



BOOK REVIEWS

***Salafism in Lebanon; From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism*, Robert G. Rabil; Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$29.95**
Reviewed by Franck Salameh

In a field where studies of Lebanon's Islamists often come in many shades of panegyrics, hagiographies, or excoriations, Robert Rabil's *Salafism in Lebanon* brings a refreshing, lucid, and much needed seasoned research-based analysis. The book covers the rise and evolution of Salafism in Lebanon, places Lebanon's Islamists and their politicization in their appropriate historical and cultural contexts—paying due attention to Lebanon's uniqueness among Middle Eastern nations and among places dealing with Islamist resurgence—and delves into the complex relationships of Islamism with Lebanon's ethnic, religious, and cultural pluralism. All this is done with clarity, lucidity, and attention to detail that few have succeeded in marshaling in a field often long on "experts" and short on "expertise" and substance.

Salafism in Lebanon is a fascinating, well researched, well documented, and well written book. It is powerful, topical, compelling, persuasive, and dispassionate history that still at times reads like a novel—not to say a thriller. But this is a thriller that draws heavily on skilled analyses of the history, the rituals, the theology, the epistemology, and the politics of Lebanon and its Salafists.

In Robert Rabil's telling, the Lebanese "branch" of Salafism has achieved a level of influence nearly unimaginable, specially that in a place like Lebanon, where with vying tendencies and ethno-religious claims and narratives, Muslims themselves, at least until the early 1970s, have traditionally constituted a minority. Today Muslims, Sunnis and Shias alike, are deemed a majority, outweighing the traditionally more preponderant Christians, and therefore making demands for wider and more relevant participation in Lebanese political and cultural life. But the implications of this newfound relevance and rising power of the Muslims (and Islamists) appear to reflect negatively on the future of democracy, consociationalism, power-sharing, coexistence, peace, and stability in Lebanon—a country, which, arguably an uneasy mosaic of ethno-religious communities sitting atop a powder-keg of ethnic and religious resentments, still managed to regulate its diversity and contrive a number of power-sharing devices, often successfully, in ways Lebanon's neighbors could only dream of.



In an 1844 dispatch to his ambassador in Istanbul, Prince Metternich is reported to have written that “only when peace and security will prevail on Mount-Lebanon, so shall they also prevail in the neighboring countries.” This mid-nineteenth century axiom could very well apply to modern Lebanon today, where regional struggles and international rivalries continue to be played out, and where colliding creeds and ideologies continue to find fertile ground. It is in this context that *Salafism in Lebanon* is perhaps best read: in the context of Lebanon as “Alpha and Omega,” as a “small country,” to borrow words from Lebanese Druze politician Kamal Jumblat, that “has the task of intercepting the life ripples of the [...] universe, in order to cast them and retransmit them [...] to the nations of the hinterland, to this realm of sands and mosques and sun.” Such is an element of an “Eternal Truth” forewarned Jumblat. That is why perhaps why, as some have recently said, small countries like Lebanon *do* matter, and what happens in Lebanon *may* realistically serve as template and barometer for things to come elsewhere in the Middle East. It is in this sense that *Salafism in Lebanon* and the future of *Transnational Jihadism* ought to be gauged and read in Robert Rabil’s book.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork, dozens of in-depth interviews, and a wealth of Arabic-language sources not previously accessed by Western researchers, Robert Rabil traces the evolution of Salafism in Lebanon from its birth roughly around the date of Lebanon’s independence in 1946, to the present. Furthermore, Professor Rabil examines the Salafists’ trajectory in Lebanon in light of their work and movements elsewhere, revealing variances in behavioral patterns, methods, and goals reflecting Lebanon’s unique circumstances.

Rabil highlights Lebanon’s own social and political divisions, and consequently the internal divisions the Salafis themselves confront within Lebanon. He demonstrates that while other groups inside Lebanon, Maronites and other Christians for instance, were leaning toward greater moderation, the Lebanese Salafists themselves were tending toward increased radicalization, marking rising tensions, fractiousness, and ultimately a repudiation of the Lebanese political system and the pluralist elements of Lebanese society; in sum, a rejection of Lebanon’s time-honored democratic trappings and the adoption of such illiberal concepts as *Sharia* Islamic law. Highlighting elements of Salafism’s fluidity, continuity, heterogeneity, and change, and demonstrating that shifts in the Salafists’ (and in general the Islamists’) strategies are not the result of a single impetus, Rabil provides a systematic, subtle, and nuanced account of the growth and evolution of Islamism in Lebanon, and the wider Middle East.

The rise of Salafism in Lebanon seems to be where the fault-lines of the larger Sunni-Shi’ite divide—perhaps even a showdown—are coming into view. Whereas



much has been made in the past decade of a rising Shi'ite crescent extending from Iran and Iraq and crossing into the Levant, that scenario has been at once embraced and dismissed by a bevy of area specialists. However, in this book's treatment of Salafism in Lebanon, the conversation about a Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry—and perhaps an impending collision—is reconsidered, reevaluated, and elevated beyond the frenzies of some and the outright denigrations of others. Granted, sociopolitical considerations must never be discounted when examining Shi'a-Sunni tensions—or for that matter *any* of the Middle East's or Lebanon's hot-button issues. But to valorize sociopolitical considerations without reckoning with history, or without taking heed of the historical foundations to this region's old rivalries is unscrupulous, foolhardy, and may indeed prove dangerous. *This*, in my view, is one of the main values of *Salafism in Lebanon*, and *this* is what will render this book an important and much needed addition to the scholarship on Lebanon, Islamism, and the Sunni-Shi'ite rivalries in the region at large.

Robert Rabil's magisterial work does a fine job validating history in evaluating his subject matter. Rabil also brings a world of references to his inquiry and his appraisal of his topic; from interviews with actors and avatars of Salfism (and their rivals) in Lebanon, to marshaling a wealth of Arabic, English, and French primary and secondary sources, to skillfully parsing and perlustrating Arabic-language Salafist websites—with, if I may add, the subtlety and perspicacity of vintage detective work—this book is a veritable treasure trove of information and a rich inventory of authoritative data, engaging, compelling, and suitable to the specialist, the student, and the general reader alike.

In *Salafism in Lebanon*, Robert Rabil's storyteller's gift and his historian's masterstroke bring to modern audiences the sad prophecy of another discerning Robert, summoning the Lebanese from behind the mists of the early twentieth century to take stock of their tattered creation. Already in 1918, Robert DeCaix—secretary to French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud—was cautioning Lebanon's Christians about the looming dismantlement of their spawn; a Lebanese entity then still under construction. But Maronite hubris in 1920 was confident their nascent republic's Sunni-Arab element would in time be "Lebanonized," smitten (so they thought) by Christian innovation and cosmopolitanism and charm. Sunnis, on the other hand, could not have been less enthralled with the trifle notion of a "Lebanese nation." A "Lebanese nation"? "What nonsense!" The Arab nation was their lodestar.

Alas, that was then! This is now! Today it is the *Umma* (Muslim nation) that is within reach; no longer a relatively benign "Arabism"! And so Robert DeCaix's prophecy might have come to pass. In Robert Rabil's telling, the Arab nationalism that Lebanon's Christians (by hook and by crook) had kept at bay for close to a century is not only back in force; it is back on steroids; with a vengeance; a bitter, irredentist,



rapacious Islamism resolved to gobble up Lebanon and its specificity, and commit them both to oblivion. But do not despair, history *can* be merciful to those not blessed with forgetfulness, and the jury *may* still be out on Lebanon's future and the future of *Salafism in Lebanon*. Read Robert Rabil. You will see why!

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