PART THREE

NATIONAL USES OF OTTOMAN HISTORY
OTTOMAN SAIDA AND PROBLEMS OF A LEBANESE ‘NATIONAL’ NARRATIVE

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1. The Emergence of National History

The challenge of constructing a national historical narrative faces many societies that emerged in modern times from multi-national empires. Historians in Ottoman successor states have found various ways of relating the old empire to modern issues and identities, ranging from angry or dismissive condemnation of the Ottoman past, to selective incorporation, and even to nostalgia. This paper looks at issues in recent Lebanese historical writing about the Ottoman period, using three studies of Ottoman Saida as its material.

Lebanese writing about the country during the Ottoman period has in large part focused on the histories of the Mountain-based Ma’ni and Shihabi emirates for the earlier centuries, and the Mutasarrifiyya for the later decades. Typically these were seen as precursors to the modern Lebanese state. Although the Emirate and Mutasarrifiyya existed within an Ottoman framework, national-minded historians tended to treat Ottomans as ‘outsiders’ to the Lebanese story on par with other ‘outsiders’ represented by Europeans. The coastal cities such as Saida — where most Lebanese citizens today live — were marginal or peripheral to this nascent Lebanese national narrative. True, narratives regarding the supposed Phoenician ancestry of modern Lebanon could symbolically incorporate the coastal cities into an historical vision of the country. But with respect to the immediate political antecedents of the modern Lebanese state, the largest coastal cities

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