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Beshara, Adel (Ed.). *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, pioneers and identity*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

This book brings together seventeen essays on different facets of the origins, emergence, and uses of the idea of Syria as a nation and its associated nationalist ideologies. The volume takes a refreshing perspective in moving beyond national boundaries to look at how local figures conceived of their land and themselves as a united or “unitable” political space. The work is broken up into four parts. The first, “Essential Background,” includes a chapter on the history of the name “Syria” in terms of its etymology and its uses from ancient to modern times. The subsequent chapter looks at the way communalism interacted with the rise of the idea of Syria. Arnon Groiss concludes that the rise of the Syrian idea came “not at the expense of the communal bond but rather as a ... supra-communal tie” (p. 31). The essays in this section differ from all subsequent chapters in that they analyze broader phenomena.

The remaining fifteen essays analyze the specific or groups of individuals and their places within and contributions to the history of Syrian nationalism. Of these, all but two – on King Faysal of Syria and then Iraq and King Abdullah I of Jordan – are concerned with the literary works of various intellectuals spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The works of each thinker are analyzed for the particular ways in which they used the idea of a Syrian nation and, therefore, contributed to the development of Syrian nationalism in general.

The second section covers the 19th and early 20th century “forerunners” of Syrian nationalism. The writers and journal editors of the arab *nahda* (awakening/renaissance) Butrus al-Bustani, Jurji Zaydan, Khalil al-Khuri, and Rashid Rida are each given chapters, as is the Belgian Jesuit priest Henri Lammens. The intellectuals are treated as foundational figures for the idea of Syria, laying the groundwork for subsequent developments and uses.

Section three examines the role of the diaspora in the rise of Syrian nationalism. The diasporic figures considered in these chapters include Syrian émigrés in the United States and Egypt. A chapter is dedicated to each of the émigrés residing in the United States: Gibran Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhai’l Nu’aymah. These chapters consider how the experience of being abroad enabled these men to promote the cause of Syrian nationalism to foreign governments and sew popularity for the cause of Arab and Syrian liberation among the members of the diaspora communities in which they lived. The two chapters on Egypt involve comparative analyses of groups of Syrian émigrés. Caesar E. Farah examines the works of Farah Antun, Mayy Ziadah, and Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi, who each spent varying amounts of time in Egypt, though Antun was also briefly in the United States. Marilyn Booth’s chapter is the only one of the volume that examines Syrian identity exclusively in reference to women through an analysis of the women’s press in Egypt. Booth examines the differences in the views on Syria held by these women and the local reception of their views and activities in Egypt.

The fourth and final section includes essays on twentieth century contributors to Syrian nationalism. The chapter on the relationship between Syrian nationalism and King Faysal, who had briefly been ruler of Syria in 1920, takes a critical look at his role and portrays him as supporting Syrian nationalism more out of utility than conviction. The chapter on King Abdallah of Jordan examines his diplomatic designs to have a single state created in Greater Syria out of the colonially divided Arab states and why his project failed to unite the region anew. Three chapters examine the father and son paragons of twentieth century Syrian nationalism Khalil and Antun Sa’adeh. A single chapter looks at their conceptions of Syrian nationalism while abroad

in Latin America. A chapter written by Sofia Sa'adeh, the eldest daughter of Antun, outlines the ideas and goals of her grandfather, Khalil, in regards to a united and independent Greater Syria. The final chapter of the book looks at how Antun Sa'adeh built off of earlier "elementary" ideas of Syrian nationalism to "[mold] them into a systematic system of thought and a definite program of action" (p. 360). The predominant focus on the Sa'adehs is not entirely unwarranted. Adel Beshara, the volume's editor, has worked extensively on Antun Sa'adeh and his Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). The SSNP is one of the only political parties to carry the legacy of both the pre-colonial and colonial era advocacy for a united Syria described earlier in the volume. The overwhelming focus on the Sa'adehs, however, seems more a function of the editor's scholastic interests than strict historical significance.

Stephen Sheehi's chapter on Butrus al-Bustani provides one of the more nuanced analyses in the book. Taking an approach similar to that of the other authors while also being more explicitly theoretical, Sheehi draws on Marxian/Gramscian theory to conceptualize the contribution of Butrus al-Bustani and thinkers like him as providing "a language and paradigmatic logic to a new epistemology of modernity" (p. 61). More broadly, the essays in this volume are all consistent with an Andersonian¹ view on the construction of nationalism and its associated national myths and can be viewed as case studies of Anderson's paradigm in action.

There is, however, a certain contradiction underlying many, though not all, of the chapters in this work, most likely due to the framing of the book by its editor. The volume's essays are each attempts to analyze the social phenomena that are part of the history of the idea of Syrian nationhood. This implies conceptualizing the notion as historically contingent. Despite this fact, there is a primordialist presupposition that appears to run through many of the essays. The Syrian nation is spoken of as having ancient roots whose emergence in the modern era in a nationalist form is treated as historical necessity. Modern Syria is repeatedly associated with the ancient and classical notions of Syria dating back to the Assyrian empire and is assumed to have re-emerged after centuries of "being burdened by ... Ottoman domination and ruthless exploitation" (p. 1). According to Beshara's introduction, by the time of Syrian nationalism's earliest appearances in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, "Hardly anyone called the country by its correct name. Instead of the name by which it was historically known, that is Syria, it was often called *Bilad al-Sham*, a loose term that did not always have the same geographical meaning" (p. 1). Throughout the book, "Syria" is put in a contrapuntal position as both the Western and, apparently, the "correct" name for the state—as opposed to the Islamic name *Bilad al-Sham*, whose use is indicative of "national stagnation" (p. 1). The volume's introduction appears to be largely responsible for this framing. The origins of Syrian nationalism treated in this volume are treated as "a national revival in a very limited sense" (p. 4) due to internal divisions among and between the communities. This notion of revival, however, necessarily implying pre-existence, is mutually exclusive with the notion of the "origins of Syrian nationhood" dated in the early nineteenth century by the volume's chapters.

Despite a set of approaches clearly influenced by Benedict Anderson's idea on the historicity of nationalist imagination (in other words, the ultimately arbitrary basis of their

¹ The understanding of nationalism elaborated by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* which views nationalisms as the product of collectively imagined communities that extend beyond simple face-to-face relations any individual might be limited to. Nationalisms qua imagined communities became imaginable in the modern era through print capitalism which saw the diffusion of printed media written in spoken languages that would later become national languages of specific communities.

existence and delineation), the Syrian nationalist mythology seems to be taken as fact. The concern with discourse comes at the near total expense of the treatment of material conditions in Syria. While economic factors do appear in the work (e.g. Groiss, Sheehi, and Zachs), these are components of arguments about individuals and ideas. Nationalist discourses are but one component of Anderson's view of nationalism. Anderson also took into account the material conditions that make those discourses possible and give them social force. With little to no consideration of economic factors, the essays in this volume imply the Syrian nation's ahistorical reality, while simultaneously outlining its historical construction.

Another issue with the volume is the near constant reference to the influence or inspiration of "Western ideas." With the exception of Kaufman's chapter on Henri Lammens and Shehadeh's etymological chapter, each contributor analyzes the role of Arab figures relative to Syrian nationalism. Unfortunately, virtually every author relies on a variation of the same argument: it was exposure to western ideas that enabled a nationalist sentiment to emerge. This connects with the overall treatment of Syrian nationalism as a historical necessity. While each figure treated throughout this work has a distinct or unique role in the history of Syrian nationhood, by treating the idea of Syria as a primordial phenomenon lying in wait, it somewhat denudes the objects of each chapter of their constructive, productive roles. Furthermore, it emphasizes European exceptionalism at the expense of more contemporaneous, indigenous roots and causes. Sheehi's chapter on Butrus al-Bustani is a notable exception in the volume by making a more *au fait* argument in which al-Bustani is treated as part of the "indigenous intellectuals" (p. 61) who contributed to the formation of a modern epistemology that would be the basis for a local nationalisms.

Lastly, there are two practical issues with the volume. First, the reader deserves a more carefully edited volume. Minor typos abound throughout and Gibran Khalil Gibran is repeatedly and, at points, consistently spelled as "Kahlil." There are also a few instances in which works that appear in the chapter footnotes do not appear in the collective bibliography at the end of the volume. These are mechanical issues that do not detract from the force of the arguments made, but they do lessen the pedagogical value of the book, if only slightly.

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