



BOOK REVIEWS

***Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution*, Are Knudsen and Michael Kerr (eds);
London: C. Hurst & Company, 2012. 323 pp. \$29.95**

Reviewed by Franck Salameh

Since the end of World War I, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the emergence of the current state system, the Middle East has been racked with military conflict and political turbulence, at times adrift on quests for political frameworks to absorb and manage the region's cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Lebanon, for all its perplexities and defects, seemed to have found a workable formula, some ninety years ago. Lebanon's power-sharing system," says Michael Kerr, "has proved to be one of the most resilient and enduring forms of government the region has known" since the emergence of the current state system; something none of Lebanon's neighbors have yet been able to attain. Today, as Arabs from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf clamor for equality, freedom, and representative institutions, casting a searching gaze over Lebanon's successes (and failures) may be instructive, and indeed salutary, for a region in transition facing mounting transformational challenges, and scraping for reform, suffrage, and order.

"Lebanon has the task of transmitting to the Western world the faintest pulsations of the Eastern and Arab worlds," wrote Lebanese parliamentarian, Kamal Jumblat, some seventy years ago.¹ Lebanon has also "the task of intercepting—before anyone else—the life ripples of the Mediterranean, of Europe, and of the universe, in order to cast them and retransmit them [... to the Middle East's] realms of sand, mosques and sun."² This is an element of an "Eternal Truth" claimed Jumblat. Yet in the thicket of the "Arab Spring" three-quarters of a century later, Lebanon, with its models for both order and disorder, seems to be overlooked.

Are Knudsen's and Michael Kerr's *Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution* (2012), a collection of essays parsing Lebanon and gauging its "life ripples" since the end of its decades-long occupation by neighboring Syria (2005), aims to redirect attention to

¹ Camille Abousouan, "Présentations", *Les cahiers de l'Est*, Beirut, Lebanon, July 1945, 3.

² *Ibid.*



this small “unique spot in the world”; a country “at once old and young” in Jumblat’s telling; “the Alpha and Omega [...] to which the world owes values, ideas, and institutions.”³ Marshaling a veritable “who is who” of leading experts on Lebanon, spanning the disciplines, and mining the political, cultural, and social landscape of this small Mediterranean nation, Knudsen’s and Kerr’s volume calls for drawing lessons for the transformations gripping the Middle East since September 11, 2001. Surprisingly, absent from this otherwise exhaustive volume is a discussion of the history of ideas and the “myths of origin” in Lebanon—arguably among the most enduring hot-button questions in the clash over identity in this deeply divided society. Assessing the feuding identity narratives of Lebanon and their historical, cultural, and intellectual references—most notably the Phoenicianist Arabist split—cannot but lend clarity to the enigmas that are the political structure and juridical foundations of the Lebanese state. Nevertheless, this book remains an important work for our time, written and organized with depth and breadth and class, and much deserving of attention and reflection.

In a world riveted to the happenings of the “Arab Spring” and its messy aftermath, a Lebanon pushed to the sidelines is unwise, say Kerr and Knudsen: The Beirut Spring, as it were, took place in 2005, and may have been a harbinger to regional events in this second decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, a Middle Eastern State System in transition today, may have begun in the Beirut Spring of 2005. The authors of this volume suggest as much, and they summon local, regional, and world actors to heed Lebanon’s experiment, learn from it, and lend support to its fragile power-sharing endeavors.

The essays in this compilation further demonstrate that the overlay of identities, histories, and opposing narratives in Lebanon, crammed in a restrained geographical space, may have compelled this country’s varied political collectives to devise innovative frameworks of coexistence—often uneasy coexistence—but nonetheless frameworks of power-sharing and cohabitation that can serve as a starting point for the mending of a region in upheaval, a region defined by continuously contested histories and identities.

Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution is indispensable reading not only for those seeking to understand how seemingly ungovernable fractious identities *can* be governed, and indeed can thrive. This is an exhaustive, sophisticated, and unique reference book on Lebanon as a window to the Levant, and to the feuding identities of the Middle East at large. It is a lucid, illuminating compilation that offers much needed catharsis and relief from a body of traditional analyses and interpretations of the region that often fall short, and mislead more than illuminate.

³ Kamal Jumblat, *Les années cenacle*, Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Nahar, 1997, 99



***Lebanon; A History, 600-2011*, William Harris; Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 360 pp. \$34.95**

Reviewed by Franck Salameh

William Harris's *Lebanon; A History, 600-2011* is a meticulous, ambitious, and compelling story of Lebanon, from ca. AD 600 to the early twenty-first century. Fifteen hundred years of history is a monumentally long and perilous journey that any historian, gifted and competent as he may be, would be foolhardy to undertake. Yet Harris promises and delivers history in the *longue durée*, in a gripping seamless narrative, bringing clarity, class, and depth to a story a rare few can tell without disorienting themselves and losing their readers along the way.

From the Christianization of Rome, to the coming of the Maronites to Mount-Lebanon, to the Arab conquests of the seventh century, to the Frankish Crusader and Ottoman eras, ending with the establishment of the modern Middle East state system, Harris excavates Lebanon with discernment, authority, and charm that many historians before him attempted and failed. Diarmaid McCulloch famously wrote in his *History of Christianity* that historians are people who "know a lot" about "not very much." William Harris demonstrates that although "a tiny area only equivalent to large national parks in some Western countries," Lebanon *is* a handful, and the study of its rich tapestry of peoples and narratives is a challenge by any measure. Yet Harris takes on this challenge with erudition, authority, perspicacity and sensibility. In that sense, Harris is indeed a historian who "knows a lot" about "very much," figuring the complexities of Lebanon with the intimacy, confidence, and familiar flair of an old hand.

Exhaustive an investigation as this book may be, Harris does not propose undertaking the mining of fifteen centuries of Lebanese history per se. The book's discerning title promises "*A History*," not "*The History*" of Lebanon, and Harris concedes in the first few pages of his volume that no distinct conception of a discrete coherent "Lebanese political entity" as such had ever been extant to merit "*The*" definitive "*History*." At the very least, Harris notes, no such "Lebanese political entity" existed before the Maronites willed one into being during the late Ottoman period. And so, "*The History*" of Lebanon would have been superfluous both as title and historical inquiry—and that is precisely what the author eschews. Harris does, however, suggest that it was *from* Lebanon—or at least from what in 1920 became Lebanon—and from Beirut to be precise, that a modern pluralist nation-state narrative began emerging in the early to middle nineteenth century.



To the dissonance of communities that constituted the budding Lebanese body politic, and to the controversies rending the modern Lebanese over the essence of their identity, Harris concedes a “natural coherence” to Lebanon’s geography and the political collectives that emanated from it. Furthermore, challenging the norms of scholarship on Lebanon, Harris steers clear off the facile vilifications of political sectarianism—the foundation of modern Lebanon’s political system, deemed by many the root of all ills besetting the state. Instead, and with measure, sensibility, and meticulous attention to detail, and without passing value judgment, Harris traces the origins of the “Lebanese idea,” and “sectarian nationalism” as such, to Maronite monastic and intellectual history, and to the multi-communalism that they spawned. The non-Maronite constitutive elements of modern Lebanon, having been brought into the fold of the Lebanese idea more or less involuntarily, and even reluctantly, over time elaborated their own conceptions of “being Lebanese,” notes Harris. Those identities—or the perceptions of them—often feuded and clashed. But when given the requisite political space, they generally collaborated and coexisted, and ultimately provided the anchor of a cohesive—albeit multifarious—Lebanese collective.

Sectarianism or religiously-derived identities, in Harris’s telling, do not entail religiosity and must not necessarily translate into armed conflict and religious strife. Sectarianism is a valid political framework whereby legitimate, pre-modern national identities that are varied, multiple, dynamic, and shifting—at times even hostile and contentious—can set up bases for national concord.

It is important to read William Harris’s *Lebanon; A History, 600-2011*; not because it skillfully navigates the challenging waters of Lebanon’s histories and identities, nor because it elucidates the perplexities of Lebanon’s sectarian democracy. Lebanon has certainly its burdensome peculiarities and its distinguishing features as a modern state and a federation of identities, and Harris does a fine job interpreting this enigma that is Lebanon—to the specialist and the general reader at once—through deep expert evaluation of a wealth of Arabic and European sources. But Lebanon is also a microcosm of its Levantine neighborhood, and as Harris has shown, the on again off again jostling and reconciling of Lebanon’s communal identities *do* offer a framework for coexistence and nation-building that *can* serve as a template to other fractious national and sectarian communities in the Levant.

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