

Salafism in Lebanon

by [Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

Feb 20, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alslft-fy-lbnan\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

Robert Rabil is the LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science.



Brief Analysis

Facing a leadership crisis, Lebanon's Sunnis must contend with a vigorous Salafi movement in which the activist and jihadist elements are increasingly hard to distinguish from each other.

On February 13, Robert Rabil addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Rabil is a professor of Middle East studies in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science and the Lifelong Learning Society (LLS) Distinguished Professor of Current Events. He is the author of [Salafism in Lebanon](#) (<http://press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/salafism-lebanon>) (Georgetown University Press, October 2014). The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Salafism can be traced back to the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. In Arabic, the word *salaf* technically means forefathers. But Ibn Taymiyyah employed the term to refer to the seventh-century companions of the Prophet Muhammad, and believed that Muslims should strive to return to the way of the *salaf*. Along with this concept, Ibn Taymiyyah is credited with establishing the practice of *takfir*-- the declaring of Muslims deemed insufficiently Islamic as *kuffar*, or infidels.

Wahhabi Salafism rose in prominence in 1932 after becoming the official religion of the new kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thereafter, a cross-fertilization of ideas and ideology occurred between Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Saudi universities. The MB used religion as a political ideology to mobilize society, but after the Saudi royal family was challenged in 1979 with the seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque, the kingdom shifted toward support of a more quietist form of Salafism.

Salafism today can be separated into three main categories: quietists, activists, and Salafi jihadists. The quietists focus on Islamic education and *dawa*, or propagation, while the activists, unsatisfied with Arab rulers, want to exert power and influence on their governments. As for Salafi jihadists -- epitomized by Usama bin Laden -- they believe

the way to return to the golden age of Islam and Islamic society is through holy war, or jihad.

SALAFISM EMERGES IN LEBANON

Salafism was introduced to Lebanon in the 1940s by a cleric named Salem al-Shahal, who embraced the Wahhabi strain and traveled throughout Akkar in northern Lebanon, visiting more than three hundred impoverished villages to promote the ideology. Salafism found traction thanks to various factors, including the Arab world's humiliating defeats by Israel in 1948 and 1967 and the subsequent discrediting of Arab nationalism.

During the civil war and heyday of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, from 1990 to 2005, Salafi organizations proliferated. From the Syrian perspective at least, Lebanon's Salafists were of the quietist ilk, and hence apolitical and nonthreatening. Promotion of these groups also held the benefit of diluting the unity of -- and weakening -- Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community. Long before the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State, Islamists in Lebanon established an Islamic Salafi emirate between the years 1982 and 1985.

In fact, the first notions of Salafi jihadism can be traced to the emergence of al-Haraka al-Islamiyah al-Mujahida (the Islamic Jihad Movement) in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh. The ideology was honed during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and thereafter through transnational Salafi networks' contact with al-Qaeda. After the 2003 toppling of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, militants from the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon -- most prominently Ain al-Hilweh -- traveled to Iraq to wage jihad against the Americans. The Syrian regime exploited the Salafi ideology to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq, turning a blind eye to the fighters transiting its borders who were fighting alongside al-Qaeda.

POLITICAL PAWNS

February 14 marks the tenth anniversary of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, the leader of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community. His killing was a blow to the Sunnis, including Salafists. The Syrian occupation had weakened Lebanon's Sunni community, and Hariri revived it, both politically and economically. Immediately following his death -- a killing widely believed to have been perpetrated by the Alawite Assad regime and the Shiite militia Hezbollah -- meetings were held between Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to support the Salafists in Lebanon. Large amounts of money flowed into Lebanon during the 2005 elections, through Salafi organizations such as Qatar's Sheikh Eid Charity Organization and Kuwait's Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage.

Hariri's son Saad, who assumed the mantle of Sunni leadership in Lebanon, maintains an ambivalent relationship with the Salafists. On the one hand, he needs their parliamentary electoral votes, with Salafists maintaining a strong foothold in northern Lebanon since the 1940s. On the other, he is a moderate who seeks to keep Salafi jihadists at arm's length. During interviews, one leading Salafist figure complained that Saad Hariri only used Salafists when he needed them, giving them no cover in return. Other Salafists have expressed similarly negative sentiments toward Hariri. As Salafism grows in Lebanon, it is increasingly dividing the Sunni Muslim community and diluting its communal power.

Salafists have also been an important factor in Syria, where they were among the first to support the 2011 rebellion against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Salafi jihadists from Ain al-Hilweh helped train fighters from the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Other fighters in Syria continue to receive logistical support from Tripoli, Lebanon. Meanwhile, Hezbollah -- which is fighting alongside the Assad regime in Syria -- has become the "Party of Satan" to Salafists, who complain that Sunni leaders like Hariri have taken no effective action to limit Hezbollah activities targeting Sunnis in Syria.

It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between Lebanon's activist and jihadist Salafists. During Syria's 2012 battle

of al-Qusayr, for example, several activist Salafi scholars issued fatwas stating that jihad in Syria is an Islamic obligation. Today, a new level of fluidity exists between Salafi activists and jihadists. Making this transition in Lebanon is both common and troubling.

SUNNIS IN CRISIS

The Sunnis' problems in Lebanon reflect the Sunni crisis in the region: a crisis of identity. At one time, Lebanese Sunnis were the champions of Arab nationalism. Now they are aligned with -- or an appendage of -- Saudi Arabia. Nor do Lebanese Sunnis have an overall mobilizing or organizing principle, with the only relatively unifying element for the community being widespread opposition to Hezbollah and its actions in Syria. Lebanon's Sunnis are even divided on how to address this problem.

The Sunnis in Lebanon also have a crisis of leadership. Saad al-Hariri is currently living in exile in Paris, where it is exceedingly difficult for him to create and maintain communal solidarity and esprit de corps. At the same time, to maintain his tenuous hold on leadership, Hariri needs votes -- leading him, as intimated before, to rely ever more on the growing cadre of Lebanese Salafists.

Sunnis likewise find themselves amidst a religious crisis. Dar al-Ifta, or the Juridical Office, traditionally has represented the Sunni religious establishment in Lebanon. But the Salafists are outside the organization's purview, preferring instead their own institutions and mosques with no relationship whatsoever with Dar al-Ifta. Such a separate allegiance is not just a problem for Lebanon but also for the rest of the Sunni world.

Complicating matters, Lebanon is now a target of Salafi jihad, a threat that has paradoxically brought a certain degree of unity to the divided country. Lebanese soldiers have been captured and killed by Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, creating heightened popular support for the army. Although some Salafists do speak out against the army -- because it is seen as collaborating with Hezbollah against Sunni militants -- most consider the army a redline. In any event, a common perception exists that Lebanon is in danger, and few want sectarian tensions to escalate. The experience of the Lebanese civil war remains etched in the collective consciousness.

Lebanon can no longer be separated from Syria; the conflict has spread to the border towns of Aarsal, Brital, and Ras Baalbek, next to the Qalamoun region. In the face of this threat, somehow, despite friction, the Lebanese army and intelligence are working together against Salafi jihadism. The United States must continue providing its military aid to support Lebanon's fight against Salafi jihadists and the extreme Salafi organization ISIS. If Lebanon or its army collapses, by default, the Salafists will become the foot soldiers of the Sunni community.

This summary was prepared by Kelsey Segawa. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

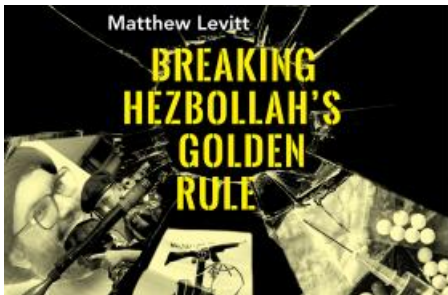
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)