

***The View From Without:
Syria & Its Neighbours***

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Preface

Omar Imady

In this issue of *Syria Studies*, we move to a regional perspective of Syria, examining recent political dynamics involving Turkey and Lebanon. Three contributions by scholars on Syria are included in this issue, and their findings consistently point to just how charged and often hostile Syria's relationships with its neighbours have been.

In *The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Syria-Iran Relations*, Özden Zeynep Oktav takes us on a fascinating journey from 2002 when the Justice and Development Party came to power, and until the present. Oktav highlights the period when Turkey sought a state of 'zero problem with its neighbours' and the positive implications this had on its relationship with Syria in particular. The advent of the Arab Spring, and the events that unfolded in Syria after March 2011, caused a dramatic change in Turkey's foreign policy. In a sense, Turkey failed to appreciate the strong sectarian current that underlined Syria's uprising, and by choosing to strongly side with it, and subsequently, to allow Sunni jihadist to pass through its territory, Turkey effectively abandoned its zero problem policy and, worse, undermined its own success story by alienating its non-Sunni Turkish segments of society.

In *Sunni Islamists in Tripoli and the Asad regime 1966-2014*, Tine Gade documents just how extensive Syria's attempt to dominate Lebanon had been since the Lebanese civil war. Using Tripoli as a case study, Gade describes how Syria succeeded in 'de-structuring' the Sunni elite, providing privileges to those willing to be co-opted and denying access to economic opportunities to those who resisted its hegemony. In either case, the urban Sunni poor were marginalised. In her very detailed historical documentation, Gade reminds us that some of the elements of what took place in Syria after 2011 were almost rehearsed, though at a much smaller level, by Syria in Lebanon. The creation of jihadi salafi groups, through a policy of neglect, the utilisation of acts by Sunni jihadis to pave the way towards stronger Syrian dominance, and to get rid of serious opponents – all of this was previously implemented successfully in Lebanon, Tripoli in particular.

In *Coping with Asad: Lebanese Prime Ministers' Strategies*, Taku Osoegawa focuses on Syrian Lebanese relations after the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003. With a special focus on Lebanon's prime ministers, Rafiq al-Hariri, Fuad Siniora, Sa'd al-

Hariri, and Najib Miqati, Taku illustrates the extent to which Lebanon's ruling elite had to compromise vis a vis Syria, and how every move they took that was not sanctioned by Syria had a definite price attached to it. Syria, threatened by events in Iraq, was adamant at ensuring that Lebanon remained not only loyal, but a card that could be effectively used against the West when necessary. The challenge confronting Lebanon's prime ministers was to somehow walk the fine line between protecting Lebanon's sovereignty and interests and fulfilling Syria's high expectations – expectations which became significantly higher after the Syrian uprising.

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The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Syria-Iran Relations

Özden Zeynep Oktav*

After the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) advent to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy underwent changes which were significant enough to raise question marks with its Western allies' regarding whether Turkey has ceased to be a part of the West and international society. Turkish foreign policy makers started to change the Cold War mentality, which urged Turkey to have a '*faith*' in the West without questioning its norms, values, policies and conduct. This change of style and substance in Turkish foreign policy became most evident with the improving of relations with Syria and Iran who had uneasy or hostile relations with the West. However, with the outburst of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Turkey was caught off guard and the mass demonstrations on the Arab streets forced Ankara to reshape its foreign policy calculations in the Arab world. Put differently, the Arab spring became a litmus test for Ankara's policies of playing to the Arab streets as well as its relations with Syria and Iran. While it lent quick support for popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt, where Turkish investments were relatively limited, Ankara's first reaction to the uprising in Syria, where Turkish economic and political investments were both substantial, was more cautious and it prioritised stability and gradual reform. However, Ankara gradually reversed its policy and ended up calling for Asad's overthrow; moreover, as against its early distancing of Turkey from the West, Ankara now sought to enlist the West in dealing with the Syrian regime. Apprehensions of Turkey's ambitions vis-à-vis Syria's civil war increased significantly because of its policy of activism which lent support to Muslim Brotherhood which dominated the Syrian National Council, the opposition coalition against the Asad regime. Turkey was seen or portrayed as a country following pro Sunni policies especially by the West.

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After a brief survey of improving relations with Syria and Iran, this article sets out to examine the triangle of Turkey-Syria-Iran relations after the outburst of Syria's civil war, focusing on the following questions: What were the reasons for Turkey's move to cooperate with the West in dealing with the Syrian crisis in spite of it sacrificing, in the process, its good neighborhood relations with both Syria and Iran? What is the impact of the Syrian crisis on Turkey-Iran relations? What were the priorities and the miscalculations of Ankara in dealing with problems stemming from Syria's civil war? In addition, the article will discuss the duality and ambivalence of Turkey-Iran relations which increasingly become evident after the significant changes taking place in the region such as the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq's Western provinces and Turkey becoming the biggest ally of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), breaking in this respect not only from Iran and Iraq but also the United States. The reasons why Turkey and Iran maintain cordial relations in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis despite so many divergences of interests will also be among the concerns of the study.

Ups and Downs in Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran

In parallel with Turkey's post 2002 tilting towards regional alliances as an alternative to relations with global actors, principally the United States and the European Union, Turkey adopted a bridge country role between East and West so as to balance its relations between the West/Israel on one hand and Syria/Iran on the other. However, with the renewed hostilities in Gaza at the end of 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan who felt a 'sense of betrayal' by Israel after his mediating efforts between Israel and Syria employed very harsh rhetoric towards Israel. This marked a new era in Turkish foreign policy because Ankara, made it evident that it dropped its previous balancing policy between the East and the West. Instead, it would prioritise "zero-problems" with its regional neighbours.

Deepening Economic Relations with Syria and Iran

Ankara had signed 51 protocols with Syria by March 2010.¹ This was a groundbreaking development in bilateral relations because those protocols, which are

¹ With the September 16, 2009 Treaty, visa requirements were lifted and the first ministerial meeting of the Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council which was held with the participation

based on the slogan of “common destiny, history and future,” (“*Al-qadar al-mushtarak, Ettarikh al-mushtarak, Al-mustaqbal al-mushtarak*”) aimed at economic integration and at the same time inflamed a hot debate concerning Turkey’s shift of axis. Erdoğan, “referring to the ongoing debates as to whether Turkey was shifting its axis in foreign policy, said: “the focus is not shifting but rather the focus of Turkish foreign policy is normalizing.” (Tur 2010) Turkish officials emphasised that it was trade, rather than politics, which determined the new contours of Turkish foreign policy. For example, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu commented that the lifting of visas with Syria as “the first step of turning economic cooperation into economic unity” (Gürcanlı 2009). In a similar vein, Turkey tried to create a common free trade area by negotiating High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils with Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon as well as Syria. In parallel with increasing efforts to enhance trade relations with Syria, Ankara also increased its trade volume with Iran to \$ 10 billion annually.

Not only did Turkey’s exports to Iran double, but also Turkey became quite dependent on Iranian oil and gas² (Associated Press 2009). Exports to Iran rose more than seven-fold, from \$300 million to \$2 billion, between 2002-2009 (TSIDICG 2010, 6). Turkey’s efforts, together with Brazil, to prevent the application of UN sanctions on Iran in 2010, should be read against this background. Ankara’s increasing trade relations with Iran has become completely incompatible with the US policy of bringing Iran to heel. The mutual distrust between Ankara and Washington became more evident as the US pressured Turkey to put sanctions into effect. Washington was increasingly uneasy about the probability that Turkey could emerge as a new safety net for Iranian business as the Turkish government insisted that it would abide by UN sanctions but not the more sweeping restrictions imposed on Tehran by the US and the European Union (Khalaf and Strauss 2010). Ankara’s reluctance to apply the sanctions of individual countries and Turkish official circles’ suspicions concerning the application of sanctions by EU and American companies manifest Turkey’s distrust of the West and its enthusiasm to be an independent regional actor.

of ten ministers on October 13, 2009 aimed exchange on trade, development and education (Ayhan 2009, 30; Turkish NY 2009).

² “Turkey receives 18 million cubic meters per day from Iran, making Iran the second largest supplier of gas to Turkey after Russia” (Associated Press 2009).

Setbacks to Turkey's Zero-Problems Policy

Towards the end of 2010, however, two developments clarified the limits of Turkey's capability of continuing its good neighborhood policy and being an independent actor in the international system dominated by the United States. One was the deployment of the missile defense system under NATO's command on Turkish territory and of the early warning radar system in Malatya Kürecik on the 19-20 November 2010.³ Turkey's consent to participate in a defense mechanism that was believed by many to be against Iran, was perceived as an example of the JDP Government's difficulty of following good neighborhood relations at the expense of its relations with the global actors, especially the United States (Özalp 2010). Although Ankara declared that the system did not target Iranian nuclear sites, the US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's statement that the purpose of the US radar system to be installed in eastern Turkey was to defend against Iranian missiles, inflicted collateral damage on Turkey-Iran relations.⁴ In addition, the arguments concerning the sharing of intelligence between Turkey and Israel from the US radar system in Turkey, which is similar to the one in Israel's Negev Desert, further strained Iranian-Turkish relations.⁵ The Iranian Chief of the General Staff's threatening words⁶ manifested the damage done to relations with Iran.

The second development that crystallised the unsustainability of Turkey's policy of balancing between its Western alliance and its good neighbor policy was the outburst of the Arab spring. Especially the Libyan rebellion became a litmus test for Turkey's institutional relations with the West. At first, Turkey, a NATO member, objected to military interference in Libya, mainly because it would jeopardise lucrative construction contracts in Libya and its large investments in the country. Turkish president Gül openly stated Ankara's suspicions concerning the hidden

³ Gürsel, K. (2010, November 21). AKP Dış Politikası Lizbon'da İflas Etti. *Milliyet*.

⁴ China Daily, "Panetta to Visit Turkey Over Shield Plan," 14 Aralık 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-12/14/content_14266117.htm Kadri Gürsel, "Füze Kalkanının Eğrisi Doğrusu," *Milliyet*, October 9, 2011.

⁵ Metin Münir, İran'ın Erdoğan'a Sunduğu Fırsat, *Milliyet*, 18 Ekim 2012.

⁶ "Turkey will be next in line for violence after Syria if it continues to work on behalf of Western interests," İran "Genel Kurmay Başkanı Hasan Firuzabadi: Sıra Türkiye'ye gelir," *Star*, August 28, 2012.

agenda of the coalition forces whose main partners were the United States and EU.⁷ However, in the face of the increasing support given to the Libyan rebels by the Western countries, Ankara recalled its ambassador from Tripoli and recognised the rebel Transnational National Council.⁸

The Syrian Civil War and Turkey

With the outbreak of Syrian uprisings and the Asad regime's indifference to Turkey's warnings to stop its crackdown on opposition protests, Ankara took care not to make a mistake similar to that in the Libyan case, (of following the same anti western policy). Ankara officially declared that it would interfere in what was happening in Syria, a dramatic shift from its traditional principle of non-interference in internal affairs of a neighboring country. Erdoğan openly stated that what was happening in Syria was an internal Turkish matter and he had run out of patience (Bugün 2011).

There were three motives behind Ankara's shift from its non-interference policy after the outburst of the Syrian uprisings: first, was to show that Ankara was no longer out of the orbit of the West; second, on the assumption that the West would rapidly depose Asad as it had done Qaddafi, to assure itself a place at the table that would negotiate the new regional order in the post-Asad period, and third, and most important of all, because the Syrian civil war would lead to a flood of Syrian refugees so as to endanger Turkish-Syrian borders, and would make them a backdoor for Kurdish terrorism.

Ankara firmly believed that a political transition from the Asad regime was essential to resolving the conflict. Turkey, hoping to bring the regime to the negotiating table, empowered Syrian opposition elements, allowing them to organise and convene in Turkey, as well as hosting defectors from the Syrian military and

⁷ Turkish president Abdullah Gül stated on a TV channel: "some coalition governments have ulterior motives and Libya could be "looted" as Iraq had been. Because the aim (of coalition forces) is not the liberation of the Libyan people. There are hidden agendas and differing interests", 2011, *TV 24*. 23 March. *Gül: Libya'yla ilgili bazı ülkeler fırsatçılık içinde*. Retrieved May 14, 2011, from TV 24: viewed 22 December 2012, <<http://www.yirmidort.tv/dunya/gul-libya-yla-ilgili-bazi-ulkeler-firsatcilik-icinde-haber-27719.htm>>

⁸ Habibi N. & W. Walker, J. 2011, 'Turkey's Grand Miscalculation on Libya', 6 March, *Boston.com*, viewed 18 December 2012,

<http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/blogs/the_angle/2011/03/turkeys_grand_m.html>

reportedly allowing the Free Syrian Army to set up their headquarters in the south east of the country.⁹ In addition, Ankara, aiming to strangle Syria's economy and severely diminish the power of the Asad government, decided to freeze assets of officials involved in the government's crackdown on the uprising, suspended its ties with the nation's central bank and banned all military sales.¹⁰ Turkey also helped forge an international "Friends of Syria" coalition to secure regime change. All these efforts, however, were ineffective and moreover deepened Turkey's mistrust of its Western allies, the EU and the United States who followed low profile policies towards Syria.

First of all, Ankara understood that Washington was not willing to shoulder responsibility for the Syrian crisis and take bold initiatives such as setting up a "buffer zone" inside Syria to protect refugees fleeing President Bashar al-Asad's forces, which would have entailed direct intervention in the year-long revolt.¹¹

Second, that the UN and Washington would not favor a military solution became evident towards the end of the first anniversary of the Syrian uprising. Turkey was disappointed by "the negligent U.S. attitude toward the Syrian regime, and the fact that Washington has not offered diplomatic, political, financial, or logistical support to the revolution in equal measure to what Russia has given the Syrian regime."¹²

Thus, a hot debate was inflamed in Turkish media whether Turkey was left alone by international society in its struggle against the Syrian regime, which had committed crimes against civilians.¹³ The lack of international consensus¹⁴ and Russia's standing by Asad "to rebuff what it sees as Western plots to induce regime

⁹ Nuh Yılmaz, Syria: The View from Turkey, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 19, 2013, http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_syria_the_view_from_turkey139

¹¹ Asli Aydintasbas, "Davutoglu'ndan ABD'ye: Humus Sarajevo Olmasin", *Milliyet*, February 13, 2012.

¹² Zagros Osman, "Syrian revolution and Washington's Miscalculations", *Fıkra Forum*, May 17, 2012, accessible at <http://fikraforum.org/?p=2241>

¹³ Semih Idiz, "Türkiye Suriye'de Yalnız Kalmamalı", *Milliyet*, March 31, 2012. "Türkiye Stratejisinde Yollar Ayrılıyor, Türkiye'nin Planına Veto", *Milliyet*, March 25, 2012.

¹⁴ "Ankara accused the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of indirectly supporting the oppression of the Syrian people by failing to unite on Syria." Semih Idiz, "Ankara BM'nin Suriye Surecine Karsi Soguk", *Milliyet*, March 26, 2012.

change in countries friendly to Russia had a negative impact on Turkey's efforts to realise regime change in Syria."¹⁵ Partly due to the increasing critiques in the Turkish media that Turkey was left alone and that it had pushed for a military intervention by the United States against Syria,¹⁶ top Turkish officials declared at the beginning of the second year of the Uprising that Turkey would not interfere in the Syrian uprising militarily; instead, they would seek a solution based on diplomacy that would include Iran, China and Russia.¹⁷ Thus, in parallel with its increasing disappointment regarding Washington's passive role towards Syria, NATO's inactivity¹⁸ and Moscow's blocking of United Nations moves, Ankara made serious modifications of its Syria policy and initiated the "triple negotiation system"¹⁹ which would bring together Turkey, Egypt and Iran; Turkey, Russia and Iran; and Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to work separately toward a solution in Syria. The involvement of Russia and Iran not only made it clear that Asad's regime, if not Asad, would have a place at the negotiating table but also made it evident that Turkey was seeking alliances alternative to the Western one to find a diplomatic solution to the war. This change in Ankara's policy was owing, not only to the realization that the West would not intervene, but also that a unilateral Turkish military intervention in Syria would be costly since Asad had dual Russo-Iranian support. Instead, Ankara sought agreements with Russia and Iran to be able to ensure its border security in the face of

¹⁵ Erol Cebeci and Kadir Üstün, "The Syrian Quagmire: What is Holding Turkey Back?", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No.2, 2012, p. 20.

¹⁶ Can Dunder, "Sam Amca Seni Iteliyor", *Milliyet*, April 12, 2012. For example, Hillary Clinton declared 'we expect the regime change process in Syria will be realised without violence under the leadership of the Arab League and Turkey' (Hürriyet 20 November 2011).

¹⁷ "For example, Turkish President, Gul stated that Turkey favored a solution based on diplomacy and opposed any foreign intervention to Syria," "BM'nin Son Kararını Tasvip Etmiyoruz", *Hürriyet*, March 25, 2012 and Semih İdiz, "Ankara'nın Kafası Suriye Konusunda Karışık Görünüyor", *Milliyet*, March 10, 2012.

¹⁸ "Rasmussen said the Western alliance had no intention of intervening in Syria even in the event of a U.N. mandate to protect civilians, and urged Middle East countries to find a way to end the spiraling violence." Reuters, NATO to Stay out of Syria Even If UN Mandate Emerges, February 17, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-syria-nato-idUSTRE81G0ZF20120217> accessed 12 Oct. 2013

¹⁹ Semih İdiz, Turkey's New Strategy could Broker Force, Almonitor, October 20, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/contents/articles/politics/2012/10/vision-and-imagination-required-over-syria.html> accessed 12 October 2013.

increasing border violations. Last but not least, Ankara became aware that military intervention could lead to internationalization of Turkey's Kurdish issue.²⁰

However, Turkey, whose ultimate aim was to ensure border stability as well as toppling the regime, found that it could not control the spillover of the Syrian conflict. As the border violations and explosions on its borders such as those in Ceylanpınar, Akçakale and Reyhanlı increased in number and severity. Ankara took further measures and declared new engagements rules. According to those rules, "any military instruments or troops approaching to the Turkish borders from the Syrian side in the form of a threat would be perceived as military threats" and would be militarily countered..."²¹ Moreover, Ankara found, over time that it had new unwelcome neighbours along its 900 km border with Syria. One was the Jihadist groups such as Al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the other was the Democratic Union Party "Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat", (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK.

New Neighbours, New Threat Perceptions

With the emergence of the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, and al-Qaeda-inspired fighters who took advantage of the power vacuum to fight for control of key northern Syrian towns, Ankara was exposed to new threats and new accusations. It was alleged that Ankara was providing members of radical Islamist groups with medical care in Turkish hospitals and supplying them with arms and ammunition, because those groups had been fighting against the PYD²² whom Assad promised to give autonomy in an area covering six districts in the region, including Haseki, Ras al-Ain, Afrin, Darbasiyya, Ainal-Arband, and Kamishli.²³ From Ankara's perspective, at a time when Turkey has been in an effort to make peace with its own

²⁰ Unver, H. A. 2012, 'Turkey's Syria Calculations: Kurdish Dimension', *Foreign Policy Association*, 22 March.

²¹ Kareem Fahim and Sebnem Arsu, Turkey Says It Shot Down Syrian Military Helicopter Flying in Its Airspace, *The New York Times*, September 16, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/world/europe/turkey-syria.html?_r=0 accessed October 13, 2013.

²² Amberin Zaman, Syrian Kurdish Leader Urges Turkey To End Support for Salafists, *Al Monitor*, October 9, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/syrian-kurdish-leader-calls-turkey-shut-down-salafists.html> accessed October 13, 2013.

²³ Today's Zaman, Turkey warns Syrian PYD against seeking autonomy, July 19, 2013.

Kurds in Turkey, the PYD's aspirations to gain autonomy, aiming at a probable independent Kurdish state which would have access to the Mediterranean, was unacceptable. In a region under PYD control, the PKK would have the ability to establish a strong foothold and lead to a serious border security issue for Turkey.

In this context, Ankara was accused of turning a blind eye to the presence of jihadist groups on Turkish territory and using those groups to suppress the Syrian Kurds' aspirations and not only by the PYD but also by Washington. While the Obama administration had encouraged a broad Syrian opposition coalition, in which the influence of Islamists would be circumscribed, from Washington's perspective, the Turkish government continued to throw its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood dominated the Syrian National Council, which was headquartered in Istanbul, and succeeded in eclipsing other groups within the new opposition coalition, effectively thwarting the American effort to empower non-Islamists.²⁴

In a nutshell, the war in Syria assumed a totally different dimension, no longer one against a brutal dictator for the sake of democracy, but over whether Syria would be an Islamic or secular state.²⁵ Most important of all, Asad was successful in giving the impression that he has been standing against the radical groups in the region. The arrival of Jihadists not only strengthened Asad's hand in international platforms but also has provided one of the incentives for Washington and Tehran to start searching for common ground. Tehran was concerned about al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Syria as much as the United States is.

Ankara's approach to international politics in the Middle East was increasingly isolating Turkey in international platforms. This was most evident when Erdoğan reacted furiously against both the West and the Arab states over the military coup that ousted Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in early July 2013.²⁶ According to some analysts, because Turkish foreign policy is a "purely

²⁴ Halil M. Karaveli, Turkey, the Unhelpful Ally, February 27, 2013, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/opinion/turkey-the-unhelpful-ally.html?_r=0 accessed 14 Oct.

²⁵ Semih Idiz, "Jihadists Alter the Syrian Equation, October 3, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/jihadists-alter-the-syrian-equation.aspx?pageID=449&nID=55566&NewsCatID=416>

²⁶ Erdoğan was puzzled at Saudi officials' support for the Egyptian coup and said: "How could a country claiming to uphold Islam and Sharia support the overthrow of an elected Islamist president who came to power after fair elections?" Al-Rasheed, M. 2013, 'Saudi Arabia and Turkey Falter Over

ethics-based” rather than an “the interest based” one, it should be defined as a “precious loneliness/worthy solitude.” This precious loneliness²⁷ of Turkey became yet more visible when the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry reached an agreement to secure and eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, although Obama had clearly declared that the United States would apply force if chemical weapons were used in the Syrian conflict, thereby averting an attack on Syria that Turkey had anticipated.²⁸ Turkey welcomed the UNSC resolution adopted in New York and the US-Russian agreement on the destruction of chemical weapons, but it came as a shock for Ankara that Assad was not obliged to quit his position immediately although approximately 1300 Syrian people were gassed in August 2013.²⁹ Thus, Bashar al-Asad not only managed to stay in power but also averted a US attack with the help of Russian inspired diplomatic efforts.

In addition, the lack of any reference in the UN resolution to refugees or the humanitarian situation in the neighboring countries deepened Turkey's existing uneasiness about the negligent attitude of the international community towards Turkey's refugee problem.³⁰ As the number of Syrian refugees which Turkey hosted in 21 refugee camps and the cost of those refugees as a result of Turkey's open door policy increased with each passing day, Ankara demanded that the international community – and especially the European Union and the United States – be much

Egypt', *Al-Monitor*, 20 August, viewed 14 September 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/saudi-arabia-turkey-strained-relations.html>>

²⁷ Adilgazi, L. 2013, 'Zero Problems' Policy Supplanted by 'Precious Loneliness' Approach', *Today's Zaman*, 25 August, viewed 14 September 2013, <<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-324415-zero-problems-policy-supplanted-by-precious-loneliness-approach.html>>

²⁸ Chris Good, President Obama's Red Line; What He Actually Said about Syria and Chemical Weapons, ABC News, August 26, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/08/president-obamas-red-line-what-he-actually-said-about-syria-and-chemical-weapons/> accessed 15 Oct. 2013.

²⁹ Dominic Evans and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria Gas Kills Hundreds Security Council Meets, Reuters, August 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE97K0EL20130821> accessed 15 Oct 2013.

³⁰ Today's Zaman, Davutoğlu Disappointed by UN Security Council Resolution, September 30, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-327814-davutoglu-disappointed-by-un-security-council-resolution.html> accessed 19 Oct 2013.

more forthcoming in funding humanitarian assistance programs and live up to pledges made in the context of the UN's Syria Regional Response Plan.³¹

In sum, Ankara made a lot of miscalculations in formulating its policies towards Syria by putting all its chips on a 'non-Asad scenario'. For example, Turkey did not foresee that Washington would not favor a more Islamised Syria and would not consent to Asad's replacement by the Muslim Brotherhood; especially after Mohammed Morsi came to power in Egypt this would have sandwiched Israel between two Ikhwan ruled countries, Egypt and Syria. Asad's fall and his replacement by Islamist rule would not only endanger the security of Israel but also lead to radical groups' control of chemical weapons existing in Syria. In addition, in the post Iraqi war period, the Obama Administration did not want to get into another Middle East quagmire while struggling with its own economic problems in domestic politics. Another important miscalculation of Turkey concerned the power of anti Ikhwan regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates. Erdogan, while voicing allegations that it was Israel that organised and supported the military coup in Egypt, publically disregarded the fact that Saudi Arabia also supported the army against the Ikhwan.³²

Lastly, Ankara did not take into account that Russia would not give up supporting Syria, for several reasons. First, Syria is the only country where Moscow enjoys a naval outlet on the Mediterranean. Russia currently has a naval installation in Tartus, which is strategically important and Russia's last foreign military base outside the former Soviet Union. Second, the Syrian uprising has clearly shown that Russia still acts in accordance with a Cold War mentality in seeking to prevent Syria from falling under Western control. Most important of all, Ankara did not foresee that Iran would prove so tenacious in supporting the Asad regime in Syria in an attempt to protect the "Shiite crescent," to support a valuable ally in the Arab world, and as a convenient conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The divergence between Turkey and Iran over Syria acquired a sectarian dimension: Tehran viewed the rebellion against the Asad regime as a Sunni uprising against minority Alawites, an outlier sect of Shi'ism, whereas Ankara backed a Sunni party, the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Ankara

³¹ Kemal Kirişçi, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Limits of an Open Door Policy*, Brookings, June 27, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/06/27-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-kirisçi> accessed 19 oct. 2013.

³² Serpil Çevikcan, *Suriye, Mısır, Görünen Köy*, Milliyet, August 24, 2013.

and Tehran are nevertheless both pragmatic enough to manage their relationship and avoid falling into enmity over the crisis in Syria.

The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Iran Relations

Continuing amity in Turkey-Iran relations has rested on deepened interdependence on the basis of trade, security and politics to some extent mainly rooted in the expansion of relations throughout the 2000s. Erdoğan and Iranian President Ahmed-i Nejad, being reluctant to damage these relations, stated, in an October 2012 meeting in Azerbaijan, that they would seek ways of cooperation over the Syrian issue. While Tehran asked that Ankara broker negotiations between moderates from the opposition groups and the Asad regime,³³ Ankara wanted Iran to take a place in two different negotiating groups, one involving Turkey, Egypt and Iran, and one involving Turkey, Russia and Iran. Erdoğan openly stated his positive view about Iran's cooperation in finding a solution to the Syrian issue.³⁴

From Tehran's perspective, the fear of encirclement by hostile neighboring countries is the main motive behind its policy of maintaining relations with Ankara and thus to secure its frontier with Turkey. Apart from the patriot missiles deployed on Turkish territories, Washington's deployment of missiles in Qatar set alarm bells ringing in Tehran. Not only did the expanded American military presence in the Gulf exacerbate Iranian security concerns, but developments such as bilateral visits between the Turkish and Saudi Chiefs of Staff in November 2012 and the signing of a military agreement between Turkey and Qatar in July 2012 also made Tehran fear that a new Sunni axis was being formed against it by neighboring countries.³⁵ To avert this, Tehran wanted not only to maintain a cordial relationship with Turkey but also to mend relations with Egypt under Morsi; Ahmed-i Nejad became the first Iranian president to visit Egypt, an important US ally, since the Islamic revolution.³⁶

³³ "İran: Suriye Konusunda Türkiye'yle Uyumluyuz," *Milliyet*, 8 Ocak 2013.

³⁴ "Esad'a Karşı İran'ı İşbirliğine Çağırıldı," *Milliyet*, 17 Ekim 2012.

³⁵ Semih İdiz, "Turkey's Secterian War over Syria and Iraq," *Al-Monitor Turkey*., January 4, 2013

³⁶ "Mısır Dışişleri Bakanı Kemal Amr, ziyaret esnasında Körfez ülkelerinin güvenliği Mısır'ın kırmızı çizgisi olduğunu söyleyerek İran'la yakınlaşma olmadığı sinyalinin vermiştir." *İran Lideri İlk Kez Mısır'da*, *Milliyet*, 6 Şubat 2013.

Secondly, Iran could not afford to lose the Turkish gas market, which became increasingly important at a time when the Iranian economy was under the severest sanctions ever applied in its history. Because both sides developed relatively interdependent trade and energy relations throughout the 2000s, officials from Iran and Turkey were determined to sustain trade relations despite diverging interests in Syria and Iraq. For example, in October 2012, Erdoğan stated at a meeting with Iranian vice-president, Mohammed Reza Rahimi, that the volume of Iranian-Turkish trade would increase from 16.5 billion dollar to 30 billion dollar.³⁷ This statement is noteworthy with respect to understanding Ankara's uneasiness about the sanctions applied on Iran by the UN since 2010. The sanctions obstructed purchase of Iranian natural gas, which provided 20% of Turkey's natural gas needs. In addition, Turkish business circles were increasingly uneasy about the double standards applied by the United States, which they believed, bypassed the sanctions and covertly exported its goods to Iran.³⁸ "At the insistence of the Obama administration, in 2012 Turkey reduced its imports of oil from Iran; at the same time, however, it began selling gold to the country to circumvent the difficulties associated with payments in dollars."³⁹ The tension between Turkey and the United States was heightened with Obama's Executive order 13622 prohibiting the export of gold and "other precious metals" to the Islamic Republic.⁴⁰ However, currently, the Obama Administration has declined to issue any sanctions pursuant to the order in the face of growing tension between Turkey and the United States. Ankara is still Tehran's largest export market for natural gas."⁴¹

³⁷ Seda Kırdar, ABD'nin İran'a Uyguladığı Altın Yaptırımını ve Olası Sonuçları, Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı (TEPAV), Nisan 2013, s. 2.

³⁸ Sabah, "Asıl ABD İran'la Ticareti Kessin," 1 Aralık 2012.

³⁹ In fact, Turkey's gold exports to Iran significantly reduced its balance of payments deficits in the first six months of 2012. See Guliyeva and Pak, 'What's Iran doing with Turkish Gold?'; and 'Gold Sales to Iran and Economic Slowdown Curb Turkey Trade Deficit', *The Daily Star*, 1 August 2012 in Barkey, p. 146.

⁴⁰ Serkan Demirtaş, Türkiye-ABD Arasında Altın Gerginliği, BBC Türkçe, 5 Aralık 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2012/12/121205_us_turkey_gold.shtml

⁴¹ Robert Zarate, Patrick Christy, FPI Bulletin, Obama and Congress must Max Out Iran Sanctions Now," The Foreign Policy Initiative, May 14, 2013, <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-bulletin-obama-and-congress-must-max-out-iran-sanctions%E2%80%94now> accessed 24 Oct.

From Turkey's perspective, a further important reason for maintaining the bilateral relations with Iran is its escalating security concerns from the spill over effect of the Syrian civil war, which became evident with the attacks on Akçakale, Cilvegözü ve Reyhanlı.⁴² Put differently, at a time when the NATO general secretary Rasmussen openly stated, "NATO can not act like the policeman of the world,"⁴³ Ankara, whose economy and border security were increasingly under threat because of the refugee flood and bomb attacks, could not depend on the West and needed diversified relations with its important Iranian neighbor. Despite occasional outbreaks of crisis, both sides quickly contained and ameliorated bilateral relations through diplomatic channels. For example, in the face of Iranian Chief of General Staff's threats concerning the patriots missiles deployed on Turkish territories, Davutoglu "reassured his Iranian counterpart, Ali-Akbar Salehi, during a joint news conference in Tehran in January 2012 that Turkey would never take any step that could negatively affect the relations with Iran and he said: "We will never accept any attack on any of our neighbors from our soil. We don't want such a perception of threat to exist, especially against Iran." In return, Salehi put the remarks of the IRGC general in context, underlining that "some people, knowingly or not, express views without much knowledge and by stepping beyond their responsibilities, and it causes misunderstandings."⁴⁴

None of this means that the Turkey-Iran bilateral relations are problem-free. On the contrary, leaving aside the proxy war in Syria, rivalry over filling the gap in Iraq after US withdrawal has affected Turkish-Iranian relations in a negative way. While Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurdistan improved, especially on the basis of energy and trade, thereby strengthening Iraqi Kurdistan's capacity to act independently of Baghdad, Iran promoted its sphere of influence in Baghdad and especially in the South of Iraq. The Shiite-based central government is also of crucial importance for Iran to maintain its sphere of influence in Syria since Iranian arms flow to Syria take place via Iraq. In addition, the Iraqi government supports the Assad regime by hosting

⁴² Reyhanlı'da Katliam: 43 Ölü, Milliyet, 12 Mayıs 2013. Murat yetkin, Suriye Savaşı kapımıza Dayandı, Radikal, July 18, 2013.

⁴³ Reuters, "NATO to Stay out of Syria Even If UN Mandate Emerges", 17 Şubat 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-syria-nato-idUSTRE81G0ZF20120217>

⁴⁴ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Turkey & Iran: Islamic Brotherhood or Regional Rivalry?, AlJazeera, June 4, 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/05/20135139554264452.htm>.

visits by Syrian officials, signing pacts to expand business ties and offering political support to help the Asad regime to cope with its isolation from other Arab League members. Turkey was labeled as "a hostile state" and accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq by the Maliki government. Turkey's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurdistan was perceived as a Turkish plot against the unity of Iraq. For example, that Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan signed a pipeline agreement⁴⁵ which would transfer one million barrel crude oil via the Kirkuk-Yumurtalık pipeline came as a shock to the Baghdad government since this agreement was perceived by Maliki as Erbil's breaking away with the central government.⁴⁶

Another area of competition between Iran and Turkey also become more visible after the outburst of the Arab spring. For example, Erdoğan's growing popularity in the Arab street, and his travel to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya five days before the opening of Iran's Islamic Awakening Conference and his message of secular democracy were perceived by Tehran as an attempt to undermine Iran's regional soft power.⁴⁷ Erdoğan's message was harshly criticised by Tehran on the grounds that Turkey's model of "secular Islam" was a version of western liberal democracy and unacceptable for countries going through an "Islamic awakening."⁴⁸ From a different angle, Erdoğan's Arab tour and his words encouraging the Arab streets to be more democratised automatically touched the sensitive chords of Iranian political elite

⁴⁵ El Arabiya, "Iraqi Kurdistan Poised to Pipe Oil to World via Turkey," 17 Nisan 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2013/04/17/Iraqi-Kurdistan-poised-to-pipe-oil-to-world-via-Turkey.html>

⁴⁶ Denge Azad, Cengiz Çandar: Kürdistan petrolü, Türkiye, Ortadoğu jeopolitiği 24 Nisan 2013.

⁴⁷ Hürriyet Daily News, "Erdoğan Offers 'Arab Spring' neo-Laicism," September 15, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=erdogan-offers-8216arab-spring8217-neo-laicism-2011-09-15> accessed 23 Oct.

⁴⁸ Henry J. Barkey, "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 54, no.6, December 2012- January 2013, s. 154. Iran who was caught off guard with the outburst of the mass protests in Arab world, sought to find and develop commonalities between the *raison d'être* of the Iranian state and the protests, therefore described the mass protests as 'Islamic Awakening' (*Bidari-ye Eslami*)," Mahan Abedin, "Khamanei Throws the Gauntlet at the West," *Asia Times Online*, September 21, 2011. http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS_IranAndArabSpring_Rafati.pdf

whose survival had been endangered by big mass protests only a couple of years previously.⁴⁹

The beginning of Rouhani's moderate Iranian diplomacy, however, offered a good opportunity for a new beginning with Turkey so as to reduce the existing tension stemming from the Syria crisis. Indeed, it had already become apparent that Ankara could no longer afford, for various reasons, to continue its policy of putting all its chips on a non-Asad scenario. First of all, the possibility that the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS could eventually grow too strong to control and threaten Turkey prompted Ankara to seek more cooperative relations with Iran. An internationalised sectarian conflict on its longest border might stoke a dangerous escalation on Turkey's domestic politics tensions, particularly the Sunni-Alevi divide. In a similar vein, Tehran, shared with Turkey perception of a threat from a probable emergence of de facto Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party, linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party along at least 400 km of the Turkish border.⁵⁰ In a nutshell, Turkey, wary of a "Pakistanisation" of its border provinces, and Tehran, pressurised on its nuclear efforts and its economy by the international community, had incentives to improve relations.

Two important developments in 2013-2014 seemed likely to further affect bilateral relations between the two countries. One was the interim nuclear deal signed in Geneva in November 2013 between Iran and the six world powers which mainly aimed to normalise Iran's relations with the outside world. First of all, the Geneva agreement gave international recognition to Iran's right to continue uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes and Iran's economy earned a relief of \$ 7 billion. While this was welcomed by Ankara, the de facto recognition of Iran's right to the full nuclear fuel cycle came at a time when Turkey's nuclear energy program was still in its early infancy. This will not only elevate Iran's international prestige but also lead to imbalance between the two countries on the energy and security levels.

⁴⁹ Today's Zaman, "Iran says Turkey's secular system not suitable for Arab Spring nations," December 13, 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-265659-iran-says-turkeys-secular-system-not-suitable-for-arab-spring-nations.html> accessed 23 Oct, 2013.

⁵⁰ Fehim Taştekin, "Rouhani Offers Chance to Turkey, Too," Al Monitor, September 26, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/rouhani-turkey-opportunity-iran-relations.html> accessed 23 Oct.

The second was the advance of ISIS to Mosul and Telafer and the accompanying exacerbation of the sectarian war in Iraq. Because, after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Ankara came to believe that an Iranian-led Shiite axis was forming to its South, extending from Iraq into Syria, it looked for allies to counter that axis, including the KRG some of the GCC states and Iraq's Sunni Arab population.⁵¹ While many analysts still accused Turkey of allowing its Syria border to become a two-way "jihadist highway" facilitating the passage of thousands of international Sunni jihadists to Syria⁵² Iran, after the ISIS advance, came to be seen by the US as a regional actor that could restore security in Iraq. At a time when a hot debate about probable US-Iranian cooperation in tackling advances by Sunni insurgents in Iraq started, Turkey's role in the fight against "terrorism" was sidelined despite its NATO membership and alliance with the West. This shows that Turkey's failure in Syria as well as Iraq is mainly due to its pro-Sunni policies which damaged not only its newly formulated good neighborhood relations but also provoked its own Sunni-Alawite divergence in domestic Turkish politics as evident during the Gezi protests. Iran's rising status as a counterbalancing power against Sunni radicalism and Washington-Tehran rapprochement over Iraq might come at the expense of Turkey's role in the region.

Conclusion

Syria had been the jewel in the crown of Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" and the accompanying ambition to substitute Turkish leadership for Western over-involvement in the Middle East;⁵³ as such the, Syrian civil war not only devastated Turkey's zero problem policy but also exposed its limited capability to act in the Middle East independently from the West, particularly, the United States.

Since the beginning of the new century, Turkey, assuming that the unipolar international system was being replaced by a multipolar one, had focused on regional policies and improved its relations with Syria and Iran in an unprecedented way.

⁵¹ Soner Cagatay, Tyler Evans, Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq, Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down, Policy Focus 122, October 2012, p.4.

⁵² Daniel Pipe, Turkish Support for ISIS, Middle East Forum, June 18, 2014 and Kadri Gürsel, Turkey Paying Price for Jihadist Highway on Border, Al-Monitor, June 12, 2014.

⁵³ Henri J. Barkey (2012) Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 54:6, 151, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2012.749639

Ankara firmly believed that the *pax Americana* was ending with major changes in international order, such as the rise of China as a global power. In parallel with this, Turkey criticised and demanded the reform of the international order in many areas such as trade, finance, nonproliferation and human rights.⁵⁴ Turkey's growing alignment with what Washington deemed to be 'rogue states,' Syria and Iran, should be read against this background.

However, the Arab spring and Syrian revolt exposed Turkey's misreading of regional dynamics, its exaggeration of its own capacity to take a leadership role in the region and most important of all, Turkey's Achilles heels, Kurdish separatism and the Sunni-Alevi cleavage. Syria's civil war also brought the fragility of Turkish-Iranian relations to the surface. Despite the increasing trade and energy relations between the two countries, the transformation of the Syrian conflict from one initiated by the masses against a dictatorial rule into one between the Sunni jihadists and Alawites/secularists and its spread to Iraq especially after the advance of ISIS, upset the balance between the two countries. Both Iran and Turkey appeared to have carved out respective spheres of influence at opposite ends of Iraq. Tehran extended its influence throughout southern Iraq. Turkey, by contrast, has consolidated its economic and political influence in the Kurdish regions of the north at the expense of its relations with Baghdad and Tehran. Ankara even went further and remained silent when the Iraqi Kurdistan took control of Kirkuk in order to stop the advance of ISIS in the region although Kirkuk had traditionally been Turkey's red line regarding Kurdish aggrandizement in Iraq.

Only a couple of years ago, following the Arab spring, Turkey was seen as a successful country because it demonstrated that democracy and Islam could coexist. However the Syrian revolt and its aftermath destroyed Turkey's popularity in the Arab world mainly because of Turkey's abandoning of its previous policy of equidistance between the regions' sectarian poles by allowing passages of Sunni jihadist groups from Turkey to Syria. Owing to these policies of Ankara, Iran achieved a rising status as a counterweight to the spread of Sunni insurgency and Assad remained in power as a leader standing against the radical Jihadist groups in the eyes of the West.

⁵⁴ Murat Yeşiltaş, Global Swing and Turkey, *The New Turkey*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.thenewturkey.org/global-swing-and-turkey/new-turkey/205>

The Syrian crisis also crystallised the fragility of Turkey's relations with the West, especially the United States. For example, while conventional wisdom had it that the usage of chemical weapon would be a cause for US intervention in the region and Turkey was expecting it in Syria, US Secretary of State John Kerry praised Bashar Asad because he quickly started the process of destroying his regime's chemical weapons arsenal. Apart from this, Turkey was disappointed by the EU's and US' indifference to Turkey's struggle with the Syrian refugees whose numbers has exceeded over 1.000.000.

To sum up, the Syrian crisis and its aftermath have prompted Turkey to modify its previous overambitious policies so as to restore its deteriorating image and to deal with the consequences of the Syrian crisis, including a sectarian based war in its neighborhood, border security, economic problems stemming from a loss of Arab markets, deteriorating relations with Iraq and clashing interests with Iran. All these expose the negative impact of the Syrian civil war on Turkey.

2

Sunni Islamists in Tripoli and the Asad regime 1966-2014*Tine Gade**

A city in North Lebanon with 320,310 inhabitants, Tripoli is one of the so-called “sensitive” zones where the Syrian war threatens to spread into Lebanon. While the Syrian army withdrew from North Lebanon in April 2005, Tripoli’s destiny remained intrinsically linked to Syria. This was because of the numerous historical, political, family, and economic ties linking the social space of north Lebanon to its Syrian hinterland. The demographic composition of the city resembles Syria. Tripoli’s population is in majority Sunni Muslim (80.9%) and includes, in addition to a Christian minority in decline, the largest Alawi community in Lebanon (8,9 %, or 28,525 persons)¹. This paper analyses the consequences of the Syrian intervention and presence in Lebanon on political leadership in Tripoli. It shows how the Syrian presence created alliances, conflicts and divisions still present in Tripoli today. The main argument is that the Syrian presence in Tripoli de-structured Sunni leadership in North Lebanon. New Syrian political-economic networks emerged, where clients were awarded with political and economic influence. Common interests between Tripolitanian businessmen and actors in the Syrian military developed during the period of the Syrian presence. Tripoli’s political field became more split, between winners and losers of the Syrian presence. The losers of the Syrian period included in particular the urban poor, who suffered from Syrian repression and from competition from Syrian labourers. This led to the disintegration of internal solidarity within Tripoli’s political field, until then known for its unity around anti-imperialist and Sunni Islamic norms. Tripoli’s

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¹ Statistics of registered residents in Tripoli (al-Mina included) for 2013, generously put at the author’s disposal by Kama Feghali, director of the Lebanese Office of Statistics and Documentation and independent consultant.

Sunnism had, at least since the struggle against French mandate in the 1920s and 1930s, constituted one sole actor on the Lebanese scene, calling for Muslim rights and re-allocation of state resources to peripheral areas and affirming Lebanon's Arab identity. Rashid Karami, who served as Prime Minister during long periods in the Shehabist period, gained large electoral majorities in Tripoli in the 1960s and redistributed state resources to Tripolitans. Karami had a very good working relationship with Syria. After 1967, the political scene in Tripoli was fragmented between Karami and movements of the Arab nationalist left, including Iraqi Ba'athism and Arafat's Fatah. The Syrian intervention consolidated and accentuated the split in the Sunni population in Tripoli.

This chapter first addresses the research literature on the Syrian presence in Lebanon and outlines the general background information on Syrian involvement, in particular the motives and interests for the Syrian intervention to Lebanon in 1976. Secondly, it analyses the transformation within Tripoli's field of politics before, during and following the Syrian intervention (1976). Finally, three hypotheses to account for the Syrian determination to control Tripoli and its hinterland are considered. The first centres on Tripoli's Islamists, the second on communal motivations, and the third on economic and material gains.

Existing literature

Despite the insightful lessons North Lebanon can bring to the study of Syro-Lebanese relations, the region is notoriously understudied. Few in-depth studies exist in English or French. The Arabic-language literature on Syrian policies in North Lebanon are somewhat more extensive but not until recently. A key problem has been the difficulty for foreign scholars to gain access to good primary sources in the heavily Syrian-controlled region. The most published scholar on North Lebanon, the late Michel Seurat, was abducted in 1985.² During 1993-2005 period, the Lebanese press was subject to heavy restrictions, which made it virtually

² Michel Seurat, 'Le quartier de Bab Tebbané à Tripoli (Liban). Étude d'une 'asabiyya urbaine', in *l'État de barbarie*, Paris: Seuil, 2012, 1989, p. 235-284.

impossible for sociologists to analyze political dynamics in North Lebanon in any significant detail³

This changed in 2005, after Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. A number of Tripolitanian political actors, journalists, and sociologists lifted the veil on the issue and published books and a series of articles in the Lebanese press⁴ about their experiences between 1986 and 2005. The main focus was on the Syrian regime's repression of Sunni Islamist movements⁵ and on the relationship between local notables and Syria.⁶ Although, much of the material was written by actors; not observers, and therefore may suffer from inaccuracies and political bias,⁷ it can be

³ A few doctoral dissertations analysed the relationship between Islamist groups in Tripoli and Syria in the 1980s. Joumana al-Soufi Richard, *Lutte populaire armée. De la désobéissance civile au combat pour Dieu (du kifah al musalah au jihad)*, PhD dissertation, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III, 1988; Dalal Bizri-Bawab, *Introduction à l'études des mouvements Islamistes au Liban*, PhD dissertation, January 1984, École Pratique des hautes études en sciences sociales; "Le mouvement 'Ibad al-Rahman et ses prolongements à Tripoli", in Olivier Carré and Paul Dumont (eds.), *Radicalismes Islamiques. Tome I*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985, pp. 159-214 and *Islamistes, parlementaires et libanais. Les interventions à l'Assemblée des élus de la Jama'a Islaiyya et du Hibz Allah (1992-1996)*, CERMOC, Document N° 3, 1999.

⁴ 'Fatfat: haqaza hawala dubbat al-mukhabarat ib'adi 'an al-hariri. Musalsal harb al-ilgha did al-hariri. 1998-2011', *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut), 27 July 2011.

⁵ Bernard Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments. Contrôler le Sunnisme au Liban*, (Paris, PUF, 2011); Nasser Kalawoun, "Tripoli in Lebanon: An Islamist fortress or a source of terror?," in George Joffé (ed.), *Islamist Radicalisation in Europe and the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2013; Abdel-Ghani Imad, *The Islamist movements in Tripoli*, Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1998; Abdel Ghani Imad "A Topography of Sunni Islamic Organizations and Movements in Lebanon," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2 (1), 2009, pp. 143–161.

Mohamed Abi Samra, *Tripoli. The Allah square and the port of modernity* (in Arabic), Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2011.

⁶ Bruno Dewailly, "Transformation du leadership tripolitain: le case de Nagib Mikati", in Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (eds.), *Leaders et partisans*, Paris: Karthala/IFPO, 2012, pp. 165-185;

⁷ See, for instance, Nusri Sayigh, *Abd al-Hamid Karmai, Rajul al-Qadaya (Abdel-Hamid Karami. The man and the cause)*, Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbu'at li'l-tawzi' wa'l-Nasr, 2011. For studies published by the actors themselves (mainly al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya), see Amal 'Itani, 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ali and Mu'in al-Manna', *Al-Jam'a al-Islamiyya fi lubnan munthu alnash'a hatta 1975 (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Lebanon from the creation until 1975)*, Beirut: Zeituna (edited by Mohsen Mohd Saleh), 2009; Fathy Yakan, *Qatuf Sha'ik fi haql al-tajarib al-islamiyya. Ru'a islamiyya min 'am 2000 (Difficult harvests in the arena of Islamic experiences. An Islamic vision from the Year 2000)*, Beirut: al-Risalah, 2001; Majid Darwiche, "Ghayat al-sukkan wa'izhar al-manan fi tarjamat al-da'aiyya Fathy Yakan (1933-2009) ("The goals of the population and the appearance of blessings

complemented with other issue-specific material, on the modes of intervention in the Tripoli's parliamentary elections,⁸ Tripoli's municipality,⁹ social conditions,¹⁰ rural dynamics in Akkar,¹¹ and the compliance with Human Rights.¹²

The written material is complemented with fieldwork research carried out during a six-year period in North Lebanon (2008-2013). The author met with politicians, religious shaykhs, grassroots activists, university professors, and journalists, from all sides of the political spectrum.¹³ Because confidence was built up with the informants over time, revealing, hitherto unknown, anecdotes and more precise information were obtained. Triangulating the different sources, the present study attempts to describe, in the most empirical and nuanced manner possible, Syrian practices in North Lebanon, and to put it into context with the general political practices during Pax Syriana.

in the life-story of the preacher Fathy Yakan)", in *Al-da'aiyya Fathy Yakan, al-mu'tamar al-duwali alawal*, Tripoli: Jinan University, 13 June 2010, pp. 372-389.

⁸ Safuh Munajjid, *al-intikhabat al-niyabiyya fi trablus wa'l-shamal khilal miat 'am. 1909-2009* (Parliamentary elections in Tripoli over hundred years. 1909-2009), Tripoli: Dar al-Bilad, 2009.

⁹ Bruno Dewailly, "La municipalité de Tripoli entre pouvoirs locaux et services de l'Etat", in Agnès Favier (ed.), *Municipalités et pouvoirs locaux au Liban*, Beirut: Cahiers du CERMOC, 24, 2001, p. 295-318.

¹⁰ Catherine Le Thomas, *Pauvreté et conditions socio-économiques à Al-Fayhâ'a: diagnostic et éléments de stratégie*, report published by l'Institut Européen de Coopération et de Développement (IECD) and l'Agence française de développement, December 2009.

¹¹ Joseph Ibrahim Abdallah, *al-sir'a al-ijtima'i fi 'akkar wa' thuhur 'ailat al-b'arini* (The social conflict in Akkar and the rise of the B'arini family), Beirut: Mokhtarat, 1993.

¹² Virginia N. Sherry, *Syria's Tadmor prison: dissent still hostage to a legacy of terror*, 8(2), Washington: Human Rights Watch report, 1996, 26; *Syria. The price of dissent*, Washington: Human Rights Watch Report, 7(4), July 1995; Amnesty International, 'Arbitrary arrests, 'disappearances', and extrajudicial executions by Syrian troops and Syrian-backed forces in Tripoli, February 29 1987, MDE 24/02/87.

¹³ 180 semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2008 and October 2013 with 140 actors.

The Syrian presence in North Lebanon

Syrian troops, which at most numbered 40,000, first entered Lebanon on June 1st 1976 during the first round of the Lebanese civil war to crush the momentum of the Palestinian-Islamo-Progressive alliance.¹⁴ It was mandated as an Arab Defence Force (ADF) in October 1976.¹⁵ The non-Syrian elements of the ADF were withdrawn during the spring of 1979, while Syrian forces remained in Lebanon until April 2005.

After initially intervening at the request of the Christian conservatives, Syria reknitted ties with the PLO, the Lebanese left, Iraq, and Jordan after Sadat's travel to Jerusalem in November 1977. The marriage of convenience between Syria and the PLO ended after Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and turned into outright war in Tripoli in the autumn of 1983. Syria's strategy in Lebanon was nonetheless consistent in the sense that it at all times aimed to impede either of the conflicting parties in the Lebanese war from conclusively defeating the other.¹⁶

Motives for the Syrian presence in the existing literature

Much has been written about the possible Syrian motives for its paradoxical intervention in Lebanon, to contain the PLO and National Movement. Five motives identified in the literature are detailed below:

- *Geopolitics*: Lebanon is a buffer protecting Damascus and Syrian industrial centres against any potential Israeli offensive through the Beqa'a.¹⁷ The intervention into Lebanon occurred in a context when a victory of the National Movement was impending and Syrian decision makers feared that the Lebanese

¹⁴ Adeed Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese crisis*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980, p. 99.

¹⁵ Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in wartime Lebanon. Decline of a State and Birth of a Nation*, London: I.B. Tauris, Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1993, p. 288.

¹⁶ Adeed Dawisha, 'Syria in Lebanon, Assad's Vietnam?', *Foreign Policy*, 33, Winter 1978-1979, p. 144.

¹⁷ Reuven Erlich (Avi-Ran), *The Syrian involvement in Lebanon since 1975*, Boulder: Westview, 1991, p. 8.

state could disintegrate.¹⁸ This caused Syrian alarm because a defeat of the Lebanese Christian-conservatives could lead to an Israeli intervention into Lebanon and/or a break-up of the country into confessional enclaves, and a defeated Christian community might have an incentive to strike an alliance with Israel. After the Egyptian-Israeli bilateral peace, Lebanon became a card against which to swap the Golan Heights. Damascus wanted to ensure Washington and Israel that there could be no durable peace without Syria.¹⁹

- *Patronising the Palestinians.* After 1973, Syria understood it was bound to lose another conventional war with Israel and wanted at any price to avoid being dragged into armed confrontation. Moreover, the Asad regime perceived the PLO's growing recognition and autonomy as a great threat. In 1974, the PLO gained observer status in the UN General Assembly and, during a summit of Arab state leaders in Rabat, it was declared the "sole representative of the Palestinian people".²⁰ For Asad, who insisted his country was the cradle of Pan-Arabism, control over the Palestinian cause was an invaluable source of internal and regional legitimacy. It was an essential card to use against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and internal political enemies.²¹
- *Ideology:* Since the Islamic conquest of Damascus in 636, Syria was the centre of *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria), which included Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and parts of Turkey. The redrawing of international borders by the British and French in 1920 and the loss of Lebanon were great traumas for Syrian Arab nationalists. Lebanon and Syria were perceived as constituting one indivisible nation.²² Dawisha argues that this belief was fundamental in shaping Syrian policies towards

¹⁸ Hanf, *Coexistence in wartime Lebanon*, p. 215.

¹⁹ Joseph Bahout, 'Le Liban et le couple syro-libanais dans le processus de paix. Horizons incertains', in May Chartouni-Dubarry (ed.), *Le couple syro-libanais dans le processus de paix*, Paris: IFRI, 1998, p. 59.

²⁰ Nadine Picaudou, *Les Palestiniens. Un siècle d'histoire*, Paris: Éditions complexe, 2003, pp. 172-173.

²¹ Ghassan Salamé, 'The Levant after Kuwait', *European Journal of International Affairs*, 12(2), 1991, p. 29.

²² For this reason, Syria refused to open an embassy in Lebanon. Adeer Dawisha, 'The Motives of Syria's Involvement in Lebanon', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring, 1984) (pp. 228-236), pp. 235. It accepted to open an embassy in Beirut in 2008.

Lebanon.²³ It helped legitimise the intervention in some segments of the domestic public opinion and amongst Syrian policy makers. Pan-Syrianism does, however, not suffice to account for the timing of the intervention in 1976.²⁴ Pan-Syrianism was not the only reason why Syria intervened in Lebanon, but a complementary explanatory variable. When, in spring 1976, the Asad regime finally decided to intervene in Lebanon, it was for the pursuit of more tangible strategic gains, essential for regime survival.

- *Regime survival*: Lebanon was central to the debate on Syrian internal stability because of its role, since 1949, as a centre of conspiracy and subversion, from which coups d'État occurring in Damascus were planned.²⁵ Since 1970, a growing part of Syrian society had protested against the usurpation of power by a military clique hailing from rural, minority backgrounds. In February 1973, protests erupted against the new constitution, which omitted the article of former Syrian constitutions requiring that the president had to be a (Sunni) Muslim.²⁶
- *Political economy*: Despite economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, Syria suffered from a widening balance of payment gap already in 1976.²⁷ The outbreak of the Lebanese civil war had hampered the accessibility of capital, on which Syrian heavy industries depended.²⁸ Some scholars therefore argue that Syria intervened in Lebanon in order to extract the needed resources, from the Lebanese banking system, the port of Beirut and cheap Lebanese manufactures, to prevent the escalation of a social conflict at home.²⁹ It is pertinent to point to the economic gains actors in the Syrian regime made in Lebanon (see below), but there is not a solid enough empirical data to demonstrate that domestic protests in Syria took off

²³ Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese crisis*, p. 72.

²⁴ Fred Lawson, 'Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war, 1976: a domestic conflict explanation', *International Organization*, 38, 1984, p. 457.

²⁵ Ba'ath leaders, including Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar, as well as Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mustafa Siba'i, fled to Lebanon in 1953.

²⁶ The Alawi community, to which the Syrian president and a very high proportion of his lieutenants belonged, was seen as non-Muslim by many Sunnis. Olivier Carré and Michel Seurat (Gérard Michaud), *Les frères musulmans (1928-1982)*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, pp. 132-134.

²⁷ Volker Perthes, *A political economy of Syria under Asad*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1995, p. 29.

²⁸ Lawson, « The Syrian intervention » p. 469.

²⁹ Lawson, « The Syrian intervention » pp. 473-475.

prior to the intervention into Lebanon.³⁰ The tipping point for the unrest seems to have been immediately following the intervention, when tens of thousands of Syrians took to the streets against the crushing of the Lebanese National Movement and the PLO in Lebanon.³¹ This led to the arrest of several hundred people in Syria, mainly communists.³² The presence in Lebanon was moreover a financial burden on Syria in the early phase.³³

The intervention of Syrian troops into Lebanon is therefore best explained using a realist paradigm: a consolidated and unitary state seeking to protect its security in the face of external aggression. This did not exclude the fact that Syria also benefited from the intervention into Lebanon to quell domestic political enemies, in particular in Tripoli. However, over time, once Syria consolidated its influence in Lebanon, economic interests and concerns related to Syria's domestic politics became more important. This was especially so after 1983, when Syria's economy began to suffer from a serious decline and budget deficits.³⁴

Although a set of defined long-term foreign policy objectives existed, the Syrian regime operated without a general plan and grasped opportunities as they arose.³⁵ The departure of the PLO from Lebanon (1983) extended Syria's margins of manoeuvre. The deepening of the alliance with Iran by the mid-1980s and Syria's isolation from the Arab world during the Iran-Iraq war also helped modify the stakes within Lebanon.

The Syrian continuing role in Lebanon after the end of the civil war was enshrined by the Ta'if accords (October 1989), which formally ended the war in Lebanon.³⁶ The accords provided that the Syrian forces would assist the Lebanese

³⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Pax syriana? The origins, causes and consequences of Syria's role in Lebanon', *Mediterranean Politics*, 3(1), Summer 1998, p. 141.

³¹ Carré and Seurat, *Les frères musulmans*, p. 134.

³² Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese crisis*, p. 72.

³³ Hinnebusch, 'Pax syriana?', p. 142.

³⁴ Élizabeth Picard, "La politique de la Syrie au Liban", Paris: CERI, 1987, p. 11.

³⁵ Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon*, p. 563.

³⁶ Weapons stilled after the defeat of General Michel Aoun's "liberation war" against Syria in October 1990. For more on Aoun, see Philippe Abirached, « charisme, pouvoir et communauté

government in restoring sovereignty throughout the country. Two years after the ratification of the accord, they were to redeploy to the Beqa'a. Further redeployments would be decided later by a Lebanese and Syrian military committee. Bilateral treaties, such as the May 1991, Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination Treaty, gave further legal grounds for the Syrian presence. This "Syrian peace" was accepted by the Bush administration, partly because it was considered better than the alternative of anarchy from the Lebanese civil war, partly because Hafiz al-Asad's regime was already in 1989 seen as a potential source of support against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The roots of the conflict between Tripoli's Sunnis and the Asad regime

Muslim elites in Lebanon and Syria respectively had, ever since the 1930s, somewhat uneasy relations.³⁷ These emerged out of conflicting interests, not religion. Since Lebanon lacked Arab nationalist credentials and Syria saw itself as the cradle of Pan-Arabism, Syrian notables felt entitled to give ideological guidance to the Arab nationalist movement in Lebanon.³⁸ Lebanese Arab nationalists resented this intervention in their affairs. They also denounced Syrian Arab nationalist governments' use of food blockage vis-à-vis Lebanon as an instrument to solve economic differences.³⁹ They saw Gamal Abdel-Nasser, not the Syrian Ba'ath party, as being entitled to lead the Arab Umma. When, at the break-up of the United Arab Republic in 1961, many of Tripoli's Muslims sided with Abdel-Nasser,⁴⁰ Syrian notables were annoyed.⁴¹ In the 1970s, urban poor Sunnis in Tripoli gave strong support to all of the Asad regime's regional enemies: Fatah, the Iraqi Ba'ath party and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This support may be

politique : la figure de Michel Aoun », in Mermier and Mervin (eds.), *Leaders and partisans au Liban*, pp. 31-35.

³⁷ Adeed Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis*, p. 24.

³⁸ Interview, Radwan al-Sayyed, Beirut, August 2011.

³⁹ Youssef Chaitani, *Post-Colonial Syria and Lebanon: the Decline of Arab Nationalism and the Triumph of the State*, London: New York, I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 128-158.

⁴⁰ Interview, Radwan al-Sayyed, Beirut, August 2011.

⁴¹ Kalawoun, *The Struggle for Lebanon*, p. 107.

interpreted in light of the increasingly conflictual relationship between Sunnis in North Lebanon and Syria.

Until the late 1960s, Alawis in Tripoli had formed part of the same social space and political masses as the Sunni Muslims. The politicisation of Alawi identity in North Lebanon began in the 1970s. While Sunni Muslims and many Christians in Tripoli in the late 1960s adhered to New Left parties and movements close to Yasser Arafat, Alawis in Tripoli increasingly began to see Hafiz al-Asad as a model.

Salah Jadid's regime and the peasant movement in Akkar

Syria began to increasingly meddle in domestic policies in North Lebanon after Salah Jadid's takeover in 1966. The main Syrian entryway was in this early period through the peasant movements in Akkar. The protesters could be identified not only in terms of their class but also by their sect: the great majority of the protesting agricultural labourers in the plains of Akkar were Alawis, while the landlords were Sunnis.

The first Alawi families in Lebanon emigrated in search for work from the impoverished Jabal Ansariyah in Syria starting from the end of the 19th century.⁴² The emigration was accentuated during the years of economic boom (1950 et 1960) and, more intensely, during the period of the Syrian tutelage. Many were seasonal labourers, who travelled back and forth from Syria.

The two main protest leaders included Khaled Saghieh, a Greek-Orthodox Ba'athist lawyer who had studied in Damascus, and Mohamed Ba'arini, a Sunni tribal chieftain. Saghieh was a pragmatist close to the Ba'ath party.⁴³ He was guided by some general beliefs on Arab nationalism and rights of peasants, but did not develop a sophisticated ideology. His leadership recalled that of Akram Hourani in the Hama region. As a permanent candidate for the legislative elections since 1964, Saghieh wooed the Alawi community, which he hoped could adopt him

⁴² Fabrice Balanche, "Les alaouites et la crise politique en Syrie", *Les clefs du Moyen Orient*, 7 mars 2012. *Les alaouites, l'espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne. Une intégration nationale ambiguë*, PhD dissertation, Université de Tours, December 2000, p. 70.

⁴³ Interview, Hazem Saghieh, Beirut, June 2012.

as their representative, given that Alawis had no parliamentary representation in Lebanon before Ta'ef. Ba'arini hailed from Fneideq, a perfect example of what Michael Gilson called the "Lebanese marches".⁴⁴ Here, men worked in the Lebanese army or gained a living from smuggling. Having relations with Syria was primordial for the population to survive. Ba'athist Arab nationalism was popular amongst the peasants.

In March 1973, after an assassination attempt targeting landlord leader Sleiman al-Ali's brother, Malik, Khaled Saghie and Ba'arini escaped to Syria. Saghie returned in early 1973. He was shot shortly afterwards and died three months later from his wounds.⁴⁵ Mohamed Ba'arini stayed in exile in Homs, and was de facto pardoned in 1976, after the Syrian entry to Lebanon. The peasant revolts ended because of the war. Ba'arini became one of Syria's main allies in Lebanon. His son, Wajih Ba'arini, took over his leadership, and accumulated personal wealth through smuggling. When candidates were appointed to the legislature to replace deceased MPs and fill new seats, Wajih Ba'arini was appointed from Akkar to replace the late Sleiman al-Ali.

It may be hypothesised that the peasant revolts were instigated by the Syrian regime to gain leeway in North Lebanon, and later, continued under Asad, once it started to prepare for a larger-scale military entry into Lebanon. The fact that regular New Left parties failed in their mobilisation attempts in Akkar strengthens this argument. When the Organisation for Communist Action in Lebanon (OACL), as well as a few Maoist parties, also tried to mobilise peasants,⁴⁶ they received a warmer welcome in Sunni villages than in Alawi villages.⁴⁷ If Alawi peasants identified with Saghie, it was because he was close to the Syrian line.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Gilson, *Lords of the Lebanese marches*, pp. 26, 47.

⁴⁵ Abdallah, *al-sir'a al-ijtima'i fi 'akkar*, p. 116.

⁴⁶ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

⁴⁷ Nahla Chahal and her associates worked in Biré, a Sunni village, as well as Tall Hayat, an Alawi village. Interviewed retrospectively in June 2012, Chahal said: "We did not receive the same welcome in Alawi villages. I do not know if the communal belonging played a part or not".

⁴⁸ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

The growing support for the peasant movements was perceived by Sunni landlords as a communal mobilisation and made them look towards the state to protect them from bands of Alawi peasants armed by Damascus. Sunni peasants found support among Palestinians in Nahr al-Bared and Beddawi, and began to mobilise in favour of the Palestinian resistance, which, at certain points, would have put them in opposition to Syria's strategy in Lebanon. Similar polarisations between Alawis and Sunnis in Tripoli began in Tripoli a few years later.

The rise of Ali Eid and the Alawi Youth Movement

The Alawis in Tripoli numbered approximately 20,000.⁴⁹ They were poor, and most settled in Bab al-Tebbaneh, the most affordable area. Most lived on the upper side, called Jabal Drawish or Jabal Mohsen. Like other residents in Bab al-Tebbaneh, Alawis worked at the vegetable market, the wheat souq, the factories in Bahsas or at the port in al-Mina.⁵⁰

Alawis and Sunnis in Bab al-Tebbaneh belonged to the same social strata and until the early 1970s, were part of the same political realm as the Sunnis in Tripoli. Alawis were often business associates with Sunnis, and intermarriages were relatively common.⁵¹ Class was initially the driving force behind political action in Tebbaneh.⁵² However, when it came to obtaining official positions within the state, Alawis had to convert to Sunnism to have the chance to hold an official function. In the late 1960s, with the consolidation of the Alawi in power in Damascus, Lebanese Alawis began to look to Syria for political support.⁵³ Some adhered to pro-Syrian political groups, such as the Lebanese branch of the Syrian Ba'ath Party.

⁴⁹ Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and revolution*, p. 248.

⁵⁰ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

⁵¹ Mustafa Allouche, an MP of the 2005-2009 period, for instance, is from a joint Alawi-Sunni family.

⁵² Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 98.

⁵³ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

In 1972, a group of Alawi young professionals created a movement campaigning for political rights for Lebanese Alawis, the Alawi Youth Movement (*harakat al-shabiba al-alawiyya*).⁵⁴ Its two main claims were Alawi representation in parliament (at least one seat) and naturalisation of 20,000 Alawi workers who had migrated from Syria.⁵⁵ Ali Eid, an Alawi from Jabal Mohsen, soon became President of the society. Eid's grandfather had emigrated from Syria and opened a large shop in Tripoli's wheat souq. Eid travelled to the US to study, married an American woman and had a daughter, but was expelled the same year because he committed a crime.⁵⁶ He returned to Lebanon and studied political science at the AUB. He claimed to have been inspired by US civil rights movements, and considered the Alawis in Lebanon to be in a position similar to the blacks in the US.⁵⁷

In 1972, Ali Eid was stabbed with a knife in the back by a Saudi prince, during a night out, and hospitalised.⁵⁸ Eid was close to President Sleiman Frangié, who arranged for Prime Minister Sa'ib Salam to strike a deal between Eid and the Saudi prince according to which the prince paid a large sum of money to Ali Eid to get his agreement to withdraw charges.⁵⁹ Eid consolidated his ties with the Salam and Frangié families and became close to Frangié's son, Tony. The latter supplied Eid with weapons, which originated from Syria.⁶⁰ Salam and Frangié sought to split Tripoli's political scene and weaken Rashid Karami, their political enemy.⁶¹ Frangié also introduced Aid to the Asads. It cannot be ruled out that the patronage

⁵⁴ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁵⁵ Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, p. 188.

⁵⁶ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁵⁷ This is written on his Wikipedia page, in itself a eulogy to Ali Eid, probably written by one of Eid's close aids upon his own instructions. It gives an idea of how Eid wishes others to look at him.

⁵⁸ Interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁵⁹ The sum was between 400 and 500 thousand dollars according to Ahmad Karami and Badr Wannous.

⁶⁰ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁶¹ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

of the Frangié family for Eid, constituted an exchange of service, after Frangié had received help of various types from Syria in the late 1950s onwards.⁶²

With the financial power of Ali Eid, the Alawi Youth Movement soon became a tool for the Eid family to control the Alawi community in Tripoli. Eid put his own family in all its positions.⁶³ Moreover, Sa'ib Salam, Prime Minister and Interior Minister, who had given it official authorisation, came to Tripoli and celebrated the official launch of the society.

Musa al-Sadr, the Asad regime, and Tripoli

From initially being close to Frangié, Ali Eid soon developed contacts with the Syrian regime. This occurred after Eid organised large protests against Shi'i cleric Musa Sadr, the Chairman of Lebanon's Supreme Islamic Shiite Council (SISC). Eid's opposed Sadr's ambition to put the personal status codes of the Lebanese Alawi community under the jurisdiction of the SISC. In 1973, Sadr issued a fatwa that Alawism was a part of Shi'i Islam. Although Lebanese Alawis were *de jure* under the jurisdiction of the Sunni-dominated Supreme Islamic Shari'a Council, the sect had *de facto* obtained autonomy in internal affairs under the French. Since they were part of the same tribes as the Syrian Alawis, they referred to Alawi religious shaykhs in Syria on important communal matters.

Alawi traditional tribal and religious shaykhs in Syria proper were initially reluctant to give Sadr jurisdiction over Lebanon's Alawis,⁶⁴ but priorities changed in early 1973, after Sunni protests swept through Syrian cities against Hafiz al-Asad's assumption of the presidency, the first non-Sunni to hold the post. The Syrian President needed an external authority, preferably a Twelver Shi'i cleric, to boost his regime's Islamic credentials. During a public ceremony in July 1973 in Tripoli, al-Sadr, in his official function as chairman of the SISC, appointed a Lebanese Alawi to the position of Twelver Mufti of Tripoli and Northern Lebanon.

⁶² Mohamed Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 100. A famous rumour has it that Frangié met Assad in Qardaha in 1957, when he fled after a massacre in Miziara, near Zgharta, which killed several dozens.

⁶³ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁶⁴ Martin Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1987, p. 246.

A delegation of Syrian Alawi religious shaykhs endorsed the move with their presence.

The Alawi Youth Movement opposed al-Sadr, arguing that Alawis should gain separate legal recognition, independent of the Twelver Shi'is. The society mobilised in the days before al-Sadr's arrival in Tripoli. Tensions in the streets of Tripoli ran high, and roadblocks were set up.⁶⁵ Rifa'at al-Asad visited Tripoli to mediate and convinced Eid that Syrian patronage would protect the Alawis in Lebanon.⁶⁶ Al-Sadr was obliged to issue a "clarification" in which he declared that SISC's aim had been not to absorb the Alawis into the Ja'afari sect but to provide them with "a service they lacked", that is, communal tribunals.⁶⁷

Rifa'at al-Asad had been recommended to Eid by Tony Frangié, son of President Sleiman Frangié and a close personal friend of Rifa'at's. Eid soon gained strong support from Rifa'at and Jamil al-Asad, who were developing the Ali Murtada organisation in Syria against the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁸ Rifa'at sent one of his three sons, Ribal, to Tripoli to help his ally.⁶⁹ Eid gained access to important funds, which enabled him to expand his clientele in Jabal Mohsen. By 1976, Eid had become the symbol of the Syrian regime in Tripoli. He married a Syrian Alawi from Safita, and travelled regularly to Tartus.⁷⁰ When he had a son in 1977, he named him, coincidentally or not, Rifa'at. When Syria turned against the Palestinians in the spring of 1976, Eid remained a Syrian protégée. The Syrian intervention led to a worsening of the Alawi-Sunni conflict. While all other political parties were banned, Eid was given large concessions and developed his presence in Tripoli.

⁶⁵ Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, pp. 246, 248.

⁶⁶ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁶⁷ Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, p. 246.

⁶⁸ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012; Seurat, *L'État de barbarie*, p. 138.

⁶⁹ Interview, Ignace Leverrier, Paris, October 2013.

⁷⁰ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

Strains in the Palestino-Syrian relations: North Lebanon as an example

During an offensive in April 1976, prior to the June Syrian intervention, the Palestinian-Progressive coalition⁷¹ forces in Tripoli struck Jabal Mohsen and destroyed several houses, including Eid's.⁷² This forced many of Tripoli's Alawis to leave Jabal Mohsen and abandon their houses, and many went to Syria.⁷³ The strike targeted Eid because he allied with Syria, and also occurred in a context of strikes against Syrian allies, Sa'iqqa and PFLP-GC,⁷⁴ but was framed by Eid as an attack against the Alawis as a community.

Eid used the event as a *casus belli* and began to argue that the Alawis needed to protect themselves militarily. Alawis became increasingly fearful for their existence in Tripoli, and many began to leave other areas in Tripoli to settle in Jabal Mohsen, which became a sectarian sanctuary.⁷⁵ The attack also worsened relations between Sunnis in Bab al-Tebbaneh and Alawis in Jabal Mohsen, since men from Tebbaneh supported Fatah in the attack.⁷⁶

The impact of the Syrian intervention on Sunni militancy in Tripoli

Rashid Karami and other Sunni institutional leaders welcomed the entry in June 1976 of the Syrian army to Lebanon to re-stabilise Lebanon. Karami developed close bonds to Syria. The same was true for many of Tripoli's merchants and notables, who developed friendships and close economic and political bonds to officers of the Syrian army. Tripoli's left-wing parties, on the other hand, opposed the entry of the Syrian army into Lebanon as a bid to crush PLO. The Syrian army outlawed all political parties, with the exception of the SSNP. All the left-wing parties, including the 24 October movement, the strongest local militia, decided to

⁷¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 384-385.

⁷² Interview, Nasser Kalawoun, London, March 2012.

⁷³ Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 103.

⁷⁴ Interview, Nasser Kalawoun, London, March 2012.

⁷⁵ Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 101.

⁷⁶ Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012; interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

withdraw without a battle.⁷⁷ The PLO left Tripoli and settled its forces in the nearby Palestinian camps, Beddawi and Nahr al-Bared. Other activists stopped their activities and went underground.

The Iraqi Ba'ath party became one of the heaviest Syrian targets in 1978. Ghassan Salamé wrote in 1991 that Syria in its regional policy was driven more by the rivalry with Iraq than by Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause.⁷⁸ The Tripoli case shows that, although the overall cause for the Syrian intervention into Lebanon was to avoid breakdown of the Lebanese state and thus a direct confrontation with Israel, Syria's entry into Lebanon assisted it in crushing its own geopolitical enemies. An illustration of the Asad regime's sectarian policies in Tripoli was that unlike Abd al-Majid al-Rafa'i, the Sunni head of the Lebanese branch of the Iraqi Ba'ath, whose house was destroyed and who was forced into exile,⁷⁹ Dr. Khodr, an Alawi cadre of the Iraqi Ba'ath party in Tripoli, was not arrested or targeted, but co-opted and moved to Jabal Mohsen⁸⁰

Jund Allah, the largest Islamist militia in Tripoli at the time, took pains to appease Syria. The group stopped all activity between the entry of Syrian troops in 1976 and until 1978.⁸¹ In 1978, Jund Allah leader Fawaz Agha was arrested by the Syrian intelligence and held for 40 days. When released, he was forced to give up his weapons and cease his political activities. This event coincided with the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, and Jund Allah was allowed to send combatants to defend the south.⁸² This helped Jund Allah gain new legitimacy, access to centres of military training in the south, and contacts with Fatah, which began to send weapons and money.⁸³ By 1979 Jund Allah had become a well-developed group, with military activities in South Lebanon, religious training, a dispensary and a sports club. Although the PLO formally realigned with Syria in 1979, Jund Allah

⁷⁷ Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, pp. 164-165.

⁷⁸ Salamé, "The Levant after Kuwait", p. 27.

⁷⁹ Interview, Abdel-Majid al-Rafa'i, Tripoli, May 2010, Paris, October 2012.

⁸⁰ Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 101.

⁸¹ Interview, Kana'an Naji, cited in: *al-Shir'a*.

⁸² Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, pp. 283-284.

⁸³ Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, p. 284.

began to oppose Syria.⁸⁴ The opposition became more and more pronounced, and in 1981, Jund Allah had gained enough strength to expel the Syrians from their positions in Abi Samra.

The Creation of the Arab Democratic Party

The entry of the Syrian-dominated ADF facilitated the penetration of a strong contingent of Syrian intelligence agents in Lebanon. In Tripoli, it took the Communist Action Organization's former office at the American School in Jabal Mohsen as its headquarters. From the Syrian side, protecting the Alawis was subordinate to the fact that⁸⁵ Jabal Mohsen was a strategic place on a hill and at a distance from the Lebanese army HQ in Qubbeh. Moreover, because Alawis had left their houses subsequent to the attack on Jabal Mohsen, there were many vacant houses. Syrian forces moved in to control these areas. The choice of Jabal Mohsen was perceived by many Tripolitarians as a sign that the Syrian regime was pursuing a sectarian policy in Lebanon.⁸⁶ Eid returned to Tripoli with the Syrian forces, and rebuilt his house where it had been, as a challenge to his political enemies.⁸⁷ The Arab Youth Movement in Jabal Mohsen developed into a militia, the Red Knights, under Syrian control.

In June 1981, Eid and certain other Syrian allies created the Arab Democratic Party (ADP).⁸⁸ The party had no obvious Alawi appearance. Nassib al-Khatib, the Sunni lawyer from South Lebanon, was elected President, and Rashed al-

⁸⁴ One day the Syrians arrested nearly 2000 persons. "We had no choice, but to combat tyranny", a Jund Allah member explained. Cited in: Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, p. 285.

⁸⁵ Interview, Nasser Qalawoun, London, March 2012.

⁸⁶ Seurat, "Le quartier de Bab Tebbané", pp. 241, 254, 265, 267; Interview, Badr Wannous, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁸⁷ Interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

⁸⁸ Al-hizb al-'arabi al-dimiqrati yakhtatim mu'tamirahu b'intikhab Rashed al-Muqaddem aminan 'aman' ["the Arab Democratic Party concludes its conference electing Rashid al-Muqaddem Secretary General", *al-Safir*, 16/6/1981.

Muqaddem, a Sunni from Tripoli, became Secretary-General.⁸⁹ Yet, de facto power within the ADP lay with Eid and his patron, Rifa'at al-Asad. ADP's Alawi character became more avowed in 1985, when al-Khatib was replaced with Eid. Al-Khatib was assassinated the following year.

Proxy battle between Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen (1979-1982)

Bab al-Tebbaneh was one of the few areas in Tripoli where the Syrian army was not immediately heavily deployed. The strength of the Popular Resistance, a local social and military group, led by a young local charismatic leader, Khalil Akkawi, hindered the Syrian troops' entry there.⁹⁰ Yet, growing pressure from Syrian intelligence centred in Jabal Mohsen forced the group to demobilise.⁹¹ A wave of arrests began, and some activists were found assassinated. Akkawi went into hiding in Beddawi under the PLO's protection.⁹² Those, who remained in Bab al-Tebbaneh stopped their activities, for fear of arrest and assassination.

Despite the end of open fighting, relations between pro-Syrian and Fatah-affiliated Palestinian groups remained tense. Kidnappings and assassinations targeted prominent communist, Iraqi Ba'athist and Popular Resistance leaders.⁹³ The civilian population suffered from siege and electricity- and water cuts. Barricades were set up in the poor quarters. People in Tebbaneh were threatened by snipers located in Jabal Mohsen, and many were arrested or attacked by the Syrian forces. The situation led to a growing anti-Syrian climate. The leader of the new anti-Syrian mobilisation was Sa'id Sh'aban, an Islamic religious preacher and former member of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (JI), the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. He became increasingly popular because of his violent denunciations of the Syrian presence. Resentment was directed against Eid. With the help of the

⁸⁹ "I'alan wiladat al-hizb al-'arabi al-dimoqrati" ("Announcement of the birth of the Arab Democratic Party"), *al-Nahar* (Beirut), 15/6/1981.

⁹⁰ Seurat, "Le quartier de Bab Tebbané à Tripoli (Liban)",.

⁹¹ Richard, *Lutte populaire armée*, pp. 168-169.

⁹² Abi Samra, *Trablus*, p. 95.

⁹³ Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, pp. 103-104

Syrian intelligence, Eid took control of state infrastructure in Tripoli and important sources of material wealth. Arafat-sympathisers in Bab al-Tebbaneh increasingly began to see him as a puppet of the Syrian intelligence machine. The rise of Jabal Mohsen as an Alawi communal ghetto worried people in Tripoli, who also felt that the Syrian army was partisan in local conflicts and that its presence tilted the internal balances of power in Tripoli.⁹⁴

The first instance of heavy fighting between Arafat-supporters in Bab al-Tebbaneh and Alawis in Jabal Mohsen broke out in the spring of 1979, following the withdrawal of the last non-Syrian contingents from the ADF. Many Sunni movements, including Jund Allah supported the Popular Resistance. Syria was involved in the confrontation yet officially insisted that it was doing nothing other than carrying out its mandate from the Arab countries, i.e., to separate between fighting forces, repress militias, and end the civil war”.⁹⁵

The Popular Resistance fought against what it perceived to be a Syrian occupation, and defended what it saw as the integrity, honour and collective memory of Tripoli as a “combative city state”.⁹⁶ The fighting between Eid’s group and the Popular Resistance initially occurred in spite of, and not because of, alliances at the regional level.⁹⁷ Despite the rapprochement which occurred between Fatah and Syria against Egypt in late 1977 (see above), Hafiz al-Asad and Fatah chairman Yasser Arafat were never allies. They competed for the control over the Palestinian cause. Arafat pursued a double strategy vis-à-vis Syria. He granted concessions to Asad but maintained relations with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Sadat’s Egypt.⁹⁸ Syria accused Arafat of hindering a common Arab front against Egypt, and being fooled by the US administration and gave full backing to Arafat’s rivals within the PLO. With the late 1970s outbreak of the Muslim

⁹⁴ Sayigh, *Armed struggle*, p. 412.

⁹⁵ Abi Samra, *Tripoli*, p. 104.

⁹⁶ Seurat, “Le quartier de Bab Tebbané”, p. 242, 251, 254.

⁹⁷ Sayigh, *Armed struggle*, p. 520.

⁹⁸ Sayigh, *Armed struggle*, p. 507.

Brotherhood insurgency in Syria, Asad also accused Arafat of sheltering fugitive Brotherhood fighters in the Palestinian camps in North Lebanon.⁹⁹

Tripoli became a microcosm of the Syrian-Palestinian rivalry. The city was a confined social space, where damaging ripple effects of local battles could be managed relatively easily. Thus, Asad and Arafat were partners at the regional and national Lebanese level, but in Tripoli Fatah backed the Popular Resistance movement, while the Syrian regime continued to prop up Ali Eid.¹⁰⁰ Fighting between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tebbaneh escalated in July 1981, and intermittent heavy clashes and car bombs caused over a hundred casualties during the year preceding the Israeli 1982 invasion.

As the Syrian regime and Arafat both invested politically in Tripoli, Bab al-Tebbaneh's struggle increasingly became part of the broader regional conflict.¹⁰¹ The conflict was at the time not sectarian. One of the Popular Resistance field commanders, Samir al-Hassan, was Alawi and fought alongside Akkawi against Eid.¹⁰² The front line of Syria Street, which divided the two quarters, was used by external actors as a means to send messages, and the dynamics were understood as such.¹⁰³

Syrian motivations in North Lebanon

In this section, three hypotheses on the Asad regime's motivations in North Lebanon will be tested. First, it will be argued that Syria considered North Lebanon a high risk-area because of the rise of Islamist movements in Tripoli after 1982. Second, it will be asked whether the Asad regime had a specific antipathy towards Sunni Muslims, which made it seek alliances to counter the influence of Sunni leaders. Thirdly, it will be argued that North Lebanon became a centre of a Syrian-dominated informal economy.

⁹⁹ Sayigh, *Armed struggle*, p. 507.

¹⁰⁰ Seurat, « Le quartier de Bab al-Tebbané », p. 148.

¹⁰¹ Interview, Azzam Ayubi, Tripoli, February 2009.

¹⁰² Interview, Mustafa Allouche, Tripoli, June 2009.

¹⁰³ Seurat, *l'État de barbarie*, p. 255.

The Syrian opposition to the Tawhid movement

In September 1982, in the wake of the Israeli invasion and the PLO evacuation from Beirut a new Islamist militia, the Islamic Tawhid movement (*Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami*), emerged in Tripoli. The movement was created by the unification of three movements: the Popular Resistance, Esmat Mrad's Arab Lebanon movement, and shaykh Sa'id Sh'aban and his supporters. The Popular Resistance and the Arab Lebanon Movement were Maoist movements close to Fatah, in particular to Fatah's Student Squad. Both Akkawi and Mrad had recently turned towards Islam, as a means to become closer to the ideology of the people they sought to mobilise.¹⁰⁴ Because they lacked Islamic credentials, they turned towards Shaykh Sa'id Sh'aban and asked him to become their public face. Jund Allah joined Tawhid three months later, and gave additional Islamic legitimacy to the movement.

Tawhid is often described as a movement supported by Iran, but recent empirical research indicates that Iran supported shaykh Sa'id Sh'aban more than Tawhid as such.¹⁰⁵ Other leaders within Tawhid, Mrad and Akkawi in particular, were closer to Fatah than to Iran (although Akkawi travelled three times to Iran before he was killed).¹⁰⁶ Tawhid fought on Fatah's side in the Syrian-Palestinian war in Autumn 1983. When Fatah evacuated, it left its weapons with Tawhid and this facilitated a further Tawhid takeover of Tripoli. Tawhid waged battles against the Iraqi Ba'ath party and killed several dozen members of the communist party. It declared the creation of an Islamic emirate, imposed its own preachers to teach religion in public and private schools and created a morality police. The Syrian army besieged Tripoli but let Tawhid retain power. In September 1985, the

¹⁰⁴ Nicolas Dot Pouillard, *De Pékin à Tehran, en regardant vers Jérusalem: La singulière conversion à l'islamisme des "Maos du Fatah"*, Cahiers de l'Institut Religioscope (Friburg, Switzerland), 2, December 2008, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ Dot Pouillard, *De Pékin à Tehran* pp. 20-21; Manfred Sing, "Brothers in Arms.", pp. 20-28; and Erik Fosse, *Med Livet i hendene*, p. 76; Interview, Erik Fosse, Oslo, 7 March 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Azzam Ayubi, Tripoli, February 2009; Interview, Abu Daoud (Esmat Mrad's brother), Tripoli, June 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Tripoli, July 2010.

communist party, the SSNP and other secularist parties, bolstered by Syrian support, gave an ultimatum to Tawhid, where they demanded to be allowed to return to Tripoli. A 21-day battle ended with an armistice signed in Damascus, the Damascus II agreement. Although Syria was a party to the conflict, Abdel-Halim Khaddam publically fronted himself as a mediator.

According to the Damascus II Agreement, Tawhid gave up their weapons and control of the city to the internal security forces (i.e. Syrian intelligence) in return for impunity. The agreement was not respected by Syria. Large waves of arrest of Tawhid members ensued. The first Tawhid leader to be assassinated was Khalil Akkawi, killed at a Syrian roadblock in February 1986. Others killed in the same period included Abd al-Karim al-Biddawi, a cadre and shaykh of Jund Allah¹⁰⁷ and Abu Rabi‘a al-Kurdiyyeh, an al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya [JI] member who had played a prominent role in the battle against the Syrian army in 1985. Many of those killed were of the Maoist-Islamist line, and had been part of Fatah’s Student Brigade.¹⁰⁸ The killings and assassinations led to the flight of most Tawhid first- and second-rank leaders from Tripoli.

In December 1986, former Tawhid members attempted an “Intifada” in Tripoli, and attacked and killed 15 Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint in Bab al-Tebbaneh.¹⁰⁹ This led to a strong Syrian reaction. On 21 and 22 December 1986, Syrian troops sealed off Tebbaneh, while Ali Eid’s Alawi Red Knight militia and Tareq Fakhr al-Din’s Tripoli resistance went into the district and committed the killings.¹¹⁰ At least 200 people were killed, though the actual number of deaths was never established.

Although Syria affirmed that those who died were “those who had put up resistance during armed clashes”,¹¹¹ eyewitness reported that most of those killed

¹⁰⁷ Ali Shandab, “Shaykh Hashim Minqara in a first interview after his release from prison”, *al-Jamahir*, 5 December 2000.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Abu Daoud, Tripoli, June 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Tripoli, August 2009; “Summary killings by Syrian forces in Tripoli”, Amnesty International Newsletter entry, April 1987; “Lebanon: Arbitrary arrests, ‘disappearances’ and extrajudicial executions by Syrian troops and Syrian-backed forces in Tripoli”, 4 March 1987, International Secretariat.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

were civilians, political supporters and/or family members of Khalil Akkawi's. They were executed in front of their homes during the night, often in their pyjamas. Machine-guns, rocket-propelled grenades and tanks were used in the house-to-house search operations throughout the district. One of the first persons killed was the father of Riyadh al-Rifa'i, a religious shaykh. The Syrian army went to his house and asked his wife who to kill, the father or the son.¹¹² Most families in Tebbaneh had someone of their households who died or disappeared during the massacre. In total, several hundred people were reported "missing". An unknown number of people are still kept in Syrian jails. Although members of Tareq Fakhr al-Din's Tripoli resistance were working class Sunni Muslims who had joined for money, the massacre went down in the collective memory of Sunni Tripolitians as one committed by the Alawi leader Ali Eid and the Syrian regime against the Sunnis. Unlike the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which the killings had little potential political and military gains – since the PLO commandos had already left Lebanon, the massacre in Tebbaneh was part of a broader strategy of political domination.¹¹³ During and following the massacre the Syrian army took control of Tebbaneh. Another aim was to create enmity between Sunnis in Tebbaneh and Alawis in Jabal Mohsen. Since Eid's Red Knights militia had played an important role in the massacre, Alawis began to feel more vulnerable and more dependent on Syria for their survival.

The impact of the Syrian civil war (1976-1982) on Tripoli

Tripoli was also affected by the armed confrontation within Syria pitting the Asad regime against Sunni Muslim opposition members from Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. This also explained the Syrian attempts to control Tripoli. After a massacre in April 1981 in Aleppo, clashes between Sunnis and Alawis within the Syrian army stationed in Lebanon were reported.¹¹⁴ Publications by the Syrian Muslim

¹¹² Interview, Omar Salamé, August 2009.

¹¹³ For an analysis of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, see Hanf, *Co-existence in Wartime Lebanon*, p. 268.

¹¹⁴ Carré and Seurat, *Les frères musulmans*, p. 171. The clashes mirrored similar army infighting between the 47th brigade and Rifa'at al-Assad's Defence Brigades within Syria.

Brotherhood (MB), which described Alawis as inheritors of a long history of plots and subversion against Muslims, stretching from the sacking of the Ka'aba by the Qarmates in the 9th century until the loss of the Golan in 1967, were distributed in Tripoli.¹¹⁵ Nasheeds (songs) supportive of the struggle of the Syrian MB found their way to Tripoli, where they were played by sympathising Islamic activists. The Aleppo famous nasheed singer Mohamed Abu Ratib, who was affiliated with the Syrian MB and wrote many anti-Asad songs, dedicated one song to “the battle for Tripoli” against Syria and the massacre in Bab al-Tebbaneh. This was a way to link the two struggles and portray them as one.

After the sacking of Hama in 1982, some dozens of Syrian Ikhwan came to Tripoli fleeing persecution in Syria.¹¹⁶ Approximately ten were from the Fighting Vanguard.¹¹⁷ This occurred because of the close and persistent contact between the Lebanese Jamaa Islamiya (JI) and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and more generally between the population in North Lebanon and the Syrian hinterland. Yet, as Salim Allouche, a former coordinator of JI's political office in North Lebanon pointed out in an interview (February 2009), their number was exaggerated for political reasons. It provided the Syrian regime a justification to impose stronger political control on Tripoli. Allouche argued that there were no more than 50 such fugitives in Tripoli, who all arrived in Lebanon as separate individuals. Azzam Ayubi, currently leader of JI's politbureau, estimated the number to be 200.¹¹⁸ Both emphasised that the refugees were second and third rank members. Syrian Ikhwan leaders almost exclusively fled to Amman, where the Brotherhood's leadership relocated after it was declared illegal in 1980. Sojourns in Syrian-controlled Lebanon were complicated for Syrian members of the opposition.

While individual JI members may have supported the quest of the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria,¹¹⁹ JI as an organisation was not involved in the conflict.

¹¹⁵ Carré and Seurat, *Les frères musulmans*, pp. 174-176.

¹¹⁶ Interview, Azzam al-Ayubi, Tripoli, February 2009.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ For instance, Abdallah Babitti, the local coordinator of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Tripoli during the war, stated in 1984: “the overwhelming Muslim majority in Tripoli, is eager to keep its religion

Ji opposed the fight pursued by the Syrian MBs in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and did not act as a “Syrian MB auxiliary”.¹²⁰ Ji was organisationally tied to the MB network, but had from the outset chosen a more pragmatic political strategy than the Syrian and Egyptian Brotherhoods. Shaykhs in Lebanon considered that the Syrian MB had a “simplistic and idealistic style”. The fact that the Islamist uprising failed in Syria demonstrated that it could never work in Lebanon, because of the plural Lebanese society.¹²¹ Tawhid’s war against the Syrian regime was distinct from the Syrian MB’s confrontation against the same regime. The war in Bab al-Tebbaneh against the Syrian army and Ali Eid’s Arab Democratic Party were expressions of Yasser Arafat’s war against the Syrian regime. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the PLO, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq had a common adversary in Syria, and this common interest united them.¹²²

Tripoli’s Salafis and the Syrian regime

Salafism had first gained a foothold in Tripoli when a generation of students of religion from Tripoli travelled to the Islamic University of Medina in the 1980s. Once their studies were completed, they returned to their hometown and established Shar‘ia Institutes. Salafi ideology was not “imported” to Lebanon without modifications, but adapted to the Lebanese social reality. Da‘i al-Shahal calls himself the “founder of Salafism” in Lebanon”.¹²³ He studied in Saudi Arabia between 1980 and 1984 and returned to Tripoli and opened the Guidance and Well-doing Institute (*al-hidaya wa’l-ihsan*) in 1988.¹²⁴ Al-Shahal quickly rose to become the most prominent Salafi cleric in Tripoli. He directed five Islamic institutes in

and Islamic moral. Tripolitarians were therefore ‘supportive of having an Islamic country as a neighbour’.” *Al-Shir’a*, p. 197.

¹²⁰ Interview, Fathy Yakan, Tripoli, April 2008.

¹²¹ Interview, Mohamed Khodr, reformist (moderate) Salafis shaykh, Tripoli, February 2009.

¹²² Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 485, 487. Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, p. 131.

¹²³ While Da‘i al-Islam al-Shahal always uses this title and non-Salafis refer to him as such, the title is disputed by al-Shahal’s Salafi rivals in Lebanon. The latter claim that Salafism is a current of thought – and not an organised movement.

¹²⁴ The institution obtained authorisation from the Lebanese state in 1990. Interview, Da‘i al-Islam al-Shahal, Tripoli, April 16, 2008.

Lebanon and administrated the “Guidance radio”, and large welfare projects in Sunni regions in Lebanon.¹²⁵

The centre received funding from many of the large Islamic charities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.¹²⁶ Most of the Saudi funds were channelled through the al-Haramayn institution (*mu’assassat al-haramayn*), one of the largest Saudi charities, which closed down in 2004, after US pressure.¹²⁷ Although the institution was close to the Saudi state ‘Ulama and the monarchy, it was also known to fund more politicised Salafists abroad. This reflected Saudi Arabia’s willingness to counterbalance Iran’s funding to Shi‘a Islamists. Another important sponsor was the Kuwaiti Ahya al-Turath association, which funded al-Shahal for three or four years.¹²⁸

The Guidance and Well-Doing Institute educated most Salafi high school graduates in Lebanon and employed a large number of the returnees from the Islamic University of Medina. The teaching staff included graduates from the Islamic University of Medina, such as Ra‘ed Hlayhel, Mohamed Khodr, and shaykh Ahmad, a Palestinian from Nahr al-Bared. Another teacher, Safwan al-Zu‘abi, was a businessman who had studied Arabic literature for two years and only studied Shar‘ia at the local mosques.¹²⁹ There were also other teachers with future bonds to the global Jihadi movement, including Nabil Rahim, arrested in 2008, accused of being second-in-command of “al-Qaida and Fatah al-Islam” in Lebanon and the coordinator between Jihadists in Lebanon and actors in the global

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*. Sa‘ud al-Mawla, “al-Salafiyyun fi lubnan. Al-ta’arjuh bayn al-d ‘awa wa’l-silah” (The Salafists in Lebanon. Fluctuating between the Da‘awa and weapons”), *al-Jazeera report*, 15 November 2012, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/11/2012111593541563647.htm> (accessed November 2012).

¹²⁶ Interview, Da‘i al-Islam al-Shahal, Tripoli, April 16, 2008.

¹²⁷ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, p. 120.

¹²⁸ Interview, Safwan al-Zu‘abi, Tripoli, February 2009. For more on Ahya al-Turath al-Islami, see Carine Lahoud, *Islam et politique au Koweït*, Paris. PUF, 2011, p. 138; Zoltan Pall, *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe. Development, Fractionalization and Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013, pp. 87-89.

¹²⁹ Interview, Safwan al-Zu‘abi, Tripoli, February 2009.

Jihadi network.¹³⁰ Another teacher, Omar al-Y'ali, was a former member of the Tabligh society, who developed close bonds to Lebanese Salafi Jihadis in the Diaspora and in Ayn al-Helweh.¹³¹

In 1996 the Guidance and Well-Doing Institute was closed down by a decision of the Lebanese Interior Minister Michel al-Murr, for “inciting confessional hatred” (*na'arat taifiyya*).¹³² Four employees of the institute, including al-Shahal's brother, were jailed for two months.¹³³ The decision was based on the paragraph in a book used in the Institute's curriculum, entitled *Contemporary Branches Belonging to Islam and the Declarations of Position of Islam towards These*. The book was written by a Saudi scholar and member of the teaching council (*hi'at al-tadris*) at the Islamic University in Medina.¹³⁴ A chapter on the Alawis (*nusayriyyun*),¹³⁵ reproduced in one of the Guidance and Well-Doing Institute's textbooks, not only described the sect as apostates but indicated that the Syrian regime was in secret agreement with the Israeli government on the Golan question.¹³⁶ The introductory paragraph of the chapter on the Alawis read:

¹³⁰ “The police surprised him in an apartment in Abi Samra, where he had been hiding for eleven months. The Second in command in al-Qaida is arrested” (in Arabic) (“dahamathu al-shurat fi shaqa fi trablus, heithu tawara 11 shahran. Tawqi al-rajul al-theni li'l-qa'ida fi'lubnan”), *al-Hayat* (London), January 11, 1008, http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/01-2008/Item-20080110-653d0b38-c0a8-10ed-01ae-81ab43198e43/story.html (accessed April 2008). Rahim was released in July 2011.

¹³¹ Rougier, *Le Jihad au quotidien*, p. 212.

¹³² The decision was made after a complaint filed by the al-Ahbash group to the ISF. The group's leader, Nizar al-Halabi, had been assassinated by Salafi Jihadis from Ayn al-Helweh in August 1995.

¹³³ Interview, Ra'ed Hlayhel, February 2009. Hlayhel was one of those arrested.

¹³⁴ Dr Ghalib bin Awaji, *Firaq mu'asira tantasib ila al-islam wa' bayan mawqif al-islam minha*. The book was published in Jeddah by *al-maktabat al-'asriyya al-thahabiyya* (third edition in 2001). The latest edition of the book may be downloaded at https://uqu.edu.sa/files2/tiny_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/4290561/1/moon547.pdf (accessed May 2014).

¹³⁵ Nusayriyyun, a derogatory term used for Alawis, refers to Ibn Nusayr, who separated from Twelver Shiism in the ninth century and founded the Alawi sect.

¹³⁶ Interview, Ra'ed al-Hlayhel, Tripoli, February 2009.

The Nusayris, as the others of the Esoteric sects are among the enemies of the Islamic doctrine [...] The closest example of the positions of the Nusayris is what happens in Muslim areas in Syria and Lebanon, where they killed innocent men, women, and children; another is the alliance of the Alawis with Maronites and Khomeinists. The Alawis also encouraged tensions in the old days. While the Crusaders slaughtered Muslims [...], they did not do so with the Alawis, but recognised their holy book. Alawis create fitna because they lie in the same trenches as the enemies of Muslims against Muslims [...]. Between the Alawis and the Jews there is love, and they concur on many principles. A certification of this fact came with the Six Day War as they call it. What happened during it is one of many indications on the positions and enmity of the Alawis towards Ahl al-Sunna [...].¹³⁷

Moreover, the same chapter directly mentioned the Hama massacre – stressing “we shall not forget Hama” and emphasised Ali Eid’s role in “plotting” against Sunnis in Lebanon:

When the Nusayri Ali Eid set himself up as the leader of the Nusayri organisation in Tripoli, the owner of the Lebanese *al-Hawadith* magazine¹³⁸ paid attention to this and was killed by a plot of the Alawis. There are also many other examples indicating that the Alawis are not convinced of the appropriateness of their own sect.¹³⁹

The book was used in courses at Saudi universities, including the Umm al-Qura University in Mecca in the 1990s and 2000s. This shows the difference between the Saudi Arabian and the Lebanese contexts, and, in particular, the red lines in Lebanon during the years of Syrian authoritarianism. Al-Shahal’s official narrative

¹³⁷ Awaji, *Contemporary Branches*, pp. 533-534. My translation.

¹³⁸ This paragraph refers to the killing of Salim al-Lawzi, a renowned Arab journalist and the owner of the Lebanese pro-Saudi *al-Hawadith* (“Events”) magazine. Al-Lawzi was born in Tripoli, but moved to London in 1976 after receiving death threats. When he returned to Lebanon for his mother’s funeral in February 1980, he was abducted by gunmen. Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*, p. 2.

¹³⁹ Awaji, *Contemporary Branches*, p. 549. My translation.

of the closure of the Guidance and Well-Doing Institute was that it was a Syrian reaction to his growing strength. The growing popularity of the Salafi Da‘awa had “irritated the Syrian regime”, and made it realise that the presence of the Guidance and Well-Doing Institute was not in its interest:

The Syrian regime wanted the totality of the Islamic movements to be under its command and to work solely under its guidance. They want the Islamic movements to be an instrument (*wasat*) of the Syrian regime, as does the Ahabash and others. I was an unacceptable opponent (*mu‘atarid ghayr shar‘iy*). My doctrine, thoughts, and policies were against them. [...] I did not enter into a conflict with the Syrians but doctrinally I am a Salafist and they are Nusayris. They don’t believe in the religion. In the depth of their hearts, they have a “party spirit” (*ta‘assub*) towards the Alawi sect and the Shias.¹⁴⁰

In 2000, Da‘i al-Shahal’s name was mentioned in the indictment against the “Dinniyeh Group”, which fought against the Lebanese army for six days in December 1999 and January 2000.¹⁴¹ He fled Lebanon for Saudi Arabia and did not return until the men arrested in the Diniyyeh affair were pardoned and released in July 2005. Shortly after he had left Lebanon, al-Shahal was sentenced to death in absentia. Although the common interpretation is that the Guidance and Well-Doing Institute was closed down by the Syrians, because of the above-mentioned book, Bernard Rougier – the most established specialist on Salafism in Lebanon – has argued that according to the rumours at the time, al-Shahal diffused a tape with a sermon of Saudi oppositionist *alim*, Salman al-Awda on the Guidance and Well-Doing radio. The Saudi regime therefore asked the Lebanese authorities to close the Institute.¹⁴² Although direct evidence that the Saudi Embassy was behind the closure is hard to find, the idea that Syria, at times, had interests in common with the Salafis was confirmed by the author’s own empirical findings, detailed below.

When discussing the question of Salafism in Tripoli, it must not be forgotten that the rise of Salafism occurred simultaneously with the Syrian presence and that

¹⁴⁰ Interview, Da‘i al-Islam al-Shahhal, Tripoli, April 2008.

¹⁴¹ For a study, see Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*, pp. 229-265.

¹⁴² Bernard Rougier, *L’Oumma en fragments*, p. 123. For a study of the Sahwa movement, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

during Pax Syriana nothing could happen in Tripoli except with Syrian indirect endorsement. The presence of Da‘i al-Shahal in Tripoli suited the Asad regime, because he called on his followers not to vote and thus helped weaken the clout of Rafiq Hariri and other representatives of Lebanese political Sunnism.¹⁴³ It also fragmented the religious scene and the influence of JI.¹⁴⁴ Although the JI leadership had accepted the Pax Syriana, not all its cadres and members in North Lebanon accepted all of Syria’s practices. Khaled Daher, a JI parliamentarian who served between 1996 and 2000, was so vocal in his criticism that Syria vetoed his name in the 2000 parliamentary elections.¹⁴⁵

Syria supported the rise of different strands of Salafism by “neglecting it”. Many observers of the field of Islamism in Tripoli have pointed out that although al-Shahal always represented himself as someone persecuted during the Syrian period, his influence over Salafism in Tripoli was stronger in the 1990s than after he returned in 2005.¹⁴⁶ Al-Shahal, like all other institutional actors at the time, was obliged to interact with the Syrian intelligence¹⁴⁷ and became “indirectly supported by the Syrian security services”.¹⁴⁸ Perceptions were often more important in politics than reality – and the closure of the institute was framed in the post-2005 period as a result of *Syrian* repression. The closure of the institute made it possible for Da‘i al-Shahal to make the Salafis look like victims of the Syrian intelligence services. This boosted al-Shahal’s credibility among anti-Syrian Lebanese Sunnis. Moreover, the idea that the Syrian army protected North Lebanon against Sunni Salafi Jihadi extremists was an argument that the Syrian regime used frequently in the 1990s. It became one of Syria’s main arguments for maintaining a presence in Lebanon after Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000.¹⁴⁹ The

¹⁴³ Rougier, *L’Oumma en fragments*, pp. 72, 122-123.

¹⁴⁴ Interview, Salim Allouche, Tripoli, April 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Interview, Khaled Daher, Tripoli, April 2008, June 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with shaykhs in Tripoli, 2008-2013; Rougier, *L’Oumma en fragments*, pp. 122-123.

¹⁴⁷ Interview, Salim Allouche, Tripoli, April 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Interview, Misbah Ahdab, Beirut, May 2010. The Syrian regime had also been behind the creation of other Islamist movements in Tripoli – such as al-Ahbash - and the Salafis and the Ahbush engaged in the 1990s in a war of attrition, which in turn strengthened Syria.

¹⁴⁹ On the impact of the Israeli withdrawal on Hizbullah, see Aurélie Daher, *Le Hizbullah. Mobilisation et pouvoir*, Paris: PUF, 2014, pp. 416-420, 241-243.

presence of Jihadi groups in North Lebanon created an image of Tripoli as a “cradle of terrorism”, which justified the Syrian presence, especially vis-à-vis the West.¹⁵⁰ The Syrian regime could afford more ambivalence towards Sunni Islamists in Lebanon than within its own country.

The Salafi networks in Tripoli were autonomous and had their own leadership and support networks. It would be reductionist to reduce them to Syrian manipulation. Yet, Salafi youth did not always have a clear perception of the enemy. In the words of Nir Rosen: “the ideology of Jihad often seemed less important than the sheer will to fight – against whoever could be found”.¹⁵¹ Which target they finally chose depended on what those who provided them with weapons, money, and ammunition told them to do.¹⁵² The Syrian intelligence agents were aware of this ambivalence and helped orient the activism of zealous Salafi youth in Lebanon and Syria towards targets associated with US imperialism, and away from targeting the Asad regime and its allies and *protégés*. This became even more evident after the US-led invasion of Iraq and the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency, when Damascus gave free passage to Salafi Jihadis who wanted to fight the Americans in Iraq. The Asad regime considered Salafis helpful in creating an anti-American atmosphere in Lebanon and Syria following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The policy continued after the Syrian withdrawal: Syria furnished vital birth-help to the nucleus of Fatah al-Islam, which fought the Lebanese army in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared in 2007. The group was created by former prisoners in Syria with the aim to create tensions within the Sunni community and hence weaken the political project of Saad Hariri.¹⁵³ Syria was therefore an arsonist

¹⁵⁰ See, for instance, Hussein Ayyub, “What about Hizbullah, the fundamentalists, and the [Palestinian refugee] camps [in Lebanon] after the Syrian withdrawal?”, *al-Safir*, 20 December 2004.

¹⁵¹ Nir Rosen, “We run the road”.

¹⁵² Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments*, pp. 104-106.

¹⁵³ The topic of the rise of Fatah al-Islam is outside the scope of this paper. For a study, see Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments*, pp. 144-213 and Tine Gade, *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad*, Kjeller: FFI-report, 2007, pp. 22-62. For a discussion of Fatah al-Islam after the battle of Nahr al-Barid, see Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments*, pp. 213-221 and Bilal Y. Saab, “Lebanon at risk from Salafi-Jihadi terrorist cell”, *CTC Sentinel*, 3 February 2010.

fire-fighter vis-à-vis radical Islamist groups in Lebanon. Thus, while Salafis emerged independently of Syrian manipulation, the Asad regime skilfully “neglected” Tripoli’s Salafis in order to split the Sunni Islamist field and uphold “security vacuums” in Tripoli. Moreover, once the Salafi Jihadis were there, the Syrian regime was skilled at orienting Salafi violence against American and international targets, rather than against the Asad regime itself.

Did the Syrian regime have an anti-Sunni policy?

The Syrian tutelage, between 1976 and 2005, coincided with a loss of momentum for the Sunni political leaderships in Lebanon. A general crisis of political representation of the Sunni community in Lebanon began in the second half of the 1980s. There had traditionally not been specific political parties for Sunnis in Lebanon.¹⁵⁴ Sunnis were coreligionists of the Ottomans and saw themselves as a majority in the broader Arab Middle East. Political leaders of the Sunnis were notables and therefore usually not activist, although they supported the Palestinian cause. During the civil war, Sunnis in Lebanon had generally speaking not enrolled in sectarian militias. Sunni notables did not participate in the war, but were mediators, while the urban poor fought for the PLO in alliance with left-wingers from other Lebanese sects. An exception was the aforementioned Islamic Tawhid movement in Tripoli.

The crisis of political representation of Sunnis began with the evacuation of the PLO from Lebanon in the 1982-83 period. This weakened the Lebanese Sunni community relative to other Lebanese sects. The two exclusively Sunni militias in Lebanon, allied with Fatah, al-Murabitun in Beirut and Tawhid in Tripoli, were both crushed by Syria and its allies. Syria subsequently helped Hizbullah gain control of the frontline with Israel. After 1985, 90 per cent of the so-called resistance acts against Israel were Hizbullah’s work.¹⁵⁵ Arab nationalism lost its

¹⁵⁴ Albert Hourani, “Ideologies of the Mountain and the city”, in Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East*, London: Macmillan, 1981, p. 177.

¹⁵⁵ Rougier, *Le jihad au quotidien*, pp. 49-52; “L’Islamisme sunnite face au Hezbollah”, in Franck Mermier and Élisabeth Picard (eds.), *Liban. Une guerre de trente-trois jours*, Paris: La Découverte, 2007, pp. 111-119, p. 114; *L’Oumma en fragments. Contrôler le sunnisme au Liban*, Paris: PUF, 2011, pp. 18-23.

impetus. The PLO began negotiation with Israel, and Hamas was patronised by Syria and Iran. Lebanese Sunnis no longer had a militant cause. Sunnis became jealous of Hizbullah and began to see political Shi'ism as their main source of alterity.

Sunni leaders were not awarded control over an institution of state patronage they could use to consolidate their leadership, such as the Ministry of the Displaced People controlled by Jumblatt and the Council of the South, controlled by Nabih Berry. All these factors made it difficult for new Sunni leaders to emerge during the 1990-2005 period. Sunni urban poor quarters were heavily penetrated by the Syrian intelligence. Sunni leaders had lost touch with the population during the war. The new leaders were *nouveaux riches* businessmen with little historical legitimacy – or little legitimacy at all. They were patronised by Syrian intelligence, which vetoed all those electoral candidates of whom it disapproved. Loyalty increasingly became transactional. Some attributed the crisis of Sunni political representation in Lebanon to Syrian policies and argued that Damascus had a specific Sunni policy in Lebanon, to curb the autonomy of Lebanese Sunnis for domestic political reasons. Rougier relates the Syrian 'preventive repression' in North Lebanon to the large Sunni majority in the region.¹⁵⁶

Certain aspects of Syria's policies indicated that Syria followed an anti-Sunni policy in Lebanon. Specific Syrian arrangements during the 1980s and 1990s disfavoured the Lebanese Sunni community, and particularly, in Tripoli. For instance, the Tripartite Damascus agreement signed in 1985 between the three militia-leaders Walid Jumblatt, Elie Hobeiqa and Nabih Berry left out the Sunnis and the Palestinians.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, during the 1990s, no institution of patronage was allocated to any Sunni politician in Tripoli. Asad feared that Sunni politicians might consolidate a political leadership at odds with Syria. Therefore, the Syrian regime made it clear to PM Rafiq Hariri that Tripoli was theirs and not a territory he could attempt to penetrate politically.

¹⁵⁶ Rougier, *Le Jihad au quotidien*, p. 236.

¹⁵⁷ Rosemary Sayigh, *Too many enemies. The Palestinians experience in Lebanon*, London, Zed books, 1994, p. 142.

Syria also continued to give strong political support to Lebanon's Alawis, against the Sunnis. In 1991, two parliamentary seats were created for the Alawi minority in North Lebanon. Ali Eid obtained one, but was replaced with a figure more acceptable to Tripoli's Sunnis in 1996.¹⁵⁸ However, Syria did have many allies among the Sunnis in Tripoli, in particular traditional Sunni leaders from the bourgeois classes. While the Sunni urban poor were excluded from institutional politics in the 1990s and 2000s, traditional, secular politicians gained power in the Lebanese system. Few, if any, Tripolitanian MPs during the 1990 period opposed Syria.¹⁵⁹ This was because the Syrian intelligence vetoed all electoral candidates they opposed. This occurred during a period where Lebanese electoral candidates had to pay bribes to Syrian intelligence to appear on electoral list. This practice was widely known and contributed to discrediting electoral politics among the Lebanese.¹⁶⁰

Despite the alignment between Sunni leaders and Syria at the surface, there were signs that many Sunnis were uneasy with the Syrian practices. One tell-tale came already in 1992, when Ahmad Fakhr al-Din, the brother of the leader of the Tripoli Resistance, who had been supported by Syrian intelligence, presented himself for parliamentary elections. Anonymous flyers were distributed in Tripoli's poor quarters against the Fakhr al-Din brothers with the slogan, 'Do not forget the Tebbaneh massacre.'. In 1996, Samir Frangié, the politician from Zgharta, obtained 12,000 votes from Tripoli, a third of his total votes in the electoral district.¹⁶¹ That was a high number, particularly compared to Omar Karami's 14,000 votes in Tripoli. Frangié succeeded because he allied himself with one of Khalil Akkawi's former comrades-in-arms and because he represented a line antagonistic to the Syrian regime. Another indication of Tripolitanian opposition to Syria was that Rafiq Hariri became very popular in Tripoli after he began to oppose the Syrian regime in the 2003-2004 period.

¹⁵⁸ 'Nouvelle crise, vieux demons, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Although Misbah al-Ahdab joined the Bristol gathering in 2004, he had, as other Tripolitanian MPs, been forced to cooperate with the Syrian intelligence earlier.

¹⁶⁰ Interview, Samir Frangié, Beirut, June 2012.

¹⁶¹ Samir Frangié had a total of 35,000 votes in the Muhafaza of the north, the electoral district.

The above could indicate that Syria was not necessarily afraid of Islamists, because it was so easy to manipulate them. Syria was more afraid of the emergence of a strong and independent political Sunni leaders in the Levant region, with international contacts and which could give ideas to Syria's Sunnis. Examples of such strong and independent leaders could be Yasser Arafat's Fatah (in the 1980s), Rafiq Hariri (until 2005) and his son, Saad Hariri (after 2005). Yet, the focus on confessionalism should not be over-rated. It should be combined with the economic motivations, discussed in the next section.

The Syrian-Lebanese informal economy

Until now the discussion has implied that the greater Syrian control of north Lebanon, occurred as a result of a Syrian plan, because Syria feared Sunni Fatah activists or Sunni Islamists in Tripoli. A competing hypothesis may be that Syrian-Lebanese ties developed without a political plan, as a result of the joint interests in the war economy. In other words, the Asad regime had no plan to control Tripoli more intrusively, but officers in the Syrian army developed particular economic interests in north Lebanon. During the Syrian tutelage, trans-state economic ties created overlapping interests between the Syrian regime, Syrian merchants, and Lebanese merchants. It was a win-win situation for most parties and contributed to consolidating Syrian tutelage. The big loser was the Lebanese state, whose revenues shrank by half over 10 years.¹⁶² The Syrian-Lebanese networks introduced new norms in Tripoli, where short-term profit became more important than sustainable economic policies aiming at job creation. Thus, the Syrian-Lebanese networks created a new "moral community" in North Lebanon, which competed with the former Islamic and anti-imperialistic values of Tripolitanian Sunnism.¹⁶³ A new Syrian-Lebanese economic entrepreneurial class emerged.

Because of differences in climate, vegetation, and natural resources, the economies of Syria and Lebanon had always been complimentary. Although custom tariffs were introduced in 1950, trans-border economic exchange grew

¹⁶² By the end of the 1980s, one third of Lebanon's GDP was controlled by the militias. Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon. A shattered country*, London/New York: Holmes & Meier, 1996, p. 147.

¹⁶³ A moral community is a community, which shares common norms.

during the 1960s, especially in the informal sector: After the beginning of the nationalisations of the Ba‘ath party in the 1960s, Lebanon was increasingly used as a backyard for Syria’s own informal sector. Syrian capital fled to Lebanon.¹⁶⁴ The imbrications of the Syrian and the Lebanese economies reached its peak during the Syrian tutelage, when most of the Lebanese economy fell under Syrian control. The main reason for this was that the Syrian economy was hit by a severe crisis in the 1980s, when purchasing power fell drastically.¹⁶⁵ The country experienced a foreign exchange bankruptcy, and was forced to drastically reduce imports.¹⁶⁶ Few commodities could be found at Syrian official markets, yet everything could be found on the black markets. Control over strategic sectors in the Lebanese economy became crucial to the survival of the Syrian economy, and regime, in the period.

Syrian business entrepreneurs in Lebanon, with connections to the army and the regime, invested in specific industries, of which there was a shortage inside Syria proper. For instance, a large banking sector was developed in Zahleh between 1983 and 1984.¹⁶⁷ The Lebanese economic space was important for those social categories who came to matter the most for the Asad regime in the 1990s and 2000s: army officers, who controlled large parts of the Lebanese economy; Damascene merchants, courtiers, and intermediaries;¹⁶⁸ and, from the late 1980s, a new Syrian class of business entrepreneurs linked to the regime.¹⁶⁹ Syria initially saw the Lebanese economic bourgeoisie as a competitor, and not a partner to its own businesses.¹⁷⁰ Yet, as the Syrian presence in Lebanon lasted, Lebanese

¹⁶⁴ Kassir, ‘Dix ans après’, p. 14.

¹⁶⁵ Wages had grown twofold in the 1980s and prices sevenfold.

¹⁶⁶ The bankruptcy was due to a large import of consumer goods and ambitious industrialisation efforts. By 1986, only 40% of imports were covered by exports.

¹⁶⁷ Picard, ‘La politique de la Syrie au Liban’, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ Picard, ‘La politique de la Syrie au Liban’, p. 8; Volker Peres, *The political economy of Syria under Assad*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1997, 1995, pp. 49-61.

¹⁶⁹ For an analysis, see: Joseph Bahout, *Les entrepreneurs syriens: économie, affaires et politique*, Beirut: Les cahiers de CERMOC, 1994; Maria Wadjinny, ‘Les entrepreneurs de Bachar. Stratégies sociales et politiques des entrepreneurs privés face à la politique économique de Bachar al-Assad’, MA thesis, Paris: IEP de Paris, 2008.

¹⁷⁰ Hinnebusch, ‘Pax syriana?’, p. 142.

entrepreneurship was compelled to not compete with, but to complement, the expanding Syrian private sector.¹⁷¹

Smuggling and trafficking in North Lebanon

During the war, militia leaders and other war profiteers enriched themselves through illegal construction, real-estate speculation, export of refined products of cannabis and the opium poppy produced in the Beqa'a, money raised from illegal taxes imposed on the civilians and on goods passing through the ports controlled by various militias.¹⁷² The development of the war economy is one of the central reasons for the durability of the Lebanese war. The war economy made the militias richer and less dependent on external support.

The war economy in North Lebanon mattered to Syrian army officers, because they controlled a greater share than elsewhere. In coordination with the warring Lebanese militias, they were able to control key infrastructure, including the port, the refinery in Beddawi and the Chekka cement works. The cement works was initially controlled by Frangié's Marada militia and constituted the main source of the revenues of the latter.¹⁷³ It became a particularly important recipient of Syrian investments because Syria itself lacked construction materials at the time.¹⁷⁴ The oil refinery was managed by a group of Lebanese politicians and businessmen, in coordination with the Syrian army. Elements of Ali Haydar's Wahdat Khassa [Special Units] were based inside the refinery.¹⁷⁵

Tareq Fakhr al-Din, the Syria-linked Sunni businessman, also had a central role. In the 1980s, he was given economic privileges in exchange for establishing the Tripoli Resistance, a militia funded and armed by the Syrian intelligence. The participation of the Tripoli Resistance in the massacre in Bab al-Tebbaneh soon

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁷² Michael Johnson, *All honourable men*, p. 226; Fawaz Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices: le phénomène mafieux', *Naqd*, 19-20, Winter Autumn 2004.

¹⁷³ Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices.'

¹⁷⁴ Picard, 'La politique de la Syrie au Liban', p. 8

¹⁷⁵ Interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

became a taboo among many Sunnis in Tripoli, who only remembered the Alawi responsibility. Fakhr al-Din became a respectable businessman, and his “Palma” beach resort, built up with war profits and drug money in the 1980s without a construction permit, quickly became one of the most popular in Tripoli.

The port of Tripoli, controlled by the Karami family, was the second largest in Lebanon¹⁷⁶ and used for hashish smuggling towards Turkey. It was in the early 1970s a major route for PLO supplies and reinforcement, and this continued more covertly during the Syrian presence.¹⁷⁷ However, the high number of taxes and impositions made it expensive, and other ports were opened north of Tripoli.¹⁷⁸ These were used for the smuggling of cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, and electrical domestic appliances towards Syria. During a short period in the 1980s, the Minqara-led branch of the Tawhid movement seized control over the port,¹⁷⁹ in coordination with Rifa‘at al-Asad and his son Firas.¹⁸⁰ The royalties from the port made Minqara a very wealthy man¹⁸¹ and helped his militia gain financial independence.¹⁸² Mustafa Allouche, an anti-Syrian and anti-Islamist political leader in Tripoli, estimates lost taxes to a value of 600 million dollars.¹⁸³

Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon had existed since the creation of borders between the countries, even during the customs union, which lasted until 1950.¹⁸⁴ It was amplified by the growing differentiation of the two economies in the 1960s. During the civil war, Akkar became the passageway between Syria and Lebanon for smuggling of construction materials, electrical domestic, and

¹⁷⁶ Interview, Ahmad Karamé, manager of the port, 1972-1991, Tripoli, August 2010.

¹⁷⁷ Interview, Erik Fosse, Oslo, December 2013.

¹⁷⁸ Traboulsi, ‘L’Économie politique des milices’.

¹⁷⁹ Interview, Hashim Minqara, Tripoli, February 2009.

¹⁸⁰ Gary C. Gambill, “Syria after Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2005, pp. 35-42.

¹⁸¹ Interview with political leaders, religious shaykhs and residents in Tripoli, 2008-2012.

¹⁸² Interview, Hashim Minqara, Tripoli, February 2009.

¹⁸³ Interview, Mustafa Allouche, Tripoli, April 2008.

¹⁸⁴ Chaitaini, *Post-colonial Syria and Lebanon*, p. 158. Traboulsi, ‘L’Économie politique des milices’.

foodstuffs.¹⁸⁵ Because of the wartime isolation of Tripoli from Beirut, merchants began importing directly through the port of Tripoli, instead of through Beirut.¹⁸⁶ They developed relations of confidence with Syrian traders on the other side of the border, who smuggled the goods using small pick-ups.¹⁸⁷ Smuggling took place everywhere, at all passage points. One route went through the village of Madaya, just south of al-Zabadani and near the Masn'a border, which developed into an important village of cross-border traffic. Smugglers also passed from north Lebanon and along the Syrian coast, through Masyaf and Tartus. There were more than 50 clandestine ports in North Lebanon and on the Syrian coastline, where one embarked goods on the sea, in arrangement with the customs officials. If they refused to let goods pass, smugglers could kill them. One passage point was controlled by a man called Hassan Makhluḥ, known to do “happy hours” where smugglers passed in exchange for a financial compensation.¹⁸⁸

The trafficking arrangement benefited Syrian army officers and their friends, who imposed regularised taxes for vans and trucks.¹⁸⁹ The same figures as those controlling Tripoli's port and refinery were also important in the trafficking business. Fakhr al-Din and his brother, Ahmad, trafficked aluminium, wood and iron purchased from pirates,¹⁹⁰ in addition to drugs. Jamil al-Asad's two sons, Fawaz and Munzar, played leading roles in the lucrative smuggling of electronics and consumer goods from Lebanon towards Syria and Turkey.¹⁹¹ Fawaz, a corporate lawyer in a leather jacket who had bought all of his diplomas, had

¹⁸⁵ Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices'.

¹⁸⁶ Interview, Abdel-Ghani Kabbara, former Future coordinator of North Lebanon, July 2011.

¹⁸⁷ Interview, Joseph Wehbé, Tripoli, June 2011. Chaitaini, *Post-colonial Syria and Lebanon*, p. 158; Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices'.

¹⁸⁸ Interview, Ignace Leverrier, Paris, October 2013.

¹⁸⁹ Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices'.

¹⁹⁰ Interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

¹⁹¹ Interview, Ignace Leverrier, January 2012 and October 2013.

already accumulated wealth through racketeering in Latakia.¹⁹² Fawaz and Munthar al-Asad were known for extolling and working with Tripoli's businessmen.¹⁹³

Since Tripoli was geographically close to Syria, and in particular to Latakia where both men lived, personal links developed between Tripoli's businessmen and Jamil al-Asad's sons. Syrian army officers became heavily involved in trafficking and contraband of stolen goods. Army commanders did not crush these practices, but gave army officers and soldiers the opportunity to resort to corruption, theft, and even vandalism for personal enrichment or power purposes.¹⁹⁴ For many Lebanese, this reflected the character of the Damascus regime as a military-mercantile crony coalition, which used power as a source of personal enrichment.¹⁹⁵ Thus, for the Syrian military constituency, the rent from illicit activities in Lebanon provided an alternative to oil-rent.¹⁹⁶ The petroleum sector had between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s constituted 70 per cent of the value of Syria's total export value, but declined afterwards.¹⁹⁷ One particularly lucrative sector was the booming drug trade, which benefited all sides of the conflict, and which linked the Lebanese militias up with European and Eastern mafias.

Most of the drug passed through the port of Beirut and transported towards Europe, but the port of Tripoli was used for hashish smuggling towards Turkey.¹⁹⁸ Rifa'at al-Asad and his son Firas levied heavy taxes on this traffic.¹⁹⁹ Fakhr al-Din gained most of his fortune from wartime drug trade.²⁰⁰ Drugs also passed from the Beqa'a to Tell Qalakh and Homs. Opium- and cannabis traffickers and merchants were often members of Lebanese political parties or militias, who used opium to

¹⁹² Interview, Ignace Leverrier, Paris, January 2012 and October 2013.

¹⁹³ Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

¹⁹⁴ Interview, Mustafa Allouch, Tripoli, May 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Picard, *Lebanon*, p. 147.

¹⁹⁶ Hinnebusch, 'Pax syriana?', p. 154.

¹⁹⁷ Perthes, *A political economy*, p. 31.

¹⁹⁸ Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices'.

¹⁹⁹ Gary C. Gambill, "Syria after Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon", *Middle East Quarterly* Fall 2005, pp. 35-42, <http://www.meforum.org/769/syria-after-lebanon-hooked-on-lebanon>

²⁰⁰ Interview, Toufic Allouch, Tripoli, February 2009; Salim Allouche, Tripoli, May 2009.

finance warfare and exchanged drugs for weapons from the European and Eastern mafias.²⁰¹ As with the case of all other smuggling and war economy activity, warring militia leaders cooperated in smuggling and dispatching drugs, which flowed unrestricted through all frontlines without difficulties.²⁰²

Lebanese dependence on the Syrian-Lebanese networks

Economic interaction reaffirmed the strong social and historical links between Tripoli and its Syrian hinterland, mainly Homs, Tartus and Latakia. The same families were present on both sides of the international border, and in the period of the Syrian tutelage, children in certain villages in Akkar near the border went to school in Syria, where enrolment fees were considerably lower.²⁰³ Another dimension of the complementarity between the two economies was the dependence of the Syrian workforce on the Lebanese labour market. Tripoli received a particularly high number of the Syrian migratory workers. Many were ambulant sellers, who gathered around the Abu Ali River.²⁰⁴ Syrian workers numbered up to a million in Lebanon and made up between 20 and 40 per cent of the Lebanese workforce. They helped alleviate unemployment and poverty in Syria proper.²⁰⁵ Contractors in Lebanon depended on their cheap labour. However, Lebanese labourers were put out of work by their Syrian counterparts, who did not pay taxes in Lebanon.

Lebanese entrepreneurs became increasingly dependent on Syria in the 1990s. They benefited from the opening of the Syrian economy and banking sector in the 1990s, and obtained licences to operate in Syria. Endorsement of the Syrian regime also became necessary to do business on a large-scale within Lebanon.²⁰⁶ Indeed,

²⁰¹ Makhlof, *Cannabis et pavot au Liban*, pp. 34, 137.

²⁰² Traboulsi, 'L'Économie politique des milices'.

²⁰³ Interview, Sophia Saadeh, Beirut, March 2009.

²⁰⁴ Interview with politicians, university professors, and journalists in Tripoli, 2008-2011.

²⁰⁵ John Shalcraft, *The invisible cage. Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 15.

²⁰⁶ Shmuel Bar, *Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview*, Herzlyia, Israel: Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2006, p. 395.

those entrepreneurs, who came to dominate Lebanese economy in the after-war era, were close to the Syrian regime and army. In Tripoli, the joint ventures between Syrian military elites and Tripolitanian businessmen developed new patterns of sociability. Syrian military officers became close to Tripoli's elites, and, as elsewhere in Lebanon, exchanged visits, and met for lunches and drinks.²⁰⁷ The wives of the Syrian military officers became friends with the wives of Tripolitanian political elites and businessmen.²⁰⁸

Smuggling, illegal construction, and other parasitic activities helped create a new class of *nouveaux riches* Lebanese, and Tripolitanians, during the war. A considerable number of northern MPs of the 1990s had gained their fortune from trafficking activities that had begun during the war. Common interests developed as a result of these trans-state economic ties, and a network of actors favourable to a Syrian "solution" in Lebanon emerged.²⁰⁹ This new and growing Syro-Lebanese entrepreneurial elite consolidated Syrian control over Lebanon. It included central figures in the political establishment; others were businessmen who entered the political arena in the late 1990s.

Najib Miqati, who served as Lebanese Prime Minister in 2005 and between 2011 and 2013, is one example. He entered politics in 1998 as Minister of Public Works and Transport and was elected MP in 2000. A considerable part of Miqati's fortune was earned in the mobile phone industry in Syria and Lebanon.²¹⁰ In both cases, favourable Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) contracts²¹¹ were obtained through the close friendship with governmental caretakers, PM Rafiq Hariri in Lebanon and Bashar al-Asad and Rami Makhlouf in Syria.²¹² In 2002, Orascom was pushed out of Syriatel after a row with Rami Makhlouf.²¹³ The episode

²⁰⁷ Interview, Ahmad Karami, Tripoli, June 2012.

²⁰⁸ Interview, Hussam Sbat, Tripoli, 2009-2014.

²⁰⁹ Hinnebusch, 'Pax syriana?', p. 154.

²¹⁰ Bar, *Bashar's Syria*, p. 395.

²¹¹ Investcom operated companies granted a BOT in Lebanon in 1994 (Cellis) and in Syria in 2001 (Areeba).

²¹² Interview, Tripoli politician, close to Nagib Miqati. Tripoli, July 2011.

²¹³ Tarek Zein, 'Lebanon's Telecom adventurers', *Executive magazine* (Beirut), 77 (November 2005).

revealed that it was difficult to operate in the telecommunications sector in Syria without the consent of the influential Makhloufs. Miqati was also given an important role when Hashim Minqara and Samir al-Hassan were released from prison in 2000, which helped the former gain Islamist votes in the 2000 legislative election.

Ahmad Hbous, the late businessman who took over the Alawi seat in parliament in 1996 from Ali Eid, also gained his fortune as a contractor in Syria and Lebanon. Other prominent members of the rising Syro-Lebanese bourgeoisie outside of Tripoli included Abdel-Halim Khaddam and Rafiq Hariri, who developed business partnerships during the 1990s and prior to the Syrian withdrawal.²¹⁴ Rafiq Hariri aided Khaddam's son to establish himself in business. Other less prominent actors were Lebanese bankers, on whom Syrian entrepreneurs relied because of the failure to liberalise banks in Syria. In the 2000s, when branches of Lebanese banks were opened in Damascus, the interdependence continued.

Hence, the control over Tripoli's economy was a joint venture between the notable families of Tripoli and the Syrian military officers, and contributed to solidifying ties between the two. Local politicians were interwoven into the Syrian orbit to the extent that they constituted one social fabric. In the parliamentary elections of 1992, characterised by the Christian boycott, controlling candidates in the North helped the Syrian regime install a political system in favour of the Pax Syriana. The cooperation, shared economic benefits, and common interest in the perpetuation of Syrian influence in Lebanon helped modify norms and identities in both camps. A common moral community and a common interest-based 'asabiyya were created.²¹⁵

Conclusion

North Lebanon, unlike the south and the Beqa'a, was not direct soil of the conflict with Israel and the motivations for Syrian control over Tripoli were not geo-political. North Lebanon's informal economy benefited Syrian military officers and

²¹⁴ Hinnebusch, 'Pax syriana?', p. 154.

²¹⁵ Similar to the 'asabiyya created in Syria itself, see Alain Chouet, p. 2.

Lebanese merchants. The rise of common economic interests consolidated already existing family ties between North Lebanon and Tripoli's Syrian hinterland. Moreover, the Asad regime had, for tactical, and not confessional, reasons developed a particular "Sunni policy" in Lebanon. The aim was to hinder the emergence of a popular Sunni za'im, but also generally to fragment Lebanese society. The relationship with the Sunni Islamist movements in Tripoli was highly ambivalent. Contestation in Tripoli was the perfect excuse to perpetuate the Syrian presence.

Syrian policy makers held a very high degree of expertise on Lebanese geography and population, which helped them adapt concrete policies to each region. The knowledge of the Lebanese terrain was so intimate, and Syrian and Lebanese societies imbricated at so many layers – families, political elite, economy – that the presence of the Syrian army in Lebanon between 1976 and 2005 does not qualify as an occupation.²¹⁶ The situation resembled that of the USSR protectorates in central European countries. The flexibility of Syrian policies expresses the exceptional Machiavellian political skills of President Hafiz al-Asad, who understood the weakness, insecurities, likes, and dislikes of his Lebanese collaborators and rivals and turned this know-how into a political instrument.²¹⁷

The creation of common interests in North Lebanon explained why, even after the Syrian withdrawal, many Sunni elites remained close to Syrian decision makers. The exclusion of the Sunni urban poor from the same networks and the repressive Syrian policies vis-à-vis Sunni poor quarters in Tripoli, explained why poor Sunnis in Tripoli opposed Syria and supported the Hariri family against Syria.

²¹⁶ Samir Kassir, "Dix ans après, comment ne pas réconcilier une société divisée", *Maghreb Machreq*, No 169, July-September 2000 (pp. 6-22), p. 13.

²¹⁷ Joseph Nye, *The powers to lead*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 80.

3

Coping with Asad: Lebanese Prime Ministers' Strategies*Taku Osoegawa*

This article deals with Lebanese–Syrian relations during the period when the international isolation of Syria increased following the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq War. Although it is true that the international hostility towards Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has been attributed to his various domestic and foreign policies, the Western antagonism has been especially aggravated by his policies towards Hizbullah's armament, the international tribunal and investigation of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and the Syrian uprising that started in March 2011. Consequently, Asad paid much attention to international diplomacy over these issues; however, at the same time, he kept a sharp eye on the actions and attitudes taken by the Lebanese government towards these three issues. This is not only because they have constituted main concerns among Lebanese politicians and indeed destabilised the country, but also because top Lebanese leaders have sometimes defied Damascus over them, which has further damaged Syria's regional and international position. Against this background, this study primarily examines how Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Fouad al-Siniora, Sa'ad al-Hariri, and Najib Miqati²⁷² coped with the Asad regime over the issues of Hizbullah's arms, the Hariri investigation and trial, and the Syrian uprising. Because the presidency was weakened, neutral or sometimes left unfilled, prime ministers were the closest approximations in the Lebanese case of foreign policy decision-maker.

Among the five main sections followed by a conclusion, the first section examines a theoretical framework explaining the Lebanese–Syrian relations, while the second section provides a short historical background on the relations of the two countries. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections, the Lebanese prime ministers' policies with regard to the three sensitive matters for Damascus are discussed respectively.

²⁷² The reason why among top Lebanese governmental leaders these prime ministers are figure in focus is owing to the increased power of Lebanon's premiership as a result of the 1990 amendment of the Lebanese constitution.

Theoretical Explanation of Lebanese–Syrian Relations

Arguably, '[a] state's formation and its power position in the international arena are decisive in shaping its external relations' (Osoegawa 2013: 6). Regarding the case of Lebanon, its state formation has not been unitary, and non-governmental actors in the state, mostly sectarian-based, have been generally powerful enough to threaten the government and still maintain strong transnational ties with more powerful states (including Syria²⁷³). This situation seems to deny the validity of studying the Lebanese government and its foreign policy, because external powers have penetrated into Lebanon and wielded considerable influence inside the country through domestic actors.

However, as this author elsewhere (2013) contends, Lebanon is not a simple puppet of Syria, and it is appropriate to talk about Lebanese policy towards Syria, although it is necessary to recognise the reservation that Lebanon's menu of policy choice in relation to the Syrian regional middle power has been rather limited. Since Syria has managed to maintain trans-state relations with non-governmental actors in Lebanon, which have been, in most cases, opposed to the Lebanese government, its top leaders have had to simultaneously counter both external threats in terms of Lebanon's disadvantageous power balance vis-à-vis Syria and internal threats from these Syrian-supported Lebanese non-governmental actors, the most important of which has been Hizbullah. Consequently, the theory of 'omnialignment' advocated by Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)²⁷⁴ could explain the Lebanese–Syrian relations, because their theory maintains that interrelated external and internal threats generally occur when externally powerful states support internal opposition groups, which should force states' leaders to face and deal with multiple and various kinds of threats at once.

Harknett and Vandenberg (1997: 124–128) propose four strategies taken by a state's leadership to cope with interrelated external and internal threats, i.e. 'double balance', 'balance–bandwagon', 'bandwagon–balance', and 'double bandwagon', and deducing from their work it could be said that Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Siniora, Sa'd al-Hariri, and Miqati had the following strategies for Lebanon in relation to Syria. First, the Lebanese could resist, by relying on Western, Saudi, and/or Israeli power, the Asad regime in order to contain Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors

²⁷³ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) refers to Syria as one of the regional middle powers and defines the concept as states which are key players in their region, but which are treated as middle powers globally.

²⁷⁴ Osoegawa (2013) terms Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)'s 'omnialignment' theory 'complex realism', because their theory is a modified or 'complex' version of realism.

(‘double balance’). Second, they could resist, with the help of Western, Saudi, and/or Israeli power, the Syrian regime as a perceived greater threat, while appeasing Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors as a perceived less immediate threat (‘balance–bandwagon’). Third, they could appease the Syrian regime as a perceived less immediate threat, while resisting Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors as a perceived greater threat (‘bandwagon–balance’). Fourth, they could appease the Syrian regime in order to get support from Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors (‘double bandwagon’).

Because Syria has been internationally isolated in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, it is reasonable to presume that Lebanese Prime Ministers would largely balance against Damascus, especially in the form of the ‘double balance’ strategy. In reality, they more often did not balance against the Asad regime and indeed bandwagoned with it, and indeed, ‘double bandwagoning’, was frequently undertaken by the Lebanese side in coping with the Syrian regime.

Historical Background of Lebanese–Syrian Relations

Following the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in April 1975, Syria’s deep involvement in Lebanon started and the latter country was put under the former country’s hegemony until April 2005. During the civil war, while Syria occasionally sparked sectarian fighting for its own benefit, it also tried to contain the conflict so as not to give its main enemy, i.e. Israel, any cause for intervention in Lebanon, with Damascus viewing Lebanon as its ‘soft underbelly’ through which Israel could readily attack it from the West. Although Syrian hegemony was sometimes challenged by Israel, Syria continued to exert a dominant influence on Lebanese soil and finally played an important role in terminating the civil war in October 1990.

As a result, Syrian hegemony in Lebanon was firmly established and later, with the conclusion of the Lebanese–Syrian Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination in May 1991, ‘legally’ consolidated. While the Ta’if Agreement, which was reached under the auspices of the Arab League in October 1989 to establish a new political order in Lebanon, had already ‘formalise[d] Lebanon’s “special” relations with Syria’ (Norton 1991: 461), the 1991 treaty ‘clearly favoured Syria and placed Lebanon in a rather disadvantageous position’ (Osoegawa 2013: 116). This is largely owing to the fact that, unlike the Ta’if Agreement, the treaty did not specify the duration and size of the Syrian army’s redeployment in Lebanon and made it possible for Damascus to continually postpone redeployment (Thompson 2002: 82).

Given the dominant Syrian dominant in Lebanon, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who occupied the premiership for a total of 10 years from 1992 to 2004, generally took into consideration Syria's political, economic, and/or military preferences and bandwagoned with Damascus in order to gain support of the Syrian-backed Lebanese non-governmental actors, such as Hizbullah, for his ambitious economic recovery programme for Lebanon, i.e. 'Horizon 2000'. However, Hariri occasionally balanced against the Asad regime by either attempting to negotiate a security arrangement directly with the Israeli government during the 1990s or aligning himself more closely with the Western powers after 2003. As for the Israeli aspect, Hariri stated in February 1993 Lebanon's readiness to sign an agreement (although he denied the possibility of concluding a peace treaty) with Israel that would guarantee the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 425, i.e. the withdrawal of the Israeli army from southern Lebanon (Norton 1997: 10). Later, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proposed the so-called 'Lebanon first' option in July 1996, which promoted the Israeli-Lebanese peace tracks ahead of the Israeli-Syrian peace tracks, Hariri took an ambiguous attitude and did not explicitly reject the Israeli proposal (Osoegawa 2013: 141-142).

On the other hand, after Western, in particular US, hostility towards Syria was heightened in the wake of its objection to the US military action against Iraq in 2003,²⁷⁵ Hariri exploited this change in the international dynamics of the Middle East. Amidst the unfavourable international wind for Damascus, Hariri worked with US President George W. Bush and French President Jacques Chirac to pass an anti-Syrian UN Security Council Resolution No. 1559. 'The resolution, passed on 2 September 2004, called for Syria to halt its interference in Lebanon's internal affairs and fully withdraw from the country and for Hizbullah and Palestinian groups in Lebanon to disarm' (Osoegawa 2013: 104).

Lebanese Policies on Hizbullah's Weapons

Before exploring the Lebanese-Syrian relations over the issue of Hizbullah's armament, the strategic importance of the Shi'a organisation for the Asad regime must be briefly discussed. With Syrian hegemony in Lebanon consolidating after the end of the civil war in 1990, the Syrian regime began to disarm local militias in Lebanon. However, Damascus permitted Hizbullah to maintain a military presence in southern Lebanon

²⁷⁵ The Syrian objection to the Iraq War was largely due to its concern that US success in Iraq would lead the world hegemon to choose Syria as the next target.

because the Israeli-backed South Lebanese Army (SLA), as well as the Israeli army, was still active in the region. In return, 'Hizbullah was required to coordinate its military activities to serve Syria's regional policy, especially towards Israel' (Osoegawa 2013: 111).

From 1992 to 1996, when the Labour government in Israel seriously negotiated with the Asad regime over a peace agreement, the Syrian side largely restricted Hizbullah's military activities (Zisser 2001: 146–147). However, when the Israeli Likud cabinet led by Prime Minister Netanyahu from 1996 to 1999 pushed Damascus aside by advocating the 'Lebanon first' option, it is probable that the Syrians encouraged Hizbullah's attacks against the Israeli army and the SLA to put pressure on the Israelis. This is supported by the fact that the mounting deaths of Israeli military personnel stationed in southern Lebanon greatly influenced the perceptions of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who assumed Israel's premiership in May 1999, and had insisted on the army's early departure from southern Lebanon during his election campaign.

While the Israeli army's unilateral withdrawal from the south in May 2000 threatened Hizbullah's *raison d'être*, the Asad regime still needed a surrogate force to put pressure on the Israeli army to evacuate from the Golan Heights. Finally, the Syrian and Lebanese authorities raised the pretext that the so-called 'Shabaa Farms', located in the Israeli–Lebanese–Syrian border area, remained Israeli-occupied Lebanese territory, despite the Israeli and international recognition of the area as part of the Golan Heights. This made it possible for Hizbullah to remain armed and for Damascus to potentially use the organisation's weapons to bargain over the Israeli army's withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The Syrian regime has never pressured Hizbullah to disarm; however there were some Lebanese and international calls for the organisation to do so.

Despite the strategic importance for Syria of Hizbullah's arms, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri did not have much sympathy for its military activities and attempted to restrain them in order to acquire international aid and investment necessary for his 'Horizon 2000'. Hariri thought Hizbullah's armed resistance against Israel had the potential to hurt his economic recovery programme, and in February 2001 Hizbullah indeed launched military operations one day after he had given assurances of Lebanon's suitable investment climate to international businessmen in Paris (Blanford 2001: 9). When the Bush administration applied more pressure on 'terrorist organisations' after the 11 September attacks and added Hizbullah to its 'terrorist list' in early October (*Middle East International* 26 October 2001: 19), it might have been anticipated that Hariri would assume a hostile attitude towards Hizbullah. Although Hariri contributed to the passage

of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, according to Blanford (2006: 104), he did so mainly to put pressure on the Syrian regime not to extend the term of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, with whom he had an unfriendly relationship,²⁷⁶ and ‘could not publicly support the resolution because of the...clauses demanding the disarming of Hizbullah and a full Syrian withdrawal’. Consequently, it is possible to say that while Hariri’s relations with Damascus further worsened over the proposed extension of Lahoud’s presidential mandate, Hariri did not intend to strip Syria of one of its important strategic assets vis-à-vis Israel, i.e. Hizbullah’s weapons.

How can Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)’s ‘omnialignment’ theory explain Hariri’s behaviour towards the Asad regime? Although it is true that Hariri aligned himself with Western governments to contain Syrian-backed Lahoud, a manifestation of a ‘double balance’, his balancing against Damascus was temporary. Indeed, from August to September 2004 Hariri’s cabinet and parliamentary bloc finally agreed to the amendment of the Lebanese constitution, which made it possible for Lahoud to serve another three-year presidential term (*The Daily Star* 30 August 2004; *The Daily Star* 4 September 2004). Hariri’s avoidance of all-out confrontation with the Syrian regime over Hizbullah’s arms and this last instance of ‘cooperation’ with the Syrian regime over the extension of Lahoud’s term²⁷⁷ meant that he still relied on Damascus to regulate these pro-Syrian actors, i.e. Hizbullah and Lahoud, hence was pursuing a strategy of ‘double bandwagon’.

After the 30-year Syrian hegemony in Lebanon ended in 2005, successive Lebanese cabinets continued to formally recognise the legitimate right of Hizbullah’s armed resistance against Israel in their policy statements. Prime Ministers Siniora, Sa’d al-Hariri, and Miqati, of whom the former two were leaders in the anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, may have anticipated that taking into consideration Hizbullah’s strategic importance for Syria could also have led to the pro-Syrian March 8 Coalition’s cooperation in future policies. Indeed, all the three Lebanese cabinets included ministers from the Hizbullah-led March 8 Coalition. The composition of the Siniora, Hariri, and Miqati cabinet led them to align themselves with Damascus over the arms issue in order to gain backing from the March 8 Coalition, and thus their policy amounted to ‘double

²⁷⁶ After Hariri returned to the premiership in 2000 following the parliamentary elections during the summer, he had to consider Lahoud’s preferences when he formed his fourth and fifth cabinets. Furthermore, Hariri’s efforts to privatise Lebanon’s telecommunication and electricity sectors were blocked by the president himself and his close allies in the Hariri cabinets.

²⁷⁷ It is widely believed that the Asad regime pressured Lebanese politicians to support the amendment. For one of the descriptions of the regime’s intimidation, see Harris (2006: 298–299).

bandwagoning'. However, at the same time Siniora indeed attempted to strip Hizbullah of the legitimacy of armed resistance.

First of all, it is important to recognise that the first Siniora cabinet (July 2005–July 2008) had strong regional and international support, especially from the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia, which indeed provided a variety of economic and financial assistance to Lebanon. 'In return for supporting the Siniora government, the international community, and in particular the United States, expected the Lebanese government to initiate steps leading to the disarmament of Hizb[u]llah' (Najem 2012: 121). Accordingly, Siniora launched this course of action in July 2006 and again in May 2008 in particular-- attempted 'double balancing'.

In the case of July 2006, immediately after the Hizbullah–Israeli Conflict started, Siniora revealed his cabinet's intention to disarm Hizbullah by reaffirming Lebanon's international commitment to expand the government's authority to all of its territory (*The Daily Star* 14 July 2006). Since the conflict was triggered by Hizbullah (whose fighters entered Israeli territory to kidnap two Israeli soldiers), Lebanese, regional, and international criticism against the resistance organisation mounted during the initial period of the conflict. While Siniora endeavoured to exploit this unfavourable situation surrounding Hizbullah with the aim of achieving its disarmament, Israel's continuous indiscriminate attacks on Lebanese infrastructure aroused harsh worldwide condemnation against Israel and boosted Hizbullah's popularity inside and outside Lebanon (Khatib 2014: 83–97). Because the widespread admiration for the Hizbullah made it impossible for Siniora to stand against the organisation, his disarmament proposal ended in failure, which was, needless to say, in Asad's favour. Finally, although UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (which brought the conflict to an end) called for Hizbullah's disarmament, the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south on the basis of the resolution was indeed realised, but in cooperation with, not against, Hizbullah which, although evacuating the immediate border area, still kept its arms (Barak 2009: 195).

Regarding the May 2008 case, 'the Siniora cabinet called for steps aiming to close down Hizbullah's secret, independent telecommunications network, which had been important for the organisation to conduct intelligence and military operations beyond the control of the Lebanese government' (Osoegawa 2013: 168). Hizbullah reacted with a 'declaration of war' against the cabinet (*The Daily Star* 9 May 2008), and members belonging to the resistance organisation and other political parties in the March 8 Coalition began to attack properties relating to the March 14 Coalition. Although more than 100 Lebanese were killed during the one-week conflict, and although many

Lebanese feared the revival of a ‘civil war’ amidst the worst situation in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990 (Najem 2012: 81), it seems that the Asad regime did not pressure Hizbullah to restrain its hostile activities in Lebanon. Finally, the cabinet decision to close down the telecommunications network, along with its decision to dismiss the head of security at Beirut’s Rafiq al-Hariri International Airport because of his close, ‘improper’ relations with the March 8 Coalition, was revoked (*The Daily Star* 12 May 2008).

On the other hand, recognising that the weakness of the Lebanese army had justified Hizbullah’s arms possession, Siniora had a strong motive to strengthen the army. As one of the ways to support the pro-Western Siniora cabinet, US military aid to Lebanon was resumed in 2006 after a 10-year hiatus, and the total amount reached \$410 million in 2008 (Schenker 2009: 227). Although this US assistance was essential in the 2007 battle of the Lebanese army against the Fatah al-Islam, i.e. a radical Sunni Islamist group affiliated with al-Qa‘ida, its aid was confined to light weapons because of US fear that its provision of heavy weapons to the Lebanese army could lead to Hizbullah’s possession of these arms. Thus, while Hizbullah was not threatened by US military support of the Lebanese army, Siniora’s ‘double balance’ strategy—aligning himself with Washington in order to contain the Syrian-backed Hizbullah—inevitably worsened Lebanese–Syrian relations and had no noticeable success.

Lebanese Attitudes towards the Hariri Investigation and Tribunal

After the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, the International Independent Investigation Commission (IIIC) was established in April 2005 according to UN Security Council Resolution 1595, which defined ‘the assassination as a terrorist crime and called for a comprehensive inquiry to identify Hariri’s murderers’ (Harris 2006: 304). As a leading figure in the pro-Western, anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, and as a close associate when Hariri was alive, Prime Minister Siniora continued to cooperate with the Western-backed IIIC, which initially pointed its finger at the Asad regime for the Hariri assassination.²⁷⁸ In fact, Siniora permitted the Lebanese authorities, at the recommendation of the IIIC, to detain four top figures of the Lebanese security apparatus for involvement in the murder of Hariri in late August 2005. They were Major General Jamil al-Sayyid, former head of Sûreté Générale; Major General ‘Ali al-Hajj, former director general of the Internal Security Forces;

²⁷⁸ Damascus has categorically denied the allegation until today.

Brigadier General Raymond ‘Azar, former director general of military intelligence; and Brigadier General Mustafa Hamdan, commander of Lebanon’s Presidential Guard, all of whom played a key security role under Syrian hegemony in Lebanon until 2005 (*The Daily Star* 31 August 2005; Harris 2006: 309; Harris 2009: 68).²⁷⁹

Although Siniora frequently declared that Lebanon had a right to know the truth about Hariri’s assassination and consequently stressed the necessity for supporting the IIC’s activities, it seems impossible to neglect his intention to use the international investigation as a political tool. Regarding this point, Siniora might have calculated that the IIC’s negative perception of the Asad regime further isolated and weakened Syria, which would, in effect, adversely affect the power of its Lebanese allies (Siniora’s domestic rivals), i.e. the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular. In defying Damascus and cooperating with Western governments, the Siniora cabinet continued, with the aim of containing these pro-Syrian actors, to ask the Security Council to extend the IIC mandate at its periodic expirations, in what amounted to a strategy of ‘double balancing’ in Harknett and Vandenberg (1997)’s ‘omnialignment’ theory.

Furthermore, and against the objections of the pro-Syrian March 8 Coalition,, the Siniora cabinet asked the UN to form an international tribunal to try those accused of the Hariri assassination on 12 December 2005 (Michel 2014: 14), and later voted for the UN draft stipulating the establishment of what has become the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) on 13 November 2006 (*The Daily Star* 14 November 2006). Accordingly, the STL was approved by UN Security Council Resolution 1757 on 30 May 2007 and finally started its work on 1 March 2009 (Tabbrah 2014: 40–42).

Damascus did not oppose the idea of establishing an international investigation and an international tribunal, and President Asad indeed expressed Syria’s intention to accept ‘non-biased’ judgement of the STL (*L’Orient Le Jour* 11/12 December 2010). However, the fact that Western initiative in the UN Security Council largely contributed to the establishment of the IIC and STL Damascus came to see both of them as Western political tools to put pressure on the regime. Despite Syrian hostility, Prime Minister Sa‘d al-Hariri—the successor of Siniora and a son of Rafiq—strongly defended the legitimacy of the STL and supported its activities, yet initially also maintained good relations with Asad. They indeed met three times from December 2009 to May 2010 and reportedly agreed upon coordination in regional matters (*The Daily Star* 1 June 2010). Furthermore,

²⁷⁹ The four generals were released in late April 2009 because of insufficient evidence; *The Daily Star* 30 April 2009.

on 6 September 2010, Hariri publicly admitted it was a mistake to blame the assassination of his father on the Syrian regime (*The Daily Star* 7 September 2010).

Hariri's alignment with Asad from December 2009 to September 2010 could be theoretically explained by the strategy of 'double bandwagon' in 'omnialignment' theory. It became widely believed in and outside Lebanon that the STL's upcoming indictment would accuse Hizbullah members of involvement in the assassination,²⁸⁰ so it is probable that Hariri calculated that aligning himself with Damascus would lead to Hizbullah's cooperation with the STL. In addition, the fact that the March 8 Coalition had 10 ministers in his 30-member cabinet (*L' Orient Le Jour* 10 November 2009) might have led Hariri to expect that good relations with Asad could gain the coalition's support for his cabinet's operation.

However, the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular continued to take a hostile view of the STL. Hasan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbullah, stated on 9 August 2010 that the tribunal was politicised and part of an Israeli plot against the resistance organisation (*Al-Safir* 10 August 2010). Later, in the early morning of 18 January 2011, Hizbullah members organised a political demonstration showing its adamant rejection of the STL, which caused a panic among a portion of the Lebanese.

Since Damascus did not pressure Hizbullah to change its stance and insisted that Lebanon should terminate its cooperation with the STL, Hariri strengthened his ties with US President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and frequently visited these states from November 2010 to January 2011. In line with the strategy of 'double balancing', Hariri aligned himself with the US and French authorities to contain Hizbullah, which consistently asked him not to support the STL. Finally, Hariri's balancing against the Syrian regime led to the collapse of his cabinet on 12 January, which was triggered by the resignation of 10 ministers from the March 8 Coalition and one minister loyal to Lebanese President Michel Sulayman (*The Daily Star* 13 January 2011; *L' Orient Le Jour* 13 January 2011).

Prime Minister Miqati—the successor of Hariri—did not express clear support for the STL in the policy statement of his second cabinet, which angered Hariri who demanded that Miqati fully cooperate with the tribunal (*The Daily Star* 1 July 2011). As deduced from the strategy of 'double bandwagon', Miqati allied himself with Damascus over the STL to gain support from the March 8 Coalition, which had 18 ministers in the 30-

²⁸⁰ On 30 June 2011, the STL issued its indictment and arrest warrants against four Hizbullah members; *The Daily Star* 1 July 2011.

member cabinet (*The Daily Star* 14 June 2011; *L' Orient Le Jour* 14 June 2011). Since the Western authorities regarded him as a man strongly affiliated with Hizbullah,²⁸¹ it was almost impossible for Miqati to choose a policy of working together with Washington or Paris to contain the March 8 Coalition (a strategy of 'double balance'). However, it is important to note that as a 'neutral' figure who formed his first cabinet in April 2005 to supervise the upcoming parliamentary elections amidst fierce antagonism between the March 8 and 14 Coalitions, Miqati took a middle ground : he did not disturb the STL's activities and quietly continued to pay Lebanon's share of the annual funding for the tribunal.

Lebanese 'Dissociation Policy' toward the Syrian Uprising

Prime Minister Miqati officially declared Lebanon's 'dissociation policy' regarding the Syrian uprising, and as Hokayem (2013: 134) pointed out, '[d]issociation received the much-needed acquiescence of key Western and Arab states, as there was consensus on the unique exposure of Lebanon, the structural weakness of the state, and the need to contain the regional spillover of the Syrian crisis.'

However, because Lebanon is a country not only bordering Syria but also having deep-rooted interstate and transnational relations with the country, in practice it has been impossible for the Lebanese to maintain an attitude of 'dissociation' towards the Syrian uprising. Indeed, the March 8 Coalition has supported the Asad regime, and Hizbullah has sent its fighters to Syria to help the regime, which especially contributed to its recovery of two strategic points, i.e. Qusair and Yabroud. On the other hand, the March 14 Coalition has supported opposition forces in Syria, and the Future Movement has sent money and weapons to the opposition.²⁸² This support provided by the Future Movement has inevitably worsened the relationship between Sa'd al-Hariri and President Asad.

²⁸¹ However, Miqati has been a prominent international businessman and seems to have had no close relationship with the resistance organisation. Reporting the 2009 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, where the fierce election campaign between the March 8 and 14 Coalitions took place, Lebanese newspapers described him as 'independent'. See *The Daily Star* 9 June 2009; and *L' Orient Le Jour* 9 June 2009.

²⁸² Unlike the case of Hizbullah, the reality of the support given by the Future Movement to the Syrian opposition is still not clear. However, it was reported in April 2011 that Jamal Jarrah, an MP from the Future Movement, was involved in financing and arming anti-Asad forces, although he dismissed the allegation (*The Daily Star* 14 April 2011). Later, in December 2012, Oqab Saqr—an MP from the Future Movement—was accused of providing arms and ammunition to Syrian rebels, and although the movement initially defended his involvement in these activities, he later denied it. For details, see *The Daily Star* 5 December 2012 and 7 December 2012.

Damascus has consequently taken hostile attitudes towards the Future Movement and indeed issued arrest warrants for Hariri and Oqab Saqr, an MP from the movement, on 11 December 2012 (*The Daily Star* 12 December 2012), after which Hariri called Asad a ‘monster’ (*The Daily Star* 13 December 2012).

Amidst this domestic polarisation, how did Miqati deal with the Syrian uprising under the name of the dissociation policy? First of all, there is no doubt that the equally divided public opinion in Lebanon between ‘pro-Asad’ and ‘anti-Asad’ supporters, the politically ‘neutral’ stance of Miqati, and the economic interdependency existing between Lebanon and Syria shaped his official stance of dissociation. On the other hand, in reality, because the majority of the Miqati cabinet were ministers affiliated with the March 8 Coalition, in order to keep its support, Miqati did not want to provoke the Asad regime, which could be seen as a strategy of ‘double bandwagoning.’ Consequently, although the March 14 Coalition increasingly labelled Miqati’s dissociation policy as ‘pro-Asad’, it did not actively seek to remove him especially since the international community, including the USA and France, supported his stance in the name of Lebanon’s domestic stability.

On the diplomatic scene, ‘Lebanon, which served as a member of the [UN Security Council] until late 2011, abstained and dissociated itself from UN statements critici[z]ing the Syrian government, and followed a similar approach at the Arab League’ (Hokayem 2013: 133–134). In early August 2011, Lebanon decided to dissociate itself from a council statement condemning violence in Syria, although the other 14 member states approved the statement (*The Daily Star* 5 August 2011). Later, in October 2011 when the US and European Union coordinated efforts to pass a UN Security Council resolution warning that Syria could face sanctions if the regime did not stop its crackdown on the opposition and this was blocked by Russia and China, Lebanon and three other member states abstained (*The Daily Star* 5 October 2011). Furthermore, on 12 November, Lebanon voted against the Arab League’s decision to suspend Syria’s membership and impose political and economic sanctions on the country (*The Daily Star* 14 November 2011; *L’Orient Le Jour* 14 November 2011).

Because these policies were directed by pro-Syrian Foreign Minister ‘Adnan Mansur,²⁸³ leading figures in the March 14 Coalition such as Hariri bluntly criticised Mansur as a mouthpiece for the Asad regime. Furthermore, on 6 March 2013, Mansur ‘called for the reinstatement of Syria’s membership in the Arab League at a ministerial meeting of the organi[s]ation in Cairo’ (*The Daily Star* 7 March 2013). In spite of

²⁸³ Mansur is a veteran Shi‘a diplomat supported by the pro-Syrian Amal Movement. For details on his career, see *The Daily Star* 14 June 2011; *L’Orient Le Jour* 14 June 2011; and *As-Safir* 14 June 2011.

Mansur's clear violation of Miqati's dissociation policy, and although he later urged ministers to uphold the policy (*The Daily Star* 14 March 2013), he did not seem to try to dismiss Mansur, who continued to retain the ministerial post until the cabinet resignation in March 2013.

On the domestic arena, a succession of the cross-border military operations conducted by the Syrian army not only damaged properties but also hurt and killed people on the Lebanese side of the border. However, Miqati initially tolerated the incursions of the Syrian army into Lebanese territory and hesitated to boost the presence of the Lebanese army on the border. Since Lebanon had not recognised the legitimacy of the anti-Asad Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Coalition,²⁸⁴ it seems that Miqati accepted, even though indirectly, Asad's insistence that the Syrian military operations on Lebanese soil were aimed at 'terrorists'. Indeed, the Syrian army captured militant Islamists having bases inside Lebanon, which was, because their presence was also a headache, beneficial for Lebanon. Consequently, it seems certain that the common interest existing between Lebanon and Syria to contain these Islamists prompted Miqati to acquiesce to the Syrian incursions into Lebanese territory. Furthermore, Miqati's tacit understanding of the Syrian operations seemed to boost Hezbollah's backing for him, since the resistance organisation not only supported the Asad regime but also battled against the anti-Asad Islamists.

However, the increasing number of Lebanese casualties in the border area led Miqati to boost the presence of the army and accept further US military assistance.²⁸⁵ By doing so, Miqati aimed to secure the border and deal with sectarian violence in Lebanon encouraged by the Syrian uprising.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, in September 2012, Miqati—along with President Sulayman—began to complain to Damascus about the Syrian army's operations on Lebanese soil and the resulting violation of its sovereignty (*The Daily Star* 4 September 2012). Nevertheless, Miqati neither took provocative action against Syria such as appealing to the UN Security Council nor seemed to have any intention to use US

²⁸⁴ Most Arab and Western states recognised the Syrian National Council as 'a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change' at the 'Friends of Syria' conference in Tunis on 24 February 2012; *The Daily Star* 27 February 2012. After it was revealed that the Syrian National Council had not functioned as anticipated, these states contributed to another umbrella opposition body, i.e. the Syrian National Coalition, which was established on 11 November; *The Independent* 12 November 2012.

²⁸⁵ It was reported that the total amount of US military assistance to the Lebanese army during the latter part of 2012 reached more than \$140 million and the assistance included helicopters, armoured vehicles, and guns. For details, see *The Daily Star* 22 December 2012; and *The Daily Star* 8 January 2013.

²⁸⁶ Especially in Tripoli, gunmen from the anti-Asad Sunnis and those from the pro-Asad 'Alawis continued to exchange fire from May 2012 to April 2014.

involvement to contain Hizbullah. Thus, it is possible to say that over issues relating to the Syrian uprising, Miqati abstained from balancing against Syria or its Lebanese allies. The reason why he avoided open confrontation with Damascus can be primarily explained by the identification of his ‘partners’ in the cabinet, i.e. the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular, with the Syrian regime.

Conclusion

Lebanese Prime Ministers Rafiq al-Hariri, Siniora, Sa‘d al-Hariri, and Najib Miqati all had to deal with the three issues which were pivotal to the survival of the Asad regime and the success of its strategies, i.e. Hizbullah’s weapons, the IIC and STL activities, and the Syrian uprising. With important exceptions, their policies were largely shaped by the anticipation that aligning themselves with Damascus would ensure support from or ward off the hostility of the pro-Syrian Lebanese actors, notably Hizbullah.

However, Rafiq al-Hariri temporarily balanced against the Syrians by playing an important role in the passage of Resolution 1559 with the aim of containing President Lahoud. Later, as leading figures in the anti-Syrian March 14 Coalition, Siniora (in particular from July 2005 to July 2008) and Sa‘d al-Hariri (in particular from November 2010 to January 2011) took provocative policies against the Asad regime. Their main aim was to use closer relations with Washington and Paris to contain the March 8 Coalition in general and Hizbullah in particular. Thus, the hostile policies of the three prime ministers towards the Syrian regime could be explained by the strategy of ‘double balance’ in ‘omnialignment’ theory. In the long run, Siniora’s balancing contributed to the deterioration of Lebanese–Syrian relations during his reign and proved in the end to be unsustainable. Prime Ministers after his tenure therefore returned to strategies of bandwagoning. This reflects the relative weakness of Lebanon as a foreign policy actor for whom balancing was only a viable option when they could exploit strong external support against Syria.

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