

In Lebanon, Tripoli Becoming Sectarian Battlefield

By: **Ghassan Rifi**. Translated from [As-Safir \(Lebanon\)](#).

Two conclusions can be drawn from the capital of the north in light of the 2012 events. The first is that the city paid a high price through its security and economy in the battle that tried to topple the city's son — Najib Mikati — and his government. The second is that some political projects turned the capital into an arena for settling accounts regarding the battle in Syria, which has been ongoing for two years. Tripoli was the only city to pay a Syrian tax that affected it at both the political and security levels.

About This Article

Summary :

Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, paid a heavy price in 2012 through sectarian bloodletting linked to a variety of domestic and international issues, reports Ghassan Rifi.

Publisher: [As-Safir \(Lebanon\)](#)

Original Title:

Outcome of 2012 in the Capital of the North: Moving Backwards

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posted on : January 3, 2013

Translated on: January 4 2013

Translated by: Al-Monitor

Categories :  [Lebanon](#)

From Tripoli, the Lebanese opposition — led by the Future Movement — wanted to overthrow the Mikati government. From Tripoli, this opposition tried to target Hezbollah and worked to support the armed opposition in Syria in order to topple the Syrian regime. This required the movement to resort to political and sectarian incitement and to distributing money and weapons. The result was the growth of *takfiri* and jihadist groups, which have taken on a variety of different names and faces and have started imposing their authority on the streets. At times they would impose their authority through mosques, which are not subject to any authority. At others, they would do so through unofficial leaders — deemed "emirs" — of neighborhoods, alleyways and traditional thoroughfares in hot spots in Tebbaneh, al-Qobba, al-Mankoobin and Jabal Mohsen.

The emerging Salafism in Tripoli proved greatly attractive to media outlets, as many insurgents found protection and cover there. Moreover, a number of sheikhs suddenly found themselves in Tripoli's decision-making circles.

But this phenomenon lacked collaboration, cooperation and coordination since each wing marched to the beat of its own drum.

Sheikh Salem al-Raffi was an exception. He worked to organize his supporters and formed a Shura Council, which included a number of active cadres led by Sheikh Hossam al-Sabbagh (against whom arrest warrants have been issued on charges of belonging to al-Qaeda) and Sheikh Nabil Rahim, who was imprisoned in [Roumieh prison](#) on the same charges. Add to this the advanced and scientific Salafism led by Sheikh Safwan Zoubi, a type of Salafism which rejects extremism and calls for dialogue and meaningful interaction between Sunni and Shiite leaders to confront sectarian strife.

Emirs seize control of the city

In Tripoli, emirs took control of the streets, thus affecting the authority of the security forces based on security

concessions. This turned the security forces into forces of separation rather than forces of deterrence. They even lost the ability to arrest those who breached security, despite all of the political statements issued at every round of violence in the city and according to which "an iron fist is in absolute control and no armed manifestations are allowed."

In addition, some good endeavors were blocked as the Mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Malek al-Shaar, was absent. He recently left Lebanon after he received direct threats conveyed by officers from the Internal Security Forces' Information Branch. Shaar had issued several fatwas prohibiting the use of weapons in Tripoli. However, his recent political stances pushed Rifaat Eid, the political leader of the Arab Democratic Party, to reject his mediation, saying that Shaar had become his own political element.

This pushed many opportunists to distort the image of Tripoli by increasingly proliferating weapons in the area. These people would shoot and terrorize innocent people with or without reason. Time and time again, they blocked roads and harmed the interests of the citizens. They occupied the streets and squares through protest movements, sit-ins and setting up tents, all of which had different political motives and demands. This enabled displaced Syrians to meddle in the city's affairs, to get involved as parties to the conflict and to take advantage of their numbers in popular movements.

2012: 60 dead, hundreds injured

All of the above factors led the Tripoli of 2012 to be characterized by security chaos, political randomness and improvised, rather than well thought-out, solutions. The city lived through days of bloody "anger" that paralyzed services, obstructed many development projects and created unrest across the fragile northern city (Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen), which witnessed its worst year of security since the end of the Lebanese civil war. Every two months there would be rounds of violence that breached Tripoli's security, each round coming under a different headline. However, they were all part of the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Tripoli and they all aimed to place pressure on the prime minister. The rounds were as follows:

Feb. 10: The Homs massacre round (Two dead and 19 wounded) It coincided with the explosion of a weapons store in Abi Osamara. Investigations have not yet revealed the owner of the store, despite the fact that people inside it were injured while transporting munitions.

May 12: The Shadi Mawlawi arrest round (Five dead and 30 wounded) This round was preceded by an open-ended sit-in held by the committees of Islamist detainees in Roumieh prison, and followed by a Salafist sit-in demanding the release of Mawlawi.

Jun. 3: The solidarity with the Battle of Damascus round (13 dead and 62 wounded)

Jul. 29: The round connected to [the bombing](#) of the state security headquarters in Damascus (One dead and 33 wounded)

Aug 2: The round of fireworks between the children of Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen (14 dead and 80 wounded)

Oct. 19: The [Maj. Gen. Wissam Hassan](#) round (Eight dead and 64 wounded) This round coincided with attacks against the National Party headquarters and the Islamic Unification Movement centers.

Dec. 4: The [Talkalakh ambush](#) round (17 dead and 90 wounded)

These rounds led to more bloodshed (60 dead and 378 wounded) and destruction that left families in misery. These clashes contributed also to postponing the visit of Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Beshara al-Rai and that of Interior Minister Brigadier Marwan Charbel, and this does not include the delayed visits of several Arab and foreign ambassadors.

Sunni Military Council

There is no doubt that the security chaos, which spread horizontally, allowed armed groups to break loose from under any political or security control for the first time in the history of this conflict. It wasn't long before these groups had their own agendas, independent funding and sources of arms. This raised the hopes of some zealots of regaining the "emirate" or giving up on the state in the interest of the Sunni Military Council. They also hoped to unify Sunni arms against those who challenged the political approach, especially after the assassination of Maj. Gen. Wissam al-Hassan. Some tried to take advantage of this attack to settle political scores. Many also attempted to implement sectarian segregation, as was the case following each round of violence, when people started to attack Alawite properties in the markets of Tripoli.

However, despite all this tension, Tripoli managed to preserve its diversity, moderation and capacity for coexistence and acceptance. The people of Tripoli totally reject any new political or religious framework that would conflict with their city's historical tendencies.

One must note that Tripoli has been through immense hardships over the past 12 months and the rounds of violence coincided with the four economic seasons (Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and Christmas). This has taken its toll on many business institutions that have become threatened by bankruptcy, especially given that the majority of the northern districts' residents were reluctant to visit the city markets for fear of security tensions.

Civil society speaks up

In 2012, the city witnessed unprecedented major challenges. However, due to their obstinate refusal to obey those who sought to use their city as a launching pad for their own projects, the people of Tripoli stood up against the security chaos — even if only to a small extent. The city's civil society expressed its refusal of arms as a means of communication, calling for distancing their city from all local and regional conflicts.

In this context, Tripoli has sent several messages. The city confirmed that it sympathizes with the Future Movement and its orientation, but also that it is not willing to give up on its son Najib Mikati, nor its growing presence in the state through his post as prime minister. This is especially true since Mikati has never failed to meet the needs of the people of his city or of his own sect, starting with his rightful efforts to preserve the position of Sunni staff and funding the international tribunal. This is not to mention that he approved a \$100 million bill to implement vital projects in Tripoli. Special competent committees are supervising the project that is supposed to see the light of day in the new year.

The people of Tripoli also conveyed the message that they may disagree with each other over the question of armed resistance, but they all agree on the need to prevent a Sunni-Shiite schism. They also sympathize with the Syrian revolution, but at the same time they totally reject any attempt to push their city into the furnace of the Syrian crisis. Tripoli refuses to become the backyard of the armed Syrian opposition, or to be targeted by the Syrian regime due to the political affiliations and tendencies of its people. The city confirmed that it will not be controlled by any armed group — regardless of its political allegiance.

The citizens of Tripoli have expressed these messages by relinquishing all efforts to topple the government, the Syrian regime, Hezbollah's weapons or anything like that, distancing themselves from these activities. All marches and protests were left to their organizers.

Within this framework, none of the Future Movement's MPs have tried to hide the fact that moving the battle to Tripoli to topple Mikati's government on his own turf was one of the main political objectives in 2012. The Blue Current was still searching for a image of the masses that looks like ones from [March 14](#), which would be capable of bringing down the PM in his own city and achieving a very similar victory to that in 2005, following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

However, the Future Movement's activities — despite all the propaganda in this regard — have not successfully persuaded the citizens of Tripoli or led public opinion to turn against Mikati, particularly in light of the Future Movement's ongoing halt of financial aid and assistance and the state of unrest that its leaders experienced in determining the internal balance of power. Thus, the March 14 coalition has moved away from reconciling its supporters, at least insofar as it requires them to keep promises made at every milestone.

The unprepared sit-in and tent camp in front of the prime minister's place in the al-Maarad district of Tripoli — following the assassination of Maj. Gen. Hassan — did not serve as a rallying cause for the city's citizens, especially in light of differences in opinion within the movement's leadership regarding the advantage of holding or continuing the sit-in. This has limited the attendance at March 14's symposia to dozens of the Future movement's supporters in Akkar, Dennyeh and Koura.

The commemoration ceremony 40 days after Hassan's assassination in the capital of the north was accompanied with a clear political boycott of the Future Movement by the citizens of Tripoli. This has sent a message of rejecting the ongoing sectarian tension and political incitement which placed Tripoli in its security bottleneck. Ahmad Hariri gave his closing speech at the festival, speaking to an audience of only officials after the public had left.

Mikati: absorbing shocks

In the meantime, Mikati tried as much as possible to absorb shocks, by maintaining his peaceful political rhythm. He succeeded in distancing the general political struggle from the security situation in Tripoli and broke the Future Movement's boycott by communicating with its MPs to find solutions to security crises.

In Tripoli, Mikati announced his candidacy for parliamentary elections and Omar Karami nominated his son the minister Faisal Karami, whereas Finance Minister Mohammad Safadi shocked political circles by saying that he was abstaining from nominating himself in protest against sectarian incitement and stife.

The decision BY Safadi has confused his allies, as he represents a main pillar of the government and the present ministerial alliance in Tripoli. A series of contacts and consultations with Safadi have taken place so far to convince him to go back on the decision, an issue that is subject to future developments.