

# Sunni Lebanon: An “Oddity” at Risk

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



## Brief Analysis

In successive [polls \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/doubts-about-hezbollah-emerge-in-lebanon-even-among-shiites\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/doubts-about-hezbollah-emerge-in-lebanon-even-among-shiites), approval of the United States within the Sunni Lebanese community has rated consistently high—a fact that stands in contrast with low numbers in other Sunni Arab populations. Certainly, part of the discrepancy reflects internal Lebanese politics. Sunni Lebanese view Washington, together with Riyadh and Paris, as backers of PM Sa’ad Hariri in his ongoing struggle with the political coalition led by Iranian-backed Hezbollah. However, it may be an error to reduce this affinity with the United States to incidental and tangential factors.

A considerable segment of the Sunni Lebanese community—and other Lebanese as well—is attracted to the United States as a model in terms of values and for its way of life. While the perception of the Trump presidency as erratic and xenophobic has affected the image and standing of the United States, and while residual dissatisfaction remains on the lack of progress in resolving the Palestinian question, Sunni Lebanese nevertheless maintain their positive view of America.

This “oddity” of affinity for the United States is inconvenient for the media and political and cultural effort aligned with the Iran-led “Resistance Axis” deployed in Lebanon and the region. On the one hand, this goes against the grain of its expectation that the Sunni base is driven by anti-Israeli and anti-American momentum, even if the Sunni leadership’s regional entanglements lead to policy decisions that do not reflect the presumed views of their popular base. Resistance media and politicians have long attempted to use this alleged divergence to exert pressure on Sunni leadership through a regular supply of ‘Resistance’ rhetoric. This tactic assumes a Sunni base responsive to the discourse of *sumud*—“steadfastness” in the face of imperialism, old and new. But if this is no longer true, or if the base is no longer appreciative of the danger of alleged Zionist aggressiveness and expansionism, this threatens to remove the ability of the “Resistance Axis” to converse, influence, and leverage within the Lebanese Sunni community.

Even more problematic from the perspective of the “Resistance Axis” communication model is the movement of the Sunni base from the place previously allocated to it, which affects the ability of Resistance messaging to leverage its presumed position while addressing other tracks. The messaging scheme of the Resistance discourse is to supply each identified audience with suitable elements for consumption, with the under-text in each case that what is propagated in other tracks is tactical and utilitarian—and therefore ought to be tolerated as audible noise but

discarded as indicative of policy, while what is offered in this track is authentic and strategic — to be believed even if necessity dictates that it remains relatively muted.

In the Sunni case, the Resistance core message is Iran and its allies' principled and constant opposition to Israel. The ultimate goal of eradicating the Zionist occupation is cast as the effort to restore justice for fellow (Palestinian) Sunnis, the integrity of the Arab homeland, or the dignity of the Islamic Ummah—depending on the segment of the Sunni community addressed. Any evidence that Sunni figures are aligning with this Resistance message is immediately recycled in Resistance communication directed at Christians to highlight the potential danger of Sunni maximalism—built on concepts they themselves encouraged: a Sunni preoccupation with para-national identities, the precariousness of the Sunni commitment to Lebanon, and latent Sunni proclivity to radicalism. Without Sunni 'buy-in' to the narrative, the Resistance Axis faces the danger of losing an effective double-edged messaging tool.

Political and media Resistance figures have publicly dealt with the 'oddity' of relative Lebanese Sunni support for the United States by denying its existence, attributing it to data manipulation of polls, or placing it within an intentional disinformation campaign aimed at creating a self-fulfilling reality. The Resistance Axis has also sought to compensate by identifying and empowering dissent within the Sunni community, reviving echoes of the Sunni militia groups groomed and funded by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early phases of the Lebanese internal wars of 1975-1990. Nevertheless, the Resistance Axis has failed to persuade any of numerous potential contenders to the Hariri leadership within the Sunni community to echo positions in line with Resistance rhetoric.

In parallel, resistance media outlets have concurrently amplified and promoted a narrative of Sunni duplicity, which has escalated into an open attack on Sunni political figures as "ISIS with a necktie." These assertions amplify the reality that, over the years, many of Lebanon's Sunni political leaders have engaged in questionable deals and actions with extremist groups—ostensibly to address an immediate situation. Such contacts have included providing funds to radical groups in exchange for vacating localities in which a particular politician has immediate interests. The case can be made and should be pursued that competition within the Sunni leadership had fueled the geographically limited but devastating recurrent conflict between the two regions of Bab al-Tabbanah and Jabal Muhsin in Northern Lebanon.

However, while costly, short-sighted, and even duplicitous, these political maneuvers from Sunni leadership are far from unique in Lebanese political life and pale in comparison to Resistance figureheads' open support of the same radical groups. Resistance Axis communication models paint engagement or support to radical groups by the Resistance, however large, as acceptably tactical and utilitarian, while arguing that the same actions from Sunni figures are a revelatory exposure of the Sunni Lebanese community's radical potential.

The resonance of this model with a large segment of the public in Lebanon and beyond points to the need for more clarity on the footprint of radicalism in the Sunni community, both to delegitimize the Resistance Axis's narrative and to clarify the real divergence of Sunni Lebanese on issues such as the United States.

### **Lebanon's Sunni Community**

Piety, observance, and conservatism are prominent aspects of religious and social life across the spectrum of social and regional settings that together form the Sunni Lebanese community. Considerable variation in lifestyle and mores can be noted between Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon—the three main cities with a substantial Sunni population. **within each mainly as a function of socio-economic distribution, as well against regions of Sunni provincial presence and concentration across the country; faith and its social implications, however, are invariably even if differently visible.** Yet the self-image in much of the community is one of openness, toleration, and moderation—values understood as reflective of the true essence of the religion.

Historically, pietism in Levantine Sunni contexts counter-balanced the community's exposure to and integration into the cosmopolitan Mediterranean continuum, mirroring in effect patterns discernible in other coastal communities—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish alike. Driven by both scholastic and ecstatic local figures, the appeal to tradition and religion was meant to resist the influx and perceived onslaught of non-native models of behavior and consumption. Pietism was championed by both the formal religious hierarchy, which consisted of scholars and clerics serving in courts and registers, and the often overlapping informal one, made up of leaders of religious orders and mosques. Together, these two groups constituted a religious quasi-caste, framing aspects of Sunni life and contributing to the moral economy of Sunni societies. The influence of the mercantilistic strata in the urban Sunni agglomerations, with vested interests in the cosmopolitan exchange, however, mitigated the effect of the drive to pietism, with the political leadership of the community—itsself multiple and dispersed, serving as an arbiter balancing the push in the two opposing directions.

The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic change in the character of the Sunni presence in Lebanon. After an initial reflexive rejection, the virtues of incorporation into a smaller nation became clear to both the Sunni political leaderships and the Sunni religious caste in the many communities annexed to form “Greater Lebanon”. These until-now provincial elites sought and achieved an upgrade as their community's first stratum in the new polity, calquing for that purpose their more established Maronite counterparts. The Maronites, together with the smaller Druze community, had developed political and clerical leadership structures over the past centuries.

Yet the Sunni political community remained distinctive in several respects. Contrary to the Maronites, Druze, and Shi'is, the Sunnis had no rural “hinterland” and were instead centered in the main cities.

This geographical distribution shaped political fragmentation; prior to Rafiq Hariri in the 1990s, no regional Sunni leader qualified as ‘pan-Sunni,’ even if some gained national stature beyond their own communities. Rafiq Hariri became the first to succeed in binding the community together politically by out-bidding his rivals in services and compensation on their own turfs. The disarray that followed his assassination in 2005, and the popular drive to anoint his son Sa'd Hariri as leader, demonstrates the lasting efficacy of his father's integration or defeat of most Sunni regional leaderships.

Contemporary Lebanese politics are characterized by an interplay of provincialism and vassal-hood; community leaders in Lebanon seek uneven alliances with external regional and international powers to build domestic leverage, while mitigating the influence of those powers by diversifying their external supporters. As a less-established political force and due to the nature of the multiple Sunni powers surrounding Lebanon that compete for influence and supremacy, the Sunni community has proven particularly dependent on alliances between its leaderships and successive powerful states in the region. Notably, while the PLO had traction in the lower socio-economic strata of the Sunni Lebanese community, its alliances in Lebanon did not include any prominent Sunni leadership, relying instead on the non-communitarian left and alliances with Druze and Shiite leaderships. Instead, the community leadership cycled through connections with Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia until Rafiq Hariri established a lasting relationship in favor of the latter by the 1990s.

The Hariri-Saudi connection presented itself as an alliance, albeit uneven, between two decision-making parties. However, Rafiq's death transformed the relationship into a vassal-suzerain arrangement, with Riyadh dictating his son's policies.

This Saudi influence does not seem to have included a deliberate effort to promote Salafism. Although Egypt's political influence faded in the 1970s, the Sunni Lebanese religious caste maintained its privileged relations with al-Azhar—the religious establishment in Egypt promoting conventional Sunni scholasticism. However, Salafi presence of the kind supported by Saudi Arabia did enter Lebanon through private charitable engagements, as well as a response to the departure of the PLO as a patron in some marginalized areas, notably in Northern Lebanon.

Still, the vast majority of Sunni Lebanese appear to reject the austere and restrictive model of religious behavior associated with Salafism in spite of a high affinity for Saudi Arabia. The estimates offered by establishment clerics present the Salafi penetration of the community at “no more than five percent,” which could represent the fraction of mosques under the influence or control of self-professed Salafi groups. However, the footprint of Salafism and its violent militant off-shoots has been maintained and even increased by the grievances of a wider Sunni audience against the hegemony of Hezbollah as a Shiite Iranian proxy. These beliefs may be further fueled by a sustained narrative existing outside of Lebanon regarding the victimization of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria.

Radical Sunni Islamism did gain a few recruits in the community’s middle and high-income strata, including one of the four pilots of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Its limited sway on the less privileged has been largely transactional, providing self-validation to the marginalized and destitute and supplying the “Islamic State” and al-Qa’idah affiliates with a thin but steady stream of fighters. Yet the concept of Islamism, both radical and non-radical, has not succeeded in achieving a serious breakthrough among Sunni Lebanese. The local variety of the Muslim Brotherhood, with a conservative loyalist political stance, is a minor actor that is well incorporated into the Lebanese political and electoral bazar.

Where radicalism seems to have found an unexpected ally is in the religious establishment’s overplay of pietism, which has emerged in reaction to their perception that institutionalized secularism is favorably received in the Sunni community. For example, marriage in Lebanon, like other civil affairs, is the domain of the clerical courts in each community. Yet informed estimates suggest that one-fifth of Sunni Lebanese would accept the option of civil marriage as an alternative to the current system. The promulgation of civil marriage, even if optional, would constitute an immediate drain on revenue for all clerical systems. Thus, Mufti Abd al-Latif Diryan, the head of the Sunni religious establishment, has taken the lead in objecting to the possibility of such a law, and has in the process used language that departs from the more normative “moderate” tone associated with his institution.

Diryan has stressed his categorical rejection of civil marriage as anathema to Divine Law and has threatened any supporter in the legislature or any Muslim thus married with excommunication. In this respect, Diryan is following the path of resistance to civil marriage charted by his predecessor, indicating that radical language is thus no longer incidental, but an established recourse in the Sunni religious establishment. More recently, Diryan has also taken the lead in objecting to the de-criminalization of homosexuality and has called for “security” measures to prevent the gay community from engaging in public activities.

As a self-assessed, modern, and open community, the Sunni Lebanese have successfully resisted the multiple pressures towards militancy and radicalization, largely by virtue of internal and inter-community socio-economic dynamics. Their leaderships, which have partially re-fragmented since the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, have nevertheless lagged behind in promoting this resistance.

Thus, while recognizing the difficulties that are associated with the wide range of positions among Sunni Lebanese and the precarious and challenged status of leadership, it may not be wise to rely on the longstanding ‘natural defenses’ of the Sunni community when examining potential responses to the deliberate assault of the pro-Iranian ‘Resistance’ camp. While the Resistance narrative of a radicalized Sunni community currently rings false, the harmful leakage of radicalism into the discourse of the religious establishment and into the neglected social services of the less fortunate could turn this narrative into a reality.

Many Sunni Lebanese leaders present themselves not as community leaders, but as national ones. They seek a composition for their political teams from across all Lebanese communities and categorically refrain from any communitarian discourse. Going forward, what would be welcome and necessary is a translation of these positions into proactive policies.

While Sunni Lebanese leaders may not be in the position to articulate an ideological counter-narrative to the “Resistance” line, they are eminently able, as many of them are successful business personalities, to lead by example. These leaders should stress that a worldview of free enterprise and global engagement along Western models, not “revolutionary” rhetoric and totalitarian impositions, is the way for their community and nation. Polls suggest that their constituency already subscribes to such mindset.

Equally important is the need to respectfully remind the Grand Mufti of his role as a spiritual adviser, not a policy maker. The Mufti is indeed expected to present the religious position on various issues. His opinions may be binding on consenting believers on an individual basis, but cannot be equated with legislation. In contrast with open patriarchies in the region, the republican system of Lebanon allocates the formulation and enactment of policy to a bottom-up process that presumably starts with citizen sovereignty. Sunni Lebanese leaders have the solemn responsibility of asserting and protecting this principle. ❖

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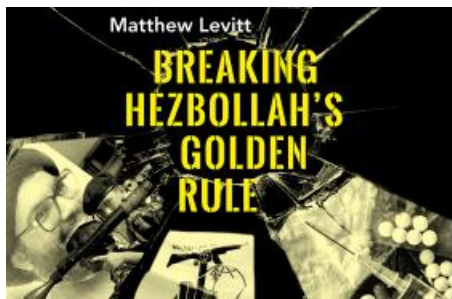
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