

Writing the History of Mount Lebanon

CHURCH
HISTORIANS
AND MARONITE
IDENTITY

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The American University in Cairo Press
Cairo New York

First published in 2021 by
The American University in Cairo Press
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
One Rockefeller Plaza, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10020
www.aucpress.com

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ISBN 978 1 649 03125 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hojairi, Mouannes, 1980– author.

Title: Writing the history of Mount Lebanon : church historians and Maronite identity / Mouannes Hojairi.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021016957 (print) | LCCN 2021016958 (ebook) | ISBN 9781649031259 (hardback) | ISBN 9781649031266 (epub) | ISBN 9781649031273 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Catholic Church. Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch—Historiography. | Maronites—Lebanon—Mount Lebanon (Province) | Lebanon—Church history—Historiography. | Mount Lebanon (Lebanon : Province)—Historiography.

Classification: LCC DS80.55.M37 H65 2021 (print) | LCC DS80.55.M37 (ebook) | DDC 281/.52—dc23

1 2 3 4 5 25 24 23 22 21

Designed by Westchester Publishing Services
Printed in the United States

*To my wife and parents, for the decades-long support, inspiration,
and lessons in perseverance.*

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Introduction

Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, nations maketh man; nations are the artifacts of men's convictions and loyalties and solidarities.¹

When addressing the ever-evolving conflict over identity in Lebanon, one has to be vigilant to observe the quickly shifting sands of the country's political field. The one stable fact about political alignments in Lebanon is that they are not stable. In the nebulous and unstable realm of political alliances, sectarian groups, led by their chief political parties, are forced with every new crisis to redefine their communal identities as well as renew their delineation of the self and the other. This feature of the system has left its mark on the communal identity of every confessional group in Lebanon, as well as on the national identity (or identities) of these groups combined. The nature and definition of the self, as well as the nation, constitute contested territory in Lebanese political culture and discourse. More often than not, this situation either leads to or simply justifies confrontations and violence, almost always along sectarian lines that have divided the country since its inception.

The main questions concerning identity in Lebanon have morphed and changed in the years following the end of the civil war (1975–91) and especially recently. In recent times, the debate, which would be better described as discord, no longer revolves around the sense of belonging, or not, to Lebanon the nation-state. The finality of the Lebanese state as well as the sense of belonging to it seem more solid among Lebanese today than they have

in the decades since the French granted independence to Lebanon in 1943. What has remained in flux, however, is what being Lebanese entails. The various Lebanese political factions and ideological currents are in contest over precisely this ontological question. Their diverse definitions of Lebanese identity emanate from their alignments in every crisis, rendering a unified vision of identity untenable.

This book examines how the current identity of the Maronite community was formed; how its content is claimed by those interpellated by the community as a stable and fixed essence; and what contemporary nationalists claim regarding the community's formation. Further light will be shed on the current debate among these nationalists. The book traces the genealogy of Maronite identity by examining the development of the historical tradition that shaped the contemporary manifestation of this identity.

As a frequently contested territory, Mount Lebanon has an equally contested history, one that has been produced, shaped, and revised by as many players as have molded the Lebanese state since its inception in 1920. The parties who influenced the birth and evolution of this diverse and fragmented political entity made claims on the writing of Lebanon's history as significant as the claims these actors advanced on the country's territory.

The Lebanese Maronite Church has had more at stake in the writing of Lebanon's history than any other group or institution. The Church is arguably one of the most influential institutions in Lebanese history and was definitely the most influential institution in the country at the moment of the state's birth. At the time of the rise of nationalist ideas in Europe, the Maronite Church in Lebanon was the one party that owned a considerable part of Lebanese territory and had the allegiance of much of the population; the Church was also the party that had the most well-established relations with European states and power brokers. Thus, the Church played a pivotal role in the spread of nationalist ideas by promulgating the "nation-ness" of the Maronites of Mount Lebanon. The Church aimed at bringing about a transformation that would render a nation out of the Church's followers and a nation-state out of the lands the Church controlled. The ultimate objective was a Maronite Christian country with the Maronite Church as the dominant political power.

As the center of a religious community and the main—and for a period of time the sole—educator in the territory that was to become the state of Lebanon, the Maronite Church played a hegemonic role in the process of identity formation. By writing its own history and producing its own

myth of origin, the Church at a certain point attempted to transform that myth into a national one. The identity produced was one that separated the Church and its followers from their surroundings and isolated the Maronite-inhabited parts of Mount Lebanon from their religious, cultural, and political environments. Dissociation from the Arab-Islamic milieu was essential in order to assert a separate identity for the Maronite inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, in a process meant to ensure the emergence of a Lebanese national identity that identified with Christian Europe and produced the Muslim world as “Other.”

When one examines the process of history writing undertaken by the members and patriarchs of the Maronite Church over the past three hundred years, there emerges a chain of historical texts that inform each subsequent rewriting in productive ways: the works of Istifan al-Duwayhi (1630–1704), Nicolas Murad (1796–1862), Yusuf al-Dibs (1833–1907), and Pierre Dib (1881–1965).² A transformation of the identity of the Church itself seems to have taken place, and differing versions of its history emerged.³ The Maronites, in Nicolas Murad’s writings, were no longer identified as a religious community in an Islamic East and an Islamic state system. The identity the Church created for itself, and the one through which it interpellated its followers, by the early nineteenth century became an integral part of European history, as the Maronites became an integral part of Europe.⁴

In the tradition of history writing within the Maronite Church, certain figures have left a significantly greater mark than others. Starting with the so-called father of Maronite historiography, Patriarch Istifan al-Duwayhi, and moving forward through time to the writings of Bishop Nicolas Murad, Bishop Yusuf al-Dibs, and Fathers Pierre Dib and Butrus Daw, one notices that these historians had a more significant impact than others on the self-identity of the Church during their time. Because their roles are different from those of their contemporaries and similar in nature to one another, and because these historians belong to a specific tradition in Church historiography, their writings are at the center of my investigation.

The historians and the historical writings that I focus on have been examined in contemporary scholarship before. Important contributions include Kamal Salibi’s *Maronite Historians of Medieval Lebanon*; Munir Isma‘il’s *al-Marada’iyyun, al-Marada: Man hum? Min ayna ja’u? Wa ma hiya ‘alaqatubum bi al-Jarajima wa-l-Marwarina* (The Mardaites, the Marada: Who Are They? Where Did They Come From? And What Is Their Relationship to the Jarajima and the Maronites?); Ahmad Beydoun’s *Identité confessionnelle*

et temps social chez les historiens libanais contemporains; and Ussama Makdisi's *Artillery of Heaven* and *The Culture of Sectarianism*.⁵ The nature, scope, and purpose of these important works differ significantly from my aims in this book. Salibi was comparing in broad terms the works of three historians; Isma'il's book was devoted to a single topic in Lebanese history; and Beydoun focused on the different sectarian readings of Lebanese history. Makdisi, on the other hand, offered an in-depth analysis of the impact of modernity on the sociopolitical conditions of nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon and the sectarian dynamics that modernity precipitated. Later, in *Artillery of Heaven*, Makdisi focused on the role and impact of American missionaries in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lebanon.

Until now, the historians I focus on and the historiography I examine have not been approached or represented as forming one unbroken tradition dating back to the seventeenth century. Some of the topics that I write about appear in previous writings, and my assessment of some of the Maronite Church historians owes a great deal to the contemporary secular historians whose books were mentioned earlier. But my focus on and analysis of this tradition fills a gap in the debate concerning Lebanese history and historiography.

This book delineates a tradition in history writing that emerges from within the Church and that is perpetuated over time despite undergoing certain changes as a result of the major developments that the Maronite Church experienced. My focus is on the tradition itself and on the *musallamat*—absolutes, givens—of the Church that Church historians have maintained and defended in this tradition, as well as on the way this process has influenced the writings of Lebanese lay historians in the past and continues to influence them in the present.

In my inquiry, I juxtapose the writings of Maronite Church historians with the debates that dominated historiography from the nineteenth century to the present. I point to commonalities that occur across the different views of history. My task is to scrutinize Maronite Church historiography according to the standards that govern modern scholarship.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the debates over European histories put into question the role of the historian and history writing as well as the dichotomy of facts and interpretation, but all the different views agree on a set of basic rules. History writing in all its forms stipulates that the raw materials of the historian, the facts about the past that the historian evokes, must meet standards of reliability in order to be used as sources.

The complexities of what constitutes reliability and why one source may be considered to be less or more reliable than another do not negate the fact that a minimum requirement must be met according to the standard accepted historiographical method. I demonstrate that when evaluated by the wide spectrum of modern methodological criteria, Maronite Church historiography, when dealing with specific sensitive elements of Church history, adopts approaches that produce accounts of history that would be considered ideological and fictive by all philosophies of history.

Chapter 1 of the book examines the depiction of Mount Lebanon in historiography as a mountain refuge to which Christians flocked in order to escape the persecution of the various Muslim powers that had dominated the region since the spread of Islam outside the confines of the Arabian Peninsula. I examine how this depiction developed in Maronite Church historiography in the accounts of the Church's different historians, while tracing the genealogy of this depiction and the impact that it has had on the various interpretations of the history of the region.

Chapter 2 focuses mainly on the Mardaite myth of origin that numerous church historians adopted in trying to establish a beginning for the Maronites in Lebanon. I address the debate that still rages among historians in Lebanon concerning the validity of this hypothesis. I also examine the historicity of the claim and simultaneously investigate the impact that the hypothesis, as well as the debate itself, have had on history writing in Lebanon and on communal identity today among the adherents of the Maronite Church.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the Maronite Church's claims of an ancient and unbroken orthodoxy. I examine the impact on the Maronite Church in Lebanon of its integration into the Catholic Church of Rome during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I also address specifically conflicting claims of orthodoxy and heterodoxy among historians when writing about the origins and establishment of the Maronite Church itself. In focusing on the debate around orthodoxy, I highlight the impact that subscribing to one claim or another has had on history writing in Lebanon. I also place special emphasis on the claim of orthodoxy and the ripple effects it has had on Church historiography and later lay historiography in Lebanon as it relates to the question of national identity.

Chapter 4 focuses on certain defining moments in the history of Mount Lebanon and the region. I refer to developments and events that reshaped the area and helped shape communal identity in Lebanon. The turmoil of

the mid-nineteenth century will be the focal point because of the significance of the events and the scale of transformations these events prompted. I also address the emergence of new conceptions of identity, as well as historiography, as history writing was transformed and certain claims and hypotheses were codified during this period.

Finally, chapter 5 focuses mainly on the Phoenician hypothesis in Lebanese historiography. I examine the emergence of the hypothesis as a myth of origin for a nascent Lebanese nation and the significance of this myth in history writing as well as national identity. I address the interaction of the two competing myths of origin—the Mardaite and the Phoenician—in the realm of history writing among Church and lay historians, and I discuss the outcome of this interaction and the debates that resulted.

In each chapter I seek to explore the presence of a tradition in Maronite Church historiography that was maintained by influential clergymen. These clergymen and historians of the Church, through the historical claims they made and the hypotheses they advanced, ultimately defined the communal identity of the Maronites in Mount Lebanon and deeply influenced Lebanese national identity. I attempt to explain the importance of this tradition, its persistence over time, and its impact on identity in Lebanon today. My work is not archivally based nor is it rooted in new primary sources; it is based primarily on the existing literature but presents a new perspective and new conclusions in examining this literature. What I intend to do is to bring evidence to bear on a particular aspect of history writing in Lebanon by presenting a reassessment and reexamination of an existing historiographical debate.

Turning Points in Historiographical Debates

When one is looking for a turning point for history writing in the nineteenth century, the contributions of Leopold von Ranke come to the forefront. As one of the earliest and most influential historians to promote reliance on primary sources, he set the tone for much of later historical writing in the empiricist tradition.

In his earliest work, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations (1494–1514)*, published in 1824, Ranke writes of his aspiration, as a historian, to show what actually happened and his belief that history should revolve around the notion of how “things actually were.”⁶ Peter Gay comments on this approach: “It was the modest pronouncement of a scientist intent on doing his work, and on concentrating on what could be reliably known.”⁷ This

statement complements Gay's depiction of the historiographical method put forward by Ranke. Defining Ranke's scientific method, Gay writes: "It is clear that whatever its principal impulses, the methods and results of Ranke's way as a historian were aimed straight at science: the systematizing of research, the withdrawal of ego from presentation, the unremitting effort at objectivity, the submission of results to critical public scrutiny."⁸

To explain the duties of a historian in reconstructing the past, Jacob Burckhardt focused on the importance of collecting reliable historical evidence regardless of its initial perceived importance. The historian is to dismiss nothing that has any potential to assist in the task of faithfully reconstructing that part of the past that holds the historian's interest. In the introduction to his book *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History* (1943), Burckhardt writes:

And now let us remember all we owe to the past as a spiritual *continuum* which forms part of our supreme spiritual heritage. Anything which can in the remotest way serve our knowledge of it must be collected, whatever toil it may cost and with all the resources at our disposal, until we are able to reconstruct whole spiritual horizons of the past.⁹

Burckhardt delineates his principle in the form of a dichotomy between knowledge and purpose; the historian's interpretation might be detrimental to the historical truth that the historian is trying to achieve.

Aspects of the modern methodological criteria that began with the works of Ranke and Burckhardt retain their relevance to historians today, even if questions concerning the role of the historian, the impact of interpretation, the meaning of the narrative, and the possibility for objectivity in history writing have transformed the field over the past two centuries.

Among the most influential opponents of the empirical view of history, R. G. Collingwood, with his idealist view, offered an entirely different approach to the interpretation of historical evidence and advanced a different understanding of the historian's role and the nature of historiography. His book *The Idea of History*—published posthumously for the first time in 1946, three years after his death—presents a theory concerning history writing that sets Collingwood's work apart from G. W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* as well as from the work of the positivists, who were attempting to render history into an empirical science. Collingwood's definition