
Reviewed by Maya El-Darzi

*Outright Assassination: The Trial and Execution of Antun Sa’adeh, 1949* by Adel Beshara is an in-depth piece examining the circumstances surrounding the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) leader’s death in a detailed interdisciplinary context. Although Sa’adeh’s case has been studied before, Beshara argues that current scholarship merely provides “a cursory treatment of the saga as part of a general history rather than the thorough analysis it deserves” (xv). Instead, Beshara argues for a re-interpretation of the events, taking into account the broader politics that “overlap, compete and clash, drown or reinforce each other in legal controversies” (xv). Moreover, Beshara’s analysis transcends the boundaries of chronology, and examines the regime and individual participant behavior – “their minds, motives, morality, deeds, and standing” under international and domestic law (xv).

Dividing the book into three general parts, Beshara spends chapters one and two providing historical and political framework for Sa’adeh’s trial and execution. Because of Lebanon’s diverse demographic landscape, political figures have often disagreed over the country’s identity in relation to the rest of the Middle East. In this context, Beshara introduces Sa’adeh and his ideology, and traces the evolution of the party until the end of World War Two. Beshara then highlights the confrontation that ultimately caused Sa’adeh’s downfall. On May 1949, Sa’adeh met with Syrian Prime Minister Husni al-Za’im, and discussed possibly manifesting his vision for Greater Syrian. After the meeting, Sa’adeh then wrote an expose, which was eventually published in *al-Nahar* newspaper. The Lebanese government under President Bechara Khoury read the expose, and charged Sa’adeh with treason against the state.

The second section, comprised of chapters three to six, examines the trial, execution, and the aftermath. The Khoury regime denied Sa’adeh several requests, such as the ability for a lawyer to review the evidence and compose a defense, etc. But despite the legal violations, the court ironically did follow certain formalities, specifically allowing a Greek Orthodox priest to bestow the final rites upon Sa’adeh. In the aftermath of the execution, Beshara also conveys the various opinions of political leaders in Lebanon, as well as the international community. While western nations, like France and the U.S., applauded the elimination of a fascist threat, Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, for instance, recognized the injustice surrounding the Sa’adeh trial, and accused the government of corruption. As an added plus, Beshara also analyzes several different conspiracy theories surrounding Sa’adeh’s trial. In the final section, chapters seven and eight, Beshara continues to show the repercussions of Sa’adeh’s execution within Lebanon, focusing on the Khoury regime, the SSNP, the military, and other entities. Finally, Beshara discusses Sa’adeh’s legacy, tracing his initial popularity, to his downfall, to its later resurrection in the 1970s.

Beshara’s study contains a number of strengths – most notably his use of various sources in the absence of court records. Indeed, the Lebanese Military Court in Beirut claims such court records disappeared during the 1982 Israeli invasion. Leaving no stone unturned, Beshara explores Lebanese press and periodicals, examines personal accounts and memoirs, as well as reviews previous studies in the original Arabic. Although these sources, individually, hold various biases, Beshara examines them on a broad scale, balancing extreme opinions, and reconstructs an objective story. In addition, Beshara includes several excerpts from such sources, which not only enriches the text, but also reinforce his claims, and strengthens his argument.

Beshara could have considered including a brief synopsis, in the early chapters, regarding both Christian and Muslim reception of the SSNP theory. Indeed, Beshara discusses the Lebanese Establishment and the
response of the upper class typified by the Zaim, but he mentions very little of the common man’s reaction to Sa’adeh’s ideas. Did the people see this as a compromise between Lebanonism and Arabism? Did the ideology mend any sectarian cracks among the different religious groups? Besides *Outright Assassination*, Beshara has completed several studies surrounding Auntun Sa’adeh and the SSNP, laying a wonderful foundation for English scholarship on the subject. Filtering any of Beshara’s biases, Levantine scholars should not only review *Outright Assassination*, but also conduct their own research, in hopes of stepping closer to the truth surrounding the Sa’adeh saga.

*Outright Assassination* is great for students already familiar with identity politics in a Levantine context, as well as those who have already heard of Antun Sa’adeh and his political party. Beshara successfully analyzes the trial and execution, while combining history, law, domestic and foreign politics, and other disciplines. Indeed, throughout the chapters, Beshara takes the time, and traces the history of a certain law, clarifies motives of the Khoury regime or the Zaim, attempts to piece together the final moments of Sa’adeh’s life as intimately as possible. As the first book in English to fully analyze the Sa’adeh saga, *Outright Assassination* truly is a welcome contribution to the field of Syrian studies due to its comprehensive analysis of such a significant event. Although Antun Sada’ah tragically died, his memory continues to live as SSNP flags fly in the wind on the streets of Hamra. People everywhere, old and young, continue to shout with pride and hope, “Tahya Souriya!”

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