

“We Speak the Truth!”

Knowledge and Politics in Friday’s Sermons in Lebanon

ABSTRACT This study investigates the preachers and their Friday sermons in Lebanon, raising the following questions: What are the profiles of preachers in Lebanon and their academic qualifications? What are the topics evoked in their sermons? In instances where they diagnosis and analyze the political and the social, what kind of arguments are used to persuade their audiences? What kind of contact do they have with the social sciences? It draws on forty-two semi-structured interviews with preachers and content analysis of 210 preachers’ Friday sermons, all conducted between 2012 and 2015 among Sunni and Shia mosques. Drawing from Max Weber’s typology, the analysis of Friday sermons shows that most of the preachers represent both the saint and the traditional, but rarely the scholar. While they are dealing extensively with political and social phenomena, rarely do they have knowledge of social science

KEYWORDS: Friday sermons, sectarianism, Lebanon, preachers, Shia, Sunni

INTRODUCTION

There is relentless literature on Islamist groups and movements, their social actions and political violence (reduced often to the battles between political actors in their relationships with power), but scarce on the knowledge they use and produce, not only within their own supporting groups but also within the larger public through Friday sermons, religious classes, *fatwas*, media interaction, and social media. Other literature, often from Islamic authors who graduate from Shari’a studies, decontextualize religious knowledge production by considering it as symbolic signs in a fixed format that “speak the truth for everywhere and every time” (quoting one of our preacher interviewees).

This study investigates the preachers and their Friday sermons in Lebanon, raising the following questions:

Contemporary Arab Affairs, Vol. 12, Number 2, pp. 53–80. ISSN 1755-0912. Electronic ISSN: 1755-0920. © 2019 by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/caa.2019.122003>

- What are the profiles of preachers in Lebanon and their academic qualifications?
- What are the topics evoked in their sermons?
- In instances where they diagnosis and analyze the political and the social, what kind of arguments are used to persuade their audiences?
- What kind of contact do they have with the social sciences?

According to statistics on religious sects/groups in Lebanon,¹ the Shiite and Sunni Muslim populations in Lebanon are estimated to be between twenty-four and thirty percent and between twenty-seven and thirty-five percent of the total population, respectively. Contrary to Shia Islam, which has a formal hierarchy of authority and knowledge, the religious authority of Sunni Islam is composed of different institutions and independent preachers called sheikhs. Sheikhs are individuals who have often pursued higher studies (bachelor's equivalent) in religion studies. On the Shia side, many preachers are graduates from *hawzas*, that is, Shia religious schools (equivalent to Quranic schools for Sunnis). There they spend no fewer than seven years in religious training.

Religious studies in Lebanon are essentially pursued at university-equivalent higher education institutions, with high levels of enrollment and active graduates (MA and PhD) students. However, these universities are often isolated from other higher education institutions and some are part of the networks of Islamic preaching universities around the Arab and Muslim world. These universities, whose language of instruction is Arabic, are accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Education.²

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on two research methods. It draws on forty-two semi-structured interviews with preachers and content analysis of 210 preachers' Friday sermons, all conducted between 2012 and 2015.³ Some thirty-five

1. Estimations vary. For example, see <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193107.pdf> and the *Lebanon 2012 International Religions Freedom Report* (published May 2013), which includes the most recent available estimation of twenty-seven percent. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208400.htm>.

2. These universities include the University of Tripoli, the Islamic Beirut University, the Islamic University of Lebanon, Al-Azhar University (Lebanon and Akkar), and the University of Imam al-Awza'i.

3. The fieldwork was conducted by the author, Meriam Itani, Nour Al-Teneer, Ali Kassem, and Nour Safieddine, to whom the author is grateful.

Sunni preachers and seven Shia preachers were interviewed about their socioeconomic status, educational background, and the process of acquiring knowledge in relation to the social sciences. By using the snowballing technique, stratified sampling was adopted, taking into account three criteria: ideological–political affiliation, geographic location, and public influence. This study does not purport to contain a representative sample. However, the research does reflect the variety of preachers in terms of the above assigned criteria. Given that the sample is small, there is no intention of producing any statistical inference.

Sunni Sermons

For Friday sermons, ninety-one sermons were analyzed,⁴ selected so as to cover three major groups of Sunni Muslim audience for the period April–June 2013. As preaching is largely an oral activity, the sermons were sourced from the three major Sunni radio stations in Lebanon which broadcast these sermons. Thus, it can be argued that these sermons are effectively the sermons of higher influence among those in Lebanon because they reach the widest audience. The sermons were sourced exhaustively from what are available in the period April–June 2013 on the following radio stations: Al-Qura'n Al-Karim radio, which is the station affiliated with the central religious authority (*Dar al-Fatwa*) in Lebanon, and whose audience is generally Muslim Sunnis, especially in Beirut; Al-Fajr radio, which is the station affiliated with Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyyah, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)-affiliated Sunni group in Lebanon, and whose audience is from across the different Lebanese regions; and Al-Qura'n Al-Karim Bekaa radio, which is the station affiliated with the relatively autonomous Sunni religious authority in the Bekaa area, a large rural district of Lebanon with a significant Sunni population. Thus said, the sermons cover three major ideological patterns of audiences and religious spheres, including the general urban Sunni audience, the general rural Sunni audience, and the MB-affiliated audience. In addition, eight more sermons from Salafi groups in Tripoli in 2015 were analyzed in a less systematic way.

Shia Sermons

Overall, the study includes 111 speeches. Half the speeches were collected from the internet, forty-one percent are transcripts, six are from books, and one is a recording. Their locations are distributed, with sixty percent from

4. Only eighty-eight sermons were the subject of statistical analysis.

Beirut, twenty-five percent from the south, and fifteen percent from the Bekaa area.

In Jaafari Fikh, Friday prayer (which is a two-*rakat* prayer that substitutes for *Zuhr* prayer and is accompanied by a two-section speech: one political and one religious) is an issue of disagreement among the *Marajji* (the highest Shia religious authority). This is the reason why, for the whole Beirut/Dahye region, there can only be one Friday prayer held, and held by Sayyed Ali Fadlallah. Other mosques hold regular *Zuhr* prayer but present a sermon as well. That is the majority of what was analyzed. In the Bekaa, Sheikh Ali Taha and Sheikh Mohamad Yazbek hold Friday prayers. In the south, Sheikh Abdulkarim Obeid holds Friday prayer.

Concerning the preachers' affiliation, half the speeches are given by preachers who are close to Hezbollah, while approximately one-quarter are given by independent preachers and the remaining are close to the late Sheikh Hossein Fadlallah and the Amal movement.

It is interesting to note that Shia sermons are more monitored than the Sunni ones. *Al-Mihrab* is an app (mobile phone application) founded by the Islamic Center for *Daawa* (close to Hezbollah) and the Al-Maaref Cultural Association. This application falls under the attempts currently underway to regulate, manage, and guide the religious discourse of Shia mosques in Lebanon. Before this became an application in early 2014, it was a sort of periodical issued and distributed to mosque imams. Recently, the printed periodical was stopped and the app developed instead.

Historically, mosques and similar institutions such as the *masjid* or *busseiniyya* (for Shia) have played an important role in Muslim society. In addition to being a place where Muslims pray and attend Friday sermons, the mosque was, and still is to a certain extent, the hub of Islamic society. The mosque is thus a dwelling that accommodates many social and political activities. Nonetheless, some mosques score more attendees than others for many reasons, such as mosque location, size, and accessibility, but the most important reason is the preacher's popularity.

PREACHERS' PROFILES

General Background

The sample is well distributed among different age groups and skewed towards older age groups. It is expected that this characteristic somehow also represents the actual preachers' population (Table 1). The sample is drawn from different

TABLE 1. Sunni Sample Distribution by Age

Age (years)	N
< 35	9
35-49	13
> 50	13
Total	35

TABLE 2. Distribution of the Sunni Sample by Region

Region	N
Beirut	15
South	10
North	7
Bekaa	3
Total	35

regions. However, Beirut, the most populated city in Lebanon, has the major share (Table 2). Concerning Shia preachers, their profile appears very similar to that of Sunni preachers, although slightly tilted to higher age groups.

Most of the Sunni preachers interviewed live in urban settings, as expected because Lebanon is an urbanized country (twenty-nine preachers in urban areas against only five in rural ones). Further, mosque location and the content of Friday sermons were evidently correlated. One-quarter of a century ago, Richard Antoun (Antoun 1989) compared the Friday sermons he analyzed in a village in Jordan with the results obtained by Borthwick who analyzed Friday sermons given in urban mosques. Antoun tentatively infers that “the sermons delivered in the village mosque, in stark contrast to Borthwick’s urban sermons, had minimal political content” (56). Even though Antoun focused on one preacher and, therefore, his inference may not be valid for other village mosques or for the current age of increasing political mobilization in the Arab east, the suggestion is that the content of the Friday sermon, which may not necessarily be limited to political content, is quite interesting and worth looking into.

Educational Background

There is no doubt that the educational background of the preacher has a direct effect on his preaching. Education culminates in certain skills and plays a role

TABLE 3. Type of School the Sunni Preachers Attended

	<i>N</i>
Private religious (Islamic)	19
Public	8
Private non-religious	4
Private religious (Christian)	1
Total	32
n.a.	3

TABLE 4. Highest Degree Obtained by Sunni Preachers

	<i>N</i>
BA/BS	14
MA	9
MD and PhD/PHD	9
Diploma/BT	2
BS Eng.	1
Total	35

Note: BS, bachelor of science, PHD, doctorate; BT, vocational training post-baccalaureate.

TABLE 5. Did the Sunni Preachers Obtain Religious Training?

	<i>N</i>
Yes	25
No	10
Total	35

in determining the sources of knowledge which, in turn, affect the content of Friday sermons and their appeal to audiences.

The majority (twenty of thirty-five preachers) come from religious Islamic schools (Table 3). Most preachers involved in the study have at least a bachelor's degree (Table 4), which is often combined with religious training (three-quarters) (Table 5). Two-thirds of the Sunni sample obtained their highest religious training in Lebanon, followed by twenty percent in Saudi Arabia (KSA) (who often become often Salafists among the preachers) (Table 6).

For those who have a non-religious degree in combination with a religious degree, it is interesting that half of them have an Arabic literature

TABLE 6. Country in which the Sunni Preachers Obtained their Last Degree

	N
Lebanon	23
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	7
Egypt	3
Other	2
Total	35

TABLE 7. Distribution of Non-Religious Degrees Obtained by Sunni Preachers if They Exist

Field	N
Arab literature	8
Social science	2
Others	9
Total	19

degree, indicating the importance of rhetoric in preaching. Only two preachers have a degree in the social sciences, and nine have degrees in other disciplines (Table 7).

Thus, the profiles of Sunni preachers may be divided into two, including those who obtained a religious education ending with a Shari'a degree and those who, less commonly, obtained a non-religious training. Meir Hatina (Hatina 2010, 2–3) noticed that many engineers or doctors become preachers. Furthermore, preachers' knowledge covers language, since more than half the interviewed preachers reported having at least some proficiency in a second language (Table 8).

Given that the sample is small for the Shia preachers, some trends will simply be pointed out. Some preachers graduated from Iraq or Qom and others from Lebanon in religious studies, and in some cases, from law or basic sciences. Shia preachers are trained in *hawzas* and the great majority have at least a bachelor's degrees. This is especially so as *hawzas* in Lebanon have agreements with universities, such as the Islamic University, by which *hawza* students obtain a degree in Islamic studies (Kassem 2018). As previously pointed out, *hawzas* are very important institutions in producing preachers.

TABLE 8. Sunni Preachers' Proficiency in Languages Other than Arabic

	<i>N</i>
None	14
Some knowledge	4
One language	8
More than one	7
Subtotal	33
Missing	2
Total	35

Relationship with the State: Control and Income

The relationship between preachers and the state has a major impact on the relative autonomy of the field of religion and the messages delivered through Friday sermons. Although many Arab countries (Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Algeria, and Morocco) impose unified Friday sermons to all preachers, the relationship with the state remains complex. In some Arab countries, Hatina (2010) argues that most of the preachers have been, and remain closely, affiliated with the state in terms of posts, salaries, and institutions, acting as teachers, mosque attendants, judges, and administrators in the state religious system. In Algeria, Abderrahmane Moussaoui (Moussaoui 2009), in a study on mosques, observed that the state, by providing a salary to preachers, controlled them and their Friday sermons. States in the Middle East failed to create independent autonomous higher religious councils that can monitor and guide the mosque institutions. There remains, however, some unaffiliated scholars who usually adopt a more critical and activist stance that often clashes with the mainstream current found within the state's conventional religious spheres and the political authorities concerned over religious and sociopolitical issues (Hatina 2010, 2–3). In Egypt, long regarded as a foe of Al-Azhar's authority, following the coup d'état of General Sisi with Al-Azhar in July 2013, the former Ministry of Religious Endowments worked to implement regulations to recruit preachers, bring mosques under the ministry's jurisdiction, and regulate the content of sermons and the issuing of *fatwas*. The Minister of Endowments, Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa, declared that prayers would be allowed only in mosques controlled by the ministry and that only Al-Azhar-qualified imams would be allowed to preach in mosques (Morsy and Brown 2013). However, this is not the case nowadays. The Algerian government seeks to find new regulatory measures to deal with imams who

TABLE 9. Salary Source for Sunni Preachers

Salary source	N
Neither Dar al-Fatwa nor a religious authority	16
Private religious authority (including mosque commissions)	7
Dar al-Fatwa	6
Private religious authority but for a different "religious" position	6
Total	35

TABLE 10. Sunni Preachers' Other Profession

	N
None	9
School principal/teacher	19
Judge	3
Accountant	1
Administrator	1
Doctor	1
Private business	1
Total	35

are beyond the control of the state and are thus free to choose the content of their speech. Nevertheless, it would be wise to avoid making a simple conclusion regarding the state employment of imams and the loss of their autonomy. One-quarter of a century ago, Antoun (1989) conceded the relative autonomy of the preacher who received a salary for writing his Friday sermons; the Jordanian Department of Religious Endowments used to send newsletters to preachers recommending topics for sermons and requested that preachers keep a copy of them. Nonetheless, the preachers Antoun interviewed did not always use these recommended topics.

As for Lebanon, it is interesting to note that almost half the Sunni preachers in the study sample do not earn money for their preaching (sixteen preachers) (Table 9). Those who do earn money from Dar al-Fatwa or religious associations. In fact, salaries are not necessarily for preaching, but for other tasks such as teaching and educational duties (nineteen preachers). Furthermore, Lebanese families who built mosques continue to pay the preachers who assures the services in them (Table 10).

TABLE 11. Frequency of Internet Usage by Preachers

	N
Daily	17
Sometimes	13
Not at all	3
No answer	2
Total	35

With regards the Shia, it can be said that they are completely autonomous from the state thanks to the *khums* system, which provides a direct income to the sheikhs. *Hawzas* are fully autonomous from the state but hold a strong relationship, including at the upper levels, primarily with the *Maraaji'* of Iran (directly or through Hezbollah) and Iraq. Further, the sheikhs obtain funding from private teaching, writing, and media appearances (Kassem 2018).

It could be supposed that the relative decrease of state influence on preachers is linked to the insufficiency of the state's pay, associated also with preachers having to work in other professions to earn their living, in comparison, according to those interviewed, with earlier times when a job in the state's religious sector was secure and relatively well paid with many social benefits.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

In attempting to trace the sources of knowledge of the preachers interviewed, it was observed that most of the Sunni preachers interviewed are connected to the internet, and slightly more than half the preachers reported using the internet daily (Table 11). Interviewees declared multiple purposes for their internet use, but it was mainly for surfing religious sites and less than half for reading the news (Table 12). As for television, the majority of viewed programs declared are obviously political (three-quarters) or religious (more than half). Moreover, almost three-quarters of the preachers reported listening to religious channels or programs on the radio, and two-thirds reported listening to other non-religious channels or radio programs. With regard to reading material, a large majority reported reading scientific journals, magazines, and newspapers (Table 12).

All the Sunni preachers interviewed declared reading books. In fact, they identified several favorite readings; many conveyed political themes as a favorite topic, followed by literature and poetics, and finally scientific topics.

TABLE 12. Use of Television, Internet, Radio, and Other Media for Preaching Purposes

	Yes	No
Watching television, religious channels	20	15
Watching television, political channels	27	8
Watching television, other	13	22
Books	35	0
Scientific journals	20	15
Magazines	24	10
Newspapers	25	10
Internet, religious sites	26	9
Internet, news	14	21
Internet, search	13	22
Internet, other	15	20
Radio, religious	26	9
Radio, other non-religious	21	14

TABLE 13. Favorite Reading Topics Expressed by Sunni Preachers

Genre	<i>N</i>
Political/news	25
Literary/poetry	18
Scientific/documentary	15
Historic	12
Religious	8
Social	6

However, few in the sample declared that books on social themes were a favorite (Table 13). The interest in reading Arabic literature and poetics (often classical) seems to coincide with the fact that half the preachers with a non-religious degree hold a degree in Arabic literature.

Thus, Sunni preachers in Lebanon seem to be very interested in politics, especially political news and updates, a genre that seems to be a very important source of knowledge for the interviewed preachers. When asked about the sources used by preachers in preparing Friday sermons, half claimed always to integrate political development in their speeches, and most of the others claimed to integrate it usually or sometimes. Once again, these numbers

TABLE 14. Declared Sources Used for Preparing Friday Sermons and the Frequency of their Use

Sources	Always	Usually or sometimes	Rarely or never
Islamic history	13	17	2
General history	3	25	4
Social events	15	12	5
Arabic poetry	5	19	8
Political development	16	14	2

confirm the above findings. With regards to using social events as a source of Friday sermon content, almost half the interviewees reported employing them in their sermons all the time, while only five preachers declared rarely or never using them as a source. This indicates that they engage with current issues emerging in their society.

Fewer than half of preachers claimed always to use Islamic history as a source for sermons, while only two preachers claimed to use it rarely or never. Finally, most preachers claimed to integrate general history and Arabic poetry usually or sometimes (Table 14).

As for the quotations used in Friday sermons, only three preachers in the sample claimed always to quote Muslim philosophers (such as Farabi and al-Kindi) and Arab social scientists (Ibn Khaldoun), and fifteen preachers claimed to use such quotations usually or sometimes (Table 15). These claims are not supported by the content analysis of the sermons, as shown below. Nonetheless, while preachers seem to be well-exposed to social events and seem to regard them as an important source for Friday sermons, this exposure to social events does not necessarily entail an exposure to the social sciences. In fact, the social genre that scored the lowest when compared with other favorite reading genres and sources of quotations derived from the social sciences. Nonetheless, politics, and possibly political sciences, which scored the highest on the favorite readings of preachers, seems to be much more important and of greater exposure. The content analysis of Friday sermons carried out does not support the preacher's declarations using quotations from social science.

It could be concluded that preachers are open to the various sources of knowledge, including mass media and social media (mainly Facebook and WhatsApp). However, these knowledge patterns do not exhibit a specific pattern of a religious or scientific scholarly dimension and are more similar to

TABLE 15. Declared Quotations Used in Friday Sermons and the Frequency of their Use

Quotes	Always	Usually or sometimes	Rarely or never
From Arabs and Muslims	9	18	6
From non-Arabs	1	18	13
From scientists	2	13	17
From religious figures	5	18	9
From philosophers and social scientists	3	15	14
From literary figures and poets	2	20	11

those of the general Middle Eastern/Lebanese population. This claim needs to be explored in greater depth, especially in relation to arguments about the improper or insufficient qualifications of religious preachers and scholars. While a career in the religious sphere provides a notable sphere of social, cultural, and knowledge-related influence on the general public, many Muslim individuals—especially amongst the youth and highly professional and educated sectors—complain of the subtle and irrelevant or outdated religious discourse becoming increasingly unappealing. This manifests itself predominantly in the content of Friday sermons, meaning Friday attendance is often driven merely by the desire to fulfill a religious commitment rather than being an interest in the sermon itself.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FRIDAY SERMONS

Friday sermons are the most important source of socialization for observant Muslims. According to Bunt (2000, 232), “Their content can vary, from commentaries on the *Qur’an* to advice on common questions or issues.” Here the focus will be on the topic addressed and the sources that affect the content of Friday sermons.

Antoun (1989) asked the preachers he interviewed to list the books they use for preparing Friday sermons. The books were the *Qur’an*, the *Hadiths*, books on preaching, and commentaries on the *Qur’an*. Nevertheless, while being certain that Friday sermons included religious content, the focus of this research was on defining other non-religious sources, specifically in knowing how much the preacher went beyond the text to look at the context and to rely on non-authoritarian practical reasonings. Maeve Cooke (Cooke 2007) construes “context” and “history” as what fundamentally distinguishes

authoritarian claims from non-authoritarian claims. This also involve the capacity to anticipate and look actively for problems, to formulate and solve them, rather than taking them for granted without argument. The anthropologist Robin Horton (Horton 1982, 121) addresses the nature of these circumstances when writing about the change in Western Europe from a traditional, authoritarian, consensus-based mode of reasoning to a competitive style that places a premium on novelty and a proliferation of methods.

Generally, the exercise of such critical thinking in the Friday sermons observed was not found, nor was there encouragement for the audience to do so. The fact that preachers are not exposed to the social sciences seems somewhat problematic as their knowledge of context and history and understanding of social and political phenomena is thereby limited. As seen in the next section, this is especially so as most of the sermons present the religious perspective on social and political matters in Lebanon. Abdal-Hakim Murad suggests that the failure of Islamic movements, and perhaps the relative stagnation of the Muslim world, is because Muslims “are endlessly fascinated by short-term political issues, but are largely ignorant of the larger tendencies of which these issues are simply the passing manifestations.” To be acquainted with these “larger tendencies,” preachers such as Islamic leaders should be “familiar with the ideas that underpin modernity” (Murad 2013, n.p.). One way to solve this problem, Murad concludes, is to establish institutions capable of training young Muslims properly, not only in the sciences of Shari’a but also in the modern, intellectual, and cultural disciplines. He gives an example of Al-Ghazali’s Nizamiyya madrasa in Baghdad that teaches philosophy in addition to *fiqh*. Some religious authorities are aware of the problem of preaching. In his *The Preacher’s Knowledge* (1978), Yousef Al-Qaradawi gives guidelines to Muslim preachers on how to deal with Islamic and general knowledge.

The following sections are based on the content analysis of the eighty-eight sermons from Lebanese radio broadcasts that were read and analyzed in order to carry out this study.

Reference to Social and Political Issues

It is not easy to separate social and/or political issues from the religious sphere because many preachers attribute all the catastrophes of the Muslim world to the sinful behavior of Muslims.

Sunni Sermons

Political and social issues are highly represented in sermons (respectively one-half and one-third of sermons) (Table 16). This is normal seeing that religion

TABLE 16. Topics of the Sermons

	N	%
Reference to political issues	49	55.7
Reference to social issues	32	36.4
Reference to general morality	29	33.0

Note: Total number of sermons is eighty-eight. Sermons can have more than one theme.

TABLE 17. Sermons' Reference to Specific Countries

	N	%
Reference to Arab countries	65	73.9
Reference to other Muslim countries	16	18.2
Reference to other countries	15	17.0

Note: Total number of sermons is eighty-eight. Sermons can have more than one theme.

TABLE 18. Invocation Reference to Specific Countries

	N	%
Reference to Arab countries	38	43.2
Reference to other Muslim countries	24	27.3
Reference to other countries	7	8.0

Note: Total number of sermons is eighty-eight. Sermons can have more than one theme.

emphasizes morality in individuals and society. However, such references enter recurrently into diagnosing problems without using the tools or the modes of reasoning of the social sciences, as mentioned above.

More than two-thirds of the sermons focused predominantly on Arab countries in contrast to a small minority on Muslim and/or other countries (Table 17). Reference was more than often in terms of politics, mentioning, for example, the political situations in Syria and Palestine. This also confirms the extent to which preachers are exposed to political news. When the speech reaches *Du'aa* (invocation), it is interesting to note that references to praying not only concerned Arab and Muslims but also sometimes non-Arab and non-Muslim countries (Table 18).

Historically and currently, the religious field in Islamic societies has experienced very little autonomy; there is a dependence vis-à-vis temporal authorities, in particular political ones. The case has been no different in

Lebanon where religious preaching has often been used to score political points.

On political issues, it is clear that a theme such as repression is very present owing to the many Sunni prisoners arrested without legal judgment. Thus, the Lebanese legal system is also denounced in preachers' speeches. Nonetheless, the concept of democracy is quasi-absent among the ninety-one sermons. It was mentioned three times: once in a positive manner and twice in a negative manner, or opposing it to the Islamic system.

However, except for Bahrain, the most commented issue is the Arab uprisings and the consequent waves of refugees. One preacher started by comparing the Arab Spring to the Prophet's biography (that aims both to spread happiness to the people and make the world a better place, and that the Prophet and the Arab uprising first had many opponents and the "media" spoke badly about them by claiming that both caused harm to the world). Preachers often expressed support for freedom, dignity, and people's choice, and denounced the rulings of Arab regimes, in many instances describing them as "tyrants," "hypocrites," "oppressors," "corrupt," and "dictators." This was especially evident in the context of referencing the Syrian uprising and the coup d'état against former Egyptian President Morsi, as the selected period of sermons analyzed was mid-2013. Here two arguments were omnipresent. The first is that the entire world (sometimes Jews and/or Americans) was united in conspiring against Muslims; and the second was that some Muslims (alluding implicitly or explicitly to Hezbollah, Iran, or the Shia tout court) were contributing to supporting "the oppressor." At times they used a political discourse of "Hezbollah and the Assad regime versus the Syrian people"; at other times an emphasis was placed on the sects, denouncing Shia involvement and support for the oppressor (the Syrian regime), and often calling for "Jihad against the Satans." In these latter cases, a tilt towards a sectarian discourse was obvious. Yet, contrary to Shia sermons calling for the believer to go to fight in Syria against what they lumped together as "*takfireyyeen*,"⁵ except for one, there was no call from the sample of sermons for Sunni believers to go to fight in Syria. This result was supported by Saoud al-Mawla's (Mawla 2016) work on Salafism in Lebanon.

The majority of sectarian arguments conveyed in the analyzed sermons related to Shia, but there was almost none against Christians. Worth noting,

5. The plural of the Arabic word *Takfir* denotes a Muslim who declares another Muslim to be apostate (i.e., not believing in the essential tenets of Islam) and therefore is no longer a Muslim.

however rare they were, was that some preachers were very careful not to make sectarian arguments. One preacher said: “The problem is not with the Shiites but with those who follow the oppressors and do harm to innocent people.” Another preacher stressed that Islam was peaceful and that people were free to believe or disbelieve in any religion. Another insisted that *jihad* (the call to fight the enemy) should be an institutional call, not something that was up to an individual to initiate. The same preacher called for Christians and Muslims to stand together in Lebanon so as to avoid disagreement, chaos, and schism (*fitna*). This term, *fitna*, is of high contextual significance in Islam, especially in the Sunni–Shiite division, and the historic crises between the two sects. Much emphasis is put on it in sermons, and it has become a buzzword through which to alert people to be vigilant against the danger of inciting the “hostility to the other sects,” which fuels the “world conspiracy against Islam.” In addition, further fieldwork was carried out to look at Salafi preachers in Tripoli. These sermons overtly support the Nusra Front and use antagonistic language about the Syrian conflict. Some use the problematic categorization of Ibn Taymeya,⁶ such as *Dar Islam* (the land of Islamic) and *Dar Harb* (the land of the infidels) as a principle for dealing with international relations. This frames their whole approach with respect to other religions. However, three sermons by Salafi preachers were selected from Tripoli close to the Syrian Nusra Front following the double suicide bombing in Jabal Mohsen (an Alawite area) committed by this organization. A striking feature of these preachings was that all three denounced such an attack. This indicates that even though they were supporting Nusra, they were not willing to adopt such action against other sects in Lebanon. It is interesting to note that some young people were aware that certain preachers were politicized to the point that they would avoid praying in their mosques, saying that: “every mosque is owned by a faction and the ones praying in a particular mosque are automatically seen as members of that faction” (Samir Kassir Foundation 2016, 24).

The over-representation of politics correlates with the previously mentioned findings analyzing the knowledge sources of preachers who reported using the mass media to stay updated with news and politics. It also coincides with the preachers’ declared tendency to integrate political current developments in their speeches.

6. Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, known as Ibn Taymiyyah for short, was a thirteenth-century controversial medieval Sunni Muslim theologian, jurisconsult, logician, and reformer.

The political deliberations of preachers have been constant over time. In 1965, Borthwick studied Friday sermons and concluded that preachers were promoting “nationalism,” but that they were not furthering political modernization. According to Borthwick, the reason behind this is that the sermons provide the rhetoric and emotions necessary for promoting nationalism, but they do not provide the audience with the skills acquired through secular education, independent reading, and experience (Borthwick, cited in Antoun 1989).

The Palestinian issue also figured highly; the arguments brought forward were often related to the land as a “holy land,” and how Israelis were prohibiting Palestinians from praying in al-Aqsa Mosque. The call for a *jihad* against Israelis is very frequent. One preacher commemorated the death of a prominent Palestinian woman, Mariam Farhat or Umm Nidal, who was vocal in congratulating her three sons on martyrdom while fighting against the Israeli occupation.

Concerning social issues, some sermons included references commending acts of social value, such as cleaning the neighborhood, working hard,⁷ respecting workers (on the occasion of Labor Day), driving safely, etc. There was an emphasis placed on many social problems related to young people, especially their sexuality and dress codes. Preachers often remind audiences that the weak practice of Islamic values had led to direct negative consequences on the everyday lives of people, often citing acts such as extra-conjugal relationship (*zina*) or homosexuality, and associated these acts with the increased spread of disease. It is clear that for many preachers the youth was a category at risk. For instance, one preacher in Beirut said in his sermons: “Nowadays our youth is lost, immersed in sin, only seeking pleasure, spending nights dancing, forgetting their religious rituals.” The approach, often used by preachers, attempts to raise feelings of guilt in their congregations. From a Bekaa mosque, another preacher said: “We are plagued these days with the immorality of homosexuality. Homosexuality is increasing and spreading in Lebanon, like fire in hay.” This statement does not confine itself to preaching morality in society but also describes a social phenomenon. However, given that much research in Lebanon indicates that homosexuality is still very marginal, there is no justification for making such a statement.

7. One preacher from Beirut said: “Islam is the religion of work. It pushes us and motivates us to work hard.”

Another topic of interest and importance in some of the sermons analyzed was the issue of civil marriage. This was related to the fact that the date of these sermons coincided with a campaign led by secularist activists in Lebanon calling for civil marriage. A closer look at the religious discourse on social issues is very relevant at this point. Two preachers criticized a Lebanese minister who signed an act for civil marriage; they considered it as a conspiracy by Christian and Shiite politicians against the Sunni sect. One preacher argued that civil marriage did not deal appropriately with important aspects of marriage such as inheritance and divorce from a religious perspective, and called on his audience to observe how marriage in Turkey was “against Islamic doctrine.” Generally, the eight sermons denounced it without really arguing the case; it was presented simply as a secularist plot against religion.

Shia Sermons

With respect to the Shia sermons, subjects greatly varied. Current political, social, religious in the strict sense, historical (life of the Prophet, Imams Ali, and Hussein) were all covered. A total of forty percent of the speeches referred to social issues. Only two speeches referred to other than the *Hadiths* and Qur’an when speaking about social issues. On political issues the sermons contained many references to sources other than the *Hadiths* and the Qur’an.

Three-quarters of speeches dealt with the everyday lives of people beyond religious rites. These included issues of law, fighting racism, democracy (one speech had a positive approach to the protection of democracy; another blamed democracy for terrorism), an insistence upon freedom and liberty (mostly regarding Bahrain and Saudi Shai area al-Qatif), much talk about political dialogue amongst the Lebanese, human rights (statements that people have rights simply by being human irrespective of other considerations), an insistence on treating others, including Syrian refugees, like brothers and sisters, corruption, avoiding the collapse of the government, condemning the politicization of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, citizenship and patriotism, protecting the army, choosing one’s spouse, charity, and child education. There was an emphasis on resistance, especially in its military meaning, citing resistance as the only effective way for nations to achieve their rights. This included praising the Lebanese army, such as greeting the national army on its day of commemoration, stating that the political leaders’ aim was not to develop their countries but to take over the government for their own purposes, and appealing to leaders to stop lying to their citizens and instead to serve them. Resistance, it was claimed, was antagonizing the “others” (referring to the United States as the “big Satan”). Another stated: “Resistance was important

to face the Western plan to occupy Arab countries. [...] America was a devil hiding behind democracy to achieve its main interests.” Resistance, it was stated, was also emphasized in the Iranian doctrine of resistance, and there was frequent mention of Ayatollah Ali Khaminai as its main theorist. There was much criticism of Arab regimes for reasons as varied as religious degradation and oppression. One example was the attack on their political position vis-à-vis Iran, which stated: “The Arab and the Gulf protest against Iran’s nuclear energy, but they remain silent on Israel’s dangerous actions.”

To summarize, both Sunni and Shia sermons are over-politicized. There were manipulations of its basic lexicon (terrorism, resistance, evil, good, etc.) with no social science modes of reasoning or social science methodology. The word “conspiracy” against Islam and the Muslim world was often mentioned in both Shia and Sunni sermons. Indeed, its use is like a national sport in the Arab world, including among the leftist groups. Political leaders are battling the electoral law proposal. There are external conspiracies against Muslims in the Arab region. Jihadists in Syria are part of the conspiracy; they are not abiding by true Islamic morality.

Generally, the difference between Shia and Sunni sermons is a difference in terms of the topics chosen. With regard to the relation with the four modes of social scientific reasoning, the variance is thin. It is rare to find the first type of reasoning and measurement (experimental exploration and measurement of more complex observable relations). For instance, the scientific description of social or political phenomena before advancing normative statements about these phenomena is hard to come by. There is also a dearth in the second (hypothetical construction of analogical models). Also rare are the sermons that encourage critical thinking by showing that social reality requires interpretation and that there are different opinions with regards to any social or political issue. Instead of introducing hesitation as a mode of experimentation, preachers insist on one truth, upheld by one side. Concerning the third (ordering of variety by comparison and taxonomy), sermons that bring a comparison between different social and political contexts and different countries and different social systems are largely absent. Conversely, comparison with the prophet and the time of his companions is a method often used to stimulate guilt among listeners. Finally, with regard to the last mode of social scientific reasoning (statistical analysis of regularities of populations and the calculus of probabilities), use of such data in sermons is scarce. Moreover, sometimes even statistics were advanced without any referencing whatsoever.

REFERENCE TO GENERAL MORALITY

There was no real difference between Sunnite and Shia sermons with regard to issues of general morality. Beyond encouraging people to follow the Islamic rights and *fiqh*, one-third of the sermons emphasized general morality (Table 16). General morality includes being merciful to young people, respecting one's neighbors and relatives, being loyal to one's country (patriotism), working hard, preserving one's cleanliness, avoiding drug and alcohol abuse, valuing freedom, dignity and humanity, etc. One preacher reminded people that in war there were ethics. Comparing the historical Battle of Tabuk (AD 630) with the present, he deplored the lack of ethics in present times. A recurring theme was helping Syrian refugees. One preacher urged the Lebanese to treat Syrians like the *al-Ansar* (Madina people) who helped the *Muhajirin* (Mekka people) in the early history of Islam. Another discussed the help Lebanon offered to Armenian refugees and questioned the lack of will in helping the Syrians.

Sometimes, communicating the good and bad behavior was delivered in harsh terms, especially when it came to women's code of dress, or even to girls playing soccer (football) in Borg al-Shamali refugee camp (near Saida).⁸ A similar harshness was found when discussing the failure to commit to certain religious rituals, such as prayer.

Almost half the sermons called for the return to the religious life of earlier times, such as the time of the Prophet and His companions, and more than half the speeches stated, in one way or another, that religion was the sole way in which to prosper in life. Islamic history was often invoked to show how Muslims, having always faced problems (Crusaders, Mongols, etc.), managed to achieve victory through Allah because they held on to Islamic values and practices. The message was often conveyed by denouncing the current "deviant" behavior of Muslims and finding hope in following the word of God. Some sermons that coincided with the Prophet's birthday (an official holiday in many Muslim countries) denounced considering this date as a holiday and celebrating it was "false festivity," stating that instead it should be celebrated by "pursuing the prophet's guidance and following it in our daily lives and decisions." One form of the return to an earlier religious life was the application of the early Islamic punishment system (*al-hudud*). Many preachers seemed strict about implementing all kinds of *al-hudud* and believed that

8. See <http://assafir.com/Article/1/520672>.

TABLE 19. Speech Reference to Christianity and the Context of the Reference

	N	%
Context of toleration	8	9.1
Negative context	2	2.3
Another context	7	8.0
No reference	71	80.7
Total	88	100.0

“doing so would stop people from further committing these sins and would purify people as well as society.” Many stressed that Muslim women should wear a *hijab* and cover their bodies.

THE NON-MUSLIM OTHERS

Sunni Sermons

Overall, speeches tended not to talk about how Christians were perceived (a large majority did not refer to Christians or Christianity). However, when they were mentioned, the reference was sometimes positive and sometimes neutral. Rarely was Christianity mentioned in a negative context or in terms of competition (Table 19).⁹

However, there was a sweeping denunciation of the West. The West was sometimes viewed to embody Christianity and at other times to embody imperialism and hegemony. For instance, a preacher reminded his audience that thinkers from the European Enlightenment attacked Islam (Voltaire and Ernest Renan). He added: “There is a law in the world that prohibits anti-Semitism. We are Semitic people. Don’t we deserve to be protected from attack? I call for international law that protects religion and prohibits attacking it.” A positive image of Western people was on occasion evoked by arguing that not all Western thinkers or ideas were bad, or by pointing to the fact that some reflect upon, inquire, and embrace Islam. One mentioned Gustave Le Bon when he said that history never witnessed people who were more merciful than the Arabs. Sometimes preachers showed how some Western thinkers praise Islam, but without a quotation or a source.

9. For instance, one preacher denounced the fact that the weekend includes Sunday but not Friday when calling for a strengthening of Sunni religious institutions. Thus, it can be hypothesized that reference to other sects or religions remains associated with contextual developments and events.

TABLE 20. Speech Reference to Jews and the Context of the Reference

	<i>N</i>	%
Positive context	2	2.3
Negative context	20	22.7
Neutral	4	4.5
No reference	62	70.5
Total	88	100.0

Some ideas seemed untrue, such as one preacher’s statement that The Vatican praised the Islamic economy!

It was also observed that the large majority of speeches analyzed did not refer to Jews. When there was a reference, however, it was mostly done in a negative context. This is a slippery slope since, instead of using the term “Zionists” or “Israelis,” the preachers used the term “Jews” (Table 20). Sometimes there was reference to “the Jews in Palestine,” a euphemism for Israelis.

Shia Sermon

Christianity was referred to in seventeen percent of speeches, three-quarters of which were in a positive context (only five were negative). Other Islamic sects were referred to in fifteen percent of the analyzed speeches. Most were made in a context of tolerance. Some sermons emphasized the Sunni–Shia dialogue and the Islamic–Christian dialogue. Reference to Jews were made in twelve percent of the speeches, three-quarters of which were in a negative context. Reference to Arab countries, mainly Bahrain, Palestine, Iraq, as well as others, were present in the speeches. There was also frequent positive reference made to Iran and negative reference to the United States and Israel. The majority of the speeches carry no reference to any interaction of the preacher with a non-religious party or group. The majority of the speeches do not refer to Western civilization in a negative context.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no specific “model” or singular concept of “a preacher.” Significant variations exist between various Muslim groups, as preachers do not necessarily agree on some major concepts, particularly as they are becoming increasingly politicized. While the majority of the interviewees graduated from religious schools and universities, rare are those who use social scientific knowledge or tools in order to analyze and diagnose social and political phenomena.

This further emphasizes the importance of studying the qualification and practices of preachers in religious institutions from a social science perspective, especially in light of the social influence they have in Muslim societies. Political and, to a lesser extent, social issues are omnipresent in the Friday sermons, while the preachers' main interactions with social research are limited to public channels, such as newspapers and television.

There is significant awareness of the problem content of the sermons and style of preaching represents. Othman Mohammad (Mohammad 2013) eloquently calls this "Depressive *Da'wah* Style [Bitter-Pill Treatment]." For him, this style has five characteristics: (1) belittling the listeners and destroying their self-esteem; (2) comparing the current state with the state of the *sahaba* (companions of the Prophet Mohamed), or the righteous predecessors, without clarifying the difference in context; (3) an emphasis on how insignificant our deeds and efforts are in contrast to God's blessings; (4) focusing on the torment of the grave and the punishment of the hereafter without mentioning the beautiful rewards God has prepared for His followers; and (5) attributing all the catastrophes in our *Ummah* (community) to the sinful behavior of Muslims and talk about sustained and perpetual guilt! (Mohammad 2013).

This study demonstrates that discursive formations of sermons are in close relationship with power structures. Max Weber considers the sociology of religion as a dimension of the sociology of power. Theorists have long sought to classify and understand the abstract processes inherent in the legitimization of power, or, in more precise terms, "the particular rationale for attributing legitimacy for command and obedience" (Matheson 1987, 199). Weber (2008) identifies three "pure types" of legitimacy (traditional, charismatic, and legal), which he maintains must emerge relationally in some variation or combination within a given community in order to ensure its sound functioning. This applies to preachers and *mufitis*. It is how they are to set forth their authority, deploying one or more legitimization strategies.

Patrick Gaffney (Gaffney 1994) modifies Weber's typology to classify Egyptian preaching into three types: saint, scholar, and warrior. The present author alters Gaffney's typology and gives it a different meaning: traditional, saint, and scholar. The *traditional* is he who mainly uses arguments referring to the past, mainly to the early times of Islam. This is also what Mohamed Abed Jabiri (Jabiri 1999) refers to as holy textual reasoning (*al-'akel al-bayani*) that always uses excessive analogy with the past. The *scholar* relies not only on the tradition but also on scientific methods of inquiry in order to read reality and find solutions by using a complex set of interpretations of holy text

and *hadith*. Finally, the *saint* (equivalent to Weber's charismatic person) relies often on an extraordinary level of personal magnetism, rhetorical skills, and emotions, without argumentation from either tradition or the social sciences.

So far, the analysis of Friday sermons does not properly tackle the way preachers establish their authority and use legitimization strategies. However, it can be said that most represent both the saint and the traditional but rarely the scholar. This has an impact on how religious people are made to be easily influenced by traditional/saint preachers. Although it is the author's belief that the individual constructs his/her own "bricolage" of beliefs, one that goes beyond what preachers want to dictate, such an approach can have dire consequences. Even Ammar Ben Hamouda (Ben Hamouda 2016) already wonders cynically if the ritual of praying has any effect on Muslim moral behavior. In the context of oppression and the closeness of the political space, it does indeed seem that such discursive strategies of preaching facilitate, directly or indirectly, the easy shifting of some young from, for example, being supporters of values such as global human justice, freedom, anti-oppression, equality, and democracy to supporting organizations and groups that abuse Islamic values (such as ISIS/Islamic State, or sectarian *jibadi* Shia groups) as well as radical groups that exclude others as "infidels" and call for imposing the outdated laws of early Islamic rule. For motivation to become radical seems to require a long process of socialization in which preaching is one of its sources. When there is no way to address social, economic, political, and identity claims, a sort of a continuum will be set between the construction of the "Other" in some preaching (frequent among the Salafi/Wahabi preachers) and ISIS *takfiri* modes of thinking. As seen in the analysis of the preachers' sermons, there are sometimes evident and guileful inclinations to these issues, such as consolidating sectarianism or calling for the restoration of the entire life pattern and laws of the historic Muslim reign, without reflecting on the distinction between the temporal and the religious. As Ali Harb (Harb 2014) clearly points out, this concerns some trends not only among Sunni Islam but also among Shiism. The construction of the "Other" by preachers sometimes mirrors how the Western world constructs the "Other" (Imad 2013). Europe's reaction to the expulsion of 8000 Christians by ISIS along with their lack of action against the ISIS expulsion of 423,000 people from Mosul in Iraq reveals how "invisible" the Muslim "Other" is in the conception of humanity among many Western politicians. As Francois Burgat put it (Burgat 2014, n.p.), "the reaction of the West to the Syrian crisis is the reverse of the universal."

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article benefited from funding from the American University of Beirut, the European Research Council, for the project “When Authoritarianism Fails in the Arab World (WAFAW),” and finally from the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue. ■

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