
Robert Rabil’s latest study, *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon*, tracks the historical evolution and political interactions of both Sunni and Shiʿi Islamist movements in Lebanon. Rabil provides an in-depth description of Lebanon’s identity quest and contemporary political history—from the National Pact of 1943 to Hezbollah’s temporary take-over of West Beirut in 2008. This analysis of the Lebanese political context and of the impact of confessionalism on the nation-building country’s political development serves as a framework to describe the birth and evolution of Islamism as a cross-sectarian phenomenon. Specifically, Islamism is analyzed by describing the organizational, ideological, and political development of both the Shiʿi Hezbollah and the Sunni *al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyah* (the Islamic Association). The work contributes to the existing literature on Lebanon and its political history by conducting a focused comparative study of the country’s main Islamist organizations. In addition to this innovative approach to the subject, the book also contributes to the understanding of Islamism in Lebanon by carefully situating it within Lebanon’s complex political history and fragmented yet resilient identity.

The main important contribution of Rabil’s work—in line with his numerous previous manuscripts and articles on the political history of Lebanon—is to provide an in-depth historical contextualization of the rise of Islamism within Lebanon. This phenomenon is explained in relation to the role that identity and sectarian politics have played in the Lebanese Republic since its independence. Looking back to the French mandate period and carefully describing the social and political milieu that led to the 1943 National Pact, Rabil explicates Lebanese confessional politics1 while outlining Lebanon’s competing political, cultural, and religious identities and how they have affected the country’s political life. Throughout the book, the rise of Islamist groups is related to the broader social and political dynamics taking place in the country, and more specifically to Lebanon’s struggle to find a common denominator and forge a national identity to bring together all the different sectarian communities and competing visions of the country.

---

1) Confessionalism is a word generally employed to describe the Lebanese sectarian political system. It refers to the fact that all the sectarian communities officially recognized within Lebanon have a pre-allocated number of seats within the Lebanese Parliament. The country’s highest political offices are also allocated along sectarian lines, with the Lebanese President belonging to the Maronite Christian community, the Prime Minister coming from the Sunni community, and the Speaker of the House being a Shiʿa.
In addressing the political ascent of the Shi’i Hezbollah, Rabil highlights the group’s historical evolution, focusing in particular on Hezbollah’s gradual participation in the political system in the aftermath of the civil war and the 1989 Taif Agreement that put an end to the war and sought to normalize Lebanese political life. Here Rabil correctly underscores the group’s evolving and adapting political discourse, its capacity to create cross-sectarian alliances of convenience, and its gradual shift from marginal militia to mainstream political party. Drawing on both the existing literature on the organization as well as primary sources (including a detailed description of Hezbollah’s 2009 ideological “Manifesto”), the study questions the notion of Hezbollah’s “Lebanonization” in the 1990s, arguing that the group—despite becoming increasingly powerful and embedded in the political system—did not give up its “resistance” nor did it show significant signs of “moderation.” At the same time, the book *de facto* rejects simplistic characterizations of Hezbollah as merely an armed or terrorist organization and instead addresses the group’s political apparatus, while also mentioning its wide and complex social network. While this is certainly not the first time Hezbollah’s political development has been analyzed in these terms, the author’s contribution is still valuable as it presents a concise, clear, and informative account of Hezbollah’s role as a political actor.

In parallel to this analytical description of the Shi’i Hezbollah, the book also examines the political evolution of the Sunni Islamist movement through the lens of the Islamic Association, from its founding in 1964 as a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organization to its role in the civil war fighting in support of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The study also describes the organization’s post-civil war political evolution. Here, the Islamic Association’s struggle to find its place in the period following the Taif Agreement and its subsequent marginal political role stand in sharp contrast with Hezbollah’s political ascent in the years of Syrian “tutelage.” The years of Syrian presence in Lebanon in fact kept the Sunni Islamists at bay, preventing them from gaining national prominence and relegating them to marginal players mostly active in the north of the country. With the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2005, there has been a resurgence of Sunni Islamist groups, an important trend that Rabil examines in his study. However, the focus of the book rests mainly on the Islamic Association and its evolution, while the rise and multiplication of other Islamist groups—especially the proliferation of Salafist groups in post-2005 Lebanon—is only treated marginally.

Rabil’s analysis of the political evolution of the two most representative historic Islamist organizations within Lebanon is particularly interesting because Rabil draws historical, ideological and political similarities between the Shi’i and Sunni Islamists within Lebanon, framing the rise of Islamism at the national level in the context of Lebanon as a “society of resistance.” In making this claim, the