

Ussama Makdisi. *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World.* Oakland, California: University of California Press. 2019. 296 pages. ISBN: 9780520385764.

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Conventional narratives of the nineteenth century tend to regard the Middle East as a geography of an age-old sectarianism. The fact that scholarly interest mostly focuses on sectarian violence obscures a profound culture of coexistence in the Middle East by implying an intrinsic fanaticism in this ethno-religiously diverse geography. Embracing a dialectic approach to the traditional historiography, this book excavates the other side of the coin, and reveals a sinking into oblivion story of a political culture which valorized coexistence, namely the ecumenical frame.

The author's goal was to write a chronology of coexistence dating back to the late Ottoman reformist era which flourished in Arab provinces during *nabda*, was shaken by European colonizers' emphasis on ethno-religious differences, nationalized by major intellectual figures after the colonization era, and finally challenged by Zionist ideology. In this book, Makdisi reaches the conclusion that modern anti-sectarian efforts in the Middle East are actually rooted in an ecumenical tradition which goes back to 1860, and that the history of sectarianism in the Arab world is not intrinsically different from any other conflictual stories around the world, such as in the US, Europe and South Asia.

The book is divided into two parts, and each part consists of three chapters. The first part addresses the emergence of the ecumenical frame during the Ottoman nineteenth century, and the second deals with the post-Ottoman Arab world in the era of Western colonialism. The book starts by depicting how the Ottoman state dealt with religious differences before the nineteenth century based on an imperial *millet* system which granted religious and civil autonomy to non-Muslim communities for their political and fiscal subordination alongside a Muslim primacy over non-Muslims. Based on this autonomy, the Ottoman Empire did not concern itself with inner religious conflicts as long as they did not threaten the *status quo*, the social order or tax revenues. The state authorities therefore embraced an equivocated attitude towards increasing foreign missionary endeavors in the eighteenth century. However, Western missionaries had already started to read the empire's multi-religious system in extremely sectarian terms.

In the following chapter, the author examines the rising anti-Christian sectarian violence in the mid-nineteenth century and analyses how Ottoman ambiguous *Tanzimat* reformism and European aggressive interventionist solutions such as drawing ethno-geographical lines and establishing the *Mutasarrafiyya* of Mount Lebanon, legitimated the newly emerging sectarian paradigm by rigidifying and politicizing the form of coexistence. Strikingly, at the very same time, the Ottoman Arab world witnessed a call

for an anti-sectarian compatriotship, secular citizenship and ecumenical equality between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects issued by Butrus al-Bustani. This constituted the beginning of the ecumenical frame in an age of genocide, which is examined in Chapter 3.

Depicting the nineteenth-century bifurcation of the Ottoman Empire, the author emphasizes that in contrast with the Balkan separatism and the xenophobic Ottoman Turkish Muslim nationalism in Anatolia, an Arab renaissance called *nabda* was occurring in Ottoman Mashriq by means of a modern press and schooling. In particular, Butrus al-Bustani's evaluation of sectarian violence and the 1860 Damascus affair as 'a pedagogical problem of the self' constitutes a foundational example for Makdisi's theoretical ecumenical frame (p. 68). However, due to the collapse of the empire and the subsequent establishment of European colonial rule, the Arab ecumenical frame as a product of the late Ottoman age was challenged and needed to be recalibrated in European-colonized conditions (p. 109).

Since the Western colonial rationale was based on an imagined Orient 'as a mosaic of irreconcilable, antagonistic religious and ethnic communities' (p. 118) in need of colonial tutelage, the possibility of the mobilization of the ecumenical frame and its faith in an anti-sectarian, secular Arabness was challenging the colonial discourse. Against this threat, while de-Ottomanizing Arab political culture, the European mandate era could not uproot this ecumenical frame but caused it to be nationalized. Here the author argues that despite their notable differences, nationalized models of each land still reflect a common ecumenical heritage.

In order to provide a closer look at these differentiations in the post-Ottoman Arab world, the author compares Michel Chiha's Lebanon and Sati' al-Husri's Iraq. Both of these intellectuals inherited the Ottoman ecumenical frame but as a result of French and British pro-sectarian policies in different part of the Arab world, they ended up transforming the unified coexistence ideal into communalism in Lebanon and secular nationalism in Iraq. Makdisi elaborates this schism in the Arab world as competing models for rebuilding the ecumenical frame within a narrower national term (p. 128).

Building on the previous chapters, the final section investigates the emergence of a disparate political culture, Zionism, which broke the ecumenical frame in the Middle East. Despite their differentiations, sectarian Lebanon and Arab nationalist Syria and Iraq were rooted in the same coexistential political culture of the late Ottoman history. The Zionist political ideal of creating a modern nationalist Jewish state, however, was a product of highly racist European nationalism and shared some similarities with the exclusionary Turkish Kemalism in its treatment of Armenian, Greek and Kurdish communities rather than the Ottoman Empire (p. 194). Considering Zionism in the broader and already successful history of coexistence in the area makes it possible to evaluate its double-edged destructive effects not only on Palestinians but also on Arab Jews in Israel and Jewish communities in most of the Arab world. Makdisi rounds off his work by questioning whether this damaged yet resilient ecumenical frame which still echoes in sporadic moments can be salvaged. Even in the most hopeful scenario, it is evident that a new constituent understanding and vocabulary to embrace the concept of equality beyond race, religion and gender is needed.

This book is a refined contribution to the history of the modern Middle East as it resurrects the forgotten history of coexistence in a geography which was mostly imagined ‘as a region where an angry God and its zealous partisans were very much alive’ (p. 45). Makdisi’s dialectic approach to the history of the nineteenth century not only makes it possible to hear an obscured ecumenical tradition, but also theoretically deepens our understanding of sectarianism because it convincingly debunks the clichéd belief that religious diversity automatically leads to sectarianism. In addition, although the book does not provide a detailed comparative approach, by sketching the global tension between sovereignty, diversity and equal citizenship with examples from US and European histories, it contains a model for a kind of transnational history.

My only quibble with this study is the lack of social historical references to ordinary people’s experiences. Although the book is vested with an innovative theoretical understanding of the ecumenical frame, readers might still want a deeper exploration of its social reflections on inhabitants of the Arab world. While discovering the major literary elites’ intellectual efforts, this book could have strengthened its thesis with references to memoirs, dairies or other sources written by or about the people who experienced the culture of coexistence. For example, what was the *Al-Madrasa al-Wataniyya* students’ perception of Bustani’s ecumenical pedagogy or who were the readers of the journal of *Al-Hilal*, and what was the reception of *nabda*’s modern press in the society? Without finding examples from popular classes, readers will question whether the ecumenical frame is an intellectual vision or a grounded reality.