

FROM THE EDITORS

In a modern Near East consumed by excesses of uniformity and order, diversity and multiple identities are often seen as perverse, inauthentic, and divisive. Thus the term "Levant," traditionally used in reference to lands around the Eastern shores of Mediterranean, often distinguished from strictly "Arab" and "Muslim" lands, has come to carry a number of negative stigmas. British historian Albert Hourani wrote that "being a Levantine," meant living

... in two worlds or more at once, without belonging to either; it is to be able to go through all the external forms which indicate the possession of a certain nationality, religion, or culture, without actually possessing any. It is no longer to have one standard of values of one's own; it is to not be able to create but only to imitate; and so not even to imitate correctly, since that also requires a certain level of originality. [In sum, being a Levantine] is to belong to no community and to possess nothing of one's own; it reveals itself in lostness, pretentiousness, cynicism and despair.¹

But the peoples of the Levant viewed things differently. To them Hourani's pejorative "not belonging ... and not possessing things of one's own" meant exactly the opposite; it meant being at home with everything, and being at one with everyone—all the time and all at once. The Levant, wrote Fernand Braudel, is a great civilizational "turntable"; a place where peoples get "caught up in a general tide of creative progress," where "civilization [...] spreads regardless of frontiers," where "a certain unity [gets] created among [...] countries and seas," and where beyond the violence and bloodshed there emerges "a story of more benign contacts: commercial, diplomatic, and above all cultural."² Indeed, most Levantines recognized themselves in Braudel's mirror: sophisticated, urbane, cosmopolitan mongrels, intimately acquainted with multiple cultures, skillfully wielding multiple languages, and elegantly straddling multiple traditions, identities, and civilizations. In Braudel's tradition, Levantines deemed *their* Near East a crossroads and a meeting-place where peoples and times blended without dissolving each other, and where languages, histories, ethnicities, and religions fused without getting confused.³

¹ Albert Hourani. *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 70-71.

² Quoted by Franck Salameh, "Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, Vol. 3, N. 1, March 2012, 46. See also Fernand Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011), 96.

³ Michel Chiha, *Le Liban d'Aujourd'hui (1942)*, (Beyrouth: Editions du Trident, 1961), 49-52.

Amin Maalouf, one of the most articulate cantors of this chameleon-like Near East, described his Levantine exemplar as one who would not be pinned down to narrowness of name, language, ethnicity, or religion. The narrator of one of his historical novels, *Leo Africanus*, described himself as,

*[...] Hassan, the son of Muhammad the scale-master; [...] Jean-Léon de Médici, circumcised at the hands of a barber and baptized at the hands of a pope. [...] I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. [...] I come from no country, from no city, from no tribe. [...] From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin, and Italian vulgari, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none.*⁴

Endorsing this same fluid, expansive identity model during the early decades of the twentieth century, Lebanese intellectual Antun Saadé (1904-1949) depicted the Levantines as

*the fountainhead of Mediterranean culture and the custodians of the civilization of that Sea, [... A Sea] whose roads were traversed by [Levantine] ships, and to whose distant shores [the Levantines] carried [their] culture, inventions, and discoveries.*⁵

More recently, in an impassioned indictment of the nationalist rigidity and cultural authoritarianism that have plagued the Near East of the past century, Syrian thinker Adonis (b. 1930) expressed hope in the restitution, rehabilitation, and valorization of the Levant's millenarian multicultural traditions. "I have no doubt in my mind," he wrote,

*That the lands that conceived of and spread mankind's first Alphabet, the lands that bequeathed and taught the world the principles of intellectual intercourse and dialogue with "the other," the lands that bore witness to processions of the world's loftiest civilizations, from Sumerians to Babylonians, and from Egyptians to Phoenicians and Romans; these lands that spawned monotheism, humanism, and the belief in a single compassionate deity; these fertile and bountiful lands, I say most confidently, will no doubt shake off [...] nationalist intransigence and immobilism, and will hurtle skyward toward modernity and progress.*⁶

It is in this spirit that *The Levantine Review* proposes to present, reflect upon, and reveal the Near East—both to itself, and to those studying it and being captivated by it. As Boston College's flagship peer-reviewed interdisciplinary Open Access Electronic Middle East Studies journal, published twice a year by the Department of Slavic and

⁴ Amin Malouf, *Léon l'Africain*, (Paris: Livres de poche, 1987), 2.

⁵ Labib Zuwiya Yamak, *The Syrian Social nationalist Party* (Cambridge, MA: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 1966), 89.

⁶ Adonis, *Al-Kitaab, al-Khitaab, al-Hijaab* [Book, Discourse, Hijab], (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Aadaab, 2009), 65-66.

Eastern Languages and Literatures, *The Levantine Review* is dedicated to a critical study of the Levant and its contiguous Mediterranean realms, aiming to reconstitute the term “Levant” as a valid historical, geographic, political, linguistic, and cultural concept, and reclaim it as a positive and legitimate parameter of identity. The journal proposes a study of the Near East from a broad, diverse, and inclusive purview, with the hope of bringing into focus the larger conceptual, geographic, social, linguistic, and cultural settings of the region.

In line with its commitment to this “ecumenical” purview, *The Levantine Review*’s inaugural issue features new research in a variety of Near Eastern Studies sub-fields and disciplines, dealing with the Levant and the Mediterranean from the perspective of Middle Eastern Studies, History, Political Science, Religion, Philology, Linguistics, and Literature. This first issue aims to set the pace for our mission in the coming years, to advance an inclusive, deep understanding of the Near East, and cast a broad look at the region beyond soothing familiar settings, and prevalent dominant models.

In a Middle East convulsed by the radical changes of the past two years, the present essays, by an international panel of distinguished academics and experts, offer an alternative to prevailing models that seek to homogenize the Middle East into a single linguistic, cultural, national, political, and civilizational mode.

Ben Lombardi’s essay on Turkey and Israel sets the tone. He examines Turkish-Israeli relations in the context of the ongoing profound transformations gripping the Middle East, bringing to the fore the role of a Turkey renewed in its regional assertiveness, poised to act as arbiter and power-broker—a prerogative it had relinquished in the waning days of its defunct Ottoman Empire.

Writing from Jagiellonian University-Krakow, Arkadiusz Płonka’s article explores aspects of modern spoken Lebanese political language. Specifically, Płonka takes a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of the informal use of dialectal interjections, animal calls, and hypocoristic names in the political language, slogans, and graffiti—as well as the conflict over language—in the civil war and post-war eras of modern Lebanese history.

Mordechai Nisan’s article, also dealing with Lebanon and the Maronites, is a provocative and important addition to the corpus of this country and its old Maronite community’s checkered past and turbulent present days. Based on extensive research, interviews, and personal recollections of major actors in Lebanon’s 1975-1990 wars, Nisan weaves a fascinating narrative of a small Middle Eastern people’s ambitions, betrayals, and failures, presenting a story of modern Lebanon that only he, with his keen historian’s eye, his master storyteller’s craft, and his insider’s intimacy can bring to life.

Drawing on Arabic, French, English, and dialectal Lebanese sources that few specialists can bring to bear, Robert Rabil’s essay on Hezbollah and the Islamic Association offers one of the most lucid, meticulous, and profound explorations of Lebanon’s Islamists, their doctrinal and theological motivations, and their ideological and political craft. With

authority, balance, and elegance Rabil parses the complexities of Hezbollah and the Islamic Association, analyses their *raison-d'être* and their political vision, and reveals the strategy of their contemplated appropriation and transformation of the Lebanese state, its "mission," and its national prerogatives and decision-making.

In a communiqué issued at the close of the "International Council of the Arabic Language" convened in Beirut this past March, the organizers called for the "enactment of laws at the national, pan-Arab, and pan-Islamic levels to punish those who treat the Arabic language carelessly, or exclude it from governmental, institutional, commercial, educational, cultural, media, and personal life."⁷ Though protecting the Arabic language is a worthy and honorable endeavor—as is the cause of protecting, say, French, Tamazight or isiZulu for that matter—there is something to say about the profoundly disturbing nature of policies—or even mere empty threats—to punish people on account of their language choices. Dua'a Abu Elhij'a's essay offers an alternative to this sort of cultural and linguistic *dirigisme*, and attempts to examine the dialectal languages of the Levant as legitimate speech-forms, worthy of being not only spoken, but formally written and taught as well. Her work on language varieties in the Levant, and the emergence of new writing-systems for the codification of Levantine dialectal forms is a monumental, refreshing contribution to the sociolinguistics and cultural history of the region. For a topic often fraught with religious and political emotion, Abu Elhij'a offers a lucid, sober, and ideologically innocent discussion of the present and future of the Arabic language and its spoken variants. She touches on the idea of writing as an ancient phenomenon, arguably a Near Eastern apanage, being restituted in modern times to benefit a slew of Levantine spoken languages. Abu Elhij'a's detective-like linguistic investigation of the spoken Levantine languages—as a trend away from Classical written Arabic—resembles the work of Medieval Europeans codifying their nascent Romance Languages as distinct from the Classical Latin standards of their times.

A congenital hybridity and a deviation from prevailing orthodoxies emerge from this issue of *The Levantine Review*. This kind of hybridity—and a recognition of it—has also infected modern Israel, as Rachel Harris's review essay demonstrates. Even in its early, pre-state incarnations, when Zionism stood unchallenged, Israel (or then the Yishuv) emitted a "cultural humanism" narrative of complex, multi-layered identities, integrating—not shunting—the Levant's disparate ethnicities. Harris's essay alludes to one of the most eloquent exemplars of this spacious conception of modern Israeli identity, one taking stock of Israel's relationship with its Levantine impulses, and one that was already being extolled in Benyammin Tammuz's 1972 novella, *The Orchard*. In his fictional narrative Tammuz tells the story of two brothers, Daniel, a Jew, and Obadiah, a Muslim, feuding over an orchard in Ottoman Palestine. The tale of *The Orchard* is in many ways a familiar one: two brothers competing for the favors of a puzzling woman, Luna, unearthly, impenetrable, timeless, like the land, born to a Jewish family, but raised by Muslim Ottoman surrogates. Tammuz's story, like the works parsed

⁷ *The Beirut Document*, Final Statement of the International Council of the Arabic Language, Beirut, March 2012, <http://www.alarabiah.org/index.php?op=3&poo=302&pooo=2>

by Harris, is a tale of love, loss, violence, and hope; a duel between past and present; history and amnesia. As in the Levant, uncertainties abound in *The Orchard*, pressing the reader to constantly question the protagonists' origins; are they Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Arab, or a mash up of all; offspring of the same crucible, children of the Land of Canaan:

Whether [Luna] was a child of a Jew or a Muslim, for her I was both; for I was of the first [new Jewish] settlers and spoke the language of the Arabs like one of them. With the passage of time, my face had grown tanned and my skin sunburned, and I looked like one of the Arab fellaheen, who are perhaps the surviving traces of those primitive Jews who never went into exile and gradually became assimilated with the country's Muslim inhabitants. Perhaps Luna thought that I was the ancient link connecting Obadiah's race to Daniel's; for, if truth be told, she, in her deafness and dumbness, faithfully served both together, sharing her favors between them—if not equally, then according to the degree of the demands and firmness of each, according to their changing temperaments during the changing days.⁸

If anything, this inaugural issue of *The Levantine Review* points to a reality that very few of those parsing the Near East are willing to recognize; namely the fact that, rather than being a collection of coherent cohesive unitary nation-state formations, the current Middle Eastern state system is an alien model superimposed on loose “geographic” regions made up of different communities, social, ethno-religious, linguistic, and cultural groups that have seldom had common characteristics warranting their being cobbled up together into single unitary states. External, regional, and international conditions may have contributed to the emergence—and some even argue the endurance—of the current state-system in the Middle East. However, enduring as it may have proven to be, the current Middle Eastern state-system is not a natural order of things, nor is it the sole prism through which one must continue to view and envision the region.

In a recent Washington Institute panel discussion on the future of Syria, Middle East historian Fouad Ajami noted that modern “Syria is [...] a contrived entity in many ways,” and if today’s Alawi hegemony is ever to come undone, there is precious little that would stand in the way of the unraveling of Syria into its original constitutive elements; an Alawi State, a Druze State, a Sunni-Muslim State, and a Christian State.⁹ Ajami’s assessment is not an aberration; it is a thoughtful, sober, and untainted reading of the modern Middle East. A mere sixty years ago, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, or Palestine didn't even exist as conceptual constructs—let alone did they exist as unitary state formations. There is no telling that they would go on existing sixty years from now.

⁸ Benjamin Tammuz, *The Orchard*, (Providence, RI: Copper Beech Press, 1984), 62.

⁹ The Washington Institute, *Syria, U.S. Leadership, and the Direction of Change*, May 6, 2012. http://www.livestream.com/washingtoninstitute/video?clipId=pla_941df399-2c9b-4437-9ab4-112ebb4b0739

In 2003, former Iraqi dissident, Kanan Makiya, wrote that the new Iraqi state that he yearned for had to be “demilitarized, federal, and non-Arab” in order for it to be viable. Those were strong fighting words that angered many romantics and Arab nationalists; they were also difficult words issuing from one who cut his political teeth in the ranks of Arab nationalist formations. Yet Makiya’s proposed blueprint remains the only workable formula for the mosaic of cultures, languages, and ethnicities that is the Near East; a preserve of Arabs and non-Arabs alike, who would be ill-served not coming to terms with their inherent diversity and multiplicity of identities.

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