The Sunni community in Lebanon: from "Harirism" to "sheikhism"?

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CHAPTER 2   The Sunni community in Lebanon: from "Harirism" to "sheikhism"?

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Introduction

On August 15, 2015, Sheikh Ahmad al-ʿAsîr was arrested at the Beirut International Airport while trying to flee to Nigeria with a fake passport. Even though all groups of the political class applauded the capture of the man wanted for his role in the bloody events that took place in Abra, near Saida, in June 2013, where 18 soldiers of the Lebanese Armed Forces lost their lives in a confrontation with al-ʿAsîr's partisans, the re-appearance of this icon of radical Sunni mobilisation underscored a deep sectarian divide among the Lebanese population. A family member of one of the soldiers killed expressed his concern about a double standard in the application of laws and security between Sunnis and Shiites. He was referring to the unsuccessful capture of a Hizbullah member accused of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Nader 2015). This particular event raises the issue of a major change of perception among the Sunni community in Lebanon; it also highlights a broader mindset according to which Iran and Hizbullah are responsible for the emergence of radical Sunni groups in the country and for the exclusion of a moderate political faction like the Hariri-led Future Movement (*al-mustaqbal*).

This change of perception becomes quite clear when one remembers that Sunnis represented the Muslims of Lebanon in the National Pact (1943), which gave the community a key role in the process of nationhood building. They were at the core of the state apparatus by virtue of them being granted the position of prime minister and several other key functions, including head of the Internal Security

Forces (ISF). While their position as a community dwindled during the civil war (Kassir 1994), a major figure emerged during the post-civil war era: Rafic Hariri. As prime minister and a rich businessman with connections to Saudi Arabia, he became a point of reference among the community while promoting a policy based on the exaltation of Sunni belonging and founding *al-mustaqbal* party. This strategy very soon pushed Hariri to become the undisputed leader of the Sunni community[i] and paved the way to the "Harirification" of Lebanese Sunnism. After the unification of the Sunnis in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination in 2005, Sunnism inexorably started faced an erosion regarding its weight in Lebanese politics: The new status of the Sunni community in Lebanon became one of political, social, and economic marginalisation.

In order to examine the recent transformation of Lebanese communities, with a focus especially on the post-2011 period, we will use the trajectory of Sunnism as a case study. Our hypothesis is that Harirism, a moderate socio-political phenomenon born with the political rise of Rafic Hariri in the 1990s, changed after his assassination, influencing the self-perception as well as the perception of 'the other' disseminated among Sunnis in Lebanon. The period between the "Cedar Revolution" (Salti 2005; Safa 2006) and the Arab revolts of 2011 has been crucial for the transformation of the Sunni community. The 2011 revolts in particular, even though they had no direct effects on the resilience of the Lebanese consociative system (Fakhoury 2011), contributed to modifying the positions of some Lebanese political actors from various communities. These actors, taking open stances towards the Syrian crisis, have deepened the polarisation inside the political and communitarian spectrum (Di Peri 2014). They have also led the way towards the modification of the boundaries of some of the leading (particularly Sunni and Maronite) Lebanese communities that, assaulted by internal and external factors, are gradually questioning the very concept of "community".

After reflecting on the shifting boundaries of the term "community", we delve into the problematisation of such a category by analysing two opposite dynamics: on the one hand, the transformation of "Harirism" after Hariri's assassination; on the other hand, the recent radical upsurge

in the Sunni community. We examine the latter by studying the mobilisation activities around Sheikh al-'Asîr that took place in the city of Sidon (Hariri's family stronghold) after 2011.

The changing role of the concept of community in Lebanon

Community is not a "natural" fact in Lebanese society; it is a social structure that embodies history, politics, and social actors' changing interpretations of issues, including external and internal factors that have shaped its definition. In this sense, there is no unique definition of what a community is, although a useful distinction will avoid any confusion. Following Beydoun (1984), a community can be understood as a sectarian belief group, which makes it possible for us to talk about sects or religious communities. "Community" also encompasses a larger spectrum of social life, as it can be understood as a social group of belonging, a rather secular dimension of belonging that is equated with ethnic belonging. In historical terms, this process can be explained through the lens of its social function and its adaptation during times of changing political environments. In the Ottoman Empire, as a powerful force that binds, orders, and identifies people, community was defined as "millet", which became "nation" during the 19th century and thus produced a collective consciousness of belonging. At the same time, they were also granted greater autonomy. Against the backdrop of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the *Mutasarrifiyya* system – under the protection of the European powers and following the "Règlement Organique" (1861), a form of communitarian division promoted by the Great Powers to pacify the Mount Lebanon area – brought the communities into politics and transformed civilian and religious institutions into political actors, which politicised collective identities by labelling them as "Maronites", "Druzes" or "Sunnis". During the time of the French Mandate in Lebanon (1920–43), the territory's communities, rejuvenated and empowered within the new political design of a nation state, were shored up as political structures after independence (1943).

It is interesting to note that the meaning of the term "community" has undergone an important shift in Lebanon, especially after the end of the civil war (1989). Before the war, the most common expressions to indicate the framework in which communities acted and lived were "communalism"

or "communitarianism".[ii] By contrast, the most used label after the war, particularly after the Hariri assassination in 2005, has been "sectarianism". This semantic shift is not without consequence. If, before the civil war, community was considered to be at the heart of the so-called Lebanese consociative system (Lijparth 1969) that functioned, despite its limits and constraints, until the outbreak of the civil war (Dekmejian 1978; Fakhoury 2009), the term "sectarianism" gradually emerged after the war, also because of the relevance it gained in academic debate. The publication of Vali Nasr's book *The Shia revival* in 2007 opened the way for the subsequent rise of the so-called sectarian rift (Norton 2015): the narrative of permanent clashes between the Sunnis and Shiites. This regional debate also had an important influence on Lebanon (Heydemann 2013; Salloukh 2013). However, interesting enough, Lebanon is not new to the debate around communitarianism, sectarianism, confessionalism, and so on (Makdisi 2000). The novelty of the sectarian narrative is that it has become pervasive, introducing itself not just in academic debates but also in the daily life relations of the Lebanese, especially after the 2011 uprisings (Kingston 2013; Salloukh 2015). If the term "community" used to have a neutral connotation, its evolution into sectarianism has clearly marked it in a negative way. This "sectarian hegemony" produces negative effects on at least two levels: on the one hand, it imposes itself as an all-encompassing meta-narrative able to explain all the regional phenomena; on the other hand, it reproduces the image of a fragmented region unable to cope with violent phenomena and pervaded by barbarianism (Di Peri 2016). According to this reading of the regional situation, which has important consequences for Lebanon, the domestic situation has been analysed by focusing especially on inter-sectarian tensions and on the effects of regional sectarian threats on Lebanon. However, in order to go beyond the logic of "sectarianism hegemony", the communities, and the processes behind the production and reproduction of their identity, are the actors to examine, even if they have blurred borders and are internally fragmented or somehow marginalised.

The 'Harirification' of Sunnism

The assassination of Rafic Hariri was a shock for the country. From that moment on, the Sunni community, which since the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Zamir 1985) has played a vital role in the "country of the Cedars", along with the Maronites, started to perceive itself as both socially and politically marginalised. However, this feeling is not new to the Sunni community: even before the outbreak of the civil war (Picard 2011), it had experienced a period of crisis at the political level with the loss of power of the traditional *zu'ama* and had no prominent figure or political party to reverse the situation (Johnson 1986).

After the civil war, a new founding pact, the Taif Agreement, further legitimised the pivotal role of the Sunni community by putting it on an equal footing with the Maronite community at the expense of the Shiites. However, the defeat of the Sunni militias, the general radicalisation of the Sunni left, and the upsurge in radical Islamism during the 1980s left the Sunni *zu'ama* in a much weaker position than at the outbreak of the war. By contrast, the heightened communal identity and the retreat of the state gave Sunni religious institutions a central role in Sunni communal and political life, and the Maqâsid Society (a charity organisation) became a focal point for the community (Skovgaard-Petersen 1998).

In the aftermath of the civil war, the pre-eminence of the Sunni community over the Maronites had a controversial and charismatic figure as a witness to the reshaping of its own narrative: Rafic Hariri. A native of Sidon, a Sunni stronghold in southern Lebanon, Hariri was a leading actor in Lebanese politics during the 1990s and helped to strengthen the idea of a "lay" Sunnism with a solidly entrepreneurial mindset. The construction of the narrative of the "new man" gave new visibility to the Sunni community, which found in Hariri a powerful, unifying leader. Hariri created a new socio-political phenomenon: "Harirism". The term succinctly illustrates how Hariri gradually imposed himself on the Lebanese political scene through control of the Sunni community, so much so that, over the years, the identification between 'Harirism' and Sunnism became increasingly stronger. Broadly speaking, a "Harirification" of Sunnism was taking place. However, it should be emphasised

that Hariri's political strategy was (at least, initially) trans-confessional. The rhetoric of "newism" that Hariri proposed was rooted in his detachment from the traditional politics marked by the *zu'ama* and their systems of patronage (Naba 1999). Furthermore, in contrast with traditional Lebanese politics, Hariri decided not to insert himself directly into the political scene but tried to seek trans-confessional legitimacy through philanthropic works (Baumann 2012) and mammoth reconstruction projects. This posture allowed him to accumulate vast political capital to spend at the appropriate time (Bonne 1995).[iii]

Very soon, however, Hariri realised that playing by these rules would not help him maintain control over his political career. After his election as prime minister in 1992 and again in 1996, Hariri's popularity grew thanks to strong investments in various public sectors, especially in the stronghold of Sidon but also in downtown Beirut. But the picture rapidly changed. The reconstruction projects included in the "Horizon 2000" programme were strongly criticised for not delivering on earlier promises: Primarily concentrated in Beirut at the expenses of other regions (Volk 2009), the projects were mainly focused on expanding the financial sector instead of the agriculture and industry sectors, and they favoured economic and urban infrastructures at the expense of human capital (Denoeux & Springborg 1998). Moreover, these plans were only partially implemented, and all in all they had a weak impact on the country's real economy: Some of the profits went to the international companies involved in the reconstruction process; others were intended to finance the importation of materials; and still others went to cover the wages paid to non-Lebanese workers involved in these projects (Di Peri 2009). At the same time, the overall economic situation was deteriorating. Hariri's economic policies led to the country becoming heavily indebted: Public debt rose from 20% to 42% between 1992 and 2000 (Nasr 2003). Lastly, in those years, the political climate and the manoeuvers of the so-called *troika* were characterised by strong confessional tensions that strengthened the consociative model instead of abolish it, as foreseen by the Taif Agreement (Kassir 2000).

All these factors pushed Hariri to develop a different strategy than the one that had previously been adopted, namely to adapt to the "Lebanese system" by embracing the communitarian option. This process materialised in controlling the key institutions of Sunnism, such as the charity organisations (the Maqâsid Society being the first), and, through them, the religious leaders who guaranteed control of the election of the mufti, the most prestigious position in Lebanese Sunnism (Skovgaard-Petersen 1998). These manoeuvers included the ousting and weakening of all the Sunni leaders' rivals and gradually pushed Hariri to build a family dynasty (Vloeberghs 2012). As part of this strategy, Hariri exploited to their advantage (often in contradictory way) the "calls" to identity and tradition: On the one hand, he used the rejection of the past, especially doing *tabula rasa* of Lebanese cultural heritage, to promote his mammoth projects with Solidere for the country's reconstruction (Daily Star 2000); on the other hand, he exploited his ties with the past Sunni tradition, underlining his belonging to this tradition. His philanthropic activities, especially through the Hariri Foundation, soon became an instrument to generate profit but primarily to accumulate political capital for the elections (Becherer 2005). Philanthropy became way to secure old constituencies and constructing ever-larger political bases. This process of the "Harirification" of Sunnism culminated in Hariri becoming the *de facto* leader of the Sunnis with the building of the largest mosque in the centre of Beirut, a symbol of the return to tradition (Vloeberghs 2008).

Hariri's assassination marked a freeze in the process of "Harirification", which had at least two effects: the incapacity of his successor, his son Saad, to preserve the political legacy of his father and the shifting of the ideological boundaries of Sunnism. This latter aspect will be analysed in the following section by looking at the case of the rise of Sheikh al-'Asîr. As for the former aspect, it should be noted that Saad Hariri, because he lacks his father's charisma and political resources, was unable to ride the wave of protests that followed the assassination and gave rise to the birth of the March 14 coalition and his *al-mustaqbal* Party (Choucair 2006; Haugbolle 2006). Only the official establishment of the party, which already took place in 2007 but only materialised in 2009, prompted

Saad Hariri to use the party, more than the financial empire of the father or his philanthropic activities, to rally the Sunni community behind him. This party logic, however, was far removed from Sunnism. As a result, Saad Hariri has failed in his attempt to complete a triple identification: the identification of the party with the leader, the identification of the leader with the community, and consequently, the identification of the community with the party.[iv] There were two reasons for this failure: first, the difficulties that Saad had in holding together a community using a party and coalition logic that were in many ways alien to the Lebanese context,[v] and second, closely related to the first reason, Saad's lack of leadership within this coalition, which was very fragmented and in search of its own identity.[vi]

Looking at the evolution of the March 14 coalition led by *al-mustaqbal*, it is evident that the members of the Party have gradually lost contact with their basis and struggle to act as a credible partner within the Lebanese political system.[vii] At the same time, the coalition showed a willingness to undermine the institutions of the state as soon as they were no longer controllable or acting in its interest.

One of the battles on which Saad Hariri and his party have lost credibility is its position against Hizbullah and its disarmament since Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005 and especially after the war with Israel in 2006. "Harirism" was based on the division of labour between Rafic Hariri and Hizbullah and concerned with mapping the future of Lebanon, while Hizbullah acted as a guardian of its past and created a mythology aimed at preserving the country's historical identity and Arab dimension (Karl ReMarks 2000). After Hariri's death, the two political coalitions' struggle over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon – created to investigate his assassination – culminated in a corruption scandal when it was revealed that Saad Hariri had manipulated witnesses to finger Hizbullah as being responsible for his father's death. This was one example of the end of pragmatism for Sunnism. Another example is the rise of the controversy between Saad and the Lebanese Army, a legacy of his father Rafic (Aziz 2011), which became evident on the "Day of Wrath" (January 25, 2011), when armed militants of the March 14 coalition were shooting in the streets of Beirut, targeting the Lebanese Army.[viii] One of the more evident consequences of this new form of Harirism is the loss of

the aura of moderation and political pragmatism that had always characterised Rafic Hariri's political activity and, in many ways, put distance between Harirism and violent attitudes.[ix] This change in attitude engendered at least three consequences: First, Sunnism abandoned its moderate posture, which left space for the emergence of radical Sunni fringes that had been latent in Lebanon since 2011; second, the boundaries of the Sunni community, painstakingly held together through the process of "Harirification", were frayed, which highlighted the difficulty of identifying a strong and unified leadership capable of affecting Lebanon at both institutional and confessional levels (Samaha 2013); and finally, the posture of Saad Hariri was a critical factor in Hizbullah's decision to support the Assad regime in Syria and produced a new wave of sectarian claims that have increased the distance between the country's communities (Aslam 2012).[x] Despite Saad Hariri's brief return to Lebanon in August 2014, following three years of self-imposed exile after his government was toppled by a coalition including Hizbullah, Harirism seems to continue to be deep in crisis. As Ahmad Fatfat, a deputy of *al-mustaqbal*, declared, "the threat against Saad Hariri will remain as long as there are illegitimate weapons in Lebanon" – a declaration that clearly illustrates the perceived persistence of the threat of the Islamic Party for the Sunni leader and Hariri inability to produce a new political strategy (Daily Star 2014).

The game changer in town: Ahmad al-'Asîr as a new face of political Sunnism

The transformation of the Sunni community is also palpable when it comes to the emergence of a new profile and means of mobilisation. Among the sect's radical fringes, it is recognised that "most Salafists of all stripes have in some ways mobilised their community against Hizbullah and the Syrian regime" (Rabil 2014). Within this process of change and radicalisation among the Sunnis, mainly in the area of Tripoli (Rougier 2011; Gade 2015), the figure of Sheikh Ahmad al-'Asîr emerged late in 2011 as an interesting Salafist preacher who managed to gather a local radical group of partisans around a small mosque in Abra, a suburb of Saida. The main rationale for this mobilisation was in line with two main stances of the Future Movement: the support of the Syrian insurgents (Caillet

2012) and the denunciation of Hizbullah as a factor in the destabilisation of Lebanon. It is therefore necessary to focus on the mobilisation strategy that Sheikh al-'Asîr followed in order to understand the kind of shift within the Sunni community at the double level of means of action and self-perception. We will see that, surprisingly, al-'Asîr adopted a behaviour, a repertoire of action, and a general imaginary that refers to a minority sect.

The social context in Saida in 2011, when al-'Asîr started his mobilisation, is marked by the polarisation of the Lebanese political forces with respect to the Syrian crisis, as *al-mustaqbal* was facing Mustapha Sa'ad (a local ally of March 8) and Hizbullah militants in the city and its surroundings. The socioeconomic situation in Saida was already critical. Beneath the touristic reshaping of roads and streets in the old city, a process of pauperisation was affecting the majority of local inhabitants, mostly Sunni, because of a lack of investments, and it was slowly disenfranchising the local population at its fringes.[xi] Sectarian affiliation soon became the only common identity for inhabitants who perceived themselves as abandoned by the central power and instrumentalised by the main political parties. This is where Al-'Asîr found fertile ground for his mobilisation based on resentment and a feeling of marginalisation. He was also able to capitalise on a frustration with the Shiites because of the political fight of early "May 2008 events" that saw a confrontation between Hizbullah and the March 14 government led by Fouad Siniora. During these heady days, Hizbullah's militiamen and allies sealed off West Beirut and stranded Walid Jumblat and Saad Hariri[xii] in their houses, thus shedding a crude light on the Future Movement's impotence against the Shi'i movement. In the following years, several attacks targeted senior security officers and political leaders, all of them coming from the Sunni community. Al-'Asîr was able to play on sectarian honour and transform a political weakness into a sectarian threat. This link between sects, politics, and honour was repeated in his Friday sermons along the following lines:

We won't accept this abject (*haqīra*) Syrian-Iranian tutelage (over Lebanon)! [...] Enough contempt for the Sunnis! Enough contempt for their blood, their security and the honour of their wives![xiii]

Manufacturing a sectarian reading of the situation, al-'Asîr was able to mobilise anger and dissatisfaction to blame the pro-Syrian regime partisans identified with the Shi'i community. One way in which this strategy of sectarianising dissent from the Shia was built is quite apparent in the religious dispute that occurred with Mohammad Yazbek, a top-ranking leader of Hizbullah.[xiv] Sheikh al-'Asîr sparked a religious dispute after claiming Yazbek had "insulted" Aisha, the mother of the Prophet, and thus he positioned himself as the defender of the Sunni community. This sensitive matter in a multi-sectarian society allowed him full media attention and the ability to reach a larger Sunni constituency, close to *al-mustaqbal*. By mentioning the Hizbullah weaponry issue, a classical topic of the March 14 coalition, he implicitly bridged sectarian and political dissent. The strength of al-'Asîr's posture lay in the powerful position of his Shi'i foe in the political game and in the brutality of the repression that the Syrian population, mainly Sunnis, suffered because of the Assad regime. The latter, defined as primarily Alawite, has been affiliated with the Shia since the onset of the Syrian uprising in Salafi circles, which pointed to an "evil alliance" between the two minorities in Islam: the Alawites and the Shia. This "natural" explanation of their political alliance helped Sheikh al-'Asîr identify Hizbullah as an internal threat for the Sunnis of Lebanon and thus positioned his community as a victim and possibly as a gatekeeper of Islamic orthodoxy against deviant groups.[xv] The notion of the Sunnis as victims of Shi'i power was also fuelled by Miqati's government, clearly oriented towards the March 8 coalition and pro-Hizbullah forces, which promoted its "dissociation policy" towards the Syrian uprising as a means of staying neutral in this turmoil. This so-called "neutrality" of Lebanon quickly revealed itself as an ideological way of masking Lebanon's tacit agreement with

the Syrian regime's brutal policy.[xvi] By opposing such a policy, al-'Asîr kept calling for the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus and the disarmament of the Shia-led Hizbullah (Abi-Akl 2012).

The seriousness of this political context and the general environment of the Syrian uprising and Hizbullah's political domination in the era after the signing of the Doha Agreement seem to be quite significant, as al-'Asîr's biography did not suggest his life would take such a radical trajectory. One should note that he was not a recognised cleric and was preaching in a small mosque located in a suburb of Saida. Moreover, his previous affiliation with Jamaa al-Tabligh, a quietist religious movement that avoided any statements that could lead to conflict, was not really conducive to the gathering of radical partisans (Caillet 2012). In the meantime, among the opportunities that served al-'Asîr well was the duration of his involvement in that mosque and his strategic opportunism in side-lining Saad Hariri's Future Movement the moment the uprising started in Syria. His activism and his reputation as a Salafi figure grew during Ramadan in the summer of 2011 and secured him an audience. The economic situation in Saida also helped him to capitalise on discontent, as seen above. But most of all, Hizbullah was a very useful rival group, as it mobilised on the basis of religious affiliation, which al-'Asîr violently denounced. In sum, this Shi'i image of Hizbullah, built up as a foe and progressively as the group responsible for the Sunnis' disempowerment and vulnerability, largely contributed to the forming of al-'Asîr's identity as a radical leader struggling to defend the Sunnis' pride and honour in Lebanon. Thus he stood in stark contrast to Saad Hariri, who lacked the ability to unify the Sunnis.

Built on his social capital as a cleric, Sheikh al-'Asîr's Salafi movement was closely linked to him as a person. In this sense, his movement was familiar with the classical Lebanese political pattern, characterised by the personalisation of power as a main trend in politics (Messarra 1996). Between 2000 and 2003, Sheikh al-'Asîr became known as a Salafist, as it seemed clear that he followed the doctrinal principles of Salafism (Caillet 2012). In the meantime, like other sheikhs, he wanted to promote an image of himself as a non-sectarian figure by showing his moderation in the media in

order to reach a wider spectrum of the Sunni citizens he was primarily targeting. Nevertheless, the populist and radical dimensions of al-'Asîr's movement can be highlighted by examining the steps and repertoire of the kind of mobilisation he adopted (Meier 2015).

During an initial period, al-'Asîr organised demonstrations in support of the Syrian uprisings or against Hizbullah's weapons, exacerbating the polarisation of the political spectrum with regard to the Syrian uprising. Mobilised via social media, the Sheikh al-'Asîr movement grew in number and tended to radicalise its actions by organising a sit-in in Saida for one and a half months, blocking a main road and thus continuing its strategy of entrism, and raising the flag of the Sunni community threatened by Hizbullah's weapons. He explained this new approach by making an analogy with the Arab uprising in Egypt: "Our movement is similar to the one on Tahrir Square in Cairo. But the difference is that here injustice is armed" (l'Orient le Jour 2012). He also gave a definition of his protest as one that is intended to gather people from everywhere in Lebanon, as "all regions of Lebanon are hurt". Al-'Asîr clearly mentioned who hurt these regions: He identified the Shi'i movement of Hizbullah and used its "Resistance" label to show the contradictory nature of Hizbullah since it became involved alongside the Syrian regime. "You can live without bread or electricity but not without dignity. The Resistance party stole our dignity. From now on, we cannot accept this anymore" (l'Orient le Jour 2012).

The second step was taken when another protest of the al-'Asîr movement turned into an armed confrontation on November 11, 2012, because al-'Asîr militants had torn down Hizbullah posters. The riots across the city of Saida resulted in several people injured on both sides and two dead among the al-'Asîr militiamen (Daou 2012). Days later, al-'Asîr displayed bloody images showing the faces of two of his partisans who were killed and a Hizbullah flag tarnished with blood, including sentences that read: "Hassan Nasrallah killed Ali Samhoun in Saida", and "Hassan Nasrallah killed Lebanon". This event signalled a process of militarisation of the movement that was visible when the Sheikh unsuccessfully tried to mobilise the Palestinian refugees from Syria in the Ain el-Hilweh camp in

December in order to form a proper militia. In early 2013, he publicly appeared in military fatigues with an AK-47 rifle in his hand during a strong protest against the presence of Hizbullah militiamen in the vicinity of his mosque in Abra (l'Orient le Jour 2013a).

A third and last step was taken later during the spring of 2013. Against the backdrop of the Qusayr battle that saw the Syrian Army being backed by Hizbullah members against the insurgents of the Free Syrian Army, al-'Asîr issued a *fatwa* for *jihad* in Syria. In April, the area close to his mosque in Abra became the stronghold of his movement with big screens to see him preaching and carpets in the street for Friday prayer. While Hizbullah's General Secretary revealed the involvement of his militia in the Qusayr battle alongside the Assad regime, the Sheikh publicly displayed the forming of a new militia named "the Phalanges of the Free Resistance", primarily dedicated to enrolling local volunteers to fight in Syria for the Sunni cause (Baaklini 2013). In June, several militiamen, clearly affiliated with al-'Asîr's group, took control of Saida for a few hours as a means to flex their muscle (Khalil 2013). A few days later, a violent clash erupted at an army checkpoint near Abra. It resulted in the killing of four soldiers and led to the intervention of troops that ended up dislodging and killing many of al-'Asîr's partisans in an extremely brutal fight lasting 48 hours.[xvii]

The effect of this disastrous end to the al-'Asîr movement helped the *al-mustaqbal* movement officially distance itself from such extreme actions, although dialogue between Hizbullah and the Future Movement remains a challenge, particularly after Saad Hariri returned to Lebanon one year later. The disappearance of the Sheikh did not resolve the issue of the Sunnis' feeling of marginalisation. Some of the radical fringes of the al-'Asîr partisans went to Syria and joined Salafist jihadi groups like al-Qaeda.[xviii] However, in the light of the lingering political crisis affecting Lebanon, the majority of the community continues to see no reason to expect a significant change for the Sunnis in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Sunnism is currently being challenged by both internal and external factors. At the internal (domestic) level, the Sunni leadership's confrontation with Hizbullah and its loss of credibility are the two main components of the crisis. At the external level, the regional transformations and the Syrian crisis have contributed to a change in the country's confessional equilibrium. If, after the end of the civil war, the Harirification of Sunnism rested upon the creation of a unified leadership firmly in the hands of Rafic Hariri, the situation quickly changed after his death. The example of the mobilisation of Sheikh al-'Asîr revealed a far less moderate and pragmatic face of Sunnism and pointed to a deep change in collective self-perception. This change is something new for Sunnism and one of the unexpected consequences of the Hariri assassination. As one of the historic communities of Lebanon for many decades, the Sunni community has been at the heart of the Lebanese political game, as evidenced by its centrality in the National Pact and in the Taif Agreement. However, after 2005, the Sunni community seems to be living – both politically and socially – in limbo. This community appears to be unable to fill the political vacuum left by Rafic Hariri and to tolerate its slow marginalisation within the country, which is also caused by the political rise of Hizbullah and to some extent, the "death of Harirism".

Another factor in the mutation of Sunnism in Lebanon is linked to the transformation of the balance of power in Lebanon. The Doha Agreement signed in 2008 clearly recognised the continuation of Syrian influence over Lebanon, manned by Hizbullah and its allies in the March 8 coalition. The context of the decline of the heirs to Harirism and the loss of its key influence over the state's destiny opened the door to the emergence of several forms of radicalism, as had brutally come to pass in the Nahr el-Bared camp during the summer of 2007. It became palpable in Tripoli during the confrontation between the rival suburbs of Baal Mohsen and Bab Tebbaneh after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, and later in Saida with the goal of targeting "Shi'i power" under the lead of Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-'Asîr. His movement appeared as a by-product of the local dynamics of social exclusion in the Sunni environment and regional dynamics marked by the polarising effect of the Syrian uprisings on the Lebanese political scene. The radicalisation of the al-'Asîr movement and its

violent repertoire of action gave voice to a deep frustration of some fringes of the Sunni community and highlighted a major transformation of Sunnis' self-perception as victims and a threatened category within Lebanese society. In the meantime, the failure and the violent excesses of al-'Asîr radical trajectory as well as the spectre of uncontrolled violence affecting Sunni cities like Tripoli with the 2013 double car bombings, have probably contributed to a moderation of the internal political confrontation between the two opposite 8/14 March blocs.

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[i] While not all the Sunnis identified with Hariri before his assassination, the wave of outrage following the assassination caused a reconsolidation within the community that is also expressed through the large participation in the event organised in Beirut on March 14, one month after Hariri's killing.

[ii] All these terms, including sectarianism, factionalism and confessionalism are the European translation of the Arabic *Tā'ifīya*.

[iii] One of the most interesting examples of this lack of political exposure is Rafic Hariri's decision to push for the candidacy of his sister Bahia in 1992 in the district of Sidon instead of his own. Bahia had already been president of the Hariri Foundation, and with her candidacy Rafic Hariri decided to lay the groundwork for building a family dynasty.

[iv] Obviously not all Sunnis identified with Hariri and his party. However, it should be emphasised, as they were the majority.

[v] Di Peri interview with a militant from the Communist Party, Beirut, November 2014.

[vi] For example, the strong disagreement about Syria between Saad and Kabbani, the mufti of the republic. See Chirinne (2016).

[vii] Di Peri interview with a Lebanese Maronite deputy, Beirut, December 2014.

[viii] The protests were sparked after Hizbullah's nomination of the new prime minister the Sunni, Najib Mikati, a move that brought the group one step closer to controlling the government. See Saghiyeh (2011).

[ix] This is, in general, a legacy of Lebanese Sunnism, of how it was built from the days of the French Mandate to preserve its specificity from the influences of regional Sunnism. See Khoury (1987).

[x] See chapter 7.

[xi] Meier interview with Ahmad Beydoun, Beirut, June 2013.

[xii] The leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, the prominent Druze movement, and the co-founder of the March 14 coalition, respectively.

[xiii] Quoted in Caillet (2012).

[xiv] Ibidem.

[xv] From the perspective of the Sunnis, Muslim non-Sunni communities have long been perceived as deviant. Thus Alawites, as well as Shiites, were designated with stigmatising labels as *nosayris* and *metwalis*, respectively. (Mervin, 2000).

[xvi] By arresting Syrian opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad and bringing them back to Syria (Meier and Galeno 2012).

[xvii] While the LAF lost 18 men in this fight, no precise death toll was made public concerning the partisans of the Sheikh. The state's silence on the final episode of Sheikh al-'Asîr could be linked to Hizbullah's involvement in this assault and the secrecy the party of God tends to favour in such security issues. See l'Orient le Jour (2013b).
[xviii] At least three of them blew themselves up in terrorist attacks targeting Hizbullah. See Rowell (2014)