sides of the continuum of social belonging and inclusion, they have the same effect in terms of prompting respectively Lebanese Shia and Sunni youths to involve in the conflict next door. Both experiences indeed, *asabiyya* and anomie, contribute through different sets of dynamics to make the individual susceptible to processes of identity exacerbation along a "we against them" logic that leads to violent mobilization.[2]

The first section deals with Hezbollah's involvement, relying on a relatively dense scholarship developed around a quasi-military actor with a strong internal discipline and that has been a long-standing object of inquiry despite its strongly secretive culture. The second section deals

[2] These concepts and their theoretical articulation will be developed later in the paper. Though the latter is not meant to lean heavily on theory, the findings it lays are best explained and analysed through these conceptual frames.

with the much more recent and far less known phenomenon of Salafi jihadi movements in Lebanon which are mobilizing in the framework of the Syrian conflict. Nebulous, obscure, providing shifting platforms for both atomized individuals and transnational networks of jihadis with constantly mutating agendas, these movements need to be better explored though this paper offers significant yet not thorough insights.

2. The Mobilization of Hezbollah's Fighters

The Islamic Resistance (IR), Hezbollah's armed component[3], has retrospectively become a key actor in the Syrian war since its role in the "battle of Qussayr" (May-June 2013) which has signalled a turning point in the conflict. While some observers might consider that the Lebanese Shia component is an over-analyzed one in the current context, Hezbollah remains a major player in the unfolding reality[4] and an unavoidable element of the "dual" topic discussed in this report. This section will try to summarize Hezbollah's shift from resistance in Lebanon to jihad in Syria, recalling what is Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance, and how its members have involved in the Syrian conflict. We will then focus on how the identities of these fighters have been reframed to mobilize across borders. In order to highlight this mobilization dynamic, we will subsequently confront Hezbollah's pragmatic objectives and Hezbollah's evolving narrative, as both elements contribute in the promotion of dedication and motivation among its troops in a peculiar way.

1. From Resistance in Lebanon to Jihad in Syria

1.1 Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance

The Islamic Resistance was technically created in 1982 by the sending of roughly 2 000 Iranian revolutionary guards (*Pasdaran*) by Ayatollah Khomeiny in reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion of South-Lebanon and in the broader framework of the foreign policy[5] of the newly born Islamic Republic of Iran. In the context of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), this armed new-comer grew steadily stronger among the other Lebanese militias. It ultimately became the only militia able to maintain, for "resistance" (against Israel) purposes, its weaponry outside of state control after the implementation of the Syrian-backed Taif Agreement[6] (1990). Beyond the politicized debate around its "terrorist" label[7], the Islamic Resistance has gone through an

[3] Despite the widespread depiction of Hezbollah as "a political party with an armed wing", the reader should bear in mind that Hezbollah first emerged as a paramilitary organization, which later grew a "political wing". See DAHER, A., *Le Hezbollah*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2014, for more details. In the framework of this report, "Hezbollah" will often exclusively refer to this armed component — thus bypassing the numerous other facettes of the "Hezbollah phenomenon" – for practical reasons. See LEROY, D., *Hezbollah, La Résilience islamique au Liban*, Paris, Ed. L'Harmattan, 2012, for more details on these facets.

[4] WHITE, J., "Hizb Allah at war in Syria: Forces, Operations, Effects and Implications", *CTC Sentinel*, January 2014, Vol. 7, Issue 1.

[5] One of its force lines was the exportation of Ayatollah Khomeiny's main thesis (*wilayat al-faqih* or the guardianship of the Islamic jurist) promoting the fusion of religious and political powers under his authority as "Supreme Guide" until the return of Twelver Shia Islam's hidden Imam. While several attempts have taken aim at different Shia minorities across the Muslim world, Lebanese Hezbollah has remained to this day the only true "success story" on that level.

[6] Initially signed and ratified in 1989, the Taif Agreement marked the end of what is commonly referred to as "the civil war" but encapsulates in reality no less than twenty-seven sub-conflicts across fifteen years. See notably MERMIER, F. & VARIN, Ch. (dir.), *Mémoires de Guerre au Liban (1975-1990)*, Arles, Actes Sud/IFPO, 2010.

[7] While Hezbollah is currently blacklisted as a terrorist organization by Israel, the US, Canada, Australia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and partly by the EU (which distinguishes its political and armed components), it is not considered as such by the rest of the world, including major actors such as Russia, China, the UN, etc. The ongoing debate revolving around that question is quintessentially politicized, and the scientific literature has

extraordinary development between 1990 (when it was able to focus its struggle on the southern front) and 2008 (when it was politically "pushed" to turn its weapons inwards). That period witnessed the important role played by the Shia organization in Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon (2000) and in Israel's first "non-victory" during the July war (2006). In three decades, Hezbollah's armed wing mutated from a minor local militia to a powerful regional force, famous for the weight of its arsenal (roughly 100 000 rockets and missiles, some of which are capable of hitting any part of Israeli territory) and for the quality of its personnel resources (roughly 20 000 fighters, some of whom previously benefitted from Palestinian and Iranian expertise).[8]

1.2 Hezbollah's Military Involvement in the Syrian War

Hezbollah was initially thrilled at the outbreak of popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and so on, as these were targeting rulers closely allied with the US and the West. Hezbollah had been in a virtual cold war with Egypt since January 2009, when Nasrallah had effectively accused Mubarak's government of collusion in Israel's intervention in Gaza, and had called for the Egyptian people to take to the streets against him. In the case of Libya and Bahrein, Hezbollah was particularly zealous. Libya's Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi was in fact considered a foe for having allegedly ordered the killing of Lebanese Shia leader Imam Musa Sadr in 1978, while the Bahreini case involved a Shia oppressed minority. As the uprisings unfolded, Hezbollah realized that people wanted good government and social justice, and were not necessarily attracted by Iran or interested in joining any "axis of resistance".[9] Even its erstwhile ally Hamas drifted away from Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian backers, finding new footing in Egypt thanks to the –short-lived rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.[10]

When turmoil first erupted in Syria in March 2011, most Lebanese actors opted for a cautious neutral stance. As months went by, and especially since the Lebanese decision to vote against Syria's suspension from the Arab League, latent rifts appeared, highlighting deepening inter-Lebanese divergences on the Syrian crisis. This polarization triggered a series of bilateral accusations.[11] On one side, the Hezbollah-led pro-Syrian forces (March 8th, or M8) accused Saad Hariri's Future Movement of transferring weapons to the Syrian rebels. And indeed, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) seized weaponry on several occasions in the northern regions of the country. On the other side, the Hariri-led anti-Syrian forces (March 14th, or M14) repeatedly blamed the Lebanese government for neither providing humanitarian assistance nor opening refugee camps in Lebanon, criticized the LAF for preventing any aid from being

already showed how socially-built discourses addressing exclusively either the "terrorist" or the "resistant" nature of Hezbollah are both mere caricatures of a much more complex socio-political phenomenon. For more on this, see notably SAMAAN, J.-L., *Les Métamorphoses du Hezbollah*, Paris, Ed. Karthala, 2007.

[8] These numbers, scientifically unverifiable, are "guesstimates" scholars commonly agree on if both rockets and missiles are considered in reference to the arsenal, and if only "permanent full-timers" are considered in reference to the troops. Israeli and Iranian media outlets regularly go as far as doubling them, respectively out of alarmism or defiance.

[9] DOT-POUILLARD, N., « 'Résistance' et/ou 'révolution' : un dilemme libanais face à la crise syrienne », 11/01/2012. See http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/2833.

[10] The massively-supported military coup led by Gen Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi on the 3rd of July 2013 against President Mohamed Morsi has since then isolated Hamas to an unprecedented degree on the regional chessboard. While Iran and Hezbollah have never totally shut the communication door with the Palestinian movement, its relationship with Damascus has remained rather frigid since this U-turn.

[11] KHALIFEH, P., « La crise syrienne menace l'unité du Liban », RFI, 14/11/2011.

smuggled into Syrian territory, and accused the Syrian army and intelligence services of hunting down Syrian opponents in the eastern part of Lebanon, notably in Ersal.

Hezbollah's concern rose when demonstrations and fighting reached in Syria a variety of areas beyond the traditionally hostile Sunni cities of Hama and Homs, and as defections occurred among top-level governmental officials. As Sunni fighters became more numerous and more aggressive in the north-eastern regions of Lebanon, the Party's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah publicly announced the engagement of Hezbollah fighters in specific areas of the Syrian territory. This new configuration triggered an ongoing series of direct (bombings, even suicide-bombings) and indirect (abductions of Shia pilgrims) retaliation "measures" on Hezbollah by Syrian (and pro-Syrian) opposition forces in Lebanon.

The Islamic Resistance has been essentially committing "lightly"-equipped[12] personnel and know-how to Syria, while most of its heavy weaponry has stayed in Lebanon, ready for a hypothetical Israeli attack. Local war-journalists themselves admit that it is difficult to provide numbers when it comes to assessing Hezbollah's presence on Syrian soil: the best-informed "guesstimates" seem to narrow it to a stable 8 000 manpower between December 2013 and September 2016 (including first aid, logistics, etc.), never engaged all at once given the reportedly frequent (monthly) rotation policy.[13] Hezbollah has become more than an auxiliary force in Syria thanks to its martial expertise and its relatively important presence[14] (signalled in more than 80 locations by the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). Most of its military operations have reportedly taken place under the supervision of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in cooperation with the Syrian army and with occasional back-up from other Iraqi,[15] Lebanese[16] and Palestinian[17] paramilitary forces. All in all, Hezbollah has been involved in four types of military missions in Syria: training missions in urban and counterinsurgency operations, a combat advisory role, corseting operations and direct combat operations.[18] But mostly known for their guerrilla warfare tactics, Hezbollah fighters have mainly served as "methodical" infantry units, clearing areas of operation house by house, block by block, village by village and so on.

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[12] For details that explain the use of quotation marks, see BLANFORD, N., "Hezbollah acquiring new tactics in Syria", *The Daily Star*, 29/05/2015.

[13] NERGUIZIAN, A., *op. cit.*, p. 18. Interviews with Nicholas BLANFORD, Beirut, 13/12/2013 and 20/09/2016.

[14] Lebanon expert Joseph Bahout mentioned the following numbers during a conference at the Free University of Brussels on the 17th of December 2013 : *« Actuellement, l'armée syrienne fonctionne avec 70.000-80.000 hommes, soutenus par 40.000 miliciens chiites... on ne peut donc plus parler de force 'supplétive'. »*

[15] The Badr Organization has notably sent fighters to several Syrian warzones (Damascus, Aleppo and Palmyra among others) since 2012. Internet sensation "Abu Azrael" (Death Angel), alias Ayyub Faleh al-Rubaie, an Iraqi Shia commander of the Kataib al-Imam Ali (which is part of the Popular Mobilization Forces), has also regularly admitted training in Lebanon and fighting in Syria alongside Hezbollah. SMYTH, Ph., "Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the rise again in Syria", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2430, 29/05/2015.

[16] The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) has reportedly helped the Islamic Resistance in the battle of Zabadani in 2015, beyond regular cooperation on Lebanese soil. LEITH, F., "Syrian Army and Hezbollah advance in Southern Al-Zabadani", *Al-Masdar News*, 24/08/2015.

[17] The Syria-controlled Palestine Liberation Army has also reportedly taken part in some recent operations in the region of Zabadani. EDWARD, "Violent clashes in the area of Al-Zabadani city", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 09/08/2015.

[18] WHITE, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

Chronologically, we can discern four phases in Hezbollah's military engagement in Syria, each phase being associated with areas bearing different meanings.

(1) The first one dates back to the early episodes of violence (Spring 2012) and focuses on the holy Shia shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqayya (Damascus area). This very symbolic choice reflects Hezbollah's initial thesis of "defending Syria's holy Shia sites".[19] During this initial phase, Hezbollah also sent discreetly a few units along the border east of the Beqaa valley (in order to protect "Lebanese Shia villages in Syria")[20] and military advisors to pro-Assad forces (to help secure key road networks and support operations between Damascus and Lebanon).

(2) The second phase focused on the Qussayr area[21], where Hezbollah delivered its first ever large-scale offensive operation (May-June 2013). This purely geostrategic operation, led bilaterally with the Syrian army against (mainly) Jabhat al-Nusra, turned out to become a decisive victory for the "loyalist" camp which allowed the Assad regime to pull itself together. While Hezbollah explained that it had decided to rescue the local - mostly Lebanese Shia - population from "*takfiri*" violence (after their call for help received no answer from the Lebanese authorities), one can easily understand that the Qussayr area is first and foremost a highly sensitive area for the Islamic Resistance's weaponry transit and stockpiles. Qussayr thus carried a double significance, touching the Shia as a community and linked to the IR's political "national" cause. Since Hezbollah's "cleansing" of the region, Qussayr has reportedly become a significant recruitment and training area for local pro-Hezbollah residents.

(3) In a third phase initiated in November 2013, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah launched the "Qalamoun campaign"[22] in several (mostly Sunni) villages stretched along the 90 km-long axis that roughly joins Qussayr and Sayyida Zaynab, *id est* the Homs-Damascus M5 highway. Along that artery, a combination of Hezbollah infantry and Syrian air power pushed back opposition forces from north to south through the Qalamoun mountainous region, sweeping successively through the villages of Qarah, Dayr Atiyeh, Nabk and Yabrud (the closest Syrian village to the Lebanese pro-opposition village of Ersal).[23] Retrospectively, it would appear that Hezbollah wanted to push rebel fighters (back) into Lebanese territory and let the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) handle them. The Qalamoun campaign marked a new phase in Hezbollah's engagement in Syria, as securing this region no longer affected the Shia interests – be it religion-wise or identity-wise – exclusively. This second victory was strongly advertised via an important media campaign; Hezbollah organized visits to the "liberated" areas for journalists from around the world, even those working for American outlets. The message was clear: Syria is NOT Hezbollah's Vietnam… In June 2014 however, the conquest of Mosul by ISIL reshuffled the deck of cards as it compelled most Iraqi Shia militias in Syria to head back to their homeland. This loss of extra manpower significantly affected the fragile balance of power in Qalamoun. Nevertheless, the Islamic Resistance managed to slowly but surely regain

[19] Interview with Walid JUMBLATT, Beirut, 07/12/2014.

[20] *Id est* Lebanese citizens (holding Lebanese ID and paying tax in Lebanon) whose land of residency is officially located on Syrian territory.

[21] See upper-right corner of the map of Lebanon, at the bottom of this report, to locate Qussayr. Source: University of Texas Libraries.

[22] BLANFORD, N., "Qalamoun offensive – Assad attempts to secure critical territory", IHS Jane's, Jane's Intelligence Review, 12/12/2013.

[23] ALAMI, M., "Talking to a Hezbollah fighter in Syria", www.now.mmedia.me, 24/02/2014.

the upper-hand in these contested areas, sometimes through harsh battles like Zabadani in July 2015.

(4) Russia's military intervention in Syria, which started in September 2015, has been a game-changer marking the beginning of a fourth phase. Since then, the Syrian regime and its allies have confidently consolidated their grip on their vital supply lines between the Alawite coastline and Damascus through the Qalamoun mountains. Benefitting from this providential umbrella, Hezbollah has gained new footing in farther areas of interest in Western Syria, from the strategic Golan Heights southwards up to Aleppo northwards, and even in the Eastern part of the country. In the South, Hezbollah had previously attempted a few incursions to the Syrian-Israeli border, but the Israeli Air Force (IAF) drew a not-to-be-crossed red line by annihilating a convoy of high-profile military commanders (among whom Imad Mughiyah's son Jihad) in Quneitra as early as January 2015.[24] Since then, in the framework of "Operation Chess", the IAF has regularly targeted whatever was identified as Hezbollah-bound weaponry susceptible of altering the subtle "balance of deterrence" between *Tsahal* and the IR. As an order of idea, the Israeli army revealed, in September 2018, that 200 airstrikes had been carried out against Iranian targets in Syria over the elapsed year and a half.[25] In the North, Hezbollah reportedly played a major role in the war of attrition in Eastern Aleppo (which ended in December 2016) and even provided support in the framework of the battle of Al-Bab in early 2017. Probably lacking true appetite to push further to the final rebel enclave of Idlib, Hezbollah rather seems to have shifted its next effort to the East, as several sources have mentioned it as spearheading the reconquest of Abu Kamal, thus slowly but surely contributing to the materialization of the long-fantasized "Shia/Iranian corridor" bound to link Tehran to the Mediterranean.

2. The Reframing of Hezbollah Fighters' Identities

2.1 The Party's Geopolitical Objectives in Syria

Retrospectively, it appears that Hezbollah's geopolitical objectives have evolved over the years of operations across Syria and we can notably discern that a concentric logic has grown salient over time, reflecting the priorities of the different stakeholders.

2.1.1 Ensuring its Own Domestic Survival

Initially, most observers agreed that Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was a matter of domestic survival for the movement. Military sources close to the organization explained to us that Hezbollah's main concern on the ground was the attempt to create a Sunni axis between Tripoli, Ersal and Aanjar, that could — if not prevented — end up insulating Hezbollah from its Syrian backyard and provider. This worry has notably pushed the IR to regularly press for more coordination with the LAF in the predominantly Sunni Northern regions of Lebanon. Although debatable, this effort of *tansiq* (which translates both — very different — notions of "mere coordination" and "full collaboration" in Arabic) climaxed during the summer of 2017, which

[24] "Hezbollah fighters killed in Israeli attack", *Al-Jazeera*, 19/05/2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/01/israeli-air-raid-kills-hezbollah-commander-201511816323696 0984.html.

[25] AHRONHEIM, A., "Israel struck over 200 Iranian targets in Syria over past year", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 04/09/2018, https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-struck-over-200-Iranian-targets-in-Syria-over-past-year-566487.

witnessed the final assault on the remaining pockets of Sunni "militants" (respectively identified as Al-Qaida and ISIL-aligned fighters in Jurd Ersal and Ras Baalbek) in the Beqaa valley.[26]

One must also bear in mind that the IR's infrastructure (including its missile *dispositif*) and network — which ensures Hezbollah's might in Lebanon — stretches into Syrian territory. As Druze leader Walid Jumblatt himself outlined: *« L'aspect géostratégique des choses impose au Hezbollah de se battre en Syrie…ils ne peuvent pas se permettre de perdre le régime alaouite car il leur sert de point de jonction avec l'Irak et l'Iran. Il y a en plus une psychose chez le Hezbollah par rapport à ce qui pourrait remplacer le régime actuel à Damas. […] Le Hezbollah se bat actuellement pour sa survie, pour assurer son approvisionnement en armes, qui vient d'Irak à travers le Hermel vers le Liban. Le nord-est du pays est chiite, tandis que le nord-ouest est sunnite, le Hezbollah ne pourrait pas acheminer ses armes à travers Tripoli. L'enjeu se situe donc sur la route Homs-Damas, d'où la bataille actuelle pour Qalamoun. […] La Syrie est une question de vie ou de mort pour le Hezbollah. »*[27]

Phases 1-3 of Hezbollah's engagement in Syria, which took place in vicinal areas of the Damascus-Tartus axis, can thus be considered as primarily answering the movement's own top priority — its own perception of survival at home — even if these also contributed to supporting the Assad regime.

2.1.2 Gaining Strategic Depth in Syria

Beyond this self-oriented "make or break" framework, the IR has logically extended its endeavor to a longer-term objective of directly supporting its political protector, with whom it has shared increasingly inter-related destinies.

Objectively, Hezbollah's constituency is affected by the burden of Syrian refugees in Lebanon as much as any other voting constituency, and it does not see what gains the Islamic Resistance could reap from overstretching geographically.[28] So on this level, what Hezbollah tried to achieve by sending fighters into the Syrian quagmire was to affect significantly the "military balance" on the ground, in order to help the Iranian-backed regime regain and maintain the upper-hand in any future negotiations. Only this dominant position could then help the regime reach an acceptable long-term political solution, one notably guaranteeing Hezbollah's sustainability as a resistance movement in Lebanon.

Strategically, we can see here how this translated into two intertwined priorities.[29] (1) From a Lebanese point of view, Nasrallah's fighters needed to maintain the supply line for Hezbollah-bound weaponry as mentioned previously, notably by keeping the (supportive) populations in their villages and pushing the Lebanese Sunni jihadis back to Ersal. The primacy of this goal explained the geographical focus of Hezbollah's effort in areas located in *muhafazat Rif*

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[26] See BLANFORD, N., "The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants", in *The CTC Sentinel*, September 2017, Vol. 10, Issue 8, https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants/.

[27] Interview with Walid JUMBLATT, Beirut, 07/12/2013.

[28] See map in NERGUIZIAN, A., "Lebanon at the crossroads: Assessing the Impact of the Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, 25/02/2014, Figure VIII.44.

[29] See administrative map of Syria, at the bottom of this report, to locate most mentioned disctricts and areas. Source: University of Texas Libraries.

Dimashq (also the only Syrian district linking Lebanon and Jordan) and *muhafazat Homs* (also the only Syrian district linking Lebanon and Iraq). (2) From a Syrian perspective, Hezbollah also aimed at keeping the supply line for the regime. Once the core territory around Damascus was secured, the effort shifted to maintaining the fluid connections with *muhafazat Tartus* and *muhafazat Latakia* (these two districts being the epicentre of the Alawite community and giving access to the Mediterranean sea), and ultimately clearing the major arteries located in *muhafazat Hama*, *muhafazat Idlib* and *muhafazat Halab* (these historically anti-Assad districts comprising other economically important cities).

Given their victory in the key-battle of Aleppo, the regime and its allies were able to pursue Assad's utopian goal of slowly regaining control over Syria as a whole, thus thwarting what Hezbollah officials framed as the "Western project of Syria's partition".[30]

While phases 2-4 of Hezbollah's engagement in Syria served Assad's interests — allowing the Syrian regime to catch a second breath — before anything else, Hezbollah gained strategic depth in Syria, especially in the Golan Heights area where it has detected the potential of a prolonged "Blue Line" in its fight against Israel.

2.1.3 Becoming a broader regional force

Finally, zooming further out of local events to grasp the even longer-term evolutive picture reveals a third major development. If Hezbollah operatives have retrospectively been spotted in most regions of Syria from 2015 on, we can reasonably say that the movement has not demonstrated much willingness to increase its presence in future battles against Idlib-sheltered militants or to spark major clashes with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) beyond the Euphrates river. Rather, the latest reports of significant Hezbollah mobilization mentioned its leading role in the reconquest of the Syrian-Iraqi border-crossing near Abu Kamal in November 2017.

We can easily understand that Hezbollah does not wish to alienate further the Turkish army that is deployed in North-Western Syria, and that it equally wishes to avoid getting at odds with historically friendly Kurdish actors. But this tends more seriously to point out another level of objective, one that is more in phase with Iran's agenda in the region. By regaining control over that specific location of South-Eastern Syria and by establishing a presence between Abu Kamal and Lebanon through the Syrian *badiya*[31], Hezbollah has more specifically contributed to the materialization of the long-fantasized and still debated "Shia or Iranian corridor" dreamt of in order to link Tehran and the Mediterranean.[32]

All in all, the latest developments that have taken place in the framework of phase 4 of Hezbollah's engagement in Syria have indeed allowed the consolidation of the movement's strategic depth in sensitive areas like Deraa or Quneitra, but have more largely highlighted how Hezbollah has focused its effort to meet Iran's agenda for the region.

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[30] Interview with Ammar AL-MOUSSAWI, Beirut, 20/09/2016.

[31] *Id est* the steppic-desertic territories of central Syria.

[32] See « Iranian routes to the Mediterranean » map, at the bottom of this report, to visualize the most plausible scenarios. Source: Fabrice BALANCHE, Université de Lyon 2.

2.2 The Party's Evolving Narrative on Syria

Whether the party admits it or not, Hezbollah's Syrian objectives have implied struggling for the sake of the Assad regime, which is responsible for an overwhelming amount of civilian casualties, and against mostly Sunni opposition forces, which has seriously damaged its image in the Muslim world (especially in contrast with its glorification following the 2006 war against Israel). As the traditional "anti-*fitna*[33] champion" in Lebanon,[34] the Party of God has displayed considerable caution and downplayed its — otherwise very visible — military propaganda, hoping to minimize the growing rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the long term.

In its rather successful public relations campaign,[35] Hezbollah has widely benefitted from the atrocities committed by takfiri groups, broadcast almost on a daily basis *via* the internet. In contrast with such behaviour, Hezbollah fighters have generally behaved in a way that has maintained the movement's "ethical" image as a fighting force, a reputation mostly gained in 2000 (when Hezbollah prevented payback actions against SLA[36] officers) and in 2006 (when Hezbollah fighters left reimbursement notes to shop-owners when they needed to grab goods from their stores). In the framework of this effort, Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV channel also carefully filmed some of the corridors left open (and even ambulances provided) for enemies fleeing Qussayr in 2013 or Jurd Ersal in 2017.

Beyond this preliminary remark, we can also drill further down into Hezbollah's narrative legitimizing its presence beyond borders and highlight how this discourse has managed to remain overall consistent while operating subtle shifts along a process of "securitizing"[37] its opponents as time went by.[38]

Once difficult to track for outsiders, Hezbollah's narrative has become easier to follow through the numerous video-sharing websites notably relaying the public appearances of its secretary-general, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Among other sporadic speeches, Nasrallah has indeed

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[33] *Id est* intra-Muslim strife.

[34] BAHOUT, J., "Lebanon at the Brink: The Impact of the Syrian Civil War", Crown Center for Middle East Studies (Brandeis University), Middle East Brief N°76, January 2014.

[35] Nevertheless, this public relations campaign has suffered from two minor setbacks: a Youtube-uploaded video which showed a Hezbollah unit terminating wounded Sunni fighters and the "Yabrud song" (see "Opposition fires back at Hezbollah song", *The Daily Star*, 24/02/2014, p. 8.) labelling Syrian rebels as "takfiris".

[36] *Id est* South Lebanon Army.

[37] Coined by Waever and developed by the Copenhagen school, the concept of securitization in international relations is the process of — typically — state actors who successfully manage to transform certain issues into security matters, which subsequently enables the use of extraordinary means for the sake of security. See notably BUZAN, B., WAEVER, O. & DE WILDE, J., *Security: A new framework for analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997. This process actually mirrors the one also visible on the Sunni side as developed in the next section.

[38] The analysis provided below is the result of merging personal published research and the recent academic works of promising Brussels-based scholars. See LEROY, D., « Jihadistes sans frontières et reconstruction identitaire », in *Travaux et Jours* (revue de l'Université Saint-Joseph), N°92, Printemps 2018, pp. 67-82, https://www.usj.edu.lb/publications/catalogue/my-usjinfo.php?perpubid=2871. See also KIZILKAYA, Z., *« Hezbollah's legitimization of its use of force »*, PhD in Political Science, Vrije Universiteit van Brussel & Royal Military Academy of Belgium, January 2018 ; DIEUDONNE, J., *« La rivalité entre l'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite et sa traduction dans le conflit yéménite »*, Master in Political Science, Université libre de Bruxelles, June 2018 ; HADDAD, A., *« Framing Hezbollah's armed intervention in Syria »*, Master in Political Science, Université libre de Bruxelles, September 2018.

addressed the party's followers on a regular basis at the occasion of recurrent events organized by the movement, creating as many moments of "groupness"[39].

Among these recurrent discourses, three bear special meanings and target different sets of publics: (1) *Ashura* day discourse, which commemorates Imam Hussein's martyrdom and marks the triggering event of the Sunni-Shia rift, targets Hezbollah's local Shia base, (2) Liberation and Resistance day discourse, which celebrates Israel's withdrawal from South-Lebanon in May 2000, speaks to a national — transconfessional — Lebanese spectrum, and (3) *Al-Quds* or Jerusalem day discourse reaches out to regional Arab and Muslim audiences. Framing theory[40] and framing functions[41], applied to this corpus since the beginning of the Syrian war with the objective of highlighting the problems evoked and the solutions proposed by Nasrallah, reveals major frames (or themes) such as "us against them", "takfiri threat", "defending Lebanon" and "defending Palestine", that are mobilized with consistency over time yet present variations depending on the primarily targeted audience. While most themes can be spotted in most speeches, slightly more emphasis is respectively put on (1) the takfiri threat with the Shia audience, on (2) the defense of Lebanon with the national audience, and on (3) the defense of Palestine with the regional audience.

All in all, we can retrospectively discern that the most impactful pattern has been the progressive assimilation or association of Syrian rebels to different types of enemies (the takfiris, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the US), respectively consensual to the targeted audiences. In brief, a fine-tuned process of securitization has been at work and Hezbollah has shown particular opportunism towards ISIL on this level, as the chronological overview of key-excerpts below underlines.

In 2011, Hezbollah initially remained rather silent when Syrian protests erupted in the region of Hauran in 2011. The following year, Hezbollah's discourse abided by the officially "neutral" position of the Lebanese Republic and only mentioned the safeguarding of holy Shia shrines such as Sayyida Zaynab that were threatened by the turmoil. This initial religious argument is crucial in terms of formal discourse, as it nourishes the fighters' internal dual temporalities, oscillating between the "Shia golden age" (battle of the Camel)[42] and the current historical time.[43]

In April 2013, Hassan Nasrallah publicly admitted Hezbollah's deployment to Syria for the first time and started to deliver a politicized argumentation — distancing his movement from the Baabda Declaration[44] — explaining that sending fighters to Syria was from then on a matter of defending Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. The following month, the Ashura commemoration

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[39] Brubaker defines groupness as "the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders". See BRUBAKER, R., *Ethnicity without groups*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004.

[40] See notably ENTMAN, R., "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", in *Journal of Communication*, N°43(4), Autumn 1993, pp. 51-58.

[41] See notably BENFORD, R. & SNOW, D., "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment", in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2000, Vol. 26, pp. 611-639.

[42] *"Harb al-Jamal"*, fought in Basra (Iraq) in 656, is remembered as the victory of Ali Ibn Abi Talib over Aysha Bint Abu Bakr.

[43] See Henry CORBIN's literature on *"mundus imaginalis"*.

[44] The Baabda Declaration (June 2012) is a pledge that includes noninterference in Syria's conflict, initially signed by all Lebanese factions including Hezbollah.

gave him the opportunity to confirm this argumentary line: *"Should Syria fall in the hands of the Americans, the Israelis, the takfiri groups and regional States, the resistance would be besieged and Israel would reenter Lebanon. […] If Syria falls, so will Palestine."*[45]

The party's political adversaries had of course previously highlighted the ideological paradox posed by the situation, where the *"party of all the oppressed in the world reveals itself to be against the oppressed of the country next door…"*.[46] Hezbollah's response to this specific criticism emphasized the "non-revolutionary" nature of the Syrian unrest, arguing that it considered the Syrian crisis to be fuelled by 80% of foreign meddling, while only 20% of the turmoil were actually linked to internal legitimate protest.[47] The movement leadership further developed the idea that the collapse of Syria would pull Lebanon towards a similar fate: *"Let's assume that the regime falls tomorrow. We would not witness the rise of a new regime as a whole... it would only initiate the "Somalization" of Syria. Lakhdar Brahimi himself warned against this risk of Somalization. We are now talking about something between 1 500 and 2 000 armed groups in Syria. Each group has its own laws and they are not ready to have an understanding. If the regime were to fall, the army would disintegrate and we would then have 4 000 groups! Syria would not only be divided, it would be smashed into small pieces. In some areas, moving from one village to another already resembles moving from one State to another, this is catastrophic! We are defending the unity of Syria, before defending the regime... and we are also defending Lebanon. Because if Syria were to be divided, so would Lebanon. You cannot expect such a scenario not to affect Lebanon similarly, this is impossible."*[48]

Finally, the party's narrative also tried to stick — as much as it could[49] and according to its own survival logic — to a legalist rhetoric, underlining the legitimacy of Syria's elected government and the sovereignty of the State. *"The deep reason which made us intervene in Syria was not to protect the regime; it was self-defence. Extremists were brought and spread along a strip adjacent to the Lebanese border (Qussayr, Qalamoun, etc.), benefiting from support in areas such as Ersal, Akkar, etc. These extremists also benefited from the uncontrolled border, which allowed them to come and go between Lebanon and Syria, notably launching attacks in Lebanon and then going back to Syria. We wish that the Lebanese army and the Lebanese State took care of this issue and prevented Lebanon from sending fighters to Syria. But it didn't for many reasons: it lacked the capability and it was also pressured by Western and Arab States. If we hadn't intervened, the Beqaa valley, a stronghold of the resistance, would have been besieged. This is why we could not sit idle and watch. To those who accuse us of crossing the border into Syria, we tell them: "do those standing on the other side [Nusra, ISIL, etc.] believe in borders?" We also insist on the fact that the only external actor whose intervention is legal is Hezbollah, because we regard the current government as legitimate and we entered the country at the request of this government. Whereas all the others entered the territory illegally, violating the sovereignty of the State."*[50]

By late 2013, the rise of radical Sunni actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, the use of chemical weapons and its horrific consequences in the Damascus area, and the rise of home-

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[45] Hassan Nasrallah, Liberation and Resistance day speech, 25th of May 2013.

[46] Interview with Samir FRANJIEH, Beirut, 08/12/2013.

[47] Interview with Ammar AL-MOUSSAWI, Beirut, 10/12/2013.

[48] *Ibidem.*

[49] Hezbollah did not, for example, respect the terms of the Baabda Declaration.

[50] Interview with Ammar AL-MOUSSAWI, Beirut, 10/12/2013.

grown Salafi terrorism in Lebanon gave Hezbollah more latitude to emphasize (and probably amplify, hence "securitize") the phenomenon of the new "takfiri threat": *"We must stress our brotherhood as Muslims belonging to different sects, especially the Sunnis and Shia, as the takfiri problem is one for all Muslims. […] This danger threatens everyone, Muslims and Christians. And [only] with everyone's cooperation can we confront it, stop it, isolate it and put an end to it".*[51]

From then on, Hezbollah has further hammered the argument that the "takfiris" threaten everybody: moderate Sunnis (even non-jihadi Salafis) to start with, then Shias, Christians, Druzes, Yezidis, etc. In doing so, Nasrallah virtually created a "civilizational enemy"[52] and managed to avoid the trap of defending only religious minorities against a Sunni rage: "*Tens of thousands of Christian families were displaced from Iraq. […] Likewise, the Sunnis who disagree with Daesh… [For the Sunnis,] it is either pledging allegiance to ISIL or being slaughtered. [As for] the Shia… they have no choice but being slaughtered.*"[53]

By spreading a fear that could reach almost anybody (especially the Lebanese Shia who can also fear becoming second-class citizens again), this new narrative gained momentum and created a steadiliy-increasing consensus in Lebanon, across friendly M8 and worried M14 circles.[54] "*As for the late suicide bombings that Daesh lead on the village of Al-Qaa [in the Lebanese Beqaa valley], the problem is with the ideology of Daesh which is the same as the ideology of Al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda, the takfiris and the Wahhabis... Those people, their culture is murder… their religion is murder*".[55]

ISIL's horrific propaganda, combined with violent events that shook Lebanon, has allowed Hezbollah to surf this wave through the recent decline and territorial losses of the self-proclamed "Califate": "*Daesh is one of the worst phenomena that have emerged in our region and History… Look at the mutilations and the abuse that Daesh did to Islam and to our Prophet. Look at the assistance that Daesh has provided for the United States, Israel, the enemies of Islam and the Ummah. Hence, we call today during the 10th [day of the month] of Muharram to continue fighting everywhere, to eliminate Daesh and its threats.*"[56]

2.3 A Force with Multi-Layered Motivations

Both Hezbollah's geopolitical objectives and strategic communication related to the Syrian crisis have contributed to promoting an optimal level of commitment, discipline and motivation among the ranks of the Islamic Resistance. While it has been out of our reach to measure their respective importance and impact, several pre-existing engagement factors that have been reinforced in the Syrian context could be identified through the gathered qualitative data.

It is common to hear in Lebanese Shia circles that average young men from their community basically have the choice between two careers: joining the LAF or joining Hezbollah's IR. While accurate numbers are hard to get, it is also common to hear that the latter pays slightly

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[51] Hassan Nasrallah, Al-Quds day speech, 2nd of August 2013.

[52] COURBAN, A., "Le terroriste : ennemi sans nom et sans visage", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 21/02/ 2014.

[53] Hassan Nasrallah, Al-Quds day speech, 25th of July 2014.

[54] Numerous interviews and observations across Lebanon between December 2013 and September 2017.

[55] Hassan Nasrallah, Al-Quds day speech, 1st of July 2016.

[56] Hassan Nasrallah, Ashura day speech, 1st of October 2017.

higher wages than the first. This incentive has probably always been one of the many ingredients of Hezbollah's recipe for youth mobilization, in the same vein as its numerous "social institutions" (*al-mu'assasat al-ijtima'iyya*) which encourage loyalty through aid. But fighting in Syria — further away from home — has logically triggered the multiplication of "mission bonuses" just like in any other armed force worldwide. Thus, many Hezbollah fighters who have been sent to Syria have also *de facto* been seizing a financial opportunity by taking part in the conflict, whether they wanted to do it in the first place or not. For some personnel of the Islamic Resistance, "performing their jihadi duty in Syria" has probably meant doubling or tripling their monthly income. This purely economic factor, despite being an undisputable part of the reality, cannot be flagged as a determining one based on our fieldwork.

On another level, the chronology of events has taught us that the Shia movement started its mobilization effort under the religious duty of protecting holy shrines such as Sayyida Zaynab. Traditionally, Hezbollah's religious ideology is known to promote — whenever necessary — "smaller jihad" (*al-jihad al-asghar*), which leads to the honour of martyrdom.[57] This religious argument is currently "stretched" in the party's discourse in order to reframe the Syrian crisis as a stake directly affecting the Palestinian cause. While the liberation of Jerusalem might seem poorly convincing to explain Hezbollah fighters' involvement in Aleppo, the religious factor seems cautiously salient during Hezbollah's moments of "groupness" and activated through the securitization process of — systematically Sunni — Salafi jihadi groups. The properly doctrinal nature of this religious factor can nevertheless be seen in relative terms, as "[the current Sunni-Shia rivalry in general] is not *"a fossilized set piece from the early years of Islam's unfolding, but [rather] a contemporary clash of [national, geopolitical and thus modern] identities"*.[58]

This last remark provides a bridge to a third — significant — factor of political nature. Hezbollah currently enjoys a strong and undisputed leadership through the person of Nasrallah, himself endorsed by a strong and defiant regional power: Iran. The movement — along the same lines as its Persian protector — has internally developed a powerful top-down strategic communication and has made it clear, as highlighted above, that it considers the "takfiri" enemies as foreign-manipulated pawns in the wider context of their struggle against Israel and its Western (mostly American) and Arab (mostly Saudi) allies. It seems to us that there has been a wide consensus among Hezbollah fighters to abide by Nasrallah's reading of events and to engage in this "pre-emptive war of choice in Syria"[59], based on the shared perception of a threefold security emergency: (1) the need to protect the Shia community from a self-announced deadly threat, (2) the need to shield the Lebanese nation from a potentially collapsing neighbour, and (3) the need to maintain the readiness of the "axis of resistance" (*jabhat al-muqawama*) against the new anti-Palestinian regional plot. As Nerguizian stated several years ago already, *"Hezbollah's choices reflect its own narrow set of overlapping priorities in Syria: the primacy of preserving the 'Resistance Axis with Iran,' Hezbollah's sense that it can neither appease increasingly militant Lebanese Sunni political forces nor reverse deepening regional Sunni-Shia tension, and that Shia communal fears as a*

[57] ALAGHA, J., « Hizbullah and Martyrdom », in ORIENT, Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wirtschaft und Kultur des Orients, 45.1, March 2004, pp. 47-74.

[58] NASR, V., *The Shia Revival, How Conflicts within Islam will shape the Future*, New York, Ed. W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 20.

[59] Interview with Ghassan EL-EZZI, Beirut, 05/12/2013.

regional minority group increasingly inform a need to create strategic depth in Syria."[60] Recent developments of 2018 and 2019, marked by renewed direct tensions between Israel and Hezbollah[61], tend to multiply the warnings of an imminent new war between the two camps, reactivating Hezbollah's readiness for this awaited "next round", and underlining the weight of this political factor at the individual level.

Last but not least, the social identity lens has, by contrast with most other factors, revealed a particularly strong and recurrent feature of Hezbollah fighters. Part of the IR's military appeal and cohesion has reportedly always been bolstered by the high rate of school drop-out among the Lebanese Shia.[62] For many youths in search of a "structuring" life path, being part of Hezbollah as a mass movement triggers a very powerful sense of *asabiyya* ("*esprit de corps*"), which subsequently translates into a high level of discipline (*iltizam*) and obedience toward the hierarchy within the organization. In other words, belonging to the IR and being committed to Hezbollah's agenda allows many adrift young men to (re)gain a feeling of pride. One of Hezbollah's main talents apparently lies with the way it tailors its internal offer of jihadi narrative in order to unleash this powerful emotion through a shared culture of channelled violence.

3. Section's Conclusion

The Syrian crisis has had a major impact on Hezbollah's global trajectory. While it has forced the movement to put its political agenda temporarily on hold, it has also drastically affected its military vision and practices. Indeed, the Islamic Resistance has extended major points of its military doctrine, the location of its battlefield and the identity of its enemy (shifting from an anti-Israeli defensive stance in South-Lebanon to an anti-rebel offensive one in its irreplaceable Syrian backyard).

Its military engagement beyond national borders has also compelled Hezbollah to operate a subtle shift of narrative that has evolved with time and areas of operations. (1) Its safeguarding of Sayyida Zaynab and protection of Shia border villages from early 2012 was first framed by religious and communal duty. (2) Its offensive campaign in the highly sensitive area of Qussayr (May-June 2013) was later justified by communal and political (resistance) duty. (3-4) Finally, its presence in Qalamoun and other regions of Syria unveiled a purely political phase of its agenda, one promoting support to the Assad regime and the consolidation of the pro-Iranian security architecture in the region. The drastic operational shift from one phase to the next was subtly framed by the movement's leadership along a securitization process, as the central storyline in most contemporary perceptions is that Hezbollah is now "fighting takfirism" (a positive value) rather than "supporting authoritarianism" (a negative value) in Syria.

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[60] NERGUIZIAN, A., *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[61] The IAF has significantly increased its rate of airstrikes on "Iranian targets" in Syria, and has even officially claimed some of them in the recent months. In September 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu accused Lebanon, before the United Nations General Assembly, of sheltering Hezbollah facilities and missiles on the site of Beirut airport. Also, the IDF claimed to have discovered and destroyed six Hezbollah tunnels crossing the border into Israel in the framework of Operation "Northern Shield" (December 2018 – January 2019).

[62] Interview with Loqman SLIM, Beirut, 11/12/2013. See also https://www.france24.com/fr/reporters/20181123-beyrouth-hezbollah-achoura-nasrallah-liban-celebration-islam-chiite.

Our fieldwork has highlighted how both Hezbollah's geopolitical objectives and evolving narrative about Syria have reconstructed its fighters' identities beyond the Lebanese border. Depository of multi-layered pre-existing motivations, Nasrallah's men seem to have reinvigorated their dedication to fight in the Syrian context drawing from a mix of socioeconomic, religious and political factors. But more interestingly, the key finding revolves around the role played by the strong sense of *asabiyya* ("esprit de corps") promoted by the organization, which seems to have been an important asset.

Against all odds, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has revealed a costly[63] yet rewarding learning process that has promoted its armed component to the status of regional force, a force that has centrally contributed to the Assad regime's unexpected consolidation in swathes of Western Syria. And the "Party of God" has achieved this *tour de force* under extremely challenging circumstances. The Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA), which threatens with sanctions anyone contributing significantly to the movement's financing, was voted in the US in December 2015. Hezbollah was moreover blacklisted as a terrorist organization by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in early 2016. In May of the same year, Mustafa Badreddine, one of the Islamic Resistance's leading commanders, was killed by "rebel shellfire" near Damascus airport, becoming a revered martyr among numerous other painful casualties. 2017 saw the multiplication of Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah-bound convoys carrying "sophisticated" weaponry, susceptible of changing the "balance of deterrence" in South-Lebanon. And last but not least, President Donald Trump announced in May 2018 the US withdrawal from the Joint Common Plan Of Action (JCPOA) — better known as the Iran nuclear deal — and the return of sanctions on Iran.

This ongoing pattern of resilience — that has even produced, against all odds, political dividends at home following the May 2018 elections — is unequivocally facilitated by several assets which are distinctive of the Shia organization: a cohesive and charismatic leadership, a high level of discipline among its ranks, a true military expertise with well-implemented long-term strategies on familiar territories… features that their Sunni jihadi opponents apparently have not demonstrated with similar riguor.

[63] During the crisis, Hezbollah's casualties crossed a symbolically sensitive and painful threshold: having lost more men fighing against Syrian civilians over three years than against Israeli soldiers over three decades.

3. The Mobilization of Lebanese Salafis: The Framing of an Existential Threat

Though it has been framed and experienced as a direct reaction to Hezbollah's military support for the Syrian regime, the violent mobilization of Lebanese Sunni militants in both Lebanon and Syria is part of very complex, multi-level and multi-dimensional dynamics that somehow go way beyond the Syrian conflict. Whereas Hezbollah fighters are tightly socialized and integrated in a strong and encompassing organization that commands their loyalty and can therefore order them to engage, almost as professional soldiers, in Syria, the story is totally different with respect to Sunni militants. These are not soldiers but usually youngsters who have little knowledge, let alone experience, in war and fighting, and who have only lately taken up arms. Most of them have done so by joining nebulous transnational groups of jihadis perceived to fight for some common goals. A few of them have gone as far as to blow themselves up in the first suicide attacks ever perpetrated by Lebanese Sunnis anywhere. Such a dramatic development has puzzled even the most inquisitive and somehow knowledgeable observer of the Lebanese chessboard: the LAF.[64] Indeed, the Sunnis do not have a record of warmongers in Lebanon and the Lebanese society was not regarded as the proper soil for radical jihadis.

Building notably on the fieldwork conducted in Lebanon, this section tries to disentangle some of the dynamics and triggers behind this evolution. It starts with (1) an overview of Jihadi Salafism, especially in Lebanon, and how Lebanese Sunni jihadis have involved in the Syrian conflict. It then moves to (2) the analysis of the factors and contexts of violent mobilization. This analysis tries to show how socio-economic problems and a multiple crisis of authority can breed anomie, and how this anomie can be pivotal in making some youths amenable to radicalization through the development of an identity discourse based of victimization and securitization in a strongly polarized political chessboard.

1. Lebanese Jihadi Salafis in the Framework of the Syrian Conflict: Who are They and How do They Mobilize?

Lebanese Salafism cannot be understood in isolation from the wider Salafi revival that has started in the 1980s and gained worldwide publicity through the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by al Qaida activists in the USA. This section starts with a few clarifications on what Salafism is before moving to another short assessment of the rise of Salafism in Lebanon. It moves then to the most recent wave of jihadi activism in the framework of the Syrian conflict.

1.1 Situating Salafism

The contemporary Salafi phenomenon remains in many respects a very partially chartered one and much confusion surrounds it in spite of a significant increase in enquiries and research in recent years. This religious ideology is rooted in the Sunni brand of Islam,[65] and it places at the

[64] Interview with a European security expert who wished to remain anonymous, Beirut, 20/02/2014.

[65] "Sunni Islam accounts for over 75% of the world's Muslim population", *CIA World Factbook*, 2014, (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html, accessed on 14/03/2014).

core of religious belief and practice the first three generations of Islam (i.e. the Prophet, his companions and the next two generations of their followers) framed as the "righteous ancestors" or, in Arabic, *al-salaf al-salih* (hence *Salaf*ism).[66] Salafism can be traced back to early debates within Sunni Islam during which conservative forces managed to promote a widespread – though not uniform – orthodox version of Islam as both a religion and a culture. Historically dependent on the political and social evolutions within the Muslim world, Salafism regularly resurfaced, with its tenets claiming to say what the proper understanding of religious prescriptions is, what the proper ensuing practices are, and consequently who is a good or true Muslim.[67] One pivotal moment in the history of Salafism is the alliance that was made in the 18th century between the Saud dynasty in what has come to be Saudi Arabia and the Salafi preacher Mohamed ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Another one is what Aydinly calls the "subaltern globalization of Islam" starting from the 1960s on.[68]

From the early times of Salafism to its contemporary forms, this ideology has been characterized by its diversity regarding the relationship to political power on the one hand and the means for reviving true Muslim faith and practice on the other hand. Several typologies of contemporary Salafi movements have been devised, each providing interesting elements. The one offered by Rougier serves well the purpose of this quick overview. The author highlights three major brands of Salafism. The literalist version calls on the believer to immerse in religious texts and to disengage from any form of political participation. The reformist version directly engages the political realm, criticizing established regimes in the Muslim world and their many collusions with the West at the expenses of the Muslim community (or *Umma*). The third version goes way beyond, placing (violent) jihad at the core of religious practice and encouraging each true believer to fight unfaithful rulers and non-Muslims who threaten the *Umma*.[69] The boundaries between each stream are far from being watertight and this makes any attempt to weigh the respective importance of each complicated particularly since all of them are essentially transnational movements loosely connecting individuals located in many parts of the world. However, the jihadi brand of Salafism seems to have gained momentum in the last twenty years, boosted by the many conflicts that have erupted in the Arab and Muslim worlds. This trend has been obviously reinforced by many of the crises that followed the "Arab Spring" in several countries and especially by the conflict in Syria that has attracted jihadi fighters from a variety of countries in the region, the West and beyond. This section is particularly interested in the experience of Lebanese jihadis.

1.2 The Rise of Sunni Jihadism in Lebanon

Whereas jihadi Salafism is a relatively new phenomenon in Lebanon, Salafism as a religious ideology and practice can be traced back to the early days of the Republic in the aftermath of its establishment by the French mandate. Mostly concentrated in the North and especially Tripoli, Lebanese Salafis have long remained a minority within the Sunni community which was mostly dominated by the official ulama accredited by the Dar al-Fatwa and the traditional Sunni political leadership.[70] The civil war has considerably changed the situation. Not only did

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[66] PALL, Z., *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe*, Amsterdam: AUP & Forum, 2013, p. 13.

[67] For short yet synthetic presentations, see PALL, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-28, and ROUGIER, B. "Introduction", in ROUGIER, B. (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, Paris: PUF, 2008, pp. 7-15.

[68] AYDINLY, E., *Violent Non-State Actors. From Anarchists to Jihadists*, Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2016, p. 6.

[69] See ROUGIER, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-19.

[70] PALL, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32.

the state virtually collapse, but the social system was also considerably strained: traditional bonds of authority consequently weakened while communitarian identities strengthened. The circumstances in which the civil war was ended in 1990, the balance of power that emerged in the wake of the conflict and a host of other social, economic and political developments in the country and the region opened some space for the rise of a new breed of often self-educated and self-appointed Salafi "sheikhs".[71] As the sway of traditional religious and political leadership waned, the audience of Salafism widened.

Though quietly prospering during the long years of Syrian presence in Lebanon after the settlement of the civil war (1990-2005), Salafism did not especially take a political significance.[72] The major exception during that period is the clash that erupted at the turn of 2000 between the LAF and jihadi Salafis in Sir al-Dinniyeh, a mountainous area where Basim al-Kanj, a Lebanese jihadi veteran of the Afghan and Bosnian wars had established training camps for recruits from various nationalities (Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian notably) and the hideouts of his "Takfir and Hijrah" radical group.[73] A little more than 20 militants were killed during combats; about 80 were arrested and jailed, and many more managed to escape.

The killing of the former Sunni Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 and the subsequent withdrawal of the Syrian army from all Lebanese areas (April 2005) have, along with the ensuing polarization of the Lebanese political chessboard, further boosted the extension of jihadi Salafism in the country. A blatant demonstration was given when, in May 2007, a new round of clashes erupted between the LAF and Fatah al-Islam, another jihadi group, in Nahr el-Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp north of Tripoli. The intensity of the fighting that raged for more than 3 months, causing many casualties on both sides and a quasi-total devastation of the camp hints to the enhanced military capabilities of the jihadis and the extent to which their activism has taken hold in Lebanon through extensive networks.[74]

1.3 The Increased Radicalization of Lebanese Salafis in the Context of the Syrian Conflict

As already suggested, jihadi groups are essentially informal, transnational and quickly mutating networks able to invest any new battlefield they regard as involving their cause and/or their religious brothers. To a large extent, the Syrian conflict offered them with an ideal new battlefield after the one in Iraq, or rather with a continuation of Iraq's war as demonstrated by the rise of ISIL and its expansion on a territory straddling international borders.

Being almost by definition outside of the political spectrum, jihadi groups in Lebanon were in no way bound by the policy of neutrality that was adopted by the various political forces in Lebanon in the early stages of the conflict next door. Totally reliable data is not available to assess when and how many jihadi activists started converging to Syria, notably from

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[71] Tine Gade stresses the role of the generation of Lebanese students who attended theology in the Islamic university of Medina in the 1980s as an alternative to Al-Azhar in the aftermath of the separate peace Egypt struk with Israel (GADE, T., *Lebanon : Political leadership confronted by Salafist Ideology*, Paris : Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, August 2017, p. 4).

[72] For an extensive account of the rise of Salafism in Lebanon, cf. ROUGIER, B., *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East, Northern Lebanon from al-Qaeda to ISIS*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.

[73] For an account on the build up of jihadi camps in Sir al-Dinniyeh, see ROUGIER, B., *Everyday Jihad*, Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 229-265.

[74] ROUGIER, B., "Fatah al Islam : un réseau jihadiste au cœur des contradictions libanaises", in ROUGIER, B., (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, pp. 179-210.

Lebanon.[75] Most observers agree on the fact that the number of Lebanese jihadis directly involved in the battles in Syria has never been particularly important, around nine hundred.[76] What is more visible and perhaps more significant is the extent to which Lebanese and Syrian conflictual dynamics have merged and contributed to the radicalization of wider audiences of Sunnis in Lebanon.

Very early on, the initial atmosphere of mutual distrust between the Sunni supporters of the Syrian rebels and Lebanese groups associated with the Syrian regime – essentially Hezbollah but also the Alawite minority in Tripoli – turned into regular rounds of violence. Most of these rounds have translated into deadly gunfights in the northern region of the country, especially in the suburbs of Tripoli, where the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunni neighborhood of Bab el-Tebbaneh meet. Even if clashes are reportedly common between both communities in the area since 2005, the Syrian crisis has clearly nourished and amplified the phenomenon, worrying the Alawites and emboldening the Sunnis as preachers such as Sheikh Salim al-Rafa'i called for jihad.[77]

Another phenomenon that had to be quelled is the "Assir" one. An obscure local sheikh in the southern Lebanese city of Saida, Ahmad al-Assir rose to celebrity when he started a vocal campaign against Hezbollah in his Friday preaches, organized sit-ins, demonstrations and the closure of roads during significant periods.[78] Though it appealed to many Sunni youngsters from Saida, Assir's movement was short-lived as it ended in July 2013 in a bloodbath through a confrontation with the Lebanese army. Responding as usual only to direct assault on its own members, the LAF besieged the mosque where the sheikh and his hardline followers were hiding. The fighting capabilities of the group and the quality and quantity of arms that were discovered on the grounds hint to the strength of the network and its backers as well as its violent potential.

Jihadi violence has taken a definitely more gruesome and indiscriminate path with the first bombings that targeted Hezbollah's strongholds. The early inaccurate missile launchings gave way to cars rigged with explosives and sent to kill as many people as possible in Shia neighborhoods. As security tightened making it harder to successfully blow cars from a distance, a new strategy based on suicide attacks was adopted.[79] For the very first time in recent

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[75] For a study of available figures and relevant estimates of foreign fighters in Syria see BAKKER, E., SINGLETON, M. "Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict : Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon", in de Guttry, A. et. Al. (eds.) *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, The Hague : T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016, pp. 9-25.

[76] Several interviews with local actors and foreign observers, Beirut, February 2014. The Soufan Group provides the official number of 900 Lebanese foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq in late 2015 (The Soufan Group, *Foreign fighters. An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*, New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015 (http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

[77] RABIL, R., *Salafism in Lebanon. From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014, pp. 228-229.

[78] CAILLET, R., "Le phénomène Ahmad al-Asīr : un nouveau visage du Salafisme au Liban ? (1/2)", *Les Carnets de l'Ifpo*, 10/02/2012 (http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/3075). CAILLET, R., "Le phénomène Ahmad al-Asīr : un nouveau visage du Salafisme au Liban ? (2/2) », *Les Carnets de l'Ifpo*, 9/03/2012 (http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/3240).

[79] From 2013 till October 2016, Lebanon has suffered 12 suicide attacks on its soil. Interestingly, most security experts assess the terrorist threat level in 2016 to have been reduced to 40-50% of what it was in 2014 thanks to increased collaboration between the LAF, the GDGS (General Directorate of the Sûreté générale), the ISF (Internal Security Force) and Hezbollah. Interviews with retired LAF Generals Amine HOTEIT and Elias FARHAT, Beirut, 17-18/09/2016.

history a Lebanese Sunni blew himself up, along with a Palestinian fellow, on the 18th of November 2013, targeting the Iranian embassy in Beirut in a twin operation claimed by the Azzam Brigade, an al-Qaida affiliate group.[80] Very effective, this *modus operandi* has been repeatedly used and has expanded its scope to target, in June 2016, a Christian border village (al Qaa).[81] This further hints to the depth and reach of radicalization in some Lebanese Sunni circles even though there has been a lull in such attacks for the last three years. This is probably due to the losses incurred on the battlefield in Jurd Ersal (Lebanon), Syria and Iraq by Sunni groups and the Islamic State on the one hand, and a greater efficiency by the Lebanese security services on the other hand, but does not mean that the phenomenon has disappeared altogether.[82]

2. The Context of Mobilization and the Ignition of Identities: Anomie and Securitization

Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict next door is an essentially top-down decision. A tight and disciplined military organization in many ways, the Party of God relies on both the loyalty of its members and the framing of the stakes at hand so motivation does not falter. Its warriors have a long history of armed "resistance" to proudly draw on and a strong sense of belonging and identity that underpins their involvement (cf. *supra*). To some extent then, their readiness to fight and die in Syria is not as intriguing as the readiness of a host of atomized Lebanese Sunnis to fight and die for Syria either there or in Lebanon.

Though it may retrospectively appear as participating in a trend that first materialized with the Sir al-Dinniyeh events, the current phenomenon has not only reached unprecedented forms and levels of violence, but it has also gained a wider geographical scope[83] and demonstrated its ability to appeal to larger audiences. As the conflict in Syria stirred trouble in Lebanon, a general sense that some Sunni neighbourhoods in Lebanon, especially Tripoli and its hinterland have transformed into jihadi incubators significantly grew. This last section will attempt to highlight the many factors that might account for such an evolution. It will first deal with socio-economic factors then with the decay of leadership and authority, arguing that both contribute to social anomie among the young Sunni generation. While drawing attention to the inability of the Lebanese political system to breed national belonging and loyalty, the last subsection analyzes the context in which the vacuum left by anomie at the micro-level and the lack of national integration at the macro-level has been filled with jihadi narratives on the victimization

[80] "Al Qaeda affiliate claims Iranian embassy attack in Beirut", *Reuters*, 19/11/2013. Going through archives, Nicholas BLANFORD could not find any similar precedents involving Lebanese Sunnis, except for a solitary attack by a Sunni from the Lebanese Communist Party targeting an Israeli position in South Lebanon in the 1980s (interview, Beirut, 21/02/2014).

[81] "Heightened terror threat in Lebanon after suicide attacks near Syria", *Reuters*, 28/06/2016. It is interesting to note a rapprochement between Hezbollah and Christian communities notably in the Beqaa region where the jihadi threat is high. The Party of God has notably provided training and weapons for self-defense (FUNARO, V., "'They accept us as we are;' Christians join forces with Muslim Group Hezbollah to fight ISIS in Lebanon", *The Christian Post*, 11/05/2015).

[82] *Cf.* the analyses of specialists provided by Jeanine JALKH, "Au Liban, le débat sur la capacité de nuisance de l'EI est relancé", *L'Orient Le Jour*, 25/08/2018. It is worth mentioning that the armed forces have thwarted several suicide attacks as reported in JALKH's article and in "Lebanese Soldiers Thwart Suicide Bombing in Beirut Cafe", *Al Jazeera*, 22/01/2017.

[83] Moving from remote places such as Sir el-Dinniyeh to the heart of the second largest city of the country, Tripoli, and to Saida in the South.

of the Sunni community in Lebanon and the wider region and the framing of political grievances into identity issues.

Much field research needs to be carried on in order to better grasp the importance of each class of factors and to better understand how they interact with one another, knowing that there is sometimes a real difficulty to draw a clearcut line between them. However, the data already collected from the field and analysed strongly suggests that it is the intimate combination of all factors that has a powerful potential for violent mobilization. Except perhaps for personal experiences of ultimate suffering, no factor deterministically appears to be *the* trigger.

2.1 The Socio-Economic Factors: No Past and No Future

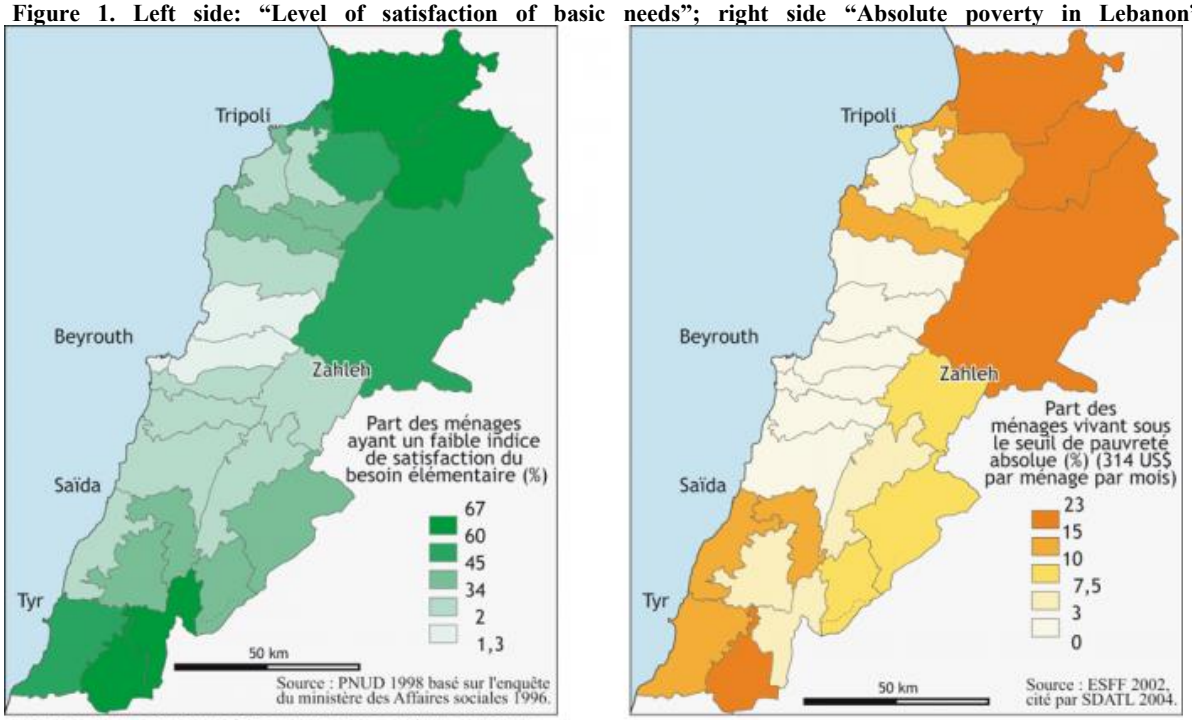
One of the first puzzles the researcher is confronted with is the role of socio-economic factors in the radicalization of young Salafis. All observers tend to agree on the despairing conditions of places such as Tripoli, Wadi Khalid or Ersal and more generally the Akkar region (Northern Lebanon). Research conducted either by organisations such as UNDP or research centers such as the IFPO (Institut français pour le Proche-Orient) have shown that throughout the 1990s and the 2000s Northern Lebanon, Akkar and the north-eastern part of the Beqaa displayed much lower levels of satisfaction of basic needs than most of the other regions in Lebanon[84] and much higher rates of households living under the threshold of absolute poverty[85]. Studying for example the outbreaks of violence in Tripoli in the early years of the Syrian conflict, Chabrier points at the role of "urban asabiyyat" in the armed confrontations of Bab el-Tabbaneh's Sunnis and Jabal Mohsen' Alawis, concluding that poverty is the central "resource" that fuels the mobilization of both groups against one another.[86]

[84] See figure 1, left-side map.

[85] See figure 1, right-side map.

[86] CHABRIER, P.-A., "La 'guerre des pauvres' à Tripoli (Liban). 'Asabiyyat urbaines à l'épreuve de la crise syrienne", in *Confluences Méditerranée*, N°85, 2013, pp., 87-102, p. 99.

Figure 1. Left side: "Level of satisfaction of basic needs"; right side "Absolute poverty in Lebanon".



Source: VERDEIL, E., FAOUR, G., VELUT, S., *Atlas du Liban*, Beyrouth: Presses de l'IFPO, 2007. [87]

However, the link between poverty and radicalization is anything but straightforward. Most observers recognize that, surprisingly and in contradiction with mainstream explanations about political violence, some Lebanese jihadis hail from mid-classes; moreover, many have a certain level of education, are not exceedingly young, and are even married and have families of their own.[88] In addition, they do not seem to fit any special psychological profile allowing an easy association between mental health and radicalization.[89] Apart from originating from poor neighbourhoods and villages, the other expectable factor is that most of the jihadis are unskilled workers.

It is possible to infer from both data and the testimonies of several interviewees that we need to look at the impact of the socio-economic environment on the individual even if the latter is not directly and personally affected by the most extreme aspects of destitution. Differently put, the very experience of growing in communities where little is offered to people, where economic and social problems are festering with no authorities to care, and where no

[87] Titles translated by the authors. The figures have been retrieved from the open edition of the book, chapter 6 : "The society: living standards, equipment and infrastructure" (https://books.openedition.org/ifpo/422, accessed on 02/02/2019).

[88] These contradictions have been highlighted by most interviewees. They converge with the findings of a research undertaken by S. HADDAD on 214 members of Fatah al-Islam showing that "*Economic destitution, poverty, lack of education, young age, and marital disruption (…) do not determine adherence to the group*" (p. 548). About 31% had between 21 and 25 years at the time of arrest or death, 24.2% between 26 and 30 years, and 15.8% between 36 and 40 years. Only 5.3% had less than 21 years. 51.2% have had access to primary education, 17.6% to secondary studies, and 20.6% to higher education. Finally, 61.7% were married. HADDAD, S., "Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Anatomy of a terrorist organization", *Studies in conflict & terrorism*, N°33, 2010, pp. 548-569.

[89] The psychologists who were interviewed during a fieldwork in February 2014 concurred on that; CAILLET has also strongly warned against the tendency of some analysts or practitioners to read through narrow psychiatric lenses the susceptibility of young Muslims to jihadism (interview, Beirut, 20/02/2014).

perspectives for a better future can be discerned except through migration can make some people more susceptible to radicalization even though they may have not experienced themselves poverty and exclusion. The general destitution of their neighbourhoods and the state of social decay around them may deeply affect the individual in many ways.

Bruno Dewailly, a specialist in the human geography of Tripoli, describes a "moribund economy" – a characterisation he deems though as a euphemism![90] He tells the story of a city whose demography has multiplied by manifolds due to the rural-urban migration and to an incomplete demographic transition. As soon as the late 1960s and 1970s, de-industrialization has hit a whole class of workers. Economic conditions grew direr with the civil war that started in 1975. Yet, post-war reconstruction focused on the capital, and almost no effort for the economic revival of the northern city was made. Local property and capital owning classes did not invest in any productive enterprises, leaving the youth with no real perspectives for decent employment and the city with little cash circulating.[91] Hardly managed by the government, public schooling is of poor quality and the rate of school dropout has soared.[92] NGOs working on children's rights in Lebanon have traditionally acknowledged that the levels of truancy and dropouts are the highest in North Lebanon, where poverty is widespread.[93] When they reach adulthood, many former absentees or dropouts find themselves in situations of unemployability, which is more in an environment where employment opportunities are very limited.

A congruent factor is the level of violence in everyday life, notably at school and within families.[94] As reported in a research linked to school based surveillance activities, the children of Northern Lebanon bear the highest levels of school violence: 43% for the 8-9 year old; 29%

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[90] DEWAILLY, Bruno, interview, Beirut, 20/02/2014. It is worth mentioning also the PhD dissertation of this geographer as it offers much more extensive developments on the economic fate of Tripoli; DEWAILLY, B. *Pouvoir et production urbaine à Tripoli Al-Fayha'a (Liban): Quand l'illusion de la rente foncière et immobilière se mue en imperium*, PhD dissertation, under the supervision of Pierre Signoles, University of Tours, 02/03/2015.

[91] A 2009 research on the three municipalities making up the wider Tripoli (Tripoli, Beddawi and al-Mina) has pinpointed the aggregation of worrying indicators at the level of revenues, investments, education, health and social protection, infrastructure and environment (LE THOMAS, C., DEWAILLY, B., *Pauvreté et conditions socio-économiques à Al-Fayhâ'a : Diagnostic et éléments de stratégie*, Tripoli: Agence Française de Développement (Dec 2009) (http://www.academia.edu/1211244/Pauvret%C3%A9_et_conditions_socio_%C3%A9conomiques_%C3%A0_Al_Fayh%C3%A2_a_Diagnostic_et_%C3%A9l%C3%A9ments_de_strat%C3%A9gie retrieved on 11/03/2016).

[92] 50% of the students in Tripoli dropout according to Carine LAHOUD from the BRIC (Beirut Research and innovation Center), interview, Beirut, 19/02/2014.

[93] Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice (IIMA), Volontariat International Femme Education Développement (VIDES International), *Statement: La jouissance du droit à l'éducation et au travail des enfants au Liban*, Neuvième Examen périodique universel, Mécanisme de surveillance de l'influence des droits de l'homme du Conseil des droits de l'homme des Nations Unies, April 2010, p. 5 (https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session9/LB/IIMA_IstitutoInternazionaleMariaAusiliatrice_JS.pdf, accessed on 02/02/2019).

[94] In a 2005 survey, UNFPA considers that young people are in Lebanon at high risk, pointing notably at significant levels of violence and depression; for instance "*40 percent of students were physically attacked by a parent, and 25 percent by a teacher. Half have been in a physical fight one or more times in the last year. Mental health was the most distressing where almost 40 percent of students felt so sad or hopeless in the last 12 months that they stopped doing their usual activities. An estimated 16 percent seriously considered suicide (Global School-Based Health Survey, Lebanon, 2005)*" (UNFPA, http://www.unfpa.org.lb/UNFPA-LEBANON/Country-Profile.aspx, retrieved on 15/03/2014). Things are likely to have worsened with higher levels of political violence since the assassination of Hariri in 2005 and with the impact of the economic crisis at the turn of the 2010s.

for the 16-18 year old.[95] A few months after taking office in Lebanon in 2009, UNICEF's representative, Ray Virgilio Torres confided in L'Orient-Le Jour being shocked by the extent of corporal punishment and wanton violence against children across the country, even in affluent circles.[96] The picture is even darker in the poor regions of North Lebanon and the Beqaa,[97] and it seems to support widely observed phenomena among young people who have been subjected to violence, such as the use of drugs and high-risk behaviour.[98]

Figure 2. Violence [in public schools]. Percentages. Data collected by age groups and regions.

% données collectées par groupe d'âge et région Violence				
Région	Groupe d'âge en années			
	8 à 9	10 à 12	13 à 15	16 à 18
Beyrouth	7	6	9	9 %
Mont Liban	11	14	28	16 %
Liban Nord	43	39	17	29 %
Liban Sud	12	12	14	19 %
Nabatiyeh	11	12	17	14 %
Béquaa	16	17	15	13 %

Source: LAHHAM, N., AOUN, H., *Surveillance de la violence dans les écoles publiques du Liban*. Social Health Program at the Lebanon Ministry of Education and Higher Education & Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Balamand, n.d. p. 22.

All these facts of life leave significant numbers of young people in a state of idleness (*désœuvrement*) with little to do and no long term perspectives. As Khaled Sobh, a member of the city's municipal council testifies, "The problem is that there are a few youngsters who are unemployed, illiterate, and could be used by anybody [to further their political goals]".[99] The end result is widespread economic disenfranchisement, simmering social frustration, and a problematic socialization to violence. In such an environment, values and norms tend to blur, and the youth obviously experiences a significant loss of bearings, nurturing hatred toward the society much like the youth of migrant background does in many European suburbs.[100] The rural hinterland of Tripoli that has also "produced" significant numbers of jihadis suffers from

[95] See details in figure 2.

[96] Interview by AL-HAGE, A.M., "Pauvreté, châtiments corporels, décrochage scolaire: la dure réalité de l'enfance au Liban", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 20/11/2009.

[97] Several interviews with social workers in Tripoli or researchers interested in educational issues (Lebanon, March 2014). These testimonies are congruent with the findings of a survey that shows that 44% of the Lebanese population directly know someone subjected to domestic violence, with the average increasing to 66% in the Beqaa and 52% in the North (KAFA & UNFPA, General awareness on family violence in Lebanon : Perceptions and behaviors of the Lebanese public", IPSOS, 2016, p. 16 (https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/43829, accessed on 02/02/2019).

[98] These connections have been confirmed in Lebanon, notably for the youth in Palestinian camps (see IIMA and VIDES, *op. cit.*, p. 5) and in the north (several interviews).

[99] Quoted in KENNER, D., "Amid raging violence in Syria, Lebanese Sunnis turn back on Islamic State", in *Foreign Affairs*, 13/01/2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/13/amid_raging_violence_in_syria_lebanese_sunnis_turn_backs_on_islamic_state/, retrieved on 15/02/2016.

[100] DEWAILLY, Bruno, interview, Beirut, 20/02/2014.

the same problems to a large extent. Yet poverty and social destitution can be deeper in an environment where public services hardly exist, where increased draught threatens the livelihood of agriculturers, and where criminal activities such as car theft, smuggling, and drugs are long-established industries with corresponding levels of violence in everyday life.[101]

Though providing in themselves a perfect breeding ground for extremism, these socio-economic conditions merge with a series of political factors that can further explain the susceptibility of some Lebanese Sunnis to the message of jihadi Salafism.

2.2 The Erosion of Traditional Authority: No One Left to Guide but Salafis?

Lebanon as a modern state was established in the aftermath of the First World War, in the context of the French mandate that was prepared by the Sykes-Picot secret agreement between Paris and London. Its borders were drawn according to France's interests and the preferences of its Maronite clients, but in opposition to the will of the Sunni elite of Tripoli and its hinterland most of which felt more commonalities with neighbouring areas in Syria than with the rest of the new Greater Lebanon.[102] After the independence was won from the French during the Second World War, most Sunni leaders joined in the national consensus but many remained, along with the Sunni population, half-hearted about it. Sunni susceptibility to pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s was a powerful indication about the lack of appropriation of a "nation-state" that was dominated by a minority of Christians lacking the will to build equitable institutions and an inclusive political system. The civil war is another indication of the inability of the Lebanese state and its elites to produce a national political project and attract citizens' loyalty.

Negotiated in a context of extreme local and regional tensions and implemented mostly through the military might of the Syrian army, the Taif agreement that put an end to the civil war brought about a new power-sharing formula. This formula rebalanced the distribution of power, diminishing the role of the Maronite president and significantly strengthening the Sunni Prime minister and the Shia president of Parliament.[103] For more than a decade, both the Sunni and the Shia communities seemed to belong with the winners' camp under the protection of the Syrian patron. The period could have been used to reach out to all regions[104] and include them in a national framework of economic and social development in order to harmoniously rehabilitate the country and produce a new social contract with the citizens and therefore strengthen the legitimacy of the state and the political system. However, and as already stated, most of the post-war reconstruction efforts focused on Beirut, whereas Tripoli and its hinterland were left to further decay.[105] Furthermore, reconstruction was largely left to narrow

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[101] Several interviews (Tripoli and Beirut, March 2014), with social workers and security personnel.

[102] TRABOULSI, F., *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London: Pluto Press, 2007, pp. 74-85.

[103] On the end of the civil war and Taif, see WINSLOW, C., *Lebanon. War and politics in a fragmented society*, London & New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 261-272; ZAHAR, M.-J., "Peace by Unconventional Means: Evaluating Lebanon's Ta'if Accord" in STEDMAN, S. J., ROTHCHILD, D., COUSENS, E. M. (eds.), *Ending Civil Wars. The Implementation of peace agreements*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002, pp. 567-597.

[104] With the exception of Southern Lebanon that remained under Israeli occupation until May 2000.

[105] This was largely due to the personal preferences of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. For an account on these preferences, see BLANFORD, N., *Killing Mr Lebanon. The assassination of Rafik Hariri and its impact on the Middle* East, London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006, pp. 41ff.

private interests with little care for the enhancement of life conditions of the population.[106] At the end of the day, the Lebanese central authorities failed to reach out to the population of the North and to reclaim its political loyalty, hence creating a significant vacuum.

This vacuum was further expanded by the erosion of traditional forms of authority that used to be yielded by both a few leading families such as the Karameh (in Arabic the *zu'ama*) and a class of Muslim religious scholars, the "*ulama*", who used to get their ability to interpret the religious text from the official "Dar al-Fatwa" after they attended prestigious religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in Cairo. Beside their inherently disruptive role, the war years also witnessed the assassination of many important public figures such as Rashid Karami and Mufti Sheikh Hasan Khalid who both were particularly influential within the northern Sunni community. After the war, no comparably powerful figures asserted themselves in Tripoli and more widely in the North. On the political side, what was left of the local *zu'ama* was much more motivated by narrow interests rather than by the renewal of the social contract in Tripoli and its hinterland. Moreover, the emergence of a strong new local leadership was actively fought off by the Sunni allies of the dominant post-war Sunni figure, Rafik Hariri who hailed from Saida, so no serious competitor from the North could threaten his own clique in the governmental circles.[107] As a result, local *zu'ama* competed for the loyalty of the local youth not by presenting them with collective projects to build the future but rather through their recruitment as henchmen who would gain some easy money with often nothing more productive to do than securing their bosses' public presence through the idle physical occupation of the sidewalks.

If, at the political level, traditional leadership did not give way to any alternative figures able to direct and inspire the youth, the story is quite different at the religious level. As suggested, the traditional leadership previously yielded by a class of educated *ulama* accredited by Dar al-Fatwa did wane during and after the civil war. However, it was replaced by low-level and often self-educated sheikhs and preachers with a variety of agendas. A growing number of these sheikhs – some of them coming from abroad and/or supported by foreign money – have been spreading the Salafi word. Often supported by charities filling the socio-economic gaps left by the central state, this word has appealed to many young Sunnis.[108] As argued by Tine Gade, even in the context of the Syrian crisis many Lebanese Salafi sheikhs have demonstrated much pragmatism as to avoid confrontation with the army and preserve their political and material interests.[109] However, those who have chosen to incite their audiences and prompt them to take up a fight against the enemies of true [Sunni] Islam have always found some susceptible ears.

Beside politics and religion, a third crisis of authority is likely to have also contributed in increasing the Salafi appeal for some youngters. Closely intertwined with the first two, this third crisis derives from the living conditions of the youth and the encounter of many of them

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[106] A law was actually passed as soon as 1991, giving "municipalities the authority to create real estate development companies to handle war-damaged areas. In a classis neoliberal strategy, the law also entrusted these companies with the capacity to act on behalf of the public good in all matters of marketing, development, and implementation of the reconstruction schemes. […] In some respects this amounted to a total privatization of the reconstruction scheme". See ALSAYYAD, N., "Foreword", in Howayda al-Harithy (ed.), *Lessons in post-war reconstruction. Case studies from Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war,* Abigdon: Routledge 2010: viii.

[107] DEWAILLY, B., interview, Beirut, 20/02/2014. Hariri's allies in Tripoli comprise notably the Mikati and the Safadi families.

[108] Several interviews have confirmed this analysis that is also found in PALL's developments (*op. cit.,* pp. 29-36).

[109] GADE, T., *op. cit.,* p. 12-13.

with violence, either physical, verbal or symbolic, especially domestic violence. It equates with the estrangement of the youth from their own families where neither mother nor father figures could yield moral authority. While women are often marginalized and/or entangled in abusive relations, there is a widespread perception that the fathers' generation has failed in every respect and does elicit neither admiration nor emulation.[110] This factor might account, at least to some extent, for the "generational break"[111] that has been observed between the Lebanese youths who have been attracted by Daesh and undergone radicalization, and their parents.

We argue that the combination of social-economic factors that trap many youths in a no-future situation and a fragile psycho-social predicament with the three-level crisis of authority are liable to produce social anomie and the latter paves the way to radicalization. Grounded in the pioneering sociology of Durkheim on suicide and in contemporary research on crime and deviance, social anomie rests on "the premise that humans are normative beings. People act and think on the basis of commonly shared definitions and traditions. […] Shared cultural values define and sanction people's goals and the means they use in reaching the goals. Anomie results when the power of social values to regulate the ends and the means of human conduct is weakened".[112] Squeezed between micro-level processes of disenfranchisement and macro-level crises of authority, part of the Sunni youth in the deprived regions in Lebanon seem to be in situations of anomie where social values are difficult to discern or unable to compel acquiescence. Hence a vacuum which seems to have been filled by jihadi discourses on a victimized Sunni identity the Sunni political elite did not properly defend.

2.3 Identity Issues: Framing an Existential Threat

During the first post-war decade and a half, the Sunni community seemed to be a central player in the new political game set by the Taif agreement and enforced by the benevolent big sister, Syria as initially perceived or framed. Things started to shift in the first half of the 2000s. Locally, the Israelis decided to withdraw unilaterally from the South in 2000 and did so hastily in May rather than in July under the guerrilla pressure of Hezbollah. Retrospectively, this episode has produced contradicting dynamics. On the one hand, it has strengthened the Resistance hand in national politics, but on the other it has opened some space for the questioning of the continued presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon and their involvement in Lebanese politics. Combined with the polarization at the regional and global levels,[113] these dynamics were to create locally a deep rift within a few years. A few months after Hariri

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[110] This last dimension has been raised a few times during discussions and interviews, notably by psychologists who have been in contact with jailed jihadis and by Misbah AL ALI, a field journalist for the Daily Star who has been born and bred in Tripoli and has an intimate knowledge of the field (interviews, Beirut, February 2014). It deserves to be explored more in depth and so does the role of mothers and its limits.

[111] GADE, T., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[112] BERNBURG, J. G., Anomie, Social Change and Crime. A Theoretical examination of institutional-Anomie Theory", *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, 2002, pp. 729-742, p. 729.

[113] Particularly important in this regard are the following developments: the failure of the Middle East peace process in its Palestinian and Syrian-Lebanese aspects; 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror and the war conducted by the USA first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq; the increased marginalization of Iran following the disclosure of its nuclear program thought by the West, Israel and the Gulf monarchies to hide a military dimension. These developments created a greater rift between states and non-state actors allied with the West (and implicitly with Israel) and those hostile to the West and Israel. Furthermore, the expeditionary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have opened significant space for jihadis to invest new battlefields and expand their audience; see AOUN, E., "Failing states, international blindness and the rise of radical Islam. Unintended interdependence and unexpected powerlessness in the Middle East", in AOUN, E., VERCAUTEREN, P. (eds.), *The State between Interdependence and Power in the Contemporary World. A reassessment*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 239-268.

rebelled against the Syrian imposition of the prolongation of the mandate of the then Lebanese president, he was assassinated in a car-bombing that politically shook the country. Most of the Sunni and the Christian forces invested the streets calling for the withdrawal of Syria's armed forces from the country (M14 forces), while mostly Shia forces, led by Hezbollah, pledged continued loyalty to the Syrian regime (M8 forces). Eventually the Syrian regime withdrew its military from Lebanon in May 2005 but this did not set the record straight in any way as internal political struggles resonated with the regional and international competitions and kept the heat intense.

Indeed, the years following the Syrian armed retreat from Lebanon have witnessed a string of political assassinations targeting essentially Sunni and Christian figures, recurrent political rows and governmental crises most of which are related to the ability of each alliance to circumvent the other notably on delicate matters such as the weapons of Hezbollah or the International Special Tribunal set for the investigation and prosecution of Hariri's assassination.[114] In May 2008, the political stalemate led to a military confrontation: for the very first time since the end of the civil war, Hezbollah used its weapons against Lebanese foes: "Sunni fighters loyal to the government largely melted away after three days of the worst sectarian clashes Lebanon has seen since its 15-year civil war. Those *humiliating* blows made clearer than ever the power and determination of Hizbullah, a Shia group backed by Iran and Syria, and its allies".[115] This display of martial might has indeed generated a significant frustration and humiliation among the Sunnis who were poorly equipped and trained. These feelings have been used by both the Sunni political leaders of M14 and local (mostly Salafi) sheikhs. Resonating with regional developments that were framed in terms of an ancestral enmity between Sunni and Shia, the new discourse (covert at the level of the political elites and overt at the level of local Salafi sheikhs) tended to present the Sunni community in Lebanon as a minority under existential threat.[116]

Caught in an intense "security dilemma"[117], the Sunnis in Lebanon found in their midst and in the wider region "identity entrepreneurs" who have played a key role in the activation of violent mobilization on the grounds of identity. Identity entrepreneurs (whether ethnic, religious or else) are people with social capital "who articulate beliefs in kinship bonds and common destiny and who mobilize and organize groups to press group claims"[118]. They engage in a social process of "framing and narrative encoding" in order to create and reify a unified group held together by a powerful group feeling in ways that do not serve only to "interpret the

[114] On this period, see ZAHAR, M.-J., "Liberal Interventions, Illiberal Outcomes: The United Nations, Western Powers and Lebanon", in NEWMAN, E., PARIS, R. and RICHMOND, O. P. (eds.) *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, New York: UNU Press, 2009, pp. 292-315.

[115] Our emphasis; WORTH, R., BAKRI, N., "Hezbollah seized swath of Beirut from U.S.-backed Lebanon government", *The New York Times*, 20/05/2008.

[116] This situation can be usefully analyzed through the conceptual framework of the security dilemma developed, among others, by. Social identity frameworks can also add interesting psychological insights (cf. REICHER, S., HOPKINS, N., LEVINE, M., RATH, Rakshi, "Entrepreneurs of hate and entrepreneurs of solidarity: Social identity as a basis for mass communication", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, no 860, 2005, pp. 621-637.

[117] ROSE, W., "The Security dilemma and ethnic conflict: Some new hypotheses", *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, no 4, 2000, pp. 1-51.

[118] Sisk, T., *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*, US Institute of peace, 1996, p. 17.

violence" but most importantly to "*constitute* it as *ethnic*", or in our case religious.[119] This can be conceived of as the first phase of a securitization process that will serve to mobilize the "group" in defense of its very existence against another equally reified enemy group. Developed by the rather critical Copenhagen School approach to security in the 1990s, the securitization process provides a series of analytical tools that allow for a better understanding of how a perceived threat can be defined by a securitizing actor as an existential threat to a most valued "security object", in our case the Sunni community.[120] Beyond, it draws the analytical focus on the *speech-act* that leads to actual policies, strategies and behaviors that break with usual and normal practices as a consequence of a successful discursive securitization entreprise.[121] Such a process can be observed in the second half of the 2000s in Lebanon. The Sunni community was increasingly framed as the "oppressed" or "vanquished" community within Lebanon (*al-ta'ifa al-mazlouma* or *al-mahzuma*) by most Sunni politicians and, in more radical terms, Salafi sheikhs. Though far from being uniform in its sources and formulations, the discourse laid by influential Sunni figures depicted indeed a community deprived of political power, physically eliminated by the assassination of several Sunni leaders, militarily threatened by the powerful Hezbollah and discriminated against by the government and the LAF that repeatedly fought and killed (Sunni) Salafis in Sir el-Dinneyeh and Nahr el-Bared while the security and judicial apparatus tortured, mistreated, and denied justice to many Salafis in the Roumieh jail.

This discourse was further exacerbated by the Syrian conflict: what started as peaceful demonstrations by citizens against an oppressive and corrupt regime mutated into an open war framed notably by Lebanese Sunnis as opposing an Alawite regime and its Shia backers (Hezbollah and Iran) against the Sunni majority in the country. This discourse was particularly evocative and powerful as it could build:

- on the transnational dynamic of jihadism that makes any war involving (Sunni) Muslims a battlefield for jihad,
- on the regional polarization between an alleged Shia crescent running from Iran to Lebanon and intent to dominate the region and Sunni countries and populations struggling for political survival,
- and on the close identification between Lebanese Sunnis (especially from the north) and their fellow brothers in faith in neighbouring regions in Syria.[122]

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[119] BRUBAKER, R., "Ethnicity without groups", *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, N°2, 2002, pp. 163-189, p. 173 for the quotation. Emphasis in the original text.

[120] On the securitization process, see BUZAN, B., "Rethinking Security after the Cold War", *Nordic Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 32, N°1, 1997, pp. 5-28.

[121] "[I]n order to count as security issues they [threats and vulnerabilities] have to meet strictly defined criteria that distinguish them from the normal run of the merely political. They have to be staged as existential threats to a referent object by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement for emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind", BUZAN, B., *op. cit.*, p.13.

[122] It should be emphasized that sentiments of kinship are enhanced by a series of factors. Because of the artificial character of Lebanese borders especially in the North, many families live on both sides of the border and have kept strong ties. Second, because of the inability of the Lebanese state to conceive of and implement inclusive policies, Tripoli and its areas' economies have been more turned towards Syria than towards Beirut. In addition, the poor, or more accurately often inexistent public services have incited many Lebanese in border regions in the Akkar to seek for education and health services beyond the border. Finally, illicit activities have created many interests that totally ignore the border which, in any case, remained hardly policed and controlled. Several interviews, February 2014.

In such conditions, sectarian identity was viewed as more significant than any international border and fighting for the rights of the Sunni brothers in Syria was framed not only as the moral thing to do, but also as the duty of Lebanese Sunnis. This was particularly clear in the discourses of many Salafi preachers. For example, on the 27th of January 2012, Salim al-Rafa'i loudly told fellow Sunnis in Syria that their brothers in Tripoli are ready to cross the border to help them. Other sheikhs published fatwas and calls exhorting Sunnis to support Syrian rebels by sending money and weapons, and by killing Syrian soldiers on the border and all those supporting the regime, whether Alawi people or Hezbollah operatives. The discourses of al-Assir in Saïda had an even more inciting tone. Explicitly rejecting borders and nations, al-Assir called on to the *Umma* – the whole community of Sunnis – to denounce the attacks perpetrated against it notably in Syria, and to prompt his followers into action, plainly stating that it is compulsory to conduct a jihad to break Shia domination, and warning that the Lebanese Sunnis would not tolerate anymore to remain silent and idle.[123]

The reference to the *Umma* allowed for many incursions into the past, to the early days of Islam and the rift between the Sunnis and the Shia. Sometimes echoing parallel strategies by Hezbollah, Salafi preachers revived powerful memories such as the battle of the Camel, defended the righteousness and honour of figures such as Aïcha, wife of the Prophet and mother of the *Umma*. In a nutshell, the mid-7th century political and religious wars within Islam were reawakened and used to mobilize people along sectarian lines in today's conflicts. The power of such a discursive strategy has to be assessed in regard to what it prompts: a bunch of 14 Sunni teenagers who enthusiastically go to fight in Syria only to be shot down when crossing the border; about a dozen young people who "sacrificed" themselves in suicide attacks; an undetermined number of jihadis fighting and dying in Syria; dozens of followers of al-Assir engaging in a fierce battle with the Lebanese army… And the power of the discourse of mobilization has also to be weighed against the relatively new rediscovery of the Sunni-Shia "ancestral" enmity. Indeed, it is not until late 2004 that the notion of a threatening "Shia crescent" is mentioned for the first time, in the context of Iraq's convulsions;[124] moreover, not so long ago, the Iranian (Shia) revolution was the model inspiring every Islamist.[125] However, the overlapping crises that are currently shaking the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, to name but a few) while feeding on the outright competition between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran have further reinforced antagonistic identities. The rapid rise of the Islamic State by mid-2014 as a core protagonist of the violent redrawing of the Middle East borders and the role that Hezbollah has also played in quelling it along with other "Sunni" rebel groups as to offer the regime of Bashar al-Assad a chance for survival have only reinforced the intense polarization. While it did not give way to widespread communitarian strife in Lebanon thanks notably to the leeway all mainstream politicians have given to the security apparatus, this polarization remains one of the major obstacles to a political stabilization in Lebanon as demonstrated by the difficulty in electing a president and forming a goverment.[126]

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[123] All the discourses that are mentioned in this paragraph rely on translated quotations by CAILLET, *op. cit.*

[124] This assertion is based on a thorough research on the Factiva database in all sources in English and French from 1980 to 2012. See AOUN, E. "L'Iran et le Levant. Dans les sables mouvants de la crise syrienne", in NAHAVANDI, F. (ed.), L'Iran dans le monde, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2013, p. 164.

[125] This has also been stressed by several interviewees during fieldwork in Lebanon (Tripoli and Beirut, February 2014).

[126] The presidential seat has remained vacant for 29 months (May 2014 – October 2016) and it took 9 months for the Lebanese protagonists to form a government after the May 2018 legislative elections (see "Lebanon forms new government after 9 months of deadlock", *The New York Times*, 31/01/2019).

3. Section's Conclusion

This section has tried to analyze the role of socio-economic factors, of authority crises and political contexts of polarization in order to make sense of the violent mobilization of many Sunni youths in the framework of the Syrian conflict. Some people suggest that these people are brain-washed, that some of them are under the sway of drug addictions or that they found in war and sacrifice a source of money for their families.[127] What our fieldwork strongly suggests is the failure of the Lebanese state and society to build a meaningful political project for its youth, and the failure of both regional and international actors to sooth rather than instrumentalize differences in the region, to contain societies rather than allow them to develop. As put by Misbah al-Ali, there is an unfathomable political and ideological "void" in the region that is increasingly being filled with extremism. The universe of meanings shrinks as to exclude anything but primary religious identities, and the youth discovers that having no future, it has nothing to lose. Differently put, the vacuum that characterizes anomie has been filled by powerful processes of group reification on the one hand and securitization on the other hand, leading to violent mobilization.

For sure, with the reversal of the situation in Syria where the Islamic State has been if not eliminated at least contained while the Syrian regime and its allies, notably Hezbollah, have strengthened their position, the level of mobilization of Lebanese Sunnis seems to have decreased. However, such a lull is bound to be more circumstantial than structural as none of the permissive factors has evolved, quite the contrary. The evolution of the Syrian conflict can be regarded as a new defeat of the Sunnis in the face of a superior yet heterogeneous coalition of adverse forces bringing together Western powers, Gulf states, Iran and Hezbollah.

In Lebanon, the basic equation has not changed. Though figures are quite elusive,[128] it is widely acknowledged that the Syrian crisis, the influx of refugees and the repeated political deadlocks have considerably worsened the overall socio-economic situation. And the impact has especially weighted on many of the already deprived communities. The UNDP assesses that the Syrian crisis' impact "was most significant in areas already deprived prior to the crisis (251 areas are home to 67% of deprived Lebanese and 87% Syrian refugees). Local resources, which could barely provide for the host population pre-crisis, are now under even greater pressure."[129] There is much reason to fear further outbreaks of violence and new radical callings whenever a new regional episode would offer jihadis with a new opportunity to fight for the existence of their true *Umma*.

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[127] These claims were mentioned by several interviewees but none was able to ascertain the reality of any of these practices.

[128] In an late 2018 report, the World Bank explains indeed that "The latest available official poverty rate shows that nearly a third of the population is poor. There have been substantial structural changes, such as the large refugee influx, since 2011/12, when data on households' living standards were last collected. These structural changes have likely impacted households' incomes. However, because the conditions today are very different from those in 2011/12 when household data were last collected, it is not possible to estimate by how much households may have been impacted or to construct poverty projections." The Word Bank, Lebanon's Economic Outlook, October 2018 (http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/756401538076843074/mpo-am18-lebanon-lbn-2.pdf, accessed on 02/02/2019).

[129] UNDP, *Lebanon. Response to the Syrian crisis. Overview*, (http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/response-to-the-syrian-crisis.html, accessed on 02/02/2019).

4. Conclusion

Identities are very flammable and can easily consume borders, social bonds, national aspirations, and countries. In this framework, Lebanese from both sides of the Sunni-Shia "divide"[130] have been fighting the Syrian war in both countries in the name of *their* respective jihad. This research has thus tried to show the strategies and the ideological contortions that are currently at play in Lebanon. It has also tried to identify the various factors that drive so many people in a deadly conflict. In doing so, it has shown the differences between the involvement of Hezbollah operatives who are bound to a powerful top-down organization with an agenda underpinned by geo-strategic calculations and a layer of identity politics, and the involvement of Sunnis on an individual basis within networks of jihadis built almost exclusively on the activation of religious identities and enmities.

It is not easy to deal with any of these mobilizations, yet it is essential to bear in mind the constructed nature of exclusive identities and their instrumentalization by leaders with an agenda, whether ideological, religious, or strategic.

5. Recommandations

- Support a sustainable settlement of conflicts that have been framed in religious, ethnic, cultural terms (Yemen, Israeli-Palestinian, Kurdish, etc) in order to confront primordialist narratives about identity and enmity ;
- Monitor closely the socio-economic situation in Lebanon and support and assess development projects addressing socio-economic problems in the remote regions of the North and North-East regions ;
- Support projects and programs aimed at enhancing the living conditions and education in Palestinian camps and deprived neighbourhoods in Lebanon which have been havens and incubators of radical individuals and groups ;
- Monitor closely the wider security sector in Lebanon — including the LAF, the ISF, the GDGS — but also the judicial and penitentiary system and support all programs and projects aimed at improving their record in terms of rule of law and respect for human rights, including when dealing with would-be jihadis ;
- Develop working relations between Belgian and Lebanese actors involved in the respective security and judicial systems in order to share best practices and promote a socialization to human rights imperatives ;
- Support research aimed at improving knowledge about radicalization in the Middle East notably through ethnographic fieldwork.

[130] For an overview, see map "2018 : conflits sunnite-chiite et intra-sunnites" at the bottom of this report. Source : Gilles KEPEL & Fabrice BALANCHE.

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7. Maps

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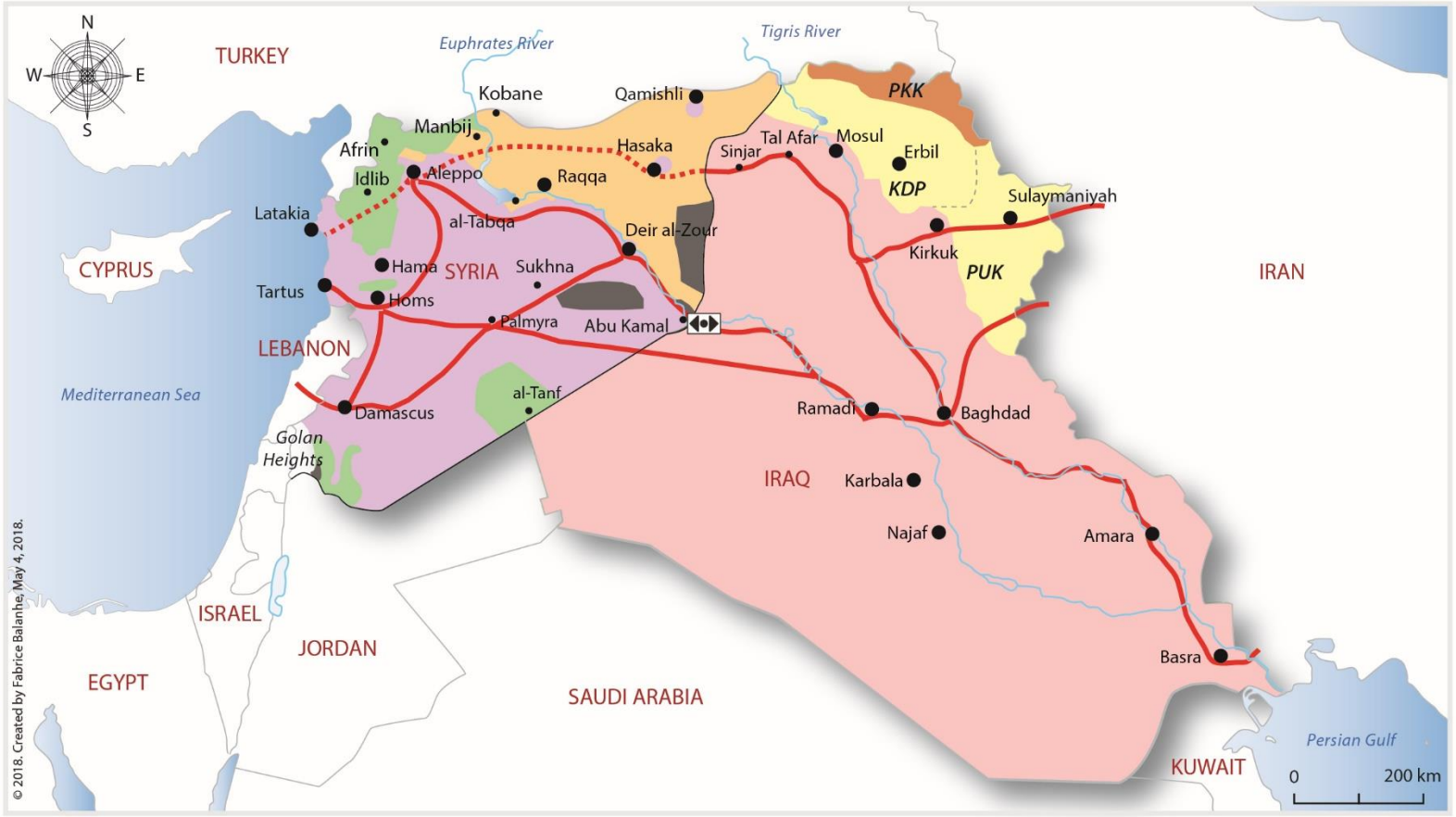
Base 803271AI (G00046) 5-07

IRANIAN ROUTES TO THE MEDITERRANEAN



IRANIAN ROUTES

- Existent
- Potential

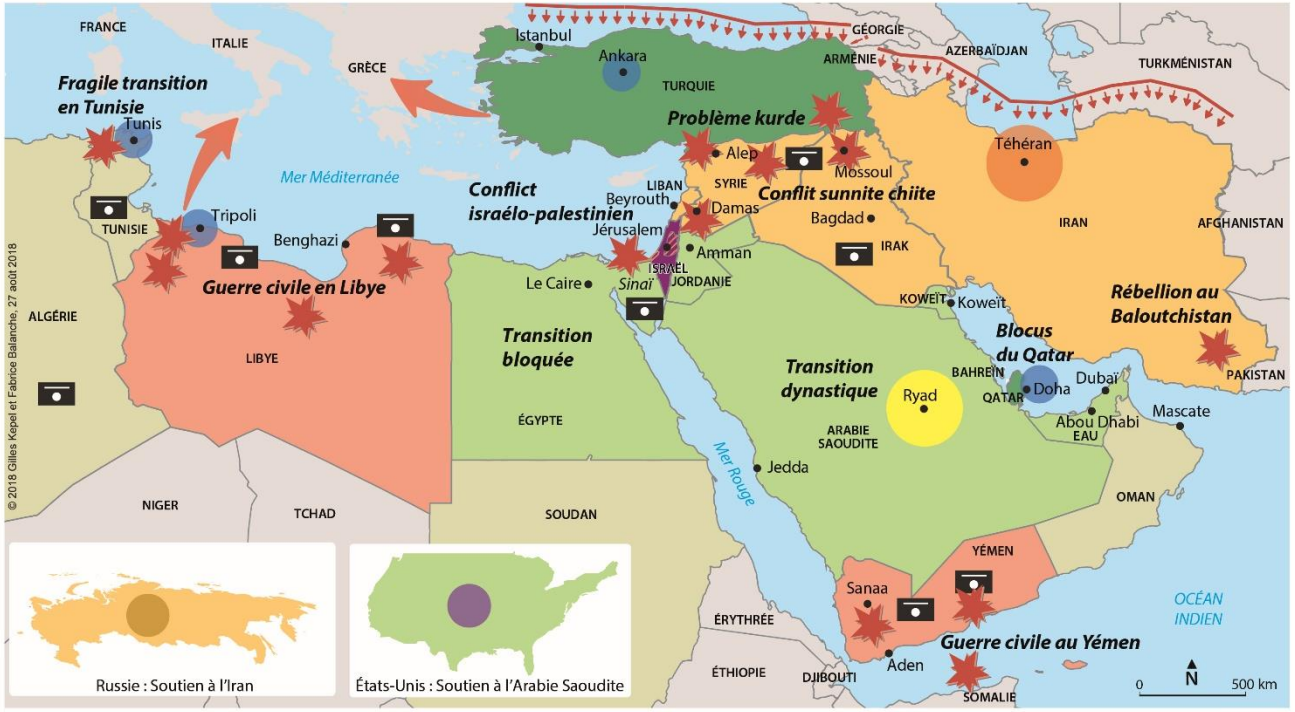
AREAS OF CONTROL IN SYRIA

- Syrian army and militias
- Rebels
- SDF (Kurdish-led)
- Islamic State

AREAS OF CONTROL IN IRAQ

- Iraqi army and militias
- Islamic State
- PKK-KDP
- KRG (KDP and PUK)
- PKK

- Major city
- Locality



2018 : conflits sunnite - chiite et intra-sunnites

- Arabie sunnite et alliés
- Concurrents sunnites
- Iran chiite et alliés
- Pays fragmenté
- Etat sunnite neutre
- Israël
- Territoires palestiniens

- Phare du sunnisme
- Phare du chiisme
- Frères Musulmans
- Foyer jihadiste
- Immigration illégale

- Gendarme du Golfe
- Gendarme du Proche-Orient
- Conflit
- Influence russe

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