Sheikhs and the City

Urban Paths of Contention in Sidon, Lebanon

Are John Knudsen

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article examines the rise and fall of the "Assir movement," a neo-Salafist campaign led by a charismatic local sheikh who, after years of community activism, rose to prominence in the wake of the Syrian uprising (2011–present) protesting the Sunnis' political decline and disempowerment. To understand the Assir movement's popular appeal, it is necessary to examine the pathways of contention in specific urban contexts and the extension of Salafism to secondary cities such as Sidon, where Sheikh Ahmad Assir's neo-Salafism became a political force and can be classified as a new social movement. Neo-Salafism combines populism with sectarianism, and this accounts for its widespread support after 2011, when the Syrian uprising increased Sunni-Shia tensions and shifted the locus of contentious politics from the capital, Beirut, to Sidon, a Sunni-majority city and the seat of the Assir movement. Ultimately, this led to an armed confrontation that crushed the movement, eroded its popular support, and was followed by an electoral defeat in which local elites reasserted control.

■ **KEYWORDS:** contentious politics, Lebanon, pathways, Salafism, social movements, urban ecology

After years of community activism in the Sidon, a local sheikh named Ahmad Assir rose to prominence in the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian uprising as leader of the neo-Salafist "Assir movement." The movement's rapid growth was enabled by internal and external factors and combined an Islamist (Salafist) discourse with social protest over the Sunnis' disempowerment and political decline. Based on a detailed reading of Sheikh Assir's biography and religious background this article seeks to explain the roots and extent of the movement's popular support, rapid growth, and gradual transformation during the contentious period since the Syrian uprising. The Assir movement's growth was spurred by the onset of the Syrian revolt, which, together with internal crises, paralyzed Lebanon's political system, polarized the public, and deepened the Sunni-Shia divide. The popular support for Sheikh Assir was followed by conflict escalation leading to the abrupt downfall of the movement after a deadly confrontation with the army that saw traditional Sunni elites reassert control. Assir's attempt to challenge the political system from within and restore the Sunnis' political preeminence failed, leading to the movement's contraction.

The widespread support for the Assir movement was enabled by the urban ecology in Sidon and the internal crises in Lebanon's Sunni political and religious establishment that for a brief period shifted the moral leadership of the Sunnis from the elites in the capital of Beirut to the Sidon-based preacher. The growth of the Assir movement hence led to a temporary shift in the

locus of contentious politics from the capital to secondary cities such as Sidon, and a conceptual shift from elite politics to that of grassroots (Meier 2015; Meier and Di Peri 2017). Here, I aim to explain this twin transition and analyze the movement's urban pathways that made Sidon (see Figure 1) the epicenter of Sunni discontent and shifted the moral leadership from the party elite to the local Sheikh Ahmad Assir.

Recent studies have accounted for Sheikh Assir as leading a movement of the poor and disenfranchised (Meier 2015; Meier and Di Peri 2017). This reflects the general assumption that the main supporters of Islamic activism are the urban poor, what Asef Bayat (2007) has termed an "urban ecology" attributed to the growth of Salafist and other Islamist groups. Turning conventional wisdom on its head, Bayat argues that the groundswell of Islamic militancy, and of Islamism more generally, is not the urban poor but the educated middle class. My study lends support to Bayat's argument; indeed, a closer examination of the Assir movement shows that it was a broad-based protest movement with supporters from across Sidon's social spectrum and backed financially by members of the upwardly mobile middle classes who sought personal advancement in a deeply clientelist urban environment.

The Assir movement's widespread appeal can be traced to the combination of social protest and Islamist activism in the form of a neo-Salafist discourse that resonated with the anger and discontent among Sidon's Sunni populace and can be classified as a "new social movement" (Wiktorowicz 2004) that campaigned for the restoration of Sunnis' dignity and honor. The Assir movement's urban pathway was shaped by the expansion of Salafism from its Tripoli center to Sidon. This provided the Assir movement with a political platform amidst the city's entrenched poverty and clientelism, thus demonstrating the concomitant link between "Sheiks and the city" as detailed in the conclusion.

This article is based on interviews in Beirut and Sidon in 2017, and follow-up interviews in early 2020. The Assir case is both contested and sensitive, so I used personal contacts to reach out to potential interviewees—religious scholars, politicians, supporters—including a former member interviewed by telephone. I conducted the interviews in English and Arabic, the latter with the help of local assistants providing Arabic translation. In addition, an assistant conducted interviews with two women supporters based on an interview guide I prepared. The taped interviews averaged one hour, with the longest totaling five hours, and were fully or partially transcribed in English translations. The article draws on nearly two decades of intermittent field research and publication on post–civil war Lebanon, and thematically builds on extant scholarship on Salafism in Lebanon and information in an unpublished Sidon city profile (UN-Habitat 2017).

Social Movements

Salafism has a transnational reach, but I focus here on the national characteristics in Lebanon (Pall 2013; Rabil 2014; Rougier 2015), in particular the role of neo-Islamists such as Sheikh Ahmed Assir. In Lebanon, Salafism took hold in select rural and urban localities (Saab and Ranstorp 2007: 829) and, with Tripoli being the center of Salafism from the early reformist writings of Rashid Rida (1865–1935), today controls more than a third of the city's mosques (Pall 2013: 32). Although historically connected, the country's Salafist groups are deeply divided, with each sheikh having his own following attached to a local mosque. This also accounts for the problem of mobilizing the followers beyond the urban locale and the tendency to remain localized groups and enclaves. Neo-Salafism combines populism with sectarianism, and this accounts for its broad-based appeal among Sunnis, especially after 2011, when the Syrian uprising became a

civil war, increased sectarian tensions, and amplified Sunni discontent and dishonor. In secondary cities like Sidon,[1] Salafism found its place among not only the disgruntled masses and urban precariat but also the middle-class supporters and wealthy backers who sought to carve out their place in local clientelist hierarchies, and hence is analyzed here as an urban phenomenon.

Islamist movements share traits with social movements and can be analyzed as a subclass new social movements (Wiktorowicz 2004). The key characteristics of social movements are their conflictual relations with rivals, their networked character, and their in-group collective identity (Della Porta and Diani 2009: 20). Moreover, Salafist movements like the one examined here have a religious outlook and organizational characteristics that make them avoid formal organization in favor of loose networks; indeed, for doctrinal reasons, they do not consider themselves a movement (*haraka*). The key tenets are unity of God (*tawhid*), an absolute division of the world (Islamic, un-Islamic), and a literal interpretation of the Quran (Pall 2013: 20–21). Despite internal divisions among Salafists, they seek to uproot Sufism and stop the Shia expansion, which puts them at odds with Hezbollah and Sufi-oriented Sunni groups, leading to contention and violent confrontation.[2]

Islamist movements with members recruited from an urban locale form close-knit groups that infuse members with strong religious conviction, purpose, and collective identity that sets them apart from majority society—organizational traits that can lead to conflicts with rivals. Following Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's (2015: 114–15) argument in favor of distinguishing social movements based on the forms of contention they engage in, this opens for studying

Figure 1: The city of Sidon, with Abra and adjoining municipalities and Palestinian refugee camps (map courtesy of Chr. Michelsen Institute).
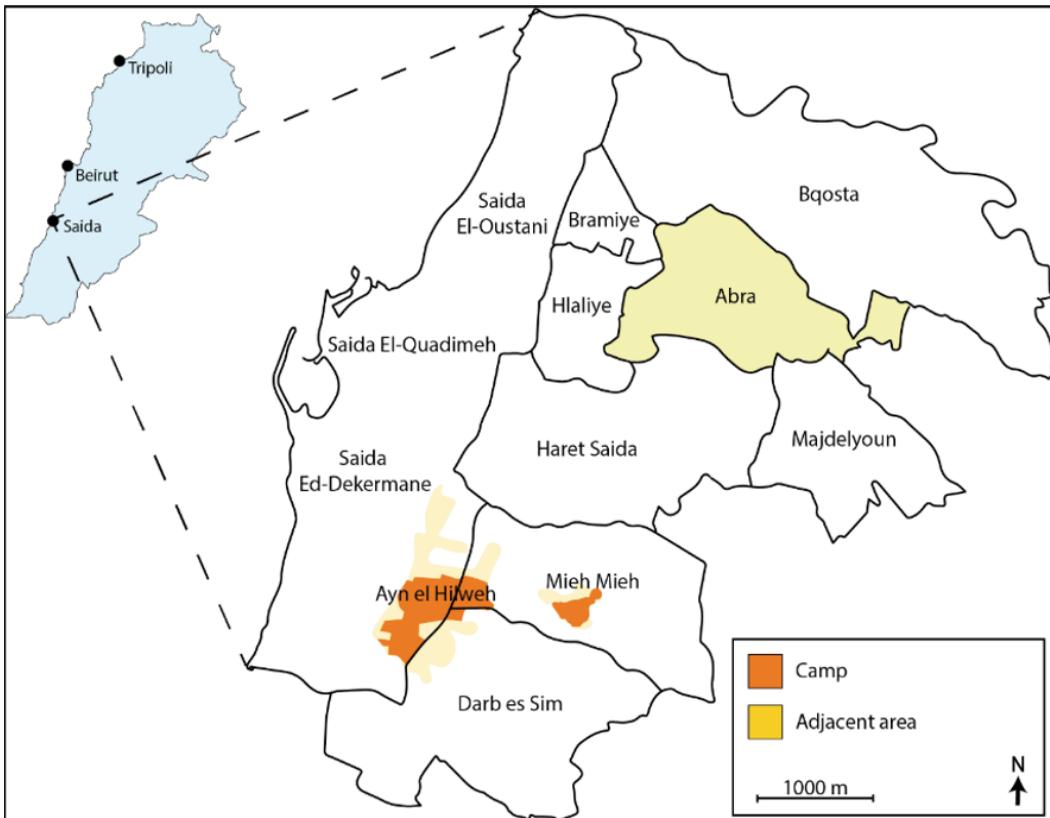
what triggers the transition from collective action (demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins) to violent forms of contention (clashes, brawls, riots). This enables us to study the origins (1990–2000s) and transformation of the Assir movement from a peaceful to a militant one (2011–2013), as well as the post-conflict ramifications for the movement, leadership, and the urban milieu that nurtured it (2014–present).

The Assir movement's growing popularity was enabled by three concurrent crises: sectarian, religious, and political. The sectarian crisis was the 2011 ousting of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which brought down his government and, by implication, the claim to Sunni political preeminence ("Sunnism"). The Syrian revolt quickly followed, dividing the country and increasing Sunni-Shia tensions. The religious crisis came from the turmoil inside Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest Sunni religious authority, which spurred internal rivalry and caused popular discontent. Finally, the crisis in the Future Movement, Lebanon's foremost Sunni political party, stifled reform, frustrated supporters, and disconnected the leaders from the base.

Political Sunnism

Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (1944–2005) was Lebanon's preeminent statesman (Baumann 2016), and his dominant position in Lebanese post–civil war politics and as leader of the Sunnis has been coined Harirism (Meier 2015; Meier and Di Peri 2017). After Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, the Sunnis' political decline was followed by sectarian tensions that deepened after the Syrian revolt. Daniel Meier and Rosita Di Peri (2017) argue that this led to a shift from Harirism to Sheikhism, meaning that the moral leadership of the Sunni community changed from the urban party elite to the town's lay preacher, Sheikh Ahmad Assir. This also involved a shift in the locus of contentious politics from the capital, Beirut, to secondary cities such as Sidon, and a conceptual shift from elite politics to the grassroots. The tensions between the two can be illustrated with the nationalist slogan of the Future Movement—"Lebanon first" (ICG 2010: 7)—and the sectarian sentiments in Beirut's Sunni stronghold Tariq al-Jadideh, captured in the slogan "Sunnis first" (Baumann 2016: 179).

The claim to Sunni political preeminence lies at the heart of what has been termed Sunnism (Gade 2012) and is linked to the Sunnis' political decline that followed Rafik Hariri's assassination (Knudsen 2016). Despite being a numerical majority in Lebanon, the Sunnis have since acted as if they are a minority, spurred by their political disempowerment vis-à-vis Hezbollah and the Shias, as well as the regional standoff between Sunni and Shia states embroiled in the so-called New Arab Cold War (Wehrey 2017: 3). Despite the (Sunni) prime minister's wider powers in post–civil war Lebanon, Sunni politicians have failed to secure equal state investment in Sunni communities outside Beirut, which has caused widespread resentment among disenfranchised Sunnis in cities such as Tripoli and Sidon (Henley 2017: 301).

As shown by Melani Cammett (2014: 123), there is strong in-group support for sectarian parties in Lebanon (see Table 1). The Sunnis display the highest in-group partisanship, eclipsing that of the Shias, with sectarian loyalties split between two parties, Amal and Hezbollah. Importantly, the Sunnis also have the lowest level of the political activism, consistent with the problems of mobilizing them in electoral politics and the widespread use of strategic service provision and vote-buying to win closely contested elections and electoral seats. The Future Movement (Tayyar al-Mustaqbal) was founded in 2007 but lacks party-like structures, program, and organization (ICG 2010).[3]

The person-centered politics and weak institutionalization of political parties in Lebanon make them susceptible to competition from preachers like Sheikh Assir, which points to the

Table 1: Relationship between Partisan and Sectarian Identities

Sectarian identity	Partisanship	In-group partisans %	Correlation
Sunni	Future Movement	83.3	0.84
Christian	Christian parties	82.6	0.79
Shia	Hezbollah	63.1	0.71
	Amal	31.6	0.51

Reproduced from Cammett (2014: 123).

importance of mobilizing the Sunni grassroots and the potential importance of Sheiks in attracting, mobilizing, and harnessing the "Sunni street" for electoral purposes.[4] This paradox follows from sectarianism replacing communitarianism after 2011, when Prime Minister Saad Hariri was forced to step down and street protests erupted in Beirut and Tripoli in late January 2011. His resignation weakened the Future Movement, and he neither reached the level of influence of his father, Rafik, nor fulfilled the Saudi sponsors' ambition for the country or mounted a political challenge to Hezbollah.

At the same time, the Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest Sunni religious authority, was stifled by lack of reform and challenged by new breed of preachers mounting a leadership contest seeking to depose Grand Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani (policy analyst, interview, Beirut, 10 December 2017). Adding to the disarray, Qabbani was embroiled in a row with the Future Movement and its leader, Saad Hariri (Henley 2016).[5] Disliked and distrusted by many Sunnis, Qabbani represented a singular and orthodox version of Sunni Islam that alienated many and gave rise to popular resentment, Islamic activism, and Salafi militancy in places like Tripoli and Sidon. The regional dominance of Beirut's Sunni clerical families and their privileged access to high-ranking jobs and elite networks added to the local disenfranchisement (Henley 2017: 301). Taken together, this made many Sunnis turn away from established political leaders and embrace hard-liners such as former General Ashraf Rifi, whose "Sunnis first" narrative and criticism of Hezbollah helped win closely contested Tripoli elections (Knudsen 2017).

Neo-Salafism combines populism with sectarianism, which accounts for its broad appeal among Sunnis, especially after 2011, when the Syrian uprising turned civil war (Samaha 2013). The conflict between the Assad regime and the Sunni insurgents (Free Syrian Army) was replicated in Lebanon as a contest between Sunnis and Shias. In the final stage of narrative inversion, the Sunni majority was portrayed as being dominated—indeed, under siege—by the Shia minority. This change replicates historical shifts among the Lebanese Shias who were likewise mobilized by a charismatic cleric, Musa Al-Sadr, to form the Movement of the Deprived, which transformed into a military resistance brigade at the eve of the civil war (Ajami 1987). In a similar vein, the Sunnis' political decline since 2005 created an acute sense of disillusionment and frustration, to become a "neo-movement of the deprived" (policy analyst, interview, Beirut, 10 December 2017). The void between the Sunni political elite and the grassroots meant that the only issue that unites them is their opposition to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah (Asfura-Heim and Steinitz 2013). This means traditional Sunni leaders must either resort to a sectarian rhetoric to maintain the support of their base or, as a last resort, co-opt and appease fringe Islamist movements. It was in this situation that Ahmad Assir, a local sheikh and lay preacher from Sidon, stepped into the void. To understand his role, we need to examine his personal background and the roots of his popular appeal.

Historical Origins

Born in Sidon to mixed Sunni-Shia parents in 1968, Ahmad al-Assir al-Hussayni grew up in the Shia-majority Haret Saida neighborhood (see Figure 1) and, as a descendant from the linage of the Prophet Mohammad (al-Hussayni), could claim descent from a holy lineage (former movement member, telephone interviews, 18–19 August, 20 October 2017). When Assir came of age during the final years of the civil war (1975–1990), the Islamic Group (*al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*) the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, already had a strong presence in Sidon and was leading several mosques. The outbreak of the Afghan war in 1979 introduced audiocassettes with songs that popularized the Afghan mujahidden as models of an Islamic resistance. This influenced the local religiosity in Sidon more generally, and the formation of a religious milieu that came to characterize the town (former member, telephone interview, 18 August 2017). During the civil war, forced displacement made Sidon become predominately Muslim and contributed to the early Salafist influences: in the mid-1980s, two Salafist preachers[6] were displaced from Tripoli and settled in Sidon. During the latter part of the civil war, violent conflict broke out between Lebanon's four major Sunni Islamist groups, which also impacted the trajectory of the Salafi movement (Pall 2013: 45). The conflict culminated with the murder of Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi, the leader of Al-Abash, a Sufi-inspired movement, by members of Usbat al-Ansar, a Salafi group based in Sidon refugee camp (see Table 2). The persecution of Salafi groups that followed resulted in the movement's disintegration and made Salafism split into a peaceful, quietist branch and a militant, jihadist one, with the former establishing its first mosque in Sidon's Al-Zouhour neighborhood in the early1990s (Saab and Ranstorp 2007: 837).

After a short period as an active member of the Islamic Group, Assir became disappointed with the leaders' failure to live as they preached (former member, 18 August 2017), so he left and joined the Tablighi Jamaat (*Dawa'a Tablighi*), a quietist Islamic movement that was founded on the Indian subcontinent by roving preachers from Pakistan touring Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s. Assir was one of the early adherents in Sidon and rose from supporter to member in 1985–1986, and later becoming a central figure in the movement. From the late 1980s, Assir became a full-time preacher and had followers from around Sidon, traveling with his group all over the country on missionary tours or proselytizing trips (*da'wa*). A well-known figure in Abra, Assir supported himself as a street vendor, selling traditional bread (*manoushi*) from his small neighborhood shop.

In the mid-1990s, Assir began his studies at an accredited Islamic university in Beirut with links to Cairo's Al-Azhar University and completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in Sharia studies, specializing in comparative Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (former member, telephone

Table 2: Sunni Islamist Groups, Lebanon

Name	Affiliation	Founder / leader
Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya	Lebanese Branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt)	Fathi Yakan (1933–2009)
Usbat al-Ansar (aka Osbat al-Noor)	Salafist group that split into many factions, based mainly in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, Sidon	Founded in 1985 by Sheikh Hisham (d. 1991)
Al-Ahbash (aka Association of Islamic Charitable Projects)	Sunni movement that includes elements of Sufism	Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi (d. 1995)

Source: Pall (2013: 45)

interview, 18 August 2017). This qualified him to teach in Dar al-Fatwa mosques, but he moved back to Sidon, where he made several unsuccessful to establish himself as an independent preacher (sheikh) leading minor congregations. Assir started preaching in the Hamzeh mosque at the entrance of Abra, under the leadership of Sheikh Ghazi Huneini, who was affiliated with the Islamic Group in Egypt (Table 2). As Assir's popularity grew, and because of the discord between the Tablighi faith and Jamaa doctrine, the personal relations with Huneini soured. So, Assir left the Hamzeh mosque and, with the help of the connections and funds raised by his followers, rented and refurbished a ground-floor flat in a multistory residential building in Abra that would become the movement's future center, the Bilal al-Rabah mosque, named after the Prophet Mohammad's prayer caller (*muezzin*). The Abra neighborhood is a mixed residential and shopping district located about five kilometers east of the city center and originally a Maronite Christian part of town (see Figure 1). Densely populated, the Abra municipality is characterized by urban congestion, high real estate costs, and land speculation with many empty flats owned by wealthy Sidon families, which testifies to the profound social and economic inequalities in the city (UN-Habitat 2017: 82–83, 124).

The Abra center was the first Tablighi mosque in Lebanon but lacked the religious credentials and architectural features of a mosque: minaret, dome, and pulpit.[7] (This is important to understand Assir's status as a preacher and that of his movement. By not being the custodian of a traditional mosque, the unassuming prayer hall reflected the popular character of the movement and Assir's formal status as lay preacher (*da'i*) rather than religious scholar (*'alim*) (for details of this distinction, see Pall 2013: 33). Moreover, Assir neither wore the turban signaling his official status as a sheikh nor exploited his descent from the linage of the Prophet Mohammad to raise his stature (former member, telephone interview, 17 August 2017), underscoring the movement's lay status and the fact that joining the congregation did not require allegiance to a religious or political authority (Sunni politician, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017). In the clientelized urban milieu in Sidon, this was significant and provided an avenue for channeling frustration and resentment, but without confronting or challenging the clientelist networks and local elites that many depended on for their livelihoods. The groundswell of sectarianism was also significant, as it is not linked to particular programs, parties, or partisans and appealed to primordial identity issues affecting Sunnis and their claim to political preeminence, and hence as Sunnism. This also accounts for sectarianism's broad appeal to the Sunni middle class, feeling neglected by the state and their social mobility and economic aspirations thwarted by governance failure, favoritism, and corruption (*wasta*). Moreover, sectarianism in Lebanon is institutionalized, with sectarian quotas for parliament and key government posts that underwrite "a countrywide patronage system" (Salloukh et al. 2015: 3).

A former member of Assir's group describes the first meeting with Assir as a revelation. Although from a conservative family, he, like many young men of his generation, led a frivolous life disdaining Islam's tenets and teachings while at the same time searching for a deeper meaning and purpose in life. Meeting Assir was a life-changing event and religious awakening that jolted him into the realization that he should be "a beacon spreading the light." Overnight, he changed his dress, appearance, and lifestyle to join Assir's inner circle of trusted devotees and took part in monthlong proselytizing trips across the country (telephone interview, 18 August 2017). At the time, Assir and his followers were not highly regarded in Sidon; indeed, "people hated their guts" (telephone interview, 20 August 2017). Their aggressive proselytizing in mixed Christian and Muslim neighborhoods and their disregard of women were a nuisance, and "they were very much looked down upon" (policy analyst, interview, Beirut, 10 December 2017). From 2000 to 2010, Assir focused on preaching and, true to his Tablighi roots, remained apolitical. In private, however, he expressed reservations about Hezbollah being apostates and their

lack of reverence for the Companions of the Prophet (*Sahabah*). Hezbollah's rapid takeover of West Beirut in 2008 at the expense of Sunni militias demonstrated the Sunnis' powerlessness and humiliation, and anti-Hezbollah rhetoric gradually found its way into his public sermons.

While the established clerics of Sunni Islam have a relationship of mutual dependency with political patrons (*zu'ama*) and notables, lower-ranking clerics such as Sheikh Assir depend on support from local communities and individuals (Pall 2013: 31). Assir's independent status attracted many people to the mosque to attend his sermons. The fact that Assir did not pay allegiance to a local patron or religious authority made his message attractive to many, as was speaking colloquial rather than formal Arabic, which added to his popular appeal (female supporter A, interview, Sidon, 15 February 2020). This concurs with followers who stress his growing public support in Sidon, becoming a respected arbitrator, trusted adviser, and mentor (former member, telephone interview, 17 August 2017). Unorthodox in both his views and demeanor—traditional *Shami* dress, long beard, charismatic personality—he grew to command respect, swelling the number of his sermon attendees. The Bilal al-Rabah mosque was packed during the Friday prayers, and religious classes were held at the compound, which included Assir's office across the street facing the mosque, a gift from one of his local backers reportedly costing $150,000 (Karouny 2012). Assir's popular appeal combined support for the Arab Spring revolutions (Syria in particular) with the discrimination of Sunnis and their right to bear arms: "All of this attracted the rich, the poor, doctors and engineers to his movement . . . [as did] his classes and seminars, which appealed to educated people" (Sunni politician, interview, Sidon, 21 February 2020).

As Assir's reputation grew, the number of worshippers outstripped the mosque's capacity and spilled onto nearby streets. During one of last days of Ramadan, on what is known as the Night of Destiny (*Laylat al-Qadr*), an estimated four thousand people congregated for nighttime prayers at the mosque (Caillet 2012). The huge street congregation was a public protest and visible display of religiosity that underlined the dual character of the movement. In the words of a middle-aged supporter who was a regular visitor to the mosque: "I loved the prayers there; there was a high spirituality in his prayers, especially during [Laylat] al-Qadr night" (female supporter A, interview, 15 February 2020).

As Assir's following and public influence grew, he also gained the support of influential families, wealthy individuals, and middle-class people who endowed his movement with funds: "People from the higher socioeconomic classes used to pray in his mosque . . . Many rich people supported him . . . even financially" (female supporter B, interview, 15 February 2020). Some were local businessmen, salaried professionals and shopkeepers, or returning migrants who had made their fortune abroad and now wanted to make their mark on Sidon society (policy associate, interview, Beirut, 4 December 2017). They saw in Assir a future leader, and supporting him and providing him with a religious platform conferred religious legitimacy and an avenue for upward social mobility in the city's hierarchy. One funded the construction of a new mosque in the center of the city, the Aisha mosque, planning to appoint Assir as custodian, while another provided Assir with a hilltop residence in the outskirts of Sidon. To understand this, we need to examine the political economy of Sidon that was conducive to the movement's growth and the urban ecology that provided the movement's sociopolitical base and Islamic milieu.

Clientelist City

Sidon is Lebanon's third-largest city and the South Governorate's administrative center, comprising three districts (Sidon, Jezzine, and Tyre). The Sidon district includes 16 municipalities,

one of which is Abra (pop. 13,300), the center of the Assir-movement (see Figure 1). Sidon has a rich cultural heritage that includes the Old City with markets (*souqs*), caravanserais, and a port with a Crusader castle, but the neglected and deteriorating tourist sector is lagging (Al-hagla 2010). Since the 1960s, the city has been transformed from agricultural town and citrus capital to a mercantile city with urban sprawl, a real estate boom, price hikes, and land speculation. Known as the Gate of the South, Sidon connects Beirut with south Lebanon, but the proximity to the capital has made the city an economic backwater, and fierce competition between local political actors often stalls development projects.[8]

In the Sidon District, one-third of the population lives below the national poverty line of $4 a day, which is higher than the national average (UN-Habitat 2017: 64). Poverty also afflicts the city's Palestinian refugees, who have the highest poverty rate in Lebanon and lack civil rights.[9] Sidon includes two refugee camps, Ayn al-Hilweh and Mieh Mieh (see Figure 1), the former of which is Lebanon's most populous camp, where violent conflict often spills across camp boundaries. The camp and adjacent areas are hubs for jihadist and Salafist groups (e.g., Jund e-Sham, Osbat al-Ansar) engaged in armed conflict with Palestinian nationalist groups (Knudsen 2005; Rougier 2007; Sogge 2018). Following internal clashes in 2016–2017, a new security wall was constructed around the camp, which is also used as a hideout by fugitives and others who are wanted by the authorities.

Sidon is characterized by strong systems of non-state and informal governance at the expense of the public authorities and involving political parties, associations and syndicates, and, especially, influential families and individuals (UN-Habitat 2017). This includes notable families with a historical pedigree and residence in Sidon, and who are thus referred to as *Saidawees*. Until mid-2000s, the traditional *Saidawee* elites, notables, and person-centered political parties held the upper hand in Sidon politics. Sidon is the hometown of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's preeminent postwar politician and billionaire, the main power base and seat of family dynasty (Mermier and Mervin 2012). In the 2004 municipal elections, however, the Hariri family suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of a candidate backed by the traditional *Saidawee* elites leading professional unions and local political parties (ICG 2010: 19).

After the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the subsequent nationwide protests and international prosecution (Knudsen 2012), no one wielded greater influence than the Hariri family, headed by the late Hariri's sister, MP Bahia Hariri, representing the Hariri Foundation, the Future Movement, and a network of family associations in Sidon (Ghaddar 2016). Using personal contacts and local family associations, Bahia Hariri has built a complex clientelist network that attracts foreign and local development money. From her base in the upscale Majdelyoun neighborhood (see Figure 1), she stands atop of a web of local associations and party-affiliated groups that controls development interventions in the city and can obstruct those of opponents. Compared to historical accounts of Sunni clientelism (Johnson 1985), the political scene in Sidon takes the form of a bureaucratic network of family-based unions that has become an alternative to the state's welfare system (Cammett 2014) and keeps "citizens continuously indebted and dependent" (Ghaddar 2016). Bahia Hariri is also involved in security provision and have engineered buyouts and swaps with militant Islamist and Salafist groups to leave Sidon (Knudsen 2011).

During this time, the relations between the Future Movement and Assir were amicable, and ahead of the 2009 general elections, there were informal contacts between them on electoral collaboration (Azzam 2013: 50). Assir was also a member of the Islamic Consultation Meeting, which included all the Sunni Islamic parties in Sidon (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020), but the 2011 Syrian uprising and the onslaught on Sunnis changed Assir's outlook and that of his supporters, turning the Abra congregation into an independent

movement as the conflict with rivals escalated (female supporter A, interview, 15 February 2020).

Conflict Escalation

Following the onset of the revolt in March 2011 and the formation of a new Lebanese government backed by Hezbollah shortly after, Assir's message became more confrontational, and having "hid behind the pulpit," he began airing his views in public after (Sunni cleric, pers. comm (Arabic), Sidon, 1 March 2020). An important part of Assir's popular appeal was his daring, even reckless behavior: "He was bold. He said what others did not have the courage to say" (senior Sunni scholar, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017). Assir's knack of speaking his mind led to increasing friction with Hezbollah. In late 2011, Assir verbally attacked Hezbollah dignitary Mohammed Yazbek's rendition of the Battle of the Camels, Islam's first civil war (656 CE), here used to legitimize Hezbollah's right to bear arms. In early 2012, a new controversy with Yazbek erupted, this time over his critique of Aisha, one of the Prophet Mohammad's wives and a subject of historical dispute between Sunnis and Shiites. From 2012, Assir's sermons became more confrontational, and he began openly attacking his opponents—in particular, oppression in Lebanon and in Syria, with Hezbollah being active on both fronts (former member, telephone interview, 18 August 2017). This issue, which unites the Sunni political elite and the grassroots, has a strong mobilizing power, as the following excerpt from a sermon illustrates:

> We will not accept the domination of anyone! We will not accept the abject (*ḥaqīra*) Syrian-Iranian tutelage (of Lebanon)! Enough contempt for Sunnis! Enough contempt for their blood, their safety, and the honour of their wives! Have you seen what is happening, thousands of massacres in Syria, thousands of rapes, mosques are destroyed and the ulema are being murdered! Where is dignity, where is loyalty, where is the ardor to defend your honor (*al-ghīra*), where?! . . . The Community (*Umma*), which had once conquered the world, is afraid and watching the massacres in Syria without moving or reacting; But where are we my brothers?! . . . It is obligatory to lead a jihad to break this domination and we will not tolerate that anyone, even if he claimed to rise up to heaven, threatens us in this country (Lebanon)! (Assir, cited in Caillet 2012)

In the spring of 2012 Assir undertook a series of political rallies in support of the Syrian people, beginning with Beirut in early March, an event that attracted about two thousand supporters and was broadcast on national TV. Overnight, this made Sheikh Assir a household name and the face of the Salafist movement in Lebanon. In Beirut, Assir was joined by Fadel Shaker, a renowned singer and performer once hailed as the King of Romance who gave up his career to join Assir's inner circle. A few weeks later, Assir took his message to Tripoli, a Sunni-majority city and Salafist stronghold (Pall 2013). Thousands of followers attended the rally, greeting Assir as a long-lost son. In Sidon that summer, a six-week sit-in paralyzed one of the main streets linking the city to the capital. With time, the protests from the angry and frustrated shopkeepers were serious enough for Interior Minister Marwan Charbel to come to Sidon (Naharnet Newsdesk 2012). There, he met with Assir, who vowed not to move until "Hezbollah is disarmed or the last drop of blood of our last child is spilled" (Nada 2013).

After the meeting, the siege was lifted, and popular pressure forced the highway to reopen and Charbel to promise to review the national defense strategy. The end of the siege was followed by a counterdemonstration by the Popular Nasserist Organization, a local political party aligned with Amal and Hezbollah (see Table 3). In early August, Assir held a second rally in Bei-

rut's Tariq al-Jadideh neighborhood, a Sunni bastion, in support of the Syrian uprising, pledging undying loyalty to the opposition (*Daily Star* 2012), followed six weeks later by a third rally in the center of Beirut. Assir's many rallies were an attempt to broaden his popular support and unite Salafi groups across the country, but people close to the Hariri family intervened to "prevent the constitution of a Salafi front in North Lebanon" (Rougier 2015: 216). Although steeped in the Salafi doctrine (former member, telephone interview, 18 August 2017), Assir never identified as a Salafi and preferred to be called a Sunni or simply a Muslim (Caillet 2012), captured in slogans such as "Muslims Honor Lebanon" and "Honor of Muslims, Lebanese, and Sidon's citizens" (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020), which tapped into sectarian discontent over the Sunnis' disempowerment and dishonor at the hands of Hezbollah.

Militant Showdown

By the end of 2012, Assir had become a media phenomenon with more than 330,000 followers on Facebook and 65,000 on Twitter (Nada 2012), while his actions grew increasingly confrontational and militant. In early November, Assir supporters tore down Hezbollah posters in Taamir, an Islamist stronghold adjacent to the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp. The ensuing shoot-out injured many and killed four, including two of Assir's men. The funeral procession for Assir's aides turned into a protest that congregated at the roundabout near the Hajj Bahaeddine Hariri Mosque (Lebanon's largest mosque endowed by the Hariri family), where the two men were buried; the roundabout was later referred to as the Assir Roundabout (*Dawar Assir*). At the funeral, Assir and his closest followers branded automatic guns and wore military fatigues, signaling the growing militarization of the movement. Soon after, Assir (unsuccessfully) tried to set up at militia with support from refugees in Ayn al-Hilweh. In early December, he organized another rally in Sidon with more than 1,500 men roaming the streets and protesting Hezbollah's hegemony in Lebanon and commemorating those laid to rest at the roundabout.

Unlike the rallies in Beirut and Tripoli, his third foray outside Sidon in late January 2013 challenged sectarian boundaries, bussing a large entourage of his followers to the fashionable Farayya ski resort in the Christian Metn District. Stopped by Christian protesters along the way, Assir's group made it safely to Farayya and was pictured cajoling and basking in the snow before returning to Sidon. This peaceful outing did not signal a change in Assir's confrontational strategy and indeed was seen as a publicity stunt by local rivals (senior Sunni scholar, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017). The trip to Farayya was followed by a series of conflicts that raised the stakes for Assir and his opponents. During this time, Assir also announced his departure from the Tabligihi Jamaat, a reflection of his growing politicization and that of his movement. The security situation now became more fragile, with tensions rising and the army deploying in Abra. There, the mosque was also being watched over by members of the local Resistance Brigades (*Sarayaa Muqawama al-Lubnaniya*), a Hezbollah-affiliated militia. Because the members, non-Shia volunteers, brazenly support the party and its goals, local Sunnis consider them thugs (former member, telephone interview, 20 October 2017).

With financial support from Hezbollah, members of the Resistance Brigades rented flats overlooking the mosque and kept watch on Assir's compound. At the mosque, armed guards patrolled the perimeters, while inside Assir was receiving delegations urging him to neither step down nor surrender his weapons, which many, including his financial backers, saw as unjust because Sunnis, unlike the other sects, have been barred from acquiring arms. The situation gradually got tenser, and a series of events from February to April brought the latent conflict to a head. In rapid succession, Assir issued a fatwa in support of a jihad in Syria, announced

the formation of a new militia known as the Free Resistance Brigades (*Kataib al-Muqawama al-Hurr*), and shortly afterward was pictured crossing the Syrian border in full battle gear, before returning to Sidon and organizing another demonstration in the city center. At this point, Assir was challenged by political opponents on several fronts, yet he criticized not only the leaders of Hezbollah and Amal but also potential allies like the Future Movement (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020).

Now several of Assir's closest aides, including members of his own Shura Council, grew concerned and urged him to defuse tensions and avoid a confrontation that threatened to engulf the city and the movement. Assir, however, brushed their concerns aside and argued that the army deployment in Abra was a security guarantee that would prevent conflict escalation and protect him and his followers; at one point he even distributed flowers to the soldiers (female supporter A, interview, 15 February 2020). He was adamant that the people of Sidon would come to his support, as would Sunnis across Lebanon. This fatal misreading of the situation, as well as his not "listening to the voice of the country" (Municipal Council member, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017), was a major catalyst for the final conflict escalation that took place when the private car of Assir's brother was attacked by members of the Resistance Brigades near the city center, wounding two of Assir's adult sons.

The incident sparked the Battle of Abra (23–25 June 2013), which rapidly spread from the city center brawl to the Abra mosque, where shooting started and over the next hours sparked an all-out confrontation with the army, the Resistance Brigades, and militant groups in the Mieh Mieh refugee camp joining in the machine gun, artillery, and mortar fire (Al-Jazeera 2017). The three-day battle turned the Abra compound into disaster zone, killing 20 soldiers and injuring more than 100. About 40 of Assir's men were killed, and another 65 taken into custody amid charges of army brutality and torture, as well as collusion between the army and Hezbollah.[10] Assir and his aide Fadel Shaker fled the scene, the latter to the nearby Ayn al Hilweh refugee camp, while Assir moved to an undisclosed location. After two years in hiding, Assir was arrested as he was about to board an airplane at Beirut International Airport in August 2015.[11] He remained in solitary confinement in the notorious Roumieh prison until appearing before a military tribunal. After deferring the trial proceedings several times, Assir received the death penalty for his role in the killing of 20 soldiers in late September 2017 (Al Jazeera 2017). Afterward, Sheikh Assir's wife Amal Shamseddine led a group of women who took to the streets to protest the verdict and that of his 15 codefendants who were sentenced to life imprisonment and long prison terms. Decrying the verdicts, Shamseddine pledged: "Saida is dignity, Saida is al-Assir's, Saida is ours . . . God will avenge us" (Chehayeb 2017). While open conflict between Sunnis and Shias has since been averted, the tensions have been growing amid increasing assertiveness on behalf of the Shia. Posters of Khomeini were now displayed alongside those of Amal and Hezbollah leaders, Berri and Nasrallah, in the Shia-majority Haret Saida municipality, which was matched by greater insecurity and victimhood among the Sunnis (policy analyst, interview, Beirut, 10 December 2017).

The Abra incident posed huge costs to Sidon; the city's reputation and peaceful image suffered and was followed by an economic downturn and steep reduction in retail trade (Municipal Council member, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017). Moreover, the incident cost many supporters and families dearly and left them traumatized, some with their sons imprisoned and "accused as murderers without evidence. Some of them were [even] sentenced to life imprisonment without evidence" (female supporter B, interview, 15 February 2020). In post-conflict Abra, the Assir compound lay deserted, the worshippers disappeared, and the erstwhile supporters grew silent. Wanted by the authorities, Assir's closest aides went underground to avoid arrest, yet many were tried later in absentia and received long prison terms. In Sidon, many of

Assir's supporters now retracted their support, and "after the battle and the killing of the army soldiers, seen as a national symbol, people started disassociating themselves from the Assir narrative" (policy analyst, interview, Beirut, 10 December 2017). Indeed, the more prestigious the supporter, the greater the need to publicly withdraw their support. By a local estimate, the number of supporters fell to about 10 percent of the Assir movement's pre-conflict strength (senior Sunni scholar, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017). Some of the remaining supporters rose to protest singing and dancing during the 2016 Sidon International Festival, marching under the banner "Sidon Will Not Dance" (Student, personal communication, Sidon, 6 December 2017), but the movement was now weakened and popular support greatly diminished as many felt Assir had betrayed the trust they placed in him and misled the city's youth (female supporter B, interview, 15 February 2020).

Electoral Fallout

Sidon is predominantly Sunni (about 84 percent of registered residents), but there is a sizeable Shia community in Haret Saida (pop. 19,625) who supports Amal and Hezbollah. Of the 60,000 registered voters in Sidon, about half cast their vote in municipal elections. In 2016, three electoral lists contested the municipal elections.[12] The Sidon Development List was backed by the Future Movement, while the Voice of the People was backed by their opponents, the Popular Nasserist Movement, with the support of Amal and Hezbollah. The third list, Sidon Freedom (*'ahrar Saida*), was a newcomer led by Ali Sheikh Ammar, a former executive bureau chief of the Islamic Group and a supporter of Sheikh Assir. The Sidon Development List won the elections but lost almost a quarter of the votes obtained in the 2010 election. The Sidon Freedom List came last with about two thousand votes, consistent with estimates of the popular support for Assir, locally seen as an "election key" (*miftah inthikibat*) in Sidon's entrenched clientelist politics (Azzam 2013: 50). Because of the winner-takes-all system used in municipal elections (Abu-Rish 2016), the Sidon Development list bagged all the seats in the municipal council (see Table 3).

The election results are consistent with the diminished public support for Assir, with many disavowing him and negating their former allegiance to and support for his movement. However, party officials involved in the elections cite vote-rigging, throwing out ballots and intim-

Table 3: Municipal Elections in Sidon: 2010 and 2016

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

(*) The lists ran under different names in the 2010 elections: Loyalty and Development; The Popular Will.
(**) Voter turnout % (total votes): 2016: 44.5 % (26,970), 2010; 54.6% (29,982).
Source: (The Monthly 2016)

idation as reasons for the poor showing of the Sidon Freedom List, with more than half of the initial 21 list members withdrawing their candidacy following political pressure from Sunni contenders and army security.[13] Contesting the elections was a last-minute decision and precluded an electoral campaign, yet the main demand was justice for Assir and his followers who were tortured while detained in prison (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020). In retrospect, local people are adamant that Assir was led into a trap, the Hezbollah-affiliated Resistance Brigades started the fatal battle, and Assir's subsequent trial by military tribunal was unjust and the verdict politically motivated, as was the imprisonment of his many followers (female supporters A and B, interview, 15 February 2020). This can also account for the declining voter turnout in Sidon and the diminishing support for the Future Movement (see Table 3), covertly supporting Assir only to drop him when he turned against the army. According to popular opinion, the representatives of the mainstream Sunni parties, the Future Movement and the Islamic Group, "were with [Assir] if he succeeded but abandoned him when he failed" (senior Sunni scholar, interview, Sidon, 7 December 2017).

The problems faced during the 2016 municipal elections were repeated in the 2018 general elections when a new attempt was made to launch a list demanding the release of Assir supporters and the many Islamists detained in Lebanese prisons. Following new regulations, Sidon and the neighboring town Jezzine were joined as one electoral district (South I) and required election lists to include deputies from both. However, the list faltered when candidates withdrew following pressure and intimidation until the list was no longer eligible to run. The few remaining candidates tried to join other election lists, but blackballing and political pressure served to exclude them, while the regulations prevented them from running as independents (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020). Their attempts to secure the release of imprisoned Assir supporters likewise faltered, as politicians were unwilling to intervene or reopen their cases, leaving many lingering in jail without due process and signaling the ultimate defeat of the movement.

Urban Pathways

Sidon and Tripoli are Sunni-majority cities that have remained at the economic and political margins of the capital Beirut. In both cities, clientelist networks are entrenched, with local businessmen-turned-politicians contesting elections and, in the process, upstaging traditional elites to become new political patrons and leaders (Knudsen 2016, 2017). Historically, Tripoli and Sidon have both reeled under social inequalities that gave rise to social protests serving as foundations for new social movements.[14] The 2005 murder of Rafik Hariri reignited latent sectarian conflicts and grievances in Tripoli, followed by the onset of the 2011 Syrian uprising and the army's crackdown on and arrest of militants and leaders in mid-2014 (Knudsen 2017: 88). This also coincides with the conflict escalation in Sidon and the rapid growth of the Assir movement that culminated with the Battle of Abra in mid-2013.

According to Tine Gade in her analysis of Islamist groups in Tripoli over longer time scales, the outcome or post-protest pathways for Islamist movements vary "according to individual characteristics of activists and movements" (2019: 60), as well as the level of authoritarian repression they experience. Gade identifies four contingent trajectories (pathways) that Islamist groups tend to follow: contraction, co-optation, scale/arena shift, and disengagement. In the first, the movement contracts, and supporters end open protest, but the network and collective identities survive as the movement and supporters enter a dormant phase of abeyance. Gade's movement-level analysis points to the urban setting as important for the growth of Islamist groups, and more so in secondary cities like Tripoli and Sidon, where entrenched poverty and

clientelism lead to deprivation, and Islamist movements offer an alternative outlet for protests silenced or subjugated by elites.

Sheikh Assir's trajectory is shaped by his Sidon upbringing, the city's growing religiosity, and Sunni identity, as well as the quietist and, later, Salafist influences that connected Sidon with Tripoli. The major transformation of the movement came after 2011, when sectarianism replaced communitarianism and Sunni-Shia tensions increased popular support and changed contentious repertoires from collective to conflictual. The subsequent army clampdown on the movement and imprisonment of Assir led to the movement's gradual dissolution and forced loyal cadre underground with the remaining loyalists supporting the political offshoot, the Sidon Freedom list (Table 3). Recent interviews in Sidon confirm that the clampdown on former Assir supporters, in particular those who had been imprisoned, "marginalized themselves and stopped their involvement as result of the suffering and injustice they endured. So, today there is nothing called the Assir movement or the Bilal Bin Rabah mosque except for the wife of Assir and the families of the detainees [who are campaigning for their release]" (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020). The Assir movement's trajectory hence mirrors what Gade has termed contraction, meaning that repression forced the movement into hibernation, while grievances remain unresolved and could later be reignited.

Conclusion

The rise of the Assir movement followed years of Islamic activism that had embedded it in Sidon society, and the growth was triggered by the Syrian uprising that spurred political and primordial grievances that radicalized the leader and the movement. This was followed by tit-for-tat conflict escalation and militarization that in the end led to the fateful confrontation with the army. The post-conflict intimidation, repression, and incarceration made the movement contract, losing popular and electoral support, yet grievances remained as political elites reasserted control. The combination of sectarianism (Sunni disempowerment and dishonor) and populism (popular discontent) was amplified by political events and concurrent crises in the Sunni religious and political establishment. The Assir case hence provides important insights into the inner workings of new social movements, the role and position of the leader, the roots of their popular appeal, and the conflict dynamics triggering their rise-and-fall that is applicable beyond this case study. More specifically, the Assir case underscores the importance of the urban realm for the formation of Islamist movements due to the presence of social inequality, elite politics, and aspiring middle classes whose mobility and aspirations are thwarted and hence become financial backers of the movements and leaders. These niche factors combined to form an urban ecology that amplified discontent, sustained social protests, and subsumed this within a popular Islamist (neo-Salafist) discourse. In this manner, the urban realm provided the pathways and concomitant link between "Sheikhs and the city."

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▪ **ARE JOHN KNUDSEN** is Research Professor at the Chr. Michelsen Institute and holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Bergen. He specializes on post–civil war Lebanon and has published on micro conflict, urban displacement, and Islamism in the Middle East and South Asia. His current research studies the consequences of Syrian refugees' urban displacement and containment in the Middle East. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9630-939X | Email: are.knudsen@cmi.no

▪ **NOTES**

1. A secondary city is as an urban area with a population of one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand (Cities Alliance 2020).
2. Salafism in Lebanon is commonly classified as quietist, activist (*haraki*), or jihadist (Rabil 2014: 4).
3. With the exception of Hezbollah, most political parties in Lebanon lack traits common to parties in Western democracies; they have often had no ideology, have devised no programs, and have made little effort at transcending sectarian support, so most of them have seen their support wane to become "parties without partisans" (Khazen 2003).
4. The prevalence of street-level politics and protests does not, however, imply irrationality as implied by the "Arab street" label (see Regier and Khalidi 2009).
5. In 2014, Qabbani was forced to step down from the position he had held since the 1989 assassination of Mufti Hassan Khaled (Knudsen 2010).
6. Abd al-Hadi Shahal and Daa'i al-Islam al-Shahal, sons of the prominent Tripoli Sheikh Salim al-Shahhal (1922–2008), the founder of Salafism in Lebanon (Pall 2013: 38).
7. For studies on the missing architectural features of mosques, see Batuman 2012; ietersee 2009).
8. The city's governance crisis was manifested by the inability to resolve the festering garbage crisis. Sidon's Garbage Mountain (Jabal al-Zabeleh) grew to become a public health hazard and environmental risk, receiving 150 tons of solid waste per day (UN-Habitat 2017).
9. Since 2012, the Syrian refugee crisis has led to a near 10 percent population increase (approx. 25,000). Most of the city's poor congregate in the urban core serving as a poverty pocket (UN-Habitat 2017).
10. This also ties with the Sunni conviction that the army is Hezbollah-controlled and not a neutral arbiter (Knudsen and Gade 2017).
11. Some of Assir's associates are still in hiding and facing charges (Almisshal 2017).
12. The elections for the 21-member municipal council are held every six years. Election lists comprise parties and independents. There are no sectarian quotas, and the bloc voting system opens for a winner-takes-all outcome.
13. This also coincides with preelection attempts to unite Islamic parties under the banner of the Islamic Movement, but this too fell through because of the historical links between some Islamist parties and the Future Movement, as well as internal political and doctrinal divisions (Sunni politician, interview, 21 February 2020).
14. In the 1970s, Tripoli and Sidon formed the seat of social protest movements and were involved in conflicts that led to the murder of the main protagonists: Ali Akkawi (Tripoli, 1973) and Ma'ruf Sa'd (Sidon, 1975) (Gade 2019: 62; Traboulsi 2007: 183).

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