



Bernard Rougier

The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to ISIS
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Rougier's book examines the rise of Sunni Jihadism of the al-Qaeda and ISIS type through the case of the marginalized city of Tripoli and the adjacent areas in Northern Lebanon and Western Syria. As he explains, "What makes North Lebanon such an interesting and troubling setting is what it lacks, or only weakly possesses. It is not an intellectual hub generating new political rhetoric and local innovation. The region is instead a locus of hybridization, a crucible for multiple influences, and a cradle for mobilization" (pp. ix-x). Following an overview of the political history of Tripoli from the period of the French Mandate through the civil war and the Syrian army domination, the major part of the book is devoted to the past decade, beginning with the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. This is one of the first studies to tackle the Sunni Islamic scene in Lebanon, which has long remained under the shadow of its powerful rival from the south, the Shi'i movement of Hezbollah.

Tripoli's modern history is marked by deterioration and decline. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with its loss of primacy to Beirut, the incorporation of the city into Greater Lebanon in 1920 severed it from its hinterland, which was included in Syria. The struggle to escape isolation as a Sunni minority outpost was led before and after independence by the notable Karami family, but following Nasser's June 1967 defeat and the establishment of Fatah in Lebanon, urban politics succumbed to street militancy. The Syrian army's intervention in the civil war in 1976 turned Tripoli into a key battleground between the Syrian regime and the PLO and its local leftist allies, and after 1980 also militant Islamists organized in the Tawhid movement. Strangely, the role of Fathi Yakan and the Muslim Brotherhood is largely overlooked. Two sieges and the "massacre of Bab al-Tabbaneh [neighborhood]" in 1983-1986 secured Tripoli's lasting hatred of Ba'thist Syria.

Rougier focuses instead on the Salafis. He shows how, as in other parts of the Middle East, Lebanese and Palestinian Islamists found refuge in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, volunteered for Jihad in Afghanistan, or escaped to Europe. Returning to Tripoli after the end of the civil war in 1990, they founded a variety of Salafi networks: *Haraki* (political) Salafis who followed the Saudi Islamic Awakening, quietists associated with the Wahhabi religious establishment or the Kuwaiti Salafi charity society, Jihadi-Salafis wishing to extend the Afghan jihad to other fronts, and Salafi preachers radicalized in Europe who embraced fiery anti-Western rhetoric.

Salafi-jihadi terrorism erupted in Syrian-dominated North Lebanon right after 9/11 with a series of attacks against Western symbols like McDonald's restaurants. Framed as actions in defense of the "imagined global Muslim *umma*," they were carried out by poor young militants from Tripoli urged on by Lebanese émigrés in Europe and Australia and assisted by Palestinian jihadis from the Ayn al-Helweh camp near Sidon. Such actions did not fail to attract the attention of al-Qaeda.

From these beginnings Rougier moves on to disentangle the kaleidoscope of forces that shaped the course of Lebanese Salafi-Jihadism after the Syrian withdrawal in



April 2005, in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. In the first stage his son Sa'ad's Future Movement entered to fill the vacuum and extended its political influence to the north of the country. This enhanced the status of political Salafi shaykhs, who offered their services in reining in local militants, expounding religious criticism of Hezbollah, and reactivating anti-Syrian sentiment.

Syria's reaction transpired with the November 2006 proclamation of the jihadi group Fatah al-Islam, the core members of which were recruited to the service of the Assad regime mostly from among Palestinian and Syrian political prisoners. First directed to support Zarqawi's anti-American and anti-Shi'i jihad network in Iraq, with the latter's approval they were relocated to Lebanon, to fight Israel. Taking over the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared, north of Tripoli, Fatah al-Islam was legitimized by a new generation of Palestinian Salafi preachers and sought to win over Tripoli's Sunni shaykhs against the Future Movement-led anti-Syrian coalition. In July 2007 its terrorist and criminal acts escalated to confrontation with the Lebanese army that lasted three months and resulted in large-scale destruction and defeat. At that time the Syrian regime was in the process of shifting to a new rhetoric, presenting itself as a bastion against jihadism.

Hariri's Future Movement aided the Syrian uprising beginning in spring 2011 in the hope of toppling the Assad regime, but also to contain the religious enthusiasm of Tripoli's Salafi-jihadis, whose violence threatened the cohesion of the Sunni community. Setting up supply lines to the resistance, especially to the strategically-located Homs, "the capital of the Syrian revolt," Hariri's envoys aided the Free Syrian Army whereas the Salafi networks helped Ahrar al-Sham. But the insurgency threatened to spill over into Lebanon when clashes erupted between Alawites and Sunnis in Tripoli's neighborhoods, and with the fall of the border town of Qusayr to Syrian-Hezbollah forces in June 2013 the Lebanese government was compelled to withdraw. Thereby the door to the reassertion of jihadi terrorism was re-opened, now in collusion with the rising force of ISIS.

Rogier's book is based on first-hand acquaintance with the Lebanese Islamic scene, an impressive array of interviews with major actors in both the security services and the Salafi arena, and hard-to-come-by documents. This combination has resulted in an invaluable "thick description" of the tapestry of local, regional and global forces that in their intricate and ever-shifting interactions and conflicts shaped the trajectory of jihadi-Salafism in North Lebanon. In the strength of this excellent study also lies its major weakness, as Rougier's constant digression to intelligence-style reports on individual protagonists and specific incidents makes it sometimes difficult to follow the broader picture, which I have tried in the above to distill.

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