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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World

Ussama Makdisi

Oakland, University of California Press, 2019, 312 pp., \$29.95 (Paperback)

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The latest book of Lebanese-American historian Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*, published in 2019 by the University of California Press, contributes to the growing literature on non- or anti-sectarian movements and builds upon the anti-primordialist arguments he formulated in his first book. In *The Culture of Sectarianism* (2000), Makdisi argued that sectarianism is a distinctly modern phenomenon born largely from the politicization and instrumentalization of religious identities by imperial actors in late nineteenth century Mount Lebanon. In this latest book, he goes a step further by identifying an actual but ignored history of anti-sectarianism in the Levant, during that same time period. In line with the abundant scholarship that unpacks essentialist understandings and stereotypes about the region and its people, Makdisi's book offers readers a nuanced articulation of the Mashriq's modern history through the lens of religious coexistence – or what he conceptualizes as the ecumenical frame – avoiding orientalist and defeatist tropes or the romanticization of cross-sectarian dynamics.

The book comprises two sections of three chapters each, in addition to an introduction and epilogue. The first section is primarily concerned with tensions surrounding religious coexistence and the question of minorities in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. In Chapter 1, Makdisi examines how Ottoman rulers upheld Muslim supremacy while also distributing privileges to other communities in the Empire. However, in Chapter 2, he discusses how this differentiation evolved with the emergence of the principle of nondiscrimination during the *Tanzimat*. Makdisi goes on to argue that despite growing tensions in other parts of the Empire, religious identity in the Levant was increasingly becoming an agent of diversity and equality rather than one of power and discrimination. The third chapter supports that argument by contrasting ethno-nationalist violence in the Balkans and Anatolian north with the growth of Arab national unity and coexistence in the Mashriq during the *Nahda*.

This rising culture of coexistence between Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs, particularly in the Mashriq, looked to transcend religious difference, as part of a growing movement of secular nationalism characterized by cross-sectarian unity. The book also captures the nuances within that “ecumenical frame”, underscoring the multiple modalities of coexistence that require further study, and the futility of idealizing one ideal type when cross-sectarian

dynamics were still very much bound by unequal, gendered, and conservative practices that “actually denied the secularity and equality of citizens” (8).

The second section of the book investigates the Mashriq following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the advent of Western colonialism. It further demonstrates how the thriving ideals of an inclusive Arab nation during the age of *al-Nahda* were ultimately forced to grapple with European colonial powers’ flawed and disrupting conceptions of borders, sovereignty, and religious identities. Chapter 4 examines various definitional and structural visions of Arab mandate states in the context of British and French colonial pluralism. It shows how imperialist ambitions, problematic understandings of complex local contexts, and attempts to structure nominally independent states compelled the ecumenical frame to take on new forms in the twentieth century. As Makdisi put it, “religious freedom, in a word, became a metaphor for colonial domination” (116).

To illustrate these new forms of coexistence, the fifth chapter compares the differing and overlapping ideological positions of Michel Chiha – one of the architects of the sectarian state of Lebanon – with those of Iraqi-Syrian Arab nationalist Sati’ al-Husri. The takeaways from this conversation are particularly laudable because they show how two local schools of thought (communalism and secular nationalism), albeit with flaws, were theoretically able to transcend their admitted differences and align together on the concept of equality. In light of this, Makdisi underscores in the sixth chapter the extent of the damages posed by the advent of British-backed colonial Zionism on inclusive conceptions of the Arab nation: “The main tragedy... unfolded where politics broke decisively with the region’s Ottoman heritage... It is the story of the destruction of Arab Palestine and the beginning of the end of Arab Jewish communities” (162).

Overall, *Age of Coexistence* contributes to the literature on sectarianism in multiple ways and comes at an opportune time. In October 2019, masses in Lebanon and Iraq mobilized to oppose their rulers, voicing cross-sectarian sentiments and hoisting openly anti-sectarian slogans. As cross-communal mobilizations against oppressive and discriminatory regimes become more frequent in the Arab world, emerging scholarly interests have been appealing to shifting from the study of sectarianization towards that of desectarianization (Mabon 2019, Valbjorn 2020, Gengler 2020).¹

For the past two decades, several authors have been revealing the complex manners by which sectarian dynamics were consistently made and remade by a range of actors – foreign and local – throughout modern history (Makdisi 2000, Weiss 2008, Haddad 2011).² However,

¹ Mabon, Simon (2019). Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17:4, 23-35; Gengler, Justin (2020). Sectarianism from the Top Down or Bottom Up? Explaining the Middle East’s Unlikely Desectarianization after the Arab Spring. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*. 18. 109-113; Valbjørn, Morten (2020). Countering Sectarianism: The Many Paths, Promises, and Pitfalls of Desectarianization. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*. 18. 12-22.

² Makdisi, Ussama (2000). *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Weiss, Max (2010). *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi’ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Haddad, Fanar (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

most studies focus on geopolitical developments, imperialist violence, and sectarian policies (Hashemi & Postel 2017, Salloukh 2015, Hinnebusch 2020)³ with limited insights concerning instances and periods of inter-religious solidarity and anti-sectarianism. Moreover, scholarship on anti-sectarianism, although historically contextualized, has primarily been concerned with the contemporary period. As such, historical non-sectarian traditions in the Arab world remain largely unexamined.

Accordingly, Makdisi's book does the invaluable job of incorporating cross-sectarian social manifestations and traditions into histories of the region and scholarly thought. His work not only contributes to historical scholarship on sectarian identities and communal relations, but also to studies of contemporary social movements in Levantine countries. *Age of Coexistence* thus offers a solid foundation from which to draw upon and explore further emerging questions related to cross-sectarian traditions, mobilizations, and everyday practices.

Beyond its timely contributions, the main strengths of the book are the incisive framing of its analyses, its comparative contextualization, and the debunking of seemingly paradoxical phenomena. Indeed, Makdisi not only contrasts developments in the Mashriq with growing ethno-religious nationalism and violence in northern parts of the Ottoman Empire, but also provides illuminating parallels to these anti-sectarian dynamics through a discussion of anti-racism in the United States and anti-communalism in South Asia. By situating both realities within the larger "incomplete, paradoxical, and often contradictory nineteenth-century project of equal citizenship" (12), this astute juxtaposition, far from equating the realities of black slaves in America to those of non-Muslims in the Ottoman world, seeks to challenge orientalist arguments that profess an alleged uniqueness to the Middle East.

As such, the book should be commended for its ability to resituate the Mashriq within the broader global context and the overlapping social and political changes of its times. This perceptive and internationalist framing goes a long way in refuting and demystifying neocolonialist propositions about the uniqueness of the region and the psycho-cultural inferiority of its people. By bringing to light the global project of equal citizenship and its contextual nuances and ramifications, distinctive anti-sectarian, anti-racist, and anti-communalist experiences are interwoven into a comprehensive broader picture.

Moreover, *Age of Coexistence* stands out with its abilities to unpack historical contexts characterized by seemingly contradictory events, such as the Damascus massacre of 1860 and the founding of the secular *madrassah al-wataniyya* of Beirut in 1863. Indeed, the book navigates and reconciles divergent historical developments through the author's skills at carefully disentangling the region's complex and reemerging paradoxes. Through his holistic and grounded approach, readers are able to make sense of multilayered phenomena that may

³ Hashemi, Nader & Postel, Danny (2017) Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15:3, 1-13; Salloukh, Bassel F., et al. (2015) *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. Pluto Press; Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2020) Identity and state formation in multi-sectarian societies: Between nationalism and sectarianism in Syria. *Nations and Nationalism*. 26: 138-154.

seem detached from one another yet are part and parcel of a period characterized by these incongruities.

Two points of critique could be made in relation to the author's conceptualization of the ecumenical frame and its exploration. First, a discussion of the class dynamics that shaped the ecumenical frame and its proponents could have been addressed more comprehensively. While the elitism of intellectuals from the *Nahda* era is raised, it's unclear how this translates to the broader population. More specifically, an investigation of the effects of vertical inequalities on processes of socialization that aided or limited the reach of non-sectarian sentiments would have been a useful addition to the text. How did material and socio-economic realities at the individual level impact the character of inter-religious circles? Such a discussion could have expanded the reader's understanding of the accessibility and reach, or lack thereof, of secularist dynamics.

Second, the conceptual boundaries of the "ecumenical frame" come off as too broad, encompassing varying social manifestations, from religious coexistence to overt anti-sectarianism. However, most examples provided fall under the prism of inter-religious or non-sectarian manifestations, with few overtly challenging religious categories or calling for the systemic abolition of sectarian politics. Conversely, one could contend that these initiatives should be thought of as anti-sectarian because, if understood within their contexts, they qualify as audacious and bold challenges to the status quo. Such argument could potentially be made to justify the conceptualization of the term, however this discussion felt lacking.

Overall, *Age of Coexistence* adds to Makdisi's growing list of invaluable scholarly contributions. The book is highly recommended for established academics and students alike. Social scientists investigating sectarianism, historians of the Islamic world, and postcolonial scholars would all appreciate the book's substantive framework and significant findings. Faculty members across departments will certainly enjoy teaching several chapters from this book to their students. The text is sufficiently accessible for those unfamiliar with scholarship on sectarianism, but interested in the modern history of the Mashriq, and beyond.