Most recent scholarly publications on and interests in political Islam in Lebanon cover primarily Hizbullah, the leading fundamentalist movement in Lebanon. A number of smaller movements, in particular with the Sunni community, have attracted less attention. Like their Shi'ite counterparts, most of these groups surfaced during the war years, in particular after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Political Islam in Sunni Communities of Lebanon

The political landscape of Lebanon in the late 1990s differs markedly from that of a decade earlier. For instance, the new leadership of Hizbullah were well able to prepare the party for the new and difficult stage of post-militia politics. Many positive steps have been taken in terms of relations with the Lebanese state, whose legitimacy the party endorses. Hizbullah leaders now hold meetings with various Lebanese political factions, including some from the enemies of yesterday, like the Phalangists and the Communists. They have even met with representatives of the Lebanese government and its army. This would have been inconceivable until recently.

Along the various Sunni fundamentalist groups, support for the reconstruction of the Lebanese state and its army, too, has increased. Due to their limited size and following popularity support, some of these movements find difficulty in participating in post-militia politics.

Al-Ahbash

The Sunni political groups include Al-Ahbash, Harakat al-Tawhid, and al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya. Recently Al-Ahbash has begun to receive scholarly attention. The group, legally known as Jam‘iyat al-Mashri‘i al-Khairiyya al-Islamiyya (Association of Islamic Philanthropic Projects), is a small Sunni group of the traditional fundamentalist thought. Its head quarters are in the area around the Burj Al Nahr Haydar mosque in Beirut. Al-Ahbash is spiritually headed by al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Habashi, a former mufti from Syria. The group is involved with theological issues and is anti-Shi‘i and very secretive. For the last few years, Al-Ahbash has become very prominent in the Sunni community.

Al-Ahbash opposes the basic doctrines of modern fundamentalist movements, which accuses of neglecting negligence of the Qur’anic sources of Islamic law. In this context, the group was founded in 1995 by a militant fundamentalist thinker that includes schools, centers, sports, and scouting. It is unclear as to who the sources of Al-Ahbash funding are. It is nonetheless active in many parts of the world.

The Islamic Group of the Islamists was unknown until 1995 when it was denounced for assassinating the head of Al-Habashi. Nizar al-Halabi. Three of the assailants were executed. The leader of the group, the Palestinian Ahmed ‘Abd al-Karim al-Sarid (nicknamed Abu Muhjan), is still free in one of the Palestinian camps in southern Lebanon. This group is not active publicly, its members live away from Lebanese society. It is nevertheless active in Palestinian camps.

The group was founded by Shaykh Hisham Shairidi in 1991, Abu Muhjan became the head of the group. The group has a very strict position against those who do not follow exactly the sunna (way) of the Prophet. It believes that all political systems are living the life of paganism (jahiliyyah). Al-Ahbash is targeted as its foremost enemy because of its justification of un-Islamic governments and of its very strong opposition to Islamic fundamentalism.

Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami

Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami is the most important radical Sunni group. Al-Tawhid has become very prominent in the Sunni community since 1992. It was founded in 1992, and its leader is Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Habashi, a former member of al-Ikhwan al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Movement). He was able to assert his power over the city in 1983 against Syria’s wishes. Shabir, who comes from a lower-middle-class family, has been the leader of the group since 1992. It was the unhappy end of a pro-Saudi Muslim Brotherhood branch in Lebanon. This group was founded in 1992. It was the outcome of a fundamentalist organizations: Soldiers of God (Junubullah), al-Muqawama al-Sharabya (Popular Resistance), founded by Khalil ‘Hawzi, and the Movement for Arab Lebanon (Harakat Lubnan al‘Arabi), founded by Dr ‘Imad Murad. However, the majority of small groups split from the Islamic Unification Movement by the summer of 1984, denying Lebanon an important political body. Al-Muqawama al-Sharabya formed Lijan al-Masajid wa al-Ahya’ (Committees), and the Movement for Arab Lebanon made Lijan al-Masajid wa al-Ahya’ (Committees for Mosques and Neighborhoods). Shabir believed the civil war could end only if Shari‘a (Islamic Law) were applied in Lebanon under an Islamic government. He was very antagonistic of the communists, who were subject to the deadly massacres of ‘Amal. Shabir’s movement controlled the city for a few years and imposed strict Islamic laws on the people. But when Syrian forces entered the city, the movement was defeated. In recent years, Shabir has become a close ally of Iran, and he has improved his ties with Syria.

al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya

The last Sunni group treated here is al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya. This fundamentalist group was established in 1964 in Tripoli by young members of ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Rahman (the Worshipper of the Merciful). According to one of its leaders, ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Rab, the split took place because some younger members wanted to be involved in politics. The movement was led by the influential Sunni fundamentalist thinker Fathi Yakan, Judge Faysal al-Mawlawi, and writer Muhammad ‘Ali al-Dinawi. It called for an Islamic society and state whose sources were derived from Sharia. This call led to its advocating and using political violence and rationalism, and to the establishment of its own military wing in 1985 up to the outbreak of civil war.

The group fought during the civil war on the side of the leftist-Islamic coalition in Tripoli. While it opposes secularism and communism, it considers Islam to be the best solution to the Lebanese crisis. Later on, however, some of its members, like Yakan and Zuhayr ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Rab, became members of the secular, though confession, Lebanese Parliament. The group still calls for the abolition of confessionism.