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THE ISLAMIC GROUP AND LEBANON'S POPULAR UPRISING

POLITICAL ISLAM MOVEMENTS

IN THE SECOND WAVE OF **ARAB UPRISINGS**

الشرق
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

The paper is originally written in Arabic.

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Abstract

The Lebanese uprising or '*Hirak*' erupted on October 17 2019, with demands revolving around combating sectarianism and changing the political class that has been ruling the country, on the basis that they were the source of corruption and the cause behind Lebanon's political and economic crises. In spite of the rhetorical acknowledgement Lebanese parties proffered on the popular uprising and its demands, a number of key and effective groups within the regime stood against the *Hirak* movement, as with the Shi'ite duo (the Amal Movement and Hezbollah), and the Free Patriotic Movement. Others expressed reservations, and avoided direct confrontation, while likely seeking to benefit from the popular movement, as with the Future Movement. Other parties, though few in number, provided the popular movement with unconditional support, as in the case of the Islamic Group (*al-Jama'ah al-Islamiya*).

The Islamic Group (IG) bears considerable political clout within the Lebanese Sunni community, second only to the Future Movement, but nonetheless without representation on a national level. Its involvement in the popular uprising presented it with the opportunity to rebuild itself as a significant and ascendant political force in Lebanon.

This paper seeks to review the role of the Islamic Group in the *Hirak*, given its position as the most prominent Sunni political actor that supported the Lebanese popular uprising. The study will assess the group's response to and engagement with the *Hirak*, as well as the influence the *Hirak* had on the Islamic Group and its ties to others within the immediate political climate. The focus is mainly on its relationship with the Future Movement, which represents the foremost political force within the Sunni coalition, as well as its relationship to Hezbollah, the primary Lebanese and Shi'ite political authority with a controversial regional role.

Introduction

The significance of the role of the Islamic Group (IG), *al-Jama'ah al-Islamiya*, within Lebanon or the Arab and Islamic contexts more broadly, derives from the fact that it is nearly the only Lebanese Islamic entity playing an active political role while also representing a major segment of Lebanese Sunnis. The Islamic Group comes second to Saad Hariri's Future Movement, which calls on the IG's support of 'Political Sunnism' merely when politics and religion intersect amid sectarian struggle in Lebanon and throughout the region.¹ Moreover, it is also a member of the Muslim Brotherhood organization (MB), which witnessed political resurgence with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, at least in terms of intellectual referent, influence and vision. The Islamic Group also bears shared characteristics as well as political and social ties with its Middle Eastern environs, particularly the Levant. It presents itself as an actor concerned with the events in Syria and Palestine, exhibiting interest in the Islamist phenomenon and its developments throughout the region.

These two features of the group – mainly its sectarian positionality within the context of the broader Lebanese regime and its ideological dimension that transcends the national context to the broader Arab and Islamic context – did not prevent it from identifying with the Lebanese *Hirak*. Also known as the 'October 17 Intifada', the *Hirak* broke out on October 17 2019, mainly in response to the failures of the Lebanese political system formed after the 1990 Taif Agreement which entrenched a sectarian distribution of power and wealth, and further consolidated its endemic corruption and cronyism. It is nonetheless remarkable that the Lebanese Sunnis, their cities, and villages were positioned at the forefront of the revolutionaries in the *Hirak*, but with nationalist motives, slogans and demands.

There appears to be a discrepancy between the Islamic Group as a sectarian group, and the *Hirak* movement as a national actor. The Islamic Group's alignment with the Lebanese popular movement in its rhetoric and demands for change have, to a large extent, created a space of positive engagement that will undoubtedly impact the Islamic Group.

The Islamic Group at the HIRAK's mercy

The rise of the MB and its aligned forces within the context of the Arab Spring in 2011 opened political horizons for the Islamic Group previously unavailable. It also triggered a reevaluation of its performance and organizational structure, which would qualify it for a credible and significant political role in the Lebanese arena. However, this window of opportunity soon came to a close following the coup d'état in Egypt (2013) and the subsequent formation of an "Arab counter-revolutionary coalition", which implicitly doubled as an anti-MB movement that saw the organization besieged on a regional and even international level. This was followed by the advent of the Gulf crisis (the siege of Qatar) in the summer of 2017, making matters worse for a group that had once interacted with a primarily unified Gulf region, suddenly finding itself a target for actors within the already divided Gulf.

The Islamic Group was no exception to the strain endured by the MB organization. In time, the group, its myriad of associations and the figures linked to it were no longer welcome in Saudi Arabia which had previously embraced Lebanon's Sunnis to some extent. They were also not welcomed in the United Arab Emirates to a certain extent. According to the Islamic Group's leaders, Egypt also took a hostile stance against the group, to the extent that its Beirut embassy played a role in tracking the group politically.² Taken altogether, the effects of these restrictions would manifest in the results of Lebanon's recent parliamentary elections held in 2018, where the IG failed to gain a single seat. The group justifies this loss by claiming it was subject to an 'Arab' blockade and a decision to confine it and distance it from the political scene, preventing it from reaching agreements or creating alliances, whether with the Future Movement or the March 14th Alliance –with whom it held a special relationship following Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005.³

On the other hand, its relationship with the Iran-Hezbollah axis was deteriorating on account of Iran's role in the Arab region, and particularly in the Syrian war (2011). As such, the Islamic Group understood Iran's role to be based on "sectarian and expansionist dimensions" in service of its regional interests,

“with no connection to the resistance (of Israel).” In essence, this turned Iran from a friend and potential ally –particularly in the 1980s and 1990s– into a significant adversary in need of confrontation to adjust its behavior.⁴ This is due to the fact that the battle fought by the “Iranian axis” in Syria and even Lebanon, waged under the guise of combatting “terrorism”, consisted also of an attack on the MB in the media and in the ideological mobilization of the axis’ militants. The division between the two parties was further reinforced by the departure of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) from Damascus in 2012, and the distance the group maintained from Iran and Hezbollah, to avoid getting involved in the ongoing war in Syria and the rest of the region, and to further avoid “aligning itself against its own people.”

At the local level, Hezbollah’s position in the Lebanese context was contrary to the Islamic group’s respective position and the aspirations of its demographics, setting them up against one another not only politically, but also on ideological and sectarian lines.⁵ For the most part, the Islamic group’s audience still perceives Hezbollah as a dominant force in the state, having shifted from a resistance force into a functional ‘sectarian’ position leading and inciting an alliance of ‘minorities’ in Lebanon and the surrounding region. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s audience places the MB and Islamic “*Takfiri*” movements in the same basket, at least in terms of their opposition to the “resistance” axis, even in local Lebanese discourse, especially in the time period between 2013 to 2017.⁶

As the relations of the Palestinian resistance forces with Hezbollah and Iran improved (2017), pressure mounted on the Islamic group to fulfill its regional responsibilities, which historically have overshadowed its domestic nature. On the one hand, it had to continue its political commitment with regards to the Palestinian issue and take the needs of the Palestinian ‘resistance’ from Hezbollah into account. On the other hand, it needed to uphold and maintain its commitment to the Syrian issue which has been at the forefront of its priorities since 2011, although more recently it focused on humanitarian efforts rather than political engagement. The period leading up to the *Hirak* saw

meetings between key figures or leaders of Hezbollah and the Islamic Group, where Hamas played a positive role, and contributed to easing the political clash between them. Both would remain entrenched in their respective stances, but careful to avoid any direct confrontations or escalation of their disagreements.⁷ As such, the Islamic Group's efforts were divided as they sought to achieve a balance in rhetoric and political direction between their commitments to the Palestinian and Syrian issues, as well as between the regional and domestic fronts; all in an environment that elicited a number of contradictions in their policy and commitments.

This regional and local context has imposed near complete political isolation on the group, alongside a financial blockade. The group's primary source of income, which has largely come from donations from abroad, has dwindled to nearly nothing, leaving the group dependent to a large extent on the contribution of its members in addition to some limited investments.⁸ Donations from the Lebanese public were nearly negligible, largely given that recruitment was too slow for organizational reasons, with the group remaining relatively elitist and mainly targeting the religious Sunni public. Moreover, its position was relatively weakened, especially after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, resulting in an inability to establish a discourse that meets the ambitions of its local demographic or responds to the Lebanese national challenges. Its inability to compete with the discourse of the Future Movement has prevented it from attracting a supportive cross section of the Sunni public, specifically among the middle class, depriving it hence from the needed economic and political leverage.

Organizationally speaking, the Islamic Group witnessed a long period of transitional leadership between the Arab Spring of 2011 and the Lebanese *Hirak* of 2019, that may yet continue. It saw a transfer of power from the founding generation to the next, resulting in internal disagreements that the group has not kept a secret.⁹ In 2011, Sheikh Faysal Mawlawi passed away, having served as the group's secretary-general since 1992. He was one of the foremost jurists of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a prominent Lebanese

religious scholar. With his death, the group's performance and influence saw a relative decline, alongside the decline in its appeal in the Arab world. His successor, Ibrahim al-Masri (elected in 2010), who also belongs to the generation of founders, primarily managed the transitional phase and prepared for the leadership handover to the next generation. The selection of Azzam al-Ayoubi as secretary-general of the group in succession to al-Masri (2016) was not an easy decision. This was particularly so following his second term (early 2019), where he was elected by the Shura Council by a single vote's margin. This is an indication of the deep differences between the poles of the group and the growing organizational challenges, raising questions about the group's ability to attract new blood, let alone play a reforming role in the Lebanese arena.

Thus, the Lebanese *Hirak* erupted at a time when the Islamic Group did not settle its organizational challenges nor has it crystallized its vision for a post-Arab uprising period. Instead, they were struggling with political and financial isolation, while facing local Lebanese challenges open to regional developments that were not in their favor, nor to the benefit of their Sunni or 'Islamist' environment, whether regionally, or in Lebanon. For the first time, it felt the burden of direct responsibility for a specific sect in Lebanon and the region, i.e. Sunnis, in addition to its fundamental responsibility, i.e. its ideological message.

The Islamic Group's response to the popular movement

The demonstrations that took place in Beirut on October 17 saw broad participation from the Lebanese population from north to south. Although all Lebanese parties rhetorically acknowledged the demands of the *Hirak* in principle, the main parties active in the regime stood against it, as with the Shiite duo (the Amal Movement and Hezbollah) and the Free Patriotic Movement. Others expressed their reservations over the *Hirak* movement and avoided direct confrontation with it. Some may have tried to take advantage of the *Hirak*, as was the case with the Future Movement, while others supported it absolutely and without condition, although very few in number, one of which was the Islamic Group.

This was an expected position for the Islamic Group in the sectarian Lebanese context; especially given that the city of Tripoli witnessed the largest gatherings, which maintained their strength despite the decline in protest intensity throughout the rest of Lebanon over time. This was largely due to the fact that Tripoli was one of the most negatively affected cities by the post-Taif regime. Tripoli is home to the poorest demographics and serves as the main Sunni bastion, which has long complained of sectarian discrimination and marginalization resulting from unfavorable development, both locally and regionally.¹⁰

In terms of vision, the group does not regard the Lebanese *Hirak* (as an event and the political values it bears) as different from the uprisings the Arab world witnessed in 2011. This is particularly the case since the objectives of the popular movement are not far from the demands of the 'Arab Spring' which called for the fall of regimes, but in accord with the Lebanese context and its complexities. The demands of the *Hirak* revolved around four basic objectives that continued to lead in the absence of any specific leadership: the fall of the present government, an interim government for six months consisting of technocrats with exceptional powers, the organization of a new parliamentary elections, and finally the restoration of stolen assets.¹¹ The aim of these objectives is to change the current ruling class and to produce a new one in the hopes of establishing a new vision of governance: one that will extricate Lebanon from its economic crises and allows it to recover.

The group saw in these objectives: "a real opportunity to build a state outside the control of traditional political forces ruling since 1990, or to at least allow people the ability to put pressure on the political class to achieve their interests." These objectives also resonate with the reformist demands of the group to abolish political sectarianism,¹² which it has been calling for as far back as the 1970s,¹³ alongside the promotion of social justice, reforming the judiciary, eliminating corruption, and other demands, all of which were included in a 2017 document called the 'Homeland Vision' (Ru'yat Watan).¹⁴

Yet, according to the Islamic Group's former deputy in the Lebanese parliament Imad al-Hout, the Hirak took the group by surprise and caused confusion at the beginning in how to keep up with it, given the organizational challenges facing the group. The group's adoption of a "comprehensive framework" approach to understanding Islam and political action, by namely 'seeking to make Islam the ruler of all spheres of life', makes it difficult for the group to be flexible in dealing with public affairs in a multi-confessional country such as Lebanon. Another difficulty for the organization stems from the predominance of the educational approach (tarbiya) over its performance. However, the group's support for and involvement in the Hirak have made it easier to achieve its objective.

The group found in the popular movement an amplifier for its reformist discourse. The group believes that the Lebanese sectarian political system "prevented it from achieving its reform goals in Lebanon, while hindering public engagement with its political discourse and the economic systems it advocated for".¹⁵ In this respect, the Hirak presented it with an opportunity to be a part of a popular change movement, so long as it bore some of the group's goals, leading it to adopt the popular movement and its nonviolent tactics as its main tools for change. This is one of the reasons why the popular movement is sometimes accused of being backed by opponents of the March 8th Alliance, amongst which is the Islamic Group. However, it is also possible that members of the Islamic Group found in the popular movement an opportunity to rid the country of one party domination, the March 8th Alliance, controlling the parliament, the government, and Lebanese political life.¹⁶

The social base of the group and its members participated in the popular movements in all regions of Lebanon, with varying degrees of presence, whether as part of larger Lebanese society or in their personal capacity. They did not participate in the name of the group or through its organizational capabilities because they considered the Hirak to be a popular mobilization by nature, hence the engagement with it in any organizational capacity or title

would have triggered the popular movement's implosion from within.¹⁷ Moreover, the Arab Spring experience came at a great cost for the political Islam movements in countries that experienced a revolution, and the group certainly did not want to repeat that experience in Lebanon.

Yet, the group's decision to participate certainly encouraged its membership towards participation in the protests.¹⁸ As such, it had a significant presence in the southern city of Sidon, in gatherings and other activities in general.¹⁹ In Beirut, their presence was most prominent in the 'Youth for Beirut' group (Shabab Li Beyrut), a religious conservative group unaffiliated with any of the Islamist movements, but which played a particular role in mobilization efforts in the first weeks of the popular movement.

In the north, they participated in the organizing committees of the Hirak through the 'Youth for Tripoli' group (Shabab Li Tarablus). However, it is not possible to distinguish crowds by ideology in al-Nour Square (Sahat al-Nur), the center of the Hirak in North Lebanon because a large segment of the protestors could be described as conservative when compared to other squares, reflecting the city's character. It is important to note that the platform used by the protesters at al-Nour Square was mostly handled by the 'Guardians of the City' (Huras al-madina), a relatively conservative group unaffiliated with the Islamic Group, contrary to what some have assumed or claimed. However, the 'Guardians' are less conservative than the remainder of the city's population and they are keen to assert their independence from all political trends in it, including the Islamic Group.²⁰ The Islamic Group has also held a considerable presence in the span of year in a number of villages and towns, as with those in the Bekaa Valley or southern Arkoub region among others.

The group launched an early initiative on October 25, 2019 with a list of demands to solve the crisis in Lebanon: 'declaring a six-month transition period, reducing the terms of the current three presidencies and the existing councils, calling for the formation of a national body to abolish political sectarianism, and establishing a senate for sectarian representation (as stipulated by Taif). The initiative also called

for the adoption of a modern non-sectarian electoral law, the election of a new parliamentary council (outside sectarian representation as stipulated by Taif) and its chair, as well as the election of a new president, the formation of a new government and the rapid adoption of an act for the recovery of the stolen assets.²¹

The initiative of the group did clearly echo the demands announced by the HIRAK, prompting some to assert that the wording of the HIRAK's demands resembled the group's initiative. This claim may partially be true in terms of the contribution of the group and its activists, alongside others, to the development of these demands, up until they became the revolution's "manifesto" particularly in the first month. However, these demands had already been circulating among activists and protestors since day one of the popular movement, and in different formats.

It is noteworthy that the participation of the group in the HIRAK did not grant it a key role as a party. Nor did the group, its activists, or other Islamists, have a strong influence on the HIRAK, neither in the beginning nor more recently. This is likely because the larger social base of the HIRAK consisted of Lebanese demographic segments unaffiliated with any political group, trade union organization, nor civil society organizations. They mostly hailed from the middle and lower class, with the participation of a sector of the upper middle class. On the other hand, the imprint of the Lebanese left was far more present than any other ideological group.²² This was made possible because the Left transcends religious sects, unlike the rest of Lebanon's sectarian parties, and because its social struggle makes it more suited to the economic grievances at the time. The Left in this context is viewed as a social trend that promotes the ending and rejection of sectarianism, and advocates values of democracy. The advanced role of Lebanese women in the movement also gave it a more 'liberal' face as opposed to a religious one representing Islamic movements and organizations.

The bottom line remains that the Islamic Group supported the Hirak movement and participated in it with activists and ideas, but following the terms of the Hirak and in its service in order to assert the convergence between their respective goals. It is not possible to determine whether the participation of the Islamic Group in the Hirak had a decisive impact on its direction, its path or its slogans. On the other hand, it is possible to state that the participation and role of the group in the Hirak made it easier for the Hirak to permeate the Sunni community in Lebanon much more so than other communities. This is especially given that the Future Movement does not adopt the Hirak's slogans. Moreover, if the Islamic Group had exhibited reluctance to participate in the Hirak, the group would have been considered to be in favor of the opposing axis, according to the Lebanese sectarian calculations. Had the group rejected to participate, the Hirak would have certainly faced more challenges.

The Implications of the Islamic Group's Interaction with the Hirak

Particularly at its peak, the Hirak is considered the foremost mobilizer in the Sunni community, surpassing the Future Movement in terms of supporters, unlike the case in other communities. This is likely one of the reasons behind the fall of the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on October 29 2019 in spite of the popularity of his movement. In other words, this change in the highest Sunni political position was propelled by the Sunnis rather than being imposed by any other sect. It should be noted that instead of forming an alternative government according to the demands of the Hirak, a mixed government of technocrats and politicians headed by Hassan Diab was formed on the terms of the March 8th Alliance. The intended message was to assert the control of the parties of the alliance in their respective sectarian bases and that the Hirak is not the primary political mobilizing force within their sects.

In this sense, the advance of the Hirak in the Sunni community provided the activists of the Islamic Group, for the first time, a political platform uncontested by the Future Movement. The most significant cooperation bringing the two parties together (including others in what would later come to be known as the March 14th Alliance) was called the 'Cedar Revolution (Thawrat al-Arz) in the wake of the assassination of Rafik Hariri (2005). But even then, the Islamic Group's participation was largely capped by the Future Movement, in part because of the nature of the political event and its repercussions on the domestic, the regional and international sphere.

The Hirak also provided the group and its activists with an opportunity to act outside of the organizational framework they are used to and to interact with the wider Lebanese public. During the Hirak, the Lebanese public became more accustomed to the group's activists participating in discussions and gatherings taking place in public without organizational or jurisprudential restrictions. This can be attributed to the decline of the 'jurisprudential discourse' as a strict regulatory standard within the group, following Sheikh Faisal Mawlawi's legacy of tolerance in relations with the other and in his jurisprudential opinions. This has effectively contributed towards the motivation of the activists to work with the wider public and the Hirak. In doing so, the group was able to establish its presence in the joint bodies of the Hirak and be welcomed more than ever before in all regions. It presented itself as a "Sunni player with no history of political control in the Lebanese popular consciousness".²³

This progress, some of which was spontaneous and some of which came through critical decisions from the group itself, did not reflect yet into a real change in the organizational structure of the community or its modus operandi. Rather, it remains both elitist and religious revivalist in its essence and in its mechanisms of action. Its margin for political work remains narrow in terms of both practice and thought, where religious proselytization (Da'wa) and charitable activity are the first and foremost functions of the members of the group. Even the debate about the separation of political activity from proselytization, which was ongoing inside other political Islam movements after the Arab Spring was not prevalent in the group as such, but was overshadowed by other organizational concerns.

Given this rhythm of calculated and cautious interaction, it did not necessarily lead to a strengthening of the group's role in the Hirak nor to an increase in its popularity or influence in the Sunni environment or the greater Lebanese political equation. Nevertheless, the group did become involved in local political activity more than ever before and was able to maintain its status in the eyes of its public and community. The group has also become more ready than ever to interact with the highly diverse Lebanese environment and the difficult questions it posits for the group in terms of its religious and regional background.

However, the primary change is in the position of the group vis-a-vis the Lebanese political class as it transformed into a 'revisionist force' that aims to change the status quo.²⁴ By associating itself with the Hirak and playing an active role in it, the group stood in challenge to the traditional political class of ruling parties.

This is significant in terms of the Islamic Group's relationship with the Future Movement at the sectarian level, as well as its relations with Hezbollah as a dominant authority in power and a key player in the region. Any shift in these relations will be reflected in the Islamic Group and its role.

First: The relationship with the Future Movement

The Future Movement perceives the Hirak and the active forces within it as competitors, and will deal with them on this basis. It considers that these forces have benefited from the state of weakness that affected the movement, mainly the crisis with Saad Hariri in his relationship with Saudi Arabia, who recently changed its approach to Lebanese affairs. The Future Movement not only dropped on the list of priorities for Saudi Arabia, but Saad Hariri's brother, Bahaa al-Din Hariri is also trying to enter the Lebanese politics through criticizing his brother.

Should the Future movement overcome its current crisis and bounce back strong, it will inevitably be through adopting the slogans of the Hirak, as is the case for the other traditional parties. In this manner, it will attempt to take the leadership of the popular momentum in various ways. The Future movement will certainly consider the Islamic Group to be a main opponent within the Sunni constituency, especially if the Saudi position vis-a-vis the Islamic Group and the MB remains unchanged. Alternatively, the Islamic Group will have to repackage itself as an adjunct force to the Future Movement to avoid any confrontation with it, especially on central issues that concern Lebanon's Sunni population, and in order to uphold its self-ascribed traditional responsibility of "preserving the religious component of Sunnism, and at the same time serving as a reserve force for it."²⁵ Imad al-Hout continues to emphasize that the group is not affiliated with the Future Movement, but is keen to avoid any conflict within the Sunni community due to its possible negative repercussions.²⁶

Second: The relationship with Hezbollah

Efforts have been made to normalize the relationship between the Islamic Group and Hezbollah, which has worsened considerably due to Hezbollah's position on the Arab uprisings, its involvement in the Syrian war, as well as the escalation of sectarian rhetoric in the region, positioning the two in different camps. However, with the outset of the Hirak, their relationship not only reverted to its previous point, but in fact was sapped. According to one of the group's leaders, some of the meetings between the two sides have been greatly reduced and Hezbollah is no longer concerned with these meetings, at least in the current circumstances.

It can be noted that Hezbollah's priority, both in Lebanese and in regional affairs, is no longer based on a relationship with the Islamic Group as a faction of the MB. On the regional level, Hezbollah's relationship with Hamas is decoupled from its relationship with the Brotherhood as well as its reservations about the Syrian situation. Within the Lebanese context, there are few shared interests between Hezbollah and the Islamic group. And despite the fact that Hezbollah acknowledged the spontaneous nature of the Hirak, especially in the first two days, it came to perceive it as a tool manipulated by its opposing local forces or as part of an international conspiracy against it, therefore setting up Hezbollah in confrontation with the Islamic Group.

Mediators concerned with improving the relationship between Hezbollah and the Islamic group have delivered to the group Hezbollah's criticism of its position in the Hirak.²⁷ It is clear that the two sides do not want to be at the forefront confronting each other, perhaps because their religious nature indirectly transforms any confrontation between them into an unwanted escalation of sectarianism in Lebanon. Also, pressures to converge are still present both domestically and regionally, especially in the case of the Palestinian file, and the conflict with Israel more broadly, where the group asserts Lebanon's right to 'resist'. However, the group wants this resistance to be part of a 'national defence strategy' determined through a Lebanese dialogue and within the framework of the Lebanese state, not beyond that framework.²⁸

The group's relationship with the Future Movement and Hezbollah is still governed by the rules and alignments of the Lebanese sectarian model, as well as the regional

conflicts and contradictions, and thus any real change in this relationship driven under the influence of the Hirak is largely dependent on the fate of the Hirak itself, as well as the fate of the Islamic group's engagement with it.

Conclusion

There are a range of indications and conclusions that can be drawn from the Islamic Group's interaction with the Hirak. Firstly, the fact that the Sunni public in Lebanon is patriotic to the extent that even activists of an Islamic movement of a religious nature such as the Islamic Group engaged in national activism (such as the Hirak) spontaneously and unconditionally following the popular demands rather than the interests of the group. This entails responsibilities for the group to become more nationalistic (as opposed to Islamist), to proffer more concern to its local responsibilities, and to resolve the tension between national action and its Islamist formation, even if tentatively, as it is in a diverse multi-religious and multi-sectarian environment.

Secondly, the group's relationship with other Lebanese forces, particularly the Future Movement and Hezbollah, will not necessarily be the same as it was prior to the Hirak. Perhaps, the effects of the group's involvement in the Hirak are not clear yet because the group does not have an influential position in the Lebanese equation in its current form. But whenever the ruling parties reclaim the initiative from the Hirak, they will likely target its centers of power wherever they may be.

Thus, the group must determine whether to continue to pursue its role as part of the forces seeking to 'challenge and revise' the ruling order, no matter how weak the group's influence in the Lebanese equation is, and to build on its position in the Hirak championing the demands of the people, putting itself well on its way to becoming a local rising power. Alternatively, it could choose to back off from the former option for fear of paying a price with the Hirak, leaving its demographic base disenchanted, as has already occurred with a number of other forces that emerged in the Arab Spring. If so, the group would have to then face the decline and revisions that Islamists are famous for, followed by atrophy and decay.

Endnotes

- 1- Shafeeq Choucair, "Map of Sunni Actors in Lebanon: Composition and Trends", *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, March 16, 2015.
<https://bit.ly/2SiivSO>
- 2- Interview with Azzam al-Ayoubi, Secretary-General of the Islamic Group, Beirut, November 17, 2018.
- 3- Telephone interview with Imad al-Hout, former member in the Lebanese parliament regarding the Islamic Group in the Lebanese parliament, January 22, 2019. Telephone interview with Wael Najm, media officer at the political bureau of the Islamic Group, January 27, 2019.
- 4- In a series of interviews with some figures and leaders of the Islamic Group in Beirut in November 2018, they agreed on the need to confront Iran's project in the region in order for it to sit down, discuss and change its 'sectarian behaviour'.
See also: Shafeeq Choucair, "The Islamic Group in Lebanon: a Levantine Model on Transformations in Role and Identity" *Lubab for Strategic and Media Studies* 1, (February 2019): 74-75. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.
<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/190214112218301/02/2019.html>
- 5- More on the sectarian shift in the identity of the Islamic Group and Hezbollah can be found in two separate studies. See: Choucair, "The Islamic Group in Lebanon," 67-76; Shafeeq Choucair, "Hezbollah: His Account of the Syrian War and the Sectarian Issue, (1-2) *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, December 28, 2017.
<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/171228102923122-1/12/2017.html>
The second part was published on January 17, 2018.
<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2018/01/180117110920994.html>
- 6- In these years, Hezbollah fought major battles in Syria and the Lebanese border, such as the battle of Qusayr, Arsal, Al-Jaroud, and others.
- 7- Telephone interview with Wael Najm. Interview with Ali Baraka, Hamas leader, Beirut's southern suburbs, November 20, 2017.
- 8- Telephone interview with Wael Najm.
- 9- Ibid.
- 10- According to a study by the ESCWA released in January 2015, 57% of Tripoli's inhabitants are poor, 26% of whom are poorer. <https://www.unescwa.org/ar/node/12315>
- 11- Shafeeq Choucair, "Lebanese Movement: Motives, Components and Implications", *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, January 23, 2019. (access date: February 12, 2020).
<https://bit.ly/31PfSuB>
- 12- Telephone interview with Imad Al-Hout.
- 13- See: Mohsen Saleh et al., *The Islamic Group in Lebanon from its inception until 1975* (Beirut: Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultancy, 2009), 172 and beyond. See also: "Document 6: A statement from the Islamic Group calling for constitutional amendments, the protection of Lebanon and support for the Palestinian cause," statement by the Islamic Group in October 1974.
<https://bit.ly/2Bs8KeW>
- 14- 'Homeland Vision' conference...a milestone in the history of the Islamic Group. The Islamic Group website. Monday, May 15, 2017. <https://bit.ly/39DBMnz>
- 15- Telephone interview with Imad Al-Hout.
- 16- The researcher conducted several interviews with activists in the HIRAK from the Islamic Group, reflecting their clear desire to get rid of the dominance of the March 8 forces, especially on the

security level and the 'militia' level as some might describe it. Meeting with a group in Beirut, November 22, 2019. Meeting with a group in Sidon, November 24, 2019.

17- Ibid

18- Telephone interview with Imad Al-Hout.

19- A telephone interview with Rami Besbah, activist in the Islamic Group and the Hirak, Sidon on 27 January 2019

20- Interview with Jamal Badawi, head of the Emergency Services in Tripoli, Guards of the City, Tripoli on November 23, 2019.

21- Youssef Hussein, "The Islamic Group announces an initiative to resolve the crisis in Lebanon", *Anadolu News Agency*, October 25, 2019.

<https://bit.ly/39jDES5>

22- See: Choucair, "Lebanese Movement: Motives, Components and Implications."

23- Telephone interview with Imad Al-Hout.

24- Revisionist forces are the forces that do not accept the existing international order and seek to change it. Russia is described as a revisionist for example.

25- Choucair, "Map of Sunni Actors."

26- Telephone interview with Imad Al-Hout.

27- Telephone interview with Wael Najm.

28- Ibid.

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