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Together all the way? Abeyance and co-optation of Sunni networks in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses how social movement continuity may vary in non-democratic and repressive contexts. Using a single case study of Islamist networks in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli over three decades, I ask: Under what conditions is social movement continuity possible, and in what form? Former studies have three levels of abeyance - activist network and personnel; movement goals and repertoires; and collective identities and symbols - are instructive. Network survival and abeyance structures can facilitate rapid mass protests in case of a facilitating external conjuncture. This analysis relies on data collected during fieldwork conducted over a decade in Tripoli, triangulated with secondary literature and primary sources in Arabic. I find that four individual-level continuity pathways are available in authoritarian contexts: continuation of activism; disengagement; co-optation; and arena shifts. These pathways should not be seen as final and stable outcomes but as fluctuating and

contingent processes, or pathways. Due to the ambiguity of informal networks, co-opted movements may easily turn against the authorities once again. Moreover, local legacies of protests may be used as resources by new protest leaders.

KEYWORDS:

Contentious politics

abeyance processes

high-risk contexts

Islamism

social networks

Lebanon

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. In this article, I distinguish between formal social movement organizations (SMOs) and more informal protest networks. The latter are more common in the Middle East today. Another category is represented by networks of everyday interaction, based in local communities, which may become politicized and transformed into a social movement community (Hassan & Staggenborg, [2015](#)).
2. ‘Politicization’ will here signify a process whereby existing networks of everyday interaction are taken over by political activists, and used for political and strategic purposes as a means of organizing individuals and making demands on the authorities.
3. I adopt Michel Dobry’s (2009, 1986, pp. 151–169) approach to political crises, viewing them as a fluid conjuncture characterized by exchanges of moves between the conflicting camps.
4. As Olivier Fillieule writes, the researcher risks a biased sample selection if only those are considered who continued their activism over time, and not those who gave up. (Fillieule [2005](#), p. 11).
5. The Future Movement was created by former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in the 1990s; after his assassination in 2005 it was inherited by Rafiq’s son Saad and gained popularity in the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal.

6. It is more precise to limit the term ‘co-optation’ to the granting of some sort of official functions to former members of dissident movements (violent or non-violent), in exchange for their ending the protest campaign. A quite different case is the granting by the regimes in power of privileges to conservative Islamist movements which never engaged in dissidence.

7. Likewise, some protest networks may also have undefined relations to state power (Dobry, [2009, 1986](#), p. 11).

8. Interview, Erik Fosse, Oslo, March 2014.

9. Under the 1969 Cairo Agreement, the Lebanese Army did not have access to the Palestinian refugee camps.

10. Informal discussions, politicians and inhabitants in Tripoli, 2008–2016.

11. Interview, Fatima Akkawi, Tripoli, June 2012.

12. Interview, Nahla Chahal, Beirut, June 2012.

13. Discussions, residents in Bab al-Tebbaneh and Abi Samra, Tripoli, 2008–2016.

14. Interview, former member of Jund Allah in Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, August 2011.

15. Interview, former member of Jund Allah in Abi Samra, Tripoli, February 2009.

16. Interview, Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, October 2016 and August 2017.

17. Interview, Fatima Akkawi, Tripoli, July 2012.

18. Email correspondence, Nahla Chahal, October 2018.

19. Interview, Fatima Akkawi, Tripoli, July 2012.

20. This section is based on Rougier ([2011](#), p. 139–140). ‘Marwan’ is a pseudonym used by Rougier.

21. Sheikh Ahmad is a pseudonym.

22. Interview, Sheikh Ahmad (a pseudonym), Tripoli, February 2009.

23. Interview, anonymous Islamist figure in Tripoli, August 2017; interview, anonymous former Tawhid member, August 2009.

24. Discussions with anonymous former Tawhid members, August 2009–August 2017.
25. Personal observations, Tripoli, 2008–2016.
26. As Minqara is a well-known figure, he is not anonymized here.
27. Interview, Hashim Minqara, Tripoli, April 2008.
28. As al-Hassan is a well-known figure, he is not anonymized here.
29. Salafis are distinguished by their common creed ('aqida), which centred on the strict adherence to the principle of Tawhid (the oneness of Allah) and their rejection of human reasoning and logics. Wiktorowicz, [2006](#), p. 60.
30. A total of around 200 Lebanese, including some Salafi sheikhs in north Lebanon, participated in the Afghan jihad. (al-Attrache, [2007](#)).
31. Interview, Salim Alloush, Tripoli, April 2008.
32. 'Hisham' is a pseudonym. Some personal details have been omitted for reasons of anonymity.
33. Interview, former Jund Allah member, Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, June 2009.
34. Interview, former Jund Allah member, Bab al-Tebbaneh, Tripoli, June 2009.
35. Interview, Fawaz Zakaria, lawyer defending youths on terrorism charges Tripoli, May 2010.
36. Interview, Salem al-Rafai, October 2016 and August 2017.
37. Interviews, Ra'ed Hlayhel, Tripoli, April 2008 and February 2009.
38. Interview, Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, October 2016.
39. Interview, Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, August 2017.
40. Interview, Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, August 2016.
41. Interviews, Kanaan Naji, Tripoli, August 2017.
42. Interview, Dai al-Islam al-Shahal, Tripoli, May 2016.
43. Interviews, anonymous Islamist figure in Tripoli, October 2016.

44. Observation of the site al-Jond.com, Spring of 2012.
 45. 'Dialogue with a leader' (in Arabic), interview aired on al-Fajr radio, September 2007, reposted on al-Jond.com (accessed February 2009).
 46. Interview, anonymous Islamist figure in Tripoli, October 2016.
 47. Observations of political posters, Bab al-Tebbaneh and Abi Samra, May 2009, August 2009 and June 2010.
 48. Interviews, Mustafa Alloush, Tripoli, 2010-2012.
 49. Interview, Mustafa Alloush, Tripoli, June 2012.
 50. Interview, anonymous Islamist figure in Tripoli, April 2016.
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Additional information

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