



North Lebanon on the verge of war

Henriette Johansen

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Cover Image: *Salafist Sunni Muslim gunmen take cover during a shoot-out in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood of Tripoli, Lebanon. Photograph: Adel Karroum/EPA*

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MEMO Publishers
419-421 Crown House
North Circular Road
London, NW10 7PN

t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231
f: +44 (0)20 8838 0705
e: info@memopublishers.com
w: www.memopublishers.com

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Sectarian strife, catalysed by chronic national marginalisation, severe economic and infrastructural decline and state negligence are all combining to push the once-prosperous commercial hub of Tripoli in north Lebanon to the brink of war. This lethal concoction, arguably reflective of the general state of affairs in Lebanon, was the focus of a recent conference held by HRW (Human Rights Watch) and the Carnegie think-tank in Beirut.

With round after round of brutal violence, the Sunni neighbourhoods of Bab Al-Tabbaneh and their Alawite neighbours in Jabal Mohsen are locked in deep-rooted hatred. Ignited by socioeconomic hardship and endless attacks on residential and commercial districts, the conflict threatens the fragile peace in an area rocked by regional unrest.

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) began implementing a security plan at the beginning of last month to restore law and order in the north and other regions affected by the crisis in Syria. The Daily Star reported last week that the army had announced that eight local militia leaders had handed themselves over to the military. The judiciary has issued hundreds of arrest warrants against those suspected of involvement in clashes in Tripoli but “some” of the suspects remain at large. Military Prosecutor Judge Saqr pressed charges against 10 people from Bab Al-Tabbaneh for taking part in the recent fighting.

On May 13th 2014, the National News Agency reported that the ISF Intelligence Bureau had raided a warehouse in the north Lebanese city and confiscated a large number of weapons. The haul included rocket-propelled grenades, Energa-type rockets, bombs and light and medium weapons. The government has increased the number of security personnel on the ground to

tackle the issue.

The new security plan is a response to the heated rivalry between Bab Al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen. HRW and several researchers, such as Carnegie's visiting fellow Raphael Lefevre, looked at the influence that the current Syrian unrest is having on furthering instability amongst the pro-Assad Alawites and the wide-ranging and more loosely structured Sunni opposition. The enmity, originating in Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) has long been exacerbated by national economic and social marginalisation faced by both communities. As state disaffection grew, and gaping inequality developed which affected selected districts like Bab al-Tabanneh, and left 87 per cent in poverty,[1] systematic eruptions of violence manifested themselves from May 2008; these intensified further with the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011.

In May last year, the fight and siege of Al-Qusayr demarcated clearly this direct response to the Syrian unrest in the fighting in Tripoli. HRW reported how, as fierce fighting broke out in the Syrian city, Lebanon's pro-Assad Hezbollah repelled the Sunni fighters going from Lebanon to support the opposition forces across the border. The Shia militia then saw a backlash against Jabal Mohsen, where Sunni commanders explained, "As long as Al-Qusayr is surrounded, Jabal Mohsen will be surrounded."

Whereas the Alawite community account for 11 per cent of Tripoli's sectarian makeup, Sunnis are a clear majority of 80 per cent. The profusion of armed Sunni groups operate under independent commanders with varying ideologies and loyalties, in contrast to the more centralised Alawites. This often leads to strong clampdowns on the significantly smaller but much more structured ADP (Arab Democratic Party)-controlled Alawites of Jabal Mohsen. Shopkeepers have reported systematic attacks and the complete destruction of their businesses, with no reporting or prosecution of the culprits.

Several speakers pointed out at the conference last week that "the roots run deep" but they are being eroded gradually

by a certain political and financial structure. HRW accused politicians of providing direct financial support to the Sunni gunmen; this is contested by several people interviewed in Bab Al-Tabbaneh. Statistics and documentation of on-the-ground political developments have proved to be ambiguous for many of researchers.

How state negligence and polarisation induce radicalism in Tripoli

Many scholars and activists argued that Tripoli's new security plan cannot be translated into practice, as local leaders often conflict with the on-the-ground power blocs of the city's divided inhabitants. The security set-up was criticised by scholars and local politicians as it resembles an elitist political pact that disregard the vast political shifts and unrest in Tripoli, rendering implementation improbable.

According to Lefevre, Sunnis seemed to be the primary victims of the socioeconomic inequity which has caused them to turn away from the state, as it continues to marginalise them and ignore their plight. Tripoli's Sunni residents try to find religious rather than political leadership, and religious groups are branching out faster than ever.

Lefevre believes that there has been a "treacherous shift", with the increasing disengagement of the public sector whilst the Shia Iranian-backed Hezbollah find themselves at their political apex in contrast to the declining leadership of Sunni communities. He explained that many Sunnis found radical alternatives in Salafism or extremist groups such as Al-Nusra Front and ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), in their search for guidance.

The lack of political leadership is due to a number of factors. The collective militia disarmament and LAF absorption of all armed groups excluded Hezbollah due to its role as a "resistance movement" against Israel; that bolstered the group politically and militarily, in contrast to Sunni armed groups. Another crucial factor was the 2005 assassination of former Sunni Prime Minister Rafik

Hariri, and the fact that his son, Saad, decided to join national unity cabinet alongside Hezbollah earlier this year. The hope of the more moderate Sunni party, the Future Movement, also failed to provide sufficient patronage for the Sunnis, as their Saudi funding shrunk considerably compared with Hezbollah's solid backing from Iran. Since 2011 and the start of the Syrian revolution, the community split even further into camps under Syria's leaders; groups such as Islamic Action Front and the Sufi Al-Ahbash on the side of Assad regime, and Salafists and Jamaa Al-Islamiya (the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) opposing them.

Although Jamaa Al-Islamiya is clearly gaining ground in Lebanon, it is not ready to redeem votes from its outlay of charitable and welfare investments, yet. The Salafists channel Sunni populism via the same charitable strategy, whilst recruiting mainly disenfranchised, marginalised young Sunnis in areas such as Bab Al-Tabanneh. Another crucial divide is between the growing number of extremist groups who chose to send their soldiers to Syria and fight, and those that did not, such as Jamaa Al-Islamiya,

The increasing level of Sunni attacks on the LAF, which is accused of being politicised against their cause, has in some instances emboldened local militias in their fight against Shia, Alawites and even other Sunni groups. In this way, the security plan, a senior security officer told Carnegie, is like "anaesthesia", calming but not eradicating the roots of the disease.

Lefevre said that the current sectarian polarisation can only be resolved effectively by a national dialogue that would include important issues such as Hezbollah's armament.

The need for structural reform

Impunity and the lack of any prosecutions of those behind the corrupt governance in Tripoli, combined with the incapable and pressurised armed forces sent to bring stability to the region, now make the international community and UN consider shouldering the burden of the fragile conditions in the city. Statistics show that Tripoli is host to nearly 71,310 Syrian refugees and although the former mayor, Fawaz Hamdi, believes that the city could create

“value of their presence”, it has proven to be a challenge to the inadequate infrastructure and delicate sectarian makeup.

According to Carnegie’s senior researcher Yezid Sayigh, the issue lies within the Lebanese structure and regulations; the question is whether it can be remedied through Lebanese politics. The usual leadership, taken up by Sunnis, seems to abuse this position while sects are marginalised and under-represented, remaining divided and unlikely to present a feasible alternative just yet (e.g. Jamaa Al-Islamiya). The call for strong leadership seems to boost the creation and arming of new groups. The clear need for strong leadership intensifies the focus on the increasing party fragmentation (especially within the Sunni communities) and solidifies the battles in marginalised Bab Al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen.

According to the activist and Professor Dr. Samer Annous, Tripoli has suffered from alienation from both within, via the sectarian and inter-sectarian splits, and also from state indifference towards its second largest city. Along with this, there is a municipality that does not reflect its own people; it is predominantly Sunni, disorganised and unable to conduct strong leadership. Basically, it too has started to disintegrate internally. Tripoli is where “politicians funded armed sides to ignite their clashes,” Annous argued. Even the majority of the mosques are under political patronage, and thus leadership.

As state and local municipalities continue to practice an ostrich-like stance with regards to the internal and external marginalisation of Tripoli’s residents, myopic micro-hegemonies, admittedly corrupt and politicised, come to rule. Researchers and local politicians agree: the state’s voyeur attitude towards the once-prosperous, job-generating Lebanese city should no longer be tolerated. The prevalent lack of trust in the ISF (with Transparency International documenting at least 60 per cent of the people who consider the ISF to be on the scale of corrupt to severely corrupt last year) along with the absence of a functioning security sector leaves the army without much back-up. The Ministry of Justice representative, Judge Ahmad Al-Ayoubi, announced that

ceaseless corruption is the nature of accountability procedures, even within an institution built for its eradication.

The real crisis of losing trust in the state is that the people get caught in the vicious cycle of unemployment due to absence of a role for the state to help Tripoli to get back onto its feet. It was suggested that as a link in this endeavour, the state ought to re-invest in institutions that could locate feasible solutions to the disparity of certain neighbourhoods to dampen sectarian clashes, as well as advance and support Tripoli's infamous port, having long brought prosperity and jobs to the city.

Last weekend, a number of Tripoli and government officials attended the "We'll keep running for peace" half-marathon along with almost 20,000 runners. In a protest against violence in the city, Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi and Sports Minister Abdul-Muttaieb Al-Hinawi refrained from firing the traditional shot to mark the start of the race; they used yellow whistles instead.

Although neglected and marginalised by the state, it seems that Justice Minister Rifi, on the surface at least, is trying to recognise the struggles of Tripoli's people. "This is Tripoli's real image... We want to confirm that the city is a place of coexistence, moderation, peace and sports," Rifi said. "We are seriously working to help the city rise and begin an economic and development plan."

[1] United Nations unpublished report of end 2011

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