
Anyone with firsthand familiarity with what we conveniently refer to as the Arab World is well aware that in this vast expanse extending from Mauritania and Morocco in Northwest Africa to Iraq far to the East in Asia, there is no common spoken language. Rather there exists a plethora of vernaculars, commonly called Arabic dialects, which are not all mutually intelligible and which can differ from one another as much as one Romance language differs from the next. Furthermore, many Arab countries play host to other native languages such as Berber, Kurdish, Nubian, Armenian, and Aramaic, which are spoken by ethnic or religious minorities—sometimes very substantial minorities. There are also a number of countries where European languages, particularly French or English, are used on a daily basis not merely by elites, but by anyone with a modicum of education. This bilingualism is an integral part of the local cultural milieu, with people switching languages in mid-conversation or even in mid-sentence (what linguists refer to as code switching). This is especially true in the former French-ruled Maghreb and in Lebanon.

In the Arab nationalist paradigm, it is the Classical Arabic literary language (*al-‘arabiyya al-fushā*) in its revived, somewhat simplified modern form called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) that unites this world culturally, ethnically, and in an idealized (but unfulfilled) sense, politically. This inflected literary language must be learned in school and differs from the spoken languages as much Latin differs from French, Spanish, Italian, and the other Romance languages. But as in medieval Europe, where Latin was the only recognized written language by ecclesia et regnum until Dante, Petrarch, and others came along, a doctrinaire fiction is maintained by the proponents of Arabism and Islamism that the living spoken languages are merely vulgar dialect forms of the true language, MSA, which is the only legitimate medium for written and formal communication. Thus, a native speaker of a vernacular who has not been taught the literary language in school cannot understand a news broadcast or a written text when it is read aloud. This point was vividly driven home to me when relatives with whom we were staying in an interior Moroccan town in the early 1970s asked us to translate what was being said on the evening news.

In *Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon*, Franck Salameh, who teaches Arabic and Middle Eastern intellectual and cultural history at Boston College, meticulously documents a powerful counter-
argument to the regnant, monochromatic, Arabist paradigm. The lion’s share of the book deals with the lifelong effort of Sād Akl, a Lebanese poet, philosopher, and intellectual, to make “Lebanese,” his designation of the spoken vernacular of Lebanon, the recognized national language of his heterogeneous country. Salameh dubs this endeavor “linguistic Lebanonism.” Akl, a Maronite Christian who views himself as the Lebanese Dante, has argued that Lebanese is not an Arabic dialect (‘āmmiyya or laḥja) at all, but actually the indigenous Semitic language of the country, rooted in Phoenician/Canaanite and Syriac/Aramaic with an Arabic overlay. This overlay further masks its true nature, all the more so when rendered in the consonantal Arabic script, which is totally inadequate for representing its phonology. In arguing this point, Akl was following in the footsteps of the Phoenicianists, such as Charles Corm and Michael Chiha. But as Salameh explains, Akl went far beyond his nationalist predecessors, eventually creating a Latin-based alphabet of thirty-seven characters and founding a press, Ajmal Ketub al-‘Alam [sic], or World Vintage Books Press, for the publication of books in Lebanese. By the year 2000, the press had published over forty books in the Aklian script (p. 245). As Salameh notes, intellectual and literary nationalists in Egypt, such as Salama Musa and Taha Husayn, had advocated similar ideas in their country but never went so far as to actually carry them out; in Husayn’s case, he eventually recanted his heresy. In Salameh’s opinion, this is why Taha Husayn is still highly regarded in Arabic literary circles, whereas Salama Musa is largely forgotten. Indeed, Egyptian academics such as Nafusa Zakariyya Sa’id, author of Tārikh al-Da‘wa ilā al-‘Ammiya wa-‘Āthārihā fī Miṣr (Alexandria: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1964), regarded calls for adopting the spoken Egyptian vernacular as a literary medium to be nothing less than an imperialistic plot. (Surprisingly, Sa’id’s book is absent from Salameh’s otherwise very thorough bibliography.)

While Akl claimed that his language reform would unite Lebanon’s heterogeneous population in a patriotic Lebanese unity, the effect was—as Salameh notes—quite the opposite. For the most part, it was primarily Christians who demonstrated any enthusiasm, much less interest, in the de-Arabizing of the language; only a minute number of private schools integrated the Aklian script into their curricula. In an endnote (p. 257, n. 129), Salameh mentions that his school was one of those few institutions. A handful of Muslim intellectuals, such as Nagib Jamaaddine, Kamal Charabi, and Abdallah al-‘Alayli, saw Akl’s innovation as a liberal, secular, national antidote to their country’s fractious sectarianism. Most Muslims viewed this as yet another attempt by pro-Western Christians to cut Lebanon off from its natural place in the Arab World and as an affront to Arabism and Islam. The Muslim Lebanese who opposed Akl’s
campaign saw the obvious parallel in Atatürk’s Latinization of the Turkish writing system, which was part and parcel of his program to de-Islamize Turkish society.

While clearly a great admirer of Akl, whom he interviewed at length in May 2000 and recalls affectionately, Salameh understands the basis of the opposition of Akl’s Muslim opponents for whom Arabic is inextricably bound up with Islamic identity. Among the many admirable qualities of Salameh’s work is his properly dispassionate tone throughout. One of the blurbs on the back cover refers to the book as “a stunning polemic.” I beg to differ. It is certainly a brilliant and erudite tour de force that offers a welcome corrective to widely held academic orthodoxies, but its overall tone is anything but polemical. Although the book provides fresh insights into a different aspect of the Middle East, it is always measured, analytical, and cogently and elegantly argued on the basis of data that has been meticulously researched.

That is not to say that Salameh does not challenge certain idées reçues and generalizations prevailing in many quarters of contemporary Middle Eastern Studies. As the author states in the Introduction (p. xi): “Where this work should hope to differ from traditional Middle East scholarship is in its reevaluation of the very image that specialists—and Middle Easterners alike—have normalized and intellectualized about their area, often with a patronizing refusal to attribute its pathologies to causes outside the traditional, oft-visited and overused Arabist, Arab-Israeli, and postcolonial paradigms” (p. xi). For Salameh, “Arabic, in its Classical and Modern Standard forms, is a key factor in the Middle East’s turbulence, authoritarianism, intellectual torpor, cultural rigidity, and lack of freedoms” (p. xvii). That is a lengthy and scathing bill of indictment, to be sure, but Salameh is not alone in these harsh judgments; he cites examples of Arab intellectuals and ex-nationalists who came to similar points of view, such the Syrian poets Adonis and Nizar Qabbani, the Palestinian-American novelist Fawaz Turki, and the aforementioned Egyptian littérateur, Taha Husayn.

For Salameh, the villains who are most responsible for this sorry state of affairs are the Arab nationalists Sati‘ al-Husri, who championed MSA education, and his apostle Michel Aflaq, the philosopher of Ba’athism. They saw anyone who did not accept an Arab identity and recognize MSA as their legitimate national language as traitors to be reeducated, fought, or suppressed. One cannot help but wonder: had they not had such Fascist tendencies, which brooked no opposition, perhaps some of the ills in Salameh’s bill of indictment may have been lessened to some degree. As an historian, I would hasten to point out that the profound social, cultural, and political malaise of the Arab
and the wider Islamic world have roots that go back to the decline of the later Islamic Middle Ages. However, Salameh is certainly correct that Arab nationalism and its authoritarian language policies have had a noxious effect on the region and its overall encounter with modernity. It is noteworthy that he has subtitled his book *The Case for Lebanon* rather than *The Case of Lebanon*. Perhaps it is Salameh’s subtle allusion to what might have been or might yet be a more salutary cultural and social model of pluralism in that unhappy and tempestuous region.

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