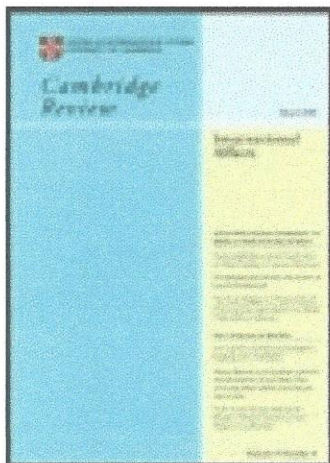


This article was downloaded by: [98.77.183.154]

On: 21 July 2015, At: 13:51

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



## Cambridge Review of International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccam20>

### Salafism in Lebanon: from apoliticism to transnational jihadism

Joseph Alagha<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Haigazian University

Published online: 14 Jul 2015.

[Click for updates](#)

**To cite this article:** Joseph Alagha (2015): Salafism in Lebanon: from apoliticism to transnational jihadism, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/09557571.2015.1058066](https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1058066)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1058066>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Book review

Robert G Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: from apoliticism to transnational jihadism*, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2014, ISBN10 162616116X, ISBN13 9781626161160 (hbk), 283 pp

Robert Rabil has written a groundbreaking book on Salafism in Lebanon. Drawing on field research, personal interviews and a vast repertoire of primary sources, he traces the emergence and development of Salafism, underscoring the major ideological and political transformations that helped shape its various schools in Lebanon.

Rabil provides an excellent introduction to the history of Salafism in which he explains the doctrine as well as its disputes with Shi'a Islam. He also provides key historical background that helps explain what made the northern city of Tripoli the citadel of Salafism in Lebanon. In the first chapter, Rabil chronicles Salafist ideology and socio-political changes in order to contextualize the major developments and transformations that shape this transnational movement. He elucidates, in excellent detail, Salafism's three schools: quietist, Haraki (activist) and Salafi-Jihadi, as embraced, respectively, by Sheikh Sa'd al-Din al-Kibbi, Sheikh Zakariya al-Masri and 'Usbat al-Ansar. Though they share in common the principle of creating a society grounded in the emulation of the methodology (*manhaj*) of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*), these schools disagree over how to bring about the ideal society or the best political order. In exposing the ideological underpinnings of the three schools, Rabil meticulously underscores the basic principles of Salafism as well as the tensions, incongruities and divergences inherent in the movement, especially in regard to its approach to politics. His insights into the intellectual fusion of the Muslim Brotherhood's political culture and Wahhabist doctrine that occurred in Saudi Arabia's universities underscores the politicization of Wahhabi-Salafists.

Rabil aptly connects the emergence and development of Salafism in Lebanon to various domestic and regional factors. Initially, Salafism was brought to the northern city of Tripoli in the 1940s by Salem al-Shahal. An autodidactic sheikh who furthered his education in Medina, al-Shahal embraced Nasir al-Din al-Albani's quietist school, which focused on Islamic propagation (*da'wa*). Significantly, al-Shahal's quietist Salafism was affected by the ideology and praxis of the Islamic Association, whose co-founder and ideologue paved the way for Salafists to redefine their approach to the state. Meanwhile, the rise and fall of the Islamic Unity Movement in Tripoli in the 1980s at the hands of the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies underscored to the Salafists the importance of adjusting their *da'wa* to the political conditions of the country. Paradoxically, Salafist organizations operating during the period of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon



## 2 Book review

proliferated because they were largely apolitical and did not pose a threat to the Syrian-imposed order.

Rabil then takes the reader on a journey exploring the nuts and bolts of Lebanon's confessional and labyrinthine politics before and after the Syrian troops' withdrawal from Beirut in 2005. He goes on to meticulously examine the development of Salafism in relation to the following critical junctures: the penetration of al-Qaeda affiliates and members into north Lebanon, former prime minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005 and Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut in 2008. Rabil acknowledges the efforts of the quietist Salafists to open up (*infitah*) to the country's communal groups, in particular the Shi'a community, as led by Hezbollah. Yet, Rabil concedes the deep concerns and resentments that persist amongst many in the Sunni community towards Hezbollah, which they pejoratively label the 'Party of Satan' or 'Party of *Allat*' (in reference to a pre-Islamic pagan god).

This aggrieved attitude towards Hezbollah becomes more salient with the gradual but steady involvement of the Party of God in the Syrian Civil War (2012 onwards). On close scrutiny, Rabil correlates this attitude to the crisis engulfing the Sunni community in Lebanon and to the Salafists' own involvement in Syria's civil war. Specifically, he emphasizes the weakness of the leadership of the Future Movement and their lack of vision. According to Rabil, this ambivalent attitude towards the Salafists is due to the Future Movement's oversight in taking proper account of the Salafists' political and jihadi character. Moreover, he argues that the Future Movement and its allies have been mistaken in their 'naïve belief' that Salafists can be controlled (239). Rabil adds that the weakness of the Future Movement is partly related to its inability to construct a national identity superseding the Sunnis' historic attachment to Arab nationalism. He argues that Salafists have benefited from this ambivalent policy and 'naïve belief' and the policies that have come as a result (240). Furthermore, he adds that Salafists have exploited sectarian tension to enhance their standing, relying on expansive formal and informal networks, spanning the gamut from interpersonal relations, to patronage networks, to institutes and mosques.

Rabil convincingly argues that Salafism will keep accumulating power and capital so long as sectarian tensions plague Lebanon and Syria. He adds that Salafism's selling point is its 'appeal to the Sunni downtrodden and oppressed in Lebanon on account of its authenticity and individual and collective empowerment' (239). Rabil concludes the book on a cautionary note, underscoring that 'although Salafists share basic principles but have divergent and even contradictory ideologies and tendencies, they share a collective identity based on creed and a mission to purge Islam from foreign accretions and to create an ideal Islamic community. Regardless as to whether they are quietist, activist or Salafi-Jihadi, they have collectively consolidated a Salafi identity, increasing the emotional distance between them and the rest of the population' (244). As such, the book demonstrates why Salafism poses an ideological as well as a concrete threat to both Lebanon's plural society and the rest of the region.

This is a must-read book. It is the most detailed and up-to-date study on Salafism in Lebanon. The book's merit lies not only in its division of Salafism into three distinct schools: quietist, Haraki and Salafi-Jihadi, but also in the elegant

way in which it sheds the layers of confusion canopying this relatively new but prominent religious movement.

Joseph Alagha © 2015

Haigazian University

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1058066>

#### Notes on contributor

**Joseph Alagha** (PhD, Free University of Amsterdam) is Professor of Political Science at Haigazian University, Beirut. He is the author of *Hizbullah's DNA and the Arab Spring* (2013), *Hizbullah's identity construction* (2011), *Hizbullah's documents* (2011) and *The shifts in Hizbullah's ideology* (2006), the last three published by Amsterdam University Press. His current research deals with political mobilization and the performing arts in the Middle East and North Africa. Email: [jalagha2001@yahoo.com](mailto:jalagha2001@yahoo.com)