Book Review: Nationalist Strains in the Work of a Seasoned Social Historian


Reviewed by James A. Reilly

Abdul-Karim Rafeq needs no introduction to Syrianists and to historians of Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This collection of three articles is a reiteration and summary of major themes in Rafeq’s mature work. Their intellectual significance is that they operate within an updated Syrian Arab nationalist paradigm to reinterpret elements of Ottoman and early Mandate era history in Syria.

From his early career, Rafeq focused on eras and aspects of Syria’s Ottoman history that earlier generations of nationalist historians had patronizingly dismissed as emblematic of stagnation, backwardness and tradition (tradition in the “bad” sense of historical immobility). In 1966 Rafeq’s first book, on the rise of the ‘Azms in the eighteenth century, explored the dynamics of regional politics and (controversially) the emergence of a kind of Syrian political identity in the century before the era of modernizing reform in the Ottoman Empire. In the 1970s and 80s, Rafeq was prominent as a pioneer in the use of *shari’a* court registers for studying Syria’s Ottoman-era social history. In this capacity he assisted and encouraged international scholars and helped to raise the profile of Syrian Studies.

The book under review builds on these interests. The first article or chapter focuses on Syrian Arab consciousness during the pre-Tanzimat Ottoman centuries. The next chapter discusses agrarian relations in the Syrian countryside during the Ottoman period. The final chapter analyzes the leadership and outlook of the northern Syrian guerrilla movements against encroaching French colonial rule in the period 1919–1921. The chapters feature sparing references to other authors’ publications, but the first two include extended quotations from relevant literary and archival primary sources. The third chapter includes references to memoirs and to French archival sources.

*Mahattat fi Tarikh Bilad al-Sham* engages wider controversies implicitly but not explicitly. These controversies revolve around questions of collective consciousness and identity. Against a viewpoint that national identities are modern “inventions,” outcomes associated with modern state formation and with the dissemination of print culture, Rafeq maintains that Syrian Arab identity had already developed form, meaning and expression prior to the Ottoman Tanzimat. To build this argument he explores the writings of prominent Syrian (or Shami) ‘*ulama*. Far from being “stagnant” (as claimed in the older nationalist stereotypes of the Ottoman era), Syrian Arab intellectual life in the early Ottoman centuries was critical, dynamic, and engaged. Rafeq identifies proto-nationalist themes in their work, including a strong sense of ethnic and linguistic consciousness and of moral/doctrinal superiority (in *shari’i* terms) expressed against Ottomans (the Arwam, or people of Rum). Furthermore, Shami ‘*ulama*’ demonstrated a commitment to justice
expressed by noblesse oblige and local loyalties, sentiments that led urban ‘ulama’ to support Syrian peasants against their predominantly Rumi oppressors.

A “national” theme is detectable in the second chapter on agrarian relations, although here the connivance of Arab or Arabized Syrian-Ottoman elites (like the ‘Azms) in the privatization of waqf properties mutes any implicit nationalist dimension of the narrative. However, the article traces a distinct assertion of Syrian localism in the form of the growing prominence of the Shafi‘i legal school in adjudication of waqf property transactions against the official Ottoman Hanafi madhhab. The latter part of the chapter emphasizes attempts by Europeans and consular protégés to acquire land in Syria in the 19th century. Stressing this issue (rather than, say, the emergence of urban-notable latifundists) may serve to raise readers’ sensitivity to or anxiety about the integrity of the national patrimony.

The nationalist theme is brought to its conclusion in the third chapter. In his discussion of the rural guerrilla resistance in northern Syria against French forces and French rule, Rafeq emphasizes and concludes the following: 1) the rural resistance was led by recognized notables; 2) the leadership was mindful of noblesse oblige including their responsibilities to the poor, to the downtrodden, and to potentially vulnerable religious communities, especially Christians; 3) the rebels’ alliance with Mustafa Kemal (till 1921) and their use of religious (Islamic) slogans was tactical and utilitarian; whilst 4) the rebel leaderships’ commitment to the Syrian homeland and to their Arab identity trumped other potential loyalties, as evidenced by the leaderships’ choices at various key moments.

So, in these chapters, Rafeq offers an interpretation of major issues in Ottoman-Syrian history, including the formation and expression of national consciousness, the nature of local identities and loyalties, and the character of armed rural anti-colonial movements. Given his command of the material, Rafeq’s theses must and will be taken seriously. Yet this book, while a worthy summation of Rafeq’s mature thought, misses an opportunity to engage more explicitly with these broader questions. Direct acknowledgement of competing paradigms could have offered Rafeq’s Arabophone readers a window into the environment in which he, an internationally engaged scholar, works.

On the other hand (the reviewer’s inner voice retorts), authors are entitled to their own agendas. The book’s introduction (by Balamand history department chair Mahmoud Haddad) suggests that Arab historians should learn from Rafeq’s commitment to social history and from his use of Ottoman-era archival materials. The book’s photographic reproduction of some shari’a court documents reinforces this point. So if Mahattat fi Tarikh Bilad al-Sham can encourage new generations of Arabophone historians to study the Ottoman centuries with a sense of seriousness, engagement and openness to new interpretations, Abdul-Karim Rafeq’s legacy is secure.

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