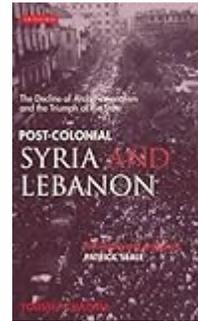




**Youssef Chaitani.** *Post-Colonial Syria and Lebanon: The Decline of Arab Nationalism and the Triumph of the State.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007. xiv + 210 pp. \$72.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-294-3.



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## **Between Ideology and Economic Hardship: State-Building in the Wake of French Colonial Rule**

The years immediately preceding and following French mandate rule have received extensive coverage in the historiography of modern Syria and Lebanon. While much of this research has focused on events and developments during the 1920s and 1930s, local politics on the eve of independence and in its immediate aftermath have attracted much less attention. Few studies, however, have aimed at reconstructing the choices and challenges that local actors had to confront the moment independence was finally achieved.

Youssef Chaitani's *Post-Colonial Syria and Lebanon: The Decline of Arab Nationalism and the Triumph of the State* partially fills this gap in the scholarship by providing detailed insight into the crucial years between 1943 and 1950, during which time the governments of both states gradually acquired true sovereignty. Focusing on the relations between the two states, Chaitani sheds light on the economic interests that helped shape political currents as well as the behavior of interest groups on both sides of the border. Chaitani's analysis of government policies and of public debates as reflected in the local

press reveals that, while Arab unity persisted as an ideological umbrella under which mutual relations developed, conflicting economic necessities and visions obstructed the idea of Syrian-Lebanese union.

Chaitani's study of Syrian-Lebanese relations begins in the fall of 1943, when the struggle for liberation from French rule provided the basis for a unified stance among local elites, and ends in March 1950, when the decision to sever the two states' economies was taken. Chaitani traces the steadily escalating ideological and economic conflict on the ground, and concludes: "[T]he beliefs of the Arab nationalists in Syria and Lebanon were identical in theory, but when it came to negotiating bilateral relations between these two Arab countries, behavior was conditioned by circumstances and national interests that contradicted Arab nationalist sentiments" (p. 163).

In chapter 1, Chaitani highlights the spirit of cooperation that came to shape the relations between the Syrian and Lebanese leaderships in the fall of 1943, when the ascent to power of Bishara Khoury and Riad al-Solh

in Lebanon was received so warmly among nationalist circles in Syria. As both governments were confronting French maneuvers to retain some measure of their mandatory authority, the Syrians considered the newly elected Lebanese government a partner in the struggle for independence and Arab unity. While in the past Lebanese elites had often been accused of granting French prerogatives too readily, for the first time since 25 years the Lebanese and the Syrians met on one side, with the French on the other (p. 20).

Yet, the common front against France—and to a lesser extent against Britain—provided no solutions to many of the conflicts that had shaped local politics over the previous decades, and that now, with independence at hand, came again to the surface. Chapters 2 and 3 address the issues most dreaded by Lebanese nationalists on the one hand, and Syrian Arab nationalists on the other. Among these was, for example, the question of Christian autonomy versus Muslim hegemony, which continuously re-emerged in public debates (p. 50). In addition, the deteriorating economic situation in 1946 brought to the fore the profound differences in the two governments' economic priorities. With Lebanon's economy largely depending on free trade, and Syria's on the production and marketing of basic commodities and agricultural goods, the formulation of a unified policy with regard to customs, taxes, and monetary arrangements was ever more difficult to formulate. Such disagreement over customs policies and the regulation of Syrian-Lebanese trade was not limited to the political class, but was echoed in public opinion as well. Repeated Syrian attempts to influence the Lebanese government through the manipulation of grain exports fostered the belief among larger segments of the Lebanese public that economic separation from Syria had become the only viable option. At the same time, Lebanon's rising standard of living vis-à-vis Syria and Syrian producers' dependence on Lebanon for market access provoked much discontent on the Syrian side of the border. With Syria being described in the local press as Lebanon's "exploitation farm" and "milk cow," the government's position in its negotiations with Lebanon was subjected to greater public scrutiny and criticism (p. 62).

The following years of 1947 and 1948, which Chaitani treats in chapters 4 and 5, witnessed a deepening row between the two states. The Aramco TAPLINE project and the negotiations on monetary agreements with France added to the existing tensions. Even the escalation of the Palestine conflict only temporarily suppressed local discord. These disputes were not limited to the ongoing

ideological confrontations between the various Lebanese, Syrian, and pan-Arab nationalist currents; they clearly echoed the distinct social and economic conditions of Syrian and Lebanese society. While the Syrian economy required protectionist policies in relation to customs and imports, such policies would have inevitably undermined Lebanon's role as regional market place. Furthermore, many considered the multiconfessional nature of Lebanese society incompatible with the vision of a centralized, bureaucratic state that was being advocated in Syrian Arab nationalist circles. As Chaitani observes, in Lebanon, where different communities have to cooperate and live together, it was inconceivable that the state become omnipotent and start controlling the thoughts and movement of every citizen, particularly if that state retained a corrupt administration. Under these circumstances Lebanese commercial sense and initiative would be lost. Worse, in a multi-religious environment, which sect would control the state and its people? (p. 120)

The series of Syrian military coups in 1949, which are dealt with in chapter 6, further complicated relations between the two states. While the instability in Damascus was deemed potentially threatening to the Lebanese state, Syria's military rulers viewed the Lebanese government with varying degrees of suspicion. In addition, the yearlong deadlock of Syrian-Lebanese economic negotiations had pushed frustration among producers and merchants on both sides of the border to new extremes. While these negotiations had permitted vague hopes for Arab partnership to remain alive, the conflicting interests of the respective economic actors ultimately convinced the Syrian leadership that separation had become inevitable. Prime Minister Khaled al-Azem's decision to dissolve the customs union in March 1950 thus signaled the end of an era that many thought would culminate in Arab unity and brotherly cooperation.

Chaitani's study offers a detailed reconstruction of the transitional period from French mandate rule to independence. Furthermore, by refusing—unlike most previous studies—to focus exclusively on Arab unity as the ideological principle dominating local politics, Chaitani provides a significant new perspective. According to Chaitani, ideology was but one of many factors shaping the strategies and immediate goals of local political actors. Equally significant were the concrete interests of merchants, industrialists, and agriculturalists, all of which had to be weighed by those attempting to build and consolidate the structures of these embryonic states.

Such an assessment reveals a new dimension of the

history of French mandatory rule and its immediate aftermath. Chaitani's study reveals the degree to which Syrian and Lebanese economic interests evolved and diverged during the period of French rule, creating issues that now had to be managed by independent nationalist governments. While unity schemes persisted, the ques-

tion of inter-Arab cooperation and partnership was put aside. Due to the various economic challenges that both states inherited under the mandatory regimes, the attention and energies of both governments were increasingly devoted to local concerns.

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