

Lebanon: The Many Assirs of Beirut



Tariq al-Jdideh is in fact home to five such security compounds, which are in effect a series of residential buildings centered around a mosque led by one or two Assir clones. (Photo: Marwan Tahtah)

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If one Salafi sheikh in the Lebanese city of Saida can cause such mayhem and bloodshed, what kind of trouble can five or six Ahmad al-Assirs in Beirut stir up? Strategically located alongside Hezbollah's heartland of Dahiyeh, the Tariq al-Jdideh sheikhs are itching for a Sunni-Shia showdown in the country's capital.

As the Lebanese army fought its way into Ahmad al-Assir's security compound in east Saida, groups of men in Beirut's Tariq al-Jdideh neighborhood – a Future Movement stronghold for many years now – tried to block major roads around their area in solidarity with the besieged sheikh. It was an indication of the extent to which the Hariri enterprise is implicated in the Assir phenomenon.

Tariq al-Jdideh is in fact home to five such security compounds, which are in effect a series of residential buildings centered around a mosque led by one or two Assir clones. Military intelligence made a note of the level of coordination among the various groups that took to the streets in support of their brethren in Saida, reporting that they moved more or less as a single group, with many even wearing the same military uniforms.

We had one Ahmad al-Assir in Saida and around three in Tripoli, only to end up with five, or maybe six, in Beirut alone. Most of the street leadership, as well as the sheikhs themselves, have long been associated with Future. Before then, local sources say, many of them worked for Syrian intelligence until Damascus pulled its forces out in 2005, switching, as was the fashion then to the Future Party, only to declare their Salafi loyalties in recent months.

Commenting on the mobilization that took place around Tariq al-Jdideh during the Saida siege, a close observer says, "We had one Ahmad al-Assir in Saida and around three in Tripoli, only to end up with five, or maybe six, in Beirut alone." Just as Assir sought to create a frontline of confrontation with the Shia of Saida, Beirut's sheikhs can top him in stirring sectarian tensions as their territory runs alongside Hezbollah's Dahiyeh stronghold.

Future Party leaders like Fouad Siniora and Saad Hariri know well that neither Assir nor his clones in Beirut and Tripoli are capable of defeating Hezbollah in an open confrontation, much less draw them into such a showdown. The purpose of these Salafi militias is to strike a bargain with Hezbollah to surrender their weapons in exchange for disarmament.

The Future Movement today is deeply implicated in the rise of jihadi Salafi groups across Lebanon and Syria, justifying their increasingly indefensible actions at every turn, even when their victims are members of the Lebanese army. The once mainstream Sunni party's radical turn is a reflection of its determination to topple the Assad regime in Damascus while drawing Hezbollah into a local sectarian war.

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