Jihad in the City

Tawhid was a militant Islamist group which implemented Islamic law at gunpoint in the Lebanese city of Tripoli during the 1980s. In retrospect, some have called it “the first ISIS-style Emirate.” Drawing on 200 interviews with Islamist fighters and their mortal enemies, as well as on a trove of new archival material, Raphaël Lefèvre provides a comprehensive account of this Islamist group. He shows how they featured religious ideologues determined to turn Lebanon into an Islamic Republic, yet also included Tripolitan rebels of all stripes, neighbourhood strongmen with scores to settle, local subalterns seeking social revenge and profit-driven gangsters, who each tried to steer Tawhid’s exercise of violence to their advantage. Providing a detailed understanding of the multifaceted processes through which Tawhid emerged in 1982, implemented its “Emirate” and suddenly collapsed in 1985, this is a story that shows how militant Islamist groups are impacted by their grand ideology as much as by local contexts – with crucial lessons for understanding social movements, rebel groups and terrorist organizations elsewhere.

Raphaël Lefèvre is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. He is the author of Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (2013). His PhD thesis was awarded the Best Dissertation Prize by the Syrian Studies Association as well as the Bill Gates Sr. Prize. He was previously a Research Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s office in Beirut, where he published on Middle Eastern politics and Islamist movements.
Jihad in the City

*Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli*

Raphaël Lefèvre
University of Oxford
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Writing this book was a long and arduous process. It took me seven years, half a dozen different drafts and many headaches to reach the stage when I would finally be satisfied sending my manuscript out for publication. Unquestionably, my determination to give my best throughout this drawn-out process stemmed from my passion for Tripoli, its people and history. I did not expect to develop such a passion for Tripoli. In fact, my first trip there in 2012 resulted from chance. Frustrated by my inability to return to Damascus to conduct the doctoral research I had just started on Syrian history and politics, I set my eyes on this Lebanese city: it not only used to be the coastal hub of Greater Syria but, up until today, remains organically linked to the country and still “feels” Syrian – from its architecture and its food to the family relations and cultural references of many Tripolitans. This book, therefore, is as much the product of the passion I then developed for Tripoli itself as of my older love for Syria, where I briefly lived before the 2011 revolution and underwent experiences which shaped my subsequent life journey as well as my intellectual interests. Before acknowledging the specific individuals who proved key in the elaboration of this book, then, I wanted to highlight the significance of my stays in both Syria and Lebanon’s Tripoli. My emotional connection to these two places has guided this book from beginning to end.

Because this book relies extensively on ethnography, interviews and archival research in Tripoli, I first wish to thank the people who, each in their own way, provided the type of essential support without which this book could not have seen the light of day. I am deeply grateful for the friendship and assistance of many Tripolitans and friends of Tripoli. This includes Mustafa Hajar for his help in locating archival sources; Ibrahim Chalhoub for his aid in setting up interviews; Hassan Mallat and Ibrahim Saleh for their trust and opening up their contact books; Mayez Adhami for giving me access to records of his newspaper, al-Incha; Tine Gade, Marie Kortam, Toufic Allouche and Adib N’ame for all introducing me to the city and helping me to set up a preliminary network of contacts;
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This book started off as a doctoral dissertation which I undertook in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge between 2012 and 2016. I feel incredibly privileged having benefited from the unique combination of complete freedom and thorough guidance provided by my PhD supervisor, George Joffé, who encouraged me to do much fieldwork but also asked for updates and draft chapters regularly. Being a part of the community of Gates scholarship holders also allowed me to forge lasting friendships in Cambridge and I am grateful to my friends Vaibhav, Siddhartha and Danny. During this period, finally, my work benefited from the in-depth feedback on my doctoral dissertation by two scholars I respect and admire, Yezid Sayigh and Glen Rangwala, who acted as my PhD examiners in 2016 and have since then continued to support and encourage me. I look back to the years of my PhD as stimulating and formative but also fun – and I am grateful to all these individuals for having contributed to making it such a good experience.

Although this book takes my doctoral research as its backbone, the core literatures it addresses and the arguments it makes bear little resemblance to what my thesis looked like. After getting my PhD from Cambridge, I moved to Oxford University as the Rank-Manning Junior
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Research Fellow in Social Sciences at New College and then as Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations, a period during which I was fortunate enough to focus exclusively on engaging with theory and on writing this book. Throughout the slow and sometimes confusing process of revision which took place in Oxford, I was lucky to count on the presence of my colleagues and friends Kevin Mazur and Stathis Kalyvas, who each in their own way provided the mentoring and guidance I needed. The shape which this book took also owes a lot to a manuscript workshop I organized in May 2018 in Oxford. There, the additional comments I received and the discussions which took place helped me to turn my very empirical PhD thesis into a book more grounded in political science. I am incredibly grateful to the scholars who kindly accepted my invitation, took time off to read my draft and actively participated in the event, including Salwa Ismail, Louise Fawcett, Kevin Mazur, Stathis Kalyvas, Jeroen Gunning, Neil Ketchley and Chris Pickvance.

Overall, from the early dissertation stage all the way to the final draft of this book, the manuscript has benefited from many pairs of eyes. Some have kindly taken the time to comment on individual chapters, and here I am indebted to extremely useful feedback, in addition to the participants to my manuscript workshop, by Anne Wolf, Jean Thomas, Hanna Baumann, Rory McCarthy, Stephanie Cronin, Jonathan Leader Maynard, Sidney Tarrow, Doug McAdam, Toby Matthiesen and Morten Valbjørn. Others have shown great generosity by commenting on the entire manuscript. In this respect, in addition to my PhD supervisor and my two examiners, I am grateful to Tine Gade, whose excellent research on Tripolitan politics and society I have long admired, Saleh al-Machnouk, whose intimate knowledge of Lebanon proved insightful, and Mikael Naghizadeh, whose in-depth familiarity with the broader scholarship on conflicts helped me sharpen the manuscript before I finally sent it out. I also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers commissioned by Cambridge University Press, whose feedback on an earlier version was key in helping me improve the manuscript. Finally, as this process took much longer than initially anticipated, I would like to express my gratitude to Maria Marsh, Daniel Brown, Atifa Jiwa and the rest of the team at Cambridge University Press for being so effective but also so kind and patient with me.

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Tripoli, Beirut, Cambridge, Oxford or Aarhus, have accompanied me throughout this long journey. But here I would especially like to express my thanks to my family. My parents Maryline and Sylvain, my two brothers Amaury and Lancelot and my grandmother Jeannine have heard me complain about my book revisions for seven years. By consistently encouraging me to pursue my project until I reached some satisfaction, they gave me the confidence I needed. In addition, I owe to Anne Wolf much more than she knows. During all this time, she has not simply been a very patient partner dealing with my occasional mood swings and providing me crucial support but, as a scholar of Middle Eastern politics herself, has been a fantastic person with whom to brainstorm on a sometimes daily basis about the intricacies of Tripoli in the 1980s and their broader significance. My drive to write this book therefore owes as much to her active presence by my sides as it does to all the Tripolitans whose stories inspired me.
Glossary of Concepts

**Champion of mobilization**: informal leader with such a large and dedicated following in his community that he becomes uniquely placed to activate local solidarities and to channel them into activism, thus drawing community members to the protests and movements he joins.

**Contentious Tripolitans**: this critical mass of Tripolitans across time who mobilize to express primarily local grievances and are buoyed by the ideal of the defense of the city.

**Cultural momentum** of an ideology: the set of transformations in culture (e.g. religious practice, clothing style, social views, artistic genres) which either underpins or helps pave the way for the growth of a political ideology, making it more widely available in society.

**Habitus of place**: the set of local historical, cultural and political narratives specific to a place which become so internalized by local actors that it pushes them to interpret the world through partially local lenses, shaping some of their concerns, beliefs and behavior.

**Ideological artifacts**: works of art meant to indoctrinate society by projecting ideas visually.

**Ideological entrepreneurs**: these highly dedicated figures at the extreme of a movement’s “spectrum of ideological commitment” who are not only motivated by ideology but also go to lengths to mold the nature of activism and of the broader environment around their worldviews, typically by seeking to spread their beliefs to society and to movement members and by lobbying its leaders to make decisions consistent with or, indeed driven by, ideology.

**Ideological entrepreneurship**: the mobilization of worldviews with the aim of translating ideology into action in order to mold movement behavior and society around these beliefs.
Islamo-gangsterism: the involvement by some Islamist movements in those criminal activities and networks which prioritize economic gain over ideological consistency.

Neighborhood Islamism: an Islamist mobilization so rooted in the neighborhood’s fabric that it may be shaped by local solidarities, concerns and antagonisms more than by ideology.

Protest ideology: a corpus of symbols, discourse, practices and infrastructure associated with a specific ideology but which are embraced instrumentally to express dissent because of the contentious potential they are associated with, more than because of their intrinsic appeal.

Sites of transcendence: those sites whose location, shape and history have such salient meanings in society that they hold the potential to enhance mobilizations; both by politically transcending older cleavages to enable short-term but potentially transformative coalitions across class, space and ideology and by emotionally transcending activists who rally there.

Social jihad: involvement in a type of political violence which takes the form of militant Islamism but, at core, remains more shaped by preexisting social tensions than by ideology.

Spatial barriers: those features through which space can hinder broad-based collective action because of physical properties like distance or the built-in environment, but even more importantly because of the socially and symbolically consequential local rivalries, conflicting priorities and different traditions or identities of geographically proximate spaces.

Spatial repression: a calculated attempt by the target of contention to deactivate the resources provided by space for activists, whether through physical infrastructures of support or the social and symbolic local solidarities, identities and emotions that enable mobilization, aiming at turning a “safe space” for activism into a “repressed space” where it is made harder.

Spatially oriented movements: those social movements which are not just based in a space but also oriented toward it, engaging explicitly with local grievances and identities and striving to achieve some local social change – “the local” is what they are primarily about.

Spectrum of ideological commitment: the disaggregated analysis of the strength of commitment of the main factions and figures to their movement’s professed ideology, with implications on whether they will try to steer the movement toward or away from ideology.
Glossary of Concepts

**Stronghold of contention**: a space characterized by its propensity to nurture frequent and sustained episodes of collective action across time.

**Subaltern Islamism**: the readiness and ability of some Islamist movements to court a subaltern base by providing the dominated sections of society with a conduit for their revolt against power structures and by ushering in a new social order in which they grow dominant.

**Sufi jihadism**: a politically revolutionary and socially conservative breed of Sufism whose millenarian religious prophecies can pave the way for the spread of militant Sufi movements.

**Sunni Khomeinism**: a current within Sunni Islamism which advocates for the embrace of the Iranian model; that is, supports the overthrow of secular regimes and their replacements by Islamic Republics featuring clerical guidance over politics and backs Iran’s post-1979 anti-imperialist foreign policy and bid for regional leadership (e.g. Palestinian Islamic Jihad).

**Tales of contention**: narratives putting forward a history of shared struggles and associating a community with a glorified tradition of rebellion which, when revived, help movements signal rootedness, activate local identities and cast activism as a duty in line with local culture.

**Vernacular ideology**: the transmission of a grand beliefs system in the local language of the grievances, identities or cultural and historical narratives which are all specific to a place.

**Vernacular Islamism**: an Islamist discourse cast in and shaped by a local cultural backdrop.
Note on Transliteration

I have used an extremely simplified system of transliteration from the Arabic. I base my transliteration on the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, for instance using the diacritic ’ for the glottal stop *hamza* and ‘ for the consonant *ayn*. But, to facilitate reading, I have not transliterated the *ayn* when it features at the beginning of a word (e.g. I write Ali Eid instead of ‘Ali ‘Eid or Akkawi instead of ‘Akkawi); I have foregone bars and dots above and below the letters and I have kept the spelling of words which have long been transliterated into English in a certain way and have therefore acquired wide recognition that way, even if their spelling is not fully accurate (e.g. Rashid Karame instead of Rashid Karami, Hezbollah instead of Hizbullah, or the Beqaa Valley instead of the Biq’ā).
Maps

1 Map of Lebanon and Syria.
2 Neighborhoods of Tripoli.
3 Main sites of Tripoli.