

The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to ISIS

Bernard Rougier

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 259 pages.

Northern Lebanon, the mountainous terrain bordering Syria and the coastal plain centered on the city of Tripoli with its nearly 130,000 residents, has long been the heartland of the country's Sunni Arabs, along with the old scholastic and population hub in the southern city of Sidon. The outbreak of mass popular protests and eventually armed rebellion in neighboring Syria against Bashar al-Asad's government in the spring of 2011, and that country's continuing descent into an increasingly violent and sectarian civil war, has had a profound effect upon Lebanon, particularly in the north, for both geographical and demographic reasons. First, northern Lebanon borders strategic areas of central-western Syria (e.g., the town of al-Qusayr) and is located just south of the major Syrian port city of Tartus. Second, the north's population includes significant minority communities of Christians and Alawis, the latter of which are largely aligned politically with Damascus. These factors have made the border regions particularly dangerous, for while the Lebanese army attempts to maintain control of the country's territory, Iran-aligned Hizbullah pours fighters and military supplies into Syria and militant Sunni groups (e.g., ISIS and Jabhat Fath al-Sham [JFS]) seek to establish a foothold in Lebanon from which they can pursue their anti-Asad campaign.

Bernard Rougier is uniquely placed to write about the contemporary history and complex web of politics among Lebanon's Sunni factions and particularly the rise of jihadi militancy among some of its segments. The book under review, like *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), is based upon extensive in-country fieldwork and interviews beginning in the early 2000s and ending in 2014. It provides a fascinating and nuanced overview of jihadism's rise as a viable avenue of political frustration and expression in the wider milieu of Lebanon's intra-Sunni socio-political competition and a fast-changing regional situation.

Rougier argues that the contentious political disputes and competition among the country's mainstream Sunni political figures (e.g., the al-Hariri family), as well as the impact of Syrian control of large parts of Lebanon between 1976 and 2005 and ensuing power vacuum after its withdrawal, enabled the emergence of jihadi militancy. Northern Lebanon also became a center of competition among regional actors through their local allies, which pitted

Damascus, Tehran, and Riyadh against each other, as well as a host of such non-state actors as Al-Qaeda Central (AQC), like-minded Sunni militants, and Hizbullah. Lebanon's establishment Sunni political leaders, first Rafiq al-Hariri and then his son and successor Sa'd, faced hostility not only from Hizbullah and its Christian and secular allies, but also from forces emerging within the north's Sunni communities, such as the growing influence of indigenous Salafi preachers and militant organizations.

Fath al-Sham and other small transnational Sunni jihadi groups, also challenged the Sunni political establishment and further destabilized the country. All of these competing forces found fertile ground in the north because, Rougier asserts, the region lacked a strong and innovative intellectual hub. It thus became a "locus of hybridization" (p. x) one in which domestic and foreign competitors contested with each other for influence as well as political and military power and primacy.

Rougier's interview subjects include a diverse array of Lebanese and Palestinian societal and political actors, including members of Palestinian parties (e.g., Fatah and HAMAS), Lebanese government officials, Salafi preachers and religious scholars, Islamist activists, representatives of the Alawi community, Hizbullah-aligned political factions, and clerical supporters of Syria's Ba'th Party. Building upon the wide range of interviews he conducted for *Everyday Jihad*, he met with individuals who are influential in particular communities and local geographical areas, just as he did for his doctoral dissertation and 2007 book on Ain al-Hilweh, Burj al-Barajneh, Nahr al-Bared, and other Palestinian refugee camps located in southern Lebanon. He supplements his interviews with primary sources in print as well as the relevant secondary literature.

Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of the region's modern history, from being a part of Greater Syria that France gave to the new nation-state of Lebanon during its mandate period (1923-48) to the post-civil war region that continues to suffer frequent outbreaks of inter-party and inter- and intra-communal violence. Between the mandate and the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), the north moved from being dominated politically by regional Sunni notable families to an array of armed militias, which the Syrian army suppressed in the mid-1980s. This period also saw the formation of different spheres of authority among Lebanon's Sunni government officials, street leaders, and local religious figures.

The first expression of militant Sunni Islamism, which Rougier examines in chapter 2, emerged in Tripoli following 9/11 and was initially aimed at perceived "western" influences in the area to defend the militants' imagined and narratively constructed notion of an idealized transnational Muslim commu-

nity. According to documents obtained by Rougier, during this period AQC, through a Yemeni operative named Ibn al-Shahid who was fleeing the American invasion of Afghanistan, came into contact with Lebanese Salafi militants who wanted to attack western business interests in the country. More radical, militant, and puritan Sunni voices gained sway in part due to the establishment Sunni politicians' weakness and failure to institutionalize their control over the country's Sunnis as a bloc.

The withdrawal of Syrian military and intelligence forces in 2005, following Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination and the ensuing wave of anti-Syrian demonstrations, significantly changed the region's political dynamics and particularly those of Tripoli, which Rougier looks at in chapters 3 and four. Freed from Syrian harassment and threats, Lebanese Salafi activists built anti-Asad grassroots networks. Responding to the perceived growing threat of anti-Syrian Sunni Islamism and militancy in northern Lebanon, Damascus sought to use its intelligence services and resources to redirect some of the emerging jihadi militancy inward to Lebanon. It did this by entering into tacit informal "agreements" with jihadi groups operating in Iraq, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's organization that would eventually morph into ISIS, that they could use Syria as a sanctuary and a base from which they could fundraise, funnel recruits, and rejuvenate themselves. In return, they would not target Syrian government interests in the country. Syrian forces cracked down periodically on jihadis in the country when they suspected the latter of planning to launch attacks on American or European targets from inside Syria.

Rougier arguably provides one of the most detailed accounts of the formation of Fatah al-Islam, a small Damascus-aided militant group that managed to take over the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp outside of Tripoli and battle the Lebanese state from late May to early September 2007. The group also allegedly plotted to assassinate dozens of anti-Syrian figures in Lebanon. Based on interviews with key figures, Rougier shows that in the early 1990s Salafi religious entrepreneurs established spheres of influence by providing far better educational alternatives to young Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Salafism achieved "normative power" (pp. 125-26) by providing disaffected Palestinian youth with an alternative identity and narrative to counter the defeatism of Palestinian nationalism: that of religious (Islamic) historical glory and primacy. Groups such as Fath al-Islam harnessed similar sentiments in their own recruitment calls. Rougier also documents Fath al-Islam's contentious relationship with AQC due to the latter's disapproval of a number of the former's characteristics and strategic decisions.

Further damage to the authority claimed by Sa'd al-Hariri and his fellow Sunni politicians came during the first few years of the Syrian civil war. Initially

al-Hariri, backed by Saudi Arabia, actively supported the anti-Asad opposition and worked to keep a channel open from Lebanon into Syria, specifically the governorate of Homs, in order to support the Syrian rebel forces located there. However, this channel was cut off in 2013 by a combination of Damascus, Hizbullah, and even Lebanese army forces that weakened his standing among the country's Sunnis. This allowed competing Sunni voices, including militant ones, to enter the fray and claim to be the true defenders and guarantors of Sunni interests and security in the Levant. The most militant Sunni voices have been aided greatly by Hizbullah's open pro-Damascus involvement and Tehran's increasing maneuvering in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

This book is a significant addition to the scholarship on modern Lebanon, political Islam in the Levant and the wider Middle East and Arab world, and Sunni jihadism. Combining extensive interviews with key figures among the factions operating in northern Lebanon with key secondary and primary sources, Rougier provides extensive details while maintaining a clear and readable writing style. The book includes useful appendices, including five maps and a glossary. It is slightly hampered, however, by the absence of a stand-alone bibliography, a trend that seems to be growing in even academic book publications, which makes it difficult for readers to quickly review a complete list of the sources, interviews, and primary sources used. This minor criticism aside, the book will be of interest and great use to academics, policymakers, and the interested public.

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