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BOOK REVIEWS

INCONVENIENT REMINDERS: READING A SELECTION OF CLS PAPERS

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The inconvenience of anniversaries is that they force individuals to reflect on events they would much rather forget. Three years into what some persist in calling the Second Republic, an oppressive feeling lingers that politics – the interaction between a people and its governors in a system which tries to define, (and reflect on), long-term goals for a society – are dead in Lebanon. Lebanese politics seem, instead, to have become a sort of sinister ballet of posturing and backbiting, completely devoid of long-term vision. The inconvenience of the fiftieth anniversary of independence is that it serves as an annoying reminder of this.

The words "political society" seemed appropriate when they were used by Albert Hourani in the first Paper on Lebanon put out by the Centre

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for Lebanese Studies (CLS), an independent research institution affiliated with the Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College, Oxford. Pointedly, Hourani used the terms to describe pre-1975 Lebanon, when ideas and institutions still had their place in shaping the country's future.

But if Lebanese politics are, today, increasingly a source of mockery to those stalwart enough to pay attention, things may not always be so bad. At some stage, the ruling class left behind by the war will come to realize that it should establish an order that is both durable and self-perpetuating. Only by injecting some thoughts and ideas into *their* Republic will the representatives of this class turn it into something more than largely an ambiguous amalgam of businessmen, militia leaders, and war profiteers.

But what will the future fault lines of reflection and debate be? A selection of the CLS papers is as convenient a source as any to draw the outlines of an answer, if for no other reason than the fact that the CLS collects in one series thoughts by some of the most notable thinkers on Lebanon. While, overall, the papers are uneven, they are comprehensive. Our selection covers three major subjects which Lebanese leaders will have to come to terms with in the near future: the role of ideas in shaping Lebanon's future; Lebanon's future identity in a post-settlement Middle East; and a new National Pact.

What role will ideas have in Lebanon's future, and how did they shape its past? In the last issue of this publication, the writer Elias Khoury spent a great deal of time discussing the uncertain state of culture in post-war Lebanon. Since that interview, Lebanese authorities have gone out of their way to take action against a number of newspapers for publishing news which, in some way or another, was determined to "threaten the security of the state." On July 9, a novel entitled *The Garden of the Senses*, by Abdo Wazen, was banned, and its 1,600 copies confiscated on the grounds that it "described sexual relations in a shocking and explicit way." Meanwhile, far more "shocking" novels, from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* to the works of the Marquis de Sade, are readily available in Beirut bookstores. That the government seemed to be following no specific censorship policy made the situation only worse, and vindicated Khoury's contention that, as laws stand today in Lebanon, "any policeman can come and censor Shakespeare."

In their response to the banning of the *Garden of the Senses*, some 200 cultural figures meeting at the Beirut Theater noted that the decision "damaged the image of Beirut which was, and remains, a city of freedoms, and a cultural laboratory for ideas and for original [cultural] experiments." The first step in the control of ideas is their sterilization, the methodical undermining of innovation. Two of the CLS papers, in particular, show how alien this process was at different times in post-independence Lebanon: Nadim Shehadi's *The Idea of Lebanon: Economy and State in*

the Cénacle Libanais, 1946-54 and Chibli Mallat's *Shi`i Thought from the South of Lebanon*.

The Cénacle Libanais was founded in 1946 by a young intellectual named Michel Asmar, according to Shehadi "to mobilise Lebanese intellectuals, to 'rouse them out of their apathy' in order to devote themselves to finding concrete solutions to Lebanon's problems." Over the years, leading Lebanese and international political and intellectual figures, including Michel Chiha, Hamid Franjiyyeh, Philip Taqla, George and Alfred Naccache, Taqieddine al-Solh, Kamal Junblat, Constantine Zurayk, Denis de Rougemont, Jacques Berque, Nadia Tueni, Andrée Chedid, Ounsi al-Hajj, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, presented talks before the Cénacle.

The close ties between the Cénacle and one of the leading thinkers, and figures, of Lebanese independence, Michel Chiha, had a lasting impact on the forum's political philosophy. Shehadi notes that participants in the Cénacle tended to support the vision, most clearly enunciated by Chiha, of Lebanon as a "Merchant Republic," open to East and West, and endowed with a liberal economic system free from government meddling. In time, however, Chiha's supporters moved in the direction of President Chehab, with his penchant for government-imposed order and planning in the conduct of public affairs. The Cénacle came to reflect this tendency as well and, Shehadi remarks, both the *laissez-faire* policies of the Khoury and Chamoun periods and the more centralized policies of Chehabism "were present and represented in the Cénacle."

But whatever economic and political system the Cénacle reflected, and granted the brilliance of a large number of its *conférenciers*, the forum was, ultimately, in the mainstream of the Lebanese system. In Shehadi's words, the Cénacle's vision was "essentially the Christian Lebanese nationalist vision," and yet, by the 1960s, he notes, "Arabist groups started taking it seriously after the philosopher René Habachi became involved and 'opened up' the Cénacle to various ideas." Most of those who spoke before the Cénacle were members of Lebanon's ruling hierarchy, whether ministers, deputies, civil servants, or intellectuals. What made the forum so stimulating, however, was the fact that Lebanon's prewar ruling class, for all its faults and elitism, was a far more secure, enlightened, worldly, and, diverse group than what emerged after the war. Lebanon was seen as part of both a region and a world, and its role in both was discussed and debated. Reading through Michel Chiha's essays of the 1940s and 1950s, for example, one is surprised by the extent to which he writes of events outside Lebanon. His perspective, and that of many of his contemporaries, was global, not parochial. Lebanon had a destiny as a crossroads for ideas, particularly those of Europe and the Arab world; it was not, as it has become today, a dead end with appeal only to the aficionados of *la petite politique*.

Even more important was that the formulation of ideas was perceived as a step in the policymaking process, and the interplay between thought and action was ever present. Intellectual forums continue to exist in Lebanon today, and are intended to provide some sort of link between ideas and political action. For example, former prime minister Salim al-Hoss heads the *Nadwet al-`Amal al-Watani* intellectual grouping, while the current interior minister, Bishara Merhej, belongs to the *Dar al-Nadweh* grouping. Yet both forums suffer from the fact that, although they are linked to influential politicians, they do not emanate from where the true power is in Lebanon. For some sort of new Cénacle to come into being – the notion sounds hopelessly farfetched at present – it must be intimately tied in to Lebanon's new power structure, and yet independent and above it. Moreover, it could only come into being if Lebanon's new leaders develop a sense of security that public debates on Lebanon's future will not threaten the positions they fought fifteen years to take over. The problem, however, is that were Lebanon to witness a return of trained and educated emigrants, a necessary prerequisite to any economic and intellectual rebirth of the country, it would only further increase the insecurity of the present rulers.

If, by virtue of the background of its participants, the Cénacle tended to open itself more towards the West than towards the Arab world, Chibli Mallat examines the thought of a Shi`a community in South Lebanon which looked almost solely towards its brethren in the East. The world Mallat describes was at the opposite end of that of the Cénacle, but in its own way underscored Lebanon's almost inevitable role as a source and nexus of the region's ideas. Mallat's paper, arguably the best in the CLS series, works on two levels: it is an intellectual history of both the Sidon-based journal *al-`Irfan*, and of the thoughts of three leading Shi`a religious figures, Shaykhs Muhammad Jawad Mughniyyeh, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, and Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddine; and it is an account of the interplay between the overall condition of the Shi`a community in Lebanon and the Middle East, and the political (and religious) writings of the three figures.

For our purposes, we can concentrate on the journal *al-`Irfan*, which, in Mallat's words, "like the Conférences du Cénacle . . . epitomize[d] an era, and an area." Founded in 1909 by Ahmad `Aref al-Zein, *al-`Irfan*, "protected by the Lebanese freedom of the press, became the point of convergence of Arabic speaking Shi`i writers throughout the century." As Mallat notes, "more significantly for contemporary times, *Al-`Irfan* also became the voice of the new Shi`i revolutionary movement which emerged from Iraq in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution."

The importance of the journal as both an observer and actor in the politics of Iraq and Iran is brought out by two events described by Mallat.

The first is the 1966 visit by *al-`Irfan*'s editor, Nizar al-Zein, to Najaf, where he spent about an hour and a half with the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. The significance of the apparently uneventful encounter is that it came at a time when Khomeini was keeping a low profile in Iraq. As a result, Mallat notes, "it was left to *al-`Irfan* to give indications of the religious leader's importance," during a period when very little was otherwise known about the future Iranian leader.

The second event occurred in October 1969. The Iraqi Ba`th regime, in order to support an alternative to the Great Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, with whom it was in conflict, sent the *`alim* Ali Kashif al-Ghita to Lebanon to act as a representative of the Najaf *ulama*. *Al-`Irfan* responded by publicly attacking the Ba`th representative and reaffirming its support for Muhsin al-Hakim. Less than a year later, when Muhsin al-Hakim died, the funeral turned into an act of defiance against the Ba`th regime, and *al-`Irfan* "echoed the messages of sympathy that came to Najaf from the followers of Hakim throughout the Shi`a world."

If the Cénacle's role was to provide a free forum for Lebanon's ruling elite to reflect on the Republic, *al-`Irfan*'s providing an outlet for writings on Shi`a affairs was an equally important, if less publicized, indication of the vitality of an exchange of ideas in a community that had little stake in what was being debated in the upper echelons of the state. Both forums also reflected Lebanon's role as a place were diametrically opposed political philosophies and intellectual traditions could coexist, and moreover have significant regional implications.

This naturally raises questions about the external dimension of Lebanon's relatively free intellectual environment. In both cases, it is the Lebanese system – it has been repeated enough times – which allowed for the free flow of ideas, both from and towards East and West. Today, however, there seems to be no clear concept of Lebanon's regional role as a propagator of ideas. Will Lebanon be able to rediscover its role as the democratic alternative in the Middle East? Do Lebanon's leaders have any intention of once again making Lebanon a "laboratory for ideas?" Lebanon is caught today between two authorities: a business class eager to benefit from the economic revitalization of post-war Lebanon, and having a predilection for order and good regional relations that intellectual liberty continually threatens to undermine; and a former militia class, which arose from the debris of the war, and which has no experience in, or sympathy for, pluralism.

Whatever the answer to these questions, they will almost certainly impact on the region. This leads us to a second major future fault line of debate which is confronting the current Lebanese leadership: Lebanon's role in the Middle East, and, by extension, the world. We can look beyond Lebanon as simply a clearing house for ideas, to ask what role it will come