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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Arab Christians in British Mandate Palestine: Communalism and Nationalism, 1917-1948

Noah Haiduc-Dale

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 221 pp., £65, Hardback

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In recent years, several excellent monographs have been published by historians of the interwar Levant, and the current book by Noah Haiduc-Dale is a nuanced and engaging addition to this field. *Arab Christians in British Mandate Palestine: Communalism and Nationalism 1917-1948* focuses on the process of identification during the British administration of Palestine. It explores the engagement of Palestine's Arab Christians with both Christian and nationalist identities amidst the social, cultural, political, religious and economic changes brought on by the mandate administration and the Zionist movement. The complexities of nationalist and communal ideologies as linked to a new and specific Palestinian Arab identity are analysed in light of the rifts that occurred within and between the Arab Christian communities throughout the mandate era.

Haiduc-Dale takes care to note that his work differs from a recent monograph by Laura Robson (*Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine*, University of Texas Press, 2011) in that Robson's book explains the development and normalization of sectarianism in mandate Palestine and the subsequent political marginalization of Arab Christians. Haiduc-Dale's research focuses less on the making of sectarian communities under the mandate and more on the relationships and tensions within the Christian communities and between self-identified Christian leaders and groups, and both the nationalist and Islamic political leadership. Both books have been grounded by Michelle Campos's *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* (Stanford University Press, 2010) and they can be placed alongside Benjamin Thomas White's recent work on minorities in mandate Syria, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: the Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) and Jacob Norris's new book on colonial development and its effect on the communities in Palestine, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

The book is organized chronologically as Haiduc-Dale stresses certain key historical features of Arab Christians' relationships with national and religious identities during the entirety of the mandate administration. One feature of the book is often overlooked by previous histories that detail Palestine's religious communities: rather than assume the standard colonial narrative that all Arab Christians felt the same way towards the British, the Zionist movement, and communal identity, Haiduc-Dale proves that each denomination interacted with identity in different and flexible ways. In addition, individuals and leaders within denominations did not act in unison on matters of national identity, religious hierarchy and stances towards the government. Haiduc-Dale also takes care to explain that the actions of the religious communities—for example the Greek Orthodox, the Latin (Roman Catholic),

and the Melkite—were not necessarily influenced by doctrine, theology or conflicts over church hierarchy. Instead, elements such as social class played an important role in Christians' responses to the British mandate administration, Zionism, the Arab national leadership and the use of Islam to mobilise resistance to the mandate.

The author makes it clear that the British and the Zionists in Palestine played influential roles in changing the nature of the Arab Christians' communal relations. British policies based upon the Ottoman millet system made inter-communal cooperation difficult, if not impossible at times. Christians and Muslims protested together against the mandate's electoral and legislative policies, which they saw as threats to national unity, throughout the 1920s. Meanwhile Zionist immigration and politics in Palestine created a culture of fear that helped unite the Arab population. British officials and Zionist leaders endlessly analysed Muslim-Christian differences and appeared confused by the coexistence of the Arabs' religious and national identities.

Related to discourses of the mandate, the author points out an interesting discourse of some Christian communities in the early 1930s. In protests to the mandate administration, Christian writers noted that the Arab Christians were a minority in Palestine and should be accorded protection, by right, from the mandatory power. Previously, politically active leaders and intellectuals within the Arab Christian denominations had stressed that they could not be classified as a minority, since they were Arabs first and thus members of the majority population.

Indeed, religion was important to nationalist Christians. The first two chapters detail how Arab Christians often opposed church hierarchy and foreign leadership of the churches. They pushed for communally-oriented political action in order to seek greater local control of church administration; in doing this, they incorporated nationalist and anti-Zionist elements into their demands. By the mid-1920s at the national level, elite and middle-class Christians practiced politics within the nationalist bodies. Still, both Christians and Muslims often cooperated or worked with mandate institutions as well as nationalist organizations in order to further their personal aims or to hedge their bets.

It was not until the increased activity of the Supreme Muslim Council and the appointment, made by the British, of Mufti Hajj Amin Muhammad al-Husayni as its leader that both Muslim and Christian Arabs began to understand the relationship between religion and politics in a new way. Religion had not been politicized by the Arabs in Palestine and more generally under the Ottoman Empire (aside from Mount Lebanon before and after the Egyptian administration and 1860 violence) as a basis from which communities could agitate for either decentralization of administration or for national demands. Only under the mandate administration did sectarian and national identity become conflated. Chapter Three demonstrates that inter-religious tensions rose as Christian critiques of the national movement were portrayed by some politicians and writers as anti-Muslim. However, Haiduc-Dale takes care to explain that the divide between active Christian and Muslim nationalist leaders did not come from one single event and that the urban and village Christian political leadership held a range of views on all political and national issues. Yet despite internal conflict, through the early 1930s numerous writers and political and religious leaders continued to insist on, and enhance, the Arab character of Palestine and of Palestinian Christianity, and a national identity that allowed for the incorporation of both.

In Chapter Four, Haiduc-Dale challenges previous historical assumptions that Christian Arabs had little to do with fighting or supporting the Palestine Revolt of 1936-39. He shows that historians must develop a more nuanced narrative to explain the range of Christian participation and political action during this time period, since the author argues that a substantial number of Christians supported the Revolt despite some Muslim hostility towards Christian communities. Often participation was on an individual level, but Christian

religious leaders also spoke in support of the revolt. He devotes the final chapters to events in Palestine after 1939, specifically noting that many mandate histories do not explore the post-revolt era in detail. In doing so he uncovers an important history. In particular, the changes to the Arab Christian leadership after 1940 led to an increased embrace of communal organisation and nationalism at the same time. The older Christian political leadership, whose members had first established nationalist and non-sectarian clubs and activist bodies and who had demonstrated and written petitions stating their opposition to British control of Palestine, had seen communalism and nationalism as contradictory. However, during the final decade of British administration, the number of Orthodox and other religious societies for activities such as aid and educational opportunities grew and promoted an exclusively Christian nationalism rather than including secular or non-Christian nationalism. They filled important local gaps during the 1940s, providing welfare assistance, establishing cultural centres and offering opportunities for religious education. By 1948 national loyalties again became a point of tension for the Arabs who increasingly oriented themselves communally. During the war for Palestine Zionist troops sometimes treated Christians and Muslims differently based on prior stereotypes of each community, such as allowing the more 'peaceful' Christians to stay in their homes or giving certain individuals and villages advanced warning of the army's actions, while Muslims fled from the approaching Jewish army. Zionist troops also played on the idea that Christian Arabs were fearful of the majority Muslim Arab community, stirring tensions in mixed Arab areas. Haiduc-Dale ends the book by stressing that the social history of the 1940s has been overlooked by historians. Communal relations changed after the revolt ended, and the ways in which these changes impacted the history of the events in 1948, as noted above, would further shed light on the transformations of the Christian Arabs during the latter years of the mandate.

One important analytical problem is the nature of the Palestinian nationalist movement itself. Haiduc-Dale, like other historians, refers to a singular nationalist movement in Palestine. Should the movement be defined in the singular? Indeed, this study suggests that a number of movements existed and it is difficult to categorize the nationalist leadership as acting as one unified, singular movement especially during the early years of the mandate. The language and rhetoric of national identification plays a role in this study, but could be analyzed further to expand upon the notion of separate but often co-existing nationalist aims and movements.

As a small point of contention, the author notes that the pan-Arab *Istiqlal* Party, whose charter was officially made public in 1931, was a driving force behind the Higher Arab Committee decision to declare a general strike in 1936. The party had all but ceased to exist as a party by the end of 1934 and so it is unclear how it could have exerted any influence upon the strike and the beginnings of revolt in 1936.

Haiduc-Dale's use of archival resources is particularly fascinating. Recently, historians of the mandate period have been able to access previously unused archives. The archives of Palestinian newspapers are scattered throughout Israel, the West Bank and Great Britain and a number of titles provide an immense and under-used resource for the mandate era. Often, press research centers on the prominent newspapers such as *Filastin* and *al-Difa'*, but the current book cites a number of less-used titles. Also, the use of a number of mandate archives containing British and Zionist documents in Israel and in Britain have allowed the author to nuance his study of the activities and writings of the Arab Christian communities as much as possible. In large part, the lack of nuanced archival sources for Palestinian history is because the mandate archives are, in general, difficult to access in that no central Palestinian archive exists. Haiduc-Dale accessed various lesser-known newspapers located in Jerusalem as well as documentary files detailing Arab nationalism during the mandate which had been restricted in the Israel State Archives in light of the political situation in Israel.

The topic of the book is, needless to say, huge. An entire monograph could be written on the early 1920s alone. Even alongside Robson's recent book, these studies only scratch the surface of the history of Arab Christians under the mandate administration. Many key events of the 1920s and 1930s, which certainly played a role in the national and communal identification of Arab Christians, are left out of the current book, such as riots in Jaffa and Jerusalem in the early 1930s and reactions to the work and reports of a number of British investigative commissions sent to Palestine. Hopefully this demonstrates that a wealth of scholarship could be forthcoming, which historians of Palestine will certainly welcome.