

## BOK

Tine Gade

*Sunni City. Tripoli from Islamist*

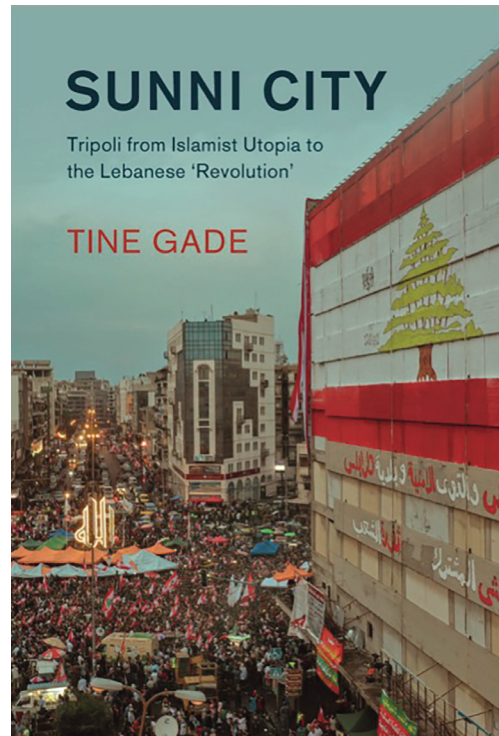
*Utopia to Lebanese 'Revolution'*

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Why did so many episodes of Lebanon's contentious politics in the last century occur in Tripoli? In her work, *Sunni City*, Tine Gade traces the hundred-year trajectory (1920-2020) of the 'Sunni crisis' in Lebanese politics to explain how identity plays into urban protests and violence in Tripoli. The author's noteworthy contribution lies in her exploration of Sunni socialization and clientelism in Tripoli after the passing of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, and in elucidating how these channels were expressed through religious leaders and the Islamist ideology. These practices led to the exclusion of Tripoli's non-Sunni population and catalyzed armed confrontations within the city between 2008 and 2014.

Clearly written and coherently structured, Tine Gade's book significantly contributes to existing literature in the fields of Lebanese studies, sectarianism, identity politics, and discussions on the causes of Jihadi violence. The author's scholarship intersects with the works of scholars like Bernard Rougier, Zoltan Pall, Robert Rabil, and Raphael Lefebvre. Notably, *Sunni City* offers exceptional insights into Tripoli and North Lebanon analyzed from a Sunni perspective. The book's scope is impressive; the author relies on an extensive array of primary sources including over 300 interviews across all levels of Lebanese society conducted over 14 years of intermittent fieldwork. Furthermore, the book taps into seldom-referenced and challenging-to-access sources from local libraries in Lebanon and Europe written in



«A clearly written and accessible book.»

English, Arabic, and French, as well as occasional references to personal archives.

The author adopts a chronological approach to the argument, framing the intertwined «Sunni crisis» and «State crisis» within the inherent paradox of Tripoli. This paradox stems from the city's dual nature – on one hand, its reduced status and redrawn international borders at the end of the Ottoman Empire relegated it to a secondary city, while on the other hand, its «city corporatism», fostered by political entrepreneurs like the Karami family from 1920 to the 1960s, used Arab Nationalism as a stabilizing ideology in Tripoli by unifying the city against external initiatives (French Mandate, imperialism, and the political Maronite project situated in Beirut).

Chapter 1 traces how city corporatism consolidated and began to crumble in Tripoli by

the late 1960s. Internal boundary work by the city's political actors restructured the city's corporatist dynamics, centering it around Sunni Islam. Within this revised Sunni framework, the author contends that three distinct groups vied for influence: the *zu'ama'* (political patrons), exemplified by the Karami family; the Islamist bourgeoisie, which encompassed entities like Aal-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah and Gulf-educated Salafist clerics; and finally, the urban poor, including populist movements such as Khalil Akkawi's Leftist-turned-Islamist Popular Resistance in Bab al-Tabbaneh. This reconfiguration involved the redefinition of Tripoli's long-established religious minority groups as external to the new Sunni order.

The Sunni factions maintained relative unity against external threats until 1976 when Syria intervened in Lebanon. Chapter 2 illuminates how, throughout the 1980s, the city's corporatism faced challenges from proxy wars, external alliances, and Islamist violence. Syrian intelligence played a notable role by setting the *zu'ama'* and Islamist bourgeoisie against the urban poor (p. 14). Following the expulsion of Fatah from Beirut in 1982, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) promoted the establishment of the Tawhid (the Islamist Unification Movement) in Tripoli. While recognized today as a proto-Jihadi group, the Tawhid comprised various neighborhood militias and was defined by internal divisions among these factions. The downfall of city corporatism in Tripoli occurred in December 1986 amid the escalating sectarianization of the Lebanese civil war. Discontented with the Tawhid's dominance, Tripoli's conservative middle classes chose to remain silent in the aftermath of the 1986 Tabbaneh Massacre when the Syrian Army and local allies crushed Khalil Akkawi's movement of the urban poor.

In post-war Lebanon, Gade argues in Chapter 3

that a pronounced crisis in political representation emerged, particularly acute in Tripoli due to the substantial influence exerted by Syria. During this period, class divisions escalated as both the middle class and the *zu'ama'* adopted a neoliberal habitus, which disrupted the anti-imperialist leadership patterns that had characterized pre-war Tripoli. The author's analysis of the Future Movement in Tripoli – expanded in Chapter 5 – sheds light on the utilization of sectarian rhetoric and the manipulation of collective memory as methods for recruiting followers in Tripoli (p. 173). It continues to observe how clientelism underwent a transformation in post-war Lebanon. This shift had consequences for the urban poor, who felt excluded from the neoliberal vision championed by Future Movement politicians and the networks of privilege established as part of the post-war order. Consequently, the urban poor became disenfranchised by Hariri's party.

In Chapter 4, Gade engages with the debates on Salafism and urban violence and pragmatically contends that an understanding of Islamic radicalization in Tripoli necessitates consideration of factors such as social isolation, poverty, and police harassment in working-class quarters (p. 111). In the absence of alternative means of political representation, the urban poor gravitated toward the imagined community of Islam. However, expressions of Islamism varied significantly among different social classes in Tripoli, thereby exacerbating class and generational divides (p. 110). For the urban poor, embracing Salafism encompassed aspects of religious identity and asceticism that offered a pathway for upward social mobility (p. 108, 129).

The author's inquiry into Salafism continues in Chapter 6, where Gade underscores the distinctive characteristics of Lebanese Salafism by highlighting the role of the Islamist bourgeoisie – particularly the clerics – as political entrepreneurs

responding to evolving regional dynamics within Islam, and their imperative to secure funding, rather than functioning solely as ideological actors (p. 176). This perspective helps elucidate incongruities and tensions within Lebanon's Salafist movement. The impact of these trends is explained in Chapter 7 which is framed by the conflict in adjacent Syria and its impact on Lebanese politics. Following the events of 2006, the Future Movement's adoption of sectarian rhetoric and its enlistment of clerics bolstered Tripoli's Salafists and enabled their entry into other political arenas and spaces. Nonetheless, the Salafist movement of Tripoli remained fragmented between local and international pressures, and expressions of jihadism taking place in the city (p. 190).

*Sunni City* is a clearly written and accessible book – useful to scholars, professionals working on or in Lebanon, as well as the casual reader. The author's ethnographic observations add a compelling personal dimension, and I wish there were more examples throughout the text.

My critiques are limited. The author brings up the so-called 'mailbox theory' as an example of city corporatism in the context of clashes between 2012-2014 (p. 203). The mailbox theory as a driver of conflict is widely circulated among Tripoli's political and activist circles. Nonetheless, this section could benefit from further unpacking due to the seemingly nonsensical logic of politicians close to Syria (Mikati) striking other politicians close to Syria (the Arab Democratic Party) to send a message to another Sunni politician (Hariri). This invites the question of how we can understand the conflict field in Tripoli shaped by internal conflicts between rival militias in Tabbaneh, criminal violence, economic violence, and violence produced by external incentives including self-enrichment through state mechanisms.

*Sunni City* challenges one-dimensional characterizations of Tripoli exemplified in the

trope of utilizing monikers in writings on the city. Recalling David Urquhart's characterization of Tripoli as «Little Damascus» in 1860, this colonial era legacy continues as shown through the author's tongue-in-cheek engagement with «Lebanon's Kandahar» and the «Bride of the Revolution» (ch. 7).

The strength of *Sunni City*, however, lies in elucidating a narrative that captures the shifting, fractured, and at times paradoxical identity of Lebanon's poorest city.