

Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon; The Challenge of Islamism. By Robert G. Rabil. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 213 pp. \$85.00

Reviewed by Franck Salameh.

In a universe where serious studies of Lebanon's Islamists often border on uncritical hagiographies and naïf panegyrics, Professor Robert Rabil brings a refreshing, much needed work of profound, wide-ranging, and incisive analysis. *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon* covers the rise and evolution of Islamism in Lebanon, places Lebanese Islamists and their movements in their appropriate historical, cultural, and theological contexts, and parses their problematic relationship with a congenitally diverse and pluralistic Lebanese polity. Professor Rabil does all of that with polish, aplomb, scholarly integrity, and courage that very few academics have managed to muster when dealing with a topic such as this.

Drawing on his intimacy with, and access to Arabic, dialectal Lebanese, French, and English sources, Rabil brings a lucid and clearly structured analysis of the history, scriptures, thought, rituals, epistemology, and politics of Lebanon's Islamists.

Far from integrating the State, and far from adjusting to Lebanon's complex ethno-religious makeup and sprightly political culture—that is to say, far from “Lebanonizing” their *Weltanschauung*, to use the favored terminology of those who have defined the canon of Islamist scholarship in Lebanon today—Rabil suggests that Lebanon's Islamists have sought to dismantle the “Lebanese experiment” and cast off its constitutive diversity. To wit, Rabil demonstrates that those who have been for many years sounding the happy clarion of Hezbollah's “Lebanonization”—and over-exaggerating the party's “Lebanese” credentials—have also been misleading the field and dissimulating Hezbollah's toxic totalistic role in Lebanon's pluralist social and political order.

Indeed, Rabil's work calls to task those embellishers of Hezbollah's absolutism, challenges their fantasies, and revises—and deflates—the rosy paradigms that they have normalized, by marshaling a wealth of documents, personal testimonies, and primary sources that point to “another,” less than benign, Hezbollah.

But this is a book *not* only about Hezbollah. It is about both Shia and Sunni Islamism in Lebanon and about the growing conflict and incompatibility between Islamism and Lebanese pluralism. Lebanon's experience with Islamism is a distinct case study, specific to Lebanon; but it is also an archetype and evidence that theology and epistemology *do* matter when it comes to political Islam—in spite of those who would argue otherwise—that not all Islamisms are created equal, and that the empirical data on the emergence, life, and death of Islamism often flies in the face of received wisdom and accepted textual assumptions.

To my sense, rare are those who are suited to write on this topic with Rabil's depth, poise, and authority. A polyglot academic socialized in both Lebanon and the United States, Rabil benefits from the scientific, cultural, and intellectual tools of both worlds, and is able to negotiate both their linguistic and idiomatic intricacies with rare intimacy and finesse.

In sum, *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon* is essential reading for specialists and non-specialists alike: it is wise, literate, insightful and honest; written with conviction, rigor, and clarity; supported with evidence and a wealth of sources—namely, albeit not exclusively, Arabic sources—which Rabil avails to Anglophone readers with exquisite accuracy and discernment.

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