
Reviewed by: James A. Reilly

This collection of essays looks at the origins and development of the Syrian national idea from the 19th century through the mid-20th century. Twelve of the 17 articles focus on the pre-1920 period, i.e., prior to the establishment of the modern Syrian state under French auspices. Most of the articles focus on specific thinkers or activists, beginning chronologically with Butrus al-Bustani and ending with Antun Sa’adeh. The quality of the contributions is highly uneven. One of them even shows evidence of plagiarism (explained toward the end of this review).

The best of the articles examine the lives and careers of their protagonists in the context of their specific time and place, and in light of wider questions linking intellectual history to issues of modernism, nation, gender and/or diaspora. The strongest of the book’s four sections is Part Two, “The Forerunners,” whose contributors discuss al-Bustani, Jurji Zaydan, Khalil al-Khuri, Rashid Rida and Henri Lammens. Authors Stephen Sheehi, Thomas Philipp, Fruma Zachs, and Eyal Zisser contextualize and explain the different ways in which these thinkers and educators formulated and understood the concepts of Syria and of Syrian identity. The contributors place these historical figures in their Ottoman, Egyptian and (for Lammens) French imperial political and social contexts, and they demonstrate the ways in which these personalities’ views and commitments related to their life experiences and social positions. Marilyn Booth and the late Christoph Schumann make equally valuable contributions in other sections of the book, in their respective studies of the women’s press of Egypt and the Syrian diaspora in Latin America. Booth demonstrates how Syrian national identity in the Egyptian women’s press was negotiated, elided or expressed along with other categories of collective categorization and belonging, and both she and Schumann explicitly deal with the relationship between Syrian identity and diaspora. For his part, Schumann uses as his examples the contrasting approaches adopted by Brazil-based Khalil Sa’adeh and his son Antun, founder of the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP).

Some other articles, although less interesting analytically, are useful as references. These include the two in Part One, “Essential background.” Lamia Rustum Shehadeh traces the ancient and modern usages of the name Syria, and Aaron Groiss argues that the emergence of modern Syrian identity was a new, 19th century way to express an older Orthodox Christian identity in the Syrian context. There is indeed something to Groiss’s argument, but since it is rooted in an understanding of intellectual and social change that privileges “borrowing from the West,” it shortchanges the complex social transformations and modern migrations that pushed, for example, al-Bustani and Zaydan to explore the Syrian idea. Two articles in Part Four, a section oddly titled “Twentieth century crusaders [sic],” also may be useful for quick reference. Muhannad Salih reiterates the oft-told tale of Faysal b. Husayn’s brief tenure in Syria, and the impossibility of Faysal’s diplomatic position vis-à-vis the conflicting demands and expectations of his followers and putative followers, on the one hand, and British, French and Zionist ambitions for geographic Syria, on the other. Oddly, though, the article appears to have been written in something of a scholarly vacuum, in that it disregards work of the past 15 years (starting with James Gelvin’s) that explores the crosscutting social and political currents within Syria that complicated Faysal’s brief tenure. The late C. Ernest Dawn’s article details Abdullah I of Trans-Jordan’s attempts to create a greater Syrian kingdom during the 1930s and 40s. Dawn recounts inter-Arab political and diplomatic jockeying around this issue, which came to naught with the formation of the Arab League in 1945 and the crisis posed by the impending end of the Palestine Mandate. He offers no general conclusion, but readers are left to consider how the “Syrian idea” was no match for political realities, including the absence of a convincing “Arab Prussia,” a lesson that would likewise be driven home to Arab nationalists 20 years or so later.
The rest of the book’s articles are generally poor — often polemical, analytically superficial, hagiographic (particularly regarding the Sa’adehs), and sometimes inaccurate or badly written (i.e., uncorrected grammatical and spelling errors). At its worst, one article (by John Daye on Mikha’il Nu‘aymah) plagiarizes Wikipedia in n. 60 (p. 208) where a text lifted from Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Lebanon_Mutasarrifate, accessed 10.25.13) is presented as Daye’s summary, but for the sake of misdirection is falsely attributed to Albert Hourani (without a page reference). Many other notes in Daye’s piece do not have page references either, a fact that ought to have raised a red flag in the editing process.

The organization of the entire collection, and the tone of editor Adel Beshara’s writing on the Sa’adehs, suggests that Antun and his party the SSNP represented the apex of the early Syrian idea. Beshara’s apologetic tone notwithstanding, it is hard to read his summary without concluding that Antun Sa’adeh’s political outlook was very much an expression of 1930s-style authoritarian nationalism, including “scientific” racial theorizing and leadership fetishes.

When all is said and done, the question of whether Syria really is a nation or mainly exists just as a national “idea” remains open today. The best of the articles in this collection will help readers to assess and understand the circumstances that gave rise to various expressions of the Syrian idea.

James A. Reilly is Professor of Modern Middle East History in the Department of Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto. He can be reached at james.reilly@utoronto.ca.