
The basic argument of the study is that before the rise of Arab nationalism there developed a secular Syrian identity, which grew quite independently from European national ideas, out of local conditions, economic circumstances and intellectual and political activities. The author starts out with the thesis, that the mainly Christian, bourgeoisie in the fast rising Beirut recognized the need of Beirut’s integration with its hinterland for economic reasons. This idea was then propagated by the intellectuals living and working in Beirut, who were partially financed by the merchants. Hence the subtitle *Intellectuals and Merchants...* — a clear reference to Leila Fawaz’ work on “Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth Century Beirut.”

The development of a Syrian territorial identity during the 19th century is traced also through the use of the term “Syria” replacing increasingly the term “Bilad al-Sham;” following the impact of Ibrahim Pasha’s occupation of the region between 1831 and 1841; the Ottoman administrative reorganization of the region in 1865 into a single Vilayet of Syria, the development of a new history reconstructing a Syrian (cum Arabic) past beyond and before Islam; a new genre of narrative literature that dealt with historic figures such as Zenobiya of Palmyra and Halwa bint al-Azwar, putting them into the service of a Syrian identity. In this way the author can demonstrate how a new, modern identity could develop which was secular, territorially defined, and culturally Arabic and which united all inhabitants regardless of religion as ‘Syrians’. This identity could indeed be called proto-national, because it lacked a political nationalist program demanding independence from the Ottoman Empire. The argument the author makes is, in the end, convincing because she has done solid research and provides substantial evidence. Her argument is certainly much better than that of A. Havemann who covers large parts the same grounds as she does, but tries to co-opt many of the same intellectuals as essential for the development of a Lebanese historiography.

But the book has its weaknesses of the conceptual as well as the editorial sort. The author elaborates on the concept of proto-nationalism only to dismiss it then and suggest terms such as “notion”, “idea” etc.:

(…) by using the term “proto-nationalism” we imply that the development of the Syrian identity in the nineteenth century eventually carried into the twentieth century and led to the development of Syrian nationalism. Although it seems that this is indeed the case with the Syrian region and it is in fact the reasoning behind my perception of this phase as proto-nationalism, this assumption requires further research, which is not within the purview of this book. In light of this I [sic] minimize the use of “proto-nationalism” and mainly emphasise terms such as “notion”, “idea” and “concept” for describing the initial roots and stages of evolving self-identity. Only in reference to the stages after this self-image had been moulded and had become part of a growing and defined identity, do I introduce the term “Syrian identity”. (p. 5)

Why bother at all with “proto-nationalism” when such vague terms as “notion”, “idea” and “concept” seem to do better? (“We” and “I” are supposedly referring to the same author and reflect just sloppy editing). The author insists that this

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“Syrian identity”, though intended to include the whole population was essentially a Christian-Arab identity and declares: “since my main aim is to stress the creative aspect of Christian-Arab intellectuals . . .” (p. 184). She has a point when she claims “that for perhaps the first time, Christian Arabs whose families had lived as recognized and integral parts of the Ottoman Empire were seen more clearly as ‘the other’ by the Muslim majority”. But beyond that there existed an intense discussion and intellectual exchange with Muslims which casts doubt on her claim of the exclusivity of a Christian-Arab identity. In fact, she herself gives repeatedly examples of the closeness of developments in the Muslim and Christian community, for instance on p. 59 where she speaks of Muslim-Christian commercial cooperation concerning the integration of trade between Beirut and its hinterland; p. 67 where she speaks of a network of relations between the Christian community and the educated Muslim community in Beirut; p. 106 where Muslim and Christian intellectuals collaborate to prevent escalation of sectarian tensions; p. 110 where Rashid Pasha lays foundations for the development of a Syrian identity to create unity among Muslims and Christians.

At the end of the book (p. 182) she posits the question why most of the intellectuals involved in creating the new Syrian identity were Greek Orthodox. I would firstly question whether that is so clear, on the one side one of the intellectuals she quotes most extensively, Miḥāʾ Ill Mišqā was Protestant, after his family had been Greek Catholic for a long time. On the other hand somebody like Gūrīṭ Zaydān was Greek Orthodox, but decidedly pan-Arabist in his writings. Both men, by the way were soundly antireligious. Secondly the author’s partial answer, to her own question does not make sense: She claims that because the Greek Orthodox Patriarch was “local” while the head of the Churches of the Greek Catholics and the Maronites was in Rome, i.e. the Pope, the Greek Orthodox population had a greater interest in Syrian identity than the latter. It was at the end of the 19th century that the Greek Orthodox patriarch was “local” while the head of the Churches of the Greek Catholics and the Maronites was in Rome, i.e. the Pope, the Greek Orthodox population had a greater interest in Syrian identity than the latter. It was at the end of the 19th century that the Greek Orthodox patriarch was not at all perceived as part of this local identity because he was Greek and not Arab, a circumstance which was to lead to considerable conflict between clergy and community. The Maronites, however, had always been a territorially defined and restricted minority and focused on Mt. Lebanon. While the Greek Catholics had actually been the first to clamor for a local autonomy and identity a hundred years earlier in Damascus. She also seems not to be able to make up her mind about the majority-minority status of Christians. She claims that Beirut became the first city in the region with a Christian majority (p. 46). Twenty two pages later she ascertains that the Christians in Beirut: “as minority trying to live peacefully and in prosperity in the midst of a Muslim majority, the stratum saw itself as an integral part of local society” (p. 68 and also 80). Peculiar and perhaps only ill-formulated is the following observation: “In most cases the members of the [Christian middle] stratum preferred to see themselves as more closely connected to the indigenous community among which they had lived for centuries and to which their families and activities were tied” (p. 70). Does this imply the Christian Arabs were not indigenous? In which case they should always, and not only recently, have been considered as “the other”.

The author states (p. 43) that the beginnings of the process of the rise of Beirut is hard to date and that in the 1820’s there was still no sign that the town was to become an important centre of Syria. I beg to differ. This process was already kicked off in 1813, it had little to do with the downfall of Sidon, as she claims,