

Tripoli's Salafist community fears being stereotyped, persecuted | News , Lebanon News | THE DAILY STAR

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: The northern city of Tripoli has become a metropolis of fear, with its residents drowning in anxiety and weighed down with concern for the future.

Meanwhile, the marginal Salafist community in the country's second city fear that they will ultimately pay the price of the recurring rounds of violence that have plagued Tripoli since the uprising in Syria erupted three years ago.

The city's Salafist community, individuals who hold fundamental Islamic beliefs, interpret the latest political and regional developments, which culminated in the formation of the new Cabinet, as aiming to eliminate them as a religious entity.

They also expressed to The Daily Star their ever-increasing fear that their community might be targeted as they lack both support and political cover.

Their relationship with the media has also been troubled, making them easy targets since, they argue, they have no staunch allies to speak of. They are also burdened with a generally skeptical outlook and are wary of persecution, concerns that have led many to leak sensitive information to the media in order to ward off suspicions of criminality.

Despite the impression that the Salafist community is at odds with the security forces, their concerns do not seem to extend beyond Tripoli, and their qualms with the security forces relate to a long and bitter issue closely tied to the arrests and prosecution of members of the Salafist community in Lebanon.

During political conflict and division, they feel they are catapulted into the spotlight and used to instill fear in people, and once matters are settled, they are left to pay the price.

When clashes typically erupt in Tripoli the word "Islamists" instantly pops up in the media. Salafists, however, affirm that while they are individuals with a righteous cause, the media often blames them for the actions of thugs.

But outside the community, Salafism is becoming a trend, to the horror of most practicing Salafists.

One Salafist, who requested anonymity, described a scene outside his mosque he had never seen before: young men who had deliberately grown their hair and beards, gotten tattoos and were mimicking the stereotypical image of an "Islamist."

Though they hoist the flags of Islam and yell religious phrases, "they are drowning in all sorts of vices," the man said.

Salafists' concerns do not stop there; these are many and varied, but they particularly fear the power of the media.

“You write about us and accuse us, and some fabricate stories about us without bothering to ask or communicate with us,” said a sheikh, who also declined to be identified.

But Salafists see themselves simply as individuals who carry certain beliefs and who have dedicated their lives to following them, to such an extent that they are willing to die for their beliefs. They also prefer not to be designated as extremists, they told The Daily Star, and they reserve their right not to be persecuted.

“We have the right to call for Islam and express our beliefs freely, just like the Communist Party, the Baath Party, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, so why are we subjected to oppression and continuously threatened by the judiciary and the security forces? Is it only because we are Muslims who are passionate about our religion?” another sheikh demanded angrily.

“And why is it that the Sunni Muslim does not have the right to demand his rights and express his thoughts, or is this only a war against the bearded man?” he asked.

The sheikh also lamented the extent to which Salafists are being manipulated and accused of matters of which they are innocent.

Sheikh Mosbah al-Hanoun, for his part, reviewed at length the latest regional developments and their repercussions on Islamists.

“We call for unifying efforts among us, the Islamists, and not holding multiple fronts. We can do nothing as Muslims in Lebanon except heed God’s call,” Hanoun said.

Speaking of the sectarian standoff with Shiites, he said it was “an ideological one and is not new at all,” adding that “the most dangerous problem is their [Shiites’] method of [religious] concealment, and this is what scares us. Therefore, we consider dialogue, a means to bring us closer, as useless.”

Hanoun said that takfiri beliefs were limited to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, a rebel group with links to Al-Qaeda fighting in Syria, and was not adopted by any of their factions.

The issue of takfirism is thorny, he added, as not everything is forbidden just as not everything is allowed according to its doctrine.

Hanoun did not hesitate to condemn the recent spate of car bombings that targeted Beirut’s southern suburbs where Hezbollah enjoys wide support, saying targeting civilians is forbidden by Islam.

He also questioned the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the group that has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks, saying a group proclaiming to be jihadist was not considered as such until legitimacy was

granted by jihadist scholars, such as Abu Mohammad al-Makdissi and Abu Qatada, whom he counts as “references to jihadist movements.”

For Sheikh Nouredine Ghalayini, Islamists are paying the price of a stereotyped image, as every time chaos ensues in the city of Tripoli, they are immediately accused of inciting it.

“The truth of the matter is, they [Salafists] are suffering like the rest from the rampant chaos, from which only the henchmen and followers of Tripoli’s politicians benefit while conservative Islamists are being accused ... it is a great injustice,” he added.

Responding to whether they felt the formation of the new Cabinet came at their expense, Ghalayini said Salafists did feel as though they were being sacrificed “for the only reason that we are Sunni Muslims,” and that this has becoming obvious with the targeting of their sheikhs, such as Sheikh Hussam al-Sabbagh.

He added that Hezbollah had been “shedding the blood of Muslims” since 2000 and “usually we pay the price and we feel that inevitably we will pay the price of this injustice because we support the Syrian people so long as our religion calls for defending the weak and the oppressed before an unjust ruler.”

Ghalayini was quick to add that Hezbollah’s fighting in Syria, which he called the “preventive war,” was targeting Sunnis in particular.

“Since the beginning of the American-Afghan conflict, we as Sunni sheikhs have been paying the price of years of persecution, especially as this conflict spread to other places, reached Iraq and is now ongoing in Syria,” he said.

“Because of this we feel that our cause is being targeted and we have all the right to defend ourselves.”