

The Origins of Syrian Nationhood; Histories, Pioneers and Identity, edited by Adel Beshara, London, Routledge, 2011 xi + 390 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-61504-4

This curious, timely and passionate anthology provides a sweeping historical and cultural account of the formation of modern Syria and Lebanon. Inside this academic analysis lies a perceptive and sensitive description of the complex fabric of an evolving mixed Christian–Muslim population, over an exceptionally transitional 100-year period during the decline of the Ottoman hegemony. Several important biographies are sketched, which ably demonstrate the ambiguous role of individuals within intricate fluid political structures and developments. Weaving together a broad variety of largely historical material, this book explores various social and societal interpretations of the past and warns of the unique and inherent communal challenges of the region, but ultimately suggests an optimistic view and charts a positive trajectory for renewal. It is a sometimes sober volume that bluntly asks rather probing questions, the foremost being what exactly is Syria (politically or socially) and who is a Syrian? Critics will almost immediately spot that the book's title does not exactly match the subject matter. Some may object to the inclusion of so many Lebanese (and other Arabs) in an account ostensibly about Syria. However, the fact remains that the contemporary political boundaries of *al-Waṭan* are fairly modern creations, and simply did not exist in the nineteenth century and before World War One – the period under examination here.

The book has 17 chapters arranged in four sections: “Essential Background”, “The Forerunners”, “The Diasporian Pioneers”, and “Twentieth Century Crusaders”. Almost every contributor has chosen to focus on a specific character from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and all make reasonably extensive use of primary and secondary literature – for example: Stephen Sheehi in exploring Butrus al-Bustani (1819–83) and his contribution to the evolution of Syria as an idea; Thomas Philipp in discussing Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914) and his role in the Arab-Syrian cultural renaissance of the period. Four chapters elucidate the modern and ancient name of Syria, communalism, women, and – interestingly – the diasporic nationalism in Latin America. As well as the Preface and Introduction, the editor provides the concluding entry, a chapter on the Lebanese poet Gibran Kahlil Gibran.

The reader will no doubt consider the text from a multicultural perspective – paying attention to monocultural tropes, exchanges and themes, and civil and civic rights. Since World War Two, both Lebanon and Syria have experienced entrenched administrations motivated by profound ideological imperatives and history has been employed in a very restrictive fashion for very specific political objectives. Scholarship that operates within a narrowly defined confessional or overtly political paradigm can produce a deeply myopic *corpus* that only addresses queries carefully defined by the state apparatus and designed to present the regime (their philosophies, conclusions and actions) positively. However, as has been observed before, when historiography is too tightly regulated by any regime, the common folk will simply cultivate their own historical discourse and meta-narratives. Such popular anaphora will then invariably seep back into mainstream thinking and the official “canon”. Whether one can talk entirely honestly about the past – especially the recent past – remains an open question in both politically sensitive Lebanon and contemporary Syria. One obvious problematic and traumatic topos is the description and assessment of the Ottoman epoch and its relationship to the next phase: European colonialism. Another pertinent conundrum for all students of the late Ottoman era is that of religious institutions, communities and minorities outside Islam: were Christians and Jews persecuted mercilessly by the Turks? Or was this a harmonious, modern, multi-cultural paradise of idyllic Garden of Eden-like proportions? Beshara's primary aim here is to remind readers that the

current geo-political map of the Middle East is not exactly what many early pioneers of Arab nationalism and identity in the region had in mind. He asserts that a regional identity encompassing the entire Arabic-speaking eastern Mediterranean seaboard was envisioned as a viable entity, but that it was lost to Lebanese “particularism” (read parochial politics) founded inside the old Ottoman provincial *Beirut Vilayet*, and also to a broader and more elusive notion of pan-Arab nationalism.

A few criticisms spring to mind. Maps might have been useful for distinguishing the areas under discussion. I would like to have read more about the role of the secularist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in defining the Syrian border during the 1920s and also the 1938 cession of Hatay province to the republic of Turkey. Furthermore, the voices of local Arabic-speaking Jews, who were, after all, an integral component of the social and cultural milieu, might have helped balance out the predominance of Christian perspectives expressed here.

The task of creating and fostering some kind of popular and/or communal historical discourse – one that rises above older national or parochial ideas and impressions – confronts most countries that have emerged in modern times from various cosmopolitan realms. The atrocious and virulent war that raged in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 interrupted and retarded most normative multi-confessional educational and cultural projects (just as the current multi-faceted conflict is thoroughly muddling society inside Syria). However, this thought-provoking view of Lebanese–Syrian relations and regional historiography makes a bold (if at times controversial) and significant contribution to a better comprehension of the Middle East today. Perhaps Beshara's greatest leverage is his geographic distance from Lebanon and Syria: he can claim a degree of intellectual freedom and independence that works enormously to his advantage. *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood; Histories, Pioneers and Identity* is to be praised for its energetic enthusiasm and resourceful approach to a delicate subject.

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