



Sects and the city

Tripoli's fighters are pawns in a regional game

In Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli, sectarian warfare has become entrenched as a way of life. Every few weeks, armed clashes erupt between Sunni Muslims in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood and Alawites on the hilltop of Jabal Mohsen. With the absence of a real political initiative to contain the crisis, clashes are expected to continue as the conflict in Syria worsens.

Different political parties are believed to be investing in the rifts so as to steer events towards a course that would better serve their goals. Syria and Hezbollah are backing the Alawite fighters while Sunni politicians and Gulf sources are backing the Sunnis to mobilize their support. As fighters on both sides become pawns in a larger regional game, former Prime Minister Najib Miqati is believed to be extending an arm to the Sunni street seen as supporters of the revolution.

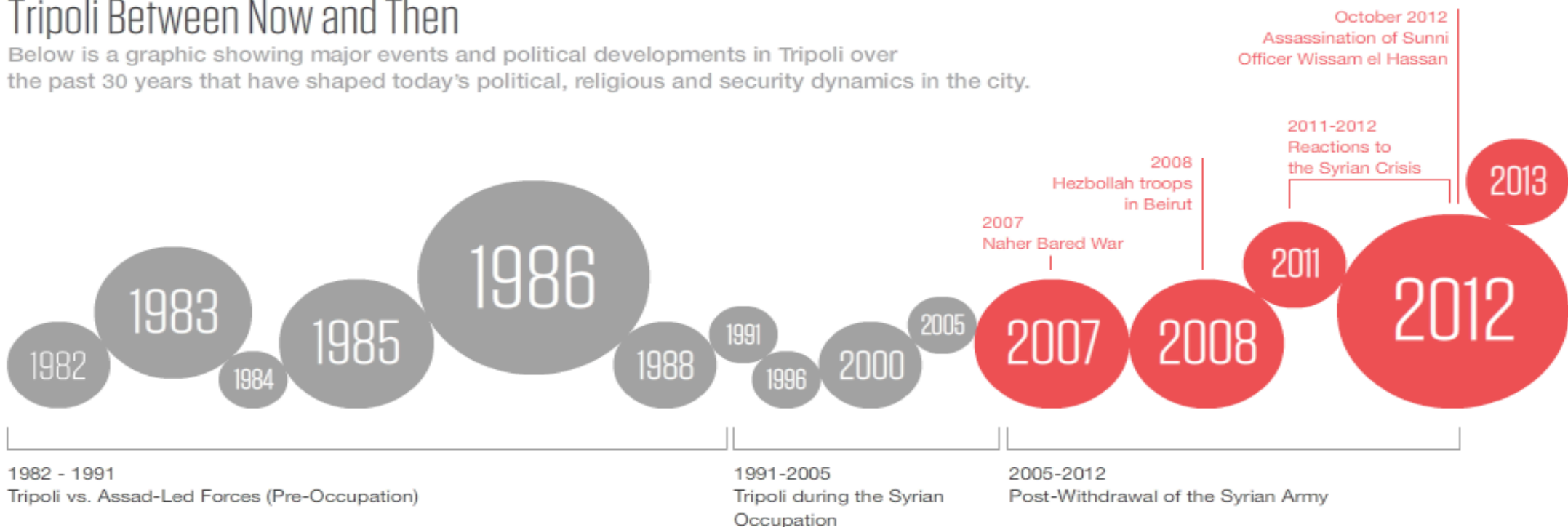
Since the outbreak of hostilities in Syria between the Assad regime and opposition forces, the war has spilled over into Lebanon. Sunnis in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood support the rebels trying to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad while the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen stand loyally by him. It is fitting that the street which forms one of the major frontlines between both is called Syria Street.

This division dates back to the early 1980s when the Syrian Army attacked Tripoli's Bab al-Tabbaneh during the Lebanese Civil War. Since then, the fighting between residents has been directly related to Syrian affairs. Both neighborhoods being among Tripoli's poorest and most densely populated areas, the high number of unemployed men also means a glut of ready and willing fighters each time the clashes erupt.



Tripoli Between Now and Then

Below is a graphic showing major events and political developments in Tripoli over the past 30 years that have shaped today's political, religious and security dynamics in the city.

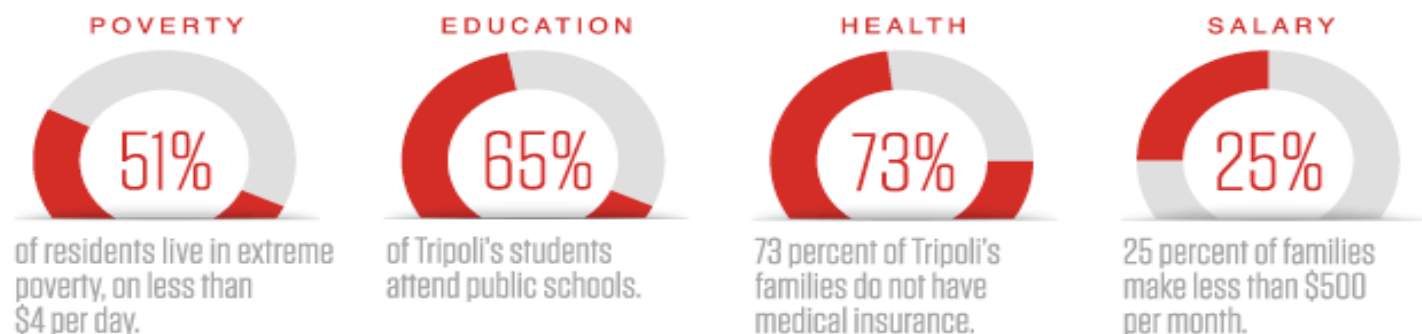


An anti-Syrian regime dynamic is also driving the violence in Tripoli. Salafists and other Islamist groups, which have had relatively small pools of supporters in the past, have now been emboldened by funding from Gulf sources and are mobilizing in support of Syria's anti-Assad rebels.

Abu Mohammad, a resident of Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh, told NOW that schools, mosques, and religious centers where Sunni scholars teach have mushroomed around Tripoli. Militant groups use these centers to recruit and Abu Mohammad says they pay recruits decent money through obscure charities. "An important part of this money we hear of is coming from Qatar. They are donating money, paying salaries, and funding religious schools and radio stations that lean towards Salafism," he says.

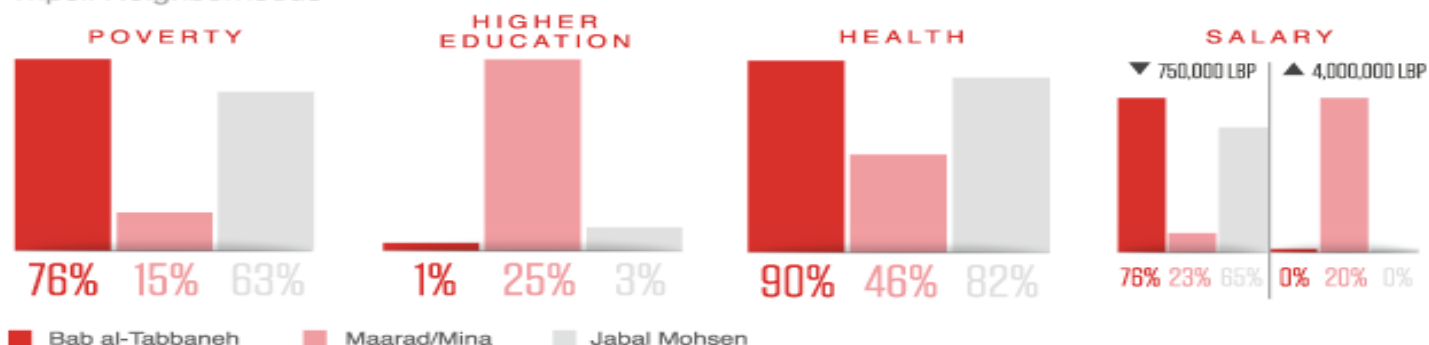
A Poor City

Tripoli



Eager to maintain an image of 'good faith' as a principal of the Sunni community, Miqati has also been financing Islamist groups and well-known clerics in Tripoli. Future bloc's former MP Mustafa Allouch spoke to NOW of monthly endowments being distributed by Miqati's mediators to key Islamist figures.

Tripoli Neighborhoods



“Some of the brand-new machine guns found in Bab al-Tabbaneh cost 8,000 USD”

“Salafi Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, Imam of the Taqwa mosque in Bab al-Tabbaneh is one of them,” he says, “and he receives financial assistance worth \$20,000 USD per month.” Al-Rafei is known for his pro-Syrian revolution stances, and Allouch believes that he enjoys impressive popular support and Miqati is interested in having him on his side.

Allouch confidently claims that Bab al-Tabbaneh gunmen get their money and weapons from Lebanese political leaders, Miqati included. “Some of the brand-new machine guns found in Bab al-Tabbaneh cost \$8,000 USD,” he stressed. “Who in an area of such poverty could afford to buy such weapons?”

“Last summer, Prime Minister Najib Miqati slammed allegations that he is arming Salafist movements in the northern city of Tripoli, saying that such accusations are politically motivated.



BAB AL-TABBANEH

POPULATION
up to 80,000

SECT
SUNNI
with a small number of Shiite families

POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Pro-PM Najib Miqati
Minor support: Omar Karami
Pro-Future Movement Hezbollah



JABAL MOHSEN

POPULATION
up to 60,000

SECT
ALAWITE
with a small number of Sunni families

POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Pro-Arab Democratic Party





Rifaat Eid

Affiliations: Syrian proxy and relations to Hezbollah

Between 700 and 2K fighters



Houssam al-Sabbagh

Affiliations: PM Miqati and Salafist Sheikh Salem al-Rafei

Almost 300 fighters



Saad al-Masri

Affiliations: PM Miqati and Salafist Sheikh Salem al-Rafei

Almost 250 fighters



Sheikh Khaled al-Sayyed

Affiliations: PM Miqati supporters, Salafist Sheikh Salem al-Rafei, and Future Movement

Around 150 fighters



Harba Mosque Committee

Affiliations: Hezbollah

Almost 100 fighters



Sheikh Kamal al-Boustani

Affiliations: PM Miqati and Salafist Sheikh Salem al-Rafei

N/A



Amer Arish

Affiliations: PM Miqati and shifts allegiance between Future Party

Around 60 fighters



Ziad Allouki

Affiliations: PM Miqati and shifts allegiance between Future Party

Around 60 fighters

A security official who spoke to NOW on condition of anonymity says that Miqati gains additional electoral points with Tripoli's residents due to "aid services" his office provides for impoverished residents. Some of these "aid services" come as direct money payments to fighters, he adds. According to the official, the major leading fighters in Bab al-Tabbaneh are Saad Masri and Houssam Sabbagh. Masri, he adds, receives a \$30,000 USD monthly salary.

In his official statements, PM Miqati acknowledged that a "large part" of the Tripoli unrest is a consequence of the war in Syria

and warned of the increase of weapons in the city, yet he has taken no action towards controlling the arms flow. His reactions to the violence focused on the role the Lebanese Army played in ending the conflict and in curbing attempts of establishing an extra-governmental emirate.

About Mohamad, who is also a Bab al-Tabbaneh fighter, tells NOW that it was Masri, one of Miqati's men, who publicly declared Salafist fighter Houssam Sabbagh the 'Emir of Tripoli' in front of hundreds of other fighters and that segments of the Lebanese army protect them.

MP Mouein Merehbi confirms the above and explains to NOW that security institutions are protecting fighters on both sides. He tells NOW that when Sunni and Alawite gunmen from both neighborhoods are captured, they are freed instantaneously.

"The Lebanese government could end all violence in Tripoli if it wanted to," Merhebi stresses, "disarming these groups would take no time at all and would not cost lives if both sides agree to disarm simultaneously. But neither party wants to shut the other down."

The Story of Arms

Testimonies from arms dealer/ arms buyer/security official

“Some weapons are stock leftovers from the civil war. There are weapons bought directly from the market and others shipped into Lebanon.”

“Bab al Tabbaneh fighters receive money from some Lebanese politicians or from some sources abroad and buy the weapons themselves.”

“The process of buying and selling the arms is overseen by senior politicians who are sometimes directly involved in the trade.”

“Fighters in Jabal Mohsen get their arms from Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah. Weapons can be transported by sea, land and air.”

“During truces, fighters from Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh buy and sell weapons to each other.”

“Some of the weapons (rocket-propelled grenades and heavy caliber ammunition) destined to the rebels in Syria from Libya, are found on the market in limited amounts.”

“There are also US brand weapons and Saudi brand weapons present in the market, but the majority of brands present today are made in China.”

Weapon inventory and price per unit

JABAL MOHSEN AND BAB AL-TABBANEH COMMON WEAPONS



PKC AND MAG
MACHINE GUNS
\$5,500 - \$6,000



SNIPER RIFLE
\$9,000



B10 RECOILLESS
RIFLE
\$19,000



KALASHNIKOVS
AK-47
\$1,400 - \$1,900



M4 ASSAULT RIFLE
\$7,000



B7 RPG
\$2,000



M1 GUN
\$1,200



M16
ASSAULT RIFLES
\$3,500



GLOW GK
WITH LASER
\$3,500



GRENADES
\$250

JABAL MOHSEN UNIQUE WEAPONS



ROCKET AND
LAUNCHER
\$12,000



MORTAR BOMB
AND LAUNCHER
\$120 + \$45,000



SNIPER RIFLE
AND SCOPE
\$9,000 + \$2,000



Tripoli MP
Mostapha Alloush

“Whatever quantity there might have been stocked would expire in a single day during such ferocious clashes. Every day of battle costs about 100,000 USD. Bab al Tabbaneh fighters get their money from certain political leaders of Lebanon and Alawites of Jabal Mohsen get their artillery from Syria and Hezbollah.”



Former LAF
General Wehbeh Qatisha

“The types of weapons are all available to both, but in Bab al-Tabbaneh the quantity is much less than that in Jabal Mohsen. The Mortar launchers in Jabal Mohsen for instance are not found anywhere else. Hezbollah arms Jabal Mohsen and oversees the process, same goes for Bab al Tabbaneh, and whoever is arming is also overseeing and facilitating the process. That being said whomever is arming needs to have direct access to the State’s intelligence apparatus, whomever is running the government today is responsible for the arming. Jabal Mohsen’s weapons come from Iran, Iraq and Syria. Notably some of these weapons are also found in Bab al Tabbaneh main reason being that Jabal Mohsen fighters sell their excess weapons to make money.”



1: A video of the Bab al Tabbaneh fighters during the December 2012 clashes in Tripoli. (NOW)

2: Ziad Allouki, Saad al-Masri, Houssam al-Sabbagh and Amer Arish during protests in Tripoli (slabnews.com)

The fighters, he believes, are pawns in a larger game which serves the interest of all those involved. On one hand, Hezbollah sees that their Sunni fighters' very existence fits Assad's narrative that extremists from the 'Emirate of Tripoli' are sending 'terrorists' across the border to fight the regime. On the other hand, Miqati sees a chance to expand his popularity by mobilizing them.

Former Tripoli MP Mosbah al-Ahdab points out that Miqati supports Islamist groups with the intention to outbid his opponents and to undermine the popularity of his political rivals; he wants to gain votes and to stress to the

Arab countries his influence over the Sunni Street. Miqati's intentions, he says, also "transcend the Lebanese borders." He explains that by pointing to the possibility of onset chaos, Miqati "conveniently frightens the international community and draws on the attention of Arab countries that will ultimately see in him a guarantee for stability."

Miqati's relations with Arab countries turned sour when he agreed to become the prime minister of a Hezbollah-backed government that rose to power after a coup to the Arab-sponsored Doha agreement government led by Saad Hariri. Miqati is aware that these

relations will not improve as long as he heads a government which has become a flashpoint of discontent among Arab countries. Therefore he is extending an arm to the Sunni street, seen as supporters of the revolution. "His resignation was a convenient way to break free from Syria," Ahdab explained.

"But Miqati now holds the key to almost all fighters that surround the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen. The question is, what does he plan to do with them and how does he plan to protect them now that he's no longer in government," closed Ahdab.