Tripoli: A Syrian Heart in a Lebanese Body

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If we think of sensitive, complex cities in the modern Middle East that are highly volatile, reflect sectorial tensions, and are home to serious acts of violence, the first names that come to mind are likely to be Baghdad, Mosul, Beirut, and even Jerusalem. However, perhaps it is actually Tripoli in Lebanon that is a microcosm of dramatic regional phenomena and trends and offers a vivid contemporary case study. Located on the northern coast of the Mediterranean, Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, has in recent years been home to another round in a long cycle of violence.

This article attempts to provide a broad context for the tempest in Tripoli, focusing on the domestic situation in Lebanon and the civil war in Syria, and deriving insights from what has emerged thus far. To this end, it takes a combined look at Syria and Lebanon, as this is the only way to shed light on the situation and allow an in-depth examination of its consequences. The challenging situation in Tripoli has crucial importance for the future, both inside and outside of the city.

Background

A review of Tripoli's rich history, which dates back to the days of the Phoenicians and covers almost three thousand years, is beyond the scope of this article. However, a number of essential points will help provide the necessary background for understanding the situation of today.

The particular character of modern Tripoli was formed at the time of the Ottoman conquest of the Middle East and the establishment of the eyalet[1] of Ṭarābulus[2] al-Sham (Tripoli of Syria) in 1579. Tripoli was the capital of the province because of its centrality and its proximity to a Mediterranean port.

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It was also the gateway to the interior of Syria, Bilad al-Sham at that time, and especially to the two nearby cities, Hama and Homs;[3] the connection between the three cities was and has remained strong. Another connection that was established at that time and continues today was to the northern coastal region and the Alawite Mountain (Jibal an-Nusayriyah), to this day the traditional home of members of the Alawite sect.

When Mount Lebanon gained autonomy in 1864, Tripoli was associated with the newly established vilayet of Beirut. This arrangement gave Tripoli an identity separate from the rest of Greater Syria. However, when the French mandate in Lebanon began after the end of the World War I, Tripoli remained in dispute because it had a significant number of Sunni Muslims with a conservative approach who saw themselves as an integral part of Greater Syria and not of the new state established in the spirit of the Maronite Christians and their French patrons. The city's population also found it hard to cede the preeminence of the nearby port of al-Mina to the up and coming Beirut. Ultimately, Tripoli was included in the new state and has remained a part of it to this day. [4]

Yet despite its inclusion in Lebanon, Tripoli did not lose its singular character. Its Sunni foundations have made it a natural representative of the Arab Middle East in the twentieth century. This is reflected in two different yet interfacing ideologies, pan-Arabism and Nasserism on the one hand, and traditional Islamic conservatism on the other. Accordingly, the city has produced prominent figures who were known in Lebanon and beyond for their activities, among them military leader Fawzi al-Qawuqji, Rashid Karami, who was prime minister of Lebanon for eight terms, and Sheikh Sa'id Sha'aban, who headed the Islamic Unity Movement in Lebanon. After Greater Lebanon was established, the Sunni population found it difficult to accept the French mandate, and anti-French groups operated in the city with the goal of ending the foreign presence on Syrian and Lebanese soil. This trend continued after Lebanon gained independence in 1943 with the small civil war that took place in 1958, in which Tripoli's residents played a significant role. The 1967 war caused Tripoli, like elsewhere in the Arab world, to lose its faith in secular radicalism, and political Islam gradually grew stronger there. This was clearly reflected in the second Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990. Armed militias with radical Islamic characteristics were active in the city, as well as against IDF forces in Lebanon. In addition, Tripoli was a refuge for Fatah leader Yasir Arafat until, together with his entourage, he was expelled by the Syrians.[5]

Once the war ended, the city remained under the influence of the prolonged violence that has continued, at least intermittently, to this day. Aside from the national issues that were reflected in the urban fabric, among them the Palestinian problem, the heart of the conflict in the northern city revolved around the sectorial tension welling up among its residents, with a focus on two neighborhoods: Jabal Mohsen, which is Alawite, and Bab al-Tabbaneh, which is Sunni. Since the outbreak of the civil war, tensions have risen in these neighborhoods, which are separated only by a street named for Syria. It appears that since early 2014, after a period of relative calm, the clashes in the streets of Tripoli have returned, leading to the intervention of the Lebanese army in late October 2014 and claiming the lives of dozens of people.[6]

It is difficult to separate these events from the civil war in Syria, which provides fertile ground for sprouting destructive seeds of calamity and ties its fate to that of Lebanon. Therefore, the situation in Tripoli should be seen in part as a microcosm of the civil war in Syria, yet different from the inferno across the border because it evolves according to local rules derived from the Lebanese context.

The Syrian Angle

While Tripoli has belonged to Lebanon for nearly 100 years and was unquestionably the keystone in the building of the Lebanese state, what takes place there cannot be separated from the remaining vestiges of Syrian political and social culture. Prior to the contemporary turmoil in the Arab world, such a statement could have been considered archaic and a distortion of the modern geopolitical fabric of the region. However, today this cannot be dismissed – and all the more so given the weakening of the state structure in the wake of the changes that have occurred. The recognizable borders that divided between the national entities established over the previous 100 years have been blurred, and distinct identities based on religion, ethnicity, community, society, economics, and culture have risen to the surface. It is no wonder, therefore, that a city such as Tripoli, whose demographic makeup and common traditions differ little from those of Syria, reflects the strengthening of the Middle East sectorial trend within its territory, and in particular, the trend that has grown stronger in Syria.[7]

The first element of the spillover of the Syrian war to Tripoli concerns the city's Alawites. This large community, based in the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, numbers 40,000-60,000 people. It is the largest concentration

of Alawites in Lebanon, and more than half of Lebanon's Alawites live there. [8] Traditional Sunnis naturally identify the Alawites with Shiism, and hence there is an inherent tension between the Alawite minority and the Sunni majority in the city. Moreover, many in the Middle East do not even consider the Alawites to be Muslims (although this idea subsided somewhat for a period of time when in a religious ruling in 1973 Shiite imam Musa al-Sadr recognized the Alawites as Muslims). [9] Despite the latent volatility given the proximity of the two communities, for hundreds of years a stable and relatively calm way of life was maintained, and Christian and Jewish communities lived in the city as well. The match that ignited the fire that has still not been extinguished was the ascent of Hafez al-Assad to power. Assad, who was Alawite, headed a country whose population was mostly Sunni. The rule of the persecuted minority over the majority has had the constant potential to spark a conflagration, a challenge that the Syrian president handled effectively during all his years in power.

Nevertheless, in Lebanon too the Alawites remained a minority, and in Tripoli, the situation intensified as Jabal Mohsen residents were perceived by the city's Sunnis as representatives of the Assad regime. Syria's involvement in Lebanon from the day of its establishment, which increased during the civil war and afterwards, aroused the ire of much of Lebanese society against the patronage of the state's big sister. The Sunnis constitute a significant part of the anti-Syrian movement in the country, which does not take a favorable view of the close connection between the Assad regime and elements in Lebanon – primarily Hizbollah – that has grown closer since Assad's death and the ascent of his son Bashar to power in 2000. [10] The clashes between the residents of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh have continued with fluctuating intensity, against the backdrop of critical events such as the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, and the crisis in the country in 2007-8. The latest milestone on the road to the current events was the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011.

In Lebanon, where the wounds from its own civil war have not yet healed and sectarian rifts are contained in a delicate balance to prevent another round of violence, the events in the neighboring state are read loud and clear. Every ethnic group and community has drawn its own conclusions according to the sensitivities and interests on its agenda. Sunni residents of Tripoli, many of whom have moved closer to Salafist Islam over the years, largely thanks to the conservative Muslim tradition that is an integral part

of the city, have felt a deep solidarity with the Sunni population in Syrian cities in face of the conduct of the Assad regime toward this population. However, since the city is not part of the Syrian state from the point of view of sovereignty or geography, they have vented their anger at Assad's local representatives, the residents of Jabal Mohsen. Every detail that was routine in the past, such as pictures of the Syrian president hanging on the balconies of homes, has become a provocation and led to unrest in Tripoli in 2011.[11] The Alawite population, which always identified and was identified with the Assad regime, has, against its will, ended its temporary passivity, and realized that it must fight for its security.

The Alawite context, however, explains only part of the picture, as conflicting elements in the history of Tripoli remain quite salient, despite the political and social changes since the period of independence and the end of colonialism. Tripoli's connection with the ancient cities in its area, Hama and especially Homs, continues and is an integral part of the story. These two cities were among the first to enter current the Syrian cycle of bloodshed and become a focus of the war.

Tripoli's strong connection with Hama, which is further away than Homs, is reflected primarily in the shared ideological platform. Traditionally, Hama and Tripoli were considered strongholds of conservative Islam and fertile ground for activity by groups associated with political Islam. Hama was also etched as a symbol of Islamic resistance to the Assad dynasty and as the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion between 1976 and 1982, which culminated in the massacre of tens of thousands of residents of the city, carried out by Rifaat al-Assad in his brother's name. The deep solidarity between the populations of Tripoli and Hama has grown, particularly since Hama experienced the strongarm tactics of the regime and was under siege and suffered mass killings in July 2011, less than four months after the start of the riots in the country.[12] Thus, for example, Riad al-Shaqfeh, the secretary general of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and a native of Hama, found refuge in Tripoli after the civil war broke out.[13]

The connection with Homs is even closer. Geographically, the cities are about eighty kilometers apart, slightly more than the distance between Tripoli and Beirut. Indeed, many residents of the city have a stronger sense of proximity to Homs than to Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and Mount Lebanon, where the prominent religious groups are the Christians, Shiites, and Druze.[14] Aside from commercial and religious ties, which have been adversely affected by the prolonged Syrian involvement in Lebanon and

the suppression of the Sunni population in the city,[15] there are even more tangible connections: some 10 percent of the Sunni Muslims in Tripoli have relatives in Homs.[16] In the past, Homs was not perceived as an Islamic stronghold like Hama, but its demographic makeup in the five decades of Assad family rule has turned it into a model with strong similarity to Tripoli. Both cities have an established Alawite community, a small Christian community, and a decisive Sunni majority. The variegated structure has created a dangerous compound that could easily ignite violence, and in fact, during 2011, the popular protest reached the gates of the city. The waves of demonstrations and the massive military operations by the regime that followed in their wake made a deep imprint on Homs, giving it strategic importance in the war and in the public consciousness making it the capital of the revolution. It was not long before volunteers from Tripoli and the surrounding area began to stream into Homs to resist the Assad regime and come to the aid of their brethren, for reasons of religious and cultural solidarity and for purely familial reasons.[17]

The Lebanese Angle

The Syrian experience is alive and well on the streets of Tripoli, and to a considerable extent is part of the local DNA and dictates the city's inward and outward stances. However, the city is located in a state that is complicated in and of itself and operates according to its own rules. Lebanon has attempted to distance itself from the civil war in Syria, lest the events spill over into its territory and create an undesirable situation. After initial success, several factors combined to force Lebanon to become involved in various aspects of the struggle across the border on a larger scale than it wished. The first concerned the flood of Syrian refugees into Lebanon. More than one million refugees poured into the country, a large percentage of them Sunni Muslims, and about one-quarter settled in the Tripoli area.[18] This dramatic fluctuation in the demographic makeup of the country led the authorities to adopt a tougher immigration policy in order to stop the trend jeopardizing Lebanese society, and in late 2014 steps were taken toward this end.[19]

The second factor is the dual problem of involvement by Lebanese elements in the fighting in Syria. The first, which thus far has played the most significant role, is Hizbollah's decision – possibly taken voluntarily and possibly because of the dictates of Tehran – to stand by Bashar Assad and fight alongside his army in the struggle against the rebels. This choice

subjected the organization to harsh criticism domestically, particularly from anti-Syrian elements in the country represented by the March 14 Alliance, for forcibly dragging Lebanon into an unnecessary conflict. This criticism, however, has yielded little, and Hizbollah is still entrenched in the fighting in Syria, mostly along the border with Lebanon. The organization casts itself as the defender of Lebanon and is fully supported by the March 8 Alliance, which it heads.

Some of the significant battles in which Hizbollah fighters have participated are on the country's northeastern border. The most prominent of these were the battle of al-Qusayr, near Homs, where Hizbollah and the Syrian army defeated the rebels in June 2013,[20] and the battle in Arsal, which was part of the larger battle in Syria's Qalamoun region and was fought to the south between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS) on the one hand and Hizbollah on the other, on the Syrian-Lebanese border. In August 2014, a dramatic reversal took place in the border city, when Islamic rebel groups kidnapped a Lebanese policeman and soldiers. Some were executed and others are still in captivity. The incident stirred up the public in Lebanon.[21] Al-Qusayr and Arsal are not far from Tripoli, and it is highly possible that in certain scenarios, the events would be felt in the streets and the surrounding areas.

The other side of Lebanese involvement in Syria is represented by Salafist Islam, with its varying manifestations and intensities. The Sunni population, much of which has remained relatively moderate over the years on questions of religion and nationality in Lebanon, has been exposed to the bright colors of Islamic activism, and this process has been spearheaded by elements in Tripoli. Years of ideological radicalization, together with economic collapse, have pushed the city's residents into the comforting arms of Islam. The presence of Palestinian refugees, primarily in the Nahr al-Bared and al-Baddawi camps near Tripoli, has intensified this phenomenon, in light of the growth of al-Qaeda cells among this public. Thus, a situation has been created in which aside from the tension within Tripoli, the city serves as a breeding ground for jihadi fighters in Syria and elsewhere. The fact that the Palestinians are not currently a great security threat, after being routed from the area at the end of the previous decade, has caused the Sunnis of Tripoli to unite against a more pressing common target, Assad and the Alawites.[22]

Beyond the cross-border sectorial tension polarizing Lebanese society is a serious political crisis. Since May 2014, when President Michel Suleiman

ended his term, the presidential palace in Baabda has remained empty. The two large political blocs, the March 14 Alliance and the March 8 Alliance, have not been able to reach agreement on a presidential candidate, and the country has been functioning – or more precisely, not functioning – for a number of months without a president.[23] In addition, the parliamentary elections that were to take place in November have been postponed, with the terms of current members of parliament extended because of the security situation. With the serious political situation in the background and the war in Syria spilling onto Lebanon's doorstep, it appears that the pressure is growing in the already unstable city of Tripoli.

In April 2014, Lebanese security forces launched an operation to suppress the violence in Tripoli, which had increased intermittently in parallel to the war in Syria. In the short term, the Tripoli security plan did succeed in stopping the destruction and the killing, but after several months, serious clashes broke out again between the warring neighborhoods of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.[24] Once again the army intervened, and this time the objective changed from eliminating local bloodshed to eradicating a much greater threat, Jabhat al-Nusra and particularly IS. The sweeping conquests by IS in Iraq and Syria made waves around the world and created a serious backlash among moderate states in the region, certainly in a country like Lebanon, which is populated by various minorities, including Christians. Tripoli's young people are a target audience for the ideological attraction that is spreading through the Middle East and beyond, and more than a few have expressed support for its revolutionary ideas and admitted planning to establish an Islamic emirate in northern Lebanon.[25] Therefore, unprecedented steps were taken, such as sending armored vehicles into Bab al-Tabbaneh, from an understanding that the threat is qualitatively different and should be dealt with aggressively. The result was that this fire was completely extinguished, at least temporarily, but it is impossible to know how and when it will be reignited.[26]

Significance

"Tripoli has been accused of militant trends, but it has proven that it is the beginning of change, the first capital of Lebanon that has drawn the map of the strong and just state." These words were spoken by former president Michel Suleiman during his visit with Mufti Malek al-Shaar in the city in early November 2014. This was an attempt by the two to prove that Tripoli has weathered the crisis and is facing a better future.[27] Is this the case?

Within the turbulent Middle East, which abounds with opposing factions, a number of islands remain that were damaged less by the ravages of the storm. Lebanon was and still is such an island. Despite the delicate balance among the communities and the security, political, economic, demographic, and social crises it faces, the long-suffering country has thus far known how to contain the conflict and to maintain its integrity, certainly in comparison to its Syrian neighbor. The trauma of its own civil war is still deeply etched in the minds of Lebanon's citizens and leaders, many of whom were actively involved in those events. The prevailing feeling in the country is that the situation is dangerous but that the opening shot of another civil war has not yet been fired, and it does not appear that it will be fired soon. This is also the situation in Tripoli, where the city's residents have been engaged in conflict for almost forty years. A political commentator for *al-Bayan*, published in Tripoli, captured the mood very well in the paper's lead article on November 5, 2014: "The gate of *fitnah* [civil war] in Tripoli has been closed … at least for the foreseeable future … In the end, the weapons and the *fitnah* have been dropped … but the anarchy has not."

While *al-Bayan* expresses itself calmly and confidently, it also demands that state institutions comprehensively address the evils that are destroying the city from within, not in a piecemeal and reactive fashion, as has been the case until now. Consequently, it is not at all certain that in the future Tripoli and Lebanon will remain as they were. The state structure in what is commonly called the Fertile Crescent is collapsing. Syria and Iraq are being reshaped, and it is impossible to know what they will look like in another few months, let alone another few years. The border between Syria and Lebanon was never hermetically sealed, and it is an area that has lost its governability and enables terrorist, criminal, and refugee activity. Moreover, within the borders of Lebanon, Tripoli is different from the other areas and main cities. Since it was closely connected to Syrian culture and tradition for generations, the era of state dissolution is drawing some of its residents back to their deep feeling of Sunni communal belonging. In a city that suffers from poverty, a lack of personal and public security, a sectorial conflict, and a history of clashes, it is only natural that the new messages from the east find a sympathetic ear among the desperate young people.

Tripoli's physical proximity to the border with Syria, as well as the connections between the Sunni population and its counterparts in Homs and Hama and the Alawites and their brethren in the nearby Jibal an-Nusayriyah, could lead the borders and the checkpoints in northern Lebanon

to collapse and the Syrian civil war to penetrate completely. This is a grave scenario that while not spoken of openly should be taken very seriously. In a state that is so fragile, which is now lacking a healthy, functioning political system, the likelihood that the situation will become chaotic increases. Tripoli is a major candidate to be the first domino to fall, and after this occurs, the Lebanon we know will change in many ways. Furthermore, aside from the Lebanese framework, which is naturally influenced by the events in Tripoli, the city is a microcosm of existing and potential turmoil in other areas in the region that directly affect and are affected by it, e.g., Syria and Iraq, on the one hand, and Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza, on the other. Hence, the ongoing battle for Tripoli, with its escalations and periods of calm, is also Lebanon's battle for its future, and neither Israel nor Lebanon's allies want to see this battle lost.

Notes

1 This is the administrative name given by the Ottomans at the start of their empire to the territorial units of which it was composed.
2 The transliteration of the Arabic name of the city, which is different from Ṭarābulus al-Gharb (Tripoli of the West), the capital of Libya.
3 C. Edmund Bosworth, *Historic Cities of the Islamic World* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2007), pp. 528-29.
4 Meir Zamir, *The Establishment of Modern Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, 1993), pp. 99-102.
5 Hilal Khashan, "Lebanon's Islamist Stronghold," *Middle East Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2011): 87-88.
6 Anne Barnard, "A Lebanese Battle with Syrian Overtones," *New York Times*, October 26, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/27/world/middleeast/a-lebanese-battle-with-syrian-overtones.html; Antoine Amrieh, "Army Battles Jihadist in N. Lebanon, 14 Killed," *Daily Star*, October 25, 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-25/275328-clashes-in-north-lebanon-wound-10-including-five-soldiers.ashx.
7 Robert Fisk, "Homs Bloodshed Spills over into Lebanon," *The Independent*, February 13, 2012.
8 Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Lebanon: Displaced Allawis Find Little Relief in Impoverished North," UNHCR, August 5, 2008, http://www.refworld.org/docid/489c1be4c.html; "Lebanon's Alawites Watch and Wait as Assad Struggles for Power," *Naharnet*, November 7, 2011, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/19685.
9 This ruling is remembered mainly as a stamp of approval for the rule of Hafez al-Assad, who was an Alawite and a Baathist, in Syria. See also Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 237-54.

10 Eyal Zisser, *Blood in the Cedars* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Meuhad, 2009), pp. 131-32, 225-26.

11 Zoi Constantine, "Pressures in Syria Affect Alawites in Lebanon," *The National*, August 11, 2011, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/pressures-in-syria-affect-alawites-in-lebanon.

12 "Syrian Forces in Deadly Assault on Hama," *al-Jazeera*, July 5, 2011, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/07/20117575942416758.html.

13 Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2013), p. 171.

14 Ibid., p. 107.

15 The Syrians opened their country to international markets, which damaged the standing of the al-Mina port, and ports sprang up in the Alawite region in its stead. At the same time, the Muslims in Tripoli suffered from their opposition to Assad and his intervention in Lebanese affairs.

16 Fisk, "Homs Bloodshed Spills over into Lebanon."

17 Eyal Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, Civil War* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2014), pp. 124-25, 171-76.

18 UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," November 4, 2011, www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122.

19 Elise Knutsen, "Lebanon Drastically Limits Syrian Refugee Entry," *Daily Star*, October 20, 2014, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-20/274632-lebanon-drastically-limits-syrian-refugee-entry.ashx#axzz3IYyp7Rh7; Frank Jordans, "Lebanon Wants End to Flow of Syrian Refugees," *ABC News*, October 28, 2014.

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25 "Terrorists Confess to Plot to Establish Islamist Emirate in North," *Naharnet*, November 11, 2014, www.naharnet.com/stories/en/154786-terrorists-confess-to-plot-to-establish-islamist-emirate-in-north.

26 Barnard, "A Lebanese Battle."

27 "Suleiman Calls for President to be Elected in order to Avoid Bitter Experiences," *as-Safir*, November 9, 2014, www.assafir.com/Article/383011/Archive.